The Age of Anxiety: Review of *Mother Millett* by Kate Millett.

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The age of anxiety

going on for years. You, who have been through a par-
catatrophic illness will find this story familiar, too, perhaps unehar-
singly. Interviewing the caregiver: can I get a read- on the lit- ial life of someone dear to me? Mother seems “disoriented”—why? a woman would have a memory of things or simply just a dumbfoundedness (we all lose keys, words, all the time) The phone call that comes, the one that doesn’t come. If she lives to this ripe age, won’t she ever go on vacation, but on the other hand...

The failure of a trusted doctor (here, a brain tumor’s symptoms misdiagnosed, “diabetes”) is disturbing to the patient, the in-
nation, nature’s course, the failures of an aging automobile?) and the way that free colors all future decisions about surgery with a halo of mistrust. The way an aging parent’s financial worries make one rinclusion on one’s own future plans (or lack of them) and one’s own vulnerability.

Mother seems to give up...

a resignation one should honor, or a sign of depression one should help her recognize and offer a new will in her own interests? Does that sen-
tence even make sense? Someone needs to... It is not a patient, but who can one trust, can one trust oneself even? How to resist the temptation to take revenge for things that happened while in the hands of the doctor before the law, now that the positions are reversed?

The struggles with siblings reopen old wounds: who through worldly success is most able to help, who is smartest about this sort of thing, who is neediest—and thus who constitutes serious need or real, true need? Who is a normal,

son, a good daughter, what does it mean to be a grownup? The moment when the doctor answers the question is in the gray,

valent mental or physical deterioration or simply... a loss of a will, that she can no longer count on the parent to be the strong-willed refuge, that the helplessness of childhood, much as one may have hated it, is gone forever, can’t help but generate mourning—and terror.

“Her tiny body is the heaviest thing I have ever had to hold up.”

And finally, the cry of outrage: why are all the available options so inhu-
mane, so plain lousy? “For $36,000 a year you can be tied to your bed and die.” It is not just that women have been and practiced in America and elsewhere; you can spend your last dollar on it. After that’s gone, this enslavement 
continues free of charge at state expense, under slightly worse conditions in a smaller, darker room... Tolerated rou-
tine is no longer a surprise. Rather like the sufferings of women, one takes such things for granted.

If Mother Millett has a thesis, a politi-
cal one, it is that women are aw-
ful (even the ones that at first look ok are awful, and in practice and in princi-
ple), just as lousy boys are awful, and for that reason we are all as guilty as people (like the mad) shouldn’t forfit the human right to make their own deci-
sions, that medications designed for the convenience of caregivers, not to heal the sufferer, are morally unacceptable. In the abstract, this is true enough to be accepted in principle. In the concrete, however—and this book is almost unbearably concrete—the ques-
tion isn’t, “what’s right?” The question is “No, it isn’t right, what are you doing?"

What has been always appealing to me about Kate Millett’s writing is that she expresses the extreme of what is ordinary and commonplace to the condition of many women. True, the confessional mode has always been available to women: “I Married an Alcoholic,” “How I Reded My Life to the Bathroom in Seven Steps.” Oddly, the “new journalism” of Norman Mailer et al. have helped legitimate the sort of emotional “process nar-
ra-tive” or public diaries even that Millett (and Doris Lessing and Jill Johnston) opened for feminists. What was novel about consciousness-raising, and the sort of writing that came out of it, was the idea of actually using that mode to tell one’s own truth, which meant first finding the strength within oneself, how you really felt. “Confession is not a luxury, it is a necessity,” wrote Johnston, but this was confession not in search of personal resolution, the talking cure without the cure part.

That was supposed to be about breaking silences, raising consciousness as a prelude to collective action. So thir-
ty years later, with memoir the most thriving genre (ever since flowers perhaps self-help), it does seem fair to ask whether this is still a feminist gesture, or indeed any kind of a good idea. Jacket copy compares this book, with some jus-
tice, to Philip Roth’s Patrimony, and one could list a hundred others. Ads from prestigious law to strong-
men Learning Annex boxes beckon everyone, writer or not, into courses to learn their family stories. Has honesty died into formula?

Part of Millett’s project, and again this is familiar, is to find and honor the per-
son her Millett was on her own—the courageous single mother who became a successful businesswoman—to write a sort of biography of the Unknown Woman. Still, that Millett remains the daughter, and the relation-
ship. For me, the mother finally does cohere “as a character”—and that’s why in the end the book doesn’t seem exploitative, or not as much as it might be. After all, it’s fictional characters that collude people, which is why they are irreplaceable, and, somehow, invisible: the privacy Millett most deeply invades here is, as usual, her own.

Wanting to end on a high note, per-
haps wanting to avoid the imputation of exploitation, Millett crafts a sort of redemptive coming together as the last part of the book, everybody’s facades intact, with the real deterioration and loss of control apparently still to come. We are told (in a sentence or two) that things got worse afterward, and the final short section is a eulogy. I understand the temptation, the consolidations of form in this one place, but the end didn’t quite work for me.

There’s a principled avoidance in Mother Millett of the worst excesses of memoir as personal testimony, just as she refused to have her mental edge dulled by lithium, refused to hand over her agency to the doctors, Kate Millett refuses the smug consolations of moth-
ern-blaming, does not take refuge in the idea of “codependency” (as in Soheith Pornoy put it, “I hate to say it about myself but I’m Too Good”). Too much emotion in a woman is terrifying too great a passionate intensity risks being pathologized; and there is a lot to gain nowadays by allowing oneself to be pathologized. “It’s just the alcohol talk-
ing,” “It’s my mother’s fault.” “She can’t help it.” There is as much risk as ever in-
volving in being a talky, hysterical, “over the edge,” but now we are asked to risk the anxiety risk of taking medication if necessary. Taking respon-
sibility by giving up responsibility. This, if anything, is probably insane. It would be easy to say, yes I’m crazy and you made me that way; so if to be sane is to hang on to your own story, then Millett’s writing is sane, healthy, even health-giving. On the other hand, if to be sane is to be able at will to produce a story (along with combed hair, neat shoes, etc.) then the anxiety and not too little (and not too little) that will satisfy the doctors so that they’ll let you out, at least on a day pass, well...

Unfortunately, the attempt to re-meet one’s mother, to re-engage traditions meaningfully, runs up against the fact that traditions tend to be somewhat traditional. Memory (sacred, precise, beloved) inheres in domestic objects of a certain aesthetic: the china cabi-
net, the geraniums of a particular color. Cheaper ones won’t do. “Family wars are so often class wars,” Millett says. Yes, and Americans, particularly the daughters of the middle class, often have a hard time figuring out which side they are on: materially, culturally, ideologically. As Millett knows, these rarely map perfectly; “So I live in a derelict building and have Persian rugs I was smart enough to get cheap.” Any economic or domestic choice will be wrong, it will violate the canons either of St. Paul or of the Bowery.

Here I think is the source of some of the anxiety in the opening parts of the book. To ask for the better part of one’s energy and intellect worrying that one has said or done the wrong thing, brought down the wrong gift (too much or too little), worn the wrong sort of clothing—these are among the hidden injuries of patriarchy, and one does not step outside this circle simply by reversing the values from plus to minus.

More to the point, Millett’s attempts to organize the end of her mother’s life as a series of aesthetic epiphanies—the visit to the art gallery, the lobster dinners, the “good talk”—are doomed from the start. The perfect moments that illness, death, or indeed romantic love, demands are rarely forthcoming exactly when we need and plan them. (It’s like expecting to be alone in a room, before Christmas, on Christmas, than other days of the year. Suicide rates are higher over the holidays, conventional wisdom has it, so that all those things which one normally does not; I dare not think of the kind; Mother has a nice reserve about her that defies allusion.)

How should we interpret that word, “nice”? Is it just an unironic recognition of the mother’s achievement?—that impression of normality: she has made a lifetime’s accomplishment, that serene surface of sofas and magazines and seemingly random remarks that punctuate making tea after so many decades away, a life where if you are going out for dinner at six you begin to get ready at five, having discussed your bath and what you’ll wear since 4:30 or so.

Fear of embarrassment, of doing or saying the wrong thing, losing one’s grip on the genitility and the “dignity”—the “nice reserve” that still passes for sanity in a middle-class world—these fears can be the strongest emotional current of a woman’s life, after all. And women, often of the eighteenth-century variety, seem less likely to simplify their feelings. Simply to be heard, one has to pass a sanity test, every single day. First, your own. “So it says it’s not... anywhere if you... you’d better... you’d better not... hysterical... shrill... strident...” Yes, people still say those things. The consciousness of standing up between these (internal and external) voices are formidably capable of not standing up to them and worst. Robin Morgan, with typical wit, invokes this double bind in her recent memoir: “In my forties, I decided ‘Enough!’ and announced to any who would listen that I now felt free of being concerned with what others thought. Then I would sneak peeks at their reactions.”

The irony here is that the very Kate and her mother share—the sense of the world as a place in which one is not at home, where one has to establish oneself again and again—has been less a connection than a source of sympathy between them. The anxiety begins in the over-eagerness to do everything right, to measure up to a high bourgeois domestic standard, to “perform normally” for someone who after all is very ill and who has thus earned the right to set the terms.

But there is another element, the tide bringing us down. And here it is enormous, here in the motel room. This fatigue and hopelessness I remember as my chief memory, the final knowledge of this town, its ease of possibil- ity... I almost wanted to stay there last night, frightened by the sheer size of my emotions, like someone out of control, a dangerous person, maniacal, watch it... with your rep. My whole life in this family a struggle not to cry (childhood), not to faint (adolescence), not to open my mouth (adulthood)... and in all difficult moments, to read and keep on reading; became a bookworm and finally even a scholar out of a steady need to block out domestic reality. (pp. 76, 81)

We’re not too far, here, from Beauvoir’s analysis of the family as an institutional strategy for containing and managing unruly emotion (sexual, ado- lescence, anger, despair)—a system that it should not help as figure out what to do now. As she herself recognized: A I love you; B I like you too. It’s all the more moving because it shows Beauvoir, the very type of the cold and undaunted daughter, unexpectedly broken up by the spectacle of suffering in someone she had only dismissed, years before, as understandable but not particularly interesting. There was nothing special about “fami- ly” to her, and yet it turned out there was.

With equal poignancy, Millett asks the hard question that pervasive alternati- ve to the family, the fictive kin arrange- ments, the groups of friends, really hold only in the long run, in the face of need? Finally, who will do this work?—not just the cleaning up after the disabled, the fight- ing with the insurance people, but the dif- ficult and unrewarding “emotion work” of care. Philip Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint teaches us that men can do this, after all; in fact, for a man, having to clean up somebody else’s shit is such an absurd and praise- worthy event that it achieves the status of an epiphany. But will anxiety continue to be delegated to those of us who are “good at it” to those who aren’t really doing anything else?”

A feminist critique of the family meets practical life and comes to an impasse at two points now—small chil- dren and the elderly—and usually, femi- nist theory looks to a more astute idea. As it probably should. Even when we know “better,” as when Millett’s sister, reading about restraints in the nursing home, says, not to my mother they don’t need to. And there is the point that it should not happen to anyone’s mother. This was Beauvoir’s point too, at the end. And yet one must save the world one mother at a time.

Reading The Politics of Comedy, her daughter’s book about torture, toward the end, Millett’s sister seems to have changed, mentioned, as mothers so often do, “I’m not sure I needed to know all this.” Some readers may well have the same response to Mother Millett. Me, as with Sita, I’m not sure I wanted to hear all this, and anyway, it isn’t entirely news: but it has to be faced.