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THE  
PENGUIN BOOK  
*of*  
FEMINIST  
WRITING

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*Edited by*  
HANNAH DAWSON

PENGUIN CLASSICS  
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## Introduction

I put hoops in my ears. I rubbed cream that smelt of geraniums onto my arms, and went out into the night to meet my friends. I had to go along a road that had a park on one side and empty buildings on the other. There was no one around. The liquid moon of a motorbike's headlamp appeared, far off on the opposite side of the road. As it came closer, it crossed over, and came straight at me. I put my head down, away from the light. I froze. The motorbike swerved and stopped, sort of side-on, blocking my path, gleaming purring metal. A voice said, 'What have you got for me darling?' I looked up and from deep within the helmet a man wearing the mask of a skull looked back at me, sharp teeth and jawbone coming out of the dark. I thought: he is going to hurt me. And then I smiled at him.

Why did I smile? I have asked myself this question many times. I have felt shame at my smile. It came involuntarily, as automatic as adrenalin. Does my training run that deep? Mary Wollstonecraft said that 'the mighty business of female life is to please'.<sup>1</sup> How to parse a woman's smile? Who can tell its secrets? In this instance I know that the texture of my smile was fear. I smiled because I was terrified, and this was how my body thought to protect me. Survivors of rape worry that they will not be believed, sometimes because they did not fight back, or try to escape. They are right to worry; juries acquit men on these grounds. But these acquittals, and the systematic suspicion of a woman's testimony, fail to comprehend the workings of violence. Silence, stillness, a smile: these are the last ditches of protection, the body's chronic attempts to circumvent an attack, rather than complicity with it. Indeed, complicity itself, often touted as consent, can be the evaporation of power.

Perhaps my smile did protect me, and disarm him. Or perhaps he thought twice when other people turned into the road. Or perhaps he only ever wanted to mess with my head. At any rate, he drove off. Nothing happened.

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not really. There was no harm done. Yet I tell this story because my fear at the edge of the cavernous park was one more jolt in everyday gendered reality: a hand between my thighs on a crowded train; the boy who was my friend who gave me a razor and told me to shave my legs; the driver who shouted out of his window 'do you want to die, bitch?'; earning less than men, for the same work; watching another woman assaulted on television, for entertainment; receiving another instruction to cheer up, calm down, eat more, eat less; seeing rooms of white men make decisions about women's bodies; hearing a President say that he could do anything to women. Grab 'em by the pussy.

Feminism only makes sense if you believe in sexism. Otherwise it has no object, no legitimate claim. And here we come to a precipice: many people do not believe in sexism, in the same way that many people do not believe in racism. They deny that these are structural realities. If they concede that there is a problem, it certainly does not exist in them. They are not sexist. Indeed, men might say that *they* are under attack, caught up in a kind of war – they love their military metaphors – a culture war, a war on free speech, a sex war that women are winning, wearing the trousers, victorious over redundant, henpecked men.

I met a man, a successful artist, who said he was worried that women now have an unfair advantage. He was sympathetic to feminism, he explained, but he thought it ran the risk of discriminating against men. He told me that he had been asked to speak on a panel where he was the only man. This upset him, he said. He felt like a token. I saw another man on the news, a Member of Parliament, say that he did not believe in feminism, but in equality for all. He simply would not put up with double standards (lower for women, higher for men). I heard another man on the radio, a judge this time, say that he disapproved of positive discrimination. The first priority, he insisted, in choosing a judge is that they should be a good judge, rather than come from a particular group of people. He was concerned that favouring a candidate on the basis of their identity would discourage those who felt that the dice were loaded against them. I have listened to many men say that the 'me too' movement feels like an assault on them. It has gone too far, they explain. Their hands are tied. They are not allowed to flirt anymore. There are some bad men, of course, but not them. Not all men. When is International Men's Day, they ask every year.

Privilege does not see itself as such. This is core to its operation. The way of the world passes for the way of justice. Male supremacy stipulates itself as a reflection of merit, rather than a contingent function of power. And if you are told that what you think you see – sexism, misogyny – is not really there, but just a figment of your imagination, you might start to doubt your eyes, your capacity to read the world. You might venture to say that one of the reasons why people did not vote for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential election was because she was a woman. This might elicit outrage, or a smirk, followed by a list of 'real' reasons why she was not quite right. She was cold, unlikeable, too pleased with herself. As Rebecca Solnit put it, 'unconscious bias' was 'running for president'.<sup>2</sup>

You might complain when a man touches you, you might whisper that it is harassment – and then be told that it is just a bit of fun, don't be such a snowflake. And indeed, as your words fall through the air, they can seem like snowflakes, settling on nothing, vanishing into the tarmac. You are the offence, your complaint is the offence, rather than the offence that you are complaining about, and you are making everybody feel bad. A feminist is a killjoy, by definition, as Sara Ahmed explains; you kill joy by calling out sexism. 'To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order, is to be willing to cause unhappiness'. You are the one who is 'difficult', and 'angry', and causing tension, not the man with his hand on your knee.<sup>3</sup>

In this perceptual rift, the women who speak up are painted as the assailants. When Clinton stood against Donald Trump, the crowd shouted 'Lock her up'. When Christine Blasey Ford alleged that US Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her in high school, it was as though Zeus thundered back. The President called the accusation a 'trauma' for Kavanaugh; 'a man's life is in tatters'; what was happening to him was 'unfair'.<sup>4</sup> Kavanaugh shouted. He wept. He said that his name had been 'destroyed'. In fact, what happened was that he was confirmed in post while Blasey Ford received death threats and lived in hiding. Andrea Dworkin wrote: 'men often react to women's words – speaking and writing – as if they were acts of violence; sometimes men react to women's words with violence. So we lower our voices. Women whisper. Women apologize. Women shut up. Women trivialize what we know. Women shrink. Women pull back. Most women have experienced

enough dominance from men – control, violence, insult, contempt – that no threat seems empty.<sup>5</sup>

In the story of Medusa, a woman is angry and can turn men to stone. This cannot be borne, so Perseus cuts off her head. He decapitates a woman who has been raped and cast out of society. Or you could see it another way. You could say that he neutralizes a dangerous threat.<sup>6</sup>

From the perspective of gender, there are two ways of experience. One is flooded with light and runs along smooth lines. It feels well framed by language. Words like meritocracy and impartiality seem to touch something real. In this realm, the architecture of decision-making is constructed out of glass and steel. Shafts of objective reason shine through to the best candidate. Unbending principles of due process and the rule of law gird the halls. Here the best man wins. Here a man is innocent until proven guilty. To obstruct his path, to stop him from further ascent because of the whisperings of women would be prejudicial. He could lose his career. It would be a witch-hunt.

The very same place can feel like it is made of thorns. Due process, the rule of law, the proper channels – these bar your way; they can draw blood. The branches of the state – immigration, education, justice, healthcare – these tangle you up. You might know that you have been beaten, or are qualified for a particular job, or are ill – but the verdicts come back negative. Not guilty. Rejected. It is all in your head. Work – invisible, precarious, reproductive, emotional – does not feel like liberation. This does not feel like a land of equal opportunity. It does not feel like a safety net.

You might say quietly: if this is a witch-hunt, I am not the hunter. In the sixteenth century, it was said that you could find out whether someone was a witch by forcing them under water. If they floated back up, they were a witch. The king of Scotland, James VI, explained that this was because God made the pure water expel them. He (the king) went on to say that another way of ascertaining whether someone is a witch is seeing whether they can cry. Witches cannot cry. This is not a fail-safe method with women, however, because women can fake cry, ‘dissemblingly like the Crocodiles.’<sup>7</sup> They can turn on the waterworks. It is impossible to know whether a woman is a witch, or just a woman.

Here, you are guilty until proven innocent. You cannot be trusted on

the basis of your words, or your crocodile tears. Weep or don’t weep; speak up or stay silent; you’ll drown all the same.

To try and make people see what is right in front of their eyes: this is core to the history of feminism, as it has been to the history of all human rights struggles. It ran through the anti-slavery movement. ‘Am I Not A Man And A Brother?’ was the very basic question stamped on the halfpenny manufactured by Abolitionists in c. 1790. There is ‘no truth more self-evident’, wrote Frederick Douglass, than ‘that every man is, and of right ought to be, the owner of his own body; and that no man can rightfully claim another man as his property’. But white people would not see it. Douglass identified the same problem with women’s suffrage, for which he also campaigned. ‘There are none so blind as those who will not see’, he consoled in 1870, wondering at those who would not admit the truth of ‘the right of woman . . . to have a voice in the Government under which she lives’.<sup>8</sup>

As Douglass knew in relation to American ‘liberty’, the most blinkered are the most proud of their panoramic vision. When the so-called enlightenment dawned over Europe at the end of the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke announced that men were not born subject to kings but, rather, were born equal and free. Mary Astell, also a philosopher, pointed out that Locke had a blind spot. ‘If all men are born free’, she asked, ‘how is it that all women are born slaves?’<sup>9</sup> How could this be so blatant a fallacy to her, yet so perfect a syllogism to the person who was being lauded as the greatest thinker of the age? Under the system of coverture in English common law, a wife’s identity and will were subsumed by her husband’s. Her property became his, even the gifts he gave her. He was permitted to beat her, within reason, if she would not bend voluntarily to his command.<sup>10</sup> Astell had her own blind spot in brandishing the status of a slave on behalf of aristocratic white women when there were black women and men being bought and sold in London. As for Locke, he actively participated in the administration of the transatlantic slave trade, and had a hand in composing *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* which declared in 1669 that ‘every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves’.<sup>11</sup>

More than a hundred years later, Mary Wollstonecraft gazed at the French Revolution, thrilled by its promise of liberty. Blithely assuming