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Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and (Male) Hysteria over John  
Bobbitt's  
Missing Manhood  
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Abstract:

*This article draws on feminist theory and psychoanalysis to analyze the media discourse surrounding the 1993 incident in which Lorena Bobbitt severed her husband's penis after he allegedly raped her. Touted as the ultimate example of "male bashing," Lorena's literal emasculation of John was described in the media as a specific instance of feminism's more general emasculation of men. This framing, like castration anxiety itself, reveals the intimate connection of heterosexual masculine identity with the phallus as the privileged signifier of sexual difference and naturalized male power. Male hysteria over the Bobbitt case also illustrates a tired double standard in which isolated cases of female aggression are read as evidence of the routine victimization of White men rather than as evidence of men's power to voice their complaints in the media (while silencing women's) or as evidence of White men's privileged entitlement to sexual invulnerability.*

## INTRODUCTION: A SLICE OF LIFE

We begin this article by invoking two stories, one ancient, the other (post)modern. The first is the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, summarized by Jean-Joseph Goux (1992) in a recent essay on the phallus and masculine identity.

The god Osiris is killed by Typhon who dismembers his corpse into pieces which he then scatters in all directions. Osiris' faithful companion, Isis, patiently retrieves the fourteen pieces to reassemble and reanimate them. However, there is one part of Osiris' body which she cannot find: his virile member. To replace this missing piece which is irrevocably lost, Isis erects a simulacrum which she orders everyone to honor. (p. 41)

As Goux observes, "the myth thus presents itself as the justification of a rite: the exhibition of the phallus, which has become the object of a cult in temples and which is carried in procession during festivals" (p. 41). The phallus stands in for the missing penis but is also something more. As a fabrication, an artifact, the phallus both simulates what is missing and renders it larger than life, a kind of cult object. More important for Goux, the myth demonstrates that the initial trial of dismemberment must first be endured for the male organ to transcend its material base—that is, the "death" of the penis is essential to its subsequent resurrection as phallic signifier, sign of rationality, power, and cultural authority.

The second story takes place closer to home, Manassas, Virginia, 1993. In the early morning hours of June 23, John Bobbitt returned home to his wife Lorena after a night out drinking with a friend. Desiring sex, he woke her, allegedly raped her, and promptly fell asleep. Lorena Bobbitt then made American history by cutting off her husband's penis with a kitchen knife and throwing the severed organ away in a nearby vacant lot. Police recovered the organ (after Lorena herself notified them of its location), and surgeons spent nine hours reattaching it to John. In subsequent months, the media reassembled and reanimated the incident in a frenzy of national and international coverage.

At first glance, there appear only superficial similarities between the myth of Isis and Osiris and the Bobbitt case. After all, John was no god, killed and chopped into pieces by a male rival, nor was Lorena the faithful companion who pays homage to her lover's missing member. By all accounts, the couple had a volatile and abusive union strained by financial and other hardships—hardly the stuff of which myths are made. But what links the two tales is the clarity and precision with which they dramatize the inextricable relationship between the organic penis and symbolic phallus, despite our culture's refusal to acknowledge this relationship, as well as the necessity of the

penis's initial dismembering to its subsequent remembering as phallic substitute.

In the Bobbitt scenario, however, unlike the Egyptian myth, remembering the phallus was not accomplished without a certain amount of struggle and contestation over the very concept of masculinity itself. Indeed, we argue that cultural tensions and anxieties over the definition of masculinity were central to media discourse in the year following the penis-severing incident, and we draw upon feminism and psychoanalysis to examine those anxieties. More specifically, we are interested in the ways in which certain narratives in the media are symptomatic of social and psychic conflict around sexual difference, masculine identity, and heterosexual male privilege, and we use the concepts of castration anxiety, hysteria, and the phallus as a framework for this discussion. The phallus supposedly soars "free," its corporeal origins rigorously denied in modern social and religious doctrine. But the phallus is nonetheless haunted by the penis, a haunting in which psychoanalysis has played a most useful ghost-busting role.<sup>1</sup>

While American men may experience their concern over John Bobbitt's missing manhood as "natural" and therefore "innocent" (i.e., divorced from issues of male sexual privilege), the great contribution of psychoanalysis is, as Jacqueline Rose (1986, 86) suggests, to challenge the self-evidence and obviousness of everyday life and language. A psychoanalytic approach sees certain external behaviors as symptomatic of underlying, unconscious psychosexual activity, activity that reveals not only the inscription of patriarchal relations and ideology but also the failures of that inscription. According to Rose, this is what differentiates psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender; whereas the latter assumes that gender norms are successfully internalized, the basic premise and indeed starting point of psychoanalysis is that they are not. Nor does psychoanalysis see such "failure" as an aberration—rather, failure is constitutive of identity formation, something endlessly repeated and relived as part of the struggle to secure and maintain a stable sense of self (Rose 1986, 91). More important for Rose, the recognition that resistance to "normal" gender identity exists at the very heart of psychic life is what links psychoanalytic projects in crucial ways to feminist ones. Psychoanalysis becomes one of the few places in our culture in which it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that many women (and men) do not painlessly slip into their roles, if indeed they do at all (Rose 1986, 91).

Because the genders are positioned unequally in the cultural order, men and women exhibit psychosexual neuroses differently and with different consequences. One of the lessons of feminist theorizing is that women are often constrained to act in the realm traditionally given them, that of the body (nature), while men, having greater authority, get to express themselves through speech and language (culture). At one level, the Bobbitt conflict and

its media coverage illustrate this point well. Lorena's so-called hysterical behavior, like that of Freud's (1963a) Dora, was a bodily response to the sexual abuse of which she could not speak; male "experts" and commentators then gave voice and meaning to her actions through societal institutions they still dominate, the popular media. At the same time, however, the intense media coverage of the Bobbitt case challenges any neat assumptions linking hysteria to women (while Freud did not deny that men could also qualify as hysterics, it was a label typically associated with women and, to a lesser degree, homosexuals). Indeed, we want to read the coverage itself as a form of straight-male hysteria, one we call "privileged hysteria," which, because of straight men's greater cultural authority, was primarily discursive and textual rather than bodily or somatic and therefore never seen as neurotic or as a form of acting out.

This is not to say that in the wake of the Bobbitt case men did not somatize their anxieties about castration, both phallic and penile. As we shall see, there were endless displays of such anxiety, and it was John Bobbitt himself who most clearly exposed what is at stake for us as feminists in this whole debate—the intimate connection of heterosexual masculine identity with the penis as the privileged signifier of sexual difference and naturalized male power. It was precisely because of this connection that Lorena's (literal) emasculation of her husband was conflated in media accounts with feminism's (metaphorical) emasculation of men. But since male privilege works in part by denying the relationship between penis and phallus, any aggressive behavior on the part of women that exposes and critiques this relationship tends to generate hostility toward women rather than toward the larger system of gender inequality. Touted in the media as the ultimate example of male bashing, male hysteria over the Bobbitt case was not unlike that over the film *Thelma and Louise*; both illustrate a tired double standard in which isolated cases of female aggression ("real" and Hollywood) are read as evidence of the routine victimization of white men rather than as rational responses to male oppression. This double standard highlights white men's greater power to voice their complaints in the media (while silencing women's) as well as their sense of entitlement to sexual invulnerability.

Coverage of the Bobbitt case also opened up a discussion among feminists of the apparent standoff over the subject of female victimhood, specifically whether the continued emphasis on women as victims of rape and abuse perpetuates a negative stereotype of women as passive, weak, helpless, and masochistic. Lorena's "sadistic" knife-wielding behavior seemed to contradict this stereotype; at the same time, her tearful courtroom testimony during the subsequent trial seemed to reinforce it. Either way, her acquittal on charges of malicious wounding fails to highlight the extent to which women are disproportionately punished for aggressive behavior because such behavior violates normative standards of femininity. Thus, for a feminist critique of victimhood to make sense, cultural notions of proper femininity must also be

challenged.

We now turn to the media coverage of the event, which served as a synecdoche for already existing cultural tensions surrounding gender relations and, in particular, the so-called battle of the sexes. Mass media accounts are, of course, interpretive and constitutive not above or outside the events they describe. Thus our aim is not to set the record straight but to investigate with a critical eye the particular kinds of narratives that emerged.

## FRAMING THE BOBBITT CONFLICT

The Bobbitt case spawned numerous jokes, T-shirts, fodder for radio and television talk shows, and more than 1,600 news articles and opinion pieces nationwide (Kaplan 1994). Of course, news is never just what's "out there" but rather what someone deems important, the more unusual the better—especially when it comes to sex and violence. When Lorena Bobbitt severed her husband's penis, the bulk of media coverage centered on what men are most interested in: the status of John Bobbitt's John Thomas, including the length of the knife used to sever it, the length of time his manhood lay in a vacant field, the length of time needed to surgically reattach it to the man, and how long before he will be able to do "it" again. Even the several trenchant feminist analyses that appeared in the popular press mainly responded to a discourse initiated by men and reflecting men's concerns.

Most media accounts suggested that men and women nationwide seized on the Bobbitt case as a symbol of the ongoing power struggle between the sexes, in part because Lorena Bobbitt did what many men supposedly fear and many women supposedly fantasize about. "Fantasize" is the key word here, since actual incidents of penis severing are extremely rare. Given Lorena's claim that her violence was in retaliation to his, some accounts even positioned the young woman as a feminist heroine. The following passage from the *Los Angeles Times* is illustrative: "Overnight, the 24-year-old manicurist became a heroine to a handful of feminists who took the dismemberment and unceremonious disposal as an exquisite revolutionary act on behalf of the abused women of the world" (Abramson 1993, E1). Similarly, Rush Limbaugh (1994) complained in a *Newsweek* editorial that "those [feminists] who view all men as 'potential rapists' have made Lorena into a symbol for the plight of battered women" (p. 56), while Peter Jennings of ABC's *World News Tonight* accused American feminists of using the Bobbitt case to "advance their own agenda" (quoted in Shaw 1994, A18) (as if educating the public about wife abuse is neither a legitimate response to the Bobbitt conflict nor an agenda worth advancing). Of course, it is possible to suggest that media professionals were the ones advancing their own agenda, for if Lorena's actions sparked a trend, it was not a rash of penis cutting but a rash of talk shows and news articles that consistently used the Bobbitt affair as a convenient way to discredit feminism and reassert male sexual privilege.

Ironically, the few feminist intellectuals who expressed support for Lorena are precisely those feminists most likely to agree with Rush Limbaugh (1994) that women need to stop viewing all men as potential rapists and stop whining about how victimized they are. Katie Roiphe, for example, who believes that date rape is merely a charge feminists have invented so women can punish men for any regrettable sexual encounter (Roiphe 1993a), approvingly called Lorena "a symbol of female rage" in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* (Roiphe 1993b, A13[N]). The *Times* also printed an essay by an Australian feminist who described Mrs. Bobbitt as "a symbol of innovative resistance against gender oppression everywhere," while the American Camille Paglia said that Lorena's cutting of her husband's penis sounded a "wake-up call" to every man in the world, comparable in impact to the Boston Tea Party (Pollitt 1994, 224).

However, most other feminist critics refused to frame the Bobbitt conflict in these terms. "The universal feminist response I see reflected in the press," wrote Mim Udovich (1993) in the *Village Voice*, "is one of guarded sympathy for Lorena Bobbitt as a rape victim, coupled with an unconditional disapproval of marital rape law and a conditional disapproval of penis-severing as a reasonable response to domestic violence" (p. 16). Robin Abcarian (1993) further insisted that "to make Lorena Bobbitt into a symbol for anything other than a sick marriage between two, immature, angry people is to compromise the legitimacy that has finally been conferred on battered women who strike back in self-defense" (p. E1).

Feminists writing in the press also emphasized that Lorena's attempt to "take back the night" is not the sort of politics feminists espouse; that Lorena Bobbitt is not another Anita Hill doing for marital rape what Hill did for sexual harassment; and, most important, that men's sexual violence against women (including genital mutilation) is unfortunately too commonplace to be newsworthy. As Cynthia Reimel (1994) wrote in *Newsweek*, quoting a friend, "rapists are chopping off women's arms and getting out on parole two years later, and maybe it's covered once in the news. But let one woman touch one single penis and the whole country goes ballistic" (p. 58). Perhaps this friend was referring to Robert Keith Smith (1994), who wrote a letter to *People* magazine complaining that "being a male in America today is like being a Jew in Nazi Germany" (p. 13). Or maybe she read the *Los Angeles Times* article in which the director of a Virginia-based women's center said "there is no justification for what she did. Her abuse of him was so barbaric that the fact she was allegedly abused is hardly an issue" (quoted in Abramson 1993, E1).

Thus, while many media accounts tended to sympathize with John Wayne Bobbitt and worry about women on the rampage, some feminists tried to refocus the debate around sexual violence in general, which is overwhelmingly male against female. Interestingly, feminist critiques of such violence

were seen as either hostile and partisan or unnecessarily plaintive, while the national obsession with the sexual victimization of one man was framed as a natural, nonpartisan, apolitical, and entirely justified concern. Consider, for example, the confrontation between panelists on the *Maury Povich* show (aired 4 November 1993) devoted to the Bobbitt conflict. The two "resident feminists" on the panel, while not condoning Lorena's actions, nevertheless repeatedly tried to situate discussion of the Bobbitts within a larger social context in which male violence contributes significantly to women's oppression. When one of the feminists (Ann Siminton) pointed out that men commonly masturbate to pornographic images of female genital mutilation and nobody in the media objects, the "resident psychologist" said, "Here we go again! You are still on the political thing! Getoffthepolitics! Be real!" A few moments later, Siminton noted that women who kill their husbands tend to receive prison terms twice as long as those of men who kill their wives, and the psychologist gave a similar response to considerable laughter and applause from the audience: "Wind her up and you get the party line!" This man got the last word when he said, "This [case] is not about politics or vengeance; this is about sensitivity, sensitivity between men and women." Thus, the feminist insistence that we see the entire Bobbitt affair-John's alleged abuse of his wife, her violent retaliation, and the public response-within a larger context characterized by systemic gender inequality was belittled as partisan and political, while the psychologist's insistence that we view John Bobbitt as an individual victim was framed as an apolitical matter of "sensitivity" between the sexes.<sup>2</sup>

Isolated cases of female aggression tend to generate a climate of concerned debate about proper role models for girls, the possibility of copycat crimes, and the ever popular subject of male bashing that men's routine victimization of women does not. While feminists have consistently challenged male sexual violence, charges of male bashing imply that women's complaints about male aggression are just as victimizing as the systemic violence that produces the complaints in the first place. Of course, what discussions of male bashing in newspapers, magazines, and on television and radio talk shows reveal is that men still have privileged access to the media and, further, that female aggressivity is intolerable-especially when directed at a White man.

## **VIOLENT WOMEN: VILLAINS AND VICTIMS**

Q: What did Jeffrey Dahmer say to Lorena Bobbitt?

A: You gonna eat that?

This joke is remarkable for suggesting a likeness between Bobbitt and Dahmer (and their reprehensible actions), while exposing *her* violence as relatively wimpy-what Lorena threw away in a vacant field, Dahmer would have considered a piece de resistance. On a talk radio program, host Joy Behr indirectly made this same point when she said, "Hey, she just threw it

out, it's not like she put it in a Cuisinart" (quoted in Heimel 1994, 58).

Wimpy or not, some may argue that Lorena Bobbitt's acquittal on charges of malicious wounding in fact indicates a new social tolerance for female violence. But a closer look reveals that her courtroom behavior as a proper feminine subject helped ensure her acquittal. Lorena Bobbitt played the consummate victim, crying profusely and acting confused. Both the defense and the prosecution agreed that temporary insanity, perhaps caused by spousal abuse, caused the violence-not surprisingly, since women's violence is rarely lawful and is typically authorized only when the proper femininity has been established. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Bobbitt were known for their maturity or intelligence, but the lack of such qualities in Lorena's case may have worked to her advantage because female savvy, like female violence, challenges the gender status quo. Thus, while female violence is generally intolerable, exceptions are made for extra feminine, extra helpless, extra naive women. In any event, the pervasive media attention to the case ensured that Lorena's acquittal will not establish a precedent but will be a one-of-a-kind event, because no woman anywhere who hereafter cuts off a penis can insist the act was not premeditated. That is, given the intense, high-profile coverage, it would be extremely difficult for any penis-severing woman to claim ignorance of Lorena Bobbitt and, hence, to claim that her own actions were spontaneous rather than premeditated and modeled after Lorena's. Many men, on the other hand, feel entitled to violent retaliation when their boundaries are violated. The 1985 Bernhard Goetz case illustrates this gendered (and, in this case, racist) double standard. Goetz, a white man, was acquitted for shooting several black youths on the New York subway during an altercation in which Goetz claimed he was being assaulted. His violence was defended as a refusal to be victimized, whereas Lorena had to be a victim to be acquitted. Goetz's racial violence was considered rational, whereas Lorena's gender violence cast her rationality into doubt. Goetz reestablished his entitlement to social authority and personal boundaries through violence in a racist society; Lorena did not dare claim that kind of respect-if she had, she might now be in prison.

The fact that social tolerance for aggression is gendered reflects the cultural equation of violence and masculinity in a way that naturalizes their coincidence. Both men's self-defensive violence and their sexual violence against women fit neatly into what we understand as natural masculinity, while women's aggression is seen as unnatural and therefore pathological (Jones 1980). Conventional gender identity does not emerge naturally or unproblematically but rather involves parameters set by a culture invested in gender inequality. Freud (1962) suggested that all children have narcissistic and aggressive impulses, and in girls these impulses are eventually channeled into passivity and masochism. If we understand such channeling to be the result of unequal positioning in the cultural order, then notions of proper womanhood, and a social commitment to rigid gender polarity more generally,

underlie the double standard around violence. Put differently, aggression is a primary marker of masculine/feminine difference, and construing women's aggression as unnatural helps mask the political character of gender inequality (indeed, gender itself).

We see the construction of "the battered women's syndrome" defense in this context. Women have to be beaten for years before they can legally act in their own defense against violent partners, and even then they use violence only because the other person's has driven them insane. Models of sanity are gendered, and female sanity, or proper femininity, revolves specifically around a lack of anger, aggression, and inviolable bodily boundaries. In other words, violent women are either seen as not sane or not women, because sane women are never violent. Media discourse, then, failed to challenge our cultural insistence on women's natural passivity, which permits women's violence only under conditions of extreme victimization.

The debate also throws into sharp relief the great standoff around the subject of victimhood. As Barbara Ehrenreich (1994, 74) describes it, on one side are the domestic abuse specialists who focus on women's long weepy history of rape and abuse; on the other side are feminist scholars who claim women are turning away from feminism because they are tired of hearing about battering, foot binding, and clitoridectomies. These antivictimhood feminists (Kaminer 1992; Wolf 1994) say that it is time to stop whining and go for the power. Sabine Reichel (1994) epitomized this position in a *Los Angeles Times* article titled "Some Women Nurture Misery." Lorena Bobbitt has no one to blame for her plight but herself, Reichel contended. Indeed, women have run out of excuses for their own inept, irresponsible behavior, which includes tolerating outrageous and abusive acts by men.

The times when parents sold their daughters for a couple of cows are over. Most women can pick whom they want, be what they want, do what they want when and how they want it. If they wind up with a jerk, a woman-hater, a philandering Mama's boy or a sadistic two-timer, it's because that's what they chose; it's their own fault. (Reichel 1994, BI 1)

Katha Pollitt (1994, 224) suggests that the current attack on "victim feminism" is also partly a class phenomenon in that it reflects the desire of educated female professionals to distance themselves from stereotypes of women as passive, dependent, helpless, and irrational—stereotypes that simultaneously contribute to women's victimization and ensure the punishment of aggressive women who violate the stereotype. Lorena Bobbitt can stand as a mascot for either side, since she was framed as both a victim (of domestic abuse) and an aggressor (against her abuser). What this debate fails to highlight, however, is the extent to which women are disproportionately punished for aggressive behavior, including violent acts of self-defense.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the entreaty of anti-victimhood feminists to "stop whining and go for the power" is itself victimizing if gendered stereotypes about "proper" (i.e.,

nonviolent) feminine conduct do not also change.

No matter which way feminists slice it, there was undeniable grassroots support for Lorena Bobbitt among many ordinary women outside of official academic and activist circles. Indeed, what was most interesting for Ehrenreich (1994) about the whole Bobbitt affair was the huge divergence it revealed between high-powered feminist intellectuals and your average housewife, waitress, or female retail clerk. While the former were tripping over one another to distance themselves from Lorena Bobbitt and from charges of male bashing, she says, the latter were "discussing fascinating new possibilities for cutlery commercials" and "making V signs by raising two fingers and bringing them together with snipping motions" (p. 74). Ehrenreich admits feminism has a lot to do with this new "beyond-bitch" attitude, but she also suggests that for most women the feminist revolution has not come along fast enough. "All too many women still go home to Bobbitt-like fellows who regard the penis as a portable battering ram" (p. 74), she insists, and women are sick and tired of it. Consequently, feminist intellectuals have it wrong. Your average woman does not shrink from the "F" word because feminists are perceived to be militant ball-busters but in fact because they aren't militant enough.

This conclusion is highly appealing; after all, what feminist would not want to believe that her public image suffers from too little militancy rather than too much, or from behaviors deemed too dainty and accommodating rather than too aggressive and overbearing? However, our own experiences as feminists, as well as our analysis of the media discourse on the Bobbitt conflict, contradict this observation. Instead, the feminist who emerges in media representations both now and in the past more closely resembles the "straw feminist" Ellen Goodman (1994, B7) describes: that mythical figure who burns her bra, hates men, has an abortion as casually as getting a tooth pulled, is hostile to family life, wants all children warehoused in government-run day care, and wants to drive all women out of their happy homes and into the workforce. Not only is this creature helpful for discrediting real feminists, says Goodman, but she is handy for scaring potential supporters away.

But it is not only the limited social tolerance for female aggressivity that accounted for Bobbitt mania. The specific focus of her aggression cut right to the heart of gender inequality. Lorena did not shoot John or chop off his arm or leg. No, she did something so uncommon the act has been named after her. She "bobbittized" him. Men express their social power to dominate women in specifically sexual ways (which is why rapists do not just hit women), and Lorena's actions simultaneously acknowledged and protested this domination. But men's eroticization and naturalization of their social power means that they tend not to experience their fixation with the penis as political. Neither do they recognize or experience as political their assumption of sexual

invulnerability, an assumption Lorena explicitly challenged.

## TAKING FREUD LITERALLY

Most contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing about masculinity and the phallus at some point deals with the specific relation between phallus and penis. Lacan (1966) himself points to the myth of Isis and Osiris as evidence of an ancient phallic discourse that our own culture has repressed but that psychoanalysis can excavate or unveil. At the same time, however, he insists that neither women nor men can ever actually "have" the phallus, insofar as the phallus is a cultural fiction, transcendental signifier of the wholeness, plenitude, and mastery that human subjects by very definition lack (and therefore desire). The desire for completeness is thus an act of phallic identification for both sexes that is always in some sense "failed" (see Lacan 1977). But, as a number of feminist theorists have pointed out, this failure is not identical for men and women because the phallus-with its emphasis on verticality, ascension, elevation, and erection-undeniably derives part of its signifying power from the male organ itself. Kaja Silverman (1992) puts it this way,

As long as the phallus is designated the "image of the penis," and the penis as the "real phallus," there can never be less than an analogical relation between those two terms, a relation that often gives way to complete identification. (p. 99)<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, the penis functions as the natural signifier both of maleness and cultural dominance. This is why, to most guys, manhood is simply the natural result of having a penis, while to feminists, it is a political category central to gender inequality. The penis is, to borrow a phrase from Frank Krutnik (1991, 82-82), the male "membership card" permitting access into the club of the cultural elite that, because of the general valorization of the penis in patriarchal culture, offers security in its very possession. Thus, when Freud (1963b) proposed his Oedipal theory of castration anxiety, he meant it quite literally, although scholars since Freud have often emphasized the fear of losing the social power and privilege associated with masculinity rather than the male member itself.

The public concern over John Bobbitt's John Thomas illustrates the extent to which penis and phallus remained closely aligned. The notion that the penis is a man's manhood-a literal and figurative substitute for the man himself-was a trope heard over and over in the media discourse on the Bobbitt conflict. In *Elle* magazine, Vince Passaro (1993) confessed that "men are admittedly odd about this body part," listing fifteen synonyms for penis including "dick cock prick tool member boner hose joint woody wiener" (p. 94). He writes, "we have lots of words for it, but none of them express how, day to day, hour to hour, we feel about those squiggly little fellows we carry in our pants" (p. 94).

While it is possible that Lorena, in an uncontrollable fit of penis envy, cut off John's bobbitt (predictably, the latest synonym for penis) in an attempt to make him just as miserable as she was-after all, hadn't she endured a state of penislessness for twenty-four years?-more than likely she aimed below the belt because she knew perfectly well where his seminal sense of selflay. This is not to suggest that penis envy is necessarily a woman's lament of an anatomical defect, as Freud (1963c) first proposed; rather, it is a resentment of being deprived of the political, cultural, social-including sexual-advantages many men routinely enjoy (see Homey's discussion in Irigaray 1985: Torok 1992). Lorena claimed that John repeatedly gained sexual gratification without treating her as someone with her own sexual needs; if this is true, then perhaps Lorena can appropriately be said to have had penis envy. Her attempt to acquire phallic power took such a literal form precisely because our culture itself is so literal about it.

For example, John's brother Todd, who appeared on the *Jenny Jones* show (aired 11 and 12 January 1994) with John and the entire Bobbitt clan, got an enthusiastic round of applause when he said, "She did worse than kill him, she took away that thing that means most to a man"-a pronouncement that popped up repeatedly on television talk shows. Of all John's many such appearances, the two-part interview with Jenny Jones was perhaps most remarkable for its explicit discourse about the severed organ. Claiming she was only asking what everyone else was dying to know, Jones posed pointed and detailed questions about John and Lorena's sex life, the experience of dismemberment, the surgery to reattach the penis, and its current status as a functioning sexual organ. She seemed especially interested in the condition of John's penis now, whether it was "working" (that is, whether he could get an erection) and whether, after frequent sex with Lorena (they were reported to have had sex more than 900 times in four years), he was anxious to "test it out soon."

John admitted that he had tried intercourse with an old girlfriend, but so far only the lower third of his penis could maintain an erection. But he insisted it was healing rapidly and would be "fully functional" in just a couple of years. Jones then noted that a full recovery would be quite unusual, medically speaking, and the following exchange took place:

Bobbitt: I feel I will fully recover .... Actually, I don't know, it's healing real well now, I think it's going to be a lot better than it was.

Jones: Better how?

Bobbitt: It'll be stronger and bigger!

Jones: You think it's getting bigger now?

Bobbitt: Not now, but it will be, because the nerves will grow back, you know, rejuvenate.

Jones was rather astounded by this, and after a commercial break she returned

to the subject (note how John's penis seems to grow as they talk about it):

Jones: You' re healing well, in fact, you expect when you' re healed for your penis to be bigger?

Bobbitt: Yeah, I feel I'm getting stronger, and through the new nerve rejuvenation it'll be a lot better.

Jones: Is it getting wider or longer?

Bobbitt: I wouldn't say wider .... It's a little longer than it was.

Jones then asked, "Where would you be now, emotionally, physically, if they hadn't found your penis and reattached it?" John shook his head and said, "I'd be real depressed, I'd probably be bottled up in some corner somewhere, not talking about it at all, probably even contemplating suicide."

Things apparently would not have been so great for Lorena Bobbitt, either, had the police not found her husband's penis in a nearby vacant lot and had doctors not been able to surgically reattach it. A *Vanity Fair* article featuring Lorena's side of the story suggested that if the penis had not been recovered, Lorena might have faced a possible prison sentence of forty years instead of twenty (Masters 1993).

In Freudian terms, the horror of John Bobbitt's close call with "lack" is in part a horror of the feminine itself-and the subordinate position of women. With characteristic aplomb, John told Jenny Jones that having his penis cut off was particularly terrible because he might not be able to stand while urinating.

Bobbitt: They said I'd have to sit down to urinate for the rest of my life. I said, "What?!" You know, I started to get real depressed, I thought, how am I going to handle this, what kind of life am I going to have?

Jones: What did the thought of having to urinate sitting down do to you?

Bobbitt: It's terrible! It's not normal!

Jones: Did it make you suicidal?

Bobbitt: Well, I thought about that, because, you know, it's so depressing.

According to Freud, the threat of castration is not fully real to a little boy until the devastating moment when he witnesses for the first time the "inadequate" female genitalia (usually that of a younger sister or playmate). No wonder men were reported to cringe when they heard the details of John Bobbitt's ordeal; he certainly underwent an experience more disturbing than catching a glimpse of a little girl at her bath. Psychiatrists and anthropologists cited in *Vanity Fair* agreed that the cutting of the penis "is an act that would be freighted with symbolism in any culture," a kind of universal no-no (Masters 1993, 170). One author quoted put it this way, "The response [to the threat of castration] is so rooted in the neural substratum and reptilian back brain that men cannot find words to express their shock" (quoted in Masters 1993, 170). Given this, either men are on an evolutionary par with birds and snakes, or Freud was right-in a patriarchal society, the male genital organ has a

socially constructed meaning that plays a leading role in both psychosexual and social relations.

This leads to something else Freud clearly had a hand on. Compulsive repetition, such as the media coverage of the severed penis, is really nothing more than a fruitless attempt to fix or pin down what can never be fixed or pinned down: an essential masculinity (and an essential femininity). As Krutnik (1991) puts it, "The phallic regime of masculine identity is by no means a secure option that can be taken for granted once it is set in place for the male subject" (p. 85). Rather, it has to be endlessly narrativized, idealized, and defended against threats, both internal and external, revealing that men have castration anxiety precisely because their masculinity is not as unproblematic or invulnerable as they would like to believe. And in the Bobbitt case, as in much of our popular culture, a woman figures as the castrating femme fatale, the feminine projection of a man's deepest fears and figure of his ultimate demise.

The constant valorization of the phallus in popular discourse-despite the conspicuous absence of visual representations of the penis itself-exposes the perpetual effort necessary to secure male privilege as natural and inevitable. Ironically, this absence of visual representation is one of the principle mechanisms by which the penis is idealized. Just as Osiris's missing member engendered the erection of the phallus as cult object, the literal invisibility of the penis in most forms of popular culture serves to maintain its sacred status, while its display threatens to render it profane. In the one place in which men's naked bodies are almost as visible as women's-pornography-the penis is invariably represented in a way that maintains the myth of perpetual potency: It is longer than average, usually erect, and constantly in motion. Rarely is the penis depicted in its more common but decidedly unphallic state.

The display of the erect penis is itself a deliberate mechanism for securing and sustaining phallic power, one that, according to Charles Bernheimer (1992), has been neglected in feminist psychoanalytic theorizing. Merely exposing the phallus's anatomical dependence leaves woefully unanalyzed the actual penis itself, as if the penis represents the limits of theoretical discourse, its meaning clear, transparent, and unambiguous. For Bernheimer, just as our culture tends to conflate phallus and penis while mystifying the conflation, much feminist theorizing does the same thing at the level of the penis, when it conflates the idealized, erect penis-the phallic penis-with "penis" in general. Acknowledging the difference-that is, acknowledging the diversity of the penis in terms of size, state, color, functioning, and so forth-not only emphasizes the fact that physical bodies are as shifting and provisional as any other semiotic construction. It also serves to destabilize the notion of the phallus itself by revealing the phallus to be a kind of theoretical dream or projection-a dream of perpetual erection and potency that clearly does not exist.

## CONCLUSION: DISMEMBERING MALE SEXUAL PRIVILEGE

Lorena Bobbitt's violence is particularly frightening for many men because of something that the media has failed to deconstruct. Under a system of compulsory heterosexuality, the use of the penis to have sex with women is central to securing a natural heterosexual male identity. This is why men do not experience the Bobbitt incident as threatening to their privilege but simply, "innocently," to their sense of who they are. A man's sense of entitlement to use his penis whenever he wants, with or without a woman's consent, a "natural right" that defines rape culture, is what women are describing when they say that a man uses his penis as a weapon. And, as Barbara Ehrenreich (1994) notes, "If a fellow insists on using his penis as a weapon, I say that, one way or another, he ought to be swiftly disarmed" (p. 74). That statement so outraged talk show host Montel Williams, he read it repeatedly on the air as evidence that feminists have declared open season on men's genitals. Heterosexual men are "real men" because they have sex with women, and sex itself is practically synonymous with vaginal penetration. Thus, we tend to think of women who have had clitoridectomies, but not men without penises, as capable of having sex. Hence, one man's lost penis generates a national fixation that a woman's lost clitoris never has. At the same time, masculinity is racially tiered; hence, a white guy's castration generates a national fixation that a black man's never has.

The centrality of the penis in forming masculine identity not only leads to genuinely horrified reactions to John Wayne Bobbitt's missing manhood but is partly responsible for the high incidence of rape in the first place. Because intercourse, whether forced or consensual, is a crucial way for men to establish themselves as manly, a woman's refusal to have sex is easily construed as emasculating and therefore intolerable. Likewise, feminism's insistence that men honor women's sexual boundaries must feel, well, castrating. From this vantage point, the conflation of Lorena Bobbitt's (literal) emasculation of her husband with feminism's (metaphorical) emasculation of men is entirely apropos because it reveals the extent to which the sexual functioning of the penis figures in the construction of masculinity, across class and across race. Were it not for this particular construction of masculinity, Lorena's retaliation would not have been emasculating in the same sense. But in that kind of world, rape itself—the violence that prompted Lorena's—would be less compelling, as it would no longer be "masculating" in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

As John told Jenny Jones, it would be just a matter of time before he could put his penis back to work, and he even insisted that it would be better, stronger, and bigger. Unfortunately, media coverage of the Bobbitt extravaganza failed to make this a growth experience in any other way. That John himself remained remarkably unchanged by his ordeal (save for the size of his penis) was made clear by his appearance on *Rolanda* (23 May 1994), another daytime talk show. On this show, we learned not only that John had

been arrested for battering his new fiancée in the months following his trial but that another woman has named John in a paternity suit. He admitted that he is the father of the child in question and insisted he will take partial responsibility for it. John said he is especially interested in teaching his son to choose a mate wisely and will do everything in his power to prevent the boy from getting his penis cut off, since, after all, "women are dangerous."

The media never challenged the presumed naturalness of male sexual identity. Instead of spawning discussions of male sexual violence, and how men often use sex to establish themselves as naturally different from and superior to women, popular attention remained fixated on John's penis, without which he presumably could not have sex or a sexed identity. Thus, the media coverage of Lorena's actions ultimately served to perpetuate rape culture rather than dismantle it. Furthermore, John's ordeal will long afterwards be associated with the protection of male sexual privilege. For example, a legislative bill under consideration requiring the chemical regulation of convicted rapists' sex hormones was referred to in the media as "the Bobbitt bill," as if any move to control men's sexuality (even violent sexuality) is castrating, emasculating, bobbittizing. Indeed, an Italian sculptor invented a male chastity belt made of stainless steel and leather for men to wear at night so their wives cannot "do a Mrs. Bobbitt." If only the phallus could be similarly secured!

We have argued that men's defensive posturing with regard to their genitals constitutes what we call privileged hysteria-privileged in the sense that men had in the mass media a readily available cultural forum in which to voice their outrage over the violation of both John's penis and their own sense of sexual invulnerability. While Lorena, like Freud's Dora, employed the language of the body, journalists, reporters, critics, and talk show hosts employed the language of words and images.<sup>6</sup> We have also tried to show that the fixation with the penis is really a fixation with political and cultural authority (the naturalization of which helps justify and maintain it) and that the conflation between penis and phallus is not surprising precisely because the penis remains the signifier of a falsely naturalized cultural dominance.

At the same time, the phallic regime of masculine identity is by no means stable or secure; it constantly must be reinforced, reasserted, and rearticulated. Thus, men's anxiety about "those squiggly little fellows" in their pants-their desire to talk about the penis, valorize it, put it into "action"-is in fact a somatization of psychic stress over heterosexual male identity, an anxious "speech of the body," hysteria in the classic sense. From this perspective, Dora's nervous cough, which belied her unconscious psychic turmoil, finds its contemporary parallel not in the castrating action of Lorena Bobbitt but in the male-dominated media brouhaha that accompanied it.

Not surprisingly, the recent porn video dramatizing John Bobbitt's version of the story is the one document that most explicitly exposes John's concern

with his penis as a somatization of his insecurity about his masculinity. In *John Wayne Bobbitt: Uncut* (directed by Ron Jeremy, 1994), when we finally get to see "it," we see him "doing it," reasserting his manhood through endless scenes of heterosexual intercourse, including the infamous cum shots as the undeniable proof of his virility. When John and the other porn actors appeared on *Geraldo* (on 27 September 1994) to promote the video's release, audience members wanted to know why he had chosen to star in "that kind" of film. John said that making a XXX-rated video was the best way to tell his story. "Lots of people have a curiosity about my penis," he explained, "so an adult film was the best way to show everybody it works." A man in the audience then asked him if he felt "more of a man" for having made the film. "Definitely," John replied without hesitation.

But while the video may try to persuade us that his manhood is intact, it does little to establish John as the "sensitive" individual he claims to be, nor does it seriously discredit Lorena's charges that he raped her. The video's primal scene shows John coming home drunk from a local strip club, waking Lorena for sex, and, despite her repeated refusals, climbing on top of her. At this moment, Lorena miraculously changes her mind and is, in fact, excited by his failure to respect her wishes—a sudden reversal of attitude consistent with much heterosexual porn fantasy and a bit of revisionist history that breathes life into the tired old myth that "no" means "yes." John orgasms and falls back unconscious, while Lorena pouts, obviously dissatisfied with the encounter. In this manner, the scenario is brought to a head. Lorena, provoked by frustrated desire rather than vengeance for rape, grabs a knife from the kitchen and smites the offending member.

John Bobbitt apparently hopes the video will exonerate him and restore his sense of manhood. Maybe it will. But it may also expose "manhood"—both the natural category and the penis that serves as its privileged signifier—as a particularly impoverished cultural fiction. Unlike most discussions in the media, *John Wayne Bobbitt: Uncut* makes no bones about what was at stake for men on that fateful June night. Thus, the video's release may actually serve, however unintentionally, to parody our cultural obsession with manhood and offer on its own the very critique we have developed in these pages.

We began by invoking the ancient myth of Isis and Osiris, juxtaposing it to the contemporary narrative of John and Lorena Bobbitt. The former is an originary tale offering an account of the connection between penis and phallus; the latter is a modern-day reminder of both the strength of the connection and, more important, the strength of growing challenges to the male privilege that requires and sustains it. It is because of the slippage between phallus and penis that Lorena cut John's off, that the media went ballistic, and that John Wayne Bobbitt himself decided a porn video would be the best way to reconstitute his damaged sense of manhood. But at the same time, because

the phallus is not reducible to the penis, there is space to maneuver an alternative kind of discourse around masculine power, privilege, and responsibility. This maneuvering is what we take to be one of the central contributions of feminist psychoanalytic theory.

## NOTES

1. Some feminist critics have tended to view Freudian psychoanalysis as a theory that justifies and perpetuates gender inequality on biological grounds, but we do not view psychoanalysis in this way. Because psychoanalysis is a product of our heterocentric, patriarchal culture, the classic psychoanalytic framework can serve as a useful tool for interrogating the boundaries of sexual identity and desire-and, more important, for revealing the fragility and instability of those boundaries. For a feminist defense of Freud, see Rose (1986); for a review of feminist revisions of Freudian psychoanalysis, see chapter three in Irigaray (1985).
2. The failure to see the Bobbitt conflict within a larger context characterized by systemic male domination was also revealed in several articles concerned about women's vigilantism (see, e.g., Estrich 1994; Limbaugh 1994).
3. See Gillespie (1989), Jones (1980), Kandel (1993), and Walker (1989).
4. See also Gallop (1988) and Rose (1985).
5. The fact that *masculating* does not appear in the dictionary illustrates well the cultural assumption that masculinity is "natural" and effortless rather than requiring constant rearticulation; within this framework, a man can only be emasculated, that is, stripped of something he already "naturally" has.
6. Significantly, while Lorena did give a couple of interviews (one on ABC's *20/20* newsmagazine, and one in the November 1993 issue of *Vanity Fair*), she remained largely silent about the ordeal, refusing to discuss on the talk show circuit either severing her husband's penis or the sexual abuse that she said led up to it.

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