

## Books

# Reclaiming Rand

*Karen Michalson*

*Atlas Shrugged: Manifesto of the Mind*

Mimi Reisel Gladstein

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Over the last quarter century, there has been an explosion of interest among literary scholars in the politics of canon making and, by extension, in the various forces behind the historical exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon. As a result, feminist scholars have focused an unprecedented amount of attention on the literary work of previously obscure or unknown women in an attempt to both include more women's writing in the traditional canon and to establish an alternate feminist canon.

During my own graduate studies in the late 1980s, it was fair to say that no woman writer was too obscure or too lacking in influence to disqualify for being "reclaimed" by contemporary feminist scholars. The woman writer didn't even have to write in a traditional literary genre. The way discursive practices in a private journal or in a nineteenth-century book of manners reflected the woman writer's socio-political context was often of far more interest than analyzing her fiction or poetry qua literature.

Literature proper lost many of its traditional boundaries and was no longer studied exclusively as a static artifact but as a dynamic activity inextricably bound to social and political contexts. Reading became a political act, writing even more so. Canon-making and re-making became a revolutionary act.

In the social and political context of late twentieth-century gynocriticism, many studies of women's writing merged seamlessly into discussions of such extra- and quasi-literary issues as women's

lives (known or presumed), their emotions (extrapolated from journals or merely guessed at), their class position, their material culture, their family lives, their child-rearing practices, and so on. The personal was now political and so the political, i.e., the act of re-making the canon and/or creating a new feminist canon, became imbued with the personal.

History, including the personal history of the author, is of course relevant to making an informed interpretation of any literary work, but for many feminist scholars the author's personal history was at least as important as her work's intrinsic merit, and in some cases maybe more so. What was unique was the degree to which previously undiscovered literary foremothers were given biased consideration in respect to whether they would have been fellow travelers with late twentieth-century feminists. Feminist canon-making was as political as the traditional kind was supposed to have been, with the difference that feminist literary scholars were willing to acknowledge as much. The idea was not to eliminate politics, which at any rate is impossible, but to redress the exclusionary politics of the past.

That is why much of this feminist re-discovering of literary foremothers took the form of reclaiming these same women for contemporary political and social agendas. And that is why it is remarkable and political that feminist critics unanimously ignored radical individualist Ayn Rand, arguably the most influential woman writer of the later twentieth century.

Since feminist criticism has a tradition of privileging the personal account, the woman's point of view of her life in her own words, non-co-opted by dominant patriarchal power structures, I am taking the opportunity here to offer my own account. I think my experience of Rand's work in my own graduate school days is typical. In short, it didn't exist. Not once did any of my teachers or fellow students so much as mention her. I do recall mentioning to a fellow student that I was reading Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. My colleague's only response, made in a voice of rushed dismissal, was, "I hear she's really conservative."

And that was the extent of my experiences with Rand in graduate school. A lot of feminists, a lot of people who have never actually read Rand and seen for themselves that "conservative" is a problematic label when applied to her work, a label Rand herself detested,

have heard she's conservative. In the socio-political context of socialist-feminist criticism, that is code for "not worth reading." Only women writers whose work and lives could be "reclaimed" for the various agendas of late twentieth-century socialist-feminism are worthy of discussion. Which is a loss, because as other, more recent feminist critics such as Lisa M. Dolling, Mimi Reisel Gladstein, Wendy McElroy, I, and others, have pointed out, Rand's radical individualism has much to offer to modern feminism. If I may use another late twentieth-century feminist catch term, it is "radically empowering" for many women to read *Atlas Shrugged* and realize that it is good and moral to value the self.

That is why Mimi Reisel Gladstein's new offering in Twayne's Masterwork Studies series, *Atlas Shrugged: Manifesto of the Mind*, is a welcome act of reclaiming, in the best feminist sense of the word. Gladstein is one of the most important contributors to the current and long overdue scholarly interest in Rand's work. Gladstein is a foremother of contemporary feminist Rand scholars because she was writing about Rand at least fifteen years before the current upsurge in interest. Greenwood Press published her *Ayn Rand Companion* in 1984 and has also published her *New Ayn Rand Companion*, revised and updated in 1999. Gladstein also co-edited with Chris Matthew Sciabarra the controversial but widely reviewed *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). This collection of essays by contemporary feminist Rand scholars continues to receive a great deal of attention from both feminist and Objectivist circles, and is considered by many to be a groundbreaking book in opening the case for Rand's inclusion in the literary canon. In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I wrote one of the eighteen essays included in that collection.

In *Atlas Shrugged: Manifesto of the Mind*, Gladstein presents a clear, cogent, and concise overview of what is easily one of the most influential novels of the twentieth century. From her chapter entitled "Rand's World: Global and Personal" emerges a charming portrait of Rand as a young girl named Alisa Zinovievna Rosenbaum, who lived in Russia before the Bolshevik revolution. With an eye for just the right detail, Gladstein reports such incidental yet relevant biographical details as Alisa seeing a young English girl playing tennis in the Crimea—a girl who, decades later, became her image of Dagny

Taggart, the heroine of *Atlas Shrugged*. The personal is political, as feminist critics have argued, so Gladstein includes an intriguing discussion of how Alisa was raised in a fairly well-to-do family with the resources and leisure to travel around Europe until her father's business was confiscated by the new Bolshevik state. This sudden reversal of fortune was no doubt a major influence on Rand's life-long conviction that communism is inherently immoral. A portrait emerges of a young, intelligent, university-educated woman who found her artistic ambitions in direct conflict with her options in Soviet Russia. One can't help drawing parallels between this particular woman artist's situation and the oppressive, limiting, restrictive societies that intelligent, ambitious women have faced in other times and places.

Gladstein reports that one of Alisa Rosenbaum's first acts of radical self-definition was to re-name herself Ayn Rand at about the time when she made the courageous decision to travel by herself to the United States. Gladstein reminds us that traveling halfway around the world unescorted was an unusual and courageous thing for a young woman of Rand's place and time to do; Rand was always an individualist, a strong woman who subverted social expectations and broke out of the narrowly prescribed roles of her gender. Gladstein also mentions that even in the relative freedom of American society Rand found herself an outsider. Just as Rand began working in Hollywood, Hollywood went socialist.

There is something aesthetically appropriate in the idea that an author's life should mirror her work. *Atlas Shrugged* is also an outsider. Gladstein provides a useful discussion of the critical reception of *Atlas Shrugged*, including many examples from the excoriating reviews that greeted the novel's publication. Had Rand been easily co-opted into a socialist-feminist literary agenda, the virulence of these reviews would have been used by scores of gynocritics as evidence of misogyny, female oppression, the victimization of independent women artists, and so on. Gladstein presents the same kind of evidence that feminist critics usually present about newly reclaimed woman writers: an unconventional life of female empowerment, the hostility and repression of male opponents. This is where most arguments would be made for re-considering the writer's work in terms of unacknowledged influence on later male

authors.

But Rand's influence has always been openly, and often passionately, acknowledged by her readers and by other writers. Gladstein mentions many readers who have credited Rand as an influence on their lives and careers, including constitutional lawyer Henry Mark Holzer and tennis player Billie Jean King. She does not mention fiction writers who have been influenced by Rand, but if she had, she might have mentioned Robert Heinlein and Kay Noite Smith. There is no need to argue a case for Rand's influence, for *Atlas Shrugged* was always a remarkably influential work. It attained best seller status upon publication and has remained one of the best selling novels of the last fifty years. Denying its influence is like ignoring the proverbial elephant in the living room. That is why Gladstein's chapter on the importance of the work is a refreshing change from so much feminist criticism that uses questionable cases to argue for the influence of female writers. With respect to Rand, there isn't much of a case to be made, so Gladstein can provide a useful summary of the impact of *Atlas Shrugged* without resorting to strained, speculative arguments.

Gladstein's reading of biography and critical reception sets the context in which she reads the plot of *Atlas Shrugged* as mystery, as science fiction, as female fantasy, and as Arthurian romance. What is notable about Gladstein's fourfold approach is that by using mainly popular genres as lenses through which to read Rand's fiction, as opposed to relying exclusively on more classic literary forms, she is in a sense attempting to claim legitimacy for those popular genres, although she never actually says this is her intent. The context here is more significant than the actual reading, because most of these genres have been making bids for literary legitimacy in the last fifteen years or so and most of them continue to be dismissed despite their immense influence on readers. Science fiction, including fantasy fiction, is perhaps the most salient example of a genre whose recognition by serious scholars is long overdue. In this sense, it is perhaps the most appropriate lens for reading Rand's plot.

Gladstein divides Rand's characters between heroes and villains. It is the mark of genre fiction to have clear divisions between "bad guys" and "good guys," and many literary critics, feminist and otherwise, dismiss this kind of device as simplistic and uninteresting.

But it is also a device used by undisputedly canonized writers such as Dickens and Shakespeare, and it can work beautifully in the hands of a great writer. Most critics would dignify this technique with discussions of archetypal greatness, an archetype being a cliché that is used to advantage by a great writer. The reason why clearly demarcating good and evil characters doesn't often work is because it is easy to do badly and difficult to do well. Gladstein shows how Rand uses and appropriates those often overworked and badly executed moral divisions in support of her own creative vision, how Rand in effect uses genre fiction techniques to create a unique work of art. This says much in support of Rand's inherent greatness as a novelist.

Gladstein also demonstrates Rand's worth as a writer when she discusses what she considers the most important themes and highlights of *Atlas Shrugged*. Her discussions include the "Martyrdom of Industrialists," the "Moral Meaning of Capitalism," the "Meaning of Sex," "From Each According to His Ability, To Each According to His Need," "The Forgotten Men of Socialized Medicine," "The Nature of An Artist," and "This is John Galt Speaking." In each case, she succinctly shows *Atlas Shrugged* as a vehicle of great ideas that transcends what is expected of a mere popular novel. Some of the ideas Gladstein discusses are Rand's treatment of money and morality, the moral justification of capitalism, sex and one's highest values, the problems with collectivism, and how one identifies what is good and virtuous.

The Twayne Masterwork Studies series has long been a staple of busy English majors in search of a quick handbook summary of the critical history and important literary elements of frequently read works. That *Atlas Shrugged* merits a volume in this series is a sign that, nearly half a century after its publication, general interest in this novel remains strong. I predict that Gladstein's volume will be a popular study aid for new readers of Rand for many years to come.