

## Paglia's Central Myth

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### Abstract

This piece aims to rescue Camille Paglia from waves of unsympathetic critics. The article asks what it is that she actually stands for. Employing the religious metaphors of "fallen" and "restored", as well as the idea of "sacraments", it argues that what is uppermost in the work of Paglia is a concern with a fallen state connected to sex and gender alignment (disempowering for both men and women) and a risen state in which self-fulfilment is effected by transgenderism. For Paglia, Graham argues, the social purpose of literature is to help individuals understand their own transgender destiny: writers provide models for that "migration".

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Camille Paglia is the subject of a veritable mountain of journalistic work, in print, on-line and on TV. Academic material on her output is dwarfed by the journalistic treatment, but the scholarly work of her writings has been slowly taking shape over the past few decades. In the appendix to *Sex, Art, and Culture*, Paglia documents her

own appearances in all media (cartoons included), and a follow-up record is provided in *Vamps & Tramps*. If we divide the critical response to her into “defense” and “attack”, we see that the hostile treatments vastly outnumber the more sympathetic accounts. In the early nineties, Naomi Wolf turned her fire on Paglia, accusing her of “howling intellectual dishonesty” (Wolf 1992, 23). In “Feminism’s Unfinished Business”, Katha Pollitt stated that Paglia was guilty of “glorify[ing] male dominance” (Pollitt 1997). In *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism*, Rhonda Hammer discusses Paglia as a “‘feminist’ bashing feminist” (Hammer 2002, 43) and a “feminist impersonator” (Hammer 2002, 61). It is important to analyze the quality of Paglia’s feminism – not to mention her view of homosexuality – but there is a danger that these elements are emphasized so much in (negative) commentaries on her that we lose sight of the larger context – the central myth, one might say – she is always articulating.

A clarification of that myth is the task I have set myself in this piece. Such a myth typically involves a notion of “where we are”, “where we want to be” and “how we get there”. In this piece, I shall use the metaphors of “falleness”, “restoration” and “sacraments” when discussing the distinct aspects of her central myth. Such a commentary does not necessarily represent a defense; but, as an attempt to give a neutral account of what Paglia actually stands for, it is, in terms of mood, at some distance the negative appraisals of her outlook.

### The Fallen State

From Paglia’s point of view, the 1960s was a time when Dionysian power was unleashed in society. “This was the Sixties: energy. *Energy* was the Sixties!” (1992, 271), she declares. But, significantly, her attitude to the record of the 60s is ambivalent. Her general opinion is that, unchecked, Dionysian energy becomes chaotic – in one essay she speaks of the Dionysian spinning into barbarism (1994, 330), and when she turns to the Sixties she unreservedly levels the same charge, despite her identification with the Sixties experiment. “My generation”, she admits, “inspired by the Dionysian titanium of rock, attempted something more radical than anything since the French Revolution. We asked: why should I obey this law? And why shouldn’t I act on every sexual impulse? The result was a descent into barbarism” (1992, 216). If we ask what lies behind this

strangely damning analysis, the answer appears to be “sex” to a significant extent, or better the twin issues of sex and nature. “The Sixties”, she states, “attempted a return to nature that ended in disaster. The gentle nude bathing and playful sliding in the mud at Woodstock were a short-lived Rousseauist dream” (ibid.). Playing the part of *agent provocateur*, she connects Sixties’ license in sexual matters with the development of the AIDS epidemic, and it is this factor which lies at the root of her ultimate judgment of that decade and its revolution<sup>1</sup>

Fallenness in Paglia’s view is not simply a question of the ascendancy of Dionysius. Rather, Paglia thinks of history as cyclical and alternating between periods of Apollo and periods of Dionysius, which represent two types of fallenness. If the Dionysian may spin into barbarism, the Apollonian hardens into fascism (1994, 330). Whether Dionysus or Apollo is in the ascendancy, society, in Paglia’s view, is organized along what can only be described as authoritarian lines. (A libertarian might wish to distinguish between the authoritarianism of the Left (economic) and the authoritarianism of the Right (social), but Paglia seems to have little interest in that distinction.) Generally, there are too many restrictions placed upon pornography and prostitution, for example. Great restrictions are placed upon gender and sexual orientation, too. In discourses dealing with gender and sexuality the stress is customarily placed upon women and homosexuality, but in Paglia we have something different. Restrictions on gender result in gender stasis: women are encouraged to be feminine and men masculine. What we have, then, is a cloven society, with men here and women over there. If, in Rousseau, we come across the notion that, in a better society, men would be masculine and women feminine, for Paglia this is the current – entirely undesirable – state of affairs. The same logic applies to sexual orientation: it is also divided. Restrictions on sexuality result in monosexuality. People are either hetero- or homosexual. Society, then, is doubly-cloven.

### Pagliopia

One might assume that an ambivalent attitude to the Apollonian/Dionysian opposition marks an opportunity for a thinker to begin to think dialectically. The moment we cease to identify with one side and cast off the other it seems that the only way beyond such

an *impasse* is to begin to think in terms of a higher level of thought where opposition is reconciled, and we move onto the level of *co-incidentia oppositorum*. And Paglia does actually make a number of remarks which point to her desire to move somewhat dialectically beyond the Apollonian/Dionysian opposition. "We need a new point of view", she states, "that would combine the inspiring progressive principles and global consciousness of the Sixties with the hard political lessons of the Seventies and Eighties, sobering decades of rational reaction against the arrogant excess of my generation" (1992, viii).

To be more precise, Paglia advocates a "social liberal" reorganization of society, characterized by a *laissez-faire* attitude towards, for example, pornography and prostitution. In her M.I.T. lecture she hits a stretch where, in her customary *ad lib* manner, she provocatively explains her outlook: "I'm someone who is on the record as being pro-pornography [...] I'm pro-prostitution – I mean *really* pro, not just pro-prostitute and against prostitution. I'm pro-abortion, pro-homosexuality, pro-drag queens, pro-legalization of drugs" (1992, 252).

We might well wonder if, despite the anti-conservatism of such a position, a society based on such extreme social liberalism would not be very hierarchical, and Paglia at times suggests society always will be. Indeed, she seems to resist the idea that inequality could ever be abolished. "We are", she states, "hierarchical animals. Sweep one hierarchy away, and another will take its place, perhaps less palatable than the first" (2001, 3).

What we might ask – perhaps somewhat aghast – would be the fate of historically disempowered groups in society in such a world? Would they not experience a far worse form of oppression in a society entirely free of state control? What of women, gay and straight? Would women remain the second sex? Would gay people's sexuality symbolize the "second sexual orientation"?

The short answer for Paglia is "No". There is an element of utopianism in Paglia's thinking, and it is partly focused on women and sexual orientation. Her central work of social criticism is titled "No Law in the Arena", and early in that piece she describes how women should orient themselves in the kind of world she wants them to live in:

The ultimate law of the sexual arena is personal responsibility and self-defense. We must be prepared to go it alone, without the infantilizing assurances of external supports like trauma counselors, grievance committees, and law courts. I say to women: get down in the dirt, in the realm of the sense. Fight for your territory, hour by hour. Take your blows like men. I exalt the pagan personae of athletes and warrior, who belong to shame rather than guilt culture and whose ethic is candor, discipline, vigilance and valor. (1994, 23-4)

Paglia thinks of women as very powerful: "Man has traditionally ruled the social sphere; feminism tells him to move over and share his power. But woman rules the sexual and emotional sphere, and there she has no rival" (1992, 31). Now, in her view, it is time for women to consolidate their power, and, a strong – in her lexicon, "masculine" – female personality will be a necessity if women are to flourish in a world free of statism. In Paglia's view, women have inescapable ties to femininity, but transgenderism – here a migration away from a hormonal base – is nonetheless possible; indeed compulsory.<sup>2</sup> She repeatedly refers to her own personal intellectual heroes – "Great women scholars like Jane Harrison and Gisela Richter" (1992, 244) – but it is certain figures of the silver screen as well as ordinary public life that she turns to for her role models. In her view, these figures are emblematic of resistance to gender stasis. Critiquing contemporary American femininity, she states "Movies from the Thirties and Forties [...] showed a quite different kind of woman, either bold and pioneering, like Katherine Hepburn in *Woman of the Year*, or elegant sophisticated, and sexual, like Marlene Dietrich in *Dishonored*" (1992, 111). A whole gallery of other figures such as Dorothy Parker and Mary McCarthy ("I loved their tough realism, bare-knuckles pugnacity, and witty malice" (1994, 347)) are also included in her various celebrations of great women, but it is "intrepid, masculine Amelia Earhart" who gets the most attention from Paglia: "Amelia Earhart to me was an image of everything a woman should be. It remains that for me. Amelia Earhart, my obsession. She is woman alone" (1992, 258).

One could be forgiven that masculine women would ideally be the first sex of the "arena" society in Paglia's view. However, it

seems that the basic contrast Paglia has in mind is between masculine women (the dominating) and masculine men (the dominated). However, the feminine male is a match for the masculine woman.

What of sexual orientation? Turning to sexuality, Paglia's resistance is to monosexuality. Just as she favors androgyny for women (and men, for that matter), so she argues for openness towards the both same-sex and other-sex sexual relations. Paglia identified herself a lesbian woman for many years, but, in "No Law in the Arena", she argues in favor of bisexuality, making it clear that she sees sexual orientation as partly a matter of conviction. The distinction between homosexual and heterosexual is illusory for Paglia, but the distinction between monosexual and bisexual is genuine, and bisexuality is to be preferred to monosexuality, be it gay or straight monosexuality. Freedom also involves liberation from monosexuality. It is, she says, "our best hope of escape from the animosities and false polarities of the current sex wars" (1994, 94). Maleness or femaleness may be a question of hormones; sexual orientation may be partly related to experience; bisexuality may be helped along by an effort of will.<sup>3</sup> Bisexuality is the "compulsory" sexual orientation of the arena, though, in an afterthought, she admits that "Perhaps bisexual *responsiveness* is all we can hope for" (ibid.).

In Rousseau's ideal society, men would be masculine and active, and women passive and feminine. ("One should be active and strong, the other passive and weak," as Rousseau declares in *Emile: Or, On Education* (1979, 358).) For Rousseau, active men are the elite; underneath them, passive women enjoy an enviable position on the hierarchy; masculine women and feminine men, however, are Rousseau's psychological and social underclass. For Paglia, masculine women and feminine men, both of whom are at least bisexually responsive, are the elite. Their social inferiors are the – hopelessly monosexual, in her view – masculine men and feminine women. Such is the pecking order in Pagliopia.

### Literature as Sacraments

I have spoken (in brief) about the logic of the "fallen word" as well as Paglia's notion of what a restoration might indicate. What is missing is the "sacraments" which might, in her view, serve to lift mankind up to the level to which it truly belongs. For Paglia, the most obvious "sacrament" is literature itself, not to mention popular cul-

ture. In her view, the social value of literature and popular culture descends from their representations of transgenderism. In her view, our literary and cultural heritages are structured around the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, but, in her view, both strains are connected to transgenderism. Literature, Dionysian and Apollonian, represents a repository of the kinds of examples we need and should imitate in the "arena" society.

I will conclude with just a few examples of the way in which literature furnishes us with this kind of "capital". Apollonian Wilde, Paglia argues, teaches society all about the androgyne of manners. In this context, she speaks of "the male feminine in his careless, lounging passivity" and the "female masculine in her brilliant aggressive wit" (2001, 532), and these are crucial types for her social ideal. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Cleopatra* are every bit as socially useful as Wilde. Where Paglia speaks of the androgyne of manners in relation to Wilde, it is a figure called the Mercurius androgyne she connects with *Dionysian* Shakespeare. "Shakespeare's great Mercurius androgyne is the transvestite Rosalind and, after her, the male-willed Cleopatra. The main characteristic", she continues, "is an eclectic wit – dazzling, triumphant, euphoric – combined with rapid alterations of persona" (2001, 199).

## Conclusion

"I honor Apollo and Dionysus equally, as the Sixties did not do", Paglia claims (1992, 122). And clearly it is through transgenderism, bisexuality, as well as the social liberalism which facilitate them, that this synthesis of Apollo and Dionysus is effected and the promise of the sixties realized.

This article has taken umbrage with scholars and journalists who simply dismiss Paglia as someone who has offensive views about (sex and) gender and sexuality. If it successfully effects a change in the response to Paglia, the new response should be based on new questions, which include the following. How might we evaluate her version of the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian? If not (extreme) social liberal, which type of political sensibility serves the goals of the feminist movement most efficiently? How are we to finally *reconcile* men and women, not to mention gay and straight? What is the larger significance of the presence of

masculine female characters and feminine male characters in canonical literature?

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## Notes

- 1 Somewhat humorously (and much less controversially), Paglia says that her Sixties vice was not free love, however. "With me it wasn't sex, it wasn't drugs", she confesses in her famous M.I.T. lecture, "with me it was challenging authority and just being absolutely *impossible* in every situation. And I just had to learn my lessons. My career has been a disaster, an absolute disaster" (1992, 254). The only disaster to match her career, she self-mockingly assures us, is that of her love life.
- 2 Paglia's insistence upon "sex" and her refusal to think in terms of "gender" provokes a great many feminist thinkers who subscribe to the attitude to human identity most often referred to as "social constructionist." Paglia explicitly speaks in terms of "maleness" and "femaleness" as the basis of human identities. "As mammals, we are each an unstable idiosyncratic mix of both male and female hormones, but human males have an average of eight to twenty time more testosterone than females. I have found the words *masculine* and *feminine* indispensable for my notations of appearance and behavior, but I apply them freely to both sexes, according to mood and situation. Here are my conclusions, after a lifetime of observation and reflection. Maleness at its hormonal extreme is an angry, ruthless density of self, motivated by a principle of 'attack' (cf.



'roid rage', produced in male bodybuilders by anabolic steroids). Femeness at its hormonal extreme is first an acute sensitivity of response, literally thin-skinned (a hormonal effect in women), and secondly a stability, composure, and self-containment, a slowness approaching the sultry. Biologically, the male is impelled towards restless movement; his moral danger is brutishness. Biologically, the female is impelled toward waiting, *expectancy*; her moral danger is stasis. Androgen agitates; estrogen tranquilizes – hence the drowsiness and 'glow' of pregnancy. Most of us inhabit not polar extremes but a constantly shifting great middle. However, a preponderance of gray does not disprove the existence of black and white. Sexual geography, our body image, alters our perception of the world. Man is contoured for invasion, while woman remains *the hidden*, a cave of archaic darkness" (1994, 108).

- 3 As if to deliberately provoke the gay and lesbian community – having already annoyed most feminists – she constructs sexual orientation as an aspect of personality partly based on experience, presenting a view which goes against the grain of the contemporary preference for purely biological explanations of sexual orientation. Paglia argues that lesbianism "seems to be primarily produced by social pressures" (1994, 73). Male homosexuality, on the other hand, may involve genetic factors. But she is mostly interested in what kinds of experiences may foster homosexuality in men. If a man is interested in same-sex sexual relations, it is owing to a biologically-determined artistic tendency *and* how that is handled in life, she argues. "No one is 'born gay'", she states. "The idea is ridiculous, but it is symptomatic of our overpoliticized climate that such assertions are given instant credence by gay activists and their media partisans. I think what gay men are remembering is that they were born *different*. [...] My tentative conclusions are based on a lifetime of observation and experience in the modern sex wars. [...] Men are not born gay, they are born with an artistic gene, which may or may not lead to an artistic career. More often, they are connoisseurs, aesthetes, or simply arch, imperious commentators with stringent judgments about everything. [...] A sensitive boy is born into a family of jocks. He is shy and dreamy from the start. His father is uncomfortable with him, and his brothers are harsh and impatient. But he is his mother's special favorite, almost from the moment he is born. He and she are more alike. Repelled by male roughhousing, he is drawn to his mother's and sisters' quietness and delicacy. He becomes his mother's confidant against her prosaic husband, a half-eroticized relationship that may last a lifetime and

block the son from adult contacts with women. He is fascinated by his mother's rituals of the boudoir, her hypnotic focus on the mirror as she applies magic unguents from vials of vivid color, like paints and palette. He loves her closet, not because he covets her clothes but because they are made of gorgeous, sensuous fabrics, patterns, and hues denied men in this post-aristocratic age. Later, he feels like an outsider in the schoolyard. There is no male bonding; he tries to join in but never fully merges with the group. Masculinity is something beautiful but "out there"; it is not *in* him, and he knows he is feigning it. He longs for approval from the other boys, and his nascent sexual energies begin to flow in that direction, pursuing what he cannot have. He will always be hungry for and awed by the masculine, even if and when, through bodybuilding and the leather scene, he adopts its accoutrements. Thus homosexuality, in my view, is an *adaptation*, not an inborn trait. When they claim they are gay 'as far back as I can remember', gay men are remembering their isolation and alienation, their differentness, which is a function of their special gifts. Such protestations are of little value in any case, since it is unlikely that much can be recalled before age three, when sexual orientation may be already fixed. Heaven help the American boy born with a talent for ballet. In this culture, he is mocked and hounded and never wins the respect of masculine men. Yet this desperation deepens his artistic insight and expressiveness. Thus gay men create civilization by fulfilling the pattern of Coleridge's prophesying, ostracized poet, dancing alone with 'flashing eyes' and 'floating hair'" (1994, 72-4).