
Paglia-Burchill

Earlier this year history was made when Julie Burchill and Camille Paglia engaged in the first recorded fax war. This is the complete, unexpurgated transcript of what the press dubbed "The Battle Of the Bitches"

On 9 February 1993 our Cultural Studies Editor Matt ffychte faxed Camille Paglia asking her to contribute to his pages, offering her a signed copy of Julie Burchill's new novel "No Exit" in addition to her usual fee. Within minutes she phoned him demanding to know where he'd got her "private" fax no. Shortly afterwards he received the following fax:

9 Feb 93

Dear Mr ffychte, I am responding to your inquiry about a possible letter or article from me for the Modern Review. I am offered a signed copy of a novel by Julie Burchill as an inducement.

One would have thought that had Julie Burchill been interested in securing my services to contribute to the Modern Review or to defend it against the charge of 'anti-intellectualism', she would have taken more care not to write such a malicious, distorted, error-filled, and yes, anti-intellectual review of my book. I value honesty, accuracy, and fair-dealing, all of which were in short supply in that article.

In view of these circumstances, I regret to say that I must decline your offer. It is certainly true that both Julie Burchill (who is completely unknown in America) and The Modern Review have lost a potentially strong ally in me. Unfortunately, one reaps what one sows.

Yours truly

Camille Paglia

Philadelphia College of Art and Design

MR Editor Toby Young faxed her back - via her agent - inviting her to review "No Exit" in the MR. A few days later the following fax arrived:

Dear Mr Young

I have received your letter of Feb 14.

I'm afraid that after your unfortunate opening gambit in your last letter which offered me a "signed copy" of a novel by Julie Burchill, you have given me even deeper offense by suggesting that I should review her novel and "rip her to shreds."

I find it highly objectionable, and personally insulting to me as a scholar, that you would think I would be interested in exacting this kind of "tit-for tat" petty revenge.

You are full of fulsome praise for me as a writer, but I have now received two letters from TMR that treat me as a hack rather than an intellectual.

Apropos of your request to write for you: I'm afraid your magazine, even by your own admission, is too deeply associated in the public eye with Julie Burchill. That you automatically offered me a copy of her novel shows that the problem is an internal as well as an external one.

Because of Burchill's coarse and dishonest review of my book in The Spectator, I'm sorry to say that I cannot add the weight of my name and my work to an enterprise that would seem to reflect positively on her. I would have been happy to have allied with her before, but her own behaviour has made that impossible. I no longer take her seriously as a thinker or as a personality.

If Julie Burchill is now a millstone around your necks, it is your task, not mine to get rid of it.

Yours truly

Camille Paglia

Toby Young then faxed Paglia asking if he could reprint her first fax in the next issue. Because time was short, he did not bother to go via her literary agent. Within minutes she called him, accusing him of "invading her privacy". When he refused to apologise, she called him a "pig fucking cunt". A week later The Modern Review received a copy of letter which Paglia had sent to the Sunday Times *DB's note: I won't bother to reproduce it here; suffice to say it advises of the change of her fax and phone nos and offers a distinctly light-handed reproof of TMR's tactics to date*

On 18 March, The Modern Review received a copy of a fax Paglia had sent her English publishers, alerting them to a diary story in the Telegraph about her previous faxes. "I'm sure it will stir up the malicious London literary world and get Burchill into high dudgeon" Paglia wrote, "I'm afraid she has cast down the gauntlet and may regret it.")

20 Mar 93

Dear Professor Paglia

It has come to my notice that you believe you and I are currently engaged in a feud; I quote, "the Burchill vs Paglia pugilistics are sure to be an entertaining, long running drama."

Believe me, a feud, like a love affair, takes two. As you have pointed out, I am unknown in your great country; you on the other hand are an unimpeachable celebrity. Your career is far hotter than mine. But I don't have the time or energy to participate in such trite theatrics; how can you?

I'm surprised you were so upset by my Spectator review. How you of all people can complain of my "malice" is a complete mystery to me. Now you know how Naomi Wolf and Susan Faludi must feel every time you spew up your speil to a waiting world. I'm here to tell you that you can't come on like a street tough and then have an attack of the Victorian vapours when faced with a taste of your own style.

I know ethnicity means a lot to you. You've got a wop name, so you think you're Robert De Niro. These little girls, Jewish and middle class and whatever, are too nice, too well bred to fight back. I'm not. Don't believe what you read about the English; our working class, from where I'm proud to come, is the toughest in the world. I'm not nice. I'm not as loud as you, but if push comes to shove I'm nastier. I'm ten years younger, two stone heavier, and I haven't had my nuts taken off by academia.

Are you SO insecure that you can't get one critical review without throwing a temper tantrum? What a fucking GIRL you are! Perhaps it's because you got famous so late. One day you'll learn it comes with the territory.

Julie Burchill

PS I see you are planning "to sustain interest media interest by nip-and-tuck mini raids on the British media". To show that there are no hard feelings, and to help your rather touching pursuit of publicity along, I will be happy to tell all my friends in the British media of your fascinating game plan.

22 March 93

Julie Burchill,

I have recieved your extraordinarily clumsy and ill written letter. You and your coterie seem to have the mental age of undergraduates, with whom I am certainly used to dealing. What empty bluster and tired cliches! If you were once witty, I'm afraid you're in a bit of a decline.

I have no idea who you are. I was simply told, twice in the past year, by people who have lived in England that there is this person named Julie Burchill who as a close parallel to me in sensibility and prose style.

Naturally I assumed this would be someone I would at some point ally with.

Your review of my book was not particularly negative, compared to other reivews I have recieved, most of which tend to be highly, even hysterically negative and which I am well known to relish. But if you are as smart as you think you are, you would have realized that your reputation was on the line in reviewing me, and you would not have written such a sloppy, distorted article. It did you more harm than it did me. Your weaknesses and limtations as a thinker and writer were very much on view in it. I don't think you fully realise the ammuntion you have given your enemies in Great Britian.

As the years pass, it will become clearer and clearer to everyone, perhaps even to you, that this was a pivotal moment in your life. You had an opportunity to move forward and to grow by making an important alliance. But instead you chose to dig in your heels, clamp down, and sulk at the new girl invading your turf. You have behaved childishly.

I could have helped you far more than you could help me. I am read and translated around the world from Japan to South America, and the basis of my fame is not just journalism but a scholarly book on the history of culture. You are a very local commodity, completely unknown outside of England, and you have produced nothing of global interest. It is you who began this fight, and it is you who will pay the price for it. The more vicious you are in print, the stupider you will look.

Your review, as I said to the Daily Telegraph when it called, was not about my book but about yourself. It contains a shadowy, tragic - or should I say pathetic - history of your life, your grim obsessiveness about your body image and what were pretty clearly some early sexual encounters with men, where your credulity or failures of judgement got you into situations that left permanent marks on you. As a teacher I can't help but feel sorry for you.

This time you've gotten in over your head, but you don't realise it yet. I have already gathered from my contacts in the London media (and even from the Modern Review itself!) that many people are tired of your bullying and pretensions. I have no intention of publicly attacking you (except where I am specifically asked to by reporters), since I don't view you as that important in the world scheme. But there are many ways I can help others expose you. Your coarse and unskilled letter is yet another way you have wounded yourself, and I will make sure it is widely seen.

Camille Paglia

22 March 93

Dear Professor Paglia,

Yes, please feel free to show my letter to whoever you like. I'm pleased with it and I'm certainly going to pass around the fax someone at your English publisher gave me, in which you outline your pathetic plan to get publicity in my country by inventing a feud with me, the nation's sweetheart.

I don't dislike you. I think you're rather sweet. As Madonna said about when asked about your obsession with

her, "I think it's very amusing."

It's great to see an academic cube like yourself get with it. I'm very glad you're big in Japan. But the day I need your "help" or "alliance", I'll give up and go into academia.

Now that really is a fate worse than death.

Julie Burchill

PS Your Diana program was crap, and none of the TV reviewers knew who you were AND I was asked to do it first. I was glad to pass some work your way, and I'm sure I'll have the chance again.

23 Mar 93

Julie Burchill,

I have received your latest message of March 22 via my agent. Believe me, it gives me no pleasure to see a person of your standing debase herself in the way you have done in these shallow, desperate letters. It is as if you've lost all sense of what wit or argument is. Your fright and panic are painfully visible. I never dreamed my position was as strong in England as your shrill letters have demonstrated. If you were as confident in your stature or reputation, you would not have needed to take that tone with me. Your spluttering hostility proves I have made serious inroads into territory you once ruled alone.

It is hard to believe you are a woman in your mid 30s. Your flip, cliched locutions, braying rhetoric, and meandering incoherences are those of a colleg or even high school student. I am truly sorry to see yet another British woman writer self destruct, in the way Germaine Greer did (whose achievements are far more substantial than yours) did in the Seventies.

You must face the fact that the letters you have written me - in which television reviewers are cited for their authority! - will give great pleasure to your enemies, who have waited a very long time to see you finally trip yourself up.

As far as I can gather, you seem to think your loud, brash style is unique and impressive - which it may well be in England with its code of decorum. But in America, everyone, down to the guys on the street corner, talks in this way, except in the academe. Your letters are banal and ludicrous in American terms because of your lurching inability to use this vernacular in a fresh way. You think yourself madly clever, but I'm afraid your infant terrible personality is a bit tattered. you seem trapped in juvenility, like a matron who can't forget her salad days at the school sorority.

A friend of mine calls a style like yours -which we have seen a thousand examples of- "alcoholic prose".

There is a heavy, grinding ponderousness pull on the sinking syntax, a noisy blathering sound, a bitter, maudlin self pity breaking through the false bravado and cynical posturing. It is probably a style you learned at home. It is palpably 30 years out of date.

Apparently you are someone who once made a claim for yourself on the basis of her working class roots. this may have been useful once, but obviously several decades have passed and the hypocrisy of your present position is becoming all too clear. Blow your old, dusty proletarian tuba with all your might, but the unhappy truth is that for many years your life has been one of coterie privilege and dining clubs, a cozy, smug, chic literary insiders' set that would turn the stomach of any authentic member of the working class. you have become a sheltered, pampered sultan of slick, snide wordplay, without direct experience of life of any kind. As a writer approaching midlife, you lack vision and deep insight.

As I said before, your encounter with me has been a pivotal moment for you. Here was your chance to reassess and invigorate your career. What I could have provided was a way for you to combat the widespread view of you as flash and superficial. Alas, your letters have done more damage to you than anything I could do.

Camille Paglia

24 Mar 93

Dear Professor Paglia,
Fuck off you crazy old dyke.

Always,

Julie Burchill

Six weeks later the Modern Review contacted Paglia - via her literary agent - asking if it could reprint her faxes in this issue. Minutes later it received the following fax:

3 May 93

Permission is granted to The Modern Review to reprint all letters/faxes I have written to it and Julie Burchill, on the condition that they be reproduced, in toto, with no cutting or condensation whatsoever.

Camille Paglia

On the eve of publication, Paglia sent one final fax:

6 May 93

Dear Mr Young

In reference to the letters that, earlier this week, I granted permission to you to reprint: I would like to go on record about a blatant misrepresentation of the facts made by Julie Burchill in her second letter to me in March.

Burchill claims about the Channel 4 special, "Diana Unclothed", which was televised 16 March, that she "was asked to do it first." This is categorically false. Peter Stuart, of the London based independent production company RapidoTV, approached me last year about the possibility of basing a television program on my ideas about the Princess of Wales, as contained in my cover story on her for the New Republic (8 Aug 92). He also asked for my contribution to a program on Lolita that he was planning. Mr Stuart came to Philadelphia in January of this year to film me talking about Diana and Lolita for the two programs, which were jointly sponsored by Waldemar Januszczak, Editor of The Arts at Channel 4.

It is true that Julie Burchill, along with other writers and commentators, was asked to contribute remarks to the Diana program, but she refused on the grounds, I am told, that 1) she never does television interviews and 2) she didn't wish to participate in a "Camille Paglia documentary".

Burchill's wild inflation of this easily corroborated detail is one of the striking passages in her letters to me. Quite obviously, it was a strategy born of a sense of weakness rather than strength.

Permission is granted to reproduce this letter in full or (in this case only) in part.

Yours truly

Camille Paglia

Finito

(*DB notes: to those of you unfamiliar with Julie Burchill, she is an English journalist plucked out of working class obscurity at 16 as a "hip young gunslinger" for the New Musical Express. This coincided with the 1976 outbreak of Punk, and she was one of a group of writers who turned this weekly teen pop mag into what was for several years the most interesting and influential culture magazine in Europe. Since then she has become one of the highest paid columnists in Britain, and has been called everything from a Stalinist feminist to a Thatcherite bitch. There are several collections of her journalism available; I can recommend her most recent "Sex And Sensibility" as a good intro to her love-it-or-shove-it style. She is, I think, 36. She has never left her native Great Britain)

Presented on fa.paglia-I by

danielb@voyager.co.nz.

June'96.