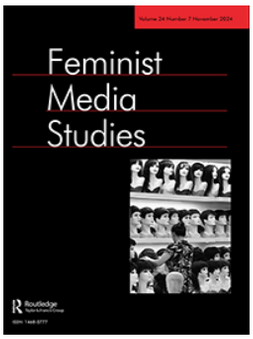

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How to tame your hormones: menopause rage in media discourse

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ABSTRACT

While feminist scholarship has challenged earlier misogynist discourses around menopause, menopause continues to be associated with women's rage. Focusing on UK news and advice websites (2018–2024), we ask if and how this association is figured in contemporary cultural representations and what cultural and political work it performs. We situate our examination within three converging contexts: 1) the unleashing of public displays of women's rage in Anglophone media in the wake of the #MeToo movement; 2) the changing cultural terrain of ageing women and their growing influence in public life; and 3) the rising visibility of menopause in the UK. We identify four distinct patterns: 1) construction of rage as a natural and biological symptom of the hormonally imbalanced ageing female body; 2) bundling of rage with other symptoms associated with menopause; 3) repudiation of menopausal women's rage; and 4) positioning of menopausal women as responsible for managing their rage. These patterns render menopausal women's rage visible while simultaneously disavowing and obscuring its legitimacy as an apt response to gender injustice. The analysis shows how menopausal women's apt rage over gender and racial injustice is being depoliticized and reduced to hormone-induced behaviour that ageing women are exhorted to self-manage.

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Introduction

Published in 1966, American gynaecologist Robert Wilson's bestselling book, *Feminine Forever*, describes the horrors of female ageing, suggesting that "the tragedy of menopause" (Robert Wilson 1966, 20) makes a woman the "equivalent of a eunuch" (Wilson 1966, 40). Wilson depicts menopause as a disease—a "living decay" (Wilson 1966, 43)—which destroys a woman's health, character and psyche (Wilson 1966, 20). As he explains, "the post-menopausal woman suffers a decline in *all* of her bodily functions—not merely in those connected with reproduction. Such perturbation of the body indeed puts her mind and spirit to a grueling test, and it is hardly surprising that many women become

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mentally disturbed in their menopausal years" (Wilson 1966, 77–78). Wilson, of course, was not the only purveyor of misogynist views of ageing women or of menopausal women as irritable, angry, and mentally disturbed (Judith A Houck 2006; Margaret Lock 1993). Popular advice books and advertising written during this period also played a key role in perpetuating the idea that menopausal women are bad-tempered, irritable, and full of hormone-induced rage, while promoting medications such as Premarin which promised to help calm women down.

The misogynist language characterizing popular and medical discourse about menopause in the 1950s and 1960s has since been widely criticized (Sandra Coney 1994; Houck 2006; Lock 1993; Kathleen I MacPherson 1981). However, as this article shows, the association of menopause with women's mental and emotional instability, irritability and especially rage, has persisted into the 21st century. Focusing on the UK landscape, we ask whether and how the association of menopause with rage and its attendant affective dispositions is figured in contemporary cultural representations and what cultural and political work this association performs.

We begin by situating our analysis of menopausal rage within three converging cultural contexts: 1) intensifying public displays of women's rage in Anglophone media and culture in the wake of the #MeToo movement; 2) the changing cultural terrain of ageing women and the growing numbers and influence of ageing women in public life and in the workplace; and 3) the recent increased visibility of menopause in the UK. We then move to describe the methodology used to examine whether and how women's rage is associated with menopause and how it is constructed in news and advice websites. The analysis identifies four patterns: 1) the construction of rage as a natural and biological symptom of the hormonally imbalanced ageing female body; 2) the bundling of rage with other symptoms associated with menopause; 3) the repudiation of menopausal women's rage; and 4) the positioning of women as responsible for managing their own menopausal rage. We then show how, in current UK news and advice websites about menopause, rage continues to be associated with "the change," and women's ageing bodies continue to be cast as unwieldy. However, the emphasis now is on the need for women to optimize their biological bodies and self-manage their rage. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the current moment, in which older women are ever more visible in the Anglo-American cultural landscape and are increasingly occupying positions of power and influence (Susan J Douglas 2020; Victoria Smith 2023).

Menopausal rage in the current context

Unleashing of women's rage post #MeToo

Historically, public displays of women's rage have been taboo. Women who dared to articulate their anger were severely punished. Indeed, there has been a conspicuous absence of angry women in public culture, reflecting and reinforcing the prohibition of public displays of female anger, with the exception of the persistent trope (especially in the US) of the "angry Black woman." Carla Kaplan, Haley Sarah and Mitra Durba (2021) argue that women of colour "are expected to assume a disproportionate burden of affective labor and never to show anger for the insults that they face" (785). Black women's rage is

consistently repudiated and "censured for being a bad affective object" (789) rather than a reaction to living in racist societies (Sara Ahmed 2010; Brittney Cooper 2018).

Feminist scholars have documented the systematic policing, prohibition, denigration, dismissal and pathologization of women's rage (Ahmed 2010; 2021; Lauren Berlant 1988, 2008; Megan Garber 2017). Angela McRobbie's (2009) discussion of illegible rage highlights how female rage has been circumscribed and redirected in postfeminist culture. McRobbie (2009, 119) argues that the pain and rage expressed by young women against inequality and patriarchy appear to be illegible as a political affect since the focus of their anger is redirected from sexual injustice and violence to themselves. This self-directed anger becomes a culturally intelligible script that fits and reinforces the familiar and legible tropes of female pathologies—particularly female self-beratement, low self-esteem and discontent.

However, in the wake of #MeToo, there appears to be a radical break from the systematic policing and muting of expressions of women's anger in media and culture. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins (2023) note an explosion of mediated female rage at sexual harassment and sexual violence, manifested most volubly and visibly in the #MeToo movement and its aftermath. Jilly Kay (2019) observes how, over the last few years, women's rage more generally (i.e., not just at sexual violence) has achieved new visibility, even popularity. Kay describes a "celebritisation" of anger, in which globalised media culture appears, for the first time, to accommodate certain kinds of female fury. Some feminists see the rise of women's rage in public discourse as largely positive and hopeful, signalling the challenging of regulatory patriarchal power, as seen in protests against sexual violence and femicide across the globe (Kaplan, Sarah, and Durba 2021) and in protestors' appropriation of such words as "fuck" (Helen Wood 2019). Others (e.g., Kay 2019; Orgad and Gill 2019; Holloway Sparks 2019) are more ambivalent, noting that women's anger in public discourse and popular culture continues to be contained and displaced into the private and personal realm, and, often, co-opted by commercial culture.

"Upheaval" in the cultural terrain of ageing women

Feminist scholarship has also underscored how, for centuries, ageing women have been rendered culturally and socially invisible, disdained and demeaned in the Western cultural imagination (Simone De Beauvoir 2010 [1953]; Douglas 2020; Betty Friedan 2006; Germaine Greer 1993; Lynne Segal 2013). However, since around 2010, scholars have observed both a quantitative increase and a qualitative shift in depictions of ageing women in contemporary Anglo-American culture, with older women enjoying more positive portrayals (Sara De Vuyst 2022; Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell 2012; Douglas 2020; Deborah Jermyn 2016). Jermyn (2016, 574) observes how "across various media genres, from film, through TV, to advertising, older women are more frequently evoked as vital, passionate, and purposeful, in ways that would have seemed quite unimaginable a generation ago." Douglas's (2020, 1) account of the changing cultural representations and meanings of ageing women in the US describes an "upheaval" in the contemporary cultural and media environment, characterized by "visibility revolts" (110)—that is, increasing disruptions to conventional models of female ageing.

The shift in ageing women's cultural visibility is linked closely to significant transformations in the workforce and an increase in the ageing female population, which has become the fastest growing economically active demographic. The UK government Department for Work and Pensions (2023) states that women aged over 50 are the fastest growing segment of the workforce. In addition, increasing numbers of older women are now occupying senior roles in the private and public sectors. Douglas (2020, 81, 174) highlights that in the US women over 50 are today "the wealthiest and most active generation of women in history" and "the largest group of older women ever to have their own money and independence." This sociodemographic trend is driving important shifts in what it means to be an older woman, and how older women perceive themselves as well as how they are represented in mainstream and popular culture.

Nevertheless, as Douglas (2020) and Smith (2023) observe for the US and UK respectively, positive portrayals of older women are outweighed by negative depictions, with older women still subjected to the demands of heteronormativity and, in particular, to dominant notions of "sexiness." Older women are increasingly subject to "aspirational aging:" a "media-crafted, marketing-created zeitgeist whose central tenets are self-actualization, the ongoing importance of personal pro-active transformation, and developing another new potential self to ward off (and pretend we aren't) aging" (Douglas 2020, 57). In this context, Big Pharma plays a key role in promoting the "anti-aging industrial complex" (Douglas 2020, 87), which exploits deep-seated cultural and gendered anxieties around ageing to tap into the buying power of this growing demographic. Furthermore, older women's "visibility revolts" are extremely uneven and exclude many women across the lines of race, class, ableism and heteronormative beauty standards (Douglas 2020).

The rising visibility of menopause in the UK

The changing cultural terrain of ageing women, the significant rise in the number of older women in the workforce and positions of power, and the growing visibility of women's anger and ageing women in the media, have facilitated and, in turn, been reinforced, by the increased attention to menopause in Anglophone public discourse over the past few years. This contrasts with the general historical invisibility of menopause in Anglo-American media, inextricably tied to the perceived insignificance of ageing women.

Compared to North American and other European countries, media visibility and awareness of menopause in the UK are significantly higher (Ben Spencer and Zoe Crowther 2022). Content analysis of UK daily newspaper coverage of menopause over two decades shows a substantial rise in coverage since 2015 and a particularly sharp increase since 2021. Described as "the menopause moment" (Shani Orgad and Catherine Rottenberg 2023a) and the "menopausal turn" (Deborah Jermyn 2023), this trend has been animated by high-profile women and celebrities, such as Davina McCall, Angela Jolie, Michelle Obama, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Oprah Winfrey, who have shared their personal menopause stories in the media. These stories often disclose the initial negative impact of menopause on the celebrity's life but go on to describe the self-transformation process it instigated, often involving positive thinking, confidence, resilience and a sense of "ownership" of their menopause (Jermyn 2023; Shani Orgad and Catherine Rottenberg 2023b). This emphasis in current narratives appears to represent a shift from depictions

that framed menopause as a shameful oestrogen deficiency disease, and that cast ageing women's bodies as undesirable, distasteful and sick, requiring medical treatment (Linda Gannon and Jill Stevens 1998; Jen Gunter 2021; Karen Throsby and Celia Roberts 2023).

The growing visibility of menopause is also evident in the flurry of best-selling books, written by women on the topic, such as, *Cracking the Menopause While Keeping Yourself Together* (Mariella Frostrup and Alice Smellie 2021) and *The Menopause Manifesto* (Gunter 2021), as well as in portrayals of menopause in popular television shows, such as *The Change* (Channel 4), *And Just Like That* (HBO Max) and *Borgen* (Netflix). Alongside these developments, the market for menopause medications, products and services has grown significantly, now estimated to be worth between $120 billion to $350 billion globally (World Economic Forum 2024). In addition to Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) treatment, this market includes an array of treatments and products on sale in pharmacies and health stores, and the promotion of menopause-related wellness programmes and specialized menopause retreats and apps. Indeed, the heightened visibility of menopause can be attributed, at least in part, to this expanding and lucrative market, which, in turn, has led to more marketing of menopause-related products, such as menopause cosmetics and menopause-related sanitary products.

The study: menopause rage in UK news and advice websites

While feminist scholars have highlighted the explosion of women's anger, the changing cultural representations of older women and the rising visibility of menopause in current media discussions, our study is the first to focus on how the *relationship* between menopause and rage has been depicted in the current moment, situating this relationship within these recent converging developments. In this section, then, we turn to examine how menopause (and) rage are figured in contemporary discussions in news and advice-focused websites (including websites of menopause-related apps) in the UK—a cultural landscape where, as discussed earlier, menopause has received notably heightened attention in recent years.

Drawing on a previous large-scale content analysis of UK news coverage of the menopause between 2001 and 2021 (Orgad and Rottenberg 2023a), we conducted a search, focused on rage, of the eight major tabloid and broadsheet UK news groups, across both print and online editions: (1) *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, (2) *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and telegraph.co.uk, (3) *The Guardian* and *Observer*, (4) *The Independent* and *I-independent*, (5) *The Express*, *Sunday Express* and Express Online, (4) *The Mirror*, *The People* and mirror.co.uk, (4) *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday* and Mail Online, (8) *The Sun*, *Daily Star* and *Daily Star Online*. Using the most comprehensive online news database, Nexis UK, we searched all articles with the words "menopause" and "anger" and/or "rage" and/or "fury" in the article headline and/or the title paragraph, published between January 2018 and February 2024. We acknowledge that this search strategy might have overlooked some relevant articles, but it yielded a rich sample of articles whose central focus is menopause rage. The January 2018-February 2024 timeframe matches our interest in how menopause and rage are configured in the contemporary post-#MeToo moment, which, as discussed earlier, is characterized by significant public expression of women's rage.

The search yielded an initial sample of 291 newspaper articles; the removal of duplicates, errors and articles where menopause and rage were not the focus, reduced the sample to 148. To examine how menopause rage is being constructed in recent UK news representations, we conducted a thematic analysis of each text. We coded the main thematic focus and the specific ways that each text depicted menopause, informed by the themes identified in the extant literature on representations of menopause. To supplement our primary sample, we consulted websites and apps and created a second, smaller sample of 21 UK menopause-related advice articles which we coded in the same way. The sources for the second sample were identified using Google search, relying on mentions in the primary news article sample. In contrast to the news articles, the articles in the second sample target menopausal women readers/users specifically and focus on providing information and advice about menopause. While the second sample of articles is less systematic and not representative, analysis of this sample illustrates how patterns in the construction of menopause rage in news discourse, are appropriated, echoed and reinforced by or, alternatively, diverge from advice discourse targeting women in midlife.

Analysis of the two samples identified four patterns of the depiction of menopause rage in current UK news and advice websites. In what follows we discuss each in turn, and in the concluding section we reflect on them jointly, to address the question of the cultural and political work they perform in the current moment.

Rage as a biological symptom of the hormonal menopausal body

In 62% of the news article sample and in 100% of the second sample, rage is described, almost exclusively, as a symptom caused by natural hormonal changes. The "appropriate" response to these natural changes is often medical intervention, and, specifically, some form of hormone therapy. For instance, the menopause app, Stella, reassures its users that "anger and rage are common problems during menopause. Even if you have always been a cool customer, hormonal changes can wreak havoc on your moods" (Stella). On the official Scottish National Health Service (NHS) website, NHS Inform Scotland (2022), the first symptom listed on the "Menopause and your mental wellbeing" page is "anger and irritability." Rage is presented recurrently as one item in a list of "official medical symptoms," appearing in 64% of the news sample and mentioned in 90% of the second sample. The other symptoms include physical symptoms, such as hot flushes and palpitations, and psychological symptoms, such as brain fog and mood swings.

Many of the news articles start with the personal stories of women—particularly celebrities—who are experiencing menopause and rage; this is followed by a medical explanation attributing their raging behaviour to their bodily transition. For example, a *Daily Mail* (Jo Tweedy 2020) article about UK radio and television star, Zoe Ball, recounts her "meno madness" symptoms, including "rage, sobbing, anxiety," a description followed by summarizing (in a somewhat dumbed down fashion) the medical reasons for this "madness." Even more informative news articles that situate the experience of anger within a broader context of the often-complex realities of ageing women's lives, tend to explain away rage as related, predominantly, to changes in the "natural" biological body. For instance, in a *Guardian* article, author Ada Calhoun (2020) gestures towards the various pressures in her life, such as work stress and caring for teenage children and

ageing parents. However, she ultimately sidelines these pressures, linking rage and the other symptoms she experiences to physical—and specifically hormonal—bodily changes, and likening perimenopause to changes that occur during adolescence. In another example, a *Daily Mail* article (Helen Carroll 2020) starts by explaining women's anger as frustration over the failure of the NHS to supply HRT: "It makes me cross that we, women in a civilised society, are having to go begging around Europe for medication [. . .] Boris Johnson [will] have a million angry, hormonal women banging on his door" one woman is cited as saying. However, immediately after this quote, which underscores the failure of the UK healthcare to provide women fair and equal treatment (notwithstanding the use of the problematic term "civilised"), women's anger is reframed as a biological symptom rather than a critical response to the state's failure. The journalist refers back to the woman previously cited as being enraged because she was forced to beg for medical treatment but locates the cause of her anger in hormonal imbalance: "She is certainly not exaggerating her own potential for *hormone imbalance-induced rages*" (italics added).

The sidelining of potential non-bodily reasons for women's anger is demonstrated vividly in examples of women's anger at their husbands, a theme which recurs in discussions about menopausal women's rage (in 27% of the news articles). Midlife women's anger is likely to be, at least partly, a response to persistent inequalities in marital relationships and patriarchal society more broadly, including a persistent gender pay gap, bearing the brunt of unpaid care work and domestic work, and intensified pressure to keep looking young—all of which are compounded by race, class, and other dimensions of intersectional oppression. However, in the sample we examined, these causes are often brushed aside or not acknowledged at all. Rather, echoing sexist ads from the 1950s and 1960s, articles in the sample often imply (and in some instances state explicitly) that the husband is the misplaced object of the wife's hormone-induced anger. For instance, several articles focus on model Penny Lancaster's experience of menopause from the perspective of her "poor" husband, singer Rod Stewart, who describes his wife's "blinding fits of rage" (Samantha Masters 2022). Similarly, in a *Daily Express* article (Daniel Bird 2021) about comedian Jenny Eclair going through menopause, the focus is on the effect of Eclair's "uncontrollable rage" on her husband who "was left in disbelief" and "didn't know what to do with [her]," while a *Mirror* article describes pop star, Michelle Heaton, as being ashamed of becoming "such a horrible person" to her husband and kids (Rose Hill 2018). Interestingly, several such articles describe explosions of middle-aged women's rage during the COVID-19 lockdowns. However, rather than attributing this new behaviour—even in part—to the impact of being confined to their homes with their husbands, partners and/or children during the pandemic, the articles insist that it is the hormonal imbalance caused by menopause that is responsible for women's irritability and anger (e.g., Jackie Clune 2020; Jessica Earnshaw 2020). A similar framing of misplaced menopausal anger towards husbands is evident in several items in the second sample that advise women that the anger they are directing towards their husbands is likely to be related to menopause (e.g., Christina Sexton 2022).

The solution to this hormonal-induced anger is often presented as first admitting and acknowledging "the change" and then seeking "treatment" (often HRT) for it. In this narrative, it is not only the woman, but also her husband—who is framed as the victim of his wife's misplaced rage—who are the beneficiaries of the HRT. For example, a *Sun* interview with television presenter Saira Khan, highlights the adverse impact of

her menopausal irritability and constant edginess ("I'd fly into a rage over little things"), but then celebrates her "new lease of life" which is attributed to her husband urging Khan to seek medical help, noting that "Steve [my husband] is reaping the rewards" (Gemma Calvert 2021). In a *Guardian* article, Emma Beddington (2023) highlights a similarly positive effect of taking HRT on both her and her husband. Beddington humorously confesses: "my oestrogen level has now risen to the point where I found a pile of dishes 'soaking' in the sink recently and instead of spitting ancestral curses at my husband I thought: 'I know—I will model good kitchen practices by calmly washing these.' Then I did!"[1] Thus, the consistent suturing of ageing women's rage to their hormonal bodies, is entangled with and serves to support, a heteronormative and patriarchal narrative that depoliticizes women's anger, obscures the structural injustices contributing to producing it in the first place, and shifts attention to its adverse impact on men. Furthermore, the construction of women's bodies as "uncontrollable" in relation to partners and husbands and the emphasis on the need to calm these "unruly" bodies also supports—if inadvertently—the resurgence of contemporary narratives of "re-traditionalisation" where, similar to the (younger) Victorian ideal of the "Angel in the House," ageing women are encouraged to maintain the home as a site of peace and calm.

Bundling rage with other symptoms

The second pattern, identified in both samples, is the lumping or subsuming of rage with other affective and mental symptoms, described as "mood swings" or "menopausal moods." These include anxiety, stress, irritability, frustration and bad temper, alongside other physical symptoms. For example, in lists of the "official" symptoms of menopause, rage or anger is rarely listed on its own. Rather, they are part of lists of two or three such as "anger and irritability" (e.g., Menopause Matters; NHS Inform Scotland 2022), or "rage and anxiety." The Stella app website, mentioned earlier, for instance, identifies "irritability and anger" as one of 34 symptoms of menopause (Veronica Kirby-Garton 2023), and the Balance app website, developed by the UK private doctor and menopause guru Louise Newson,[2] dedicates an article to the topic of "Menopause, Depression and Anxiety" explaining that "it can be common for women to feel more irritated and angry than they used to [and] women often feel more tearful and frequently have mood swings" (Louise Newson 2024). In these and other examples, anxiety, irritability, sadness and anger—affects that can be quite different in terms of their causes, manifestations and implications—are frequently lumped together.

Celebrity-focused news articles follow a similar pattern, with rage mentioned as a part of other psychological, affective and physical symptoms caused by menopausal hormonal imbalance. For instance, journalist and author of the bestselling advice book *Cracking the Menopause*, Frostrup—who has become one of the leading voices on menopause in the UK (she authored 8 of the articles in our news sample)—describes how her midlife hormonal changes brought about "irrational anxiety," irritability and rage (e.g., Mariella Frostrup 2018, 2021, 2022).

Thus, rage is rarely if ever centred as an affect with its own specific sources, contours and significance. Rather, it is diffused as part of a "package" of what appear to be interchangeable and undesirable emotional and psychological symptoms caused by

biological changes and, consequently, requiring "fixing." In a post-MeToo moment, when female rage and structural gender inequalities have been rendered visible, the lumping together of a range of "symptoms" serves to obfuscate rage. It prevents recognition of the specificity of rage—distinct from menopause—and its crucial relationship to the contextual factors affecting women in their midlife, including the gendered division of labour at work and at home, caring responsibilities and financial pressures stemming from years of recession, austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic which have hit women particularly hard.

Furthermore—and especially in the celebrity stories, which make up 56% of the news article sample—rage is associated with symptoms that implicitly threaten heteronormativity and dominant notions of femininity. For example, in the *Sun* article mentioned earlier (Calvert 2021), rage is bundled with a long list of other symptoms including vaginal dryness and skin rash, whose solution (thanks to HRT) is then presented as enabling the 51-year-old television presenter Saira Khan to "feel sexy and glamorous again" and for her husband to "reap[. . .] the rewards." Like vaginal dryness, rage is rendered unfeminine and unsexy to both the woman experiencing it and her male partner. The texts often focus on menopausal celebrities' efforts to preserve a heteronormatively sexy body through diet, exercise and other remedies, and the images accompanying the articles almost always depict the smiling, upbeat looking female celebrities in glamorous outfits that emphasize their attractive and fit bodies (122 articles were accompanied by images of women smiling). Thus, the construction of rage as unfeminine and unsexy through its bunching with other "unsexy" symptoms, such as weight gain, vaginal dryness and loss of libido, is supported by and consistent with the construction of midlife celebrity women as (still and constantly attempting to retain their status as) sexually desirable and hyper-feminine.

Finally, the subsuming of rage with other menopause symptoms works implicitly to support the construction of HRT as the "magic bullet." In grouping rage with other psychological and physical symptoms, explained as hormone-induced (e.g., hot flushes and sleep disturbances), HRT is presented as the solution to containing and controlling "uncontrollable" rage. A handful of articles in the news sample do discuss the limited evidence about the effectiveness of HRT for non-physical symptoms, such as low mood, anxiety and rage, and refer to "landmark guidance" advising *against* the prescribing of HRT to treat these particular symptoms (e.g., Beddington 2023; Eleanor Hayward 2023; Xantha Leatham 2023). Yet this distinction—between certain physical symptoms, which HRT has been proven to alleviate, and non-physical symptoms, including rage, where there is little evidence of the effectiveness of HRT—is barely and rarely made.

Repudiating menopausal rage

The third pattern is the repudiation of rage, mainly by depicting it as irrational and bewildering. Menopause-related anger is frequently described as "madness" (or "meno madness"), as "irrational," "bizarre" and "unhealthy." These words recur in both samples, often in headlines and titles. News article accounts of women's menopause rage frequently include anecdotes of hysterical, infantile and, sometimes, verge on the comic, with women described as "hijacked" by rage (e.g., Lorraine Candy 2023). In a *Daily Mail* article, entitled "Grandmother, 46, with 'severe menopausal symptoms' jumped up and down on her son's ex-lover's Fiat Punto after she was denied access to her grandchildren" (Matt Powell 2022),

menopause is ridiculed as a deviant, out-of-control condition that provokes extreme behaviour including excessive drinking and frenzied rage. Similarly, several articles about model Penny Lancaster describe her throwing kitchen utensils at her husband (Masters 2022; Ashleigh Rainbird 2022), while a *Telegraph* article features a menopausal woman who admits, "I was furious and found myself walking by the beach shouting at the sea" (Lola Borg 2018). While the comic aspect of menopausal women's rage is often evoked implicitly, in some instances it is explicit. In an article about the 51-year-old actress Samantha Giles, for instance, the celebrity describes how her behaviour resembled that of a comic menopausal character she plays in the television soap opera Emmerdale, getting "into situations where you would like to scream" (Christine Smith 2022). These depictions echo historical constructions of women as hysterical and irrational and of ageing women as mad "hags" (Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer 2012; Smith 2023) with irrational desires, implying that their rage needs to be tamed if not eliminated altogether.

Dismissal of women's rage as hysterical, ridiculous and irrational is reinforced by generic images from digital commercial stock photography and visual galleries of women tearing their hair, lifting their arms and screaming (Image 1). For example, an article entitled "How to control menopause anger" published on the UK website Physic Health Consulting (2024), is fronted with a large dramatized image of a woman with her mouth wide open, signifying shouting (Image 2). A similar article about menopause rage on the website of the menopause app Midday (2024) shows a stock image of a woman with her mouth wide open, her arms held up in the air, as if she is about to tear her hair out. A *Daily Mail* article describing rage as one of the "most bizarre" symptoms of menopause (Joe Davies 2022), includes a cartoon-style image with six drawings—each representing a different symptom (Image 3). The drawing representing rage shows a woman in a pink shirt with her fists in the air and her lips clenched. Such generic images reproduce and reinforce cultural stereotypes of women—here ageing women in particular—as hysterical, emotionally unstable, mad and in need of immediate "treatment."

Notably, 93% of the news articles feature images of light skinned women; 8% include dark skinned women, only 4% depict solely dark-skinned women. While the racial composition of the women represented in the samples is important, we remain

Image 1: "The ultimate guide on how to deal with menopausal rage" (Jennifer Moore 2019)[3].

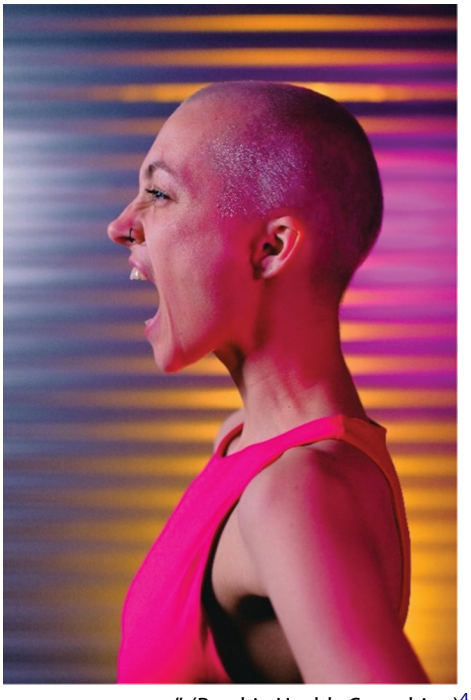

Image 2: "How to control menopause anger" (Psychic Health Consulting)[4].

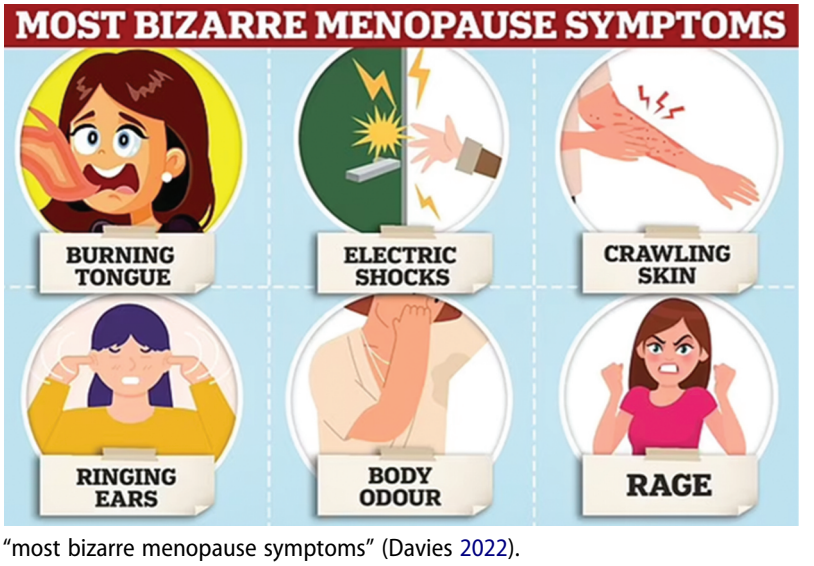

Image 3: "most bizarre menopause symptoms" (Davies 2022).

cautious about inferring their race based on these images alone, especially in the absence of information in the text to support these inferences (see Orgad 2024). However, the overwhelming representation of light-skinned women seems consistent with the wider trend of depicting menopause as primarily the terrain of white (and also cisgendered, middle-class) women (Jermyn 2023). It could also be said to

elide rage in relation to Black women. On the one hand, in *not* showing Black women as angry, the discussion of menopause rage seems to eschew the stereotypical and pathologizing trope of the angry Black woman, which, historically, positioned Black women as "always already" angry, thus framing their rage as pathological rather than as what Amia Srinivasan (2018) calls an "apt" response to living in a white supremacist society (Ahmed 2010; Cooper 2018). At the same time, this elision simultaneously reinforces the cultural prohibition against Black women publicly expressing their rage.

Moreover, 82% of the visual representations accompanying the news articles depict light-skinned women smiling and radiating calm and positivity. The visual emphasis on positivity, happiness and calm also works to repudiate rage, but here the repudiation is achieved through its visual *absence* rather than its depiction as ridiculous and comic. In this sense, the prevalent visual depiction of calm and happy (rather than raging) women underscores the ideal outcome of the successful elimination of menopause rage and reaffirms heteronormative femininity as necessarily eschewing public displays of rage and other "negative" affects.

Self-responsibilizing rage

As mentioned earlier, while rage is frequently depicted as a symptom of natural biological changes, it is constructed as a negative affect requiring immediate intervention. The fourth pattern relates to the way in which the menopausal woman is frequently cast as the central and, often, sole agent, who desires and is responsible for intervening to tame her rage.

Unlike the 1950s and 1960s, when Wilson and other doctors spoke for women and when medical and popular literature ignored menopausal women's rage (Houck 2006), our samples show that the contemporary media landscape is replete with menopausal women's confessions about their rage. However, the historical emphasis on calming down, controlling and eliminating female anger persists, only now the injunction seems to be turned inward; it is articulated by women as their responsibility and what they desire. In both samples, women's confessions of rage as they go through menopause often precede tips and self-care and wellness techniques and strategies to help tame rage. These include breathing, moving, practising mindfulness, writing things down, sleeping and expressing gratitude, alongside accounts of the benefits of HRT for coping with menopause symptoms including anger (e.g., Mariella Frostrup 2019; Abi Jackson 2021; Newson 2024).

Perhaps most conspicuously, the self-policing of menopause rage is encouraged through mental health apps (themselves part of the wellness industry), such as Midday and Clementine, and menopause self-care apps such as Stella and Balance. The Clementine app blog, for example, draws on the popular feminist embrace of female rage, citing Soraya Chemaly and her call to women to refuse to be silenced and to channel their anger into "healthy places and choices." It offers a biomedical explanation of "the biology of bubbling rage in menopause" and urges women "to own or take responsibility of your feelings of anger," for example, by making dietary changes, exercising and keeping a "Rage Journal" "to create a space where you can vent, swear and let of

steam!" (Clementine 2023). Alongside lifestyle changes, wellness apps and websites often recommend HRT as the most effective solution for dealing with rage.

The premise underpinning these apps and the current discussion about menopause more broadly, is that managing and curbing rage is desirable and is women's responsibility (see also Katrien De Graeve and Sara De Vuyst 2022). This is a project and process of self-responsibilization requiring an entire regime: consumption of wellness products, the practice of self-care techniques and the consumption of the ultimate "magic bullet," HRT, to reduce (and ideally eliminate) menopausal women's "irrational" rage. Several news articles about former First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon provide the clearest example of this framing (e.g., Patricia Kane 2022; Mike Wade 2022). Sturgeon is said to no longer feel "as rage-fuelled" after beginning HRT treatment. Sturgeon models the responsible menopausal woman who overcame the stigma and shame around menopause by consulting her GP and beginning hormone therapy. Strikingly, the many—especially political—reasons why she might be "rage-fuelled" are ignored; Sturgeon's rage is reduced to hormonal changes, safely expressed and "correctly"' contained.

Similarly, women's confessions in news articles about erratic and irritable rage during menopause often conclude with the "happy ending" of HRT. Journalist Candy (2023), confesses that thanks to being prescribed HRT "the anger was [back] at normal levels." Thus, HRT as a way of managing menopause rage and other symptoms is intimately bound up with self-responsibilization and consumption and is often exemplified by idealized celebrity figures, where neoliberal discourses of menopause and healthism coalesce (Jermyn 2023; Orgad and Rottenberg 2023b). Indeed, De Graeve and De Vuyst (2022) observe a similar message in contemporary menopause self-help books, where middle-aged women's rage is portrayed as individualised and depoliticized, which they are incited to pacify "by subjecting themselves to self-evaluating labour, self-improvement and consumption" (449).

To be clear, we are not dismissing or questioning the effectiveness of HRT or other therapies and remedies offered to menopausal women. Rather, we want to highlight how the self-responsibilization of women in this context both decontextualizes rage from various forms of gender injustice and directs women to control and eliminate rather than explore rage as an apt affect to continued injustice.

We also point to a small number (14%) of outlier articles in our news sample, which do gesture towards other factors, with some explicitly questioning the dominant framing that attributes middle aged women's anger to menopause. For example, a *Daily Mail* article by male doctor Max Pemberton (2022) entitled "Sorry, but midlife horrors aren't just hormonal" suggests that the anger women experience is at least partly a result of "women taking stock of their lives" and feeling unsettled by societal factors that have shaped them. Pemberton (2022) mentions the "huge sacrifices" some women "have made [. . .] in the service of other people" and "a cruel aspect of the inequality between the sexes that women have to contend with a society that pours scorn on their ageing bodies in a way it does not do for men."

It is interesting to note that in these few outlier articles, anger is often depicted as an ambivalent affect, echoing feminist understandings of rage not necessarily as negative but rather as potentially liberating and even empowering. For instance, a *Times* article cites psychologist Meg Arroll's explanation that midlife women's anger "stems from inequalities in our society that limit women's ability to fulfil [their] ambitions . . . [and is]

a powerful emotion that can be harnessed for progress and [social] transformation" (Mariella Frostrup 2023). Nevertheless, even in articles that do explore anger as a more complex and ambivalent affect, exploration of its non-biological causes and its potential uses for social transformation—as Audre Lorde (1981) famously put it—are very rare.

Conclusion: visibilizing, depoliticizing, disavowing menopausal rage

Douglas (2020, 102) describes the current cultural moment as a "hinge moment" where gendered ageism is being actively challenged and disrupted on multiple fronts and in different ways, even as many contradictions and ambivalences around the portrayal of older women abound. In this hinge moment—post-Covid and post-MeToo—the historic visibility and influence of older women converge with the public volubility of women's rage at sexual, gendered, ageist and racialized injustice. Our analysis shows that it is precisely in this context that menopause rage is being naturalized as biological, diffused through a bundling with other "symptoms," repudiated and ridiculed, and depoliticized through self-responsibilization. These patterns render older women's rage visible while concurrently making it illegible as a legitimate outcome of and response to continued social injustice.

Rather than accounting for rage as (at least partly) an affective response to the structural inequalities and pressures that shape and constrain ageing women's lives, the frame of the "hormonal body" in news and advice websites decontextualizes rage from its possible social, psychological and political causes, and from the injustices older women experience to which rage can, indeed, be an "apt" response (Srinivasan 2018). Similar to how young women's anger was redirected from sexual injustice and violence to themselves in the pre #MeToo era (McRobbie 2009), menopausal women's rage is currently being redirected from gender, ageist and racial injustice onto themselves, their bodies and psyches. Depictions of ageing women's rage are reinforcing culturally intelligible scripts about ageing women's bodies as decaying and distasteful, requiring taming and fixing, and age-old scripts describing women's rage as needing to be "cooled off." The disavowal and depoliticization of menopausal women's rage are perhaps also a response to and a partial containment of the politicized expression of female rage seen in #MeToo. While #MeToo saw the mediated expression of individualised, primarily youthful female rage; post-#MeToo we see a deflection of the public expression of older female rage, in ways that reinscribe ageism and racism in addition to sexism.

The repudiation and depoliticization of menopausal rage are also strongly shaped by the "anti-aging industrial complex" (Douglas 2020, 87). This is most evident in the many celebrity-focused news articles and articles for menopause-related apps, which, by promoting heteronormative notions of "sexiness" and "aspirational aging" (Douglas 2020), individualize and privatize rage as a hormonal symptom requiring self-management (involving the purchase of consumer goods, adoption of wellness regimes, and HRT) as part of a self-transformation process. This narrative leaves little if any room for ambivalence about the causes and effects of menopausal women's anger or its potential revolutionary uses (Lorde 1981). Perhaps genres such as contemporary women's fiction or art, and aesthetic forms such as performance art, comics and zines, which are less intertwined with celebrity culture and less influenced by advertisers, allow for a more ambivalent, politicized and even radical depiction of menopause rage (Sara De Vuyst and Katrien De Graeve 2024; Marie Mulvey-Roberts 2024; https://menopausenewperspectives.com).

In her recent analysis of the burgeoning contemporary fiction about menopause, Mulvey-Roberts (2024) shows how novels such as Kirsten Miller's (2022) *The Change* and Joanne Harris's (2023) *Broken Light* depict menopause as unleashing a magical force through which older women can exert supernatural powers. In contrast to the normative and normalized imperative to pacify rage, the characters in these novels harness their rage, turning it into a powerful, celebratory as well as disruptive force. This harnessing of rage echoes Lorde (1981), for whom women's rage is a "source of energy" that can directly serve political ends and be a "liberating and strengthening act of clarification" (111). "It feels like a hot flash," Bernie Moon, the middle-aged protagonist of *Broken Light*, reckons, "but now I'm beginning to understand what it really is. There's something about a woman's rage that feels very old, very primal [. . .] a woman's rage is born from centuries of violence" (Harris 2023, 36). Thus, as Lorde argues, anger allows women to see their oppression more clearly—a mission ever more critical in the present moment. However, in contemporary UK news and advice websites, menopausal women's rage is largely cast not as a source of energy, but as a biological symptom that consumes energy; not as a source of clarification that illuminates structural inequalities but as irrational and hormone-induced affect that women are obliged to diffuse and then eliminate. Yet if, as Soraya Chemaly, C Kaplan and D Mitra (2020, 761) claim, "anger is a really rational response" to everything that women face and allows a clearer sight of their oppression, then middle aged women's rage can be a potentially powerful force disrupting scripts of heteronormativity and femininity as well as gendered and racialized ageism. This, then, begs the question of how in the current cultural and media environment, we could transmogrify and collectivize middle-aged women's rage into a legible and powerful *feminist* affect, which can merge with and amplify other mobilizations of voluble feminist rage.

Notes

1. Beddington later discusses the limited evidence on the effect of HRT on non-physical symptoms such as rage and wonders whether the change in her behavior was a placebo effect.
2. Elsewhere (Orgad and Rottenberg 2023b) we discuss how contemporary menopause discussions, as exemplified by the popular 2021 Channel 4 documentary "Davina McCall: Sex, Myths and the Menopause," locate a significant part of the solution to women's menopause-related issues in the private health sector, as part of the injunction for menopausal women to self-responsibilize.
3. Source: https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-obese-woman-rumpling-hair-with-closed-eyes-in-white-studio-6975383/ (the image has been reproduced in Jennifer Moore 2019).
4. Source: https://www.pexels.com/photo/expressive-bald-woman-shouting-in-studio-7194740/ (the image has been reproduced in Psychic Health Consulting 2024).

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