

Graphic Male Dominance

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It's not what you think, how you think or even mean to say it; in an electronic world increasingly filtered for nasty-minded spam, your messages might have a better chance of getting through in a bottle than through spam-proofed email.

So here's the story. My father recommended me for a business opportunity to a friend of his. She needs someone to read her novel and write a short marketing synopsis to send with the book to her publisher.

While flattered that Dad has confidence in my abilities, nepotism should never be the sole reason anyone gets work. To show the author that I am the woman for the job I sent her an electronic missive describing my background, assets and interests.

Here is part of that letter:

"This year I'm writing my undergraduate thesis at the University of Washington. The broad theme is to look at representations of the female hero in modern mythology.

"I will be presenting a paper at an academic conference next June which focuses specifically on Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the original incarnation of Wonder Woman as modern archetypal heroes.

"I'm also looking into graduate programs at the UW and have two different areas of interest.

"1) Gender and pop culture studies. Specifically women and/in comics, graphic novels, television and film. It's an emerging field and a good time to become a specialist. Especially since the focus tends to be on men.

"2) Comparative women's storytelling. Taking a cross-cultural approach, how does a history of women's storytelling (through myth, folk and fairy tales, as well as autobiographies) supplement, subvert and reflect the dominant male tradition?"

Sounds like normal academic wanking, right? That's exactly what it is. Read on.

"The message returned below could not be delivered" accompanied my bounced back missive. My father tried to forward the message from his computer and soon responded:

"I got it kicked back, too. Apparently, there are words in here that trigger a spam filter. My guess is "graphic," "subvert," "women" (too many times), "vampire," "Buffy" and, best of all, "dominant male."

He advised that I take out the links I'd included and "fine-tune the language with a dirty mind in mind." How many parents tell you to put your mind in the gutter?

Taking Dad's advice to think perversely, I "cleaned up" my language and removed the links. The recipient's server finally accepted the missive.

Though the essence of what I had to say remained, I felt I'd lost part of my flavor. And here lies the problem.

Professional writers (academic or otherwise) express themselves by conscious word choices. Isn't it funny that the same words we use to nuance our style are the same words we use to protect our inbox?

What might we be missing through this self-imposed censorship?

To communicate in a filtered era, writers, students and even job seekers sending out cover letters on a resume might have to think dirty before they clean it up. Otherwise, important messages people want or need to send can get inadvertently weeded out.

Granted, spam filters serve a valuable function (and not just for the "protection" of children). I really don't need to know how to enlarge my penis or breasts. If I want porn, I'll rent it. And sex toys are readily available from the friendly, knowledgeable and responsible staff at Seattle's Toys in Babeland store.

Obviously I don't need my inbox flooded with pornographic advertisements.

But because a spam filter doesn't differentiate between an academic and a pornographer, masturbatory rhetoric is instantly flagged and blocked -- regardless of intention.

Then again, "Don't knock masturbation. It's sex with someone I love," said Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*. In the vein of the intellectual auteur, academic "love" (author clears her throat) extends beyond physical pleasure and into the love of our own rhetoric.

So the next time I write an e-message, I'll have to think salaciously rather than academically. I'll try not to wank, even though as Woody said, "It's sex with someone I love."