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BOOK REVIEW

Stephanie Staal. *Reading Women: How the Great Books of Feminism Changed My Life*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

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How does one account for the life-transforming power of feminist texts in an age when feminism itself has become such a contested set of ideas rather than a collective project? What reasons, other than theoretical, might today's women have in revisiting these texts? Just as important, what insights, or even lessons, could celebrate feminist writers and theorists still impart to those women who nowadays take for granted many of their predecessors' achievements? A book whose very title promises to answer these questions is Stephanie Staal's *Reading Women: How the Great Books of Feminism Have Changed My Life* (2011). Part memoir and part literary and cultural study, *Reading Women* is one woman's "highly personal investigation" of feminist texts that address "the myths, masks, and madness of womanhood" across the ages (262, 8). Born in the '70s, when the second wave of feminism reached its height, Staal came of age in the '80s, a decade that saw the beginning of the culture wars. She graduated from Barnard, an all' women's college in New York City, in the early 1990s, when the very category "woman" was thrown into question by poststructuralist feminism.

Ten years later, Staal remembers her graduation day as a pivotal moment in her evolution as a feminist: a day of great expectations that would be only partly fulfilled after becoming a wife and mother. Still searching for "the best version" of herself" (32), she turns to the "great books of feminism"—from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Awakening*, and "The Yellow Wallpaper" to *The Second Sex, The Feminine Mystique, Sexual Politics*, and *Gender Trouble*—because they "offered a different plot, with a different ending" to the available fiction of female becoming (4). Though Staal is certainly not representative of all women, her emotional and intellectual engagement with these texts encodes a

resonant cultural narrative about "the toll of the transformations into wife and mother," with all "the ambiguities and compromises" such transformations raise (x). Staal approaches the feminist canon as "neither critic nor scholar" but rather as what Virginia Woolf called a "common reader" (261), her perspective limited by the "narrow slice" of her world: "Gen X, urban professional, chronically angst-ridden and excruciatingly self-analytical" (29).

The jolts of recognition, poignant recollections, and moments of critical reflection triggered by the encounters with feminist texts foreground not only the recent dislocations within feminism but also the complex attachments that emerge as Staal grapples with the competing demands of family, career, and self. If feminism, as Staal defines it, is "the simple notion that women ought to define their own destinies" (163), then the destinies and identities of women who are also wives and mothers are intimately bound up with those of their husbands and children. Thus, the author positions herself as a pragmatic feminist who, inspired by her "imperfect heroine" Mary Wollstonecraft, envisions "men and women living together, in a humanistic world" (Staal 75). I use the term "pragmatic" to acknowledge both the author's attempts at connecting feminist theory and practice and the feminist interrogation of the humanist concept of the subject as a unitary, autonomous, disembodied self.

Especially revealing for Staal is the act of rereading, "in its capacity to conjure up our previous selves" (10). Thus, the same book that reminds Staal of her college self also prompts her to enroll in Feminism 101 class at her alma mater ten years after graduation, seeking to bridge "the gap between my present self and that younger one" (13). When Staal first read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in the early 1990s, she was unlike the women described therein, for "opportunity seemed to spread out before me like a pair of wings" (11). Later, however, the "dual shock" of new parenthood and the attack on the World Trade Center forced Staal and her husband John to leave their tiny West Village apartment for a sprawling Victorian home in Annapolis, where they embraced what they "fancied was the ultimate domestic fantasy" (41). The first few months, Staal "threw" herself into the role of housewife, but soon "a sense of unease set in" (43), a symptom of the "problem that has no name" identified by Friedan.

Staal's response to Elaine Pagels's *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (1988), as well as to *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*—a moving account of the life and death of an early-third-century Christian martyr that Staal researches on her own—brings into focus one of the most complicated ideas in the history of feminist thought: motherhood. As much as Staal wants to believe that a woman is defined neither by her body nor by her sex, the realities of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood sensitize her to the biological implications of being a woman. Women, she ventures, can run but not hide from their destiny—a sobering lesson seemingly reinforced by the conclusions to both Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short-story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (88). Like Adrienne Rich, however, Staal feels "alienated by the institution—not the fact—of motherhood" (43).

Reading Women is also an illuminating exercise in contextual reading, as demonstrated by the author's reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft, "possibly one of the most celebrated yet also reviled women in history" (74). Staal finds that a close examination of the Wollstonecraft's work in relation to her life, loves, and times casts a more favorable light on her as a woman who "committed to career, marriage, and motherhood but on her own terms" (76). Likewise, processing her feelings about marriage by reference to Gilman's choices, hardships, and accomplishments leads Staal to recognize that "the landscape of absolutes that once dominated my thinking had been rubbed down by experience" (93). Staal identifies with those women of her generation who, unlike their nineteenth century predecessors, enjoy all the rights that allow them to function as autonomous individuals and yet still *choose* to marry.

If the texts of first-wave feminism remind her that "destiny can be a creative act" (103), the new chapter she and John begin with their daughter, Sylvia, back in New York shows Staal that living with this destiny day in and day out means having to constantly negotiate the conflicting desires for autonomy and intimacy. This, in a way, was the challenge faced by Simone de Beauvoir, whose unapologetic independence Staal tried to emulate as an undergraduate, only to end up choosing a "more oft-traveled path" (117). As she rereads *The Second Sex* (1949), Staal cannot help wondering whether settling down was not so much a part of growing

up as a sign that she was "merely acting on too much fear and too little faith" (117). It should be noted here that Staal's other reason for re-reading the feminist authors she was first introduced to in college is to understand how feminism is "evolving under the scrutiny of a younger generation" (13–14). Thus, she is confused by the classroom indictment of Beauvoir: "Had my Fem Texts class—composed of all women, I might add—really faulted Beauvoir for not being feminine enough? For being too *intellectual?*" (126). Staal's question—as well as her later remark that "women have had the hardest time" with the "mind-body divide" (199)—resonates with the rich body of feminist work on affect and emotion challenging the assumption that sexual difference manifests itself through a series of binary oppositions.

At the same time, Beauvoir's idea that motherhood "must be desired for its own sake" strikes Staal as particularly prescient of today's culture, with its media-generated motherhood obsession (134)—the latest version of the "feminine mystique." Re-reading Friedan's book for her Fem Texts, Staal again sees its divergences from her own story rather than the similarities. Thus, despite the professional ambition she shares with her mother, underlying Staal's decision to work as a freelance writer is mainly an "emotional rationale": "Haunted by my parents' relative absence during my childhood, I wanted the flexibility to be there for my own daughter, especially during her early years" (144). Moreover, Staal attributes Friedan's embattled legacy to the limited solution she proposed, one that did not apply to Black and working-class women (145). As she points out, in our global economy, housework continues to divide women along the lines of race, class, and ethnicity (184).

If the issue of domestic responsibilities was central to the political agenda of second-wave feminists, for third-wavers and beyond, a woman's identity is far less tied to housework (176) and more grounded in intersubjective relationships between self and others. Though frustrated with the theoretical jargon of poststructuralist feminists, Staal credits them with deconstructing gender-specific binary oppositions and proposing a notion of identity that captures the whole range of female experience. Particularly liberating to Staal is the notion of performed gender, as theorized by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler sees gender as part of

an open, mobile staging of identity rather than a category circumscribing a person's full expression of their being (243). To quote Staal, if feminism is "intended to enlarge the fabric of women's experiences," then "some of life's richest threads—love, romance, parenthood" cannot be ignored (244). Moreover, since the same threads are also woven into the fabric of most men's experiences, they provide the common ground for Staal's dialogue with women and men alike, even though she does not frame her story around the latter. Acknowledging that the social and psychological roles she and her husband "perform" are "figments of identity along a spectrum" leads Staal to understand that "underneath it all," they are "in the end, just us, two individuals" bound by love for each other and for their daughter (252).

Ultimately, even feminist slogans are shown to be ineffective "because there is always more to any life story: new perspectives, different angles, contrary truths" (97). The different strands braided into the (hi)story of feminism translate, for Staal at least, into a more nuanced definition of patriarchy according to which men, as individuals, sometimes help rather than hinder women in their quest for authenticity (223). Like Shakespeare's sister that Woolf imagines in *A Room of One's Own*, female writers are "continuing presences" in Staal's life, putting on the body "which she has so often laid down" (Woolf qtd. in Staal 112). Yet hovering in the background—their names engraved on the façade of Butler Library—are some of history's greatest male thinkers, whose enduring relevance cannot be denied. Not long after the last class of Fem Texts, as Staal happens to find herself on the Barnard College campus between the *Alma Mater* (Latin for "nourishing mother") statue and Butler Library, she pictures all of them, women and men, dead and alive, as "allies taking part in a great dialogue" (257). It is in their name and honor that Staal marshals her compelling story of feminist re-education.