

## INTRODUCTION

### *Why The Female Eunuch?*

I have two copies of Germaine Greer's first, and most famous, book, *The Female Eunuch*. One edition is, I believe, the first published in the United States: a gold-hued 1971 McGraw-Hill hardcover that my girlfriend found for me in a used bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas. The second copy is the Bantam paperback from the same year that I found on one of those New York City street vendor tables amid other out-of-print treasures. Not coincidentally, I also procured my copies of *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett and *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone by scouring these ad hoc city vendors, as well as my library of lesser-known influential feminist works such as *Vaginal Politics*, *Amazon Odyssey*, and *Rebirth of Feminism*. After the initial buzz of finding these gems wore off, I recognized the tragic theme. Women's studies may be flourishing at more than a thousand colleges and universities in the United States alone, but the great works that illuminated the second wave of feminism are out of print.

This publishing tale is familiar, as it turns out. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* appeared in 1792; a few years later, it was out of print and, with it, the foundation of English feminist intellectual tradition. While the vast majority of books go out of print a few years after debuting, it is notably sexist to let the feminist classics be let out to pasture when the political classics of other movements are not. "These books are like Marx's *Communist Manifesto* or the speeches of Martin Luther King," said Rebecca Walker, author of *To*

2 *Be Real* and co-founder of Third Wave Foundation, when she heard that these books were out of print. "They are the theory, the structural foundation of the movement we call feminism and they should be available as important historical documents and ideas which changed the twentieth century." Touché.

As I write, sixteen editions of *The Communist Manifesto* are available from Amazon.com and not a single edition of *The Female Eunuch* or *The Dialectic of Sex*. The fact that my generation, which grew up in the wake of the second wave, does not have access to the feminist classics might be one of the reasons that feminist goals resonate for so many young women and men, yet "feminism"—the label, the philosophy—tends to confuse or even turn off those same people. Imagine if most of the moral lessons you learned were derived from the Bible, but you were never allowed to read that book's text yourself. You could never come to your own conclusions or have your own relationship with morality. Instead, it would be mediated by whoever had access to the book. "If there is a sense in the industry that younger women wouldn't be influenced by these books," Susan Faludi told me, "it's a self-fulfilling prophecy: they certainly won't if the books aren't available."

The books that ignited the second wave are our feminist intellectual history and need to be in print as much as the world needs Engels or Marx or any other male writer whose opinions don't ring with the globalist, capitalist times but whose ideas are revolutionary. After all, there are only so many old copies of the classics floating around on New York City's streets, and I'm not parting with mine.

A glance at the hard- and softcover editions of *The Female Eunuch* that I own suggest that a seismic cultural shift occurred between their publications. The 1971 hardback was introducing Germaine Greer's "shotgun style and bulletproof mind" (as the flap copy has her billed) to an America still thrilled by (or smarting from) radical feminism's literary debut. That had come the

year before in the package of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which exposed the brutal woman-hating that tended to punctuate literature by recognized geniuses (all of them men, natch). Greer's book *looked* serious—like Millett's. The original cover in the States had chunky imposing type, no photo or illustration, and no ebullient blurbs.

By the time the softback *Eunuch* came out, the exceedingly dramatic Greer was already a sensation in the United States (she debated Mailer at an infamous Town Hall war of words), and her book was, in some ways, posited as an antidote to the terrifying indictment of male literary heroes Millett had put forth. On the Bantam edition, a front-cover blurb boasts that *Eunuch* is "#1: the ultimate word on sexual freedom." There is the grinning amulet-sized photo of Greer, the dashing Australian Amazon, looking like the kind of gal who can take a joke. Open the cover and the first page announces: "'Saucy feminist that even men like.' *Life* magazine puts Germaine Greer on its cover!" In every way, the paperback signals that Greer isn't one of those dour radical feminists whom the media had recently anointed in the person of author and activist Kate Millett. But Germaine Greer was hardly a mouthpiece for the patriarchy.

Greer's message in *The Female Eunuch*, though sexier, was as radical as Millett's. She was writing about autonomy, and she cast the culturally manacled, unliberated woman as a eunuch—her sexuality and will castrated. She encouraged women to assert cunt power when most feminists were focusing on political power, and she mapped the entirety of what makes a woman a woman: body, soul, emotion, and culture. She concerned herself with the questions no one was asking and said what others might have been too vulnerable to say. Sometimes this was claiming that much of lesbianism was a revolt against the limitations of the female role of passivity or exhorting so-called liberated types to take a taste of their own menstrual blood. Her book sold and

4 sold, making monthly reprintings necessary to keep up with demand.

In *The Female Eunuch*, Greer advocated using men for sexual pleasure, a precursor to pop culture icons such as Madonna and Salt-N-Pepa. She emphasized joy, pleasure, and spontaneity during a time when the hundreds of thousands of women barely experiencing feminism might have been a little hard on themselves. If American feminism concerned itself chiefly with critiquing the cultural insistence that women never show their rage and remain chic and beautiful, then Greer (seemingly always laughing, decked out in designer duds) flew in the face of that. But she was providing an important counterrule to the ones that some feminists were aggressively critiquing: it's as bad to be told you can't wear a miniskirt as it is to be told you must; it's as oppressive to feel you *can't* laugh as to be told "Give me smile" by some random idiot as you walk down the street.

Greer was a devotee of liberating sexuality and contrarian viewpoints. Prior to publication of *Eunuch*, she wrote about sex, drugs, and rock music for a British counterculture rag called *Oz*. She proudly called herself a "starfucker" and a "super-groupie," claiming the words the way some contemporary girlie-style feminists have wrestled the powerful slurs "cunt," "bitch," and "girl" away from the misogynists. She was exhibitionistic, stylish, and one of the guys. Perhaps it was no coincidence that male critics were extremely enthusiastic about this radical feminist book, one even wishing in print that *The Female Eunuch* had preceded Millett's book so as to catch "the lightning that struck *Sexual Politics*," labeling it "the best feminist book so far."

The first line of *The Female Eunuch* proclaims it as part of the second wave of feminism, yet Greer herself was a fame-laden, gilded beneficiary of the interest surrounding the women's movement, but not a movement participant. In the book, she both acknowledges the growing grass-roots movement and dismisses it, writing:

5 "The organized liberationists are a well-publicized minority . . . Inevitably they are presented as the leaders of a movement which is essentially leaderless. They are not much nearer to providing a revolutionary strategy than they ever were; demonstrating, compiling reading lists and sitting on committees are not themselves liberated behaviour, especially when they are still embedded in a context of housework and feminine wiles." Her book—which so gorgeously and trenchantly describes female bodies in its opening pages—is also riddled with slams against women. The years have passed, and new histories and biographies have delivered us the dirt about the second wave. We know now that Greer (or Betty Friedan, for that matter) wasn't big into what was then quaintly called "sisterhood." We also know that she later dropped her call to have a ton of sex and began chiming on about the pleasures of celibacy and fine food. At the time, her about-face seemed to reveal her hypocrisy. But revolutionary writers are often engaged in a struggle to convince themselves, along with their audience, of their ideas, which is why, for example, a slaveholder like Thomas Jefferson could write so eloquently about freedom. It makes sense, then, that Greer's work—so provocative, so confident—seemed to belie a deep ambivalence about sex, men, and her own body. However, fixating on whether she was able to live exactly as she appeared to command in *Eunuch* is beside the point. Her opinions evolved and complexified, as all writers' visions do. The crucial point here is that Greer described a vision of a woman that was emancipated at a time when women were not.

Germaine Greer was thus one of the most popular and influential voices for feminism, yet stood outside of the organized political movement that ushered in her bully pulpit. This was tactical. As an independent operator, Greer could afford to be more outrageous. No organization or group had granted Greer her power; therefore, it couldn't be taken away. She never had to answer to anyone or for anything beside her own instincts, which is

why she started so many fires. Even the then soi-disant “Pain in Feminism’s Ass” Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington was moved to write a pallid antifeminist rebuke with a book called *The Female Woman*. (Not as catchy a title, clearly; and, yes, it’s out of print.)

*The Female Eunuch* spoke to women on the verge of an explosive shift in consciousness. In 1971, women had heard of “women’s lib” but most couldn’t get a legal abortion. Lesbians were coming out in droves, politicizing their identity, but it was still possible for Kate Millett to be “discredited” by the mainstream media when it was revealed that she was bisexual. Feminism was expressed in the “women’s liberation movement,” not via individual feminists—and the whole concept of individual solutions was facing radical critique. So much has changed in thirty years. Nowadays, the organized “movement” either doesn’t exist or is in an as yet unrecognizable form. That said, the ideals of feminism—equality—have never been so blithely accepted. They are out there in the atmosphere, as banal as oxygen, evident in individual men’s and women’s lives. Of course, despite how casually these ideas are accepted, feminist progress can be expanded only if we have a feminist consciousness. That consciousness is gained in many ways, including through an awareness of our radical history and via exposure to the great minds—and books—that helped to get us here.

But more germane to Germaine, the snarky, pro-sex, rock-’n’-roll, know-your-body-like-you-know-your-Judy-Blume-books angle of feminism is ascendant and diverse. There is *Bust*, *Sex and the City*, Susie Bright, *Jane*, *Girlfriends*, Eve, Queen Latifah, and much, much more. Germaine Greer, verbal gunslinger and independent operator, is evident in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s topless fuck-you on the cover of her book *Bitch*. Greer is evident in Sandra Bernhard’s biting cultural criticism *avec* glamour. The fruits of Greer’s quest for the liberated female can be seen on the courts of the WNBA, on the neighborhood soccer fields dominated by tough little

girls, and in Madonna’s constant refusal to be pinned down. It’s not coincidence that these examples of Greer-ism are all part of the popular culture, and not of the theoretical or academic or even political worlds.

While the spirit of Greer’s first book is out there in the culture, the book itself remains important—critical—for those of us who missed reading it the first time. Her book is all over the place, exploring deeply, yet rapidly, almost everything that has ever popped into Greer’s head—or so it seems. She pulls together what looks like all of these individual loose ends and reveals—*voilà!*—women. *The Female Eunuch* may have been annoyingly apolitical in its day, but it validates what is happening now for feminism: namely, that while a movement is how things change, it is composed of individual women at least *trying* to be free. This book is a dare, egging us on not to take the gains we were born into as enough. To shrug off gratitude and follow our guts. “We, the children who were on the receiving end,” she writes in the chapter called “Altruism,” “knew that our mothers’ self-sacrifice existed mostly in their minds.”

For younger women, born into the famed and disparaged second wave, her words might be a much-needed reason to strike out on our own, Greer-style. It’s not so much what her life ended up being. The fact that she bitched about other women or was never part of the movement doesn’t really matter. *The Female Eunuch* is larger than the sum of Greer’s biography because it’s not about her at all but about the possibility of women to be as bold, bad, good, fierce, intellectual, and sexual as the guys. In fact, Greer’s last words in *Eunuch* aren’t about her or the movement into whose wake this book was launched. Her final words are: “What *will* you do?”

And that, I believe, really is the question that feminism invites.

—Jennifer Baumgardner  
February 2001  
New York City