She Rages on History's Pages:

An Analysis of Women's Anger in Media

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ABSTRACT: The history of women's rage is a long, tired, and tediously unheard one. By analyzing media demonstrations of women's rage from history to contemporary time, this paper explores the performances of women's anger as demonstrations of empowerment and repudiation against structures upheld to methodically invalidate and undermine women's experiences, knowledge, and embodied rising power. From the written word to music, women's rage contains a deep well of information and lived stories. Therefore, the disregarding of that anger is the disregarding of knowledge, realities, and much-needed voice. More than that, the disregarding of women's anger is also the destruction of powerful acts of simultaneous strength and vulnerability. The statements in this paper stand to demonstrate that women's rage must be allowed room to spark, breathe, and ignite – from the carefully orchestrated speeches to the raw and unruly fury that comes from every walk of life. Throughout history, the rage of women has been speaking prominently, and it must be heard.

KEYWORDS: women's rage, rage as empowerment, interlocking tools of oppression

When I think of women's anger, I see a history of swelling rage: unheeded, powerful, and constantly reaching to be heard. Sometimes this rage is the more accepted eloquent anger that has been sharpened with years and thousands of dollars in expertise, or it is the potent kind coming from a place that could not be more authentic, and sometimes it is both. However, in all versions, this valid and honest rage is too often met with doubt, discomfort, and trivialization. Interestingly enough, rage also seems to be most easily witnessed in empowered women; those who are regarded as such through the lens of their force and assertion. Alexandra Ocasio Cortez or Julia Gillard, sharp and erudite in their words. Serena Williams, defending her right to feel, and rejecting the racist stigma of the belligerent Black woman. Phoebe Bridgers, performing gutturally, destroying her guitar live on SNL, devising viewers with awe and discomfort. American musician, David Crosby, even called Bridgers' display of emotion and passion "Pathetic" (@thedavidcrosby), providing a perfectly simplified example of the reception women's anger receives on the world stage. By analyzing media examples of women's rage through time, I argue that the performance of women's anger is a demonstration of empowerment and repudiation against structures upheld to methodically invalidate and undermine women's experiences, knowledge, and embodied rising power. Furthermore, the release and embrace of women's rage can be both internalized as a form of self care and externalized as outgoing community care in the pursuit of radical change.

To begin, I must look backwards in order to demonstrate the building blocks of empowered women's anger and to fully witness how the world has changed, and how it has not. Soraya Chemaly, activist and writer of Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger, states in her TEDTalk, "In the same way that we learned to cross our legs and tame our hair, we learned to bite our tongues and swallow our pride. What happens too often is that for all of us, indignity becomes imminent in our notions of femininity." Chemaly explains this entanglement of femininity, docility, and beauty to be connected through the social behaviours projected onto the image of the 'ideal' woman. These interlocking systems of punishing expectations and social oppression can be traced all the way back to the 18th century. For example, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was a bold English aristocrat who addressed androcentric structures that shaped femininity and utilized her anger to smite them. In 1732, Jonathan Swift wrote "The Lady's Dressing Room," a derogatory poem that attacked the filth behind femininity and the disgust owed to a woman if she was not a pure beacon of feminine behaviour and beauty. This poem describes a young man perceiving the utterly human contents of his lover's dressing room; famously, upon discovering her chamber pot, he exclaims, "Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" (Swift, line 118). In response to Swift's poem, which upheld the dehumanization of women's bodies and lives, Montagu responded with "The Reasons that Induced Dr. S to Write a Poem Called The Lady's Dressing Room." Montagu, in her easily identifiable, scathing tone, described a hypothetical sexual encounter between Swift and a lover. Within a few stanzas, he experiences impotence and begins to blame the woman's filthy dressing room and bodily functions:

> He swore, "The fault is not in me.
> Your damned close stool so near my nose,
> Your dirty smock, and stinking toes
> Would make a Hercules as tame
> As any beau that you can name."
> (Montagu, lines 69-73)

In a direct mockery of Swift's poem, Montagu writes:

> "I'll be revenged, you saucy queen"
> (Replies the disappointed Dean)
> "I'll so describe your dressing room
> The very Irish shall not come."
> She answered short, "I'm glad you'll write.
> You'll furnish paper when I shite."
> (lines 84-89)

Montagu's invocation of scatological humour retorts that not only do women defecate, but Swift's lover will use his derogatory poetry to wipe herself. With her pen, Montagu singlehandedly defies the sanitized and repressive feminine narratives Swift perpetuates and steps out of the bounds of 'ideal' femininity herself. In her coarse writing, a voice of quick-witted anger can be heard speaking through the metaphors and allusions, undermining the larger oppressive regulations on women's natures. In her poem, Swift's lover, who is described as the conventionally written and titled pastoral "nymph," is capable of "[growing] furious" and "[roaring]" in her own empowered defence (Montagu, line 74). Today, a poem like Montagu's might be dubbed simply as an early 'clapback.' However, in 1734, Montagu was a ground-breaking powerhouse, using her direct epistolary talent and privilege in high society to wield women's anger in the face of the deafening circulation of androcentric social pressures.

Like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, other women from the 18th century also paved their way in literature and wrote to make their unrest heard. However, unlike

Montagu, not everyone had the funds, connections, and privilege to leverage from; most of them were even forgotten, only to be rediscovered and valued in the 20th century for their early activism. Mary Collier is one of them; she was a labouring class poet who aimed to expose the realities of lower-class life to upper society. Collier's most notable poem is akin to Montagu's: an epistle aimed at refuting the misogynistic knowledge that was spread by another male poet, Stephen Duck. In a popular piece by Duck, "The Thresher's Labour," he attempts to explain the daily hardships of the labouring-class. However, as he relays the sufferings of men, he simultaneously berates women labourers as idle, unfocused, and inferior: "Ah! were their Hands so active as their Tongues,/How nimbly then would move the Rakes and Prongs?" (Duck, lines 168-169). In response to this celebrated piece that fore fronted class issues, Mary Collier interjected and challenged Duck's misrepresentation and ignorance of the labouring woman's reality. Collier even paid with her own funds to publish her words– which were made honestly from being a woman in the labour field herself (Jones). In her piece, "The Woman's Labour: To Mr. Stephen Duck," she speaks unapologetically and directly, throwing just as much reproach back at Duck as he cast on the women labourers. To begin, Collier invokes a biting and satirical tone, to not only expose Duck's unrecognized privilege within a patriarchal society, but also as a labourer with access to a literary sponsorship from Queen Caroline: "Immortal bard! Thou favourite of the nine!/Enriched by peers, advanced by Caroline!" (Collier, lines 1-2). Collier also writes through an intersectional lens, which demonstrates the ways that class and gender interlock in their structured oppression. Through examining wage-earning labour to domestic work, Collier rebukes the idea of idle women and instead reveals the never-ending cycle of physical and emotional toil women must perform. She shares that many women must simultaneously perform paid labour and domestic caregiving as unpaid labour – including the care of fellow-labouring husbands. Collier then rewrites the simplified narrative from Duck's poem and paints a more realistic image: while Duck may work hard, at the end of the day he arrives home to be bolstered by the woman of his household. Meanwhile, many women labour through the day only to arrive home to the same exertion of a different kind:

> When ev'ning does approach, we homeward
> hie, And our domestic toils incessant ply;
> Against your coming home prepare to get
> our work all done, our house in order set;
> [...]
> Early next morning we on you attend;
> Our children dress and feed, their clothes we
> mend;
> And in the field our daily task renew,
> Soon as the rising sun has dried the dew.
> (Collier, lines 75-78, 83-86).

In her poetry, Collier describes a deep and tired "pain" (line 123) that is thrust upon women, one that is inescapable and structurally built into their daily lives. Above all, the anger and frustration of this piece is not only derived from the systemic exhaustion these women face, but also from the silencing, ridiculing, and blatant ignorance from the men within their own class. Collier's final words address this cyclical structure of patriarchy — one designed to maintain a hierarchy of gendered power:

> So the industrious bees do hourly strive
> To bring their loads of honey to the hive;
> Their sordid owners always reap the gains,
> And poorly recompense their toil and pains.
> (lines 243-246)

Collier's work is exemplary in demonstrating the effectiveness of women's anger in framing and relating their experiences. Within Collier's piece, the amount of personal knowledge, lived-truth, and pain that is shared through her poetic rage is immense – to ignore this rage would be to ignore the profound information within it. Additionally, Soraya Chemaly states that "[Women's] anger brings great discomfort, and the conflict comes because it's our role to bring comfort." (Chemaly, "The Power of Women's Anger", 8:45-8:53). Collier defiantly brings discomfort forth to trouble the idealized images of women in 'private,' domestic spaces as consistently lovely, nurturing, and motherly figures. Collier rejects the idea of natural comfort-giving, instead she exposes its tedious and draining nature, and thus utilizes her frustration with these narratives to jolt the reader from their gendered assumptions. No change or upheaval is comfortable so therefore, women's anger as a tool which sparks discomfort indicates our need to stoke that fire and sit within the blazes of our discomfort to transform outdated narratives – narratives that have survived since in the 18th century.

As I look back and read the rage-filled experiences of women from long ago, it is disheartening to deeply recognize and identify with the same issues causing such anger today. Although Montagu and Collier have long left us with their written activism, women are still raging against the same widespread patriarchal systems and are still being criticized, unrecognized, and vilified for it. However, nevertheless we persisted, and women's

rage has also underlined decade-defining movements, driven political transformation, as well as effectively fought against the very systems of oppression that try to extinguish it. For example, through her songs "Four Women" and "Mississippi Goddam," Nina Simone wielded her frustration and fury to give a voice to the oppressed and tired Black women of the world – unapologetically embodying her words and repudiating the racialized stereotype of aggressive, demonized Black women's rage. Her anger enacted power, her protest music became a revolution, building the soundtrack for the Civil Rights Movement and all the movements that followed in the justice-seeking fight of asserting that Black Lives Matter. Like Mary Collier, Simone's words utilized rage to carry across information, authenticity, and lived experience. However, while Collier wrote in the spirit of intersectionality, Simone also addressed intersectionality and enacted much more. She not only advocated against the vast marginalization of Black people, but also expressed how systems of race and gender oppression interlock to profoundly harm Black women. Ultimately, Simone's music overflows with stories that carry the earnest anger and ignored injustice of generations. On a recorded track of Simone's live performance of "Mississippi Goddam," one viewer, Destiny Jackson, commented "she wasn't performing, she was informing!" (Aaron Overfield, "Nina Simone: Mississippi Goddam"). From the legacy of Nina Simone and forward, other women artists have also embodied their rage to tell important stories and truths, such as Alanis Morrissette. In an interview, Morrissette explained her rage:

> …it became this invitation. If some people were afraid of their own anger, there I was onstage emoting my anger and having no apologies about it. […] Anger is so empowering for me. It pulled me into this sense of agency […]. I was giving myself permission to not sublimate […] feelings we're told not to feel, especially women. There are certain feelings you can't allow yourself to feel, but our bodies are built to feel them. So we either implode or explode. We either act out or get sick or depressed.
>
> - Morrissette, "Why Alanis Morrissette Feels Empowered By Anger"

Therefore, anger is not only an effective and empowering tool for change, but it also becomes a pathway to wellbeing. Consequently, the act of denying and devaluing women's anger does not only invalidate mobility, empowerment, and voice, but it is also a definite act of harm against the body and mind. This includes an internalized misogyny in which one's anger is rejected in favour for a false, amenable composure. Through upholding and investing in women's anger, perhaps a healthier state can be discovered for not only women, but also larger systems of gendered and racialized emotional marginalization. If the cost of valuing that anger is widespread discomfort, then to invoke Soraya Chemaly once again, I agree that "We should be making people comfortable with the discomfort they feel" (Chemaly, "The Power of Women's Anger", 9:43-9:47). I argue that we must normalize that discomfort, sit deep within it, learn from it. We must explore why women's anger makes us uncomfortable and angry in return; why we racialize anger and weaponize adjoining stereotypes; why we overlook the active voice in anger and sentence it to be unheard.

In conclusion, women's anger contains a deep well of information and lived stories - I know, I hold my own well within me and I often dip into its contents to make my voice heard. Ultimately, the disregarding of our anger is the disregarding of knowledge, realities, and much-needed voice. More than that, the disregarding of women's anger is also the destruction of powerful acts of simultaneous strength and vulnerability. This rage, so deeply embodied by so many of us, not only contains the ability to dismantle and deconstruct long standing structures of harm, but this rage, when given space, can also birth paths of healing. Women's rage must be allowed room to spark, breathe, and ignite – from the carefully orchestrated speeches on the world stage to the uncensored and unruly fury that comes from all of us, in all of our diverse and resilient embodiments. From the calculated language spoken over the podium, demanding accountability in no uncertain terms to the reclaimed power in the streets, similarly demanding autonomy, respect, and liberation. Whether it be in the 18th century aristocracies, the labouring fields, the protests, the marches, the courts, the government halls, the poems, songs, art – the rage of women is speaking prominently, and it must be heard.

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