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## Kick Against the Pricks

**Laura Kipnis**

DECEMBER 21, 2017  
ISSUE

***Be Fierce: Stop Harassment and Take Your Power Back***

by Gretchen Carlson  
Center Street, 244 pp., \$27.00




Gabriela Maj/Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

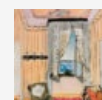
*Donald Trump with Allie LaForce (Miss Teen USA), Natalie Glebova (Miss Universe), and Chelsea Cooley (Miss USA) at a launch party for Cara Birnbaum's book Universal Beauty: The Miss Universe Guide to Beauty, Trump Tower, New York City, April 2006*

At first it was a lot of enormous media potentates crashing to earth, followed by a bunch of lesser despots and lords, many employed in the media industries too, and it soon expanded to include half the men in Hollywood and ancillary trades like politics. The accompanying din was the clamor of pundits (those who hadn't yet been felled themselves) attempting to explain what had happened—then reexplain, then explain some more—because the picture kept changing: soon the not-so-powerful were under fire too (freelance writers and experimental novelists were among those anonymously charged in an online list), and it was becoming unclear whether it was “toxic masculinity” or masculine panic we were talking about.

But at the beginning, the story seemed plain enough. It turns out that in the tallest skyscrapers and plushest hotels of the most advanced economies, many high-profile men have been acting the part of feudal lords, demanding droit du seigneur from their vassals, the

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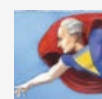
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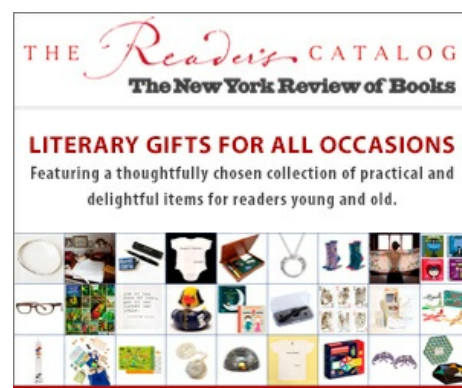

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vassals in this case being their female employees and others wishing entry into their fiefdoms. Evidently there's been a covert system of taxation on female advancement in the work world, with the unluckier among us obligated to render not just the usual fealty demanded by overweening bosses but varying degrees of sexual homage too, from ego-stroking and fluffing (which is gross enough), to being grabbed and groped, to the expectation of silence about full-on rape.

From a political standpoint the exposés about the current extent of sexual harassment look like a significant cultural upheaval: a major victory in the centuries-long fight for women's equality. This time the battleground is career, and the opponents being slain are the career gatekeepers. A struggle over careers is, to be sure, a bourgeois revolution—I mean this in the historical rather than the disparaging sense. If women's bodies are still being treated as property, then another Reign of Terror was long overdue. If women are stuck with the task of overthrowing aristocratic privilege a few hundred years late, it's because this social stratum needs to be liquidated before all genders can achieve civic and economic equality.

That the agents of destruction have been women simply telling their stories in public is nothing less than delicious. Women were gossiping, complaining, name-calling, and suddenly the world was listening. (In fact, historians have written extensively on the importance of gossip and its venues, such as coffeehouses, in fomenting previous revolutions.) Each tale that came tumbling out was more sordid than the last: infinite variations on the theme of sexual scumminess. The revelations weren't exactly new, but the frame had shifted: the handsy boss, the lewd entreaties, the casting couch, were no longer going to be business as usual. Every revolution has its weapons of choice—once it was muskets and guillotines, this time around it's "sharing" and media exposure. It wasn't heads that were rolling, it was careers: contracts yanked, deals canceled, agents quitting, e-mail accounts shuttered. Career death is hardly nothing—it's the modern equivalent of losing everything. (When the *Times* recently compiled the names of twenty-four prominent men accused of sexual harassment, it did rather bring to mind the spectacle of heads on a pike in a public square. The name conspicuously absent, unfortunately, was our groper-in-chief Donald Trump, who's thus far managed to slither away from the variety of sexual charges lodged against him.)

About those chopped-down potentates and lords: many of them, one couldn't help but notice, were not the most attractive specimens on the block: bulbous, jowly men; fat men who told women they needed to lose weight; ugly men drawn to industries organized around female appearance. Men with weird hair. Is it wrong of me to bring this up? We do, after all, move through the world as embodied creatures. I wondered what it felt like, if you're such a guy, one who's managed to accrue some significant portion of power in the world but you're still *you*—coercing sex out of underlings. When you look in the mirror, is it a great white hunter you see staring back, with women as your game of choice? Sure you've *won*, you're on *top*, but isn't every win a tiny jab of confirmation about your a priori loathsomeness? If sexual domination assuages something for certain men, is it because somewhere inside lives a puny threatened runt, and extracting sexual compliance is some form of recompense? One woman, who'd fought off the advances of a naked, pleading film producer, recalled that he thereupon broke into tears and said she'd "rejected him because he

**Brown Girl in the Ring**  
Marcia Douglas

**1968: Paris in May**  
Mitchell Abidor

**Aiming for a Nuke-Free Korea**  
Anthony Spaeth

**Shinzo Abe, Pursued by Scandal**  
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Hoshang Waziri

was fat.”

The mantra lately heard across the land is that sexual harassment isn’t about sex, it’s about power. I wonder if this underthinks the situation: Is the man who won’t stop talking about sex a man convinced of his power, or one who’s desperate to impress you with his prowess? Failing to notice the precariousness of power encourages compliance, especially among the women targeted. If recent events tell us anything, it’s that power is a social agreement, not a stable entity. The despots had power because they did things that were socially valued and profitable, but the terms of the agreement can shift abruptly. (Force is different from power, which we’ll get to.)

Looking for political analogues, I found myself leafing through my old copy of Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, a useful handbook for aspiring revolutionaries. Social upheavals like the current one—chaotic and improvised, yet destined—happen when certain echelons retract their consent to existing conditions and make new demands. Gramsci calls it “war of position.” Toppling power isn’t about storming the Bastille these days, it’s about changing the way people talk and think. If our upheavals come dressed in different garb, creating a crisis of authority for those in power is still how the world changes.

But we’re also reminded by recent events that the agents of progress can be unlikely: just as the military was a major force in desegregation, now we have corporations like News Corp acting like progressives on sexual harassment. Or ostensibly—what looks like progress can also be a way of dispersing protest, Gramsci would say. But speaking of unlikely agents, that one of the more significant battlefield wins recently was achieved by a former Miss America, Gretchen Carlson, is tough for those who’d prefer their feminist victories to come from women with better feminist credentials.

It was Carlson’s good fortune that her new book, *Be Fierce: Stop Harassment and Take Your Power Back*, came out two weeks after the first round of charges against Harvey Weinstein surfaced, reminding the world that she’d been the one to light the fuse that started the conflagration. Carlson’s 2016 sexual harassment lawsuit against Fox chairman Roger Ailes netted her a \$20 million settlement, an apology from Fox, and Ailes’s head on a platter, handed to her by Rupert Murdoch fils. (Murdoch père then tendered Ailes a \$40 million parting gift; Ailes died the following year.) Unfortunately you won’t learn any of this from *Be Fierce*—you don’t get \$20 million without a nondisclosure agreement.

For a fuller picture I recommend reading Gabriel Sherman’s excellent reporting on Ailes and the culture of Fox alongside Carlson’s book.\* It’s from Sherman we learn that Carlson secretly recorded her meetings with Ailes on her phone for a year and a half—including his remark that the two of them should have had sex long ago to resolve their differences, spoken sometime before she was fired (after an eleven-year stint as a newscaster) and sometime after she lodged complaints about the climate of sexism at Fox, for which Ailes labeled her a “man hater” and demoted her.

After news of the lawsuit broke, thousands of women in every sort of occupation—waitresses, Wall Street bankers, oil rig operators—wrote to Carlson about their own experiences, and most of her book is devoted to their stories. None of the news is good. Harassment of every sort is rampant in every industry, ranging from explicit quid pro

quos to nonstop entreaties for dates or sex, to egregious sexual hazing of women in nontraditionally female occupations like cop or soldier. The less job security you have, the worse it is; fast food workers are especially vulnerable.

What happens to women who try to resist or report harassment is also uniformly bad, Carlson reports. Human Resources offices are unresponsive (there to protect the company only); harassers who respond to complaints with defenses such as “You think I’d hit *that?*” (Trump’s defense too) are believed over accusers. Women who come forward are likely to be passed over for promotions and good assignments, or find their jobs mysteriously eliminated. On rare occasions when a boss-harasser is actually fired, the woman who brought him down often gets treated like a leper by his allies. The majority of those who report harassment end up in different jobs, which makes it understandable that, according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 70 percent of women who are harassed don’t report it. The Bureau of Justice Statistics keeps a separate category for workplace rapes and sexual assaults, which number upward of 43,000 a year, but Carlson notes that “women’s advocates say that this number vastly underrepresents such crimes.” Then there are the psychological effects Carlson catalogs: depression, sleep disorders, lost self-esteem, even suicide attempts.

*Be Fierce* is quite useful on the practical side of these issues, where Carlson is obviously alluding to her own experiences. Have a plan before you go to HR or you’ll find your options predetermined; you may have a mandatory arbitration clause in your employment contract you don’t know about (Carlson and her lawyers got around hers by suing Ailes as an individual, Sherman reports). As for recording people without their knowledge, check your local laws.

Where the book gets awkward is Carlson’s attempts to reconcile her more feminist leanings with the contours of her own career, launched by that stint as Miss America. She felt uncomfortable being on display, she says, and surprised to find herself “evaluated strictly on my looks.” She resented other people’s idea that by participating she was “agreeing to be objectified.” Claude Rains’s overquoted line about being shocked to find gambling at Rick’s came to mind—aren’t they called “beauty contests”?

One can agree that Miss America contestants shouldn’t be the object of sexual come-ons by every sleazy PR guy in town, while wishing to point out that Miss America contestants are there to uphold certain fantasies about femininity. Carlson says this herself, and tells us that after yielding the throne she took a feminist studies course and wrote a paper reflecting on her realization that if women’s role is to “do emotional labor and serve men,” for Miss America it’s all the more so. Though Carlson doesn’t go into it, one well-known man who expected such services was, of course, the future president, who’s accused of groping and kissing at least two Miss USA contestants without permission. Trump himself boasts of barging into dressing rooms in the Miss Teen USA contest to gape at unclothed teenage girls. Upon purchasing the Miss USA franchise, he says, he “made the heels higher and the bathing suits smaller.”

The “idealized pedestal” Miss America gets put on is itself a form of disempowerment, Carlson eventually came to realize. True, and if you flip to your local Fox affiliate, you’ll see the same compliant femininity distilled to its purest iteration. Like beauty contestants, the

women of Fox are hired on the basis of looks, then laminated into near mannequins. The visual requirements may be ramping down at other news networks, but the optics at Fox make clear what's expected from women: to begin with, not to be men.

The idea of rigidly binary gender roles is under assault in certain quarters, but it's hard at work here, indeed visually exaggerated as much as possible. Even when the persona is feisty, the dress code says feminine submission: tourniquet-tight dresses (undergirded by tethers of the appropriately named "Spanx"), plunging necklines, four-inch stilettos to prevent anyone from bolting. Hemlines are so dangerously short that recrossing one's legs—given Ailes's notorious "leg-cam"—leads to embarrassing crotch shots being posted online; in the ones of Carlson she appears to be auditioning for Sharon Stone's role in *Basic Instinct*. (Men in the newsroom are allowed not to have bodies; women are all body.)

Then there's the trademark Fox mouth: lips glossed to perpetual blow-job readiness. One illuminating tidbit from Sherman's reporting is provided by a former Fox makeup artist who tells of female anchors dropping by to get their makeup done before private meetings with Ailes. "I'm going to see Roger, gotta look beautiful!" they'd say; at least one of them resurfaced post-meeting with the makeup on nose and chin gone.

I'm not saying that women get harassed because of the way they dress. The point is that the way Ailes expected "his" women to dress makes clear the role they were expected to play: receptacles. Whether that means blowing the boss or swallowing male fantasies generally, that's the visual. If those who signed on had difficulty speaking out about harassment in the workplace because they felt shame regarding the trade-offs they'd made—and many have said that they did—shame is what women are meant to feel in this equation. Shame is what they're there to absorb. Women get to be the dumping ground for every form of male weakness and self-loathing that can be offloaded onto them. The convenience of misogyny is that men are spared from hating themselves because they have women to hate instead.

The women of Fox are pitching these arrangements, among their other duties. Patriarchy doesn't have standing armies (though some feminists have theorized rape as its enforcement wing); what it has is cultural institutions like Fox, where its values and norms get disseminated. Whether or not the high-minded liberal intellectual who told his female underlings to wear tighter dresses—or the nerdy public radio boss who stuck his tongue into unwilling women's mouths, or the pudgy pundit who made free with his erections—is a Fox viewer, the cultural work of Fox is to make explicit a set of implicit assumptions about female receptivity that these men also buy into.

"Sexual harassment thrives in an atmosphere where women's rights are not valued," Carlson writes. Agreed. But control over your body isn't only about not being groped, it's also about access to birth control and abortion rights, and here the women of Fox, however feisty in demeanor, are crap as allies. Megyn Kelly once told a feminist guest that feminists go wrong by endorsing a pro-choice platform, because they're alienating half the American female population. This misses the point so completely you wonder if the Spanx was cutting off the oxygen flow to her brain.



The political demand of the moment is for men to be better men: we want them to give up the toxic masculinity and vestigial behaviors that impede women's equality. But are there vestigial aspects of femininity too that are similarly maladaptive for the modern workplace? The question came to mind as I read Carlson's account of an experience at one of her early jobs: she was riding alone in a car through rural Virginia with a cameraman who suddenly launched into a discussion about how much he'd enjoyed touching her breasts when he put a microphone under her blouse, and kept talking about it, in a "graphic monologue," for the entire trip back to the office. Carlson's response was "sheer terror," she writes. Shaking, she pressed herself against the passenger door, praying she wouldn't have to jump out of the moving vehicle. Once back at the office she was trembling so badly her boss noticed and asked what had happened; feeling sick to her stomach, she told him. (The cameraman was eventually fired over something else.)

It may not win me any popularity contests to ask this next question, but what stopped Carlson from just telling the cameraman to shut up? True, she was a young woman in her early twenties, and recently hired. And he was out of line. But he wasn't her boss. He hadn't threatened her, unless talking grossly about her body is threatening in and of itself. He hadn't groped or fondled or kissed her against her will (all of which I firmly believe should sever a man from his paycheck).

One answer to the question may be that Carlson was socialized female, and a certain delicacy about sexual matters is a long-standing attribute of traditional femininity. (Which makes raunchy jokes by female comedians funnier than those of their male counterparts: more social taboos to violate.) But if we're demanding that men overcome their gender socialization, are there aspects of femininity we might wish to ditch too? Cowering when a man mentions sex transforms it into the equivalent of the master's stick: he merely has to wave it to keep you in line. It's the internalized submission of a colonial mentality—and in fact, left-wing feminists, a dying breed in these Lean In times, used to propose regarding women as "the last colony," including those of us residing in the advanced metropolises.

Perhaps if women unlearned this response we'd fare better—just in case men don't cease waving their sticks immediately. Worse, do we participate in propping up male power—or the aura of power the wielders wish to create—by helpfully trembling on command? Carlson mentions theories that verbal incidents like hers with the cameraman are a "gateway crime" to sexual assault, but if we react to verbal harassment as if it's a slippery slope to rape, we're going to be far less able to contest it, at least in instances where that's a possibility.

Collapsing all varieties of sexual malfeasance together, regardless of the scale of the injury—as in the viral #MeToo campaign, which half a



*Michael Schwartz/New York Post Archives/Getty Images*

*Gretchen Carlson shortly after she was crowned Miss America, September 1988*

million women joined after the news about Harvey Weinstein broke—has been useful from the standpoint of activism. But in everyday life, distinctions matter. You want to know when to tell someone to shut up and when to jump out of a moving car.

This would also involve the ability to distinguish between force and power. Among the many things to hold the monstrous Weinstein accountable for is that he makes it all the more difficult to have that discussion.

The accounts of Weinstein's accusers—over a hundred have been compiled online—reveal that at times he used physical force to subdue women. But more often his tactic of choice was intimidation; he rode the aura of power. He was also a practiced manipulator, and manipulators know their audience: he played on women's fear of making scenes or standing up to men. Those who didn't buy into it seem to have fared better. The actress Lupita Nyong'o recalled several encounters with Weinstein in an essay for *The New York Times*. When he trotted out his familiar moves, she refused to play the expected role: when he asked to give her a massage, she turned the tables and gave him one instead, consciously putting herself in control of the situation. When he tried taking off his pants, she walked to the door, not giving him the satisfaction of seeming intimidated. And he backed down. She seems to have understood that Weinstein may have had power over her career, but he didn't have power over her, and making that distinction gave her more options for negotiating a bad situation.

There are thousands of stories circulating, and a lot to process. What's been particularly horrifying to learn is the seriality of the harassment enterprise, the enormous numbers of victims so many of the sexual exploiters racked up. It's like they're on autopilot, programmed to extract sex—or recompense, or humiliation, or something—from unwilling women. Whatever they're after, clearly no quantity of it ever suffices. Learning about other humans acting so robotically presents a conceptual difficulty. We wish to emphasize the moral agency of the predators, their supposed gains—sadistic pleasure, the glee of getting away with it—which enlarges their monstrosity and distinguishes them from the rest of us. But who would “choose” to be a robot?

Some years ago I had coffee with a man who had Tourette's, and whose tic involved touching, which meant that he kept leaning across the small table and touching me on the shoulder, eventually migrating to the breast area. It made me uncomfortable, but I didn't want to mention it because I didn't know if he could control it. Was this lechery or disability?

A similar question nags about some of the sexual malefactors in the news. Anthony Weiner has been the public face of the sexual tic for some years now: a man of demonstrable intelligence under the sway of a compulsion so intellectually disabling that after a string of previous life-wrecking exposures, he still allowed himself to be set up once again, this time by a fifteen-year-old. Anyone could have seen from ten miles away that it was a frame—anyone but Weiner, that is. (The girl later said she was trying to influence the course of the 2016 presidential election, which she probably did—James Comey reopened the investigation into Hillary Clinton's e-mails after seizing Weiner's computer once his new friend turned him in.)

Pundits have been quick to pronounce that men such as Weiner aren't sex addicts; they make choices. But neither analysis seems entirely adequate. The question I find myself wanting to ask is: What *happened* to these men? When you hear of a man masturbating into a potted plant, or behind his desk, or worse, pinning a woman down and masturbating onto her clothes, yes, clearly they hate and need women. Evidently humiliating women is a means to alleviate something. (Psychoanalysts say about flashers that a man's need to whip out and display his penis is to reassure himself that it's still there.) Still, if hatred of women is automatically transmitted to men by a misogynist culture—the customary feminist analysis—why are some men so much more monstrous than others?

One answer, sure to please no one in the condemnation business, was suggested by the feminist Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976): the problem for men is that they had mothers. Having once been children, a time where women controlled their bodies in humiliating and disempowering ways, men seek to turn the situation around in adulthood. Mother-dominated child-rearing, thought Dinnerstein, is the reason behind men's loathing of women and everything culturally inscribed as female. Both men and women remain semihuman and monstrous under such arrangements, and this is both our social situation and our personal tragedy: men can't give up ruling the world until women cease to have a monopoly on ruling childhood. To push Dinnerstein's speculations to an even gloomier place: do mothers take out on their sons the abuses they themselves have suffered at the hands of men?

There's a built-in weirdness to possessing a sexuality, whatever your gender. It reminds us that we're animals; it's bendable into perverse configurations, which is maybe what we also like about it. We're afflicted with bizarre, amoral dreams on a nightly basis. Our fantasy lives don't always comport with our ideas about who we should be. We go to work and have to pretend we don't have genitals under our clothes, and that our coworkers don't either. Maybe this is more of a problem for biological men, given their physiology, which externalizes desires more blatantly; women are afforded more secrets. But women can be weirdos and sadists too: the worst fictions about us are that our natures are pacific and oppression has made us nobler people. Online feminism is itself a playground of bullying and viperishness, most of it under the banner of rectitude.

Will men ever see women as full-fledged human beings rather than ego salves and receptacles? Until that day, the accusations and exposés will continue: the floodgates have opened and aren't closing anytime soon. That's exciting. No doubt there will be innocents caught in the crossfire, as distinctions continue to collapse and mutual suspicion increases (men and women already resemble red and blue states); as office compliments become affronts, and pats on the back actionable.

But it's not exactly news that sexuality fractures self-coherence. We're badly held together by social mores and the threat of punishment, which is how we become such good compartmentalizers. I suspect that anyone who wondered how Harvey Weinstein could have endowed the Gloria Steinem Chair in Media, Culture and Feminist Studies at Rutgers while serially assaulting aspiring actresses and assistants is someone who either lacks imagination or has never done a thorough moral inventory.



—November 22, 2017

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\* See his numerous articles for *New York* magazine, including “The Revenge of Roger’s Angels,” September 5, 2016. ↩

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