

**“Dude-in-Distress”: A Post-Feminist Subversion of the “Damsel-in-Distress”  
Trope in Selina Fillinger’s *POTUS: or Behind Every Great Dumbass are Seven  
Women Trying to Keep Him Alive* (2022).**

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**Abstract:**

The “Damsel-in-Distress” is a recurring theme in literature first featuring in Greek mythology. Archetypal characters of helpless young ladies have made their debut in modern fiction and drama until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Deeply rooted in misogyny, the trope was often faced with Feminist criticism that broke the pattern, which portrayed women as inherently vulnerable and in constant need of rescue. By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, feminists flipped the narrative and featured empowered women who do not need to be saved by men as they manifest full independence and completion. This paper propounds an innovative trope where gentlemen are in jeopardy and women come to their rescue. The aim of this paper is to apply this post-feminist theory to American playwright, Selina Fillinger’s Broadway debut *POTUS: or Behind Every Great Dumbass are Seven Women Trying to Keep Him Alive* (2022), with the aim of proving that the “Dude-in-Distress” theme is an anticipated natural evolution of Post-feminist non-binary thinking. It manifests itself as a reversed narrative that lacks definition and labeling, and as a trope that is becoming more prominent in 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature. This research paper chronicles the notion of distress through its gradual evolution to its contemporary stance.

Keywords:

Post-feminism; Trope; Damsel-in-distress, Dude-in-distress; POTUS

The aim of this paper is to apply the Post-feminist theory to American playwright Selina Fillinger's Broadway debut *POTUS: or Behind Every Great Dumbass are Seven Women Trying to Keep Him Alive* (2022), with the aim of proving that the "Dude-in-Distress" theme is an anticipated natural evolution of Post-feminist non-binary thinking. It manifests itself as a reversed narrative that lacks definition and labeling, and as a trope that is becoming more prominent in 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature. This research paper chronicles the notion of distress through its gradual evolution to its contemporary stance.

The "damsel-in-distress" trope where a female character is found in a perilous situation and a male protagonist comes to her rescue, out of love, lust, chivalry or a combination of all the previously mentioned motives, has been a recurring narrative theme often used in mythology and literature. The concept stems from the patriarchal belief that a woman needs protection from her male counterpart as she is physically weak, sexually attractive and emotionally fragile (Idris 139). Helplessness and vulnerability were and are still believed by some men to be admirable qualities in a woman. The term itself has first appeared in a poem by Richard Ames called, "Sylvia's Complaint of Her Sexes' Unhappiness" written in 1693. This extensive poem speaks of the male persona who hears a strange, confused sound of a female posed on the ground in melancholy. He describes her as a young fair, virgin who starts complaining how her kind suffers from infancy to old age. She starts by telling him:

Like Fishes greedily the Bait we swallow,  
Not dreaming of the Ills will after follow.

The three Conditions of the Female Life,  
Are *Virgin*, *Widdow*, or 'fore that, a *Wife*;

(Ames 7)

She starts explaining how her gender suffers in every condition with men praising women in the name of love until they grow cold and distant when a woman warms up and opens her heart to them. She speaks of rejection and her gender's inability to express feelings towards a man for fear they are poorly thought of:

But *Custom* does such rigid Laws impose,  
We must not for our Lives the thing disclose.  
If one of us a *lovely Youth* has seen,  
And streight some tender Thoughts to feel begin;

The *Damsel* in distress must still remain,  
Tortur'd and wrack'd with the tormenting *Pain*  
*Custom* and *Modesty*, much more severe,  
Strictly forbid our *Passion* to declare.  
If we reveal, then *Decency's* provok't,  
If kept, then we are with the *Secret* choakt;  
(Ames 12)

The term first appears as a description used by the woman to describe herself and her kind. She finds it a restricting and confining narrative for a female to be in; incapable of expressing her feelings towards a man she likes, having to wait for him to initiate or else she would be accused of indecency. She complains about the fact that the “damsel-in-distress” trope limits her potential when the man who sought her approval earlier deserts her or grows cold because she must keep the image of a helpless, inept, chaste creature who is powerless to do anything about it. Investigating the first use of the term in literature, it becomes apparent that from the very

beginning it has been an act of pretense that women put on to win men over, but not out of genuine lack of power or will since they have shown displeasure with the narrative.

The theme was featured in Greek mythology with examples of helpless maidens like Andromeda, the princess of Aethiopia who was chained by her parents to a rock as a sacrifice to sate Cetus, the sea monster. Perseus comes to her rescue by killing the monster and marrying her as a reward for his heroic deed. The damsel-in-distress trope made its way to religious stories like the story of St. George and the Dragon in which a princess was chosen as an offering to a dragon (or a serpent in other versions) and the saint comes to her rescue by seriously wounding the fiend after making the sign of the cross. There are different retellings of the legend but one of them even suggests that the Saint marries the princess<sup>1</sup>.

In fiction, the term appeared in Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) where Harriet Byron, the main female protagonist is kidnapped and imprisoned by a man she rejects, and is freed by Sir Charles Grandison who attacks her abductor and comes to her rescue. Harriet admits that she has fallen in love with Grandison after he saved her. She says, "but when fancy is more propitious to me, then comes my rescuer, my deliverer ... and I am a damsel in distress. The milk-white palfrey once came in. All the marvelous takes place; and lions and tigers are slain, and armies are routed, by the puissance of his single arm" (Richardson 342). Other examples<sup>2</sup> in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries followed. The trope remained in use not only in published texts but also in early silent movies<sup>3</sup> and later comic books in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. The basic premise of Superman, for example, has striking similarities to the story of Perseus and Andromeda (Latham 19). The fate of most women in

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<sup>1</sup>See *Seven Champions of Christendom* (1596) by Richard Johnson

<sup>2</sup> Including Lewis's *The Monk*, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and others.

<sup>3</sup> Like *The Hazards of Helen* released in 1913

comic books was dependent upon the male heroes not only rescuing them, but by giving them a purpose (Emad 966) which is love and / or eventually marriage with the additional bonus of procreation if not won by the Superhero as a commodity or a reward to their courage and bravery from the beginning. The way female bodies were drawn in comic books with exaggerated curves, accentuated waists; revealing, or form hugging clothes that are impractical for fighting, or at least defending oneself contributed to the overall idea. Male comic book writers imposed the need to be saved by a superhero on their female characters. In fact, Michael Solis states that “the most resonating trope that unites nearly all-American comic book superheroes is rescuing the damsel in distress” (36). Disney animated movies at the beginning were not an exception. They embraced the narrative and emphasized the young breathtaking virgins’ questionable need to be rescued by strange male characters whom they have not met earlier. Snow White (1937, aged thirteen) and Aurora (1959, aged sixteen) are both saved by a kiss from an ultimate stranger. A sexual act is chosen for the gratification of the male to fulfill a fantasy, or a desire and a didactic message suggests that a young girl needs her prince charming to be saved from the evil that is brought on her by her silliness.

The “The New Woman” movement took place in the 1920s in the United States. It was a societal movement that started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The movement sought the emancipation of women by portraying them as more than sex objects only useful for procreation and taking care of the home. By the turn of the century, feminists wanted to be able to have the same rights as men in respect to their behavior, and in terms of exploring their own sexuality. “The New Woman” term was coined to encompass the women who pushed against the limits that had been set by the male dominated society. The rise of the number of women in the workforce prompted both men and women to re-examine the role of women in society.

Technological advancements and the increased demand for workers during the First World War required that women ventured into the workplace in order to replace men. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, plays<sup>4</sup> emerged touching on the theme of “The New Woman” trying to maintain her independence while still trying to express love for a man without losing herself. Kollantai - in her essay, “The New Woman” from *The New Morality and the Working Class* – refers to the female heroines introduced by works of art of the era as transgressing “the limits of the usual sexual code of virtues” (48) without being considered depraved by the audience.

The evolution of women’s capability to save themselves was established and women’s display of independence can be traced and chronicled in the works of surging female dramatists of the time including Susan Glaspell<sup>5</sup>, Sophie Treadwell<sup>6</sup>, Lorraine Hansberry<sup>7</sup>, Wendy Wasserstein<sup>8</sup> and Caryl Churchill<sup>9</sup>. Female dramatists offered different representations of their female characters on stage. Friedman notes:

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<sup>4</sup> Plays like *The New Woman* (1894) by Sydney Grundy, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895) by Arthur Wing Pinero, *A Doll's House* (1897) by Henrik Ibsen, *Votes for Women* (1909) by Elizabeth Robins show that they were not always successful and had to choose one over the other.

<sup>5</sup> In *The Verge* (1921) for example, the female protagonist who is a botanist, altered by women's suffrage, refuses to accommodate herself to stagnant norms that confine her, and struggles to create new forms. Claire defies the "feminine" role of a wife, a mother, a nurturer and according to her husband assumes the "masculine" role of the scientist so he brings her a neurologist to set her right. Nevertheless, her madness becomes her license to create vistas beyond his imagination.

<sup>6</sup> *Machinal* (1929) is considered a call for women's freedom and a change of the traditional and socially limited view about women. The success of the play is attributed to the playwright's feminist attitudes which led her to write this play about a woman who looks for freedom and independence in a time of shifting attitudes towards the role of women in society.

<sup>7</sup> *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is considered feminist because of the feminist notions displayed in the play. Women are able to fulfill their individual dreams that are not in sync with traditional conventions of the time despite men’s oppressive attitude towards them.

<sup>8</sup> Her first widely known play, *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977) involves a group of female students who consider their relationships with men and their future. The play deals with the impact of the arrival of feminism on college campuses in the late 1960s and its dual legacy of liberation and guilt. Empowered, the women in Wasserstein’s play are both torn between their career ambitions and expectations as wives and mothers.

<sup>9</sup> *Top Girls* (1982) by Caryl Churchill, challenges the accepted role of a woman as the appendage of man. Churchill dramatizes the torturous fate of sixteen women (the play has no male characters) and their gradual ascendancy to the position of top girls which is an Employment Agency that stands for women liberation. The play has shades of

It is not surprising that the experience of woman as an outsider, devalued, objectified and often subservient is a recurrent theme in women's drama. Indeed, it maybe a response to exclusion, a protest to an imposed silence, an expression of the need to create new lives ... these concerns constitute feminist themes. (69-70)

They have not only introduced common women – with average bodies and facial features - but portrayed women (not necessarily virgins) who do not need to be rescued and are fully capable of rescuing themselves defying men and long-established norms. It is worth mentioning that this change was not always welcomed by those who surrounded the female heroines in the play.

The rise of Post-feminism in the mid 1980s and early 1990s suggested that Feminism became a thing of the past. Post-feminists suggested that many of the Feminists' goals have been achieved, so any extension would be obsolete. While some believe that Post-feminism backlashes against second and third-wave feminism, others saw it was just a continuation of a fourth-wave that questions binary thinking when it comes to equality. The “post” contemporary movements are not set molded ideas. In fact, Walters states that “the defining feature of our era is that there is no defining feature” (104). Post-feminism cannot be conceptualized with recourse to simplistic definitions, as it combines a range of perspectives from conflicting sources<sup>10</sup>. The contemporary movement has condemned earlier Feminists for calling for women's equality rather than human equality; a claim that is exclusionary on its own. It rejects Feminists' hostility or indifference towards men and masculinity as well as gynocentric feminist narratives. According to Post-feminists, these narratives advocate preferential treatment by portraying

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feminism where women from different generations and backgrounds meet together to share their experiences and to challenge the accepted norms of the hegemonic society which does not allow them a room of their own.

<sup>10</sup> “It is steeped in the language and principles of feminism, patriarchy, postmodernism and the media, creating a multi-dimensional Post-feminist context that depolarizes and incorporates seemingly incompatible opposites” (Genz 2).

women as victims always fighting for their rights. The Feminist movement – in their perspective- is outdated for two main reasons: one is that women were granted equality and the second (contrastingly) is that total gender equality is a myth (Aronson 917) & (Abbott 52). Consequently, Post-feminists question binary thinking by asking what if the narrative is reversed<sup>11</sup> and the socially constructed behavioral expectations become genderless.

The “dude-in-distress” first appeared as a term in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It may be considered a subversion or a counter theme of the “damsel-in-distress” trope. It is regarded a product of contemporary Post-feminism which favors a society that is no longer defined by rigid gender roles. As a form of role reversal of the gender archetype, it includes young boys or men who fall in dangerous situations which can either be abduction by the antagonist or an evil supernatural entity, an attack by a monster / animal or being caught up in a natural disaster. The female character is expected to come to his rescue not necessarily physically but through outsmarting him with her intelligence, knowledge, science or hard work and determination. The “dude-in-distress”, in contrast to the “Knight in Shining Armor<sup>12</sup>” notion, can save himself, be saved by someone of his sex, or be saved by a woman. Thus, all options are left open. Though the term itself is recent, examples of dudes-in-distress can be traced back to Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* where Portia becomes “the damsel in shining armor”. She manipulates Shylock and saves distressed Antonio from his vengeance. Her extraordinary wit and knowledge in finding a loophole in the bond - that he is permitted to only a pound of flesh without a drop of blood in it – literally saves Antonio’s life. However, to act freely, Portia gives up her feminine composure and disguises herself in male attire in order to be taken seriously; suggesting that women need to give

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<sup>11</sup> The damsel-in-distress becomes the “dude-in-distress” and the knight in shining armor becomes ‘the damsel in shining armor’.

<sup>12</sup> An archetype of is a figure who represents the strong chivalrous masculine power and who comes forward to save the damsels who are in distress or danger (Idris 139).



up the traits (femininity) that distinguish them from men because men are expected traditionally to save themselves and women, not the other way round.

When tables turn and a distressed dude is rescued by a brave woman, it is never uncommon for him (or other surrounding characters) to describe this as an injury to his masculinity ([https://heroism.fandom.com/wiki/Male\\_Damsels](https://heroism.fandom.com/wiki/Male_Damsels)) as in the case of Fillinger's *POTUS*. "Dudes-in-distress" are described by some as effeminate or emasculated. The term is somewhat recent and has not been widely used in academic circles for the intricacy of accepting the concept. This subversion/counter theme comes as an anticipated natural evolution of Post-feminist non-binary thinking. It manifests itself as a realistic narrative that lacked definition and labeling for a long time. As a trope, it is becoming more acknowledged in 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature, cinema and videogames.

*POTUS* is a farce written by twenty-eight-year-old Selina Fillinger and directed by five-time Tony Award-winning director Susan Stroman. The playwright first started writing it in 2017 but the play made its Broadway debut in 2022, and was nominated for three Tony awards. It features seven different women who are listed according to their emotional proximity to POTUS or the American President. The women in the playwright's order are Harriet his chief of staff, Jean his press secretary, Stephanie his secretary, Dusty his dalliance, Bernadette his sister, Chris a journalist, and Margaret his wife or the first lady who ironically comes at the bottom of the list. Although the play explores the relationship between these women and the leader of the free world, the commander-in-chief does not make a single full appearance on stage. In fact, Fillinger clearly states in the stage directions at the beginning of the play that "we should never see POTUS in his entirety, a leg or two at most" (2). He is constantly in the background of the events, but it is a seven women-show where women clean up the mess of scandals and

misadventures created by the incompetent Man under the spotlight. Fillinger mentioned on Rita Braver's CBC News interview that the idea behind writing this show first occurred to her when she kept seeing headlines about powerful men abusing their power surrounded by a circle of women around them either defending or enabling them (<https://www.susanstroman.com/news/potus-cbs-sunday-morning>). They have proved to be the power behind the position with the women in charge at the daily rescue of the supposedly most powerful man in the office.

The cast is inclusive since the presented female characters are versatile; they are different in age, color, race and sexual orientation with separate individual agendas, yet a shared common goal which is to save the day despite their conflicts. The “dude-in-distress” trope can be seen in the title of the play itself *POTUS: or Behind Every Great Dumbass are Seven Women Trying to Keep Him Alive*. The play starts with a scene in which the audience is informed that the President has used the word ‘cunty’ to describe his wife’s female genitalia publicly in front of news anchors and Chinese diplomats offending the first lady in specific and women in general. His chief of staff and press secretary try to contain the situation. Jean says, “and right now I’m trying to figure out if my biggest problem today will be explaining why the President of the United States used the word “cunty” to describe his wife to three diplomats” (Fillinger 12). The President is later the same day meeting with the Female Models of Leadership or FML, as the acronym suggests. Ironically, FML in contemporary chat slang or roblox which stands for ‘fuck my life’ in reference to how these women’s lives are messed up. His female team discusses all his privates including the abscess on his anus that forbids him from sitting down, his extramarital affairs, and the pardoning of his jailed sister who is wanted in three countries. Harriet attempts to find solutions for the President to sit down comfortably with his painful buttock abscess in

fear of causing a diplomatic problem in the nuclear non-proliferation meeting. International leaders may interpret - along with the media - that the commander-in-chief is not interested in the discussed topic or showing an aggressive power move by standing up for the whole meeting. She adds, “find the First Lady and tell her I need her smiling next to POTUS at the Leslie Hopper endorsement” (34-35). The President’s mess continues to manifest itself with the appearance of his dalliance Dusty pregnant and vomiting in the White House. His women come to his rescue one more time hiding the fact that he is having an affair with a farmer’s young daughter from Iowa and is expecting a child out of wedlock. They stand against him so that he does not grant his sister a pardon as she serves as an inmate in prison for internationally smuggling drugs. Jean describes Harriet, the President’s chief of staff, by telling Bernadette that “Harriet works your brother. Harriet is the number one reason this country continues to function” (Fillinger 46) and Bernadette wonders why she is not President, to which Jean says that this has been the eternal question.

The loyalty the women reveal is seen in the determination and dedication they have towards their career. Despite their differences, they display a united front behind POTUS encouraging and empowering each other with phrases like “Go get ‘em!” and “You got this! Knock ‘em dead” (20) spoken by Harriet and Margaret concurrently to Jean before stepping into the pressroom to stand up for POTUS and save him in front of the press after his insulting sexual insinuation. Another moment is Chris pumping her breasts on stage as in real life, using a real breast pump. The single nursing mum who portrays a working mother and a journalist is another example of contemporary strong women who attempt to balance having both a career and a family. In another incident she is described in the stage directions as *holding the recording device with one hand while holding her jacket closed over breast milk stains with the other* (37).

She is portrayed as having vomit on her collar to which Chris offers her an extra shirt. The way the two working mothers - who have children sharing the same class and snacks – support each other despite their clashing careers: one being the white house press secretary and the other a reporter looking for a headline is a symbol of female empowerment and understanding of each other's individual struggles. The play does not attempt to obscure the fact that the characters on stage are biological women but attributes non-binary characteristics to them. The writer suggests that the women can save the leader of the free world not based on their wit, charm or beauty but on the fact that they are highly efficient employees (humans) as seen in the following conversation between Harriet and Jean:

HARRIET: This is his wheelchair. Room full of men, talking about weapons and war, not  
a woman in sight  
JEAN: You'll be there  
HARRIET: Of course I'll be there  
JEAN: You're a woman  
HARRIET: I don't count (Fillinger 32-33)

To the misogynist abusive President, women are creatures who detain work and distract his attention, but to the audience, they are his saviors; the ones who save the day every day. It is worth noting that all seven women care more about their careers/interests than the man in the office including: his wife, his sister, and his dalliance. Despite introducing male-female encounters in the play, Fillinger portrays them as strictly career-focused. They are far from being helpless or in need for rescue. The way Harriet wears her hair short “in a mannish way” in order to be taken seriously resembles, to a great extent, the way Portia gives up her feminine attire to save Antonio “the dude-in-distress” in *the Merchant of Venice*. It is like finding a middle ground between being a man and being a woman: basically non-binary, genderless attributes Post-feminists favor in describing humans.

When Chris interviews Margaret, the First Lady, she states, “you have broken glass ceilings in so many different areas ... politically, culturally, philanthropically” and then adds “why aren’t you President?” (38) to which Margaret jokes that this has been the eternal question<sup>13</sup>. The fact that this question which has been asked several times for different women in the play while each gives the same answer is both intentional, symbolic and serves as bitter satire. Fillinger has made it clear that her play does not depict a specific president (<https://www.susanstroman.com/news/potus-cbs-sunday-morning>) but the fact that it was written during Donald Trump’s Presidency (2017-2021) after the defeat of Hillary Clinton, the first female Presidential Candidate, suggests that this period has inspired her to write about the suitability of having her as a President in the office.

As the President collapses on stage, the women unite to think of solutions justifying his absence from the endorsement. At first, they think he is dead, so they think of an intricate plan in which he will be found with tranquilizers and a suicide note. Jean suggests that no one will go after a man who has just killed himself or criticize a mourning country. He would not be held responsible for his late words or actions by the upset feminists or angry international leaders due to being unwell. The Press Secretary tells Harriet, “This is what you do, Harry. You stand in for him every single day, you’ve done it for years. You clean up his messes, you make excuses, you do his job, and then you wake up and do it all over again” (43). In fact, the women find Harriet a better match to deliver the speech she wrote for POTUS and prepare Bernadette his sister who shares great resemblance to him as his double. With Harriet desperately consuming herself to rescue the President’s image even after his collapse, Dusty accidentally tells her that POTUS would have made a huge mistake to replace her with a man named Andrew, and that he was

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret uses the same comment as Jean in answer to the question of why all these deserving women are not the President

about to fire her because people kept saying that she was the real power and brains in the White House. The dude-in-distress trope is seen in the way it threatens men's masculinity with the reversal of roles.

This comes as shocking news to Harriet who realizes that she was about to be replaced for excelling at her job, and saving POTUS all this time efficiently. When the President wakes up, steps outside and starts winking at a female analyst in the crowd, flirting with her as if nothing has happened, Harriet decides that she won't step in to save him anymore. The ending suggests that by Harriet deciding to stop defending him, the President is on his own with his misbehavior and his days in the office are counted.

To conclude, Post-feminist advocates contend discourse on non-binary tendencies and call for the universalization of women's experiences by promoting attention to discussions of human equity and avant-garde gender reversal narratives. Detecting the relatively recent "dude-in-distress" model and tracking down its origin is a step towards gender neutral comprehensiveness. Tracing the evolution of the recurring misogynist "damsel-in-distress" theme in both mythology and literature until a subversion/counter theme rises to the surface in the modern era has led to deconstructing the notion of normality and custom. It marks the fall of gender role casting and cultural programming, giving room for new narratives where women do not just save themselves but come to the rescue of powerful men like POTUS. Fillinger's play is a typical example of a flipped narrative that attributes non-binary characteristics to its main characters. It does not attempt to obscure the fact that there are seven biological women<sup>14</sup> on

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<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, it highlights their physicality by showing them breast pumping and pregnant.

stage, but represents them as cleaning the President's mess, as the title suggests because they are capable of saving him as qualified employees; a skill that the leader of the free world lacks.

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