Ms. Turns Fifty

by Bruce Bawer

The year was 1998. Bill Clinton, who had been dogged by accusations of sexual misconduct ever since his first run for the presidency in 1992, was now mired in the most appalling sex scandal in White House history. After the public learned of his hijinks with an intern named Monica Lewinsky, which had begun when she was 22 years old, Clinton compounded his offense by dissembling about it under oath. Like flies drawn to excrement, Democratic Party apparatchiks rallied to his side. In no case, perhaps, was there more hypocrisy involved than in that of Gloria Steinem, the founding editor of *Ms.*, the feminist movement's flagship publication. In a breathtakingly jesuitical *New York Times* op-ed, Steinem drew a distinction between Clarence Thomas's alleged sexual harassment of Anita Hill, which she found unforgivable, and

Bill Clinton's repeated Oval Office sex romps, which she excused. Is it any wonder that Camille Paglia later accused Steinem of having "turned feminism into a covert adjunct of the Democratic party"?

So nakedly partisan was Steinem's op-ed that two days after it appeared, a *Times* editorial – yes, a *Times* editorial – chastised her for it, pointing out that she could be viewed as advocating "a new kind of 'no harm, no foul' mentality in the workplace." That's right: Gloria Steinem was – and still is – such a Democratic Party toady that she was taken to task for it *by the editorial board of the New York Times.* What more does one need to know about Steinem, who will turn 90 in March?

Well, there's this. In 2015, Steinem led a "walk for peace" across the DMZ with Christine Ahn, a Korean-American apologist for the Communist regime in Pyongyang. Steinem, who has spent her adult life screaming that middle-class American women are cruelly oppressed, might have taken the occasion to criticize the *actual* oppression of women in North Korea, which reaches levels far beyond her imagination. But no: Steinem, who taught generations of women to view the men in their lives as heartless dictators, showered Kim Jung-un, an actual heartless dictator, with praise.

Which brings us to her magazine, whose anniversary compendium, *Fifty Years of Ms.: The Best of the Pathfinding Magazine that Started a Revolution,* is being published this month. Edited by Katherine Spillar, it's a massive object, containing 554 outsized pages that recount the history of *Ms.* decade by decade via reprints of articles, poems, short fiction, photographs, reproductions of covers, and letters to the editor. There's also a foreword by Steinem, who states in her first sentence that *Ms.* was "the first woman-controlled magazine." Not even close. Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry Magazine* in 1912; two years later, Margaret C. Anderson started *The Little Review.* Those are just the first two to

come to my mind. I suspect there were others. It's par for the course, in any event, for Steinem to drop *truly* pioneering women down the memory hole in order to make herself shine all the more brightly.

Thanks to *Ms.*, writes Steinem, "a big majority of the country" now "supports the radical idea that people are people, regardless of gender or race or sexuality or class or ethnicity." Such nonsense! Even in 1971, when *Ms.* was founded, nobody in America disagreed with the proposition that "people are people." And *Ms.* was never about that anyway. With rare exceptions, *Ms.* was always about painting women (by which the magazine, especially in its early decades, almost exclusively meant middle- and upper-middle-class American white women, i.e. the most fortunate demographic cohort in human history) as a cruelly oppressed class, and men as their vicious oppressors.

The introduction to the 1970s section of *Fifty Years of Ms.* picks up on the notion of *Ms.* as pathbreaking. When *Ms.* came along, we're told, magazines like *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* "did not speak to the lives, needs or ambitions of most women." An odd assertion, given that those were, in the 1970s, two of America's most popular monthlies. Indeed, four decades later, *Good Housekeeping* was still doing well: in 2016, it was the nation's seventh best-selling magazine. As for *Ladies Home Journal,* it folded that same year, but just before its closure it boasted a circulation of over three million. *Ms.* has never been remotely that big; in 2008 it sold 110,000 copies per issue – nothing to sneeze at, but certainly no basis for a contention that "most women" were bereft for a voice before it came along, and sang grateful hosannas when it first hit the newsstands.

As it happens, *Fifty Years of Ms.* is candid about the magazine's long-term failure to turn a profit. Twenty years ago, after being passed around by various corporate owners,

the magazine found a safe haven in the form of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), which remains its publisher today. Which explains why, in addition to Steinem's foreword, *Fifty Years of Ms.* includes an introduction co-authored by Eleanor Smeal, president of FMF. Not surprisingly, Smeal too swatted away Clinton's female accusers back in the late 90s, smearing Paula Jones as a right-wing tool, dismissing Juanita Broaddrick's rape allegation, and maintaining that Lewinsky and Kathleen Willey didn't matter because their abuser was "so good on all our issues."

Hypocrisy and Rage

This dizzying hypocrisy by feminist standard-bearers, of course, makes a joke of the idea of sisterly solidarity. Yet to read through *Fifty Years of Ms.* is to observe that one of the running themes in the magazine's history is a tub-thumping insistence on the all-importance of that solidarity. The only thing that *Ms.* holds sacred more than female solidarity, in fact, is rage – women's righteous rage against the despotic male. How appropriate, then, that the very first piece reprinted from the book is an item from the premiere issue of *Ms.* that begins: "American women are angry." Well, maybe not the ones who were copying recipes and dress patterns from *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*. But *Ms.* readers? Yes, they were angry. Anger was the Alpha and the Omega of second-wave feminism – the feminism, that is, of housewives who'd gone to Smith or Radcliffe or Bryn Mawr and who'd learned from Betty Friedan – a card-carrying Communist who'd defended Stalin's Gulags – that their sprawling suburban homes were "comfortable concentration camp[s]," their kitchens prison cells, their bedrooms torture chambers, their husbands jailers.

"American women are angry." Why? The author of the piece in question, Jane O'Reilly, offers up an anecdote by way of explanation. During the previous summer, she and her husband

had shared a beach house on Fire Island with several other couples. O'Reilly was hanging in the kitchen with her fellow wives when one of the men wandered in and asked for something to eat. Something to eat! The audacity! The oppression! "What if we finally learn," asks a livid O'Reilly, "that we are not defined by our children and our husbands but by ourselves?" How many *Ms.* subscribers, one wonders, ended up lonely and bitter because they spent years reading articles like this, which stoked their animosity and resentment over what really were, truth be told, exceedingly enviable lives? How many women learned from articles like O'Reilly's to view the people who loved them most as obstacles to their self-definition while regarding man-hating (but Mao-loving) harpies in far-away magazine offices as their teachers, idols, and soulmates?

Also reprinted from early issues of *Ms.* are a 1971 petition for abortion rights signed by (among others) Nora Ephron, Lee Grant, Billie Jean King, Anais Nin, Anne Sexton (pre-suicide), and Susan Sontag; a 1972 piece by Susan Edminston suggesting that wives draft a "marriage contract" spelling out the division of household labor between them and their husbands; and a brief 1972 item explaining that men hold doors open for women because they consider women's lives "[m]ore expendable" than theirs. (If some miscreant is lying in wait on the other side of the door, you see, the woman will get jumped first.) And on it goes: in "Body Hair: The Last Frontier," two feminists argue that women shouldn't have to shave their legs or armpits; in "Getting to Know Me: A Primer on Masturbation," Betty Dodson celebrates her, well, self-celebration; in "If Men Could Menstruate," Steinem suggests that if men had periods they'd brag about how heavy their flow was. Hilarious. (What does Steinem have to say these days about the relatively new leftist doctrine that men *can* have periods?)

There are occasional celebrity contributions. In 1975, Angela Davis stands up for a woman charged with killing a man who'd purportedly tried to rape her. (Davis's passionate advocacy

would've been more impressive if, three years earlier, she hadn't refused to speak up for incarcerated Eastern European dissidents on the grounds that, as anti-Communists, they *deserved* to be behind bars.) Also in 1975, Alan Alda, then riding high as the star of the sitcom *M*A*S*H,* contributed a bit of would-be whimsy entitled "Testosterone Poisoning" – the joke being that "men have an overdose" of testosterone. Identifying various differences between men and women, Alda depicts women in every instance as being on the right side of the ledger and men as being on the wrong side. For example: would you rather watch a sunset or take apart a clock? The latter? Wrong answer! Alda's piece qualifies as a prominent early statement of the now orthodox feminist proposition that, far from being brought up to be dictatorial patriarchs, men become oppressive monsters because there's actually something constitutionally – which is to say biochemically – wrong with them.

Through the Decades

On to the 1980s, and to an article critical – believe it or not – of female genital mutilation. (This was before it became *verboten* for white American feminists to criticize non-Western patriarchy.) From 1985, there's a ridiculous "roundtable" on, "If Women Had a Foreign Policy." The participants include Bella Abzug, the then-famous Manhattan congresswoman, who laments that women are "outside power." This, mind you, at a moment when Margaret Thatcher (who goes entirely unmentioned in the symposium) was playing a more significant, and more positive, role on the world stage than any woman ever, but whose politics made her anathema – indeed, made her something other than a real woman – in the eyes of Steinem and company. To be sure, the article *does* mention Reagan – whom it castigates for precisely those policies that, a couple of years later, would succeed in liberating the captive peoples of the eastern bloc from the tyrants who awarded Angela Davis the Lenin Prize in 1980.

From 1988, there's a screed in which an athlete named Alison Carlson complains about the indignity of being chromosome-tested. She urges readers to accept the notion of a "biological continuum" – a topic on which she favorably cites John Money (1921-2006), the child molester who was notorious for his twisted, Mengele-like experiments on innocent minors. (Angela Davis, John Money: is every creep of the last fifty years treated as an icon in this compendium?)

Kicking off the section of the book about the 1990s is "*Ms.* Lives!," in which then-editor Robin Morgan (also known for co-founding a group called Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, a.k.a. WITCH), who describes *Ms.* as "liberated territory – where we defiantly proclaim the beginning of the post-patriarchal era." Morgan's harangue is followed by a 1993 jeremiad deploring "the tyranny of our culture." I looked up its author, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, and learned that after attending Radcliffe, Berkeley, and Harvard, she enjoyed a successful academic career at Harvard, Northeastern University, and the University of Illinois. That's tyranny, all right.

I've mentioned Jane O'Reilly's 1971 rant about having to make a sandwich at a beach house and Susan Edminston's 1972 advice on sharing household chores. *La plus ça change:* in 1992 came "The Politics of Housework," in which Patricia Mainard details her heroic efforts to split housework with her husband. The poor chump readily fell into line, but, she complains, he won't shut up: he asks her to show him how to perform certain chores, he wants to do them on his own schedule, etc. Mainard counsels readers who've faced similar husbandly insubordination to remember that "[t]he measure of your oppression is his resistance."

Reading Mainard, I thought of Katharine Hepburn. She wasn't just the most successful movie actor of the 20th century; she was also a genuine feminist pioneer who, early in her film career, irked the Hollywood studio bosses with her nervy

insistence on wearing trousers. But to the end of her days she also prided herself on doing her own cooking and washing her own dishes. “I enjoy it enormously,” she told Dick Cavett in a 1973 interview. I used to live near her Manhattan townhouse and often saw her pop out the door and scurry down the stairs to drop a small bag into her trash bin. She didn’t have a husband, but when she was at her family home in Connecticut she lived with her brother, whose meals she gladly prepared. Would Hepburn ever have described herself as oppressed by the patriarchy? She’d have laughed merrily at the very idea.

Fifty Years of Ms. does contain some worthwhile items, and three of them are from the early 1990s. In “We Are Who You Are” (1992), Bonnie Sher Klein actually praises her husband, a doctor who took off work for months to be at her side while she was in the ICU following a stroke. In a book that is otherwise a desert of humorlessness, Alison Bechdel, author of the lesbian comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (of which I confess to being a fan), provides an oasis of actual wit — a strip making affectionate fun of aging feminists. And Mary Gordon, whose first novel, *Final Payments* (1978), I remember reading with admiration, contributes a tender and sensible 1993 piece about being the loving feminist mother of a — gasp! — son.

The Fury Continues

But these bright spots are far outweighed by fatuous diatribes that exude idiotic fury. In “Hate Radio” (1994), Patricia J. Williams savages Howard Stern, then at the height of his popularity (and hilarity), whom she labels as a disseminator of hate. In fact, Stern’s equal-opportunity mockery did more to promote some liberal causes — notably the acceptance of gay men and lesbians — than anything ever published in *Ms.* In 1997, Eve Ensler, who’d won fame a year earlier with *Vagina Monologues*, writes under the name “V” about — what else? — vaginas. (Of course, Ensler, once a feminist heroine, has been

criticized of late for neglecting women *without* vaginas.)

While *Fifty Years of Ms.* doesn't include Steinem's famous 1998 article for the magazine (not to be confused with her 1998 *Times* op-ed) defending Bill Clinton in the Lewinsky matter, it does reprint a letter from a reader congratulating her for it. "Steinem's article," writes Deborah Winslow of Fort Collins, Colorado, "helped me see that those who are shouting 'Down with Clinton!' are predominately [sic] right-wingers, seeking only to serve their own agenda." Another reader thanks Steinem for insisting, in an article about certain "violent acts" (the specifics are unclear from the letter), on identifying the perpetrators as "young white boys." (Has Steinem, I wonder, *ever* insisted on identifying the race of the perpetrators of inner-city gang violence?)

In 1999, we finally get an article in which a writer praises her father. But in this case, the reason why Noelle Howey applauds her dad (who, shaped by "the testosterone-poisoned atmosphere of the 1950s," was cold to her throughout her childhood) is that he turned from an emotionally distant male into an affectionate transgendered lesbian. In 2001, Judith Levine (who, I see from Wikipedia, is famous for founding "a group dedicated to promoting abortion rights through street theater") rants about the mainstreaming of homosexuality: one-quarter of gay men now vote Republican! They want into the "kiddie-paramilitary (Boy Scouts)"! They even want in on the "oppressive" institution of marriage! From the *Ms.* point of view, few things are more unnerving than the escape of a minority from the radical reservation.

Feminists and Democrats

From 2004 comes a piece in which Gina Barreca says women are funnier than men: "Women's humor has a particular interest in challenging the most formidable structures because they keep women from positions of power." (God knows that's what *I* look for when I want a laugh.) In 2005, Catherine Orenstein parrots

the then-relatively new line that “fat is a feminist issue.” We’re shown the cover of *Ms.*’s 2009 “special inaugural issue,” which depicts the newly elected President Obama in a t-shirt that says, “This is what a feminist looks like.” A few pages later there’s a photo of Obama presenting Steinem with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. (One Democratic Party hand washes the other.)

Soon enough, alas, we’ve left the pure heaven of the Obama era for the sheer hell of the evil orange autocrat — and, as *Ms.* puts it with its usual restraint, “the Trump administration’s all-out war on women.” By way of underlining the contrast between malicious Republican patriarchy and benign Democratic feminism, the book reprints a 2011 letter from a reader who quotes Joe Biden, of all people, as saying that “no matter what a girl does, no matter how she’s dressed, no matter how much she’s had to drink, it’s never, never, never, never okay to touch her without her consent.” Given our current corpse-in-chief’s own habitual misconduct in the presence of young girls, one might wonder whether this letter is being reprinted as some kind of dark joke. But no, this is just how blindly determined *Ms.* is to hold up Democrats as heroes, no matter how absurd it may look to an informed, non-brainwashed observer. For the same reason, we’re shown not one, not two, but three *Ms.* covers of Nancy Pelosi — plus, for good measure, a sycophantic 2011 profile, “Most. Effective. Speaker. Ever.” (Never mind how shamelessly Pelosi and her husband have enriched themselves through insider trading, or how the San Francisco district that she represents has, on her watch, declined from a gem into a rubbish heap.)

The celebration of Pelosi is succeeded by a 2015 celebration of none other than Patrisse Cullors, who’s best known for buying mansions for herself with money contributed by woke corporations to Black Lives Matter. (Again, is the reprinting of this nauseating tribute to this horrible woman meant as a joke?) In 2011, Jennifer Williams invites us to applaud the

black feminist Bell Hooks's noble struggle against "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (a struggle she carried on while being paid hefty sums at Yale, Stanford, and USC); in the same year, Minh-Ha T. Pham writes that it's OK for feminists to like fashion, so long as they "harness" it for their own "political purposes." In 2013, there's the celebrity profile, "Beyonce's Fierce Feminism"; a 2020 article quotes an assurance by Benazir Bhutto that "respect for women's rights" is intrinsic to Islam. (*Fifty Years of Ms.* doesn't include *anything* positive about Christianity.) A 2014 article about rape sneers at George Will's sensible rejection of the preposterous claim that one in five women on college campuses will end up being raped; and a 2021 report on COVID-19 describes it as "the most discriminatory crisis we [women and girls] have ever experienced" — but also as "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enact transformative change."

Every so often in this book, the prose agitprop gives way to verse agitprop. (Alice Walker in 2010: "I call on all Grand Mothers / everywhere / on the planet / to rise / and take your place / in the leadership / of the world.") Indeed, no matter the form, no matter the topic, you can be sure, while slogging through *Fifty Years of Ms.*, that a stretch of stultifying rhetoric about "oppression" and "resistance" and "capitalist patriarchy" and "transformative change" is never far away. It's striking that, in pieces published decades apart, the petulant tone remains the same, men never stop being the bad guys, and women never stop being depicted as brave revolutionaries. It's also interesting to note that there's nothing toward the end of the book about the obvious difficulties posed to women's rights by the recent transgender explosion. Of course, *Ms.* can't openly acknowledge this problem, since the Democratic Party has made clear its utter fealty to the promoters of this sick fad.

But perhaps the most lamentable thing of all about *Fifty Years of Ms.* is its almost total failure to say anything positive

about motherhood — indeed, its repeated rejection of the notion that a sensible, intelligent woman might want to place motherhood at the center of her identity — and its concomitant fixation on the idea that nothing should be of more urgent import to a woman than her right to abort a child at will, with or without the father's knowledge and at any moment right up to the last day of the ninth month. To read this anthology is to experience a mindset that played no small role in shaping the personalities of all those "Karens" who explode irrationally at store managers, all those grade-school teachers who tell their pupils eagerly about gender theory, and all those chardonnay moms who would never, ever vote for a Republican (and who would pull the lever for the most manifestly incompetent woman over the most highly qualified man). Steinem's preface to the contrary, *Ms.* was never about basic human respect and equality: it was about narcissism and rancor on the part of the daughters of extraordinary privilege. And while it's true enough that the magazine started a "revolution," it's been a revolution against nature, against freedom, and against common sense. Was *Ms.* "pathfinding"? Yes. But the path it charted is one that, as has become increasingly clear, leads to loneliness, frustration, and a rage that, far from ever dissipating, just grows and grows.

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