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LOVELY LESBIANS; OR, PUSSY GALORE

Elisabeth Ladenson

From Sharon Stone's ice pick–wielding high jinks in *Basic Instinct* to Ellen DeGeneres's earnest self-revelation to Ally McBeal's vapid experimentation, fictional lesbians have gotten a lot of press over the past few years. The preponderance of lesbian themes may well be the fruit of a discovery on the part of entertainment executives that lesbian plotlines represent the only erotic configuration more or less guaranteed to appeal to all sexual demographics. Lesbians themselves, no matter how indignant over exploitation and inauthenticity, will never be able to resist taking a look at exactly how they are misrepresented; straight women are notoriously curious about such matters; straight men will line up in any weather; and, finally, gay men can generally be counted on for at least a token modicum of solidarity and identification.

In any case, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a heterosexual man in search of entertainment will want to watch women have sex. I began to ponder this phenomenon seriously some years ago while watching *Roseanne*. In one memorable episode Roseanne and her butch-but-straight sister, Jackie, get into an altercation about Jackie's decision to join the police force. They end up, in that over-the-top *Roseanne* way that I still miss, wrestling violently on the couch. Roseanne's husband, Dan, comes in, watches his wife and sister-in-law flail together for a moment, and finally asks: "Is this a sex thing? Because if it is, I'll go get my camera." The force of the joke depends on a peculiar assumption pushed to its limit: a heterosexual man finds the idea of women having sex together more compelling than any other conceivable contingency; this image somehow trumps all others. Faced with the spectacle of two women grappling, Dan is so distracted by the possibility that he is witnessing some arcane form of lesbian sex that he is prepared to ignore the scene's more likely implications: that Roseanne and Jackie are engaged in hand-to-hand combat, which is in fact the

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case, or, for that matter, that if what he is seeing actually is "a sex thing," it means that his wife is embroiled in adulterous homosexual incest.

What exactly is the appeal of lesbianism to the straight male mind, and what are the narratives of lesbianism that our culture gives us? Common wisdom suggests a twofold representation: the tragic, repellent, mannish lesbian of Sister George fame, on the one hand, and, on the other, the girlish, comely faux lesbian familiar from those preposterous *Penthouse* spreads that I'm sure you can imagine even if you've never sullied yourself by examining them. In other words, butch-fem writ large. This is not, however, the whole story. I propose to approach these questions by taking a look at the depictions of lesbianism—or, to be more precise, the depiction of male relations to lesbianism—in two bodies of work that surely offer the most impeccable straight male credentials: Henry Miller's writing, and Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and the immensely popular films made from them.

On the second page of *Tropic of Cancer* we find the following stream-of-partial-consciousness musing:

> Dozing off. The physiology of love. The whale with his six foot penis. The bat—*penis [*sic*] libre*. Animals with a bone in the penis. Hence, *a bone on* . . . "Happily," says Gourmont, "the bony structure is lost in men." Happily? Yes, happily. Think of the human race walking around with a bone on. The kangaroo has a double penis—one for weekdays and one for holidays. Dozing. A letter from a female asking if I have found a title for my book. Title? To be sure: "Lovely Lesbians."[1]

It is clear, I think, that the sequence of thoughts in this paragraph does not represent quite the dreamy non sequitur it might at first glance seem to offer. Coming after Miller's celebration of penile variety, his proposed book title appears to be proposed in a spirit of surrealist irony, as though, in the context of this catalog of male genital polymorphism, he meant *lovely lesbians* as an oxymoron. What woman, after all, or at least what desirable woman, could resist the lure of an organ that entrances its very owners? Yet a closer look at Miller's bibliography suggests otherwise. The book whose title is in question is not a playful variant of *Tropic of Cancer* itself, as one might imagine from reading this scene. Before writing the volume that made him famous (and infamous, since for three decades it was banned in the United States), Miller had written two others. His second work is the one referred to in the passage above. It was originally titled *Lovely Lesbians* and, despite endless revision, was not published until 1991, eleven years after Miller's death. The book details its third-person hero's attempts to deal with his

wife's protracted affair with another woman. Miller eventually abandoned the title *Lovely Lesbians* for the one under which the book was finally published: *Crazy Cock*.[2]

Unlike *Tropic of Cancer*, *Crazy Cock* itself is not explicitly obsessed with genitalia of any sort. In fact, *Lovely Lesbians* would have been a much more accurate title for this early work—although a still more appropriate one might have been *Crazy Lesbians*. But *Tropic of Cancer*, like most of Miller's subsequent writings, filled as they are with loving depictions of male genitalia and annoyed interrogations of the inadequacies of female equipment, would have been quite well suited by the title *Lovely Cock*. In any case, it was not until Miller had wrenched his attention away from the apparent self-sufficiency of lesbian relations and back to his own genital apparatus that he became a successful author. The lovely lesbians of his earlier work disappeared, making a cameo appearance in *Tropic of Cancer* as a charming paradox that masks the pain of the original narrative. Here the lesbian is not so much the heroine of modernity, as Walter Benjamin would have it, as modernity's traumatic subtext. Traumatic, that is, not (as in the tradition of *The Well of Loneliness*, brought to trial in England and the United States just a few years before Miller published *Tropic of Cancer* in Paris) for the women involved but for their menfolk.

My other examples of the roles of lesbian characters in modern fiction come from the James Bond canon. Fleming's Bond novels offer two memorable lesbians: Rosa Klebb, the SMERSH operative played by Lotte Lenya in the film version of *From Russia with Love* (1963), and Pussy Galore, played by Honor Blackman, in *Goldfinger* (1964). Their names alone are enough to suggest their valences in the Bond oeuvre, and the ways they are played in the film versions seem at first glance to confirm the repellent butch–versus–comely fem scenario. Their characterizations in Fleming's novels, though, tell a more nuanced story.

First, Rosa Klebb. In the novel she is introduced as "a toad-like figure in an olive green uniform which bore the single red ribbon of the Order of Lenin"—clearly we have here, among other things, a Cold War dig at Iron Curtain femininity, the sort of joke that endured until recently in digs at Eastern European female athletes.[3] Klebb is, it turns out—in the novel, not the film—head of the SMERSH Department of Operations and Executions, or the Department of Torture and Death, as it is affectionately called in the novel. In fact, she is depicted as a particularly adept torturer because she displays to her victims a certain maternal quality; she is all the more efficiently violent not despite but because of it. In the film this quality is lost; Klebb becomes a caricature of the repellent, universally undesirable mannish lesbian. But in the novel a curious thing occurs: when she

sets out to seduce the alluring Comrade Corporal Tatiana Romanova, Bond's love interest, she sheds the trappings of masculine power and instead deploys traditional feminine methods. I quote the following passage in its entirety to give an idea of Fleming's peculiarly sumptuous descriptive tarrying:

> Colonel Klebb of SMERSH was wearing a semi-transparent nightgown in orange *crêpe de chine*. It had scallops of the same material round the low square neckline and scallops at the wrists of the broadly flounced sleeves. Underneath could be seen a brassiere consisting of two large pink satin roses. Below, she wore old-fashioned knickers of pink satin with elastic above the knees. One dimpled knee, like a yellowish coconut, appeared thrust forward between the half open folds of the nightgown in the classic stance of the modeller. The feet were enclosed in pink satin slippers with pompoms of ostrich feathers. Rosa Klebb had taken off her spectacles and her naked face was now thick with mascara and rouge and lipstick.
>
> She looked like the oldest and ugliest whore in the world.
>
> Tatiana stammered, "It's very pretty." (81–82)

Although the thrust of this scene is evidently to foreground the grotesqueness of Comrade Klebb's attempt at feminine seduction—which, you will be either relieved or disappointed to know, fails—it is still a bit disconcerting to find a detailed description of lingerie that would do Victoria's Secret proud in the pages of a Cold War spy novel. In any case, what is most surprising here, especially given the minimalist appearance of her character in the film, is Klebb's underlying femininity, however misplaced. Her performance—and her fatal flaw—is an exaggeration not of masculinity, as one might expect, but of femininity. (The only hint of masculinity in this passage is the peculiar coconut analogy, which is presumably meant to suggest that Comrade Klebb's knee is inappropriately hairy, given her meticulously chosen undergarments.)

In fact, where Rosa Klebb is all repellent curves, it is Tatiana, the alluring fem, whose body is marred by masculinity, even as it is irresistible (to both men and women, as it happens):

> A purist would have disapproved of her behind. Its muscles were so hardened with exercise that it had lost the smooth downward feminine sweep, and now, round at the back and hard at the sides, it jutted like a man's. (68)

James Bond, of "shaken, not stirred" fame, is just such a purist, and yet he seems to have a taste for masculine women. This becomes most clear in *Goldfinger*, which features one of the most arresting images of lesbianism from the latter half of the twentieth century: Pussy Galore. In the film Miss Galore, as she is politely referred to, is the alluringly phallic aviatrix, leader of a phalanx of female flyers ("Pussy Galore's Flying Circus"—no relation, presumably, to Monty Python's), who attracts and rejects Bond, then bests him at judo before succumbing to his charms, literally in the hay: the scene takes place in a barn. In fact, her betrayal of Goldfinger and the forces of evil saves the day. But Miss Galore is only part of the story in the novel. In Fleming's original version, a character who is given short shrift in the film plays a larger role: Tilly Masterson, sister of the woman who gets gilded at the beginning of the film. She is described in the following terms, after having been rear-ended, as it were, by Bond in his Aston Martin:

> There was something faintly mannish and open-air about the whole of her appearance. . . . Although she was very beautiful she was the kind who leaves her beauty alone. She had made no attempt to pat her hair into place. As a result, it looked like a girl's hair should look—untidy, with bits that strayed and a crooked parting.[4]

The description further informs us that Tilly displays self-reliance and independence, in addition to holding her body proudly, her fine breasts outthrown and unashamed under the taut silk. You can always, I have learned from reading such literature, tell a lesbian by her unashamed breasts.

In short, Tilly is a babe, and what makes her especially desirable, besides her air of "provocation and challenge" (110), is the very quality that sets these women apart from the rest of the Bond babes: unselfconsciousness. Some thirty pages later Miss Galore appears, walking "slowly, unselfconsciously down the room":

> Bond liked the look of her. He felt the sexual challenge all beautiful Lesbians have for men. He was amused by the uncompromising attitude that said to Goldfinger and to the room, "All men are bastards and cheats. Don't try any masculine hocus on me. I don't go for it. I'm in a separate league." (144)

A full physical description ensues; perhaps unsurprisingly, she resembles Tilly, who shares Bond's appreciation of Miss Galore's charms:

> Bond thought she was superb and so, he noticed, did Tilly Masterson who was gazing at Miss Galore with worshipping eyes and lips that yearned. Bond decided that all was now clear to him about Tilly Masterson. (144–45)

Indeed, all is now clear about Tilly Masterson, and about the attraction of such women in general: they are unselfconscious and therefore impermeable to the male gaze. If the book had a different spin, it might feature the two women going off together into the sunset; as it is, though, Tilly dies, and it is made evident that she would have lived had she chosen to follow Bond rather than Pussy Galore. Their imperviousness to male charms and preference for each other would seem to be the crux of the appeal of such women in such literature. But Miss Galore presents a different, slightly more complicated story. In both novel and film the very phallic Pussy succumbs to the even more phallic James Bond. In the book, though, Fleming offers a psychological case study of Pussy Galore, even if he summarizes it in approximately one-eighth the time he takes to describe Rosa Klebb's lingerie in *From Russia with Love*. In *Goldfinger*, in response to Bond's remark about having heard that she only likes women, Pussy significantly replies that she had never met a man before him. She adds that she is from the American South and therefore was raped by her uncle at twelve. Bond conjectures that what she needs is TLC, and the last line of the book makes clear what he means: "His mouth came down ruthlessly on hers" (191). Tender ruthless care, then, is what the lesbian needs, or at least what she gets at the hands (and mouth) of James Bond.

It is not all that surprising that the portrayals of lesbian characters are more nuanced in Fleming's novels than in the films made from them. Whatever spurious psychologizing may be offered up in the concluding lines of the novel to account for Miss Galore's sudden change of heart, it is her sexual indifference that has attracted Bond in the first place. What is remarkable in *Goldfinger* is that, while Pussy Galore's sexual history is mentioned as an afterthought, her name is left entirely unglossed. That name is to be read in both novel and film as successively an interdiction, a challenge, and a promise withheld and finally delivered. It is the excessivity of Pussy Galore, the sheer extravagance of both name and character, that lures Bond, and also lures the public: gay and straight, female as well as male. But in Fleming's novels, as in Miller's, perhaps the most surprising element is that the lovely lesbian is not quite the oxymoron she initially appears to be. The appeal of lesbianism to straight men—of lesbophilia, as it might be termed—has been explained in terms of hyperbolic heterosexuality (straight men want to see women together without having to deal with a phantasmatic rival) and,

alternatively, in terms of latent homosexual fantasies (homosexuality without the implicit threat of other men). I would suggest, though, that ultimately Pussy Galore escapes these explanations.

In *From Russia with Love* Rosa Klebb is both a ridiculous figure and a menacing one, equipped with, among other weapons, a poisoned spike in her shoe. In the book this spike, with which she succeeds in stabbing Bond (as she tellingly does not in the film; Bond deftly fends her off with a chair), takes second place to a pair of poison-tipped knitting needles. In fact, to her torture victims and to the reader, Klebb represents the Bad Mother in a way barely dreamed of by Melanie Klein. Pussy Galore is the other side of this peculiarly maternal coin, as evidenced by Bond's reply, delivered with appropriate irony, when he is asked at the end of the film why Pussy changed sides: "I must have appealed to her maternal instinct." The comely lesbian, like her repellent double, always comes down to an image of the desirable and punitive mother, and she is always conquered, whether by a well-aimed chair or by the sheer irresistibility of the hero. In the end, as Miller's peculiar encomium implies, the loveliness of the lesbian in popular culture depends on her proximity to the six-foot penis of the whale.

Notes

1. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove, 1961), 3.
2. Henry Miller, *Crazy Cock*, ed. Mary V. Dearborn (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).
3. Ian Fleming, *From Russia with Love* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 53. In Fleming's novel Rosa Klebb is presented as "undoubtedly belong[ing] to the rarest of all sexual types. She was a Neuter," further explained thus: "She might enjoy the act physically, but the instrument was of no importance. . . . sexual neutrality was the essence of coldness in an individual" (61–62). In the film, however, her indifference is subsumed into predatory mannish lesbianism.
4. Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 109–10.