



“THE GUILTY SEX” REVISITED
Or
THE SILENCE OF THE WHAMS

STEPHEN KOCH



The antique essay reprinted here appeared first as the lead article in the July 1975 issue of *Esquire*. It was written when I was thirty-three years old, and until recently, I had not even once re-read it since the distant summer day when it was published. But recently, while moving a mildewed banker’s box from one pile to another, I happened to spot “The Guilty Sex” wedged in its papery grave. I pulled out the brittle curling Xerox, slipped off the rusted paper clip, and dared myself to re-read it.

I braced myself.

Though some of the prose made me wince, I was pleasantly surprised—pleasantly astounded—to discover that the coherence of “The Guilty Sex” has somehow survived the decades. I don’t renounce or regret a single word, and I find I am proud of the very young man who worked on it so hard.

To attribute this tenuous survival to the genius of prophecy would be preposterous. In fact, “The Guilty Sex” is not even particularly original. Yet it was very hard to write. The opinions it confronted were powerful, unforgiving and everywhere in the air. I was grappling with very powerful ideas; I knew that if I challenged them, I could not permit myself even one loose move. I had to wrestle the bruisers to the mat without one lapse of logic or intellectual integrity. It was a difficult fight, and a personal one. Though I believed my thoughts were based in objective truth, I knew objective truth would not be enough. It would be so much clattering noise unless it was rooted in my own real life as a man. The political was indeed personal. Authenticity must speak from experience.

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Forty years later, the guilty sex is seen as guiltier than ever, and men and women are rarely perceived as ethical equals. Whenever either the popular or elite cultures address the moral status of men as men, they quite consistently drape men and manhood in a kind of collective culpability. In education, entertainment, religion, criminal law, tort law, medicine, the press, family life and intimate relations between the sexes—in short wherever the moral life is tested—some fundamental moral inferiority of the male sex is taken for granted. In “The Guilty Sex,” I remarked that feminism had redefined “Woman” to indicate not the human female but a heroic condition. “Woman” was valiantly struggling to right the imbalance between women and men. She was moving from bondage to freedom and justice. This did not exactly make men into “the enemy” but it did buttress the implication that men—all men—are enmeshed in the inescapable trap of their guilty masculine privileges. To be sure, individual men might be tolerated, admired, and even loved—but the prevailing *collective* morality was shrouding the masculine half of humanity in the gloom of an unidentified primal transgression, some tremendous, aboriginal masculine sin, an originating crime which alone can account for the evil of the two genders’ unequal roles in history and society.

That is how it seemed in 1974, and it is much more emphatically true today.

And? Outside a feminist utopia, the guilty sex remains beyond forgiveness, and the unequal moral status of the genders, the perception of all men as stained with guilt in relation to all women, cannot be corrected by resorting to the slippery platitudes of egalitarianism. If women have always and everywhere been oppressed, men have always and everywhere been their oppressors. Such a vast and ubiquitous wrongdoing cannot be redeemed merely by cooking, cleaning, and changing diapers. It is bred in the bone.

And it is increasingly institutionalized by the press and by the state. To take just one example of modern moral rhetoric: a notable achievement by a woman usually shines in two lights: praised first for being the achievement it is, and second for being a righteous step in the liberation of humanity, achieved moreover against unfair odds. Response to an equivalent achievement by a man will be quite different. It may be acknowledged and even widely admired. And yet it will also be viewed as one more example a corrupt society’s same old, same old—and often viewed as the payoff

of a rigged system of male privilege, and so to some degree unearned. The woman's accomplishment is suffused with the glow of a gendered virtue. Gendered virtue is a form of pride no man should enjoy under any circumstances. Meanwhile, the slightest suggestion of any moral quality primarily relevant to men—some virtue unique to manhood—is brushed aside with disgust.

To be sure, though men are universally and uniquely guilty, much feminist doctrine concedes that men *can* be virtuous, but only by manifesting virtues they share with women. And sharing doesn't really help much. Soft feminist propaganda sometimes lures men by promising kindness and partial remission of the sin of their existence if they accept, and try to eliminate, a fundamentally invidious self-image. What's offered is a kind of cozy toleration; "we love you anyway, sweetie. You are more to be pitied than censured."

But genuine forgiveness?

In fact, men are not condemned for what they have *done*. They are condemned for what they *are*. There can therefore be no true forgiveness. They are afflicted from birth with what Lionel Tiger has shrewdly called "male original sin." This inherent culpability is not derived from individual actions. The presumption of guilt is universal.

This can be politically very useful. The reason is simple. The moral establishment cannot afford to relinquish that tremendous power over men that it gains mongering this guilt, so long as it is done softly, softly. By invariably presuming some vague, atmospheric, universal but almost unstated culpability, men are made malleable, silenced and made compliant by an equally vague, atmospheric, universal but almost unspoken sense of shame.

With inarticulate shame inculcated as a prime motivator, the doctrine of the guilty sex it not always invoked to promote what the church calls some general "amendment of life." It is not invoked to promote ethical equality between men and women. More often, it is invoked to promote the relentless demoralization of the male sex.

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To be sure, very few of the more important players in the current moral establishment would explicitly endorse collective and irreparable gender guilt. For one thing, that would end its political usefulness. Many of the players might even be disconcerted or troubled to hear that their good deeds require disseminating indiscriminate semi-rational guilt. The governing board of NOW does not meet and ask, "How can we deepen masculine self-contempt and shame?" Shame does not like the light. It fares badly when open to discourse. It consolidates its power in silence.

In any case, the movement's ideology of guilt is accepted by the general public only occasionally. All men are seen as potential rapists-in-waiting only when some horrendous rape fills the news. Most people presume that there are good men around somewhere. Though the balance of public morality has clearly shifted toward misandry, real people still lead their moral lives in their own ways. Men are steadily portrayed as incapable of nuanced emotion. And yet in real life half the human race exhibits a wide spectrum of feelings without anyone noticing the contradiction. Meanwhile, real mothers love real sons. Real achievers permit themselves a surge of self-respect, even though they are male. Shameless heterosexuality flourishes. On all levels, men and women can and

do engage in lived life easily, constructively. They can and do respect and admire one another. They can enjoy one another, and maybe have some fun together. They can even love one another.

Yet the relentless ideology goes from strength to strength. There is no move to get the guilty sex off the hook on which it is impaled. Men are presumed to be guiltier than ever, and guilty through strategies I could not have imagined in 1974.

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IDENTITY POLITICS

If this phrase had any currency forty years ago, I knew nothing about it. I zeroed in on the guilty sex by catching the inescapable overtones of the time's feminist rhetoric. And I was especially struck by how successfully it absorbed especially the collectivist rhetoric of youthful radicalism between 1962 and the mid-seventies, what I call "the Movement."

Today, this logic looks arcane. By now, the logic of identity politics is so widespread and mindlessly applied that it can pass for universal truth on talk shows. That logic is simple. For identity politics, the pre-eminent issue defining any exercise of power and justice is recognition of the systemic oppression of generic populations—blacks, women, gays, foreigners. This oppression is universally attributed to the bigotry of the group's socially generic opposites; i.e. whites, men, heterosexuals, and people born American. Moral action consists in identifying this kind of collective oppression and trying to eliminate it.

The most important and persuasive example of identity politics at work was when the civil rights movement confronted the obvious outrage of systemic oppression of African-Americans by whites. That crucial confrontation has served as the paradigm for every kind of identity politics since then. That much was clear to me in "The Guilty Sex: *"In one of its most brilliant early tactics—and perceptions—feminism simply appropriated that obsessive political language of victimhood, innocence and guilt, and with a little touching up, transformed it into a sexual language. That transformation was especially easy since the political talk was heavily overlaid with psychoanalytic assumptions that understood oppression and repression in very much the same way. And it all fitted as a sexual language. It worked. The rhetoric against racism became the rhetoric against sexism with only minor alterations. The repressive ego, the male ego. Oppression, the oppression of women above all. False freedom, so-called sexual freedom. Purifying rage, the rage of women. The hated establishment, so obviously the establishment of men."*

In the grand forum for identity righteousness, any generically oppressed group is assumed to have a malevolent generic oppressor. Individual exceptions are irrelevant, and the presumption of collective guilt by implication is the foundation on which all identity politics rests. In this moral realm, innocent African-Americans, women, homosexuals, and immigrants must be oppressed by guilty whites, heterosexuals, Americans and men, because victimization gives both their "identity." Everyone is either a victim or a victimizer, and almost everyone is guilty of something.

But one group alone is *absolutely* irredeemable: white, heterosexual, American men, or as I call them, WHAMS. Every aspect of their "identity" condemns them. Four strikes and you're out. Held back by shame and inarticulate resentment, the WHAMS rarely protest, and when they do

protest they do so defensively and awkwardly. Sheepishly explaining, when they can, how they concur with the latest turn of damnation, they stoically endure the stream of insults with what we might call the silence of the WHAMS

THE DISPOSABLE MALE

One of the few *almost* original insights in “The Guilty Sex” is that there can be no gender equality without identical roles in fatherhood and motherhood. I gently mocked this biological impossibility by suggesting that feminist egalitarianism was at bottom a search for “the totally accommodating husband.”

No extensive research is needed to see that a very substantial sector of feminist opinion would greet my gentle joke with outrage. Only a cursory reading of the pronouncements of Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem reveals implacable hostility to any presumed union between fathers and mothers occasioned by childrearing, with the worst union of all being (gay marriage excepted) marriage. Marriage has always been denounced as *the* instrument of female dependence on men. And while the desired independence may not require separatism, any capitulation to classical reproductive roles has been widely rejected.

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Forty years later, in a trend now viewed as inevitable as gravity, the majority of children born in the United States are born to unwed mothers. Only a fool would call feminism responsible for this multi-causal disaster. In fact, its role is probably negligible: certainly it is secondary to overpowering issues of culture, class and race. Even so, both feminists and the rest of us have as much to learn as to lament about the collapse of the paternal role in America.

Typically in the families of these classes and cultures, a wanted or unwanted child is born to a very young mother without the means to support her child. Nor does the often terrified and very youthful biological father. He often had no clue that a baby might result from his (usually) furtive romance, and is overwhelmed and incapacitated by the urgent responsibilities that come with the new life. He falters. He flees. He denies. In consequence, he is soon seen as either an unnecessary presence or an inexcusable absence. Either way he becomes unnecessary, immature, irresponsible, or a burden. A disposable burden.

Some studies, especially ones sponsored by feminists, brush aside this all too common pattern as merely unfortunate, and insist that the father role is incidental or even irrelevant to successful child-rearing.

Anyone who believes this should ponder the sociology of this country’s African-American population. There, irresponsible fatherhood or just plain fatherlessness has been endemic for several generations. Those tempted to see fatherhood as merely incidental to maturity should muse on *the* single statistic in a field littered with statistics, that I myself find most chilling in a field littered with statistics.

There are presently more African-American men between 18 and 25 in prison than there are in college.

Meanwhile, the white working class is rapidly falling into the African-American pattern.

What does this portend? I am no prophet, and can only respond through my conviction that successful manhood involves successfully navigating work, fatherhood, and sexual love. To remove fatherhood from this tripod is to see it fall over, while work and sexual love collapse with it. To borrow a phrase from Paul Goodman, to grow up male in this context risks “growing up absurd.” “Little man, what are you going to be when you grow up? A fireman? A physicist?” He cannot know that very likely when he grows up he will be without bonds, and without a role. When he grows up, he will be irrelevant.

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

Almost everyone agrees that the sexual revolution initiated by my sixties generation could not have happened without The Pill. Many men—certainly many men in the Movement—seized upon it as liberation perfected, and many sexual revolutionaries in and out of the Movement were far more “male chauvinistic” than their bourgeois uncles in New Jersey. Stokeley Carmichael caught the beat in 1964 when he said: “*The proper position of women is SNCC is prone.*” Such attitudes were commonplace in the ranks of sixties radicals. They played no small role motivating radical feminism’s triumphant revenge, first endowing it with the power to help splinter the Movement from within, and later crush the splinters into oblivion.

Yet in 1975, some aspects of the sexual revolution were far from obvious, at least to me. I could never have guessed that the coming thing would be a curious pairing of punitive puritanism with complete sexual irresponsibility. The boy at his college dorm party feels free to plunge into meaningless, all-but-anonymous sex, with any woman who happens to flash him a smile. He loses track of how many women he has slept with, remembering their names no better than they remember his.

A couple of years later, the same fellow may be working in an office where he can jeopardize his job, and even his career, by lingering too long over a look at a co-worker’s cleavage, or by making offensive wisecracks, or by permitting himself something called “inappropriate touching.” Not one of these things would have occasioned even cursory notice at that dormitory party.

In truth, the college promiscuity and the workplace puritanism are bound together by a common motive. Both are means of maintaining women’s all important “independence.” They stand as baffles, often very effective ones, between vagrant desire and the bonding between men and women that many feminists regard as dangerous—far more dangerous than mindless promiscuity in school or Draconian puritanism in the workplace.

Sex without bonding and work without flirtation may seem very different, but they serve the identical end.

THE “RAPE CULTURE”

In order to enforce puritanism while enfranchising promiscuity, it has become necessary to criminalize some of the freedoms the sexual revolution unleashed, and in the process an obsessive concern of with different varieties of rape and near-rape has moved in directions that are even more radical than the famous pronouncements of my contemporary, Susan Brownmiller.

The law’s response to a man forcing intercourse on a woman through violence should not necessarily be the extreme penalty of law. But it should be severe.

In fact, it isn’t. The relation between rapes and convicted rapists is oddly skewed. This is not the place to enter the thicket of propaganda that surrounds us on the subject; nor is it the place to examine some very questionable statistical claims, or seek to define what constitutes the ultimate crime of the guilty sex.

There is a wide disparity between propaganda on this subject and any genuine response to it. For example, the Violence Against Women Act (in both its avatars) appropriates large sums of money to fund the study of violence against women, or the creation of safe havens for battered or raped women, or the dissemination of information warning against it, or making the subject part of the school curriculum. It primarily funds a set of more or less desirable bureaucratic institutions to address the subject. This bureaucracy is amply endowed. What it omits, or renders negligible, are funds aimed at the apprehension, trial and punishment of the rapists. Any bureaucratic response to rape has priority over actually apprehending the criminals.

Not long ago, a very intelligent and forward looking feminist legislator, Liz Krueger of the New York State Senate, sent a letter to constituents like me urging support that would be state legislation parallel to the national Violence Against Women Act. In this letter, Senator Krueger repeated Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi’s claim that a study by the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC) had revealed that 20% of American women will be raped at some point in their lives.

I am in no position to verify or contest this claim. Yet even in my ignorance, I wrote to Senator Krueger noting that such a very large figure tells us that some very large percentage of American men are rapists and felons. One can only guess the percentage: fifteen percent, ten percent, five percent? Surely not less than five percent.

Arresting, trying and convicting 5% of the American male population would fill the jails with 7,000,000 felons. Successful prosecution of 10% of the men in America would put 14,000,000 rapists behind bars. I asked whether the Senator supports investigation, prosecution and incarceration on so massive a scale?

If not, why not?

The Senator answered that she believed all men duly convicted of rape should be incarcerated. Who doesn’t? That was not my question. My query asked why the CDC study did not mobilize a massive dragnet to arrest the many millions of men who, according to their statistics, *have* to be guilty. Why has there been no move to punish them *en masse*? It should not be overwhelmingly difficult to convict some significant number of these criminals. Most victims of rape know the assailant

or can easily identify him. Even by sticking to strict rules of evidence, surely many hundreds of thousands among those millions of rapists could be prosecuted and punished.

Yet I doubt even Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi or Vice-President Biden would endorse concerted police action seeking the arrest of ten percent, or even five percent, of America's male population. I doubt they would want their names on the massive number of trials and the huge expansion of the prison system such a thing would entail. To be sure, it would put statistics now seen as irrefutable to some real test. But it would surely be politically unpalatable to the male and female voters in the United States to see five percent of their sons, brothers, husbands under subpoena and facing long prison terms. It would not play at all well with the electorate.

But even so, why not? Why should mere unpopularity stay the hand of justice, given such a massive criminal phenomenon?

Of course, I have concocted these delirious daydreams by linking logic to pure fantasy. Nobody wants to see some vast American gulag of husbands and sons. I have raised the issue to note that the current obsession with the crime is accompanied by something resembling indifference to its punishment. It seems to me that the trend is toward demoralizing the guilty sex, rather than seeing that justice is done. And I use the illustration to suggest how the now forty-year-old presumption of masculine guilt increasingly sees men as living on a spectrum defined by mindless violence, as it creeps toward suggesting that men are not only the guilty sex, but the criminally guilty sex.

Some such thing surely motivates much of the talk about the "rape culture."

Let us leave aside the feminists who insist that rape is "not about sex," and turn to those who focus on one genuine biological fact. Sooner or later, all male sexuality takes the form of phallic assertion: arousal, erection, penetration. To many, a phrase like "phallic assertion" is simply a polite term for phallic aggression, which in turn can be defined as a violation. They therefore conclude that masculine sexuality, even at its most benign, must be judged in the light of an inherent criminality. The culture men have made is in essence a culture of rape. The boy in puberty struggling with the overwhelming new force of his desires should be understood not as being drawn toward love, or pleasure, or human connection or paternity. He should be seen as being drawn onto a spectrum that is essentially criminal.

The guilty sex has come a long way.

The Guilty Sex: How American Men Became Irrelevant

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Not long ago, during a radio talk show — the kind with people calling in to explain their philosophies of life — a thirtyish on-the-air sage and a listener were exploring (for a change) the cruel conundrum of becoming an ethical being in a society rotten with macho. Groping his way, the commentator ventured, “Well, I think we — we men . . . “ “Men!” The listener blurted the word again, startled, pained. There was a brief silence while the ugly sound sank in. Then they both giggled.

That shocked verbal blush may seem strange, but is it really? After all, the word “man” has acquired a rather nasty sound. The last five years [1970-1975] have divested it of the old heroic ring; certainly it’s no longer okay to talk about being one with any flourish of pride. (It is okay to talk about being a “person” or “human being,” but that is slightly different.) Yet these two full-grown members of the male sex positively gagged on the word. Inevitably, the conversation had been all about what’s wrong with men. As the most powerful general idea of our time, feminism increasingly dominates *any* discussion of sexual identity or what goes on between men and women — and the feminist discussion of men is mainly about what’s wrong with men. But I’m willing to bet those two surviving sons of the counterculture felt their shameful jolt of recognition jumping up from a deeper level of their minds than that. Remember that the old counterculture was based on a deep romantic link between freedom and victimization, that its whole array of “alternate lifestyles” was based on a notion of liberation from a set of repressors, oppressors. For the drug culture, the blind repressive “ego” was to be “obliterated.” Politically, the oppressor was the great collective ego of the American

middle class, the oppressor establishment. Reality meant victimization by them. Freedom meant liberation from them. Victims were innocent: repressors, guilty. Overturning them was going to mean a new life (that was never doubted), tender, rich, sensual, pure, purged, *innocent*. Innocent above all. As for victims and guilty oppressors, they were certainly not hard to find.

Remember too that back in those grand glamorous systematically alienated and paranoid days of the Sixties, long before feminism, the weakly fathered and fatherless sons of the counterculture had already begun their attack on the Manhood they'd learned (but not lived) in the green, empty American suburbs of the late Fifties and early Sixties. They'd already begun to view "men" as "them" — the others, those jocks and sons of jocks whom every campus protest instinctively understood to be the Enemy. The very image of the unliberated, anguished, unlivable ideal.

Manhood — a kind of joke, something to be flamboyantly swept aside. That ideal was plainly immoral, or else why were we in Vietnam? It was also unreal, a living death, a shame-laden ideology of happiness plainly unhappy; of fulfillment, plainly unfulfilled; of strength plainly stupefied, impotent, or, when potent, destructive. Who among those fiery sons, with their vague and blasted eyes, really connected with his father; who even knew, let alone admired, what the father did in that invisible city of his? Fatherhood meant delivering, or not delivering, checks. It meant being around, or being unwelcome when around. It meant either shouting, or that soul-crushing silence most deeply installed in the soul of any red-blooded American boy: Dad mute behind his newspaper, Dad losing an argument. Dad standing alone watering the lawn, wooden as a dead post — while inside the household lived that real life in which he didn't count. Fatherhood, and to that degree manhood, meant being feared, or ignored, or despised, or pitied, or hated. Such was the Manhood one was supposed to "achieve." "Be a man," the tender initiate was told. *That man? Never again. We would have an alternate, liberated humanity.*

Fancy talk, of course. Except it was based, hysterically based, on some very real perceptions. All the same, the great bird of liberated innocence never really flew. On the contrary, what one senses now among the men of that generation is a kind of numb, embarrassed silence as the vultures of guilt and shame settle in, home to roost. It turns out that while those children of the first television generation were floating their amazing, disorienting visions in the electronic air, Time sat watching, doing what Time does best: waiting for its eventual victory.

It seems to me that time claimed its victory over the men of the old counterculture through feminism, and that, from a moral point of view, it was feminism — even more than the Kissinger truce or the crack-up of the drug culture which killed the counterculture. Feminism was the last major intellectual movement to be born (more properly, reborn) in the counterculture. It emerged in a wildly schismatic moment when many of the most deeply cherished fantasies of emotionally polymorphous and socially polyvalent Liberation were running into rocky times; the atmosphere was dense with moral hysteria; above all, the all-important purity supposedly investing the community of Victims became more and more obviously questionable. Deeply drenched in the counterculture's personal and political language, its attitudes, its ethics, the movement's feminist sisters alone were equipped to do what no one else could: deliver the coup de grace by driving the knife into the heart of the counterculture's principal dream — the radical romantic dream of innocence. For that dream of innocence, however ardently pursued, was also an innocence bluff, and feminism alone was equipped to see it and call it. Remember that the language of the time was utterly obsessed with

guilt and innocence: Think back, take any given issue of, say, *The Village Voice* (not to mention any more hard-core countercultural publication) between 1965 and 1971. *The* theme of any given major article was simply this: Who is good? Who is bad? The goodies and baddies were rotated for variety, but the basic theme never changed. In one of its most brilliant early tactics — and perceptions — feminism simply appropriated that obsessive political language of victimhood, innocence and guilt, and with a little touching up, transformed it into a sexual language. The transformation was especially easy since the political talk was heavily overlaid with psychoanalytic assumptions that understood oppression and repression in very much the same way. And it all fitted as a sexual language. It worked. The rhetoric against racism became the rhetoric against sexism with only minor alterations. The repressive ego, the male ego, Oppression, the oppression of women above all. False freedom, so-called sexual freedom. Purifying rage, the rage of women. The hated establishment, so *obviously* the establishment of *men*. A moral language already obsessing hundreds of thousands of men suddenly clicked in the minds of their sisters. They were able to turn and say: “We have at last met the enemy, and he is *you!*”

Of course. The co-opting shock was extraordinary. The time had come for the proverbial scales to fall from the eyes. *Of course.* Found out. The real meaning of all that obsessing over innocence, the real meaning of the freakery and the mind-blowing and the sexual “liberation.” *Of course:* There’s a guilty “them” all right, but *I* am one of *them*. Faced with the revelatory attack, one might abjectly or enthusiastically agree. One might try to prove again and again what a very good boy one was. One might disagree, defiantly put on a big display of bad-boyism. None of that mattered. Those men had spent ten years inventing a moral language which they suddenly found describing — themselves. *Of course.*

Because men are the guilty sex, that is not only the message of feminism, it is what the whole obsessional moral language of the Sixties has at last settled down and resolved itself into saying. That moral language always needed a “them,” and men fit the bill. True enough, there is nothing very new about men’s role as the guilty sex. Half the items in feminism’s catalog of contempt were already strewn around us, many as old as Huckleberry Finn. There is nothing new in the vision of men as brutal, bemuscle weaklings, cloddishly incapable of appreciating the Higher Things; rough creatures tracking up the rug with their childish, animalistic emotions. During the nineteenth century, men were the guilty sex because they were the sexual sex; in the twentieth, they are the untender, faithless sex that ruts without love, They are the dishonest sex, destructively competitive, stupidly in continual need of massage for their fatuous pouting male egos. Animals. Children. Longer than anyone can remember, ideas like this have been mixed with many a mother’s milk. But the feminists filled up the cup of their mothers, refining the old-fashioned angry contempt into a modern politicized rhetoric, with some crucial additions. Above all, men are also *unnecessary*: Whatever value a member of the guilty sex might have for a woman, it should, must, not be social, emotional, or economical dependence. Add other details: Big talkers though they are, men can’t take the heat — men are terrified of a sexually liberated or competitive woman. “Their poor egos, you know.” Add: In personal relations, men are frightened cripples, incapable of a “committed relationship,” the current code word for marriage. When not guilty in their false, but oppressive, strength, they are guilty in their unreliable, infantile weakness. Add: Even “good” men are infected with the masculine disease with little hope of cure. Their “conditioning” is too deep. Add: Since by nature or training men are less sensitive than women, they are also less intelligent. At best, their intelligence is less good, less

true, less beautiful. Add: In every way that matters, women are stronger than men, they have fewer “ego problems.” Roll over Beethoven. Anything you can do, I can do better. Snakes and snails and puppy-dog tails.

The old counterculture used to make a great display of despising the exercise of power and the pursuit of success, but it’s no paradox that emerging from that atmosphere, feminism makes an equal but opposite display of enthusiastically admiring any sign of women’s power, personal strength, or success. The counterculture viewed such desires as arising from the nasty conformist hunger of the evil ego, something to be surrendered, transcended, obliterated. Here we come close to the center of the counterculture’s deepest moral hysteria, its most extreme disorientation — its desperate hash of confusion about the moral values implicit in either strength or weakness of ego. Despite all the talk, the guilty secret was, of course, that ego strength was much more desired than it was despised. The *real* problem with the wicked ego that so obsessed the scene was not its excessive strength, but its unworkability, unattainability, unlivability. It was, of course, never “obliterated” — only further damaged and confused. And damaged confused *egos* turn egomaniacal. This contradiction, more than anything else, produced massive dishonesty — career dishonesty, political dishonesty, emotional and sexual dishonesty, which the feminists, once their revelation came, were not slow to point out. What was their revelation? That the precious “ego” at the center of all the fancy talk, the brilliant energy, the evasion and dishonesty was actually the “male ego.” And so it was, so it was — exactly that suburban ego that, appalled at its options, had embarked on its flamboyant search for innocence that came to an end in the desperate dishonest morass of the guilty sex.

Meanwhile, though feminism keeps on clinging fiercely to the old-fashioned moralism about the evils of the hungry, nasty (male) ego, it very intelligently has no interest whatever in transcending surrendering, or obliterating the female ego. Hardly. Psychologically, the whole operation resembles a vast, systematic rescue mission for the battered and ignored female ego, with results rather like a new, chic boosterism, more and more orchestrated with good old-fashioned American success stories. Central to this perhaps necessary boosterism has been feminism’s reinvention of the word “woman,” so that it no longer means the adult female but “Woman,” that is, an essentially heroic moral condition. As in Helen Reddy’s song, “Woman” means an at once nourishing suffering, purifying rage, from determination, outraged victimization, clarity of vision, self-reliance, self-knowledge, richness of passion, action, power. The classical heroic virtues, in short. This heroism is now sexually exclusive: Men have no part in it. They do not participate in these virtues. But men are necessary to the heroic epic of feminism. The vision of Woman cannot survive a day without the vision of the guilty sex, and if the guilty sex had not existed, feminism would have had to invent it.

All this is half symptom, half strategy. Feminism’s rescue mission has been significantly successful, and in such a heartening and exciting way that one feels like not noticing that it is built on a certain amount of rhetorical dishonesty. Among many other things, it has indeed shown many women the way out of the inspired infantilism and bewildered self-hatred of the old counterculture, surely why everybody is so fascinated with Jane Alpert’s trip up from underground. Meanwhile the men — and especially the most intelligent and perceptive of two generations — find themselves still stuck with the perception that transfixed them from the first, now reinforced by feminism and ten years of failed “alternatives.” They confront what they have always confronted: that this culture offers less and less to make any mode of “being a man” accessible, promising, gratifying, endurable. What’s

more, they are stuck with a problem: the unshakable belief that the only *nourishing* freedom belongs to the victim, that freedom *means* the victim's process of self-liberation. And if the precious all-prized right to view oneself as a victim is withdrawn — as feminism has definitively withdrawn it from men — what then? The moral language offers no help to the guilty sex. Meanwhile, the options stink. You can't go home again. Then there is the nauseating primitivism of a macho fantasy completely cut off from reality, or some reactionary establishmentarianism. Or the pretty sentiments of feminist rhetoric about “equal human beings,” actually underwritten by deep assumptions about heroic Woman and the guilty sex. (Not to mention some new dishonesties and vanities, rather like the old counterculture's, about freedom and power, dependence and independence, which are beginning to emerge.) The revolution to come? “Life is short; it must be lived. The fact is that hundreds of thousands of men find themselves teetering on one side or the other of thirty, confronting nothing but guilty options, caught in a triumphant trap (significantly of their own making) of damned if you do and damned if you don't, still the guilty sex, still completely unsure of who or what it is okay to be (either for themselves or for women), confronting guilty hardness or guilty softness, guilty sex or guilty sexlessness, guilty manhood or guilty lack of it, guilty failure or guilty success.

A nifty dilemma. The greatest silencer of all is shame. It works much better than fear, much better than doubt. We are currently surrounded by an immense, interminable discussion; American writing now is almost totally dominated by the how-to books of alienated sexual identity. But at the center of this discussion there is a silence — a silence about the *actual* masculine experience. And I suppose it could be figured that silence exists because the whole discussion rests upon a notion of masculine failure and guilt; that without that silencing notion, the discussion would come to an end; certainly the terms would change so dramatically as to become almost unrecognizable. But the discussion is not going to end; there is no real reason why it should. More important, it seems to me, is that the problems of sexual identity men currently confront are older and bigger than feminism, and (no doubt because nothing is harder to discuss) nobody seems really prepared to define them. Take, for example, two of this year's [1975] most conspicuous entries. They are not exactly inspiring. Emerging from the right wing, George Gilder's *Naked Nomads*. And then, from the opposite pole, Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine*, which comes to us chugging directly down the feminist main line.

Feigen Fasteau's book makes one wonder if it is even possible to speak at all accurately or honestly about the masculine experience from the feminist position. It also raises some severe questions about the character of the people who claim to be that movement's seers. Still, I can recommend *The Male Machine* to any man who fears that embracing feminism means abjection, self-hatred. For, truly, this is no work of self-hatred. It is, on the contrary, one of the most complacent, self-admiring, and snobbish books with any claim to seriousness I can recall having read. It claims to be a rich, deeply personal testament straight from the soul of Feminist Man. This is exactly, and very obviously, what it is not. Yet in her unctuous introduction, so impressed is Gloria Steinem by the way Feigen Fasteau has “lived and tested” his Thought that she suggests it is more profound than the comparatively shabby and inferior contribution of Karl Marx. It takes a moment for this utterly amazing observation to sink in. Oddly, I didn't laugh. I just stared.

Instead of being the new *Das Kapital*, *The Male Machine* turns out to be a lazy little two-hundred-twenty-five-page cartoon, labeled MEN. It is not original with Feigen Fasteau of course, it

is the standard feminist cartoon cleaned up a bit for masculine consumption. But it is about the Big Subject, and, in its platitudinous way, it does mark out some major areas of concern. I was even sometimes tempted to applaud, as one is always tempted to applaud a demagogue, however vacuous, addressing one's own pain. Perhaps I should say that, like how many hundred thousand — how many million? — others, I too have lived in some considerable pain with every aspect (except fatherhood) of the masculine dilemma Feigen Fasteau discusses — and several he does not. Like them, I too have felt mutilated, baffled and enraged by plenty of the prevalent middeclass notions of manhood. It is indeed difficult to either surrender or fulfill the desire to be recognized, loved and admired as a man; difficult to surrender or fulfill the absurd sexualized fantasy of wisdom, self-confidence, attractiveness, focus of identity, fulsomeness of love, totality of competence, personal power and success one is supposed to want. Like a million others, I have found the mystery of sexual identity baffling indeed. Like them I have known considerable fear and pain over sexual humiliation, guilt over humiliating. I have sometimes confused and betrayed myself trying to “be a man,” and likewise trying not to be. I have indeed craved, despised, and been refused entry into the great magic circle of mutual masculine approval. I have known a certain amount of self-recognition, not all of it totally false, I hope. During childhood, an all-loved, all-feared father dies young; on the baseball diamond “he swings like a girl!” Growing up, love. Marriage. Deep dependence. Divorce. Confused and not so confused affairs ending badly or at least ending. Homosexuality. Heterosexuality. No sexuality. Some very rough romps with the muscular demons of self-destruction. Some surges of strength, some growth, some collapses in weakness. Discovery of some strength in weakness, and vice versa. Some numb cynicism. Some faith, Some failure. Some success. Some love. Some being loved. A life, in a word.

I raise these crucial banalities (they compose every life, after all) not out of any confessional vanity (God knows we've had enough of that), but to suggest why Feigen Fasteau's book is so peculiarly irritating, so remarkably empty. He addresses what everyone knows to be one of the most anguished questions of our time. Yet it does not seem even once to have occurred to him that anybody with the slightest capacity for feelingful self-knowledge, moral insight, or emotional intelligence might actually read him, Hence the cartoon, MEN, which runs roughly as follows:

Men are creatures of questionable humanity living a lie: namely, that they are superior in every significant way to women. This lie makes men incapable of tenderness, intimacy, self-knowledge or friendship. True love eludes us. Even if we want more, our masculine delusions make us incapable of meaningful self-expression, self-surrender, or genuine intellectual exchange, especially with women. We like women only when dominating them; we are deeply threatened by any emotional exchange that doesn't result in their submission and our glorification. Our work and careers are arid and destructive: Whatever we feel for our fellow human beings is completely subordinate to our desire to prove ourselves Big Deals. As fathers, we disregard our children except to brutalize them. We cannot allow ourselves to understand how a child might think or feel. We are sexually unsatisfactory: When potent, we are rough and thoughtless. When impotent, we are crashing bores. (We are impotent more and more often because we're scarce of women's “true” sensuality.) We are crude: Eros for us is a matter of low sex. Living our lie, we are responsible for most (if not all) the evils of this world. And yet — yet we are not completely bad. Our occasional vague insights into our buried humanity make us confused and unhappy in our crippled condition. But we can't admit those insights. Except for a few of us (like Feigen Fasteau, who acquired his keen moral insight from his wife), we have no capacity for self-knowledge, admitting all that is worst in ourselves and despising

all that is best. We are, in short, the guilty sex.

But Feigen Fasteau is all brotherly solicitude; he feels we are more to be pitied than censured. After offering this standard cartoon, he holds out a second standard cartoon as salvation. Stop thinking that we are superior to women, give up the male ego's craving to be thought a Big Deal and discover — I like that *discover* - our vulnerable humanity.

And how has Feigen Fasteau himself “lived and tested” these Profundities? Well, it turns out that the rewards of masculine ego surrender are remarkably enviable. On the dust jacket, we see that he is a very handsome man. Then Steinem glowingly reports that, unlike Marx, Feigen Fasteau moves “in the upper legal and political circles of New York and Washington,” a fact she feels has enormously enriched his mind. From Feigen Fasteau himself, we learn about a splendid record at Harvard, how he was a brilliantly promising as assistant to Mike Mansfield, how he was a mover and shaker on the *Harvard Law Review*. But mere status could not hide the truth that beneath the dazzling exterior, Feigen Fasteau was also a classic masculine cripple. For example, he solemnly confides that he wasn't especially open in friendships with men. That he sometimes behaved badly when he lost arguments with his wife. For (crucial event) there *is* a wife. As a bountiful providence would have it, Marc was able to marry Brenda Feigen Fasteau. Brenda also moves “in the upper legal and political circles of New York and Washington.” She is a feminist, brilliant, and deeply in love. Love brings hope. Under the ministrations of the peerless Brenda, Feigen Fasteau has now been able to achieve new openness, new richness of feeling, and membership, with Brenda, in the Harvard Club. Let's see, what other personal truth does he impart? Oh yes, he and Brenda Bummer in East Hampton. People play a rotten sexist tennis game out there. Anyway, on the basis of this remarkable Achievement, he has written his book. It is rapidly making him famous, and, though its theme is self-surrender, it has left his own self-esteem sufficiently intact that he suffers himself to be favorably compared, *in* its introduction, to one of the ten or fifteen most brilliant and significant minds in the entire history of humankind,

I submit that this nauseating display of almost mindless vanity is the *real* content of Feigen Fasteau's message to our bewildered world. Let's hope the nation's file clerks and gas station attendants will take his message to heart and outgrow their ridiculous obsession with their contemptible little egos. While we wait, let us think more about our mentor, our guide, our ideal. Is he truly the ideal liberated man? Or is he perhaps the ideal member of the Harvard Club? Nay, more, the *real* vision here is (feminists take heart) *the ideal husband*. Why, a woman would have to be *crazy* . . .

One tosses Feigen Fasteau's book aside to pick up George Gilder's *Naked Nomads*, a meditation from the right wing. Gilder *also* (this is getting monotonous) moves “in the upper legal and political circles of New York and Washington.” Yet, though a conservative, Gilder differs from the liberal Feigen Fasteau by showing some slight sensitivity to the special problems of men with incomes under \$50,000 a year, surely one small step forward for revolutionary thought. In fact, in his reactionary way, Gilder is as tortured as Feigen Fasteau is complacent. In a way, they both agree: Both believe that decent manhood is basically a matter of a really good marriage. But Gilder (who is unmarried) is actually saying something really troubling, something with real substance.

Gilder quotes Margaret Mead: “The recurrent problem of civilization is to define the male role.” Certainly it is the problem that has recurred right now. Why the male role in particular? Because only men can ever be considered socially unnecessary. Whatever the theoretical or real arrangement,

whether it is matriarchy, patriarchy, or the hopeful promise of egalitarian mixed doubles, women are essential to the continuing life of the human race. And men are not.

That is, most men are not. In a given year, it takes one hundred women to make one hundred babies. In theory, it takes only one man. The other ninety-nine are theoretically unnecessary and could be dispensed with entirely. Therefore men must find some service to the society — the society of women, above all — which will make them essential to the continuing life of the society. If, that is, men are to have meaningful lives, if they are to participate in what Gilder calls “responsible love.” Without performing that service, men are threatened with meaninglessness in a way that women can never be. For whom do men perform this service? Women. (And if the role is going to last, acquire content, it had better be a service beyond his cock.) Who finally judges the value of that service? Women. Women are the ones born necessary. Women are the center.

Suppose the man fails? Suppose the woman stops valuing his contribution? Suppose he can't perform it, or finds the available ways of performing it unrewarding, unacceptable? He then becomes one of Gilder's naked nomads, the troop of men without meaningful relations to women. Producing both his personal observations and a group of slightly tricky but still pretty convincing statistics, Gilder argues that unmarried men are, on the whole, the most miserable group of any marital status in this society. The statistics range from violent crime (*ninety percent* of it is committed by unmarried men), alcoholism, chronic depression, mental disease, accidental death, suicide and the disguised suicide of the guy who, after drowning his sorrows, decides to make them fly at ninety miles an hour in that spiffy bachelor's Porsche of his. Unmarried women are much better off than the unmarried men in all categories: In addition, the two groups earn about the same amount of money until the age of fifty-five, after which women earn more. In true conservative style, Gilder argues that most men develop meaningful lives — i.e, meaningful relations to women and children — only through institutions. And he triumphantly concludes that there is only one such institution capable of turning the trick in an advanced egalitarian democracy: it is monogamous marriage, and an active role as father and provider.

Do I agree with all this? I don't know. I don't know. Gilder's ideas about proper sex roles and the necessity of marriage have the weakness of all reactionary arguments, no matter how intelligent: They address a reality that no longer exists. The notion that men and women here and now are in any way ready, willing or able to relate to one another the way they did in 1915 or 1925 really strikes me as laughable. It really deserves some kind of prize, takes the cake. Right now does the role of father and provider remain truly gratifying and essential, successfully defining how men participate in “responsible love”? No doubt, for a lot of people. But there are a lot of others for whom that idea provokes little more than an angry or despairing groan. Last but not least, you don't need to be Ti-Grace Atkinson to suspect that a social system arbitrarily forcing women into social, emotional, and economic dependence on men is something less than the most splendid imaginable way of proving how marvelously valuable men are.

Yet Gilder in other ways is dead right. The question of sexual role is above all a matter of how one relates to the opposite sex and to children. That means *the* issue in defining the male role is *the definition of fatherhood*. And since fatherhood requires a definition that motherhood does not, one *must* produce a definition for a specifically male role. It is a simple fact that fatherhood and motherhood are different. It is a simple fact that in the entire history of humanity not one man has ever

given birth alone, nine months after the mother slipped fifty bucks into an envelope and took off to the Coast. It is a simple fact that no man has *ever* given birth to a child without being able to remember the name of that ship — its mother — that passed in the night. Plenty of children have been born without their fathers around. But not a single one ever came into the world without its mother. So what does fatherhood *mean*? This is not a question of equality. *Of course*, the classical sex roles are mutilating and burdensome. *Of course*, once the baby is born, the man and woman can share equally in the tasks needed to raise it. That is not the question. The question is this: Just why, precisely, is the man around *at all*? Why is he wanted *at all*? Why is he kept around for those nine months: And then for that new lifetime? Above all, why does *he* want to stay around?

This is no abstract anthropological fantasy. Just ask the fatherless and/or father-hating children of the suburbs (or the ghetto); ask the men picking up junior for their weekly three hours of pain and humiliation at the movies and the zoo. Ask the feminists, or the members of the guilty sex who see less and less even slightly compelling, desirable, or promising in our famous “committed relationship” and its inevitable guilty end. Of course women do, should, and will want to function in the world of income-producing work, just as men do, should, and will. That is not, at heart, a sexual question: It has been for reasons that are plainly archaic, and that everyone knows are archaic. The central issue is this: The male role is in crisis above all because this society is less and less able to produce a necessary, satisfactory, or satisfying definition of fatherhood. That fact, at least as much as the collapsing fantasy of male superiority (who ever believed it anyway?) is responsible for our big shake-up in masculine identity.

Children mean there *are* sex roles. The feminist rhetoric, attractive as it is, about “equal human beings” without sex roles therefore actually translates as follows: The female role, as always, will be to bear children. The male role will be to remain with the woman during pregnancy, the woman acknowledging him as the father, whereupon he proceeds to raise the child with her on exactly equal terms, just as they do other work on equal terms. In short, feminism’s vision of “equal human beings” blandly assumes the steady continuation of happy, fulfilled, satisfying marriage, in which there is a male role after all: it is to be a *totally accommodating* husband. This, by the way, is why books like Feigen Fasteau have as their not-very-disguised real theme what splendid and gratifying marriages their authors have achieved through the profound sensitivity of their remarkable souls. It’s likewise why the dominant feminist literature on the subject (see any bestselling feminist novel one can name, beginning with *Fear of Flying*) is all about how women heroically overcome all their old crippling inhibitions and limitations (and those of their men) the better to fulfill perfect marriages. Sexually, the “equal human beings” discussion is a disguised glorification of marriage and it assumes that marriage is the way men and women should relate to one another.

But from where I sit, that looks less like the solution than the problem. It’s a problem damn little likely to be solved by the reigning rhetoric of Woman and the guilty sex. As to our rhetorical “equal human beings” and their super marriages, one can only lift a dubious eyebrow, tip one’s hat to the lucky winners, and marvel at the amazing simplicity of it all. The question seems less one of equality than of gratification and livability. (It feels almost too banal to say, but I myself have never had a love relationship with *anyone* who was not, in ways, my plain superior — including sometimes professionally; likewise, I’ve never been in one in which I was not in ways, plainly superior.) Propaganda about perfect relationships may be pretty — but there is many a slip, isn’t there? The solution?

Beats me. Like Gilder and Feigen Fasteau, I come from that Sixties generation which discovered itself, in an imperial affluence, condemned to a special liberation — the apparent freedom to choose alternatives to childhood's unlivable options. Surveying the damages, it is now apparent we had no choice *but* that freedom. And one hardly knows if there are more grounds for hope or for despair in the fact that we will never again be the way we were.

[The following quotations, headed "Guilt Comes of Age," were presented on successive pages of the article by the editors of *Esquire*.]

Guilt Comes of Age

The guilt that affects young me around thirty was conceived in the counterculture and matured with the women's movement. What follows are fugitive fragments from the literature, small milestones that pointed the way fo the present dilemma of the American man.

1968

A young white today cannot help but recall the base deeds of his people. On every side, on every continent, he sees racial arrogance, savage brutality . . . There seems to be no end to the ghastly deeds of which his people are guilty. GUILTY. – Eldrige Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*

1970

[Valerie Solanas's] is composed mainly of a portrait in acid of the white American middle-class male and the social-political economic-cultural universe over which he presides. It is meant to devastate him, to reduce his works to zero, his emotions to puling infantilism . . . There can be no doubt: they're pigs, all right. – Vivian Gornick, "Introduction" to *SCUM Manifesto*

1970

I used to lie in bed beside my husband after those fights and wish I had the courage to bash his head in with a frying pan. – Sally Kempton, “Cutting Edge,” *Esquire*

1970

Good-bye, good-bye forever, counterfeit left, counterfeit, male-dominated, cracked-glass-mirror reflection of the American nightmare. . . . We are rising with a fury older and potentially greater than any force in history, and this time we will be free or no one will survive. – Robin Morgan, “Goody-bye to All That,” *RAT*

1970

The white heterosexual male is in a bind. . . . He is not oppressed. Men are not oppressed as men. Therefore they have nothing to be liberated from. – Jonathan Black, “The Feminist Wallop: Squirm, Baby, Squirm,” *The Village Voice*

1970

It is known that a father is necessary, but not known how to identify him, except negatively. – Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*

1973

Something of the mind-set of the Weathermen during this period [1969] can be seen in the way the Weatherleaders . . . talked about death, with . . . a sense of guilt so strong it had turned to rage. . . . The Weathermen actually held abstract debates . . . about whether killing white babies is “correct,” a Weatherman at on point shouting to the audience, “All white babies are pigs.” – Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS*

1974

Despite our best efforts, we remain human. – Mark Feigen fasteau, *The Male Machine*

1974

Men without women frequently become the “single menace” and tend to live short and destructive lives—destructive both to themselves and to society. – George Gilder, *Naked Nomads*



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