SHARP

The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion

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Preface

I gathered the women in this book under the sign of a compliment that every one of them received in their lives: they were called sharp.

The precise nature of their gifts varied, but they had in common the ability to write unforgettably. The world would not have been the same without Dorothy Parker's acid reflections on the absurdities of her life. Or Rebecca West's ability to sweep half the world's history into a first-person account of a single trip. Or Hannah Arendt's ideas about totalitarianism, or Mary McCarthy's fiction that took as its subject the strange consciousness of the princess among the trolls. Or Susan Sontag's ideas about interpretation, or Pauline Kael's energetic swipes at filmmakers. Or Nora Ephron's skepticism about the feminist movement, or Renata Adler's catalog of the foibles of those in power. Or Janet Malcolm's reflections on the perils and rewards of psychoanalysis and journalism.

That these women achieved what they did in the twentieth century only makes them more remarkable. They came up in a world that was not eager to hear women's opinions about anything. It can be easy to forget that Dorothy Parker began publishing her caustic verse before women even had the vote. We often don't think about the fact that the second wave of feminism kicked up *after* Susan Sontag had become the icon she was with her "Notes on 'Camp'" essay. These women openly defied gendered expectations before any organized feminist movement managed to make gains for women

on the whole. Through their exceptional talent, they were granted a kind of intellectual equality to men other women had no hope of.

All that personal success often put them in tension with the collective politics of "feminism." While some of the people in this book called themselves feminists, others didn't. Virtually none of them found themselves satisfied by working as activists; Rebecca West, who came closest, eventually found the suffragettes both admirably ferocious and unforgivably prudish. Sontag wrote a defense of feminism, then turned around and roared at Adrienne Rich about the "simple-mindedness" of the movement when challenged. Even Nora Ephron confessed to feeling uneasy about the efforts of women to organize at the 1972 Democratic convention.

The ambivalence here is often said to be repudiation of feminist politics, and occasionally it explicitly was that. These women were all oppositional spirits, and they tended not to like being grouped together. For one thing, some of them despised each other: McCarthy had no interest in Parker, Sontag said the same about McCarthy, Adler famously scorched the earth when she went after Kael. For another, they had little time for notions of "sisterhood": I can imagine Hannah Arendt haranguing me for placing her work in the context of her womanhood at all.

And yet, these women were received as proof positive that women were every bit as qualified to weigh in on art, on ideas, and on politics as men. What progress we have ever made on that front was made because the feminine side of the equation could lay claim to Arendt and Didion and Malcolm, among the others. Whether or not they knew it, these women cleared a path for other women to follow.

I wrote this book because this history has never been as well-known as it deserves to be, at least outside certain isolated precincts of New York. Biographies had been written of all of them and devoured by me. But as biographies do, each book considered these women in isolation, a phenomenon unto herself, missing

the connections I felt I could see. 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. Certainly, the so-called New York intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century are often identified as a male set. But my research showed otherwise. Men might have outnumbered women, demographically. But in the arguably more crucial matter of producing work worth remembering, the work that defined the terms of their scene, the women were right up to par—and often beyond it.

Is there, after all, a voice that carries better through the ages than Parker's? You can practically hear the scratch of her voice in every verse. Or is there a moral and political voice whose reach exceeds Hannah Arendt's? Where would our vision of culture be without Susan Sontag? How would we think about movies without Pauline Kael to open the door to the celebration of popular art? The longer I looked at the work of these women laid out before me, the more puzzling I found it that anyone could look at the literary and intellectual history of the twentieth century and *not* center women in it.

I can't help thinking the reason people haven't is because being so bright, so exceptional, so sharp, did not always earn these women praise in their own time. More often people reacted badly to the sting. Broadway producers hated Parker and chased her out of a theater critic's post. Mary McCarthy's friends at the *Partisan Review* despised the parodies she wrote of them, feeling her haughty and unkind. Pauline Kael was criticized by the male cineasts of her era for being insufficiently serious. (Actually she's still criticized for that.) The letters to the editor were scathing when Joan Didion published her famous essay on central California, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream." When Janet Malcolm observed that journalists exploit the

vanity of their subjects, newspaper columnists took to their pulpits to shame her for sullying the alleged honor of journalism.

Some of that criticism came from bald sexism. Some from plain stupidity. Quite a bit of it was some blend of both. But the key to these women's power was in how they responded to it, with a kind of intelligent skepticism that was often very funny. Even Hannah Arendt could roll an eye, now and then, at the furor her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* provoked. Didion once fired a simple "Oh, wow" at an intemperate letter writer. Adler had a habit of quoting writers' own words back at them, pointing out word repetition and philosophical emptiness.

Their sardonic ways sometimes became grounds to ignore these women, to deem them "not serious." Irony, sarcasm, ridicule: these can be the tools of outsiders, a by-product of the natural skepticism toward conventional wisdom that comes when you haven't been able to participate in its formulation. It is my view that we should take more notice of an attempt to intervene when it has that sort of edge to it. There is always intellectual value in not being like everyone else at the table, in this case not being a man, but also not being white, not being upper class, not being from the right school.

It was not so much that these women were always in the right. Nor that they are themselves a perfect demographic sample. These women came from similar backgrounds: white, and often Jewish, and middle-class. And as you will see in the following pages, they were formed by the habits, preoccupations and prejudices that entails. In a more perfect world, for example, a black writer like Zora Neale Hurston would have been more widely recognized as part of this cohort, but racism kept her writings at the margin of it.

But even so, these women were there in the fray, participating in the great arguments of the twentieth century. That is the point of this book. Their work alone is reason to acknowledge their presence.

I will cop to a secondary motive, one that shaped the kinds of questions I explored about these women. 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 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.