

Free men, free women
Camile Paglia

A ludid writer with deep insights that conform to no dogma or ideology. A gem

Camille Paglia is an enigmatic figure in American letters, a brilliant intellect and eloquent writer who refuses to be bound by dogmas and conventions. She is always a pleasure to read.

These passages from the first two pages of the book are already worth sharing. A more extensive review will soon follow.

"Sexuality and eroticism are the intricate intersection of nature and culture. Feminists grossly oversimplify the problem of sex when they reduce it to a matter of social convention: readjust society, eliminate sexual inequality, purify sex roles, and happiness and harmony will reign. Here feminism, like all liberal movements of the past two hundred years, is heir to Rousseau. The Social Contract (1762) begins: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Pitting benign Romantic nature against corrupt society, Rousseau produced the progressivist strain in nineteenth-century culture, for which social reform was the means to achieve paradise on earth. The bubble of these hopes was burst by the catastrophes of two world wars.

"But Rousseauism was reborn in the post-war generation of the Sixties, from which contemporary feminism developed. Rousseau rejects original sin, Christianity's pessimistic view of man born unclean, with a propensity for evil. Rousseau's idea, derived from Locke, of man's innate goodness led to social environmentalism, now the dominant ethic of American human services, penal codes, and behaviorist therapies. It assumes that aggression, violence, and crime come from social deprivation—a poor neighborhood, a bad home. Thus feminism blames rape on pornography and, by a smug circularity of reasoning, interprets outbreaks of sadism as a backlash to itself. But rape and sadism have been evident throughout history and, at some moment, in all cultures."

As she approaches 70 years of age, Camelia Paglia can look back on a lifetime of involvement in the intellectual movements of her time. She came of age as the sexual revolution was cresting. She celebrates the freedom of rock music of the 1960s, breaking out of what she considers to have been confining stereotypes of the 50s. It is the transition from Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds to Janis Joplin and the Beatles.

The early influences in her life were first wave feminists, the women who fought that all women might enjoy the fundamental rights to property ownership, employment, voting and elective office. Her heroines from this era include Katherine Hepburn and Emelia Ehrhardt, about whom she wrote a precocious 77 page paper as a schoolgirl.

She credits Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*) as the leading edge of second wave feminism, brought to the United States by Betty free down in *The Feminine Mystique*. Whereas first-generation feminists had not been anti-male, and in fact were grateful to men for granting the progress that they achieved, the second generation perceived men as enemies and obstacles. These were the feminists to deny biology, asserting that gender was a social construct that had been forced on women by men seeking to preserve a patriarchy. The transition was slow. Some feminists such as herself and Germaine Greer were quite content with a robust sexuality.

This book is a collection of what Paglia considers to be her most significant contributions. As such it is somewhat eclectic – not all of a piece.

The first chapter of the book, *Sex And Violence, or Nature and Art,* will be a challenge for most readers. Taken from her early book *Sexual Personae*, It employs a more erudite vocabulary than all but a few moderns possess. It is rife with references to classical Greek literature. She makes a

sweeping survey of philosophy, analyzing the evolution of feminism from the works of Rousseau on one hand and Hobbes on the other.

Paglia's principal point is that modern feminism is an incredibly simpleminded take on a vastly complex topic. It is a topic that the ancients understood better than we do. She contrasts the Apollonian male nature with the earth mother female nature.