Unpopular Feminism

The Shooting Woman in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*

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1. Introduction

Even though US critically acclaimed author John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp* may not be considered a contemporary text in the narrow sense of the word, a recent 40th anniversary edition of the novel and a projected HBO-miniseries[1] attest to the narrative's current cultural relevance. First published in 1978 and adapted for the cinema in 1982, it moved debates within 1970s US feminism to the realm of popular culture. The narrative frames the life of the protagonist T.S. Garp as dependent on the decisions of women: He is born because the nurse Jenny Fields decides to get pregnant and raise her child as a single mother. His life ends, because Bainbridge Percy, a radical feminist in her early twenties, shoots him. Even though Percy is a minor character in the narrative, her shooting the protagonist is significant since it escalates Irving's satirized version of feminism and armed resistance to patriarchy. My contribution reads the shooting woman Bainbridge Percy against this background.

The characters in *The World According to Garp* represent different strands of 1970s US feminism, most notably liberal feminism and radical feminism.[2] Irving's fictionalization of feminism was acknowledged by the women's movement of the time, so that »in 1982, *Ms Magazine* included Irving in its list of twenty-five male heroes for ›integrating feminism as a major philosophical theme‹ in his novels« (Loudermilk 2004: 73). However, from the time of the novel's publication onwards, most reactions by feminist critics have been negative. The narrative's alleged feminist leanings were reinforced in 2018 when, in his foreword to the novel's 40th anniversary edition, Irving called *The World According to Garp* his »ode to the women's movement«

1 The miniseries was announced in 2015, but it has not been realized (Haynes 2015). I couldn't find any recent information on the project.

2 I use the term »radical feminism« to describe a political approach that is in favor of separatism and operates outside of institutions, such as political parties, and may or may not agree to violence as a political means.

(Irving 2018). Stating that he sees a relation between his novel and current political movements concerned with feminism, gay rights, and transgender rights, he implies that in terms of progressive politics, *The World According to Garp* was ahead of its time. Three decades ago, I shared this view. As products of popular culture, the German translation of the novel and the dubbed version of the film, first on television and then on a taped VHS cassette, became available to me as a gay teenager in a small town in West Germany in the early 1990s. Here was a text that was not silent about feminism and queerness. I mistook the narrative's take on these topics for political progressiveness and this is the main reason why *The World According to Garp*, both novel and filmic adaptation, became important during my adolescence. The materiality of the translated paperback and of the videotape point to my then limited access to information on the topics it addresses. When discussing the status this text had in a German context during the 1980s and 90s, the time before the advance of the internet, it is crucial to be aware of the limited access to feminist publications from the United States and of traditional ways of filmic distribution.

In this essay, I will outline the ambiguous image of 1970s feminism presented in *The World According to Garp* and in feminist literary criticism. This includes a discussion of Irving's negotiation of rape, the possible function of his positive depiction of the transwoman Roberta Muldoon and the trans-negative rejections of her character by feminist critics from the 1970s to the 1990s. I will close-read the shooting scene which marks the ending in both the novel and the film and argue that since both novel and film construct the shooter as an infantilized, de-gendered, de-sexualized, and ultimately de-humanized female character, Bainbridge Percy's shooting of T.S. Garp leads the audience to presume that radical feminism is harmful, delusional, and futile. Engaging with the criticism directed at *The World According to Garp*, the majority of which is much more recent than the novel and the film themselves, sheds light on the figure of the shooting woman as discussed by feminist and other critics.

2. Radical Feminism and Rape in *The World According to Garp*

The World According to Garp narrates the life story of its protagonist, the writer T.S. Garp, from his birth in the 1940s to his violent death in the 1970s, when he is shot by the radical feminist Bainbridge Percy – a woman he has known since both were children. The other main character is Garp's mother Jenny Fields, a nurse who writes a bestselling autobiography titled *A Sexual Suspect* and becomes a feminist leader and head of a women's shelter. Like her son, she is shot to death. In her case, an antifeminist man shoots her while she is giving a supportive speech for a feminist candidate at an election-rally. The narrative parallelizes these two instances of male and female violence in order to underline the irrationality of the shooting woman.

Percy's reasons for shooting of Garp remain vague. In the novel, Irving entangles Percy's reason for killing Garp, his alleged mistreatment of her sister, with the issue of violence against women. It thus connects her motif to a key topic of 1970s feminism. Other such topics include sexual autonomy, domestic violence, sex work, and, most prominently, rape, which is a theme that runs throughout the narrative. The feminist ideas represented in *The World According to Garp* can be related to different approaches within feminism. Whereas Jenny Fields, as well as Garp's wife Helen Holmes, and Garp himself adapt a liberal approach because their family models offer alternatives to the structure of the traditional patriarchal family with a male breadwinner and a housewife, many of Jenny Fields's followers stand for more radical approaches and aim at a fundamental change of the patriarchal order and are willing to use violence to reach their aims.

Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, is constructed as an autonomous woman who rejects society's normative gender expectations. In the mid-1940s, she decides to have a child without a partner and then raises her son Garp as a single mother. She starts working as a nurse at a school for boys in order to be independent from her disapproving parents and to provide her son with a free education. In the 1970s, she writes her autobiography *A Sexual Suspect* and becomes an influential feminist leader. To a lesser degree, her son, the writer T.S. Garp, also rejects the expectations connected to his male gender role. In his home, the roles of breadwinner and housewife are reversed: While his wife Helen pursues an academic career, he stays at home to do the housework and raise the kids. The couple is moderately critical of societal norms, such as monogamy, and experiments with a sexual affair with another couple. However, their openness to non-traditional relationships has limits. Whereas Garp's affair with a babysitter remains without consequences, Helen's affair with her student Michael Milton is the reason for a horrible accident, in which their son Walt dies, their other son Duncan loses an eye, Garp and Helen are injured, and Helen's lover is castrated in a turn that might be read as representing poetic justice in keeping with the heteronormative system: Helen is punished for her affair, which signals the limits of the liberalism embodied by Garp's family.

The topic of rape – a key topic of 1970s feminism – runs through the narrative. It begins with Jenny Fields's rape of a severely wounded WWII-veteran, the disabled soldier Technical Sergeant Garp, who is in her care. As his injuries affect every aspect of his bodily and mental abilities – except for the biological function of having erections and ejaculations, Jenny Fields decides to insert the man's penis into her vagina and have him impregnate her. The scene is depicted in a positive light and thus appears to be an act of mercy. When »Jenny drew him inside her and sat on him with all her weight« (Irving 1988: 38) and asks him if this was good, he speaks the word »good«. As if to legitimate the rape, the narrator lets the readers know that »it was the first and last true word that Jenny Fields heard him speak« (Irving 1988: 38).

It is noteworthy that many feminist literary critics downplay the rape of Technical Sergeant Garp for the sake of elevating Jenny Fields's sexual self-determination. For example, Kim A. Loudermilk writes that Jenny Fields »manages to conceive a child, almost without sexual intercourse. Her one sexual encounter is with a brain-damaged soldier whose only pleasure (only ability, really) is orgasm. Shortly after this singular act of intercourse, the soldier dies, and Jenny learns she's pregnant« (Loudermilk 2004: 81). Even if the novel clearly depicts the sexual act as non-consensual, Loudermilk reduces the severity of the rape to a »singular act of intercourse« with the »brain-damaged« Technical Sargeant Garp whose disability is downplayed here in favor of his remaining biological »ability« to have an erection and ejaculate. Jenny Fields's abuse of a man she is supposed to give care to is also mitigated by Karen R. Tolchin's use of the verb »straddle« when describing that Fields »embraces her outcast status and takes the extreme measure of straddling a mentally handicapped patient with a perpetual erection, in order to conceive a child without the involvement of a husband« (Tolchin 2007: 48). Similarly, Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson call the sexual act a paradoxical and problematic combination of »an act of mercy with a benign rape« (Harter/Thompson 1986: 76). Janice Doane and Devon Hodges dedicate a significant portion of their *Garp*-chapter in the feminist literary study *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference: The Resistance to Contemporary Feminism* (1987) to the significance of rape in the novel – but omit Fields's rape of Garp's father. Elke Weiß, who distances herself from the feminist critiques of the novel, is the only literary critic who acknowledges the rape but relates it to the biblical trope of immaculate conception which frames Fields as a figure of Mary:

> The act of Procreation itself turns into an ambiguous event. From Jenny's perspective, who is free of any sexual desire and only wants to have a child, a form of immaculate conception is taking place in all innocence […]; from another perspective – if the defenseless Technical Sergeant had a perspective in his mental confusion – a rape might be taking place. (Weiß 2002: 48, translation S.D.)

Even though Weiß uses the term »rape« (»Vergewaltigung«), she suggests that rape is a subjective experience, thus reiterating the rhetorical strategy to undermine the authority of those who name rapists by pointing out their alleged subjectivity. Weiß highlights the assumed subjective perspectives of Jenny Fields and Technical Sergeant Garp, even though the scene itself – like the novel as a whole – is narrated from the perspective of an auctorial narrator giving the reader all the information needed from an outside perspective. However, including Garp's own voice in the novel – in the form of his literary texts, some letters, and personal notes, Irving adds Garp's subjective perspective to the narrative, a strategy which steers the readers' sympathies towards Garp and his family and adds a metafictional level to the novel. Even though I am critical of the way Weiß addresses this case of rape, I do

agree with her idea about the narrative function of Garp's conception by rape as the opening theme that sets off the events and runs through the whole narrative (Weiß 2002: 49).

Garp's killer Bainbridge Percy is also directly related to the topic of rape. Before shooting Garp, she joins the Ellen Jamesians, a group of several hundred women who surgically removed their tongues in solidarity with the 11-year old rape victim Ellen James, whose tongue was cut out by her rapist to hinder her from telling. The Ellen Jamesians communicate through written notes, and their radical actions reiterate the Philomena myth.[3] This group is later opposed by the rape victim Ellen herself, who motivates Garp to write the book *Ellen*, in which he sides with Ellen James and criticizes the Ellen Jamesians' practice of self-mutilation.[4]

3. Close reading: The Shooting Woman

In my close reading of Bainbridge Percy, I will analyze how her flat character is depicted in misogynistic terms and constructed in negative opposition to Garp and his family. I will contextualize this depiction with reactions by feminist and other critics, as well as examples of how radical feminism surfaced in American popular culture of the 1970s and 80s. The plot of *The World According to Garp* is framed by two acts of violence conducted by women against men. In the beginning, the 1940s, Jenny Fields uses a scalpel to severely injure a soldier in a movie theater, because he approaches her in a in a sexual manner. In the end, the late 1970s, Bainbridge Percy shoots T.S. Garp, Jenny Fields's son. While injuring and killing the men, both Jenny Fields and Bainbridge Percy are wearing white nurse's uniforms. As Jenny Fields would always dress in her uniform, even after she becomes a writer, many of her feminist followers, such as Bainbridge Percy, choose to wear similar uniforms, albeit with a stitched red heart instead of a red cross. On the one hand, nurses' uniforms evoke positive associations and stand for altruism, care, and healing, and for Garp in particular, the white nurse's uniform stands for the motherly care he experienced as a child. Next to these positive associations, the uniform, on the other hand, also stands for Jenny's opposition to sexuality and lust, as it signals rigor and sterility. In

3 The removal of the tongue of the rape victim refers to the ancient Philomela myth (see also Doane/Hodges 1987: 74; Weiß 2004: 48). It is taken up by Shakespeare in his play *Titus Andronicus*. Here, the rapists cut off Lavinia's tongue and hands. Afterwards, she reads about a similar crime against Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and – like Philomela – she exposes the rapists.

4 The book and film depict the Ellen Jamesians slightly differently: While both present them as an obscure and misguided group of radical feminists, the novel awards them the expression of at least a few political views, while the film simply depicts them as irrational.

1978, the depiction of a nurse must have strongly resonated with the character of Mildred Ratchet (Louise Fletcher), the nurse in Miloš Forman's 1975 filmic adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), which is set in a psychiatric hospital. Both novel and film depict nurse Ratchet as the authoritarian, cold, and unscrupulous antagonist to the unconventional and free-thinking patient McMurphy (Jack Nicholson). Her telling name signifies that she serves as a tool to uphold an oppressive system. What is more, »Ratched« sounds like the word »wretched«, which frames her character in negative terms. When first reading *The World According to Garp* in the early 1990s, this cultural reference must have influenced my reception, too, because *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was the novel we read in my English class, and I remember that we also discussed its filmic adaptation. Since the 1970s, the image of the violent nurse has resurfaced in American popular culture, most notably in Stephen King's novel *Misery* (1987) and Rob Reiner's 1990 filmic adaptation of the same title, as well as in the Netflix-Series *Ratchet* (2020) starring Sarah Paulson, which shows Mildred Ratchet's life prior to the time narrated in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Irving's decision to use a nurse's uniform as a marker for feminism resonates with such different cultural meanings of nurses' uniforms, which inform my close-reading of the shooting scene. Bainbridge Percy is constructed as the antagonist to the narrative's hero Garp. The shooter's outfit and the place of the shooting are significant. Bainbridge Percy deceitfully uses the nurse's uniform as a disguise to approach Garp. Shortly before she shoots him, »The nurse smiled at him. There was probably no one Garp felt as comfortable with as a nurse; he smiled back at her« (Irving 1988: 537). Upon seeing her, he fondly remembers his late mother. The shooting takes place in the wrestling room, where Garp works as a coach – the same wrestling room where he first meets his wife Helen as a teenager and a space which, throughout the novel, stands for warmth and safety. Because of the emphasis on its warm temperature, humidity, padded floors and walls, and seclusion its descriptions evoke protection. When Jenny Fields first enters it while she still works at Steering Academy for boys, she viscerally perceives the room with different senses, most notably touch and smell:

> Immediately, she felt off-balance. Underfoot was a soft fleshy feel, and the wall sank under her touch when she leaned against it; she was inside a padded cell, the floor and the wall mats warm and yielding, the air so stifling hot and stenchfull of sweat that she hardly dared to breathe (ibid.: 81).

The »soft fleshy feel« likens the wrestling room to a human organ and strongly evokes the association of a womb. Both novel and film point out that taking up wrestling is one of the very few choices the young Garp makes against his mother's will. The

wrestling room is thus constructed as a male social space beyond her influence[5] and it mirrors the female space of the women's shelter she later runs. However, from the beginning the male space of the wrestling room is extended by the presence of a female: since she was a young girl Helen has spent her free time reading there, while her father worked as a wrestling coach. On the day Bainbridge Percy shoots Garp, Helen is present, too, again reading a book: »When Helen came into the wrestling room, the temperature was up to 85° [Fahrenheit] or so, and climbing. […] Helen went to her usual corner of the wrestling room where she could not easily be fallen on. She opened her book. Her glasses fogged up; she wiped them off« (ibid.: 536).

Shortly before Bainbridge Percy fires the first shot, Garp sees her gun, recognizes her and her »square jaw-line« and her »sloping forehead« which gave her head »the shape of [a] violent navy vessel[s]« (ibid.: 537). The description of her as a violent navy vessel aggressively invading the cozy and padded wrestling room indicates that the radical feminist Bainbridge Percy herself – rather than the gun she uses – is the actual lethal weapon. After shooting the surprised and defenseless Garp twice in the stomach and chest, »Helen tackled [her] on the mat and kept her from firing a third shot« (ibid.: 537). Then, two wrestlers help Helen overpower Bainbridge Percy.

In this final chapter of the novel, Bainbridge Percy is the only remaining representative of radical feminism. The narrative satirizes and dismantles her as a *pars pro toto* for this particular radicalized version of the feminist movement. In this and most other scenes in which Bainbridge Percy appears, the narrator uses her telling nickname »Pooh« (Irving 1988: 71, 101), since she used to wear diapers until the age of fourteen. She is also featured in the novel's concluding epilogue, »Life After Garp«, which gives details about the future lives of each character after Garp's premature death. Bainbridge Percy's paragraph in this section describes her as »[a]n androgynous twerp […] with a face like a ferret and a mind completely sodden by spending nearly fifteen years in diapers« (Irving 1988: 551). In this quotation, her wearing diapers is related to her mental health. In fact, she is described as »retarded« early in the novel (Irving 1988: 111).

During the shooting, the reader learns that Bainbridge Percy has joined the Ellen Jamesians: After the two shots, a first wrestler »pinned Pooh Percy belly down to the mat and ripped her hand with the gun in it out from under her« (Irving 1988: 537). The other wrestler

> wrenched the gun out of Pooh's hand by breaking her thumb. At the moment her bone *clicked*, Pooh Percy screamed; even Garp saw what had become of her – the surgery must have been recent. In Pooh Percy's open, yelling mouth, anyone near

5 Even though the school as a whole is an institution for boys, she makes her influence on her son effective by attending all the classes prior to Garp and then advising him which ones to take.

> her could see the black gathering of stitches, like ants clustered on the stump of what had been her tongue. The […] [wrestler] was so frightened of Pooh that he squeezed her too hard and cracked one of her ribs; Bainbridge Percy's recent madness – to become an Ellen Jamesian – was certainly painful to her. ›Igs!‹ she screamed. ›Ucking Igs!‹ An ›ucking ig‹ was a ›fucking pig‹, but you had to be an Ellen Jamesian to understand Pooh Percy now (Irving 1988: 537–538).

Describing her as »sexless« and »androgynous« (Irving 1988: 491), Irving de-feminizes and de-sexualizes her. Her nickname »Pooh« refers to human excrements, she is depicted as incontinent, mentally ill and unable to communicate coherently, due to her own misguided self-mutilation when joining the Ellen Jamesians. Garp, in turn, is depicted as the helpless victim of this hateful and irrational feminist killer.[6]

In her reading of *Garp* in *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality* (2004), Loudermilk focuses on the grotesque in Irving's depiction of the Ellen Jamesians. She argues that the passage quoted above »combines several elements of the grotesque body – the open, gaping abyss, the stump of the dismembered organ, the revolting thought of eating insects« (Loudermilk 2004: 78). Building on Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Loudermilk states that »the Ellen Jamesians as grotesque figures, may embody cultural fears about feminists. And as objects of ridicule, they may lead to the defeat of these fears and, ultimately, diminish the power of feminist activism« (Loudermilk 2004: 80) Whereas I think that her argument about the Ellen Jamesians as grotesque figures is well supported by her reading of the description of Bainbridge Percy quoted above, I am skeptical about the way she frames the connection between negotiations of feminism in the diegetic world of the novel and the impact it may have on feminism in the real world.

Loudermilk's critique stands in a tradition of negative feminist critiques of Irving's version of radical feminism that started after the novel was first published. For example, in 1981 feminist writer and activist Ellen Showalter relates Bainbridge Percy's silence to her use of the gun to shoot Garp. She states that

> the Ellen Jamesians mutely protest a society in which women are silenced; […] The gun offer[s] a universal language to women who have no political or social voice. But this offer, like Irving's outrage, is a fake. The real invitations of this novel are to voyeurism, cynicism, and vicarious thrills. (Showalter 2016/17: 774)

6 Doane and Hodges build their argument that the shooting of Garp ties in with the novel's antifeminist agenda on the structure of the narrative rather than the representation of characters. They criticize the novel's traditional narrative conventions, which, they argue, do not question patriarchal structures. They state that Garp's symbolic »death of the father at the hands of a feminist extremist dignifies the hero at the expense of feminist ideology« (Doane/Hodges 1987: 76).

Upon the 1982 release of the filmic adaptation of *The World According to Garp*, Marilyn French's review »The Garp Phenomenon« was published in *Ms Magazine*. She points out that she considers *The World According to Garp* to be an antifeminist novel and particularly mentions the Ellen Jamesians. She criticizes that Irving depicts their self-mutilation as a feminist act and states in response that women »who martyr themselves do it instead of opposing men, not in order to do so […] as a symbol, Irving's Ellen Jamesians suggest that feminism is self-mutilation because it is rooted in hatred of men […]. As symbol, Ellen Jamesianism, like so much else in our culture, blames the victim« (French 2004: 76, 77). As a case in point, a book review published in the *New York Review of Books*, evinces French's critique of victim-blaming: it states that »the book is rather tame in the end, in spite of its violence and timeliness, its response to the turbulences set off by the women's movement« (Wood 2004: 69), and thus argues that the women's movement is the reason for violence, rather than misogyny and patriarchy.

Fig. 1: Bainbridge Percy as a child (00:11:13)

In the 1982 film adaption, the shooting woman Bainbridge Percy (played by Brenda Currin) is an even flatter character. The negative character traits ascribed to her in the novel are signaled through a few condensed markers: the viewer never learns her real name, she is only referred to as Pooh. She hardly speaks a word. Only once, after the removal of her tongue, she pronounces Garp's name as »Arp« when she exposes him at his mother's feminist funeral, which he attends in drag. This allusion to Dada-artist Hans Arp can be read as a further reference to the grotesque.

Fig. 2: Bainbridge Percy as an adult (02:05:56)

The two screenshots, the first from the beginning of the movie showing her as a girl, the second near its ending when she is a grown woman, signal that Bainbridge Percy did not mature while growing up – she simply looks like an older version of herself as a child – wearing similar round-shaped thick-rimmed glasses and white clothes. Whereas her black family dog, aptly named Bonkers is sitting next to her in fig. 1, in fig. 2 she is holding a black gun. Both Bonkers and the gun are pointed at Garp: whereas Bonkers bites off the young Garp's earlobe in the scene following the first screenshot, Percy uses the gun to shoot him immediately after the second screenshot, while his wife Helen is in the backdrop, reading her book.

The deprecating and grotesque depiction of Bainbridge Percy resonates with feminist theorist Caron E. Gentry's analysis of the depiction of women terrorists in research literature. In her article »Women and Terrorism«, she states that women are often pathologized, seen as driven by irrationality, emotions, obsessions (Gentry 2019: 415). Even if the Ellen Jamesians are not depicted as a terrorist organization, such common beliefs about women in radical political groups make Irving's depiction of Bainbridge Percy intelligible. Bainbridge Percy's character also resonates with a historical figure of the 1970s, the radical feminist Valerie Solanas, the author of *S.C.U.M.-Manifesto* (1967). In dominant media representations and in popular culture, Solanas is known as the woman who shot Andy Warhol in 1969, 10 years before *The World According to Garp* was first published. Like Bainbridge Percy, Solanas was a woman shooting a male artist. She is often described as mentally ill and is seen as a single extremist who acted alone – without the support of a movement, as in Mary Harron's 1996 biopic *I Shot Andy Warhol*. For a 1970s readership, Bainbridge Percy's character might be easily readable as alluding to Solanas. She is depicted as wearing a nurse's uniform which indicates her devotion to the late Jenny Fields and to her book *A Sexual Suspect*. Here, one could cautiously argue for a further reference the

novel makes to Solanas. While we do not get much insight into Jenny Fields's autobiography, its programmatic first sentence is quoted in its entirety: »In this dirty-minded world you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore – or fast on your way to becoming one or the other« (Irving 1988: 24; 154). The rhetoric of this sentence resembles the often-quoted opening of Solanas's *SCUM-Manifesto*:

> Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex. (Solanas 1971: 3)

This first sentence, too, makes a generalized, apodictic, and programmatic statement about patriarchy. Alluding to *SCUM-Manifesto* in this way and taking Jenny Fields's first sentence as the political program which unites the women following her, the novel seems to suggest that violence is the logical and inevitable outcome of feminist texts using the rhetoric of manifestos.

4. Transgender and Feminist Critiques

The group of feminists following Jenny Fields also includes a transwoman, Roberta Muldoon, thus offering a commentary on debates about trans rights within feminist movements from the 1970s, which is still relevant today. It is notable that Roberta Muldoon's gender identity is not a political issue, she is never misgendered, and she is welcome in spaces reserved for women, so the feminism depicted in *The World According to Garp* is not trans-exclusionary. The other feminists, who are constructed as cis-women, and the trans character Roberta Muldoon share the same political goals. However, building on the feminist readings of the novel and the film, I will show that the role of transwomen in feminism was not an uncontroversial issue during the 1970s and 80s.

Roberta Muldoon belongs to the group of feminists who are inspired by Garp's mother Jenny Fields, and she lives with them in Jenny's house, a women's shelter, in Dog's Head Harbor. She is such a positive character that cultural critic Christianne Benedict, in a 2009 video essay on the filmic adaptation of *The World According to Garp*, explains how this character resonates with her own experience as a transwoman. She states that Muldoon's positive portrayal is exceptional in light of most other stereotypical filmic trans characters (Lee 2009). Such positive assessment of this character was taken up again in two more recent publications. In 2012, Matt Kane of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) pointed out that »Roberta is considered by many to be one of the first sympathetic transgender characters in a film made for a mass audience« (Kane 2012). Likewise, and referring

to the novel, Ilana Masad writes in *The Paris Review* that Roberta Muldoon is »a wonderful trans woman« who »is three-dimensional, complex, and more maternal than any of the cis characters« (Masad 2019). Most of the earlier feminist critics writing about *The World According to Garp*, however, put forward a trans-negative reading of this character. French describes Roberta Muldoon as »male« (French 2004: 75), Loudermilk does not address this trans character, at all, even though her chapter is on »fictional feminism« in the novel. Doane and Hodges write rather technically that »in a gesture toward androgyny, [the novel] provides characters who prove the viability of transsexuality« (Doane/Hodges 1987: 66) and then they omit the only trans character Roberta Muldoon from their feminist critique of *The World According to Garp*, even though they discuss every other female character in the novel. Using the term »androgyny« despite the fact that both novel and film unequivocally depict Roberta Muldoon as a woman, Doane and Hodges signal that they doubt her femininity. Tolchin calls Roberta Muldoon's sex-assignment surgery »a voluntary maiming« and refers to the accident in which the character Michael Milton has his penis bitten off as an »involuntary sex change« (Tolchin 2007: 50). In short, none of them accepts Roberta as a part of the feminist project, and many explicitly doubt her status as a woman.

One reason for this rejection may lie in the 1970s view many radical feminists held about trans-women. A prominent example of this trans-exclusionary agenda is Janice Raymond's book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which was published in 1978, the same year *The World According to Garp* came out. In her book, she attacks the now well-known trans activist Sandy Stone for being part of the women's collective Olivia Records, even though she is not a cis-woman. This motivated Stone to write her seminal essay »The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto« (first presented at the 1988 conference »Other Voices, Other Worlds: Questioning Gender and Ethnicity« in Santa Cruz, CA), which is widely regarded as a foundational text of transgender studies as an academic discipline. In her essay, Stone reads »Raymond to be claiming that transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallocratic empire and were designed to invade women's spaces and appropriate women's power« (Stone 2014: 4).[7]

7 Transgender activist and writer Shon Faye historicizes this trans-exclusionary position in US-feminism. She states that »contemporary feminists in other anglophone countries – including the United States, where anti-trans feminism originated – generally agree on the inclusion of trans people and have disavowed the exclusionary position« (Faye 2021: 229). In her book, Faye writes about the current situation in Britain. Here and in other parts of Europe, including Germany, this trans-exclusionary position within feminism has resurfaced and is fueled by conservative media and politicians. Those who hold views like the ones Raymond formulated 45 years ago are now commonly labeled TERFs, an acronym that stands for »trans-exclusionary radical feminist«.

Given the 1970s/80s debate within the feminist movement about the status of trans-women and the trans-negative reactions to the character of Roberta Muldoon I quoted above, one might speculate whether Irving's depiction of a trans-woman supporting radical feminism might have been intended as a provocation. This strategy has at least one well-known predecessor, namely Paul Morrissey's film *Women in Revolt* (1971). This parody of the women's movement was produced by Andy Warhol who also did the camerawork, and it was understood as a reaction to Valerie Solanas's shooting of Warhol. The film stands out because the three radical feminist protagonists are played by transwomen who were Warhol superstars, namely Jacky Curtis, Candy Darling, and Holly Woodlawn. Mocking Solanas's acronym S.C.U.M. (»Society for Cutting Up Men«), the feminist group they form in *Women in Revolt* is called P.I.G.S. (»Politically Involved Girls«). Building on the parallels between the media image of Solanas and Irving's depiction of Bainbridge Percy outlined above, one could argue that the trans character Roberta Muldoon echoes the trans-female actors acting as radical feminist caricatures in *Women in Revolt*.

A reason for the feminist critics' skepticism of Roberta Muldoon's character which goes beyond trans-negativity might lie in Muldoon's narrative function. Throughout the narrative, she serves as a mediator between men and women. While she is living with the feminists who are inspired by Jenny Fields and is on friendly terms with the Ellen Jamesians, she is Garp's closest friend, even though he and the Ellen Jamesians are antagonists. It appears that this character is constructed as trans in order to make intelligible her seemingly holistic understanding of what is otherwise depicted as separate male and female spheres. Weiß argues along similar lines that

> the androgynous figure of Roberta Muldoon. […] combines masculine physical strength and feminine sensitivity, masculine protective instinct and maternal warmth. […] The concept of androgyny is used here to soften the hard-defined positions in the relationship of the sexes to each other and to open up an opportunity to end the gender war (Weiß 2002: 92, translation S.D.).

Contradicting Weiß, I contend that the narrative strategy to have a trans character mediate the gender war builds on clearly defined notions of cis-male and cis-female attributes and does not question the gender binary. What is more, reading Roberta Muldoon as androgynous implies an understanding of trans-women as having an identity that is not female. Like Doane and Hodges, Weiß describes Roberta Muldoon as androgynous even though her femininity is never doubted in the diegetic world of both novel and film. While these critics do not go so far as to misgender her, their use of the term »androgyny« signals that they refuse to read Roberta Muldoon as a female character.

5. Conclusion

In his foreword to the 2018 40th anniversary edition of *The World According to Garp*, Irving reframes the novel as a feminist text and describes himself as a feminist writer: »*The World According to Garp* was always a feminist novel, but in the passage of time I've become more of a feminist. […] *Garp* is a political novel, and the politics of sexual intolerance and suppression haven't gone away« (Irving 2018). Considering Irving's positive depiction of trans-female protagonists in his more recent novels *In One Person* (2012) and *The Last Chairlift* (2022), I actually do believe that Irving changed his political views and became an ally of queer and trans persons. While being aware of the dangers of biographical fallacy, I also believe that the transition of his trans daughter might have had an impact on the way he now addresses feminist, queer, and trans topics.

The metafictional elements in *The World According to Garp*, however, suggest a view that contradicts his statements in the foreword to the 2018 edition. The metafictional level suggests that while writing *The World According to Garp*, Irving had the clear idea that the women's movement would find his novel controversial. Garp, after all, is a writer, and his fourth novel is called *The World According to Bensenhaver*. In this novel, Garp describes in graphic detail how a woman is raped and how she then kills the rapist. After its publication, Garp finds himself at the center of fierce feminist critiques. Next to the negative criticism, however, the narrator mentions one positive review, which »helped to establish the rumor that *The World According to Bensenhaver* was a ›feminist novel‹« and Jenny Fields calls this view »one of the many popular misunderstandings of our time« (Irving 1988: 447). If one reads this comment as a foreshadowing of the reception of *The World According to Garp*, one could state that it was a popular misunderstanding of the 1980s that it is a feminist novel, a misunderstanding Irving reinforces in his foreword to the latest edition.

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