BOOKS

Women Are Furious. Now What?

In her new book, Rebecca Traister invokes rage to unify women in a battle against men. But being mad can prove divisive, too.

LAURA KIPNIS NOVEMBER 2018 ISSUE

Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger BY REBECCA TRAISTER SIMON & SCHUSTER

ONE OF THE unfunny witticisms going around during Hillary Clinton's first presidential run was that she'd never get elected, because she reminded men of their first wife. When a male friend relayed the update during her second run—no, she didn't remind men of their first wife; she reminded them of their first wife's divorce lawyer—I recall barking with laughter. The joke distilled all the male anxieties of the moment: Something was being taken away from them, their balls were in a vise, pissed-off women wanted men's stuff and were going to be ruthless about trying to get it.
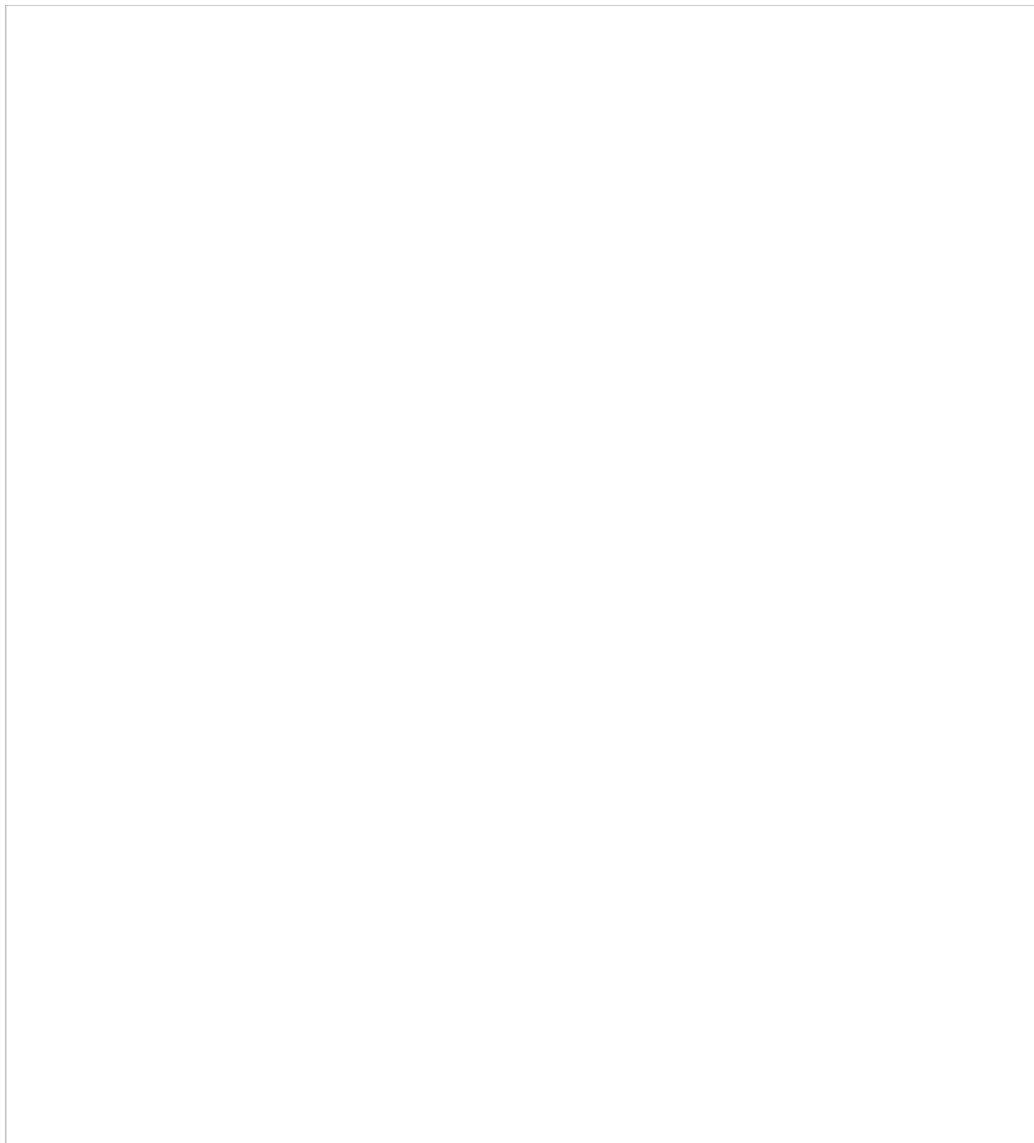
BETH HOECKEL

I recalled this joke while reading Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, which shares what might be called a divorce-court view of the gender situation in America. Men and women are on opposing sides, and women will succeed only by quashing men and seizing the spoils: the big jobs, the political offices, and the moral high ground. Walking us through recent events and still-fresh wounds —Black Lives Matter, the election of Donald Trump, the "Harvey-sized hole" blown in the news cycle (otherwise known as #MeToo)—Traister, who writes for *New York* magazine, is on a mission. Women's anger about all of this, she argues, can propel us from the "potentially revolutionary moment" we're in to one that actually alters the distribution of power. The main impediment to this taking place, in her view, is women's habit of hiding our rage.

"Women's anger spurs creativity and drives innovation in politics and social change, and it always has," she writes. Stop crying when you're angry (tears can be tactical, but they also telegraph feminine weakness), and stop trying to make your bitchy self palatable—as Traister confesses to sometimes doing, about which she can be quite droll. ("So I was funny! And playful, cheeky, ironic, knowing!") The small problem:

"Many of us who may have covered our fury in humor have occasionally found ourselves exploding."
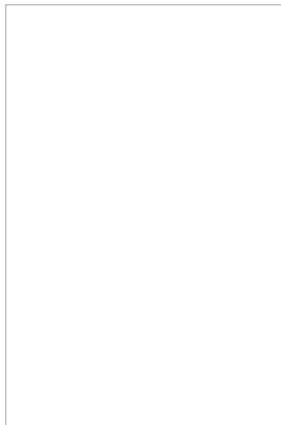
The primary target for this accumulated rage is, of course, men—white men, and one in particular. The energy of the 2017 Women's March on Washington, the largest single-day rally in the nation's history, catalyzed *Good and Mad* into existence; by 2018, according to an *Elle* survey that Traister cites, 83 percent of Democratic women were furious at the news at least once a day. But the oppositional fury isn't exactly tidy, Traister acknowledges. For many of the women of color whom she quotes, the anger is equally directed at white women.

Fifty-two percent of them voted for Trump, and the real culprit behind his election, as Traister sees it, is white heterosexual marriage. Analyses of 2016 voting patterns reveal a stark partisan divide between married and never-married white women: The married ones predominantly voted Republican (57 percent); the never-married ones didn't (59 percent voted for Clinton). Even once-married women—widows and women who are separated—were more likely to vote Republican, though only 49 percent of divorced women did. From this Traister infers that proximity to white men incentivizes white women to shore up white male power wherever possible, and endorse "policies and parties that protect the economic and political status of the men on whom they depend."

Traister's not wrong to focus on white men, who make up the traditional Republican base, after all. But determining just how to apportion the anger is murkier. Every week brings a fresh assessment of what happened in the 2016 election, confirming that white male Republicans didn't nose Trump to victory on their own. Let's not forget the Obama–Trump voter, the Sanders–Trump voter, and sizable chunks of the Latino and Asian vote, not to mention the drop in African American turnout and the Sanders voters who stayed home. Let's also not forget that patriarchy can't fully explain women's votes: We know little about the motives of the 32 percent of single women who backed Trump. And let's not forget Clinton's numerous errors.

ANGER HAS A way of making people righteous while clouding analysis—and undercutting actual clout. Traister herself thinks that our occasional admiration for female anger is in inverse proportion to its effects. We adore Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "a little doll of female anger," precisely because the angry opinions she writes are constantly outvoted. Likewise, the Angry Black Woman—"the cultural caricature of neck-snapping, side-eye-casting black female censure"—gets celebrated and fetishized because she's so disconnected from real power. More often than not, she disrupts nothing. Such emblems do the work of expelling the anger that white women feel but can't express, Traister says. The upshot is the proliferation of GIFs known as "digital blackface," which caricature extreme emotions and outsource them to black people.

Traister's point is provocative. Yet I can't help feeling that her own urge to finally let loose leaves her resorting to analogous versions of outsourcing in her political analysis, deploying women of color as spigots of angry wisdom. She invokes Saira Rao, a lawyer recently defeated in a Democratic congressional primary in Colorado, who says,

> I think the reason white women are the way they are is because the system is working for them and because they're comfortable in their Lululemon and comfortable putting aside their law degrees. So they want us to shut the fuck up because the system is working for them.

She cites Jessica Morales Rocketto, a left-wing activist, who points out that even if every person of color gets politically involved, "that's only 38 percent of America." Addressing white women, Morales Rocketto goes on to issue this call: "And y'all control the banks, the businesses, you're the head of all the entertainment companies. So let's go, we need you."

White women dominate banks and businesses and all have law degrees? This is where anger and accuracy part company. I wanted Traister to step in to say that identities are more complicated than this. For one thing, class distinctions exist (a subject she barely mentions), and blurring whiteness with the 1 percent substitutes venting for thinking. Reducing the world to oppressors versus oppressed—whether that means men versus women, or white women versus minority women—may play well on social-justice Twitter, but in book form, isn't it an offline version of those useless angry GIFs?

Traister's main question is, in the words of one activist: "Are white women going to use their power to defend their own interests" or to address the injustices faced by other women? The answer is obvious. Some will ally themselves with larger struggles, and others won't. But even in commenting on those trying to do the former, Traister rides the white-cluelessness trope a little hard:

> So it should be no wonder that when white women decided to participate in a protest against Donald Trump, after an election in which white women's willingness to protect white male power by electing an openly racist and misogynistic incompetent with authoritarian tendencies had been laid bare, black women would be anxious to explain that the white women newly awakened to rage were just that: newly awakened, and might have something to learn.

If I understand this mini-rant correctly, the white women involved in the Women's March are sister-wives of the ones who voted for Trump. As if the nightmare of Trump weren't bad enough, now we have the inverse of Trumpian blame games and purity politics, in the form of feminists lambasting one another over who's more tainted by supposed proximity to male power. Perhaps this is Trump's brilliance: He so saturates our brains that even feminists can't help modeling their discourse on his —and in a book meant to unite women into a political force to be reckoned with.

HE BLAME GAME is also politically shortsighted. Letting a selection of angry

T voices be heard, as Traister does, makes for lively reading and in theory should galvanize a broader mission, yet the exclusion of other necessary voices leaves her with a disappointingly tepid feminist agenda. When she chastises second-wave feminists of the NOW generation for being insufficiently concerned with diversity, she's overlooking the fact that the political demands of that generation were actually far more encompassing and radical than anything on the table today—among them free child care and free abortions. Feminists rallied behind these causes in the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, at that point the largest political gathering of women in American history.

What remains radical in those demands is the implicit recognition that women are situated differently in the economy—and in the world—than men are. The reason for this lies in the socially imposed costs that accompany the female body. We hear a lot lately about glass ceilings and the economic repercussions of sexual harassment, but other issues unite women even more profoundly, not least motherhood. Eighty-six percent of women in the U.S. have children, a far larger cohort than the roster hit on by Leon Wieseltier (whose behavior gets more agonized treatment in *Good and Mad* than the material burdens of maternity do).

The majority of mothers also have jobs, which means that vast numbers of women of all races and classes are grappling with the same old problem: child care. (Obviously nature doesn't dictate that childbearers are also responsible for child-raising—these are social decisions—but for reasons we could discuss until the end of eternity, that arrangement still mostly prevails.) And let's not prettify things. Maternity can be impoverishing—the result of yet more social decisions. Female-headed households are overrepresented in families living below the poverty line, and black mothers are far more likely to be in this group than white mothers are. (By contrast, in France, to take one much-cited example, publicly funded nurseries and preschool are regarded as a social right; 95 percent of children attend the latter, and the percentage of GDP spending on children is more than twice what it is in the United States.)

In passing, Traister wonders, as do I, about the expansion of #MeToo grievances into complaints about "plain old bad sex" and minor affronts. The political question we're left with is whether the movement has been sufficiently ambitious. NOW's demands, nearly 50 years ago, were radical because they involved redistributing resources and altering economic priorities in ways that would benefit women (both working and nonworking) across race and class lines. In the intervening years we've seen the priorities of American feminism shift from resources to injuries, and feminist demands reduced to little more than Band-Aids for the many and corner offices for the lucky few.

Frankly, I'm a lot angrier about the resource redistribution that has happened in recent decades—directed almost entirely upward rather than outward, into social spending—than about Trump's pussy-grabbing, not that it's an either-or. What's required, for the current anger to amount to anything lasting, is a rigorous feminist analysis that

connects the treatment of women's bodies in the workplace with the treatment of women's bodies in the civic sphere. When you think about it, women's bodies are regarded as almost a public utility, their availability for free groping and for the repopulating of the labor force all but taken for granted. At the same time, women are subject to a hidden system of taxation, whether that means sleeping with the gross boss, paying for the abortion when a slipup happens, shelling out an exorbitant percentage of your already unequal salary for day care, or facing a stalled career if you don't. We're in the habit of treating these as separate issues (and, falsely, as "personal" ones), maybe because once they're placed in the same frame, women might really get furious.

So yes, I'm angry. What follows? Traister's proposed strategy is electing more women to political office, and the last section of *Good and Mad* focuses on efforts to recruit and train female candidates. My question is what these women candidates stand for, because Traister doesn't say. I'm asking because I don't believe political smarts or values automatically flow from identity. That's not an anti-identity-politics position, by the way. No one but a political idiot can fail to notice that the social progress of the past half century—on civil rights, feminism, gay marriage, disability issues—has been grounded in appeals to identity. But if my choice is between a neoliberal woman and a socialist man, why would I automatically vote for the woman? We don't share an identity, because I disidentify with her politics.

Traister has wrestled still-unfolding history into an admirably rousing narrative, but the time might be ripe for a more explosive vision. Why set the bar so low—unless we've forgotten how to do anything else?

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