

BOOK REVIEWS

Media tarts: How the Australian press frames female politicians

Julia Baird

Scribe Publications, 2004, pp.230, pb, ISBN 1920769 23 4.

Reviewed by ROBERT MACKIE, University of Newcastle, Australia

Following the October 2004 Federal election, the Prime Minister, John Howard, abolished the Office of the Status of Women from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Office had been marginalized for years and was seen to have no importance. Its abolition indicates that maintaining the Office was even less than a non-core promise, more a don't care promise — like ATSIC.

So as Australia sinks even further into the mire of the second Ming dynasty, which, on the issues of concern here, is a loyal and faithful replica of the first, Julia Baird's *Media Tarts* comes as a welcome and pleasant surprise. In a manner that is engaging, accessible and fluent Baird provides us with compelling pen portraits of her principal media tarts: Flo Bjelke-Peterson, Bronwyn Bishop, Cheryl Kernot, Natasha Stott-Despoja, Pauline Hanson and Carmen Lawrence. As well there are lesser tarts with smaller parts namely, Joan Child, Janice Crosio, Rosemary Foot and Margaret Guilfoyle. And glowering through these pages is the odious presence, like a gorgon from Hades, of Margaret Thatcher, barrenness. Top tart.

Opinions will differ but from this reviewer's standpoint Margaret Thatcher is the very worst sort of role model for any politician — female or male. Thatcher's practice and legacy is one of atavistic authoritarian populism cleaving division in Britain on economic, regional, racial and gender grounds. Not to mention warfare, strife and bloodshed, externally and internally. While it might suit the purposes of authorial narrative to commence with Thatcher's visit to Sydney in September 1976, as Baird does, it must never be forgotten that this monstrous politician brought no benefit to women generally in Britain, and none specifically to women in politics. Indeed, the only woman Thatcher was ever interested in was herself, while it is noticeable that it has been males who have pursued her agenda of economic rationalism or privatisation combined with domestic and international bellicosity. All of which is to make a clearer distinction that Baird blurs: female politicians are not necessarily feminist politicians.

A similar reductive narrowing can be found in Baird's understanding of politics. This is a term covering more than representation in or membership of institutions of state like parliaments. By focussing on parliament, gender, media and, to a lesser degree, political party, Baird omits any examination of the wider structures of social constraint and enablement that frame the conditions of possibility for female politicians.

A complementary constriction can also be seen in Baird's reduction of media to mean the written press covering daily, weekly, monthly broadsheets, tabloids and magazines both national and local. In its ways this is fine and it suits Baird's experience and expertise both of which are located in the print media. The problem with this is that it ignores the fact that overwhelmingly political understanding and knowledge is mediated electronically via images, spin, sound bites and far more of this is consumed, perhaps even believed, than the analysis of print journalism. Television, radio, IT sites, the internet and www all reach millions immediately and directly.

Baird employs two principal heuristic devices designed to give explanatory coherence to her discussion. They are 'media tarts' of the title and 'steel sheilas' of utopian desire. Naturally the former is her major focus and it refers to those female politicians who court celebrity, attention, fame, perhaps even notoriety in an ultimately fatal media embrace. More should have been said here on how so much of the news, opinion, comment in the press is mere advertising of self, others and causes. By contrast investigative journalism, both here and overseas, especially into the arena of gender and politics is a marginal rarity. *Media Tarts* is all the more notable for drawing attention to this.

Preferable to media tarts are, apparently, steel sheilas. This is an alliterative appellation that first appeared, appropriately enough, in the male-owned, edited and dominated *Bulletin* of 1981. It should have stayed there. Acknowledging that there are many talented women in parliaments across Australia, Baird longs for one (spot the gorgon's ghost here) who 'it can only be hoped will become the Steel Sheila journalists have dreamt of for so long. Sugar and steel and a capacity to feel, that's what we want media tarts to be made of' (p. 273). Leaving aside the point that the royal 'we' here probably only refers to Canberra press gallery hacks, why is it that journalists can't think structurally and collectively? Why do they persist with the obviously erroneous view that individual solutions exist for collective problems? Does Baird agree with the original steel shiela that there's no such thing as society?

At best, terms like media tarts and steel sheilas are descriptive stereotypes. Neither has sufficient explanatory power or theoretical weight to

establish the reasons why Australian female political representatives are treated so shabbily by the media. This is important and a pity because the topic Baird is dealing with is central to Australian society as a whole, not just its political class.

The argument and purpose of *Media Tarts* are not well served by Peter Long's pop art (Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol) inspired cover. Towering astride a Parliament House, a reactionary conjuncture in itself, is presumably the archetypal steel sheila of journalism's dreams. With flaming red hair and fingernails, this mini-skirted apparition holds, in an inversion of Hollywood's King Kong, a hapless and hatless male journalist. Meanwhile in the foreground others dash in open-mouthed in urgent fear and excitement to report the news of her arrival. Book publishers, like other parts of the print media, pursue a fundamental goal of selling commodities for profit. And this cover is designed to assist in that task. By utilising the old male-held stereotypes of women politicians as domineering harri-dans crushing men and denying family this cover is at odds with the book's contents. Perhaps there is a proviso that the miniature male, as with the girl in King Kong, will be put somewhere safe and ornamental—on top of the flag pole maybe.

Great gossip and lively reading though it is, *Media Tarts* remains thin on the reasons for the media's creation, consumption and ultimate crushing of the tarts.

Thinking differently: A reader in European women's studies

Gabriel Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (eds)

Zed Books, 2002, pp 405, pb, ISBN 1 84277 003 9.

Review by Julia Anne Landweber, Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA

It is high time that Anglophone feminist scholars realize that they are operating an unintentional monopoly on ways to think about first-world Women's Studies and feminism. Possibly some (or many) of you would disavow this position and defend your knowledge of European, or even of global, feminism. If so, let me introduce you to a simple game. "Write down – without looking them up – the names of five American feminists; five British feminists; and five feminists who are German, Italian, Spanish, Slovenian, Greek, Hungarian, Portuguese, Finnish, and Bulgarian" (p 1). Can you do it? Gabriel Griffin and Rosi Braidotti, the editors of *Thinking Differently*, believe even the most advanced practitioners of Women's and Gender Studies can't win this game (though they would love to hear from anyone who can).