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# An Immodest Demand

## Autumn Gibbs

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Valerie Solanas (McDarragh, 1967)

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*'just as humans have a prior right to existence over dogs by virtue of being more highly evolved and having a superior consciousness, so women have a prior right to existence over men. the elimination of any male is, therefore, a righteous and good act, an act highly beneficial to women as well as an act of mercy'*—Solanas, SCUM Manifesto

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In the late spring of 1968, Valerie Solanas fired a .32 caliber automatic pistol four times in The Factory, Andy Warhol's New York loft space. One bullet hit Warhol in the left chest and another hit Mario Amaya, a visiting art dealer, in the left buttock (Third 104). Solanas' reasoning was all but lost amid the conjecture and spin that followed the shooting. Rather than galvanising the feminist movement and catapulting her 1967 text *SCUM Manifesto* to the forefront of culture, Solanas was maligned, ostracised, and largely forgotten. This paper will explore the impact of *SCUM Manifesto* in feminism, academia, and culture: before and after the shooting, as well as after Solanas' death.

### I. *SCUM Manifesto*: Unknown in 1967 and Hardly Relevant Now

Solanas self-published and self-distributed copies of *SCUM Manifesto* after she had written it in 1967. Solanas sold copies on the streets of New York City for \$2 to men and \$1 to women (Fahs 606). Solanas was a writer and the play she wrote a year before *SCUM Manifesto* is at the centre of the inciting incident between her and Warhol. Solanas had given her play, titled *Up Your Ass (or) Up From the Big*

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*Suck*, to Warhol. He had read it aloud at The Factory, and then summarily dismissed it and Solanas, barring her from his club and losing her manuscript in the process (Rowe 131). That the extant copy of Solanas' play sits in the archives of The Andy Warhol Museum (Rowe 131) rankles: even after both their deaths, Warhol prevents Solanas from fully expressing herself. And *SCUM Manifesto* is just a small piece of the writer that exists beyond her death, in a culture where even the "little media exposure . . . does not frame her outside of the violent female assassin trope" (Rowe Abstract).

Solanas was so much more. She graduated from the University of Maryland with a degree in psychology and began a PhD in biological sciences in Minnesota (Rowe 131). Her writing—incisive, divisive, inspired—was far ahead of its time. It speaks to the lack of real change that Solanas' work remains on the fringes of feminism and she remains a faint footnote in both feminism and Western culture.

## II. *SCUM Manifesto*: After the Shooting

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The attempt on Warhol's life by Solanas provided a gateway to *SCUM Manifesto*. Solanas did not regain custody of her play manuscript; instead the world was introduced to *SCUM Manifesto*. Feminist groups who had never heard of Solanas or *SCUM Manifesto* were now lauding the text. Some members of Cell 16, a group of radical feminists in Boston, read excerpts of *SCUM Manifesto* at their meetings, and supported Solanas by showing up at her trial or visiting her in jail (Lusty 3). However, over time second-wave feminism has largely distanced itself from Solanas and *SCUM Manifesto*. Less than one-fifth of the full text is published in *Feminist Theory: a Reader* (Kolmar and Bartkowski 2013), and the introduction to Solanas is severely undermined by the mention of Warhol's shooting. It follows Warhol's typifying of himself as "merely as a vehicle for Solanas' own fifteen minutes of fame . . . [and] this was a view quickly absorbed by the mainstream media and has fuelled an enduring representation of Solanas as an unbalanced, fame-seeking Warhol groupie" (Lusty 144). The first publication of *SCUM Manifesto* was completed by the person Solanas had originally wanted to shoot: Maurice Girodias

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(Rowe 130). This was over ownership of any of Solanas' future writings. He mistitled it as **S.C.U.M. Manifesto** (Peltonen et al 2) and printed it while Solanas was imprisoned (Rowe 132). Further perturbing the waters of Solanas' identity and legacy is the insistent characterisations of her as "mad" (Third 105), "lunatic" (Peltonen et al 2), and "paranoid" (Rowe 130).

Regarding critical readings of the text, *SCUM Manifesto* has a paucity of offerings in the form of peer-reviewed articles in academic journals. There are fewer than 60 available to the average student. Further, "the text itself has been read as carnivalesque, satire, irony, subversive and as nihilist and anarchist. When the manifesto is read as a critical text, it is read as satirical or utopian, and less so as critique to be taken seriously as *critique*" (Peltonen et al 2). Lusty expands here: "its status as an outlaw text within the broader feminist movement has confined it to the margins of feminist experimental writing" (163). Regarding the effect of *SCUM Manifesto* solely on the genre of manifestos, Lusty posits that Solanas gave: "a highly parodic and exaggerated response to its

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hyper-masculinised tone, often inverting the gendered assumptions that have invariably underpinned the genre's hyperbolic rhetoric" (144). If the satire of Johnathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is equally biting—albeit with cleaner language—why does it engender more than 4400 articles to Solanas' 60?

### III. *SCUM Manifesto*: In Philosophy

The answer lies in two philosophical critiques of Solanas' text. Because feminism and Western culture have largely dismissed Solanas and *SCUM Manifesto*, to read the text as a philosophical treatise is an uphill battle. The trio of Peltonen, Lindman, and Nyman have had to fight for over ten years within their own discipline when trying to include Solanas in their curricula (Peltonen et al 2). This fight occurred years after the 2004 Verso publishing of *SCUM Manifesto* with an introduction by philosopher Avital Ronell. Ronell is a well-known, even popular, philosopher (Greenberg 2018). Ronell puts Solanas among giants of philosophy, a queer theorist before queer theory (Peltonen et al 3; Rowe 131). Peltonen et al discuss Solanas through Ronell's description:

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Ronell describes Solanas' style and voice as a scream – a scream that cuts through. By rejecting the patriarchal grammar, Solanas makes new spaces, or simply cracks, where we can talk about what's really important. In her own way, Solanas shows us what a desire for change looks like and how a desire for change in one's own life is bound up with change in other people's lives and attitudes. Screaming is an acute call for change, and it is in this spirit that we find the value of feminist critique, in a life that both is and is not one's own. (11)

Solanas provides these new spaces, giving Peltonen et al a feminism to “pledge allegiance to”:

Solanas reminds us of how moral impulses and reactions like anger and despair have spurred feminist questions, critique and actions. These are concepts that in a sense provide theoretical discussions with their intelligibility, as they form the background of feminist thinking. One could say that feminist thinking is internally related to anger, despair, hope and love. This is the feminism we pledge our allegiance to, a feminism that doesn't

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find its feet in this world and therefore demands change, new worlds. (4)

There are problems with modern feminism. It has not yet intersected fully with other forms of oppression. Nationalist and capitalist interests aim to subvert and take over or distract from the goal of achieving equity between all people. Patriarchy is still dismissed as a product of the paranoid imagination. The possibility exists of the gains achieved by the earlier waves being rolled back and society regressing as populism regains footholds in many countries.

Solanas and *SCUM Manifesto* address them, unflinchingly, screaming back at the unfairness of life as twisted through man. More than that, Solanas provides a satirical-yet-not call to action with a plan to commit to and act upon. She succeeds where other feminism fails.

Again, Peltonen et al make this clear:

Feminist theory is sometimes described as a 'tool box' for analysing how different categories (for example, misogyny, homophobia and racism) 'work' in relation to the structures power and oppression. But feminist theory also often leaves us,



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or the feminist critic, there. We are left with our concepts, our theories and descriptions of power relations but also with the anger and frustration we experience in facing them. Concepts and historicising gestures do not always help us face our anger and frustration. (7)

But it is here where Solanas meets the barrier she cannot break alone. The stranglehold patriarchy has on the world, culture, and yes, even feminism, cannot be destroyed with culture as it is, with feminism as it is, with people as they are. Where Solanas and modern feminism part ways is perhaps over Solanas' clearer view of feminism than feminism has of itself. Lusty intuits: "[B]y suggesting that the real conflict is between women, between those independent enough to subvert the system and those deeply complicit with the system, Solanas renders visible the deeply internalised misogyny necessary for the maintenance of patriarchy" (148). If the problem actually lies between the independent and the complicit, people like Solanas—polemic lightning rods or prophetic Cassandras—get lost or turned away by the people they are trying to help. Even couching

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the painfully visceral yet necessary change in satire, Solanas remains dismissed, shunted to the side in favour of cool academic discourse, or mild-mannered statements of purpose.

The publishing of the article by Peltonen et al is perhaps the most hopeful sign one may look to regarding modern feminism. It is past time feminism, Western culture, and the world started taking Solanas seriously. It is past time *SCUM Manifesto* should be read and reread. It should be interpreted critically as a feminist text, as well as through the lenses of philosophy and political theory. Solanas was ahead of her time, as was *SCUM Manifesto*. Perhaps now is the time.

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*“with a kind of foresight that marks the uncanniness of Solanas’ manifesto, 1968, the year that Solanas shot Warhol, was a year of man’s literal demise; it was the year of Bobby Kennedy’s and Martin Luther King’s assassinations”*—Natalya Lusty, *Valerie Solanas and the Limits of Speech* (152)

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