

2 or 3 Things I Know About Him

Jacqueline Rose and the question of gendered violence

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March 2022

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On December 29, 1988, in the twenty-fifth year of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment, Winnie Mandela-Madikizela's bodyguards kidnapped four teenage boys from the home of Paul Verryn, a Methodist priest who worked in Soweto township. Claiming the boys were informants, they murdered one, Stompie Seipei Moeketsi, a fourteen-year-old anti-apartheid activist. Throughout the late 1980s, Mandela's enforcers—known as the Mandela United Football Club—abducted and tortured homeless youth in Soweto; witnesses claim to have seen Winnie herself involved in the beating of Stompie, according to Fred Bridgland, whose critical biography came out shortly after her death. Convicted of the kidnapping, the “Mother of the Nation” received a suspended sentence in 1993. She was, of course, no stranger to violence. Detained without charge for 491 days in 1968–1969, she was beaten and sexually taunted, and almost starved herself to death.

In 2018, after both Mandelas had died, the British writer Jacqueline Rose attended a conference in South Africa, which she describes near the end of her recent book, *On Violence and on Violence Against Women*. The topic was “Recognition, Reparation, and Reconciliation,” and it was about the cross-generational persistence of trauma, the ways, as Rose puts it, it “entrenches itself in body and soul.” Winnie Mandela, a heroine and a national disgrace, a victim and a perpetrator of violence, was barely mentioned at the event. Yet for many in attendance she was a ghostly presence who seemed “to be stalking the halls.” “Like the hysteric who ushers in the birth of psychoanalysis, and who so often carries the malaise of a whole family,” Rose writes, “Winnie Mandela might then be seen as a figure who, on behalf of everyone, sported in Technicolor the unhealed sickness of the nation.”

For Rose as, one can imagine, for most of those attending the event, the conversation about reconciliation did not reconcile anything or anyone. Rather than high moral sentiments or the gratification of a shared political project, “ugly feelings” had to be faced (Rose adopts Sianne Ngai's eloquent phrase). The experience demonstrated an idea that Rose has long believed: that political and psychic struggle are tied together. It is worth paying attention to the terms she insists on. Moral ambiguity does not trivialize collective struggle. Nor does pathology disqualify those who struggle. The hysteric, as Rose's reference to Freudian history suggests, speaks the truth even if her voice sounds delirious. Yet the figure of Mandela suggests a different question: Does looking too deeply into subjectivity and deception, fear and anger, displace ethics, with its relentless demand to separate the sheep from the goats, the innocent from the obscene? Do you need to be above or beyond violence to deliver judgment on it? And if you *are* above it, how on earth can you understand it?

The Fossil Record

Jacqueline Rose is easy to admire and hard to pin down. Trained as a literary critic at Oxford and London, she became known as a feminist intellectual in the 1980s and 1990s, reaching a wide audience through her broadcasting and journalism. For many of us coming to feminism at the time, she was a glamorous and intimidating presence. Rose mixed with the left intellectuals at *History Workshop Journal* and *Screen*; had the worldliness of a Julia Kristeva, seeming more European than British; dressed well and even worked for Yves Saint Laurent in one of his Parisian boutiques. Most importantly, she knew about the unconscious. With Juliet Mitchell, Rose showed us how to dislodge the legacy of Freud from a history of feminist distrust. Freud argued that gender identity is formed through libidinal identifications, a theory that understandably made second wave feminists skittish. They looked instead for a breakthrough into unproblematic sexuality: if politics could be transformed, then eros could be good again, the phallus dethroned. Then Mitchell and Rose stepped in, with a picture of sexual identity and desire informed by psychoanalytic principles. Drawing on Rose as a guide, feminist critics of patriarchy could recognize themselves and others on the psychoanalytic map of desire, disillusionment, craziness, and contradiction. This was liberating; Rose's fidelity to the psychoanalytic insight still is.

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Her great theme was noticeable from the start: the entwinement of idealism and pathology. In her first book, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984), she suggested that the idealization of childhood innocence is self-defeating, obscuring with sentiment the ways history has failed and abused children. Rose's preoccupation with fantasy also colored her next projects on how women were depicted in movies and how female writers from George Eliot to Sylvia Plath confronted desire. More risky was her 2018 assault on motherhood. Adapting the skills of a literary scholar, she drew attention to the significance of fractures, the coexistence in maternal care of love and cruelty, sacrifice and selfishness.

To see what Rose is up to (and up against), it is not indiscreet to refer to her background, the privileged middle-class British family only unusual in its Jewishness. (Her grandparents moved to England from Poland; her grandmother's family were killed in an extermination camp in Chelmno.) Her immigrant family's desire to be more "perfect"—more inconspicuous, more invisible—than their neighbors has influenced her animosity toward ideals of purity. She speaks on several occasions of the "ritual" house cleaning she and her sisters were expected to perform before leaving home every morning. But this same early experience has also contributed to her attachment to Freud, to Freud's cynicism about "civility" and his tolerance of the mess within.

Rose later applied Freud's discoveries about the analytic encounter to politics. A critic of Zionism and supporter of the academic boycott of Israel, Rose has been the target of much vitriol and accusations of treachery. Yet she calls for internal dissent in Israel, not a blanket refusal of the nation's legitimacy. Israel's totalizing identification with the Holocaust is something she thinks it imposes on the Jews of the world, inciting them to force and intransigence as a compensation for the humiliations of Jewish history. Like Winnie Mandela's followers, who invoke her as savior of the nation despite her legacy of crime, Zionists are in thrall to the magical rhetoric of violence. But the spell can hold only as long as it feeds trauma, refusing to let it go. Rose now sees a continuity in her objections to Zionism and her position as a feminist. As she explained to Rosemary Bechler in a 2005 Open Democracy interview, identity politics "fossilizes." Victimhood is not the place where justice begins.

Against the fossilization of victimhood, Rose advocates finding a "language that will allow us to recognize why, in a world of inequality and injustice, people are driven to do things that we hate"—to quote her remarks at the conclusion of a 2004 essay on suicide bombers in the *London Review of Books*. I am not the only one of her readers to wonder if this is possible. Does telling the truth solve anything? Freud hoped so. But he couldn't prove it. Rose quotes Hannah Arendt (not herself a fan of Freud): the need to think and the urge to know are both "anguished," but the urge to know is more dangerous. If thinking is to avoid becoming "despotic," it will have to accept indeterminacy. Legitimacy is a prize we may have to forego. This, I think, is key to Rose's work, and to her moral passion.

Violence/Femmes

The title of Rose's latest book alludes to Arendt's *On Violence*. In that essay, as in *The Human Condition* and the posthumous *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt set out a distinction Rose continues to find politically as well as psychologically important: What is the enemy of violence? The answer Arendt gave was thinking. Violence is afraid of thought because brute force is never strong or certain; it is always anxious and uncertain. What makes it dangerous is precisely this, its need to hide its own impotence and frailty. In the context of gender politics, Rose identifies the fantasy of omnipotence—the dream of being superhuman, of exercising control, of being always in the right—with maleness, or at least with maleness within the conditions we know. Conversely, she argues that sexual violence tends to arise in response to moments when that fantasy is challenged.

The idea is well-illustrated in a chapter titled "The Killing of Reeve Steenkamp, the Trial of Oscar Pistorius." Pistorius, a Paralympian, was postapartheid South Africa's athletic superstar—until he murdered his girlfriend, the model and law student Reeve Steenkamp, in his gated estate in Pretoria

during the early hours of Valentine's Day, 2013, putting four shots through a closed bathroom door. By Pistorius's account in the murder trial—an account full of holes and improbabilities—he did not intend to kill his lover, although he knew that the shots would kill whoever was behind the door. “I believed that someone had entered my house,” he said. Observers at the trial were quick to pick up on the racial undertones of his confession. Writing in the *Guardian*, the South African journalist and novelist Maggie Orford suggested that Pistorius was speaking to a terror he assumed everyone in the courtroom would understand, even the Black judge. The “fear” of the unknown intruder “inserts a third body into an all too familiar narrative of domestic violence,” she wrote. “This imaginary body of the paranoid imaginings of suburban South Africa.”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Pistorius admitted later. And this apparent thoughtlessness is what Rose focuses on. “What was going on in the mind of Pistorius when he shot through the bathroom door?” Rose asks. “Everything hung on that question.” Did Pistorius harbor a specific and murderous rage against a lover? Or was he acting out as a white South African, protecting his private world from a Black intruder? Or was it something to do with his masculinity? “I am not a feminist who believes that all men, simply by dint of being men, are violent against women,” Rose writes. If men are just that way—by nature unwittingly, inevitably aggressive—then there is no feminist case to be made. Yet she suggests that Pistorius’s refusal to “see” Steenkamp was not accidental, even if it was unconscious. Gender-based violence is a form of entitlement, a “willed distortion—whether conscious or unconscious—in the field of vision.” The legacy of male power throughout history is a deeply entrenched inherited narcissism. As the prosecution argued, Pistorius must have known who was behind the door. But when he reconstructed the night, he transferred an intimate rage into something else: the panic of the impotent.

Curiously enough, this way of interpreting social violence tends to be associated with feminists explicitly opposed by Rose, like Andrea Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller, and Catharine MacKinnon. Why do men rape? they asked in the 1970s. And they answered: to subjugate women. To make them feel that they are women and that being female is weak and inferior. Rose concurs that violence is a social tool, which operates on the psyche of the victim, normalizing fear, self-doubt, and apprehension. “Ensuring that women will be women and nothing else, pinning them down as women, can be seen as one of the core motives of rape,” Rose writes, “which is why all rapes, not only those which are targeted at lesbian women, should be defined as ‘corrective.’”

There is, however, something very disturbing in this depiction. Is that all masculinity is, or can be? Once again, Rose refuses to “have the nuance drained out of her,” to adapt words used to different effect in Njabulo Ndebele’s 2003 novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. Male power has indeed flourished through the exercise of fear. It has also maintained its control (at the price of degrading itself) by encouraging shame and self-doubt in those it maintains are losers in the gendered order—female, trans, queer. But violence and masculinity are not simply synonyms. “Feminism,” Rose writes in a characteristic passage, “is not served by turning violence into a litany.” Where she makes things difficult for her feminist principles is in her desire to affirm the anarchy of sexuality while at the same time recommending social and legal sanctions on issues like workplace harassment and unequal romantic relationships (as between professors and students). Sexuality, she writes, is a law unto itself, a “state within a state.” But when Laura Kipnis denounces Title IX for impinging on the freedom of human desires, Rose declares her an enemy to feminism. Liberals will agree that law and the state should keep out of the bedroom. Romantics could add that sexuality is an anti-social force, and that is its virtue. Does Rose want to line up there? I suspect not.

Arendt convinced Rose that the pathologies of violence result from what Wendy Brown calls “waning sovereignty” rather than from secure, unimpeachable authority. But violence is kept alive by the persistence of fantasy, a term almost ubiquitous in Rose’s work. To affirm the fantastic as determinative of “what one really is”—or what a people, a culture, a nation, “really,” “authentically” are—is a further step into ambiguity. Rose demands that step. She insists that the very idea of a “core,” an “essence,” an origin, or a truth is as inapplicable to persons as it is to history. In her critiques of Zionism and other forms of modern ethno-nationalism, Rose has stood by her belief that the very notion of *identity* is a

violent fantasy. To resurrect the errors of identity-thinking in the context of gender politics is something that horrifies Rose, who is depressed (and, I think, baffled) by the battles within feminism and trans politics over the ownership of the category “woman.”

Immanent Domain

Does Rose’s work help us to understand what she identifies as the “violence of our times”? In part, that depends on how much you trust Arendt’s view, which Rose draws on in most of her case studies, that violence erupts when power is exposed as impotent. It accounts for the panic she reads into Oscar Pistorius’s reach for a gun, for the rage of scorned “incels,” even for military aggression. Arendt accepts a notion that attracted many in the twentieth century—though not psychoanalysts of her own time, whose views she distrusted. What was called by Ernest Becker the “denial of death” is the fantasy of an age seeking to explain itself without religion’s monopoly over the “last things,” unwilling to be reminded of its creaturely dependence.

Let us not silence or sacrifice the “complex, uncertain truths,” Rose urges.

Arendt is right to relate force to self-deception. But there are stronger, more ambitious ways to describe violence’s negativity, as well as its attraction and its persistence. Both Arendt and Rose underestimate the allure of fear. The power to terrify may be fleeting. Yet it can be reproduced again and again. I may want to risk even my own survival just for the pleasure of taking away the independence of another. This is not merely a result of psychological deviance, nor is it exclusive to belligerent men, as Rose acknowledges in her study of motherhood’s cruelties and manipulations.

The notion that violence is immanent to consciousness has a distinguished philosophical pedigree, entering history through Hegel’s dialectic of dependence and independence in the *Phenomenology of Mind*. The “master”—who asserts autonomy and self-authorization—stands for mind unanchored to body, for the superiority of a life freed from the need to work or suffer. In the context of the ancient polis, to which Hegel refers, only those unafraid of physical harm can afford to think freely; only they deserve civil recognition and political honor. It is a strange birth for the freedom of thought, and a strikingly masculinist one. The life of the mind, the sovereignty of reason, in this reading, does not preclude aggression but in fact encourages it. The fantasy of “being master,” calling the shots, is itself violent, even if causing pain to others is an unintended consequence. And reason’s path through history has been marked by this will to dominate. Hegel puts this in stark terms: force, brutality, the fight for life and death, these are on the scene as soon as there is an I and not-I; even before there is speech and contestation, there is a murderous will to suppress the Other’s independence.

Rose’s book tries to linger in the mind of the narcissist, the rapist, the predator—authoritarian minds that Arendt would see as blocked, unwilling to think, terrified of ambiguity. Hegel is less compassionate. For him, domination represents a powerful desire, a claim for transcendence. Death may be the absolute master, but in the political world there will always be those who consider themselves its equals, who mimic its power. The “war in the mind” which psychoanalysis so deftly tracks is in danger in this book of remaining a metaphor. Reparation, like reconciliation, may do more work in the domain of the therapeutic than in the face of what Hegel called “the slaughterbench of history.”

Reflecting on her most effective interventions, her critique of Israeli policy in Palestine and her demand for a Jewish resistance to Zionism, Rose explains that what aroused most hostility was her use of psychoanalysis to interpret the “trauma” of the Israeli nation-state, as if the invocation of neurosis were an insult not to be borne. I have a different problem with Rose’s psychoanalytic reasoning: the mind, as soon as you look at it, is too interesting. Actions, on the other hand, can be stupefyingly banal, crude, one-dimensional. Let us not silence or sacrifice the “complex, uncertain truths,” Rose urges; they discourage in us the easy identification with any narcissistic collective. But libidinal rewards of aggression and collective arrogance, as Rose admits in her introduction to Freud’s *Mass Psychology*

and Other Writings (2004), are not going to lose their appeal that easily. Psychoanalysis, like Hegel's Owl of Minerva, comes on the scene in twilight. Politics is a harsher light.

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The Library of Unconventional Lives

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The Baffler, no. 62, pp. 128-133.
<www.thebaffler.com/outbursts/2-or-3-things-i-know-about-him-during>

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