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STILL MAD: AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS
AND THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION, 1950-2020

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Outraged at Donald Trump's election as President of the United States in 2016 and the defeat of Hillary Clinton, the first woman ever to compete in an American presidential election sponsored by a major political party, scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote a sweeping sociocultural survey of the lives of women writers and the anger motivating them to write professionally. The academic duo represents an already well-established partnership, as they are responsible for giving us the unforgettably impactful *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) and *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1991).

Steering away from literary theory and adopting an approach closer to cultural criticism, the authors of *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1950-2020* read "the overall arc of women's lives in the context of the community and culture in which they are living" (Gilbert and Hoepker 2022:3), concentrating on the social and cultural changes that women have made possible in the USA. Spanning in scope over a period of 70 years and focusing on the backgrounds and "the unique contributions of poets, novelists, dramatists, memoirists, and literary theorists" (p. 355), as well as artists and activists, *Still Mad* is divided into five sections, in turn subdivided into eleven chapters. They are preceded by an "Introduction" dominated by the emblematic figure of Hillary Rodham Clinton and her transformation from career woman through wife and First Lady, to an assertive politician and first woman presidential candidate, all the way to a demonised wicked witch in the Trumpist discourse.

Importantly, Gilbert and Gubar justify the adjectival use of "mad" in the title as "enraged [...], maddened, confused, or rebellious" (pp. 3-4), arguing that, despite social and political advancements, women remain angered at the enduring barriers that still hinder their progress in many areas. Although full agreement about the number of feminist waves has not yet been reached, with some opining that America is currently undergoing the third wave, while others claiming that intersectionality and the internet use of activism has already introduced the fourth wave, Gilbert and Gubar conceptualize the second wave of feminism as still ongoing, having grown from the 1950s until the present day: "tremulous, tumultuous, tremendous, ongoing." (p. 3)

An important metaphor introduced in the book from the very beginning is that of “glass ceilings”, the barriers encountered by marginalised groups, which younger generations perceive as shattered, even if the American socio-political context has often proven them wrong. In the authors’ view, there are still battles to be fought by feminists even as the book ends in the aftermath of Joe Biden’s election as President of the US, with genuine hope for a better, brighter future in terms of women’s rights.

The following well-researched chapters, written with wit and supporting documentary evidence, follow the intricate relationships of professional women writers and women’s rights activists. The chapters seem to flow one into the other, as the “especially charismatic” women (p. 2) selected and discussed grow over time, both personally and professionally, adopting different viewpoints, becoming radical activists or more culturally influenced.

The two chapters in “Section I: Stirrings in the Fifties” look at the formative years in the lives of such women writers as Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Diane di Prima, Lorraine Hansberry, Audre Lorde, Joan Didion and Betty Friedan – all of whom were “singularly determined and eccentric mad women who would make their mark on history” (p. 47). The authors highlight the racial stereotypes associated with Black people and emphasise the fact that “the classic picture of the tranquilised fifties belies the furious though sometimes furtive resistance of women who never bought into the fantasy of docile femininity or women whose surface conformity masked deep dissent” (p. 46).

The second section – “Eruptions in the Sixties” – features another two chapters dedicated in particular to an exploration of “marital domesticity and its discontents” (p. 88) from women’s viewpoint. We accompany Gilbert and Gubar on a journey of rediscovering such angry voices as those of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Nina Simone. Moreover, the sexual revolution, made possible by the appearance of the birth control pill, is linked to protests against the Vietnam war and discussed in the lives and publications of Gloria Steinem, Helen Gurley Brown, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, and Valerie Solanas, as well as through the activism of Denise Levertov.

“Section III: Awakenings in the Seventies” encompasses three chapters reflecting the many changes that occurred during the 1970s in the United States. This is the decade which sees “an explosion of incendiary feminist publications” (p. 132), among which are counted Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, with its postulation that it is family that conditions gender roles (i.e. “the (aggressive or sadistic) masculine and the (passive or masochistic) feminine traits” necessary to maintain the structure, p. 140), and Susan Sontag’s radically feminist essays, which “sought to dismantle the notion of woman as null, submissive, and irrational” (p. 147), and which so far have remained largely unknown to the general public. For instance, Sontag’s “The Double Standard of Aging”, which essentially addresses age in relation to men and women, argues that, whereas old men are perceived as powerful and even virile, old women are considered “obscene”, performing femininity like actresses in the theatre, and thus anticipating Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender.

One chapter, the sixth, is dedicated to speculative poetry and fiction, examining in particular feminist science-fiction through the lives and works of Alice B. Sheldon (a.k.a. James Tiptree, Jr.), Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin, or revisiting history as a dystopian narrative, in which women are defined as mere accessories, as does Adrienne Rich. The section’s last chapter covers, on the one

hand, the establishment and growing influence of *Ms.* magazine (1972) as the first national American feminist publication, and some of its contributors, like Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde; on the other hand, in light of the emerging concept of “identity politics”, Maxine Hong Kingston contributes to the ongoing conversations about feminism by adding geographical, linguistic, ethnic, and culinary differences, “to mark what it means to grow up female” (p. 221), thus engendering cultural dialogue and preparing the ground for Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory.

The fourth section, “Revisions in the Eighties and Nineties”, highlights the positive changes brought by the women’s movement into women’s lives and the switch to a more academic form of activism. Feminist thinking is now reshaped by two new approaches: identity politics (with its focus on coalitions and communities of women) and poststructuralist theory (with its challenge of conventional ideas of femininity and masculinity). Here is traced the influence of authors and works like Andrea Dworkin’s investigation of pornography, rape, and the objectification of women through sexual intercourse, Gloria Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” defined in *Borderlands*, which inspired feminist thinking about ethnic identity politics (Chicana) and transnational issues, or Toni Morrison’s deep exploration of racism and sexism. Although the 1980s saw an increased awareness of the women’s movement as an international phenomenon, with contributions from French feminist authors (e.g. Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva), the decade also witnessed culture wars, in which the Reagan government targeted feminism and homosexuality as archenemies. The field of queer studies emerged with essential works by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*) and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*). Women’s rights spread to include gay men’s rights and trans women’s rights, with several authors challenging stereotypical or binary perceptions of gender. Donna Haraway’s cyborg, part flesh and part machine, was a significant concept for the period, offering a very graphic image of a creature “able to hold contradictions together” (p. 281). Sadly, the end of the 20th century also witnessed disputes and attacks of women against women, as well as acts of self-sabotage within the movement, the commodification of feminism used as a marketing strategy, or even the creation of “feminazis”, a portmanteau term used to designate extreme or militant feminism, but also to silence women.

“Section V: Recessions / Revivals in the Twenty-first Century” looks at the stirrings in the 21st century, among which are counted the establishment and activism done by Code Pink: Women for Peace (2002) to protest the war in Iraq, the legalisation of gay marriage (2015), the #MeToo movement (2017-2018), the extension of the Civil Rights Act to include trans people (2020). Some of the authors and artists tackled here are Alison Bechdel and her graphic memoirs about growing up with parents who matured in the 1950s, Eve Ensler and her celebrated *The Vagina Monologues*, while Susan Stryker and others drew attention to a growing population that resisted binary classifications. New routes were mapped by younger generations of women writers, artists, activists, and politicians. In this section, Gilbert and Gubar survey aspects related to racial markers and interracial violence – for example, in the work of Claudia Rankine, her 2013 Black Lives Matter, and her literary use of the pronoun “you” in order to signal the alienation of Blacks who challenge systemic racism. In best-selling novels N.K. Jemisin revisited stories of slavery, oppression and cultural conflict, Patricia Lockwood addressed the masculinism of institutionalised religion, while Rebecca Solnit’s

scathing essay “Men Explain Things to Me” (2008) led to the coining of the derogatory term “mansplaining”.

The Epilogue, symbolically titled “White Suits, Shattered Glass”, returns to the initial metaphor of glass ceilings, which – in the authors’ view – have finally been shattered by women like Kamala Harris, incumbent Vice-President, or Jill Biden, Doctor in Education and First Lady. In addition, the Epilogue paints a vivid picture of the white trouser suit worn by various women politicians (e.g., Shirley Chisholm in 1969, Hillary Clinton in 2016, Nancy Pelosi and Kamala Harris in 2020) to mark their respective breakthroughs in terms of political achievements as well as, or perhaps even more so, a visually symbolic ‘thank you’ to the suffragettes. As Gilbert and Gubar note, the shards and slivers of the broken glass ceilings now “glitter with possibility” (p. 350), continuously inspiring new generations of women to counter male violence and patriarchal structures.

Overall, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s ambitious and well-informed survey records “not only the pioneering achievements of second-wave feminism but also the sometimes edgy dialogues, disagreements, and divisions within feminism, most of which ended up enriching the collectivity that feminists seek to foster and promote.” (p. 355) The result of a tremendous team effort, *Still Mad* brings up less known works, intriguing biographical information, and offers fascinating information about the impact of American women who have helped to shape the country over the past seven decades. At the same time, although some feminist critics (cf. Roiphe 2021, Baumgardner n.d., DeVere Brody n.d., Green n.d.) may find fault with the content organisation or the selection of women and/or texts discussed, the book raises awareness, opens dialogues and sparks debate, particularly in relation to women’s rights, gender equity, toxic masculinities, and female anger. Written in a style that is both accessible to and engaging for the general readership, *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1950-2020* represents a must-read for any student or scholar interested in the fields of feminist history, gender studies, or literature by women in the North-American context.

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