



Paglia, Camille (b. 1947)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Social philosopher, literary critic, gadfly, and self-described "loud little woman," Camille Paglia is an unlikely media star. Her frequently outrageous cultural commentary and caustic criticism have made her both famous and controversial.

An openly lesbian university professor, who also identifies as a Democrat and a feminist, she not only skewers "political correctness" and the insularity of academe but also attacks "paleofeminists," gay activists, and many of the most cherished causes of the left with an enthusiastic incisiveness that frequently approaches vitriol.

While many cheer her irreverent challenges as a refreshing call for open discourse, others accuse Paglia of egotism, divisiveness, and reactionary posturing.

Camille Paglia was born on April 2, 1947 in the south central New York city of Endicott, the daughter of an immigrant family. Her mother and all four of her grandparents had been born in Italy, and Paglia grew up immersed in middle-class Italian Catholic culture. Her mother worked at a bank and her father was a college language professor. They introduced her to art, literature, and music, including opera.

Young Camille was an excellent student and a tomboy, who developed crushes on women teachers and her counselors at Girl Scout camp. As a high school student, she discovered Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which influenced her greatly and inspired her to identify as a feminist.

Paglia attended Harpur College of the State University of New York at Binghamton, where she became deeply involved in the enormous cultural, political, and artistic upheavals of the 1960s. She developed a fascination with the avant-garde work of Andy Warhol, and a love of such poets as John Milton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. She wrote her senior thesis on the work of Emily Dickinson and became friends with a circle of gay men.

In 1968, she graduated from Harpur as valedictorian and entered graduate school at Yale University, where, even before the Stonewall riots launched the gay liberation movement, she came out publicly, and defiantly, as a lesbian. In response to an insult she received from a Yale professor of psychiatry, she decided as a matter of principle to be open about her sexuality.

Paglia earned her M.A. in English in 1972 and began teaching at Bennington College in Vermont. There, she began developing her reputation as an intense, eccentric challenger of both academic complacency and leftist analysis. She taught at Bennington for six years, during which time she completed her Ph.D. work at Yale, including her thesis, *Sexual Personae: The Androgyne in Literature and Art*, which she defended in 1976. She was asked to resign her position at Bennington in 1978, after engaging in a physical fight with a student, possibly in response to a homophobic attack.

While Paglia looked for a new job, she reworked her doctoral thesis into a manuscript, which she titled *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. In 1984, she was hired to teach humanities at the Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts (later the University of Arts).



Camille Paglia.
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She continued to seek a publisher for her book, which was rejected by eight publishing houses and five agents, before finding a positive reception at Yale University Press in 1990. Even then, the book received little notice beyond academic reviews until it was nominated for a National Book Award and released in paper by Vintage Press in 1991, when it became a surprise best-seller.

Sexual Personae launched Paglia into a new career as a social critic and pundit. The book is an ambitious survey of Western literature, art, and culture through the lens of Paglia's belief in biological determinism, the influence of paganism, and the value of popular culture.

While many readers found *Sexual Personae* stimulating and refreshing, many others were deeply angered at what they considered to be Paglia's dogmatically reactionary assertions, such as, "If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts."

Despite its statements of deliberate provocation, the book also reveals Paglia as a formidable intellect and a literary critic of unusual insight. As is inevitable for a work of such scope, *Sexual Personae* is uneven, some chapters more convincing than others. But some of them, such as her discussions of Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser and nineteenth-century American literature, are stunning in their penetration.

In many ways, *Sexual Personae's* unusual combination of serious and wide-ranging intellectual exploration and outrageous and often irresponsible generalization predicted the parameters of Paglia's subsequent career.

Freed of the constraints that a more prestigious academic position might have imposed on her, Paglia was able to skewer many of academe's sacred cows, including the dominance of French theory in literary criticism and the privileging of high culture, but the costs of such freedom has been a tendency to stake out positions more for their shock value than their reasoned approach. As a public intellectual she has frequently been more of a provocateur than a serious commentator, someone who sometimes seems more interested in calling attention to herself than in engaging in serious dialogue.

Paglia followed *Sexual Personae* with other books, including *Sex, Art, and American Culture* in 1992, *Vamps and Tramps* in 1994, an analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* published by the British Film Institute in 1998, and *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-three of the World's Best Poems* in 2006. Though none of these have created the kind of intellectual excitement that her first book generated, they have sold well and solidified her reputation.

Paglia's essays have been widely published, and she writes regular columns on culture and politics for *Interview Magazine* and *Salon*. She continues to teach at the University of the Arts.

As a media star and cultural "expert," Paglia is distinguished by an unusually wide range of interest and by seemingly contradictory stances. She can speak expertly of figures as different as John Donne and Madonna, Alexander Pope and Robert Mapplethorpe and of works as distinct as Spenser's *Faerie Queen* and Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct*. And though a self-described atheist, she extolls the social and cultural contributions of religion.

Her mordant criticisms of American feminism for inculcating a victim mentality, for a neglect of science, and for a distaste for Dionysian sexuality have caused some to label her anti-feminist, a charge that she vigorously disputes. "I belonged to a wing of feminism that was ostracized and silenced, and we suffered for decades during the hegemony of the puritanical anti-sex wing typified by Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon and so forth," she stated in 2006. "So when I suddenly seemed to appear like a Jack-in-the box in the early 90s, with a book it had taken me 20 years to write, people were determined to say I was anti-

feminist. I said, 'no I'm not, I'm anti you, I'm anti the feminist establishment.'"

In *Vamps and Tramps*, she declares, "I want a revamped feminism. . . . My generation of Sixties rebels wanted to smash the bourgeois codes that had become the authoritarian totems of the Fifties. The 'nice' girl with her soft, sanitized speech and decorous manners had to go. Thirty years later, we're still stuck with her--in the official spokesmen and the anointed heiresses of the feminist establishment. . . . Equal opportunity feminism, which I espouse, demands the removal of all barriers to woman's advance in the political and professional world--but not at the price of special protections for women which are infantilizing and anti-democratic."

In addition to criticizing the feminist establishment, Paglia has also lambasted pro-choice activists, date-rape victims, and gay organizations such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), which she has described as loud and whiny.

Paglia inveighs against what she has called the "gay Stalinism" of some activists, especially those influenced by Michel Foucault and Post-modernism, as opposed to what she calls the humanistic tradition that extends from Whitman and Wilde to Tennessee Williams and Allen Ginsberg.

She claims that the welcome relaxation of legal and social sanctions against homosexuality over the past 30 years has weakened the unsentimental powers of observation for which gay men and lesbians, as outsiders, were once renowned. "Gay men used to be ferocious exemplars of free thought and free speech. But within 15 years of the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, an insidious totalitarianism infected gay activism, parallel to what was occurring in feminism in the Catharine MacKinnon/Andrea Dworkin era. Intolerance and witch hunts became the norm," she declared in 2002.

Although she describes herself as a Democrat, she was very critical of President Clinton for bringing shame on the office of the Presidency. She describes herself as "pro-military," but she has vigorously opposed the War in Iraq and denounced the incompetence of the Bush administration. Her political stances are sometimes difficult to categorize, and are more often libertarian than liberal or conservative.

Paglia is an outspoken opponent of "political correctness" and what she sees as enforced liberalism on college campuses. A proud advocate of sexual deviance, she supports pornography--especially gay male porn--as a celebration of sexuality.

Since 1993, Paglia has lived with her partner, artist and teacher Allison Maddex. She co-parents Maddex's son Lucien, whom she legally adopted in 2002, but, with typical contrariness does not call herself his mother, since she does not believe that a child should have two mothers.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.