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Literary Tomboys From the 19th to the 21st Century

Memorable Characters and
Their Case For Free Expression

E I K O N

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Gender or Sex

– an ongoing discussion

The discussion on gender roles is new, but the issue of how to raise children and expect performances from members of communities is as old as mankind. As anyone could conclude, I am really strong in my position as a traditionalist feminist, and do not consider that we should fight with words, because it is not words themselves that need to change, but their meaning (same signifiers will gain new signified's). Can we still consider that *mankind* is only about men? I absolutely agree that when we discuss primary teaching, for example, we could use *she/her* instead of *he/his* as a preferred pronoun, as most such teachers are, in fact, women. Nevertheless, there are many words that – when changed – do not bring more clarifications, but chaos.

My view on the gender/sex discussion starts from this vision on words and meanings. There are many books, with a very complicated metalanguage, launching a series of very difficult concepts, which come to bring newer and newer ideas and arguments in favour of changing the lists of words, of changing

the paradigms and the norms. This fight for new normativity is so far from the public's understanding of reality, that we might consider it as a less than useful endeavour. In fact, such discussions are very much the *bread* of academics in the field of *gender studies*, *queer studies*, *intersectionalist studies*, etc., who are also activists in the domains they describe, and who try to set new language as a sign for new goals in the cultural war they started on what they consider to be *traditional thought*. Let us enumerate some such studies, which try to propose not only new attitudes and cultural and political considerations, but also a different language that may satisfy the new vision on gender and sexuality (sometimes in connection with new views on ethnicity and race): *Gender. Language and Power. A resource book for students*, by P. Simpson & A. Mayr (Routledge, 2010); *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class*, by J. F. Healey, A. Stepnick, & E. O'Brien (Sage, 2018); *Beyond Gender Binaries: an intersectional orientation to communication and identities*, by C. L. Griffin (University of California Press, 2020); *What Everyone Needs to Know*, by L. Erickson-Schorth & B. Devis (Oxford University Press, 2021). These are just a few of the many, many studies and outcomes of sociological, philosophical, political and linguistic research in the domain. The views they advance are mainly defined by their proposing a left-leaning ideology and activism.

Such ideas and concepts are much debated upon by many other authors, who are viewed as more traditionalist. Nevertheless, when it comes to authors like Douglas Murray or Camille Paglia there is very little that they have in common, and they can be considered anything but traditionalists. In *The Madness of Crowds* (Bloomsbury, 2020 – Expanded and Updated Edition), Douglas Murray dedicates his four chapters to four of the most delicate subjects of today's discussion: Gay, Women, Race, and Trans. The British author tackles these new outlooks on these old realities, and shows how ideology does not bring more clarity, but, on the contrary, more division, chaos, and un-equality. Camille Paglia, at her turn, started speaking about the new vision on gender as a sign of cultural and "civilizational" decline even since the 90's, when her book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Vintage, 1991) was published. In an interview for Generation Hero on YouTube, she enforces this idea, and considers that the positioning of sexual identities on a spectrum (and everything such positioning entails) is almost a form of "fascism". She has more such positions in other interviews and conferences, with Christina Hoff Sommers (Paglia 2017), in a discussion hosted by American Enterprise Institute (Paglia, 2016), or by Worldwrite (Paglia, 2016) One of the most famous discussions on culture, ideology, feminism, gender, etc. is that between Camille Paglia and Jordan Peterson,

which was followed by almost three million people on YouTube, in 2017.

Some of the concepts propagated by intersectionalists constituted a real *inspiration* for the authors of the Grievance Studies affair (also known as the academic hoax) a few years ago. Those so-called studies just repeated such words, put them in preposterous *hoax academic articles*, and sent them to prestigious academic journals. The articles got peer-reviewed, some were published and others proposed for publication. Peter Boghossian, Helen Pluckrose, and James Lindsay tried to demonstrate that there is very little epistemological research in the domain, that one article is based upon another, with very little serious grounding in reality – well, reality itself has been under so much attack by the postmodern thought, that we now have discussions about *post-truth* as something normal. Since the ‘hoax’ all three authors have been very active writing against ideologies of identity and cancel culture, and showed which are their historical and political roots – especially in Pluckrose’s and Lindsay’s latest book, *Cynical Theories. How Universities Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody*; and James Lindsay’s *Race Marxism. The Truth about Critical Race Theory and Praxis* (2022).

Whether truth is a concept to be re-considered or not is the focus of philosophical thought and not our interest here. Nevertheless, when dealing with

such subjects and academic activity, we should bring another concept into discussion: the concept of *reality*. To be active in the social medium, to be an activist, actually, and to also write and try to come with solid theories to substantiate the claims of your activism should be based on reality. Very little of the claims of today's interesectional thought seems to me to be based on reality. My arguments in favor of such a standpoint take into consideration my own experience as a woman and as an academic, but also the experiences of my peers, my students, my family members. Other sources of my convictions are ideas and considerations I have come into contact with in the many books, interviews, and podcasts I have tried to follow these past few years (I have really tried to understand the phenomenon...). The most important experience I have, though, is that of reading literature, of reading into other artistic and creative texts – films, cartoons, comics, etc. -, which will constitute the basis for the present study on tomboysm. Still, before going any further, there are a few *reality check* points, I would like to summarize.

Women's Rights.

Reality Check

The fight of women for rights was a fight for the recognition of a reality: they were not allowed to have a say in the social sphere, they were not allowed to own property, to pass on property, to make a decision in the education of their own children, to vote, to get a tertiary education or even a proper secondary education. Such shortcomings of the Victorian society were pointed out by many authors, as the ideal *angel of the house* was an imposed ideal and not a choice for many women in Britain and in America (as well as in some very religiously strict West European countries like The Netherlands, for example). Women's role was strict, very well *designed* and restricted, so that they could not express their personality or ambitions freely; on the contrary, a woman with much personality and ambition was considered to have some *un-womanly or even manly* traits, and, therefore, she was labeled as somehow undesirable.

The influence of the French Revolution with its slogans for freedom and equality was felt like imminent danger for the Empire, and they fought

against such slogans and concepts for as long as they could. Nevertheless, to identify *they* with *men* does not represent the truth, as measures and laws to free women were desired and supported by many men, as well. The rights women did not have were not rights all men had, either. Only a few were the beneficiaries of such rights. It is true that the few were men, but their idea of how a society should be organized had not yet evolved to what we consider now to be *normal in a democracy*. It took more time, more effort, and more technological advancement. Such effort and such advancement are the fruit of everybody's work – men and women. To say that it was only women who changed the face of modern society, and that men played only the role of the patriarchs and the *white supremacists*, is not only too farfetched, but represents a historical lie. The development of European and American societies to the point where they started to even consider what we call today *inalienable rights* is due to all the nations, to the contribution of both men and women, to the work of enlightened writers and philosophers, who were both men and women. For women to get to the realization of the fact that they *should* be allowed to get an education – they *should* be allowed to have a role in society beyond the limits of the *family sphere*, that they could contribute more to society than by raising children – came in time, as a consequence of the activity of many authors, who were both men and women, who were both atheist

and religious, who were both upper and lower class, who were both heterosexual and homosexual, and the categories can go on.

My view on the matter does not come to contradict the idea that women should have gotten such rights, or that women did not fight for every right they have got. On the contrary, there is much more we should do to discover the history of these steps that women took, to conduct more research to find the work and activity of women who were *neglected* by official record. Their contribution should be known, whether they were writers, journalists, scientists, social activists, poets, artists or *just* wives of important men, who were able to make their voices heard (some as they were eccentrics and could make people listen, some were writers and could get their work published, and, yes, some due to the platforms their husbands had in those times). In fact, there were women who were married, and whose work was even more appreciated than that of their husband's (just think of Mary Shelley, for example). Women, though, were not alone in these efforts. We could get the necessary nuances if we only considered the fact that many of the extraordinary women in those times had fathers, brothers, husbands and sons who were influenced by them. The example of governesses in the 19th century Britain is also meaningful. They were among the most learned people, who had knowledge in many domains of human culture, science, the arts and languages and who educated both girls and boys

(at least before they were sent to boarding schools). As already mentioned, we could also stop and think about those *eccentric* women, who were able to make their voices heard in society as they were so intriguing and attractive (intellectually) that men could not resist their influence (Madame de Mohl's Salon in Paris was the place for many such intellectual encounters for both men and women). The influence of women writers should be also taken very seriously. Their message got to a large public, even if academic and doctoral voices of many men of the day considered such literature like the novel (especially favored by women) a literary form that was not worthy to be considered an art form (Matthew Arnold's position on the novel is well-known...). Still, men liked such women-authored novels, as much as women did.

The reality was, therefore, that women had much to fight for, but men accompanied them in this effort. Most men. Simple logics would tell us that if that had not been the case, women would never have been granted those rights. The case of women's rights in Islamic countries can be given as the best example in the matter, especially when we take into consideration such countries as Iran, where women in the 70s had many rights. They could lead a fruitful and free life then, but everything stopped and changed with the change of the regime, and with men not fighting for the rights of their women anymore (although it is certain that many men have just been silenced, and

such regression was not their choice; dictatorships and totalitarianism can bring all voices to silence, be they men or women). Another aspect that is not discussed is that women, themselves, were not so democratic to begin with: they were not fighting for the right to vote for *all women*. That, too, changed with time. This is why I am so intrigued by the narratives and arguments of contemporary feminists denying the merits of so many women today, just because they were/are from another political spectrum (how are Margaret Thatcher or Dr. Condoleezza Rice inferior to today's female politicians I cannot understand)

To speak about lack of rights in Western Europe, in Britain, or in the United States of America today cannot be considered as speaking about reality. Women do have the same opportunities as men, they have rights, they can vote, they can own property and start businesses, they can be scientists, educators, artists... and they are. In many other parts of the world, though, rights are still to be obtained and it will take very much time to fight against all kinds of dictatorial regimes that do not consider women equal to men. If laws started to change at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, and if the enforcement of such laws was noticeable very soon after, mentalities took much longer to change. Mentalities are not and should not be seen as signs of a lack of progress, or lack of intelligence but a sign of sanity in society: they allow people to hold on to and