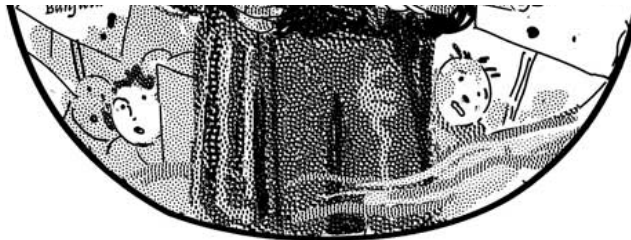


# FORCE OF NATURE



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*Camille Paglia*

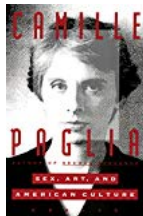
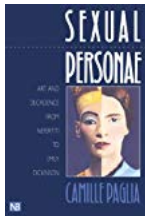


By: Mark Bauerlein

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When I was finishing graduate school at UCLA in the late 1980s, a British scholar, unquestionably liberal, came to campus to discuss his paper on “Male Feminism.” Modest and earnest, he summarized his paper’s account of how men could participate in feminist critique. The feminist Romantic scholar who responded to his presentation, however, proceeded to explain, impatiently and peremptorily, how this clueless fellow did not know what he was talking about. It wasn’t a refutation; it was a rebuke. I can’t recall what the guest speaker said in his feeble reply, but neither he nor anyone else in the room dared challenge her. The graduate students and untenured professors in attendance took it as a brutal career lesson: *never* expose yourself to this sort of takedown. In particular, never even hint that there might be some basis in nature for differences between men and women.

It shouldn’t surprise anyone that for 30 years women have earned a majority of all doctoral degrees in English and foreign languages. Feminists had good reason to be confident. But here was the opening sentence of *Sexual Personae* (1990): “In the beginning was nature.” With that heresy, Camille Paglia burst into public life. While her first book climbed the bestseller lists, humanities professors in seminars and at conferences, in editorial meetings and on hiring committees, were meting out justice to any heretic committing the old sin of explaining disparate outcomes and conditions for men and women in terms of nature, rather than ascribing them entirely to patriarchy and heteronormativity. In those years, Marxism was coping with the collapse of Communist governments, and deconstruction struggled with the revelation that its leading American figure, Paul de Man, had written anti-Semitic articles for a Belgian collaborationist periodical during World War II. Feminism, by contrast, seemed untouched by political guilt or failure.

### Red in Tooth and Claw

Yet according to Paglia, who teaches at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Western civilization was erected as a bulwark against the dark, destructive forces of existence, including our base instincts. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth had envisioned nature as maternal comforter, and individuals in a natural state as innocent. Their descendants are liberals and feminists who think we can expel aggression and inequality from the world if only we get our heads straight and our institutions right. Paglia sees nature, especially human nature, undercutting them at every turn. *Sexual Personae* describes our nightly descent “to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty, and metamorphosis.” Nature, she says, “is Pandemonium, an All Devils’ Day.” To contemplate it is to grasp “the dehumanizing brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed.”

A subsequent collection of essays, *Vamps & Tramps* (1994), argued that “everything great in human history has been achieved in defiance of nature.” Life begins in fear and necessity, so human beings compensate with laws and norms, art and technology. While her deconstructionist contemporaries characterized society as a mode of subjugation and surveillance, Paglia relied on an older cultural anthropology to conclude, “Society is our frail barrier against nature.”

An even greater provocation was her insistence, against the imperious feminist consensus that had formed before the end of the 20th century, that nature divides us by sex. Male and female biologies are distinct, and men and women experience and act upon their desires differently. Because gender begins in our bodies, it is different from and more fundamental than a “social construct.” Women give birth and menstruate, which links them to organic nature in a way no man can ever experience. She is “bound to nature’s calendar.” He isn’t. She accepts nature’s round of life and death more easily because she participates in it more fully than he does.

A man owes his very existence to a woman's body, too, and that origin threatens him endlessly. *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992) quotes literary scholar Harold Bloom, who supervised Paglia's doctoral dissertation at Yale University: "Woman is born of woman. But man is born of woman and never recovers from that fact." She gives birth, and that can be her response to nature's malice. He doesn't, and so responds by "projecting" himself through sexual acts with women or cultural acts with objects: building churches, composing songs, conducting experiments, writing poems, forming governments, and painting pictures. Hence, Paglia notes, "All the genres of philosophy, science, high art, athletics, and politics were invented by men."

She asserts these propositions against the logic of feminism, which denounces vicious social conventions that victimize women. True, Paglia says, "nature's burden falls more heavily on one sex," but you can't change that fact by pretending it results from social injustice. War, crime, the battles of the sexes, and decadence are all natural to the human condition. When epic heroes enter the underworld, they confront the actual record of nature's rapacity and human depravity. Among the "errors of liberalism," Paglia believes, is the expectation that we can keep those primal turbulences underground.

That's the theory. Men cling to their singular being, striving against absorption back into their mothers—i.e., nature—and so they create forms and rules, beauties and truths that resist the mother/nature that would swallow them up. Some great artists produce Apollonian works of order, permanence, and light such as the Acropolis and the *Apollo Belvedere*; others allow Dionysus his say, for example, Georges Bizet in *Carmen* and the Marquis de Sade, for whom, as Paglia writes in *Sexual Personae*, "getting back to nature...would be to give free rein to violence and lust."

At the core of art are sex and violence, contained or released, particularly in their deviant and decadent manner. In *Sexual Personae* and subsequent writings, Paglia interprets artworks into these elements: mythic and chthonic, lusty and cruel. Marc Antony's abandonment of his soldiers at Actium is one of the touchstones of Western military history. Paglia, reading Shakespeare's version, sees Cleopatra as the water-Venus luring sex-addled Antony from the earth, "the foundation of his illustrious career," into a fatal conflict at sea. Emily Dickinson is not the shy "belle of Amherst," but "a virtuoso of sadomasochistic surrealism." Romanticism, Paglia says, is not the loving experience of sublime landscapes or the glorification of childhood. It is "a return of the Great Mother, the dark nature-goddess whom St. Augustine condemns as the most formidable enemy of Christianity."

### **Contra Mundum**

Paglia's anti-postmodern, anti-feminist turn enthralled lay readers and made *Sexual Personae* a sensation. Women's studies professors, unaccustomed to such vigorous, explicit dissent, were at a loss. These scholar-activists were good at expressing contempt for anything they deemed sexist, but weren't used to having their own smug certitudes contemptuously dismissed by others.

And she wouldn't let up. A 1990 op-ed, "Madonna—Finally, a Real Feminist," infuriated them. Madonna, Paglia declared, "exposes the puritanism and suffocating ideology of American feminism, which is stuck in an adolescent whining mode.... The academic feminists think their nerdy bookworm husbands are the ideal model of human manhood." Annoying, to be sure, but 20 years later the *New York Times* counted it among the most noteworthy entries in the 40-year history of the op-ed genre.

In 1991 she denounced the campaign against date-rape, saying it was driven by "propaganda churned out by the expensive Northeastern colleges and universities, with their overconcentration of boring, uptight academic feminists and spoiled, affluent students." Later that year she wrote, "Anita Hill is no feminist heroine." Rather, the Senate hearings on her allegations against Clarence Thomas were "an atrocious public spectacle worthy of the show trials of a totalitarian regime, [where] uncorroborated

allegations about verbal exchanges ten years old were paraded on the nation's television screens." As a guest on Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* show in 1994 Paglia asserted that "feminism lurched in a kind of Stalinist direction in the 1970s."

Outrageous as her arguments were, ostracism didn't silence them. True, Paglia worked outside the prestige zones. Faculty lounge lizards dismissed her as an associate professor at a small Philadelphia art school. Paglia acknowledged in the introduction to *Sex, Art, and American Culture* "the disastrous twenty-year history of my career, the job problems and rowdy incidents, the isolation and poverty, the frustrating inability to get published." (Seven publishers rejected *Sexual Personae* before Yale University Press finally took it.)

The sexuality scholars of the time fancied themselves edgy characters exploding bourgeois norms. They took pleasure in deriding older scholars, the "dead wood" who devoted their careers to such square projects as the Standard Edition of John Dryden. They, by contrast, wrote books with such titles as *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*; *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities*; and *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. The key words of the day were "subversive" and "transgressive."

Paglia showed them what subverting and transgressing really looked like, mocking the tenured radicals' bogus cultural politics—bourgeois lives in leafy college towns and hip urban neighborhoods—and inept handling of bohemian, illicit material. In a review of *Vested Interests* by Harvard's Marjorie Garber, Paglia criticized her for bringing "'cutting-edge' pretensions" and "lumpish patches of tedious Lacan jargon" to an important subject, transvestitism, which Paglia claims arises at moments of cultural collapse. "Are we in a decadence, like that of imperial Rome?" she asks. Garber can't answer because the book is "inadequately researched," "carelessly reductive," and "totally neglects Western antiquity, where there is a staggering amount of literary and anthropological material crucial to her subject."

"I'm challenging *their* scholarship," she declared in a speech, "which I think is absolutely amateurish." Amateur? This was worse than political accusation. You didn't talk this way, not about figures at the very top of the field. After 20 years of recondite theory and relentless demystification of "late-capitalism," "the body," "orientalism," and "sexual politics," literary studies had convinced itself it was an arena of genius. Junior and senior theorists wielded the most sophisticated conceptual machinery in esoteric language. Everybody was brilliant. It was taken as a sign of profundity, not incoherence, that few people could untangle sentences such as this from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990):

*Once the incest taboo is subjected to Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis in The History of Sexuality, that prohibitive or juridical structure is shown both to instate compulsory heterosexuality within a masculinist sexual economy and to enable a critical challenge to that economy.*

Rather than labor to translate such a sentence into English, Paglia mocked it. Why take these writers' half-baked "readings" and low standards seriously, she asked. They come from dilettantes, not creative minds.

In 1990, Paglia attended a University of Pennsylvania lecture given by Diana Fuss, a rising Princeton feminist, who spoke on women and fashion photography. "It was *awful*," Paglia said. Fuss showed a Revlon image of a woman in a swimming pool, her head above the shimmering surface and sunlight illuminating her cheeks. "This was a beautiful ad," Paglia noted, but "Fuss was going, 'Decapitation—mutilation.'" It drove Paglia crazy to watch 200 young women gushing over Fuss's brilliance, even

though they “didn’t understand a *word* of what she was saying.” Speaking to Fuss privately made clear to Paglia that “she knew nothing about art. And I also could tell she knew nothing about popular culture.”

In 1991 Paglia spoke at Harvard, where she accused the university of hiring “trendy people in cultural studies centers who believe that the world was created by Foucault in 1969.” (The *Harvard Crimson* noted that students gave her “thunderous applause.”) Later, the *Crimson* published Paglia’s “Open Letter to the Students of Harvard,” which warned them against “opportunistic trend-chasers in your classrooms,” i.e., the literature faculty. “Under its hip varnish,” she advised, “their work is shoddy and shallow.” Since those professors were too ensconced and comfortable to improve, or even to carry out the basic pedagogical duties, the students must take charge of their own education:

*First, make the library your teacher. Rediscover the now neglected works of the great scholars of the last 150 years, who worked blessedly free of the mental pollutants of poststructuralism. Immerse yourself in the reference collection, and master chronology and etymology. Refuse to cooperate with the coercive ersatz humanitarianism that insultingly defines women and African-Americans as victims. Insist on free thought and free speech.*

The critique struck home. Under Paglia’s raillery, the theorists of sex and politics looked like small ignorant figures in spite of their knowing demeanor. All they really understood was academic politics, which they played very well. Paglia demonstrated that they had erected a social network that operated on cronyism and prestige, which would collapse as soon as a few genuinely erudite and courageous critics challenged them.

### **Telling Truths**

A new Paglia volume, *Provocations: Collected Essays*, has 600 pages of commentaries, reviews, and speeches, plus a 100-page “Media Chronicle,” which contains snippets of occasional pieces such as a Rolling Stones concert review and an interview with Raquel Welch. (Welch requested her.) The other part of the Chronicle consists of others’ remarks about her in the press, some nasty (Gloria Steinem) and some laudatory (David Bowie). *Provocations* contains astute assessments of political questions, as well. In 2013, for example, Paglia wrote, “It remains baffling how anyone would think that Hillary Clinton (born the same year as me) is our party’s best chance.”

Paglia is no more conciliatory today than when she first became famous. Academic feminism is still useless. She advised that “young American women aspiring to political power should be studying military history rather than taking women’s studies courses.” In 1999, a Massachusetts middle-school teacher posted an exhibit of 14 gay figures, including Alexander the Great, Shakespeare, and Eleanor Roosevelt. “Proclaiming Eleanor Roosevelt gay is not only goofy but malicious,” wrote Paglia, who favors gay rights. “Those who promote Shakespeare’s homosexuality for their own ideological agenda conveniently overlook the fact that none of his thirty-seven plays address homosexuality or allude to it except in negative terms.”

Alongside the assault on false idols (Michel Foucault, feminist puritanism), Paglia celebrates the same heroes (Alfred Hitchcock, Michelangelo, Bob Dylan—“[t]he postmodernist allegation that all canons are the product of political ideology is malicious propaganda,” though she has changed her opinion of Madonna, who she says “is addicted to pointless provocations like her juvenile Instagrams” and can’t accept that her “sassy street urchin” persona of the ’80s doesn’t suit a 58-year-old). She maintains her belief that the long view of history is more necessary than ever. “The worst crime of political correctness,” Paglia wrote in 2016, “is that it has allowed current ideologies to stunt our sense of the past and to reduce history to a litany of inflammatory grievances.” Feminists hated her for contending in *Sexual Personae* that the majority of world-historical figures will always be men: “If civilization had

been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts.” She would still like to add more women to the artistic canon, but admits that she spent five years trying, and failing, “to find a good feminist poem.”

Since *Sexual Personae* appeared, however, the strains of liberalism Paglia criticized as anti-nature and anti-religion have only grown more assertive. As a teacher’s daughter in upstate New York, living on farms as a kid and working while a student as an emergency room secretary in Syracuse, Paglia instantly detects the “dismaying snobbery by liberal middle-class professionals who were openly disdainful of the religious values of the working class whom liberals always claim to protect.” Though an unbeliever herself, Paglia has no patience for those secularists “fixed in an elitist mind-set that automatically defines religion as reactionary and unenlightened.” Without a genuine social gospel, liberal policy-making becomes “a sterile instrument of government manipulation, as if social-welfare agencies and federal programs could bring salvation.”

You don’t have to believe in God, she says, but you must understand that religion is “a higher poetry,” the first and fundamental response to nature. “Liberalism lacks a profound sense of evil,” she writes, and so it models sexual relations on all-rational interactions that dispel the complications of body language, seduction, unconscious desire, and male-female difference. Because feminism cannot “look honestly at the animal savagery and lust in all of us,” it reeducates men out of their “toxic masculinity”—a futile crusade.

It is religion’s proper recognition of dark nature and the power of sex that often makes Paglia sound like a conservative. She affirms a naturalist version of Original Sin. In the op-ed praising Madonna, Paglia also approved of MTV for censoring one of her more salacious videos: “Parents cannot possibly control television.” In discussing the ways in which sex education misleads boys and girls about gender difference and sex educators resist abstinence-only lessons, Paglia remarks, “But perhaps a bit more self-preserving fear and shame might be helpful in today’s hedonistic, media-saturated environment.” In *Sexual Personae*, in the midst of detailing the fecund muckiness of nature, Paglia acknowledges, “Happy are those periods when marriage and religion are strong.”

This is how a loudly bisexual, solidly Democratic, pro-pornography, free speech-absolutist, rock ‘n’ roller art professor became the most dynamic critic of progressive ideas on sex, gender, and education. She attacked *all* of modern liberalism’s deepest convictions: gender is socially constructed, men and women are the same, religion is hidebound, the past has passed, professors are wise. Defending those twisted dogmas has made liberalism at the present time more repressive than conservative Christianity, more inquisitorial than Puritanism.

In *Provocations* Paglia declares that the heart of the ’60s movements was “a new religious vision,” whose votaries cared about political reform, but “were also seeking the truth about life outside [existing] religious and social institutions.” The truth came before politics, sex, rebellion, or drugs. The truth Paglia identified long ago is that in all human beings there is an “emotional turmoil that is going on above and below politics, outside the scheme of social life.” Great art touches it, and so does religion. Individuals who respond to art and religion understand that when politics and social life presume to replace them as right expressions of that turmoil, they falsify it instead...and Paglia won’t countenance a lie. That puts her at odds with every institution liberals have managed to seize, from academia to the Democratic Party. But if you mentioned that to her, she would shrug and get on with the truth-telling. She has nature on her side.

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