

Forthcoming from Quemar Press

***The Laps of the Gods: Power, Sexuality, Publishing and Literature:
an exploratory essay***

Jennifer Maiden

Second Preview

When I wrote my earlier book length essay, *The Cuckold and the Vampires: an essay on some aspects of conservative political manipulation of art and literature, including the experimental, and the conservatives' creation of conflict*, I became even more intrigued by many aspects and associations of its topic and promised myself I would explore them further. I'd like now to continue that exploration with you, keeping in mind that my aim is to surprise as well as satisfy us. The previous essay often included the burden, 'it is a lethal business', and there is no reason that in this one, too, we should not keep such danger in mind.

I'd like to begin with D.H. Lawrence. In *Cuckold*, I discussed Lawrence's high hierarchical position in English literature, including for some decades at Sydney University, as a result of his being part of Dr. Leavis' 'Great Tradition' which emphasised humane ethics. I also looked at the political banning of what I believe to be Lawrence's most vital work, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, ostensibly on the grounds of its sexuality, but also clearly as a result of its intense and eloquent rejection of capitalism, and its thesis that capitalism was crippling and could be countered by an understanding of sexuality. In this belief, Lawrence stipulated zealously that all swearing and jokes involving sex were a puritanical attack on idealistic energy. There is great courage, of course, in taking sex seriously. Many writers realise that an important means to breaking through in their technique is to confront and delineate difficult aspects of their sexuality. It is as if this audacity removes the dead skin of acquired persona and allows them to use subjects and styles that were once out of reach. I remember once almost a decade ago, when I tried to push my writing,



with huge effort, into greater sexual candour to relax and revitalise it, one of my numerous publishers described the result as ‘spicy’. The floor sank beneath me, as I realised he had no understanding of an enormous bravery I had thought he respected. As the work was to become my third *Play With Knives* novel, it may have been, too, that its political cutting edge was something the publisher wished to blunt by overall condescension, but there is another problem here we should consider.

That problem is epitomised in the career of the remarkable English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan. Tynan created the critical environment in which Britain’s new drama in the 1950s was possible, including by declaring that he could not love anybody who disliked *Look Back in Anger*. He was a socialist and a powerful advocate of the Brechtian theatre of East Germany. He supported Castro’s Revolution in Cuba, but was able to stop an execution on the spot there by throwing a brief hysterical breakdown. Again, one should aspire to such awkward revelations that discompose persona. Tynan, however, was also a sexual sadomasochist, and felt a Lawrencian mission to reveal and analyse his own and other problematic erotic traits. The social effect of this mission was to lessen respect for his considerable artistic influence, and for his literary skill.

That a person of such professional substance was prepared to risk that in order to investigate what he saw as the sexual basis of political power nevertheless seems to me worth great respect. There is also an endearing naivety about his astonishment that makes one tremble for him sometimes. He couldn’t understand why the magazine *Playboy* refused to publish an essay he wrote about the attraction of women’s panties. *Playboy* said their magazine’s policy must always appear ‘normal’. Lawrence might have fathomed even more than Tynan, perhaps, the powerful use of the word ‘normal’ here.

There is one aspect of Tynan’s uneasy relationship with power that seems to me particularly interesting. When I was working as a writer for the NSW Torture and Trauma Rehabilitation Service, and in other workshops, I developed a ‘hierarchical theory’, in which people who have suffered trauma lose confidence in power figures, and in themselves, and inhabit an insecure position in all hierarchies, alternating briefly at either the top or bottom. I thought that one solution might be in art, or in sex - including



sadomasochism - where there are fluxing power positions between artist and audience, or active and passive erotic partners. Their instability could then be stylised beyond repetitive social grief.

In reference to stylisation, it is clear from Tynan's writings about his sexual fantasies that the main charm in them for him was that the female partner be explicitly consenting and that she enjoy the experience. I don't think that this is merely self-justifying on his part, as her described consent has its own intrinsic eroticism. Perhaps we should look more closely later at the concept of consent in that regard? Of course, 'consent' is a dubious concept in some feminist terms, as it can be a legal excuse for what a victim has actually experienced as a violation, and a friendly mutual agreement is usually not the subject of a later dispute. The nearer one comes to the Conservative's exercise of power, however, the more any playing with the concept of consent becomes political. The case of the spurious Swedish accusations against Julian Assange are a case in point.

When I discussed in *Cuckold* the Conservative use of conflict to achieve political goals, some of my focuses were art, addiction, academe, illness and espionage, but conservative political uses of sexuality also deserve more attention. As I write this, Ghislaine Maxwell has just been convicted of five charges of sex trafficking, and the intricacies of power and consent in her situation are worth noting. One scenario from a retired Israeli Intelligence asset is that she and Epstein were not employed by Mossad but - like her publisher father (Pergamon Press) - Israeli Army Intelligence, and that their sexual manipulations and knowledge of the powerful were designed to gain political influence. This could be even more complex if Mossad had a different position - say, manipulating Trump - and the Army still favoured the Democratic Party's Two State Solution. At any rate, Maxwell's brother quotes her as being convinced Epstein was murdered. In *Cuckold* and some of my poems, including several later ones - like *Death-Wish Moths* - one of the conflict-tools Conservative forces use for power is public betrayal. It fascinates me that artists in particular seem so trusting of power figures, like patrons or publishers, when bodies from such betrayals are strewn everywhere before their eyes. Or is it not trust? Is the flaw in them so reliable that the possible public betrayal is part of the seduction?



Apart from Assange, whose entrapment has a literary flourish, and Maxwell/Epstein, whose arrangements have the ingeniousness of fiction - or her fathers' newspapers - one retired Russian spy observed that he never knew of any espionage service using honeytraps as such, unless it were a young Israeli woman whose car breaks down outside a military base asking for help as her male colleagues cheerfully break and enter. Red Sparrows not so much. *Red Sparrow* was written by a retired CIA employee (of whom all their other employees must be in emulatory awe) and perhaps the whole honeytrap universe is a way of restricting sexuality within the powers of art. But there is a gigantic interaction always between the Intelligence Agencies and Literature, and one of the destabilising powers of art is doubt. When I was young, I once described the convoluted speech of a politician as 'like a spy novel, if it were written by Henry James'. But most James novels are about espionage on the hearth, and the guilt of those who practise it, often couples. Anthony Burgess thought guilt was an aphrodisiac, but that may depend on whether the sexuality burrows in, like that of Proust, Hardy and Woolf - or out, like that of Lawrence, Tynan and Márquez. Either direction is powerful.

In Proust, Hardy and Woolf, the sexual power comes from studied inhibition: Proust's chiaroscuro shifting between direct and indirect revelations of homosexuality and sadomasochism, Hardy's savoured ironies about tragic sexual intolerance, Woolf's characters constrained by their sexual caution and apprehensions - what her most poignant character, Louis in *The Waves*, describes as his distractions to defend his 'infinitely young and unprotected soul'.

In Lawrence, Tynan and Márquez, the sexual power burrows outwards to the light, but this is an arduous and oppositional process: in Lawrence the sexuality is finally insurrectionary in itself, and by its existence in exile injurious to capitalist inhumanity, in Tynan there is a deliberate quixotic emphasis on explicating the once-uncomfortable, in Márquez there is an identification of the doubts and complexities that might interfere with the purity of physical passion, as in *The General in His Labyrinth* he presents Simón Bolívar as complexly weighed-down and his lover Manuela Sáenz as idealistic and liberated but perhaps lost to him. Márquez's depiction of Sáenz is very positive and contributed to dispelling puritanical prejudice



against her in South America, but when I was acting as a sounding board for my daughter's recent translation of Sáenz's and Bolívar's letters to each other, it was clear that Sáenz was much deeper and shrewder and their relationship much less doomed than that portrayed by Márquez. Márquez, of course, was temporarily dispirited regarding revolutions by the disastrous dissolution of the Soviet Union. But female sexuality never ceases to be a redeeming force in his work, whether it is that of the young girl in *Of Love and Other Demons* whose long red hair grows back after she dies from an exorcism, or the 14 year old prostitute in *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, who becomes the love-object of a ninety-year old male journalist. The hero's sexual fascination with her grows into his first profound erotic passion and is consummated not in sexual acts but by his devoting himself to providing for her education and welfare. It is interesting that this never seems to be a transcendence of sexuality but rather an insight into its expansive emotional potential.

There is an obvious parallel between the above erotic outcome and that of Nabokov's *Lolita*, where the hero's obsession with nymphets turns into helpless ineradicable love for the grown-up Lolita, even though she is 'ruined' in terms of his sexual orientation. Nabokov was an influential asset of Western Intelligence services during the Cold War, and any paradox in *Lolita's* thesis should be seen as a reaction to this. The furtive and fixated North American social landscape across which the characters travel is finally contradicted by the spontaneous overthrow of its acquisitory cunning.

The Intelligence Services' own obsession with under-age sexual objects might be seen as more than just a convenient means to blackmail, but as sometimes part of a larger philosophy. The cheerful knowingness reported and photographed in Ghislaine Maxwell's conversation and demeanour, for example, suggests that, like her publisher father, she felt genuinely idealistic in her patriotism and that her backers provided and instilled in her a worldly reassurance about recruiting unwitting young assets, because they were also serving what was deemed to be the higher patriotic cause.

To refer again to Maxwell in the *Death-Wish Moths* context, it may be significant that the juror who has just suddenly declared that he had been sexually molested as a child, thus potentially giving grounds for a mistrial,



has been revealed to be an employee of the Carlyle financial Group. This Group has been managed by U.S. government figures such as the Bush Family and CIA executives, involved with buying and selling several Arms companies and associated with Saudi Arabia. It is possible Maxwell was reassured that some such safety net would follow her conviction, but whether or not she should trust it is still worth some speculation. What contact has she had with Robert Maxwell since he disappeared from his yacht, pursued by disappointed creditors?

On the subject of the Carlisle Group, we should remember that in 2004 the Centre for Public Integrity questioned the deliberate close inter-relating between the Group and political figures as ‘access capitalism’, a term invented to describe the Group by Michael Lewis in 1993 in the *New Republic*. A former Carlyle CEO, Glenn Youngkin, was elected Governor of Virginia as a supporter of Donald Trump, whose loss of the 2020 election he regards as illegitimate. Carlyle is also an owner of Nielsen Holdings, an American information, data and market measurement firm operating in more than 100 countries with at least 44,000 employees.

No novice himself at access capitalism, Rupert Murdoch’s HarperCollins recently suffered a defeat in the British High Court for libel against a Russian - Roman Abramovich - and the Russian state oil company. The book was part of a larger project to fuel anti-Russian feeling and conflict, in keeping with general Fox and News Corp sentiment.

Another current peculiarity in propaganda book publishing that I would like to discuss further here later is the spate of supposedly sympathetic biographies (some by Australians) of Left Wing heroes which actually undermine their political positions and stress their pathology and psychological and social flaws. Recent books on Paul Robeson, Henry Lawson and Ethel Rosenberg are particularly irritating in this regard, and often read like falsely empathetic CIA files.

One rival to HarperCollins is Penguin Random House, owned by German conglomerate Bertelsmann, controlled by the Mohn Family, with a pro-capitalist philosophy and once the largest book producer for the Wehrmacht. Murdoch recently had a partial victory, however, when Penguin Random House’s bid to take over Simon & Schuster was put on



hold by the Department of Justice on the grounds that Penguin would have owned nearly half the book market in America.

On the subject of anti-Russian propaganda, I have been meaning to differentiate more distinctly between Red Sparrows and Honeytraps. Red Sparrows, as I've suggested, are largely a CIA fantasy, but Honeytraps, such as those innocents procured by Ghislaine Maxwell, do seem to be a significant political factor. Of the two women who accused Assange, one had a CIA history but probably no training in seduction (she simply turned up back at her flat as his host and he was, as expected, obliging) but the other, who was influenced by her, and was thought at the time by Assange's other Swedish hosts to be some strange type of interloping seductress, seems to have been genuinely surprised by the seriousness of the legal outcome. On that topic, it has always seemed to me that the fact that the condom one of the women took to the police station as evidence against Assange showed no traces at all of semen when analysed was in fact a great piece of historical comedy: since the 'rape' accusation involved him purportedly not using a condom, any sperm on the condom would have actually defeated their case. So they must take in an unused one. We should acknowledge how logical that indeed was.

It has a quietly droll logic that would have appealed to Virginia Woolf. And having begun to discuss Woolf's sexuality, and some of the enormous publishing empires, it is time to look at the history of a smaller publisher, Hogarth Press, to examine Woolf's role in it and without pathologising her to ask why she relinquished it, and what sexual complexities were involved...

To be continued

