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THREE FOR THOUGHT: WHAT YOU NEED TO READ ABOUT . . . ALPHA WOMEN

Why can't a woman . . .

As more and more strong women rise to the top of the political world, CAMILLE PAGLIA ponders the paradigms of power and gender

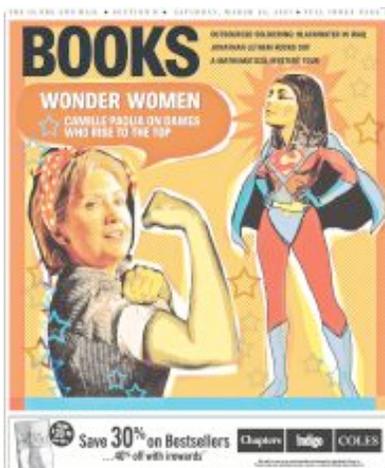
CAMILLE PAGLIA

Hillary Rodham Clinton is leading in all national polls in the United States as the first woman candidate with a real chance to be nominated for president by a major party. There have been many women mayors, governors and senators, and even an unsuccessful vice-presidential candidate, Geraldine Ferraro, but American women's exercise of political power is still a work in progress.

Other nations, in contrast, have had women leaders since the 1960s -- from Indira Gandhi and Golda Meir to Margaret Thatcher and Benazir Bhutto. Examples since the early 1990s include Mary Robinson (Ireland), Kim Campbell (Canada), Angela Merkel (Germany), Michelle Bachelet (Chile) and Tarja Halonen (Finland).

How far modern women have come over the past century can be appreciated by a reading of Henrik Ibsen's great play **Hedda Gabler**, which he wrote in exile in Munich in 1890. Ibsen's egotistical protagonist seemed monstrous to many at the time. But what we see in Hedda are the simmering, stifled energies of generations of talented women who lacked opportunities for achievement in the public realm.

Like Nora Helmer in Ibsen's earlier play, *A Doll's House*, Hedda is trapped in a bourgeois marriage, but she lacks Nora's maternal instinct and spirit of fun. The play is significantly called *Hedda Gabler* rather than Hedda Tesman, her married name. Like Hillary Rodham, whose initial refusal to take her husband's last name may have cost governor Bill Clinton voter support in his first re-election campaign in conservative Arkansas, Hedda identifies with her military father, General Gabler. There is a part of her that remains, like the warrior goddess Athena, ever-virgin.

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Similarly, Hillary's hard-edged militancy (disguised by cheery smiles and pastel hues) certainly comes from her father, a U.S. Navy drill instructor during the Second World War who was punitively harsh on his two sons. The first-born Hillary, with her vaulting ambition, became his true son.

The symbol of Hedda Gabler's yearning for masculine power is her favourite possession, a set of fine pistols inherited from her late father. One of the funniest and most unnerving moments in the play is when, standing in the French doors, she takes target practice in the garden and nearly wings a strolling judge.

But without latitude for authority in the world, Hedda's intelligence and energy turn destructive. Unable to love, she is disconnected from ordinary satisfactions. She plays with others' lives, a malicious manipulation that brings disaster.

Like *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler* ends with a bang. Shockingly abandoning her husband and children, Nora slams the front door as she strikes out on her own. But the loud noise in *Hedda Gabler* is a gunshot. Hedda chooses the radical freedom of death rather than a mediocre existence under the control of others.

Political power before modern women won the right to vote was reserved for a royal elite. There are biographies aplenty of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great and Christina of Sweden. For a different angle, I recommend Joyce Tyldesley's **Hatchepsut: The Female Pharaoh** (Penguin, 1998).

Perhaps because a movie has yet to be made about her, Hatshepsut (as her name is generally spelled) remains little known. A Los Angeles psychic did tell singer Tina Turner, according to the latter's autobiography, that in a previous incarnation she had been Hatshepsut. The queen's grandly terraced mortuary temple, nestled beneath a cliff across the Nile from Luxor, was the scene in 1997 of a horrific massacre of 58 tourists by Islamic terrorists.

Hatshepsut, who ruled Egypt for two decades (circa 1473-1458 B.C.), was a member of the New Kingdom's illustrious 18th dynasty. The daughter of a pharaoh, Thutmose I, she married her half-brother, Thutmose II, with whom she had a daughter. (Incest was the *modus vivendi* of Egyptian royalty, who were viewed as living gods.) When her brother's young son by another wife succeeded him as Thutmose III, Hatshepsut stepped in as regent and wielded power aggressively on her own.

She insisted she was not just queen, but pharaoh -- the only example of this curiosity of gender in 3,000 years of Egyptian history. Her sculptures show her sporting female breasts yet wearing the masculine royal kilt, striped head cloth and even the pharaoh's ceremonial tie-on beard. She became "His Majesty." After her death, Hatshepsut's monuments were defaced or destroyed, and her name was erased from the list of kings. As a woman, she had evidently over-reached.

A parallel tale is chronicled in Shakespeare's **Antony and Cleopatra**, based on Plutarch's life of Mark Antony. Shakespeare was surely drawn to the story of the imperious last queen of Egypt because of the presence of a willful, charismatic woman on the throne in his own time. His Cleopatra represents mercurial imagination and volcanic passion. She is regal yet given to physical rages, and her impulsiveness compromises her political judgment.

At the battle of Actium in 31 B.C., one of the turning points of Western history, Cleopatra forced the skilled infantryman Antony to fight by sea, despite the appeals (made prophetically haunting in

Shakespeare) of his grizzled veterans. After their humiliating defeat at Actium by Octavius Caesar (the future Augustus), Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide in Egypt the following year.

This profound play, which sympathizes with the fabled lovers even while it condemns them for their lack of realism, convinced me of the necessity for politically ambitious women to study military history and strategy. I argued this position, with little effect, from the early 1990s on, when feminists, in my view, were too consumed with domestic social welfare issues and with women's studies courses that preached male-bashing and female victimhood.

The U.S. president is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Hence the first woman president, especially after 9/11, must have military expertise. After she was improbably elected a senator for the first time seven years ago, Hillary Clinton shrewdly got herself appointed to the Armed Services Committee. This is the new feminism. The path to power for women lies through male territory.

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