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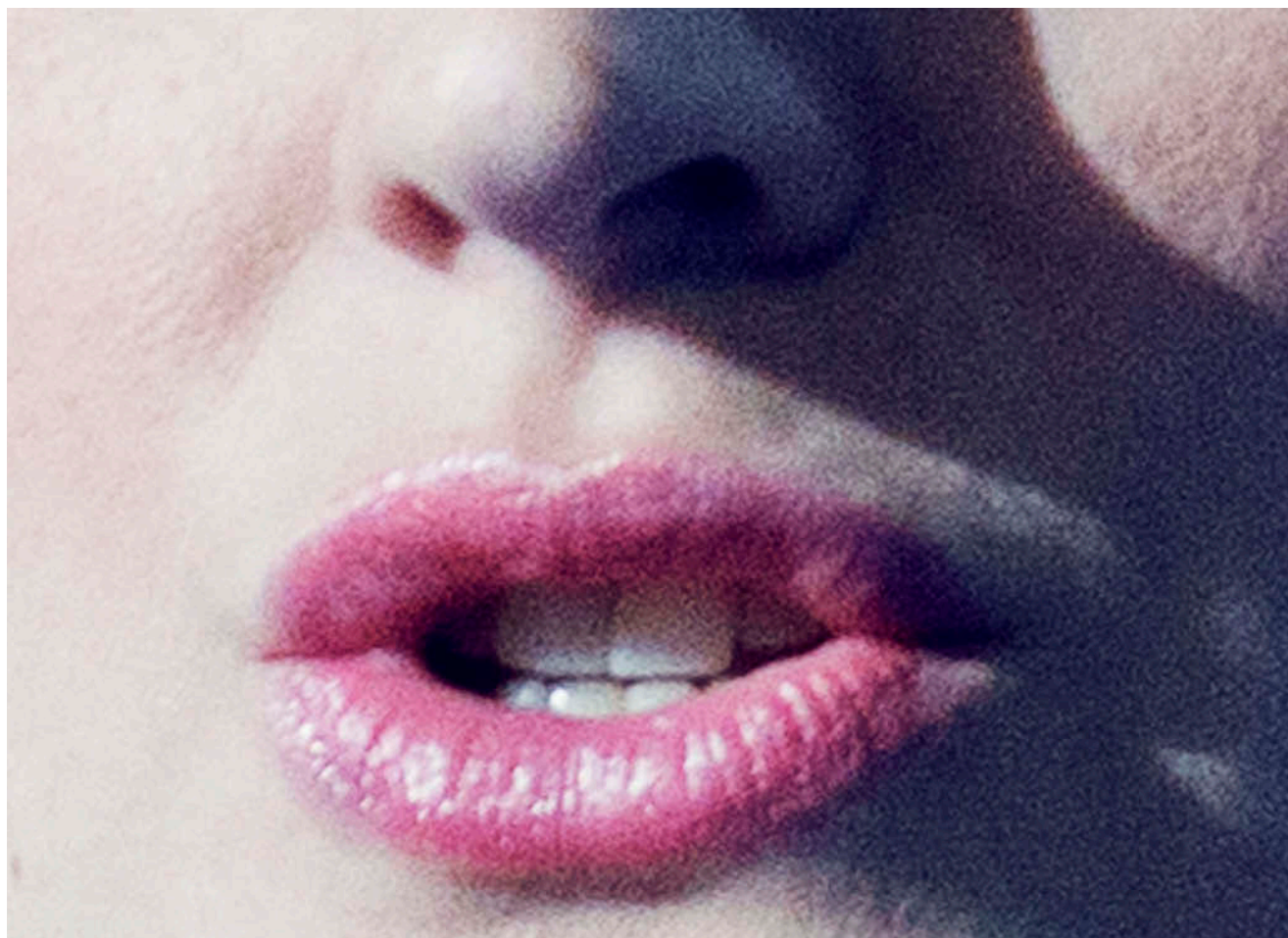
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# HARPER'S

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## SILENCING WOMEN

BY REBECCA SOLNIT



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# EASY CHAIR

## Cassandra Among the Creeps

By Rebecca Solnit

**T**he story of Cassandra, the woman who told the truth but was not believed, is not nearly as embedded in our culture as that of the Boy Who Cried Wolf—that is, the boy who was believed the first few times he told the same lie. Perhaps it should be. The daughter of the king of Troy, Cassandra was cursed with the gift of accurate prophecies no one heeded; her people thought she was both crazy and a liar and, in some accounts, locked her up before Agamemnon turned her into a concubine who was casually slain along with him.

I have been thinking of Cassandra as we sail through the choppy waters of the gender wars, because credibility is such a foundational power in those wars and because women are so often accused of being categorically lacking in this department.

Not uncommonly, when a woman says something that impugns a man, particularly a powerful one (not a black one unless he's just been nominated for the Supreme Court by a Republican president), or an institution, especially if it has to do with sex, the response will question not just the facts of her assertion but her capacity to speak and her right to do so. Generations of women have been told they are delusional, confused, manipulative, malicious, conspiratorial, congenitally dishonest, often all at once.

Part of what interests me is the impulse to dismiss and how often it slides into the very incoherence or hysteria of which women are routinely accused. It would be nice if, say, Rush Limbaugh, who called Sandra Fluke a “slut” and a “prostitute” for testifying to Democrats in Congress about the need to fund birth control and who apparently completely failed to comprehend how birth control works—Limbaugh the word-salad king, the factually challenged, the eternally riled—got called hysterical once in a while.

Rachel Carson was labeled thus for her landmark work on the dangers of pesticides, *Silent Spring*. Carson had put together a book whose research was meticulously footnoted and whose argument is now considered prophetic. But the chemical companies were not happy, and being female was, so to speak, her Achilles' heel. On October 14, 1962, the *Arizona Star* reviewed her book with the headline “*Silent Spring* Makes Protest Too Hysterical.” The preceding month—in an article that assured readers that DDT was entirely harmless to humans—*Time* magazine had called Carson's book “unfair, one-sided, and hysterically over-emphatic.” “Many scientists sympathize with Miss Carson's ... mystical attachment to the balance of nature,” the review allowed. “But they fear that her emotional and inaccurate outburst ... may do harm.” Carson was a scientist, incidentally.

**H**ysteria derives from the Greek word for “uterus,” and the extreme emotional state it denotes was once thought to be due to a wandering womb; men were by definition exempt from this diagnosis that now just means being incoherent, overwrought, and maybe confused. In the late nineteenth century, it was a commonly diagnosed condition. These women, whose agonies were put on display by Sigmund Freud's teacher Jean-Martin Charcot, appear in some cases to have been suffering from abuse, the resultant trauma, and the inability to express its cause.

The young Freud had a succession of patients whose troubles seemed to spring from childhood sexual abuse. What they were saying was unspeakable, in a sense: even today the severest traumas in war and domestic life so violate social mores and the victim's psyche that they are excruciating to articulate. Sexual assault, like torture, is an attack on a

victim's right to bodily integrity, to self-determination and -expression. It's annihilatory, silencing.

To tell a story and have it and the teller recognized and respected is still one of the best methods we have of overcoming trauma. Freud's patients, amazingly, found their way to telling what they had suffered, and at first he heard them. In 1896, he wrote, “I therefore put forward the thesis that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are *one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience*.” Then he repudiated his findings. If he believed his patients, he wrote, “in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse.”

As the feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman puts it in her book *Trauma and Recovery*: “His correspondence makes clear that he was increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis. ... Faced with this dilemma, Freud stopped listening to his female patients.” If they were telling the truth, he would have to challenge the whole edifice of patriarchal authority to support them. Later, she adds, “with a stubborn persistence that drove him into ever greater convolutions of theory, he insisted that women imagined and longed for the abusive sexual encounters of which they complained.” It was as though a handy alibi had been constructed for all transgressive authority, all male perpetrators of crimes against females. She wanted it. She imagined it. She doesn't know what she is saying.

Silence, like Dante's hell, has its concentric circles. First come the internal inhibitions, self-doubts, repressions, confusions, and shame that make it difficult to impossible to speak, along with the fear of being punished or ostracized for doing so. Susan Brison, now chair of the philosophy department at

Dartmouth, was raped in 1990 by a man, a stranger, who called her a whore and told her to shut up before choking her repeatedly, bashing her head with a stone, and leaving her for dead. Afterward she found various problems in talking about the experience: "It was one thing to have decided to speak and write about my rape, but another to find the voice with which to do it. Even after my fractured trachea had healed, I frequently had trouble speaking. I was never entirely mute, but I often had bouts of what a friend labeled 'fractured speech,' during which I stuttered and stammered, unable to string together a simple sentence without the words scattering like a broken necklace."

Surrounding this circle are the forces who attempt to silence someone who speaks up anyway, whether by humiliating or bullying or outright violence, including violence unto death. Finally, in the outermost ring, when the story has been told and the speaker has not been silenced directly, tale and teller are discredited. Given the hostility of this zone, you could call the brief era when Freud listened to his patients with an open mind a false dawn. For it's particularly when women speak up about sexual crimes that their right and capacity to speak come under attack. It seems almost reflexive at this point, and there is certainly a very clear pattern, one that has a history.

That pattern was first comprehensively challenged in the 1980s. We have at this point heard way too much about the 1960s, but the revolutionary changes of the 1980s—in toppled regimes around the world and in the bedroom, the classroom, the workplace, and the streets, and even in political organizing (with the feminist-inspired rise of consensus and other anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian techniques)—are mostly neglected and forgotten. It was an explosive era. The feminism of that era is often dismissed as grimly anti-sex because it pointed out that sex is an arena of power and that power is liable to abuse and because it described the nature of some of that abuse.

Feminists didn't just push for legislation but from the mid-1970s on defined and named whole categories of violation that had previously been unrecognized. In doing so, they announced that abuse of power was a serious prob-

lem, and that the authority of men, of bosses, husbands, fathers—and adults generally—was going to be questioned. They created a framework and support network for stories of incest and child abuse, as well as rape and domestic violence. Those stories became part of the narrative explosion in our time as so many of the formerly silent spoke up about their experiences.

On October 11, 1991, a law professor was called to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The occasion was the confirmation hearing for Clarence Thomas, nominated to the Supreme Court by George H. W. Bush; the speak-

## WHEN WOMEN SPEAK ABOUT SEXUAL CRIMES, THEIR RIGHT AND CAPACITY TO SPEAK COME UNDER ATTACK.

er was Anita Hill. When asked in a private interview and then, after that interview was leaked to the press, in Senate hearings, she recounted a list of incidents in which Thomas, then her boss, made her listen to him talk about pornography he'd watched and his sexual fantasies. He also pressured her to date him. When she declined, she said, "he would not accept my explanation as being valid," as though *no* were not itself valid.

Though she was criticized for doing nothing about his conduct at the time, it's worth remembering that feminists had only recently articulated the concept and coined the term *sexual harassment*, and that only in 1986, after the incidents she described had taken place, had the Supreme Court recognized such behavior in the workplace as a violation of the law. When she did speak up about it in 1991 she was attacked, extravagantly and furiously. Her interrogators were all men, the Republicans in particular jocular and incredulous and jeering. Senator Arlen Specter asked one witness, who on the basis of a couple of fleeting encounters testified that Hill had sexual fantasies about him, "Do you think it a possibility that Professor Hill imagined or fantasized Judge Thomas saying the things she has charged him with?" It was the Freudian framework

all over again: When she said something repellent happened, she was wishing it had, and maybe she couldn't tell the difference.

The country was in an uproar and a sort of civil war, as many women understood exactly how ordinary harassment is and how many unpleasant consequences there can be for reporting it, and many men didn't get it. In the short term, Hill was subjected to a humiliating ordeal, and Thomas won the appointment anyway. The loudest accusations came from conservative journalist David Brock, who published first an article and then a whole book smearing Hill. A decade later he repented from both his attacks on her and his alignment with the right, writing: "[D]oing everything I could to ruin Hill's credibility, I took a scattershot approach, dumping virtually every derogatory—and often contradictory—allegation I had collected on Hill from the Thomas camp into the mix.... She was, in my words, 'a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty.'"

In the long term, "I Believe You, Anita" became a feminist slogan, and Hill is often credited with launching a revolution in recognition of and response to workplace sexual harassment. A month after the hearings, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1991, part of which allowed sexual-harassment victims to sue their employers for damages and backpay. Harassment claims skyrocketed as people were given a way to address workplace abuses. The 1992 election was nicknamed "The Year of the Woman," and Carol Moseley Braun, still the only African-American woman ever elected to the Senate, won office along with more female senators and congresswomen than ever before.

Still, even now, when a woman says something uncomfortable about male misconduct, she is routinely portrayed as delusional, a malicious conspirator, a pathological liar, a whiner who doesn't recognize it's all in fun, or all of the above. The overkill of these responses recalls Freud's deployment of the joke about the broken kettle. A man accused by his neighbor of having returned a borrowed kettle damaged replies that he had returned it undamaged, it was already damaged when he borrowed it, and he had never borrowed it anyway.



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When a woman accuses a man and he or his defenders protest that much, she becomes that broken kettle.

So many broken kettles. Two decades after Anita Hill, when the hotel maid Nafissatou Diallo accused the head of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, of sexual assault, the *New York Post* called her a prostitute, the *New York Review of Books* published a piece hinting at transnational conspiracy, and Strauss-Kahn's platoon of expensive lawyers got the mainstream media to focus on lies Diallo reportedly told when seeking asylum (which she said she sought in order to spare her daughter the genital mutilation she herself had undergone in Guinea). They also attacked inconsistencies in her story of the assault, though the traumatized often suffer from exactly that kind of difficulty in transforming an obliterating experience into a neat, linear narrative. The criminal case was dropped, but Diallo received civil settlements from both the *Post* and Strauss-Kahn and ended the career of one of the world's most powerful men, or rather she and the several other women who stepped up to charge him with sex crimes did.

Even this year, when Dylan Farrow repeated her charges that her adoptive father, Woody Allen, had molested her, she became the most broken kettle around. A host of attackers arose. Allen published a tirade, asserting he could not have molested the child in the attic room where she said he did because he didn't like that room, proposing that his daughter had been coached and "indoctrinat[ed]" by her mother, Mia, who might have ghostwritten the accusation Dylan Farrow published, and adding that Mia had "undoubtedly" gotten the idea from a song about an attic. There was another gender divide, in which many women found the young woman credible, because they'd heard it all before, while many men seemed focused on false accusations and exaggerated the frequency of such occurrences.

Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, which addresses rape, child molestation, and wartime trauma together, notes:

Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens.... After every atrocity one can

expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.

They don't always prevail in our time. We are still in an era of battles over who will be granted the right to speak and the right to be believed, and pressure comes from both directions. From the "men's rights" movement and a lot of popular misinformation comes the baseless notion that there is an epidemic of groundless accusations of sexual assault. The implication that women as a category are unreliable and that false rape charges are the real issue is used to silence individual women and to avoid discussing sexual violence, and to make out men as the principal victims. The framework is reminiscent of that attached to voter fraud, a crime so rare in the United States that it appears to have had no significant impact on election outcomes in a very long time. Nevertheless, claims by conservatives that such fraud is widespread have in recent years been used to disenfranchise the kinds of people—poor, non-white, students—likely to vote against them.

I'm not arguing here that women and children don't lie. Men, women, and children lie, but the latter two are not disproportionately prone to doing so, and men—a category that includes used-car salesmen, Baron Münchhausen, and Richard Nixon—are not possessed of special veracity. I am arguing that we should be clear that this old framework of feminine mendacity and murky-mindedness is still routinely trotted out, and we should learn to recognize it for what it is.

A friend of mine who works in sexual-harassment prevention training at a major university reports that when she gave a presentation at the business school on her campus, one of the older male professors asked, "Why would we start an investigation based on only one woman's report?" She has dozens of stories like this, and others about women—students, employees, professors, researchers—struggling to be believed,

especially when they testify against high-status offenders.

This summer, antediluvian columnist George Will claimed that there is only a “supposed campus epidemic of rape,” and that when universities or feminists or liberals “make victimhood a coveted status that confers privileges, victims proliferate.” Young women replied by creating the Twitter hashtag #survivorprivilege, posting remarks such as “I didn’t realize it was a privilege to live with PTSD, severe anxiety & depression” and “#ShouldIBeQuiet because when i spoke out everyone said it was a lie?” Will’s column hardly even constitutes a twist on the old idea that women are naturally unreliable, that there’s nothing to see in all these rape charges, and that we should just move along.

I had a tiny scale model of that experience myself earlier this year. I had posted on social media a slice of an essay I’d published a few years ago about the 1970s in California. Immediately, a stranger denounced me on Facebook in response to its two paragraphs about incidents in my life back then (being hit on by grown-up hippie dudes when I was embarking on my teens). Both his fury and his baseless confidence in his ability to render judgment were remarkable; he said in part, “*you are exaggerating beyond reality with no more ‘proof’ offered than a FOX news reporter. You ‘feel’ it’s true so you say it’s true. Well, I call ‘bullshit.’*” I should have offered proof, as though proof were possible. I am like bad people who distort facts. I am subjective but believe I am objective; I feel but confuse feeling with thinking or knowing. It’s such a familiar litany and a familiar rage.

If we could recognize or even name this pattern of discrediting, we could bypass recommending the credibility conversation every time a woman speaks. One more thing about Cassandra: in the most famous version of the myth, the disbelief with which her prophecies were met was the result of a curse placed on her by Apollo when she refused to have sex with the god. The idea that loss of credibility is tied to asserting rights over your own body was there all along. But with the real-life Cassandras among us, we can lift the curse by making up our own minds about who to believe and why. ■

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