

Andrea Dworkin (author), Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder (editors)  
*Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*  
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*Reviewed by Katharine Jenkins, 2020*

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**Quote:**

"Dworkin expertly dissects women's relation to right-wing politics, primarily religious conservatism, in part through detailed readings of texts by religious right-wing women. It is, at times, wickedly funny"

In my view, Andrea Dworkin is one of the most overlooked philosophers of the twentieth century. Given this, I looked forward with anticipation to the publication of *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, an edited anthology of Dworkin's work. In the introduction, Johanna Fateman makes her own and her co-editor Amy Scholder's mission explicit: "Through chronological selections from Dworkin's lifetime of restless output--excerpts from her most infamous nonfiction works and examples of her overlooked fiction, as well as two previously unpublished works--*Last Days at Hot Slit* aims to put the contentious positions she's known for in dialogue with her literary oeuvre" (11). Fateman and Scholder succeed admirably: *Last Days at Hot Slit* is a sympathetic yet critical selection drawn from the full spectrum of literary and theoretical work by this fascinating and powerful thinker. It is equally well suited to introducing the unfamiliar to Dworkin's powerful work, and to enabling those already familiar with it to deepen and extend their understanding.

Teaching Dworkin's work, which I do regularly, has been both immensely rewarding and somewhat challenging. The texts invariably prompt excellent discussions that have students grappling with issues of major importance to their lives. However, the complexity of Dworkin's thought means that a full understanding of it requires engagement with more than one chapter (or paper, or talk), but, for various reasons, none of her monographs or anthologies is well suited for assignment as an entire text. So when I heard last year that an anthology of Dworkin's work was forthcoming, I hoped that it would offer a selection of her works that was suited to use, more or less in their entirety, in (philosophy) undergraduate teaching. This volume does not quite fulfill this need because it includes many texts that are less overtly theoretical than those I would select to teach in a philosophy class. However, what this deeply intelligent and lovingly curated selection does do is to offer a new and rich perspective on Dworkin as a novelist, literary critic, and activist, as well as a philosopher.

The first text in the anthology (aside from a postcard, of which more in a moment) is an extract from Dworkin's first book, a nonfiction work titled *Woman Hating* (1974), which is a pugnacious, exuberant, and wide-ranging broadside against the patriarchy. The sections included here focus on beauty practices and on sadomasochistic literary fiction, besides a brief section on the liberatory potential of androgyny. The opening lines read: "This book is an action, a political action where revolution is the goal. It has no other purpose" (47). These words can be read as a mission statement for all of the writings that follow, fiction and nonfiction. Throughout the anthology, one gets the strong sense that whether she is writing as literary critic, journalist, novelist, or philosopher, Dworkin is always writing first and foremost as a revolutionary, one whose aim is the profound transformation of society.

The texts that immediately follow--two talks from *Our Blood* (1976)--chart the sustained development of Dworkin's ideas about the sex-class system and the role of sexuality in constructing and maintaining it. "Renouncing Sexual Equality" argues that women should not seek equality with men in the sense of seeking to occupy a traditionally male or dominant role within a male-created oppressive system, but should instead seek real freedom and justice by eliminating that system as such. As ever, much is lost by paraphrasing Dworkin; she puts this point in the most uncompromising terms: "I want to suggest to you that a commitment to sexual equality with males...is a commitment to becoming the rich instead of the poor, the rapist instead of the raped, the murderer instead of the murdered" (80). In the era of "lean-in," procapitalist feminism, which urges women to seek success in corporate settings as a form of self-fulfillment, this argument has lost none of its relevance. "The Rape Atrocity and the Boy Next Door" is equally uncompromising and equally relevant, advancing an analysis in which rape has historically been defined as a crime against men (the rightful owners of the raped woman) and must be redefined as a crime--indeed, an atrocity--against women, individually and collectively. Again, this argument retains an appallingly urgency. The cases Dworkin gives of horrific campus gang-rapes being systematically covered up and minimized are indistinguishable from the ones we still hear about on an almost weekly basis. And her insistence that "rapists and their defenders...have high and esteemed places in the society; they are priests, lawyers, judges, lawmakers, politicians, doctors, artists, corporation executives, psychiatrists, and teachers" (104) needs no updating, unless perhaps to add to that already terrifying list a further entry: "presidents."

"The Rape Atrocity and the Boy Next Door" also serves as a good example of Dworkin's rather mixed handling of the intersection of racism and sexism. At times, she demonstrates a keen awareness of the centrality of racist ideologies to practices of sexual subordination, but at others she shows a regrettable willingness to universalize the experience of white women. For instance, she is attentive to the influence of racism on the matter of which cases of alleged rape are taken seriously to any degree, as when she points out the way in which the rape of black women (by men of any racial group) (102) is typically ignored altogether. Her insistence that "[t]hat is racism and that is sexism" (102) hints at a preliminary understanding of some aspects of intersectionality. A few pages later, however, she speaks of "the passivity" into which women have been "rained...over thousands of years" (110) without acknowledging the very different relations that white women and women of color have had to ideas of feminine passivity (see, for example, Lugones 2007). Thus, although Dworkin avoids many of the worst errors of white-centered feminism, her analysis needs to be combined with

the insights arising from feminist work that explicitly centers women of color before it can serve as a basis for the kind of revolutionary praxis to which she aspired.

The next text takes a turn toward memoir, though not away from theory. "A Battered Wife Survives" is a harrowing first-person account of Dworkin's experience of intimate-partner violence in her early twenties, preceded, in this collection, by a heartfelt letter to her parents asking for their support at the time of its publication. It can be read as, among other things, an elucidation of the epistemic standpoint of a survivor of intimate-partner violence, perhaps specifically of the "battered wife," a standpoint Dworkin describes as "chilling" in its "clarity" and that runs through her whole body of work. This chilling clarity is evident in the text that follows, several extracts from what is probably Dworkin's most (in)famous book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Dworkin's central claim is that mainstream, commercial, heterosexual pornography is a material instantiation of, and propaganda for, a system of male dominance and female submission that is violent and dehumanizing. However grueling one finds the close readings of images and texts, and whatever one thinks about other kinds of pornography or about the specific political actions that Dworkin undertook in light of her analysis--I will not attempt here to relitigate the notorious "sex wars" of the 1980s--this central claim has significant plausibility and merits deep analysis.

I was particularly pleased to see a substantial extract from *Right-Wing Women*, which is, in my view, a particularly overlooked work even compared to Dworkin's writing in general. Dworkin expertly dissects women's relation to right-wing politics, primarily religious conservatism, in part through detailed readings of texts by religious right-wing women. It is, at times, wickedly funny; Phyllis Schlafly is memorably described as seeming "possessed by Machiavelli, not Jesus" (189). It is common to hear people criticizing Dworkin and other radical feminist philosophers for "denying women's agency"; but here, the bargains women strike with power, including the political Right, are presented precisely as an exercise of agency, a calculated tactic in the "fight for survival" and the "fight for meaning" (180) in a male-dominated social world.

Agency is also central to the next text, but this time, it is the agency of men. "I Want a Twenty-Four-Hour Truce in Which There Is No Rape" is, for me, the single most powerful piece in Dworkin's whole oeuvre. Delivered in 1983 to a conference of profeminist men, it is a searing appeal to men to act to stop rape. Here, Dworkin is at her most succinct and direct. She baldly states, "all of our political actions are lies if we don't make a commitment to ending the practice of rape" (207), closing with the assertion, "[i]f you have a conception of freedom that includes the existence of rape, you are wrong" (210). Her claims are both self-evident and revelatory; as one of my students put it recently, "what she's saying sounds so obvious, but it still needs saying, even thirty-five years later."

Dworkin is at once insistent on the importance of keeping discussions of rape culture focused principally on the harms done to women, and insightful about its broader impact. In a moment of breathtaking prescience, she writes:

Some of you are very concerned about the rise of the Right in this country, as if that is something separate from feminism or the men's movement. There is a cartoon I saw that brought it all together nicely. It was a big picture of Ronald Reagan as a cowboy with a big hat and a gun. And it said: "A gun in every

holster, a pregnant woman in every home. Make America a man again." Those are the politics of the Right. (205)

I'd recommend those coming to this anthology who are unfamiliar with Dworkin's work, or who have encountered some of it and found it challenging or off-putting, to consider beginning with "Twenty-Four-Hour Truce."

*Last Days at Hot Slit* contains two previously unpublished works. The first, from *Ruins*, an autobiographical epistolary novel, is "Goodbye to All That," a tirade straight from the front lines of the sex wars. In it, Dworkin roundly condemns her opponents--"enemies" might be an even more appropriate word--both individually, by name (Ellen Willis, Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin), and en masse, as "swastika-wielding dykettes" and "liberated *Cosmo* intellectuals." Fateman's introduction does a good job of situating this startling piece in the context of the bitter disputes of the time and the sneering refusal by many feminists to take Dworkin's ideas seriously, or even to characterize them with a modicum of honesty. The next text, an extract from Dworkin's first published novel, *Ice and Fire*, thoroughly belies the common mischaracterization of Dworkin as dogmatically and pointlessly antisex and antipleasure. Here, the young narrator and her friend turn tricks, get high, and talk ecstatically about art, both of them exuberant and carefree in the face of precarious circumstances and implied violence.

We are back on familiar ground with the philosophically rich "Occupation/Collaboration" from *Intercourse*. In this lyrical and intricate text, Dworkin advances a powerful and provocative argument. She posits a dominant social conception of intercourse (coitus) as possession of women by men (he "has" her). This is both plausible and not, in itself, particularly radical. But Dworkin then takes this point and runs with it, to stunning effect. Human beings, she claims, are considered to have privacy, dignity, and bodily integrity; but we have seen that intercourse (specifically, coitus) is widely understood to violate privacy, dignity, and bodily integrity. Moreover, she contends, intercourse is understood to be appropriate and necessary for women. The upshot is that women are not recognized as human beings: what is considered inappropriately violating treatment for a human being is considered appropriate and even necessary treatment for a woman. This is how Dworkin reaches the radical conclusion that intercourse in its current form is a lynchpin of women's subordination, "second-class freedom for second-class humans" (258). The argument I've sketched here is only one of the interlocking arguments presented in this complex chapter, all of which are open to a variety of interpretations and repay careful study (for my own detailed engagement with this chapter, see Jenkins 2018).

If *Intercourse* is challenging, the text that follows, an extract from Dworkin's second published novel, *Mercy*, is devastating. A stream-of-consciousness narrative detailing a series of violent sexual encounters, its relentless brutality borders on the traumatizing. It's interesting to see Dworkin's fiction alongside her nonfiction writing, and I'm confident there are insights to be gained from the former that enrich the latter. Nevertheless, I must confess to feeling singularly unequipped, both by training and by constitution, to "review" the fiction, in any meaningful sense. All I know is that I could barely stand to read *Mercy*, and I cannot now bring myself to return to it. The volume closes on an autobiographical note, with extracts from *Life and Death* (1997) and a previously unpublished work, "My Suicide" (1999), the

latter detailing the drug rape Dworkin suffered in Paris and its devastating effect on her toward the end of her life.

The chronological ordering of the texts works extremely well, showing the development of key themes and the increasing sophistication of Dworkin's analysis. The selection is made with care and attention, and must have been an extremely difficult task, making it churlish to quibble with particular decisions. For example, I regretted the omission of "The Root Cause," from *Our Blood*, in which Dworkin's ontology of gender (constructionist realist, in contemporary philosophical parlance) is most clearly articulated; and when it came to *Intercourse*, I would have liked to see, alongside the crucial "Occupation/Collaboration," the chapter focused on the fiction of James Baldwin, titled "Communion," which offers a more tender and optimistic perspective on sex that would surprise many of Dworkin's critics. Yet though these exclusions may be limitations of this collection, the richness of Dworkin's work means that their omission cannot reasonably be considered a deficiency, but rather serves to show that there is plenty of room for further collections to be assembled in the future with different aims and emphases. I take issue with only one of Fateman and Scholder's decisions, which is their exclusion of a key passage from the "Androgyny" section in *Woman Hating* in which Dworkin comes out squarely in favor of trans liberation, arguing that "every transsexual has the right to survival on his/her own terms...every transsexual should be entitled to a sex change operation, and it should be provided by the community as one of its functions" (Dworkin 1974, 186). Given the fact that radical feminist thought and trans liberation are too often painted as fundamentally at odds, this seems like a missed opportunity to highlight that Dworkin, a prominent radical feminist, firmly rejected such an analysis as far back as 1974.

One decision made by Fateman and Scholder that works particularly well is the inclusion of a postcard and a letter from Dworkin to her parents, which provide important context for the works that follow. In addition, the postcard reveals that the anthology's title, *Last Days at Hot Slit*, was at one point the planned title for Dworkin's first book (published as *Woman Hating*). It is a hopeful as well as a provocative title, implying that these are the end-times of male dominance and female subordination, that women will not be defined, pornographically, as merely "hot slits" for much longer. With hindsight, we must grant that this wasn't true of the 1970s, when Dworkin entertained this title. But it's certainly true that revealing patriarchy as a political system, as Dworkin does, makes it clear that it could be ended. Dworkin, as this anthology amply demonstrates, did her damndest in the time that she had. Now it's up to us.

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