



# HESTER . EMMA . SONIA

## JONI . ANNIE . TRACY

### A Postmodern Feminist Discourse



*Hester . Emma . Sonia*, is a feminist reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. This heavily researched 300-page volume presents a multiplicity of voices in conversation with Hester Prynne, Emma Bovary, and Sonia Marmeladov. Inspired by polyglot bibles and illuminated manuscripts, passages of text span centuries from ancient Nag Hammadi poetry, to the 15th-century treatise the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Witches Hammer*), to 20th-century philosophy and contemporary song lyrics, which all communicate with the three literary classics. A selection of texts are in Latin, French, and Russian.

*Joni . Annie . Tracy*, the subtitle of the edition, highlights singer-songwriters Joni Mitchell, Annie Lennox, Tracy Chapman and other favored musical artists (Janis Joplin, Etta James, Leon Russell, Mary J. Blige, Laurie Anderson, and others), whose poignant, poetic lines are familiar to a generation coming of age in the 1960s-1990s. Text of philosophers, writers, and poets such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Rainer Maria Rilke, William Blake, Julia Kristeva, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bell Hooks, and Arthur Rimbaud, are incorporated into brilliant typographical designs, deconstructing the original narratives. Additional references to contemporary issues include the global coronavirus pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

*The opposite of love is not hate but power. Power obliterates another's individuality. - Marion Woodman*

**we are of our generation...** I began work on this edition well before the pandemic became a threat in March of 2020. Since this time in the U.S., we have witnessed a divisive political climate, an environmental crisis, an enormous amount of suffering and loss to the Covid-19 virus and its variants, racial inequalities, and Black Lives Matter protests. This project was delayed as we adjusted to virtual schooling, a medical crisis in city hospitals, and new realities of mask wearing and social distancing. Plunging oneself into research and narratives can be a healthy way to balance daily angst, or perhaps a way to simply escape stresses. I surrounded myself with books, including many "old friends" on cultural critique from graduate school. Spending additional hours at home provided extra time to read and research, tweak designs through endless sleepless hours, and focus on new drawings. I worked on all three sections of the volume simultaneously back and forth, before finalizing each one in succession, which became more complex from *Hester*, to *Emma*, to *Sonia*. I compiled over 100 bibliographic references and included an Afterword in the appendix.

Personal narrative has defined my work over the years, and my own mythology informs the artworks I have created. In the early 1990's, as AIDS ravaged the lives of friends and creatives, I exhibited installations in New York, from a series titled *Loss, Irony, Identity*, with subtitles: *Tell Me Why*, *Witness*, and *Empathy*. Many of the works reproduced in this edition are from these series. There are over 40 reproductions of fine artworks – paintings, drawings, photographs, and calligrams.

As I re-read Susan Sontag's essay, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Sontag referenced the last chapter of *Crime and Punishment*, where Raskolnikov dreamt that, "*the whole world was condemned to a terrible, new strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia.*" In his dream, the people "*did not know how to judge and could not agree what to consider evil and what good; they did not know whom to blame, whom to justify.*" This reference to the cholera epidemic was the link in the narrative for me, to the current global health crisis, and a chilling reminder of past health emergencies and the stigma of diseases. In addition to commentary from Sontag, I included facts about the cholera outbreak in Russia from the mid-1800's, a selection of text from Camus' *The Plague*, and statistics on Covid from the World Health Organization.

*I am quietly slipping into the waters depths, towards fear. -Jean-Paul Sartre*

In Saul Ostrow's Introduction, *No Text Stands Alone*, he describes the book as a dialogic, and the texts as inter-subjective–each text is understood in the context of other text. The reader is challenged to engage with *Hester . Emma . Sonia* in a more active way than with a traditional linear reading, and to consider the commentaries in relation to one another and to the main texts. The resulting layered discourse recontextualizes the stories, bringing additional voices to the fore. The three sections are condensed and combined into one volume, reframed to create a critical dialogue for the 21st-century.

*A feminist is a man or a woman who says, "Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better." - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

