

SEX PRISON, 2016

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REVIEWING *THE SELECTED LETTERS OF NORMAN MAILER*, edited by J. Michael Lennon, in the 2015 issue of *The Mailer Review*, I said that the letters reminded me that after breaking through the Dark Night of His Soul in the 1950s, Mailer gained newfound success in the 1960s—only to founder on the rock of Women’s Liberation, circa 1970. He lurched into the feminist bulls-eye with his usual courage, but without sufficient self-awareness, preparation, or public sobriety. I wondered in my review whether Mailer would ever be forgiven for his shortcomings, his wild blurting, in how he sometimes approached women’s liberation—even though he was out front, often at personal and professional risk, on such fraught issues as Civil Rights, the Vietnam War, our nationalistic blunders abroad, economic injustice, environmental degradation, and the proxy and corporate-protection wars of our own often paranoid government. It was, then, the Mailer *Letters* that drove me back to *The Prisoner of Sex* to try to recapture his more considered thinking on the topic. I hadn’t read the book cover to cover in thirty years.

Following a description of his discovery that feminists considered him their “major ideological opposition” in Part 1 of this four-part book, Parts 2 and 3 take us to the heart of the matter. Looking first at Part 2, “The Acolyte,” we see Mailer running headlong into voluminous reading to find out what indeed 1970s feminism/ liberation is, as best he can discern it.

Here Mailer lays out his first admission that should hint to his “opposition” that he is no cartoonish misogynist smugly accepting the economic exploitation of women, who, Mailer tells us (by available 1964 figures), are making only 60% of the wages of men, and only 2% of whom are earning in America’s workforce over \$10, 000/ year. Any “everyday common conscience,” Mailer writes, would recoil from such a “condition in need of amendment” (Mailer 40). One has to make allowances for the justifiable

strain of feminist misandry in the 1970s, given the state of female exploitation and inequality on many fronts. But am I the only one who looks at the fact that things have not changed more than 17 percentage points on the issue of gender pay equity in half a century and feels inclined to suggest to academics, in particular, that in any practical sense we should by now be more concerned (or even outraged) about the real-world exploiters of women (and children and men) and less ruffled about the fictional narratives of canonical and non-canonical male writers? According to the U.S. Census Bureau, for example, the gender pay equity gap went from 60% to 77% (*Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, 11). And The World Economic Forum's most recent data available on their website (*The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2014) puts the USA at number 20 out of 142 countries in gender equity, behind such countries as South Africa, the Philippines, Ireland, Rwanda, Latvia, Burundi, Ecuador, Bulgaria, and Slovenia.

Mailer also agrees in Part 2 of *Prisoner* with feminist Linda Phelps that women should not merely emulate men, not live in positions of power in men's world, but that the society men have created must be changed before a just and humane world can be built for both women and men (43). Mailer is nothing if not, by his own lights, a revolutionary; he seems, however, to have been too easily baited by feminists and missed his chance to engage publicly with feminism in a wider, more nuanced, revolutionary cause.

Mailer, furthermore, in Part 2 refutes, as the feminists did, Freud's theories of human (especially female) sexuality. He calls Freud's theories "cruel and unreasonable" (64–65). He also implies in the second part of the book what he will state explicitly later: his agreement with his "ideological opposition" in his attitude toward the 1950s domestic servitude of "the ranch house and plastic horizon." All "his enthusiasm for the mystery of the womb is not to squeeze women back into that old insane shoe," an insane shoe Betty Friedan called the Feminine Mystique. That Mystique, as Mailer puts it, is a creation of men, a "tool of still unsophisticated technologists and totalitarians." It led to a 1950s "hygienic and anti-sexual society" that "he [Mailer] hated . . . as few men alive" (128).

It is perhaps possible to say at least after re-reading Part II that Mailer's attitude toward women's rights is a little more complicated than often portrayed. In fact, there is a basic distinction we need to make for clarity's sake. On one hand, Mailer's position on *Women's Rights* by 1970 is, as he admits,

pretty close to NOW's legislative agenda for the Equal Rights Amendment that in 1973 started down its decades-long, futile struggle for passage (40). He does suggest, however, that NOW's legislative initiative will probably fail in the political process and that nothing short of changing the whole economic system will serve the intent of the ERA (43). On the other hand, his attitude toward the coeval *Women's Liberation* movement is far less agreeable; he finds this post-war wave of feminists too often misandrous and technophilic, tending toward a "unitary" or "totalitarian" vision of men and women. If we're going to critique Mailer's position on women, we should at least be attuned such basic distinctions.

Much of the rest of Part 2 consists of Mailer's examination at length of the women's liberation movement's specific cures for the social and political inequity he agrees they have correctly identified. But it is what he finds in his examination of the cures, as I've suggested, that gives him pause concerning the proposed solutions to men's historical exploitation of women. Using textual evidence from feminist writings, he makes the case for what he sees as a "Utopian" effort to alter the "design of human beings" in the "struggle with men" on the economic, corporate playing field in order to relieve "the damnable disadvantage" and "burden" (the feminists' word) of the womb. In short, he discovers an underlying theory ever tending (in varying degrees depending on the feminist author) toward human uniformity and technological solutions to exploitation and injustice. Ti-Grace Atkinson becomes Exhibit A in the effort to discredit sexual intercourse "as a means of population renewal" and as a rationale for "extra-uterine solutions" to the uterine "burdens" of our political economy (50–51).

And it is in Chapter 5 of Part 2 that Mailer presents through extensive quotation an ancillary tendency in liberationist writings to technologize sex, particularly the female orgasm by denying any experience of orgasm within the vagina through intercourse, a unitary theory of female orgasm that even Germaine Greer disputes and whom Mailer quotes at considerable length (Mailer 61–62). In Mailer's view, the case for limiting orgasm to the clitoris only is based on data from laboratory experimentation (or "laboratory libido") and is an effort, by the testimony of some of his quoted sources, to eliminate men from the sexual equation—one more example in Mailer's view of the drive toward a unitary vision of women and humanity, which is to say a fundamentally totalitarian impulse. Mailer sees any impulse to homogenize sexual polarity as "a world where men and women were as inter-

changeable as coin and cash.” Is it possible on the other hand, Mailer wonders, to believe that “God might have established man and woman in some asymmetry of forces”? He also argues that the technological solutions to sexual “asymmetry” are part of the effort to remove the mystery from sexual experience (63, 65).

It might be helpful to pause a moment to remind ourselves that by 1971 Mailer had argued for years, and would continue to argue most cogently in his nonfiction, against the dangers, even the evils, of the technological, totalitarian, and mystery-denying impulses in *men*.

Part 3 of *Prisoner*, “The Advocate,” is Mailer’s head-on confrontation with literary criticism, in this case feminist criticism, that relies on polemical distortions of texts; that confrontation consumes 40% or 71 pages of his book. He struggles mightily to make lengthy restorations of Henry Miller’s and D. H. Lawrence’s texts from Kate Millett’s quotations out of context and out of order, her truncated passages, and her insinuated paraphrases or summaries in her book *Sexual Politics*. “Her lack of fidelity to the material . . . was going to be equaled only by her authority in characterizing it . . . jeering at difficulties which were often the heart of the matter. . . the bloody ground strewn with the limbs of every amputated quote. Everywhere were signs that men were guilty and women must win” (72). Every reader will have to decide for herself whether the 53 pages Mailer packed with restored full texts beside Millett’s truncated texts represent a fair, accurate, or even convincing case. Laura Adams, to take one example of a female critic, said in *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer* that Mailer’s case against Millett is a fair and credible restoration of the male authors’ works, even though Adams disagrees at several points with Mailer’s more speculative sexual theories (Adams 165).

Given the tenor of the debates at the time, it seems important to understand also that Mailer does not present Miller and Lawrence as paragons of humanity or authorship. He specifically charges Miller, for example, with redundancy and with a lack of female characters “equal to Ibsen’s Nora to stand against his men” (91). And he is quite critical of Lawrence’s weaknesses as a writer: he could be pedestrian, didactic, “a pill and humorless nag,” even at times “pathetic” but with an intellectual ambition sufficient to overthrow European civilization. He was “perhaps a great writer,” but like Miller on a different, also flawed exploration in his life and work, Lawrence struggled to define himself and the deepest potential relations between men and women

(100). Lawrence's quest, his experimentations, took wrong turns, revealed weaknesses, but he was courageous in his repressive historical moment, as Miller was in his. But "*Millett concealed the pilgrimage, hid the life, covered over that emotional odyssey*," to make her reductive ideological point (102–103, my emphasis).

These are the basic lineaments and strengths of Mailer's book through the second and third parts. Dare one hope that a new generation of female readers and critics might look at Mailer—at his arguments in *Prisoner* and at his larger body of work—with a more sympathetic response than their sisters of the 1970s? Part 4 entitled "The Prisoner," however, does less to help encourage hope and seems to my mind to be a flawed authorial strategy that might sink the ship Mailer had been so far carefully constructing. It's not that the final part is entirely without moments of merit. Mailer does try to advance reasonably his earlier argument that the womb attaches a woman to forces larger than the individual herself—to forces of biological creativity, gestation, and the birth of another living being. But wouldn't this be a better book if he had never written Part 4 or had written it closer to his own advice to Miller? Like Miller and Lawrence, Mailer's own explorations as a human being and writer are of course flawed. Here, in the final section, he moves over from criticism and textual evidence to his outermost speculations regarding the mystical/cosmological implications of sex and conception. The speculations might be well-meaning as part of his effort to argue that "either sex had meaning which went to the root of existence, or it did not . . . and if human beings are not absurd . . . then sex cannot comfortably be absurd . . . and therefore best shunted over to semen banks and extra-uterine receptacles" (136–137). But in speculating over such a perhaps reasonable point, Mailer sounds at times like one of those clueless, old-school bishops or a zany right-wing politician on a roll using conception vs. contraception as a ploy to fire his zealous base. Women, some of his less mystical speculations run, once had a natural internal ability to avoid or abort pregnancy; women at the top of the economic ladder would become a "gestation free elite," hiring others to have their children; children would be raised by the "collective professionalization of the care of the young." And Mailer would not marry a woman whose pre-nuptial demands, or contract, for division of labor would cause his "work to suffer" (142–144, 154, 161, 164). His final statement that he "would agree with everything they asked but to quit the womb" (168) is perhaps unlikely to mitigate for most contempo-

rary female readers the mystical and biological speculations that preceded such an ultimate “agreement.”

The second misstep, as I see it, is that Mailer nowhere—and Part 4 would be the natural place—offers women alternatives to being trapped in either domestic OR corporate servitude. How might they best be liberated? What are the responsibilities of institutional and corporate chieftains and legislators to offer correctives for financial inequity, to offer solutions to problems of familial child-care? What is a feasible alternative, in Mailer’s view, to a woman’s technological separation from her womb, as he argued certain feminists were propounding? And wouldn’t it be better to rally male authors—including himself—to be more attuned to some of their female characters and offer at times “women equal to Ibsen’s Nora to stand against [their] men”? Given what comes before, why not propose answers to those questions, if there must be a fourth part of the book?

The Prisoner of Sex leaves me, at least, with several questions about critical approaches to Mailer. If by his own testimony Mailer would have women freed of economic exploitation, if he would rather they seek their liberation not through cultural and technological uniformities, if he would have feminist theoreticians at least play fairly with male authors when revealing their shortcomings, how might critics today confront Mailer on his “women’s issue” fairly, honestly, and productively? How might they best illuminate for readers the true strengths and true weaknesses of this writer—born just three years after women gained the right to vote—in his own experimental journey, in his own repressive historical moment, along the thorny path of one of literature’s oldest themes: how to make sense of—and perhaps restore health to—relations between men and women?

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