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

Meryl Altman  
*DePauw University, maltman@depauw.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs)  
Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs)

**Recommended Citation**  
In This Issue

Do Americans really believe in a “therapeutic gospel” of salvation on the psychotherapist’s couch? Jeanne Marecek assesses Eva Moskowitz’ In Therapy We Trust, p. 14.

The affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky made headlines worldwide, and now a new collection of essays explores its multiple meanings for feminists and others: Micaela di Leonardo reads Our Monica, Ourselves, p. 8.

Carry Nation was much more than a hatchet-wielding temperance fanatic: Carol Lasser reviews Fran Grace’s enlightening new biography of the early prohibitionist and feminist fore-runner, p. 17.

Sappho’s poetry survives in fragments and her life in a multiplicity of competing myths; Susan Gubar reads Margaret Reynolds’ exhaustive compendium of prose, poetry, music and art inspired over more than two millennia by the world’s earliest lyric poet, p. 13.

What explains the persistence of patriarchy? It’s good for business, says Nancy Folbre in The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values; Felicia Kornbluh assesses her claim that women’s unpaid work underpins society, p. 7.

and more...

The age of anxiety

by Meryl Altman


Kate Millett’s new book looks at first like a poem of family reconciliation. Helen Millett’s advancing age and illness bring her middle daughter, “the artist, the queer, even the crazy,” back to St. Paul, back to the bosom of the bourgeois respectability that she has rejected and that has rejected her, in which order one can never be quite sure. Early chapters read like private reflective writing, notebooks she’s using as an emotional safety-valve on a series of visits to the mother who has been both her earliest beloved and a “devastating force” in her life. Then, midway, she and we are suddenly launched into crisis mode and thus into narrative, as what was supposed to be a quick trip to pick up the family silver, apologize and fly off for a European lecture tour becomes an adventure story and a romance. Unable to leave her mother in the nursing home that was supposed to be “good enough,” but isn’t, Millett becomes involved, not just in a histronic rescue mission (she herself compares it to Thelma and Louise), but in the gritty daily realities and practical and emotional responsibilities of care.

Faithful readers of Millett’s work will recognize the familiar cast of characters—the mother and sisters who didn’t understand her bisexuality in Flying, who hospitalized her against her will in The Loony Bin Trip. But they’re all changed now, everybody has forgiven everybody else, haven’t they. Yes. Or maybe not quite... Don’t forget these are the people who put you away, and they could do it again. Here too are the familiar emotional touchstones, especially places: the precious refuge of the Farm outside Poughkeepsie, always on the point of paying for itself (but not quite); the Bowery loft, always on the point of vanishing into the maw of Real Estate New York and taking her identity as New York Artist with it; St. Paul itself with its confusing dynamic of cultured classiness and provincial claustrophobia.

continued on page three
The age of anxiety
continued from p. 1

Anyone who has been through a parent's catastrophic illness will find this story familiar, too, perhaps unbearably so. Interviewing the caregiver: can I transform my memory of the literal life of someone dear to me? Mother seems "disoriented"—why? a word used for epilepsy or for the absolute, just uncomfortableness (we all lose keys, words, all the time) The phone call that comes, the one that doesn't come. If she is to be a person tomorrow, she can't go on vacation, on the other hand... The failure of a trusted doctor (here, a brain tumor's symptoms misdiagnosed, "diabetes"), a family's effort to interpret, diagnosis, nature's course, the failures of an aging automobile? and the way that fact colors all future decisions about surgery with a halo of mistrust. The way an aging parent's financial worries make one confrontation one's own future plans (or lack of them) and one's own vulnerability. Mother seems to give up... a resignation she should honor, or a sign of depression one should help her recognize. One's own responsibility? what will she think of me, her daughter? Does that sentence even make sense? Someone needs to be there for a parent, but who can one trust, can one trust oneself even? How to resist the temptation to take revenge for things that happened when you were too young to understand 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 that continuity serious responsibilities need, true success? Who is a normal person, a good daughter, what does it mean to be a growup? The moment when she divides the love that still inheres: a physical or mental deterioration or simply a loss of 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 inhuman, so plain lousy? "So $36,000 a year you can be tied to your bed and denied air. It is a system that has been operated 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 routinely... in the health care enterprises. Rather like the sufferings of women, one takes such things for granted.

If Mather Millett has a thesis, a political one, it is that the medical (in the public sense) is evil, the public evil, the public evil. (If our seniors) shouldn't interpret the human right to make their own decisions, that medications designed for the convenience of caregivers, not to help the sufferer, are morally unacceptable. In the abstract, this is true enough to be a political, not a personal, view. In the concrete, however—and this book is almost unbearably concrete—the question isn't, "what's right?" The question is, "why?" The evidence here is unanswerable: any procedure, any decision, any what you have done?" or rather, "What will you do?"

I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. I'm not ready. Can't we talk about something else? No, says the book. Think about it. Get ready.

Mother Millett begins in guilt and self-division. In fact, it begins in an acute anxiety state, which never really is translated into the pages. From what I've heard, that's exactly what being responsible for a terminally or chronically ill person is—being responsible for a sick soul, and even small errors can have horrible consequences, but with no truly reliable source of information or guidance, any mistake is a serious flaw of character, an inevitable catastrophe. An absolute lack of tension 24 hours of every day, a tension that can end only with... what you precisely are afraid of. As Simone de Beauvoir recognized in what remains the acknowledged classic of this genre, even "a very easy death" is an intolerable scandal, faced absolutely alone.

So on some level, this book is unbearable, incomprehensible; what would that say? "Kate has given us an uplifting, wholesome romp through the last days of an indomitable little lady. The episodic, largely unconnected events are particularly winning: one wishes to return to them again and again." Not her style. I mean, that has always been her point, her role, to rub our noses in what people do to each other, even when everybody is doing their best.

No, it doesn't make for a soothing bedtime read. But imagine the person who could write serenely and soothingly about such an experience—what sort of person would that be? Of course, one could choose not to write the book at all. But this stuff we need to know. That, at least, is Millett within the book answers the question about the character matter raised by her youngish girlfriend, Jennifer (who otherwise hardly appears). "Why sea relaxes," asks Jennifer: "it's elite"—echoing that critique of the system that cut Millett down (but not quite) at the moment of her greatest glory as a Public Feminist. Author, reiterating the question, "Who are we to speak for us?" Millett's answer is at the very heart of that, and perhaps, if women can't write about what we are seeing now, we won't know each other. In other words, my mother's life is interesting, and so is mine. It is permitted, because every woman's life has meaning.

What has always been appealing to me about Kate Millett's writing is that she expresses the extreme of what is ordinary and normal to the condition of many women. True, the confessional mode has always been available to women: "I Married an Alcoholic," "How I Reded a Woman Bathroom in Seven Steps." Oddly, the "new journalism" of Norman Mailer et al. have helped legitimate the sort of emotional "process narrative" or public diary 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 one's own voice, then how you really felt. "Confession is not a luxury, it is a necessity," wrote Johnston, but this was confession not in search of public 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 thirty years later, with memoir the most thriving genre (as flowers perhaps self-help), it does seem fair to ask whether this is still a feminist genre, or indeed any kind of a good idea. Jacket copy compares this book, with some justice, to Philip Roth's *Patrimony*, and one could list a hundred others. Ads from prestigious to strident (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 person--*the* person--on whom the courageous single mother who became a successful businesswoman—to write a sort of biography of the Unknown Woman. Still, the fact remains that the daughter, the role, remains the daughter, and the relationship. For me, mother finally does not "have" 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 constitute people, which is why they are irreparable, 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 faculties intact, with the real deterioration and loss of control apparently still to come. We are told (in a sentence of things got worse afterward, and the final short section is a eulogy. I understand the temptation, the consolations 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 propaganda—just as she refused to have her mental edge dulled by lithium, refused to hand over her agency to the doctors, Kate Millett refused the smug consolations of mother-blaming, does not take refuge in the idee of "codependency" (as in Sophie Portnoy put it, "I hate it 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 involved in being a talky, hysterical, "over the edge," but now we are asked to make no sense of our own risk, by taking medication if necessary. Taking responsibility by giving up responsibility. This, if anything, is probably innate. 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 waves) that's as much (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 quality: the china cabi-
NEW FROM CALIFORNIA

THE PERREAS AND MR. RUDO
Forygning and Mr. Rudow
Eighteenth-Century London
Donna T. Andrew & Randolff E. Gawthrop

WOMEN WRITING

CRITICISM AND CULTURE

The Parergon

Edited by Lorna S. Duddington

NEW ON THE WOMEN'S REVIEW WEBSITE:

WE HAVE EXPANDED OUR READER SERVICE PAGES:

Now you can RENEW your subscription by Visa/MasterCard, send us a CHECK, ORDER AND PREPAY, or SEND US YOUR CHARGE OF ADDRESS. NOTIFY US OF A DELIVERY OR BILLING PROBLEM, AND FIND THE ANSWERS TO SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND AS ALWAYS, YOU CAN GO TO OUR WEBSITE TO START A NEW SUBSCRIPTION FOR YOURSELF OR AS A GIFT, OR ENTER OUR MONTHLY CONTEST TO WIN A FREE SUBSCRIPTION.

All credit card orders are processed through our Secure Server.

WE RESPECT THE PRIVACY OF OUR READERS AND DO NOT PROVIDE THEIR EMAIL ADDRESSES TO ANY OTHER ORGANIZATION OR BUSINESS.

WWW.WELLESLEY.EDU/WOMENREV

The Women's Reviews of Books / Vol. XVIII, No. 12 / September 2001

net, the gomernattle 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 mater- rially, 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, and 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 address the better part of one’s energy and intellect worrying that one has said or done the wrong thing, brought the wrong gift (too much or too little), worn the wrong sort of clothes— 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 experiences—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 able to eat a Christmas turkey, after decades of the year.) Suicide rates are higher over the holidays, conventional wisdom has it. (Millett’s family, by the way, includes non-Our families, but I always wonder.) This is still a world where “the only acceptable news is good news,” where a declaration of love would be “all well very in a letter but in person I dare nothing of the kind. Mother has a nice reserve about her that defies effusion.

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 in the busy-ness away of a world where 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 decades of anxiety. Simply to be led, one has to pass a sanity test, every single day. First, your own. Then, “It’s very easy to feel anywhere if you... you’d better... you’d be- tter not... hystercial... shriil... strident…” Yes, people still say those things. The consequences of standing up for oneself (internal and external) voices are formidable. The consequences of not standing up to them are worse.

Robin Morgan, with typical wit, invokes this double bind in her recent memoir: “In my fifties, I decided ‘Enough!’ and announced to anyone 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 struggle 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 hopeless- ness I remember as my chief memory, the final knowledge of this town, its ease of possibili- ty... I almost want to say to the girl last night, frightened by the sheer size of my emotions, like someone out of control, a dangerous per- son, manicat, watch... with your rep. My whole life in this family a struggle not to cry (childhood), not to laugh (adolescence), not to open my mouth (adultu)-... and in all difficult moments, to read and keep on reading to become a bookworm and finally even a scholar out of a steady need to block out domestic reality.

(p. 76, 51)

We’re not too far, here, from Beauvoir’s analysis of the family as an institutional structure for containing and managing unrelenting emotional (sexual, ado- luscent) and material (legal, physical) demand. To separate them had been the dream, but this doesn’t help as figure out what to do now. As she herself recognized: “A lot of nonsense is all the more moving because it shows Beauvoir, the very type of the cold and unfeeling daughter, unexpectedly broken up by the spectacle of suffering in someone she had frankly dismissed years before, as understand- able but not particularly interesting. There was nothing special about ‘fami- ly’ she supposed; and yet it turned out there was.

With equal poignancy, Millett asks her hand. And there will be progressive alterna- tives to the family, the fictive kin arrange- ments, the groups of friends, really hold 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 unmitigated emotion work of care. Philip Roth’s Paternalism 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 unusual 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 doing anything else?”

A feminist critique of the family meets practical life and comes to an impassade at two points now—small chil- dren and the elderly—and usually, femi- nist theory loses to a more atavistic idea. As it probably should. Even when we know “better,” as when Millett’s sister, reading about rehearsals in the nursing home, says, not to my mother they don’t happen. They are not 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 has two mothers men- tioned, 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 new: but it has to be faced.