

Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement

*A strong woman is a woman in whose head
a voice is repeating, I told you so,
ugly, bad girl, bitch, nag, shrill, witch,
ballbuster, nobody will ever love you back,
why aren't you feminine, why aren't
you soft, why aren't you quiet, why
aren't you dead?*

—Marge Piercy, "For Strong Women,"
from *The Moon Is Always Female**

REALLY GOOD WOMEN, REALLY "NICE" WOMEN, REALLY SISTER-ly women, are dead women.

Well, no. Nobody literally expects millions of us to drop down *ker-flop* clutching flowers to our bosoms like Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolat, and yet I wonder. Women are supposed to make other people feel good, to fill others' needs without having any of our own—this is the great Feminine Imperative. Such self-suppression amounts to the death of the self. Why demand such an impossibility?

* Alfred A. Knopf, New York. © 1980 by Marge Piercy.

All oppressed people must be controlled. Since open force and economic coercion are practical only part of the time, ideology—that is, internalized oppression, the voice in the head—is brought in to fill the gap. When people discover their own power, governments tremble. Therefore, in addition to all the other things that are done to control people, their own strength must be made taboo to them. Vast numbers of men can be allowed to experience some power as long as they expend their power against other men and against women—a desirable state of affairs since it keeps men (and men and women) from cooperating, which would be a grave menace to the powers that be. Therefore the Masculine Imperative is less severe than the Feminine one.

The Masculine Imperative means that men avoid the threat of failure, inadequacy, and powerlessness—omnipresent in a society built on competition and private property—by existing *against* others.

But the Feminine Imperative allows of no self-help at all. We exist *for* others.

But *women* are also terrified by female strength, *women* judge success in women to be the worst sin, *women* force women to be “unselfish,” *women* would rather be dead than strong, rather helpless than happy.

Feminist women, too.

If you’ve been forbidden the use of your own power for your own self, you can give up your power or you can give up your self. If you’re effective, you must be so for others but never for yourself (that would be “selfish”). If you’re allowed to feel and express needs, you must be powerless to do anything about them and can only wait for someone else—a man, an institution, a strong woman—to do it for you.

That is, you can be either a Magic Momma or a Trembling Sister.

Magic Mommas are rare and Trembling Sisters are com-

mon; the taboo is so strong that it’s safer to be totally ineffective, or as near to it as is humanly possible. Moreover, election to the status of Magic Momma requires some real, visible achievement, which, in a male-dominated society, is rare. Nonetheless, every feminist group contains at least one Magic Momma; success being entirely relative, *somebody* can always be elevated to MM status. (If canny group members, aware of this possibility, refuse to do, say, or achieve anything, they can be chosen for past achievement, or smaller and smaller differences in behavior can be seized on as evidence of Magic Momma-hood.) Since we are all struggling with the Feminine Imperative, one of the ways achieving women combat the guilt of success is by agreeing to be Magic Mommas.

MMs give to others—eternally.

MMs are totally unselfish.

MMs have infinite time and energy.

MMs love all other women, always.

MMs never get angry at other women.

MMs don’t sleep.

MMs never get sick.

If MMs don’t fulfill the above conditions, they feel horribly, horribly guilty.

MMs know that they can never do *enough*.

Like the Victorian mother, the Magic Momma pays for her effectiveness by renouncing her own needs. But these don’t go away. The MM feels guilt over her achievements, guilt over not doing more (in fact, this is the common female guilt over not doing everything for everyone), and the steadily mounting rage of deprivation, as well as the added rage caused by having to feel guilty all the time.

Meanwhile the Trembling Sister has plenty to be enraged about too. Having avoided the guilt of being effective, she’s allowed to feel and express her own needs, but she pays for these “advantages” by an enforced helplessness which re-

quires that somebody fill her needs for her, since she's not allowed to do so herself.

The trouble is that nobody can.

No matter how much *being taken care of* the TS manages to wangle out of others, it is never enough. For being taken care of is exactly what she does not need. It reinforces her helplessness, while what she really needs is access to her own effectiveness—and that is something no one can give to another person.

The Trembling Sister, insisting on being given what she doesn't need and can't use, becomes more and more deprived, and more and more enraged. The Magic Momma, enraged at her enforced guilt and similar enforced deprivation, sooner or later fails to meet the Trembling Sister's needs. She may become ill or reveal some human flaw. She may withdraw, or criticize, or get angry. If MM-hood has been bestowed on her without her knowledge and consent, she may not know what's expected of her and may "sin" in ignorance.

The Trembling Sister can tolerate achievement in women only when such achievement is "unselfish"—*i.e.*, accompanied by visible giving to everyone else and divested of visible satisfaction—and remember, it's precisely her own effectiveness that she's suppressing. She now has the unbearably enraging experience of being (apparently) abandoned by someone who is (apparently) enjoying the very sort of effectiveness she has made inaccessible to herself. The Magic Momma, already angry from years of self-deprivation which have turned out to be useless (since nothing she does ever satisfies either the TS or her own conscience) has the unbearably enraging experience of ingratitude and complaint from someone for whom she has worked hard and "sacrificed everything."

Worse, neither can justify her rage, since our (usually false) social assumption that people cause their own failures

happens, in both their cases, to be perfectly true. At the same time both feel their rage to be justified, since—according to the Feminine Imperative—the MM is right to deprive herself and the TS right to be helpless.

Put the MM and the TS together and you get the conventional female role.

You also get trashing.

Trashing in the feminist movement has always proceeded from "below" "upwards," directed by the Trembling Sister (that is, those who've adopted the TS position) at the self-elected (or merely supposed) MM. The hidden agenda of trashing is to *remain helpless and to fail*, whatever the ostensible motivation. The payoff is to Be Good (though miserable). The TS/MM scenario is predicated on the unrealistic ascription of enormous amounts of power to one side and the even more unrealistic ascription of none at all to the other. It assumes that hurting another woman's feelings is the worst thing—the very worst thing—the most unutterably awful thing—that a woman can do. In a world where women and men are starved, shot, beaten, bombed, and raped, the above assumption takes some doing, but since the MM/TS script requires it, it gets made. (The script also assumes that the MM has no feelings, or if she does, hurting *them* is a meritorious act.)

MMs do less harm; they can work themselves to death or—paralyzed with guilt—do nothing. Or they can encourage other MMs' guilt or fail to discourage TS's expectations of MMs. But discouraging a TS's expectations of an MM is an enterprise fraught with risk, as many feminists know to their cost.

What to do?

Both parties need the confidence that self-love and self-assertiveness are not evil. The MM needs to learn that feelings of guilt are not objective political obligations; the TS needs to learn that feeling intensely conflicted about

power has nothing to do with objective helplessness. The MM needs to be helped. The TS needs not to be helped.

No one originally takes either position of her own free will. The Feminine Imperative is forced on all of us. But in adulthood, and certainly within a feminist community, a woman who remains in either position is her own prisoner. The women's community as a mystically loving band of emotional weaklings who make up to each other by our kindness and sweetness for the harshness we have to endure in the outside world is a description that exactly characterizes the female middle-class sub-culture as it's existed in patriarchy for centuries—without changing a thing. This is not a revolutionary movement but a ghetto in which anyone seen as having achievement, money, or power is cast as a Magic Momma, whose function is to make up to everyone else for the world's deprivation and their terror of effectiveness. This is impossible. So the requirement becomes to *make others feel good* all the time, an especially seductive goal in times of political reaction when activity directed outward at the (seemingly) monolithic social structure is not only frustrating but frighteningly dangerous. So honesty goes by the board, hurt feelings are put at a premium, general fear and paralysis set in, and one by one any woman who oversteps the increasingly circumscribed area of what's permissible is trashed. Eventually, after the demons of success and effectiveness have been banished, and all the female villains who made everyone else feel miserable have left or been silenced, what happens?

The group disintegrates.

The Feminine Imperative has been faithfully served. The enemy has been driven from the ranks. Feminism has been destroyed.

Some revolutionary proposals:

Self-sacrifice is vile.

Martyrdom cults (like that surrounding Sylvia Plath), which link failure, death, and female approval, are abominable.

Anyone who ascribes enormous success, money, or power to any woman—certainly any feminist—is daydreaming.

“Uncritical support” is a contradiction in terms.

There is a crucial distinction between the personal and the political. The former leads to the latter but not automatically or without hard work.

Women are not beginners at art or politics; we need to recover our forerunners, not remain in a socially and self-imposed infancy.

Public, political activity is crucial for a political movement.

Demands for the right “tone” in women's interactions are like those statements made to us by men about *our* tone, *i.e.*, “I would've listened to you women if only you'd been ladylike.”

Political theory is crucial for a political movement. I favor the incorporation of class analysis into feminism (*not vice-versa*) but any way of dealing with political relations between male groups will do. Unless (like J. Edgar Hoover about Communism) you think all we need to know about contemporary patriarchy is that we're agin it.

What makes the MM/TS scenario so stubborn is the hidden insistence that a woman cannot, must not, be allowed to use her power on her own behalf. Our society runs on self-aggrandizement for men and self-abasement for women; talk of self-love terrifies men (for whom it means admitting interdependence and emotionality) while women can only expect that I'm recommending brutality and callousness.

One remedy would be to remember Cicely Tyson's TV portrayal of Harriet Tubman.* Biographers are always sur-

* A Woman Called Moses

prised when women like Tubman “sacrifice” their personal lives (or so the biographers assume) for a “cause.” That is, they interpret such women’s actions in terms of the Feminine Imperative. But to be General Moses was no Victorian self-sacrifice, any more than Cicely Tyson (in my opinion, the best living performer in the theatre, uncontainable in a conventionally superficial role) sacrificed something she really wanted to do in order to do her duty by playing Harriet Tubman. When Harriet Tubman said that God wanted her to lead her people to freedom, she was not submitting her will to another’s but arrogating to herself the authenticity and truth of her God, not losing herself but uniting herself with her own transpersonal dimension. Viewers who saw Tyson tuck her chin down in maidenly shyness and whisper, “Momma and Daddy, the last thing I want to do is cause you to worry,”—and then burst forth in fire, “But GOD—” knows that they have not seen anything remotely like self-sacrifice, either on the character’s part or the actress’s. An action may be hard, unpleasant, dangerous, the salvation of others—and heroically self-creating.

Nor is there anything wrong with that unless you believe that human selves—especially female selves—are intrinsically bad, or that we are a lousy species.

To insist that women challenge their own fear of effectiveness and their own guilt for behaving effectively, to insist that we both behave honestly and responsibly and risk hurting others’ feelings (which is hardly the worst thing in the world) is emphatically to disobey the Feminine Imperative. It’s selfish. It isn’t sisterly. It isn’t “nice.”

But it is, I’m beginning to suspect, *the feminist act*.

I haven’t, needless to say, written the above out of pure, altruistic concern for the women’s community. And I can’t envision any of it affecting those women so alienated from their own power that they feel desperately that they must have a Magic Momma (somewhere, somehow) at all costs,

even the cost of being miserably helpless. But there are many women who don’t feel helpless themselves, yet feel guiltily (a) that everyone else must be, and (b) they don’t want to risk the possibility that these totally helpless and vulnerable people may create a very nasty scene. (Quite a contradiction, that!) I also violently resent being first elevated to mythological status and then slammed for it. And the insistence on this person’s hurt feelings and that one’s tremendous vulnerability and the exquisite fragility of everyone (which doesn’t prevent some of them kicking up a very nasty fuss when they don’t get what they want). People dealing with external oppression don’t act this way. (For one thing, they don’t have time.) The MM/TS syndrome is a sign of *internalized* oppression and a form of addiction; that is, since it reinforces the Feminine Imperative, the more you get, the less you have and the more you need. The scenario strikes me as class-linked; I suspect that those oppressed in a directly economic way or by open force don’t do this nearly as much—or at least that it doesn’t reach the same pitch of feverishness. However, it may be that the kind of services women *qua* women provide (affection, admiration, R&R, personal service) require that women be controlled by ideology, since these services must be provided voluntarily at least to some degree.

I think that the unexpressed, unformulated, and very bitter belief that *sexism is true* is also at work here, that is, the idea that women can’t do this or that. It’s this belief that causes the MM’s passionately angry disappointment when Unknown Woman A’s work proves to be terrible, and the TS’s conviction that the only way most women can ever have the pleasures of public success is for the few of us who have (in some magically mysterious way) gained access to the public world of culture and action to tell lies about the achievements of the others. Such a conviction adds to the pain of dispraise (which everybody of course feels) and rage

at its seeming arbitrariness. *Why* is Famous Woman B saying such things about Unknown Woman A's work when A's only hope is for B to be nice to her? Explanations like "elitism," "male identification," selling out, or intoxication with fame, explain nothing; you might as well say Original Sin and be done with it. B is simply being *mean*, a dreadful act when all access to success is (supposedly) in her all-powerful hands.

There is also the problem of ignorance. Those without much access to the public world are unlikely to have had contact with the real hatchet-women of the patriarchy, or real Queen Bees, or know the conditions under which Famous Woman B actually has to work.

For example, feminists have no control over the covers trade publishers put on their books. Sometimes even the editors don't. *Authorial control over the very text* of a science fiction novel is not standard in the trade and must be negotiated. It is often resented; I once lost a magazine sale by insisting that a story of mine stay as written. (How many book sales I or others may have lost by getting a reputation for being "difficult" I don't know.) Even when negotiated, an author's control over the text amounts only to veto power over the editor's or publisher's changes, "not to be unreasonably refused" (you figure that one out). Good editors don't change good authors' mss.—but "good editors" means a minority of those in the field.

Did you know that the hardcover publisher of a book gets half of all the author's paperback income for ever and ever?

That one of the most famous American feminists has been on welfare and had to have money raised by others to pay her hospital bill when she fell ill?

That another, internationally known, lives on less than \$9,000 a year, out of necessity? By *farming*?

That you can publish six books in twelve years, sell 100,000 of some of them, and make less than \$2,500 a year,

including money from book reviews, other non-fiction, short-story sales, and foreign sales?

I'm not complaining, but trying to demolish the illusion of the MM's enormous power and success.

There is simply no such thing. What does exist is the American—or simply modern—illusion that "celebrities" (in however tiny a community) have real, pleasure-filled lives, and the rest of us have—what, unreal ones?—and the insistence on failure and dependency that underlies such attributions of power.

To understand that no one has or can have your power, that it remains in you no matter how forbidden you feel it to be, means defying the patriarchal taboo and that's very hard. It means claiming one's own limited but real power and abandoning one's inflated notion of other women's power. It means engaging in a direct public confrontation with the patriarchy as embodied in men and men's institutions, not concentrating on its symbolic presence in other members of the women's community.

To risk failure is bad enough. To risk success is even worse. After all, women have been burnt alive for claiming a power which was, paradoxically, not enough to save them. It's safer to be weak, safer to have someone else be strong for you and be punished for it in your place.

I believe that trashing, far from being the result of simple envy, arises from a profound ambivalence towards power. The intensity of feeling, the violent inculcation of guilt, the extreme contrast of omnipotence and powerlessness, the lack of substantive complaint,* the anger, the absolute lack

* "Cruel," "unfair," "unkind," "After I worked so hard," not "gentle" or "positive," are typical phrases (I'm skimming back issues of feminist periodicals). The claim that someone has stopped writing or publishing as a catastrophic result also crops up. Years ago a very young (junior-high-school age) woman asked me to send her copies of all my work and the answers to three pages of questions about it for a paper her teacher had suggested; I wrote her, explaining that writers hadn't the time to fulfill such requests and referred her to her teacher, who ought to be teaching her how to do research. Her older sister then wrote me, stating that she was going to expose me in *Ms.*, that because of my bad behavior her sister, who had hoped to be a writer, had given up all such ambitions.

of impersonality or a sense of public activity, the utter demandingness—all these echo a mother-daughter relationship in which the terrible, hidden truth is not that our mothers are strong, but that they are very weak. The complaint, “You are so strong and I am so helpless” hides the far worse one, “I am strong enough that my strength will get me into terrible trouble, and you are too weak to protect me if that happens.”

For all oppressed people strength and success are double-edged: heartbreakingly desirable and very dangerous. But to “risk winning” (Phyllis Chesler’s phrase from *Women and Madness*, a book to which I owe many of the ideas in this piece) is the only way out of oppression.

“Successful” feminists aren’t immune to this terror of power; all the women I know feel it. We take the risk anyway. That’s the only secret, not some fantastic, illusory power-fame-and-glory that some women have and others don’t. I recently heard a conversation between two Lesbians, one of whom was living openly as such and one of whom was afraid to leave her marriage. The married one said, “I can’t leave my husband because I’m not brave, like you.” To which the other (who had left *her* husband only two years before) said, “Don’t give me that. I was just as scared as you when I left my marriage, but I did it anyway. *That’s what made me brave.*”

The MM/TS polarity is illusory. Both are positions in the same belief system. Both are engaged in ritually sacrificing the possibility of a woman’s being effective on her own behalf, not needy and ineffective, not effective and altruistic, but *effective for herself*.

It’s selfish, vicious, and nasty, and will cause everyone within a thousand miles to faint flat.

But it beats being dead.

Being Against Pornography

MAYBE SOME WOMEN CAN TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN pornography and erotica at a single glance.

I can’t.

Three or four years ago I would have agreed 100% with the anti-pornography activists, but since then I’ve been through a long process of examining my own impulses, talking to other women, giving the subject as much thought and analysis as I can, and trying as much as possible to relate all this information to my personal history—which is by no means a painless one, truly.

In short, I’ve been consciousness-raising (with other women) not simply saying “We know what hurts us” which—when applied to male-oriented pornography—means, “This is *my* unexplored, unanalyzed reaction to *your* fantasies.”

And what I found was rather unsettling.

Joanna Russ

***Magic
Mommias,
Trembling
Sisters,
Puritans &
Perverts***

Feminist Essays

1985



The Crossing Press / Trumansburg, New York 14886
The Crossing Press Feminist Series