

Are men (still) beasts? : Rebecca West's Legacy in the Time
of #METOO

**Where The Voices Aren't: moral accountability at the
end of the earth.**

IF beast is animal, if beast is beast by the very virtue of being *not* human, animal and human differentiated by 'reason,' then no, men are *not* beasts. And as I do not believe for a second that when a man sexually assaults a woman, that he does so because he's out of his mind, that he's lost control, lost his faculty for reason, I will not accept that the man who rapes is beast. When we describe the man as beast, we exonerate him. We pardon him for *knowing*. And we perpetuate the myth that the rapist is the lone wolf, lurking in the shadows at the edge of the earth. Well I've been there, to the edge of the earth, icebergs suspended in the grey, and I've met him. I've felt him wedged inside me. And he was not animal. He was not beast. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he chose to do it anyway.

This essay is an away with the 'convention of pleasantness,'¹ because deep winter between supple thighs was not nice, nor quiet, nor pretty, nor polite. Rebecca West wrote that writers, must 'establish a new and abusive school of criticism.'² This essay is a criticism of the language that still exonerates man in the age of #METOO, and an attempt to instead hold man accountable for his actions at every corner of the earth, even where the voices aren't. This is my mean, dark roll cloud out at sea; it's the shaking of the sailor's knees. I make two arguments. The first is that man is not animal, wolf, beast; man is human, capable of critical reasoning, judgement and conscious decision-making. I argue secondly

¹ West, Rebecca, 'It Is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism: A literary manifesto for the ages' *The New Republic*, November 1915

² West, Rebecca, 'It Is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism: A literary manifesto for the ages'

that the man who harasses and assaults does so *knowingly* because he firmly believes in an age-old conception of woman as a landscape 'soft and impressible by the feet of men.'³ Woman in this narrative is surface spread out, passive and inert. It is the belief that sexual pleasure is a pleasure reserved for man. Like Rebecca West, this essay asserts that woman *feels*, that I feel. That I desire. And that I know when I do not.

First, I will address the supposition that woman is too censorious, imposing her own "restrictive conventions," trying to control man's "natural" tendencies and thus unfairly "demonising" him. This claim is one I ardently oppose. If we take man to be a fully realised, self-actualised human being, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, shaming, violating and silencing, cannot be taken or described as "natural" tendencies, as if they are animalistic impulses man is incapable of suppressing. Man is autonomous and knowing. And in the context of #METOO and workplace specifically, a hand gripping a breast as if squeezing blood from a lemon is not an intrinsic desire, it's a "right" justified and rationalised by the human being who believes that breast is flesh in isolation, and not part of a greater body, animate, infinitely complex, and ultimately the active agent in her own continual materialisations and transformations. Thus, if man is the active agent in *his* own becoming. So too then shall he be the active agent in his own unbecoming.

I will also address the question of how Rebecca West may have responded to powerful men being ejected from their jobs for conduct that while loathsome, may not break any law, by situating this argument in a workplace at the end of the earth, Antarctica. Here, in waters that are dark and deep and endless, there are no laws. In isolation, loathsome behaviour is exactly that, loathsome. And it doesn't matter that there is no book for the first, second, third, fourth time I try to pull my pants back up. He looks me in the eye and it is not crazed and bloodshot and yielding to impulse like the werewolf to a full moon, his eye is sharp and fixated and focused. He doesn't howl, he whispers. He tells me I'm

³ Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 1854 p. 288

beautiful, how much he's wanted this, how happy he is. A beast is defined as an animal, especially a large or dangerous four-footed one. *That* is in a book, a rulebook for words. But there is no rulebook for this. He is not breaking a rule, not *technically*. But he is breaking me.

When man is beast, man is lone wolf; he is lurking in the alleyway, unhinged, morally inept. This exonerates man in bed with his wife. It exonerates man in the backyard with his neighbour. It exonerates man in the lift with his secretary. This language forgets the proximity of connection for the majority of sexual assaults and instances of sexual harassment. It forgets that woman, in the vast majority of cases, *knows* her perpetrator. It forgets she often knows him intimately. And it shakes the blame of his back, slinging it onto hers. If man is beast, his desire is conceived as animalistic, thus, for him, impossible to keep at bay. He will act, inevitably. It's in his "nature." And it becomes her fault for having raised the hairs on the wolf's back, for having worn this or walked that. When we reimagine the perpetrator, however, with the language of man as human being, as self-actualised, free thinking, decider of his own behaviour, he is held morally accountable, even at the end of the earth where the voices aren't.

I will remain in Antarctica to make my second argument because hers is a landscape not impressible beneath the feet of men. I would describe Antarctica the way Cixous describes woman's unconscious, that 'other limitless country' where 'the repressed manage to survive.'⁴ Because in a place where man touched my face, spread my skin, stretching and smoothing it with his hands until myriad facial expressions were reduced to one even cheek, *I* instead saw myself as huge. I was not singular expression, as my sex is conceived beneath a phallogocentric system. No, I saw myself for what I really am, vast ocean, fluid, plural, and multiple. As Jo Gill writes,

'This Sex Which Is Not One' is that female sexuality is not amenable to a phallogocentric system, which thinks in terms of singularity. [...] Female

⁴ Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1, no. 4, 1976, p. 880

desire 'does not speak the same language as man's desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks.' Female sexuality is, she suggests, plural, multiple and fluid.⁵

Like me, the Southern Ocean at the end of the earth ebbs and flows, tides are continually shifting, flowing back and forth. Like woman, the ocean is plural, pulling and pushing. It is both of these movements at once, desire and pleasure in one body. The ocean is not divisible into ones; multiple currents form one fluid whole.

And as Virginia Woolf writes in *To the Lighthouse*,

'Beneath it is dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon to her seemed limitless.'⁶

Man is not beast. Man is human by virtue of reason. And is capable of learning. And he will learn woman is limitless, she is sensual, she is deserving of space, of voice, of pleasure. Woman is the active agent of her own body, sovereign of her own land, queen of her own seas.

⁵ Gill, Jo, *Women's Poetry*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 115

⁶ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, 1927