



A.M. Larks

Still Playing the Girl

Aristotle in *Poetics* introduces the concept of mimesis, commonly known as the idea of art imitating life. Mimesis is the telling of stories that are set in the real world. But what happens when the “real world” has values that shouldn’t be exalted by replication? Indeed, Mimesis can even perhaps explain what we consider to be art and who we consider to be an artist.

In September 1983, author, academic, and critic Joanna Russ published *How to Suppress Woman’s Writing*, an integral text that documented, among other things, the female artists left out of the cannon. While “Russ synthesizes decades ‘really, centuries’ of data and anecdotal evidence into smooth, sensible, easy to grasp explication ... [She does so] for the express purpose of drawing connections between the methodologies of suppression common across the Western patriarchal field,” says [Brit Mandelo in her 2011 article for Tor.com](#). Russ’ aim was not historical but sociological. It was to understand the methods of suppression and, one can assume, therefore prevent them.

But prevention has not occurred. In 2016, Carmen Maria Machado reflects on this very problem in her article for *Electric Literature*, [“How to Suppress Women’s Criticism”](#). Machado accurately observes that there are too many “reclaimed” women writers:

Every year, it seems like major publishers rediscover underappreciated, dead women writers. Shirley Jackson, Lucia Berlin, Patricia Highsmith, Clarice Lispector, Jane Bowles. There is always a great flurry of attention around these women, a posthumous literary

coronation that is equal parts exciting and painful, like discovering at her funeral that a long-ago, seemingly unrequited crush in fact loved you madly.

While Machado—quoting Mandelo—acknowledges that this history is vital for the next generation:

One of the things Russ refers to time and time again in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* is that the history of women writers “as friends, as colleagues, as individuals, as a group” is written on sand. Each generation feels that they're the first and the only to want to be a woman writer, that they must do it on their own. Similarly, feminist history is in a state of perpetual erasure. By using extensive citations of real women writers' works, and real books devoted to women writers like Moers' much-cited *Literary Women*, Russ is creating a *concrete list of the past*. Using the references she uses, documenting them so thoroughly, creates a history and a set of possibilities not written in sand; the knowledge that not only were there networks of talented women writing, we can prove it. It's not new. It's a history, and the presence of a real history is a boon to young critics and writers. It defeats the pollution of agency, it defeats the myth of the singular individual woman, it creates a sense of continuity and community.

She also calls us to action, to achieve the prevention implied in Russ' work. “Maybe what we need is more thoughtful vigilance; to help women and people of color and queer folks and working-class artists and so many others find their rightful place in the canon—ideally, while they're still alive to witness it.”

In April 2018, award-winning literary critic Michelle Dean published “*Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion*.” In *Sharp*, Dean profiles ten female literary critics who were panned in the history books but also raised feathers with the feminist movement. (Russ is not included because she was an avowed feminist.) “The forward march of American literature is usually chronicled by way of its male novelists: the Hemingways and Fitzgeralds, the Roths and Bellows and Salingers. There is little sense, in that version of the story, that women writers of those eras were doing much worth remembering. Even in more academic accounts, in ‘intellectual histories,’ it is generally assumed that men dominated the scene.”

Collectively, *Sharp* showcases women like Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, Pauline Kael, Norah Ephron, and Janet Malcolm and their shared experiences in the struggle to gain acceptance as critics due to their gender. Each critic had their own gender-based battle. Dean notes that with Sontag, “more often than not, the critic’s entire opinion would be predicated on his or her personal image of Sontag. And as a result, from then on, Sontag’s personality would become as much an issue as what she wrote.” One would assume that this treatment was one-sided, but Sontag was also the recipient of female derision for her striking features. “If there were any justice in this world, Susan Sontag would be ugly, or at least plain,” a female *Washington Post* reviewer remarked. “No girl that good-looking has any right to have all those brains.”

Sontag was not the only critic to be eschewed by members of the same gender, Pauline Kael was “often accused of being ‘sour or nasty or bitter.’” In fact, on New Year’s Day in 1963, she read a listener complaint on her radio show on KPFA, a Berkeley radio station. ‘Miss Kael,’ it began, ‘I assume you aren’t married. One loses that nasty, sharp bite in one’s voice when one learns to care about others.’

It is impossible to fathom a world where a male critic would have his opinions dismissed because he was attractive or single (as it would be hard to picture a world where it is acceptable to question the intelligence of a person based on their genitalia). Yet, this happened. Joan Didion baffled critics, some of whom had trouble pairing Didion’s brilliance with her gender: Melvin Maddocks of the *Christian Science Monitor* cryptically remarked, in what appeared to be a compliment:

Journalism by women is the price the man’s world pays for having disappointed them. Here at their best are the unforgiving eye, the unforgetting ear, the concealed hatpin style. That is one way of looking at it; though the reference to hat pins is clearly trivializing, the notion that the opinions were a “price” rather than a gift is somewhat revealing.

If Didion's gender was not enough of an issue, others found that Didion's powerhouse persona failed to match up to the actual person. "Kazin continued to catalog discrepancies. Didion's voice [on the page] was 'so much stronger than her own little girl's voice!'"

Nora Ephron had men responding to her columns "... calling her brainy and cute instead of brilliant, opining on how much they'd like to sleep with her. She saw that this affected what she was asked to write and what she was asked to think about in her career as an essayist." Indeed, Janet Malcolm (nee Winn) was condescended to and flirted with by Norman Mailer over her article covering his appearance on television with Dorothy Parker and Truman Capote. "*One is forced to add that the Lady Winn's account was marvelously well-written and suffered only from the trifling flaw that most of the words she put in my mouth were never said by me.*"

In her article, Machado summarizes Russ: "she argues that women's art is often suppressed before conception by 'powerful, informal prohibitions,' and if it is created, by 'denying the authorship of the work in question... belittlement of the work itself in various ways, isolation of the work from the tradition to which it belongs... assertions that the work indicates the author's bad character... and simply ignoring the works, the workers, and the whole tradition.'" Dean is rescuing these "women from isolation and identification" as the exception. As a critic herself she knows, "There is something valuable about knowing this history if you are a young woman of a certain kind of ambition. There is something valuable in knowing that pervasive sexism notwithstanding there are ways to cut through it."

"So when I ask in the following pages," Dean writes, "what made these women who they were, such elegant arguers, both hindered and helped by men, prone to but not defined by mistakes, and above all completely unforgettable, I do it for one simple reason: because even now, *even (arguably) after feminism*, we still need more women like this." (Emphasis added.)

Clearly, Machado, Russ, and Dean, are calling for art to reflect and mimic the full spectrum of life. But what if that life is flawed? Oscar Wilde, who is largely credited with being the father of the anti-mimesis movement, observes in his essay “The Decay of Lying –An Observation” that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life”. If this is true, then a closer examination of the female narratives in Art is warranted. What are the narratives that we thrust upon women both real and fictional? What are they, me, we allowed to do or be?

It turns out, if one looks to the subject matter of female memoirs, what woman are “allowed” centers around their bodies or their relationships. Vikki Warner notes in “[Where Are All the Memoirs about Women and Work](#)” that

A large majority of published memoirs by women fit into two topic areas: **marriage and divorce, family, fertility and mothering;** and **physical or mental illness and substance abuse**. When I narrowed my search to memoirs about work by women of color, the results were almost nil. Of the few exceptions, most featured celebrity authors. (Emphasis added.)

Warner posits that the publishing industry is playing it safe.

Why does the publishing industry restrict women’s memoir mostly to matters of our bodies and family relationships? Perhaps editors are still inadvertently assuming that Americans are more likely to accept stories of women’s life experiences that directly or indirectly **confirm traditional beliefs**: that readers primarily want stories of women as mothers, wives, and caretakers; and also that our tricky lady constitutions make us susceptible to physical and mental illness. (Emphasis added).

This trend that Warner observes has an eerie call back to Russ. One way to suppress women's writing is by "ignoring the works, the workers, and the whole tradition."

But it isn't just nonfiction narratives that are suspect. In *You Play The Girl*, Carina Chocano examines fictional female narratives from Hans Christian Anderson to "Frozen". Her conclusion is that the narratives haven't changed. What is unique about her analysis is that she never dismisses the purpose and influence that these narratives have, especially when choosing what to teach her own daughter about being a woman. It is precisely because of the influence of these narratives that Chocano examines and reexamines the stories that have shaped the impact that these narratives have in American society.

Likewise, Alison Bechdel, the co-creator of the Bechdel Test, wanted to examine female narratives by requiring the author of any narrative to have 1) more than one female character, 2) that talk to each other, and 3) about something other than a man. Essentially, the Bechdel Test is a plea for round female characters, or as Chocano would put it: characters that don't "play the girl". Though the critique bears her name, Bechdel has admitted that the test was borrowed from Virginia Woolf. In *a Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrator takes a fictitious book off the shelf and pretends to be shocked by the words "Chloe liked Olivia.", the idea being that the entire literary world would be fundamentally altered because women had not been allowed to like one another. The Bechdel Test is a diagnostic tool, for and from culture rather than medicine. What the test has demonstrated is that there is an immunological dysfunction in our society. We are eating our girls alive. Chocano argues that we are all Alice adrift in Wonderland, trying to keep pace with shifting rules for women. We are "...eternally frustrated, because Wonderland is governed not by reason or rules but by ideology, faith, superstition, and fear. Something is real if you believe it's real, if you continually affirm its existence. It disappears if you don't. subsumed into a parallel universe."

But this dysfunction doesn't have a mysterious cause, it is from a failure to change the narrative. "What's significant is that the cycle of idealization, devaluation, and revision gives *the appearance of progress*, superficial change, that distracts us from the big picture."

In other words, what is the narrative? What parts do the girls get to play? And most importantly, have they changed at all in the past 2,000 years? Chocano's point is that these aren't just movies (or books or memoirs) and we shouldn't just "relax" as she has been told to do by the various online persons. These are the narratives that both affect and effect. The narratives preferred by a society showcases its values and simultaneously reinforces them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Chocano's relation of the purpose of fairy tales: "The classical fairy tale for children and adults reinforced the patriarchal symbolical order based on rigid notions of sexuality and gender. Stereotypes, not archetypes –depicted in printed and staged version of fairy tales tended to follow schematic notions of how young men and women behave and *should* behave." (Emphasis added).

Chocano's analysis is not meant to take aim at any one storyteller; her purpose is to reevaluate the plot. Those same tired storylines that are meant to keep women in check and minding their manners have infested the culture and influenced women of all ages to stay in their gender-determined lane. Nothing is more powerful than Chocano's elucidation of the marriage plot. "Traditionally, the only plot that has been available to the heroine is the 'marriage plot.' In stories, it has been her one thrilling, treacherous, booby-trapped obstacle course to transcendent happiness. Because marriage was the only culturally and socially sanctioned ('happy') outcome for a girl, her story could conclude only one way to be deemed a success." "If, traditionally, the hero's story was the story of a boy's transformation into himself, then the heroine's story, or text, was the story of girl's transformation into a wife. The transition from her father's child to her husband's wife was understood to be her only adventure." Critics may argue that the marriage plot is only relevant to the eighteenth-century novels, a la Jane Austen, but Chocano brings this into clear view by referencing current reality T.V., "Pygmalion stories aren't about love at all – they're about compliance," she

writes. Pygmalion is originally featured in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Published in 8 A.D., it is about a sculptor who falls in love and marries his female sculpture. Pygmalion is about a man crafting his perfect bride. What's frightening is that Pygmalion plots can be seen as recent as 2007 in *Lars and the Real Girl*. In the 1,999 years in between *Metamorphosis* and *Lars*, the world has been transformed through the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the Information Age, but women aren't included in those advancements. The complexities of the Pygmalion plots can be expressed in a comparative contrast of *My Fair Lady* and *Pygmalion*, the play by George Bernard Shaw. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza (Galatea, the statue) comes alive and emancipates herself, an ending George Bernard Shaw fought for. However, in *My Fair Lady*, Eliza and Higgins marry; man does and can create his perfect mate. One would believe that *My Fair Lady* is the older of the two productions, but in fact it is 51 years newer than *Pygmalion*, which leads one to question: why have we gone back to the old storyline?

Chocano is not alone in her reexamination of these narratives. Molly Ringwald published an article in the *New Yorker* reexamining her movies under John Hughes. Ringwald, like Chocano, is wondering just how far the narratives have come and arrives at a similar conclusion. Should Bender, the misunderstood rebel in *The Breakfast Club*, get the girl he spends the whole movie berating? And what about that crotch shot? Is it kosher for a man to look up a girl's skirt and then say he's interested in her? In *Sixteen Candles*, is it okay that the allusion of sex--or the promise of the actual thing--is used as a bargaining chip between the girls and boys without power (like the geeky Farmer Ted) and with power (like popular Jake)?

Ringwald indicates that Hughes saw her photo out of a stack of headshots and a match was made between artist and muse. He put *The Breakfast Club* on hold and wrote what would become *Sixteen Candles*. Ringwald shot *Sixteen Candles* the summer after ninth grade. At 14 or 15, Ringwald would have been the perfect age for an ingenue, a literary device that Chocano states is defined "...not only by her age – that crepuscular moment between childhood and adolescence – but also her doe-eyed innocence." Chocano describes an ingenue, who must marry or perish, as moving "...through this world unaware of the

hypocrisy, duplicity, and exploitation all around her. She is credulous and vulnerable and dependent on a protective paternal figure, and lives in constant peril of being exploited or corrupted by some lurking cad or villain.” Isn’t Samantha, played by Ringwald in *Sixteen Candles*, exploited, even just a little bit by Farmer Ted and then saved by dashing Jake? Isn’t Claire, in *The Breakfast Club*, virginal and unspoiled, taken care of by daddy who drops her off at detention with sushi? Did Hughes craft his own modern day Galatea flickering on our movie screens?

Ringwald, unlike Chocano, is not sure how to classify these reexamined movies. Why, she wonders, would they have meant so much to so many? Perhaps that is more of an explanation of the time rather than theme. If Ringwald is correct and teen movies were sparse when Hughes began his domination, then any movie hitting thematic notes of insider/outsider and coming into one’s own would have widespread impact. But, shouldn’t narratives have moved passed the Hughes era in the last 30 years? Can’t we acknowledge that these stories are problematic in their dealings with teenage male/female relationships without suppressing their impact on the cultural narrative? The question really boils down to would you want your teenage daughter to mimic these behaviors?

Both Art and Life must move forward toward an era where both exhibit the full diversity of human existence. We must tell and show the next generation of women that you indeed can be anything, do anything. Here are the women that came before you. Here is a character that did it, too. This is why you, too, can do it.

The most off-putting element that each of the above writers has touched upon is how much things haven’t changed. Russ’ work is exactly as old as I am (I was born in September 1983). The Bechdel Test originally appeared in 1985. Even worse, it was borrowed from Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (Chapter 5) published in 1929.

The way forward appears to be two-fold; it is not only changing the historical record as both Russ and Dean have done but through “...thoughtful vigilance; to help women and people of color and queer

folks and working-class artists and so many others find their rightful place in the canon—ideally, while they're still alive to witness it," as Machado states, thereby correcting the canon, in real-time, so that history is written in concrete not sand.

The second prong calls for changing the popular narratives, rounding out all female characters and giving our girls different plot lines and outcomes. Chocano characterizes our current era as Wonderland. We are all Alice, lost amidst the confusion. We are "...eternally frustrated, because Wonderland is governed not by reason or rules but by ideology, faith, superstition, and fear. Something is real if you believe it's real, if you continually affirm its existence. It disappears if you don't. Subsumed into a parallel universe." In Alice's journey through Wonderland it appears that she is making progress, but she is no closer to reality than when she began. The tables only begin to turn in when Alice, on the witness stand, critiques the King's interpretation of a letter. He is wrong and she speaks out. The Queen, furious, orders Alice's beheading but lo and behold Alice grows too big for the army of playing cards and escapes back to reality. Alice changed the narrative. She grew too big to be beheaded. She outgrew Wonderland. What started with a critique and activism ended with a new storyline. Here's hoping that by this critique—as well as all the other critics tackling this subject—that 35 years from now Wonderland's more narratives are being written by authors like Leah Dieterich, Roxanne Gay, Cheryl Strayed, Wendy C. Ortiz, Maggie Nelson, Claire Dederer, Lidia Yuknavitch, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Bell Hooks, Michelle Tea, Tressie McMillan Cottam, Abigail Thomas, and Alok Vaid-Menom.