

Selective Vigilante Justice

by Phyllis Chesler



The tyrants of social identity have gone far enough—but I fear they will not stop anytime soon. I am talking about the de-platforming, “cancelling,” censorship, self-censorship, and revising or “disappearing” of all politically incorrect history.

Today, on stage, one can only act the character, if, in real life, you already *are* that character. Only a transgender person can “act” the part of a transgender person. So too, only someone whose ancestry is and who looks Latino, African, Japanese, Chinese, Hindu, etc. can act the part of one; only someone gay can play the part of a gay character.

And I thought that actors are in the specific business of acting the part of someone who they themselves are not. It’s why we call it “acting.”

Today, while men can again play and sing women’s roles on stage, and women can, increasingly, play male parts; and while

singers and actors of color can play white parts—recently, only African-Americans were allowed to sing in the Metropolitan Opera’s production of *Porgy and Bess*. Okay, fair enough, historic marginalization and discrimination was and is real, but how far are we prepared to take this? Will no white opera singer ever be allowed to sing the roles of *Aida*, *Turandot*, or *Othello*? And will divas and tenors of color be confined only to such roles?

Roger Kimball has just [excoriated](#) Yale University for deleting everything white, straight, and male from its Art History survey course. Thus, out with Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Goya, and Vermeer. Yale has also removed statues and names of men who had slaves or believed in slavery.

Will Flaubert also eventually be stricken from the curriculum because he dared to write about women—when clearly, he himself was not a woman? When he was a whoremonger and wrote about the brothels in Egypt quite graphically? And will George Elliot, Colette, and Virginia Woolf be “de-platformed” because they wrote about men? As “outsiders?”

Here’s something that bothers me quite a lot. As everyone knows, I am a very strong supporter of believing women (and men) who allege rape. In 1971, I delivered a keynote speech at the first-ever radical feminist speak-out on Rape in New York City. I support the #MeToo movement but also bear in mind the possibility that not all accusations are true or can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. A mere allegation should never serve as a conviction as it now does.

But, here’s where I part company with what’s happening.

I do not think it was right to remove the great opera singer Placido Domingo because he was accused of abusing his power as a director and world-famous tenor in sexual ways. Try him for committing a crime—but until then, allow him to move us to tears on stage. Nor do I think James Levine, the conductor,

should have been dismissed because it was finally acknowledged that he'd been preying upon young boys and men. Try him if he's committed a crime but if not, allow him to conduct. If Luciano Pavarotti were still alive, would he too be dismissed because he took liberties of one kind or another?

I despise what filmmaker Woody Allen has been accused of doing (sexually abusing his young daughter Dylan, an allegation which Ronan Farrow, Dylan's brother, most ardently believes is true). Even if this remains an "unfounded" accusation, Allen's very public, originally secret affair with and marriage to his long-time girlfriend, Mia Farrow's adopted then teen-age daughter, is reason enough to see him as a cruel and immoral man. But he is still a great filmmaker. Should we ban his films? Or boycott them? I think not.

This brings me to the banning of Roman Polanski's new film about Dreyfus [*An Officer and as Gentleman*](#). This is sheer madness. Yes, Polanski the man did something disgusting. He drugged and had sex with a thirteen-year-old girl and then fled the country into permanent exile in Europe to avoid being held responsible for this crime. Polanski the filmmaker is someone else.

This is absolutely the right time to screen a film about France's sordid, Jew-hating past. The Dreyfus story is seminal. His trial was covered by the very assimilated Theodore Herzl and led to Herzl's writing *The Jewish State* and eventually to his convening the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. Then, as now, crowds in Paris screamed "Death to the Jews." Then, as now, there are heroes and villains galore involved in this story.

We will not be able to see this film in the UK or in the United States. And that is outrageous, unfortunate, dangerous, and demented.

The sexual harassment and assault of women must end. That is

not happening any time soon. Rape victims are still rarely believed by police officers. Rape kits across the United States have sat on the shelves [untested for nearly thirty years](#). Many women are desperate. People are paying attention for the very first time. But does de-platforming and cancelling the *work* of very imperfect, even criminal individuals solve this problem?

How close are we to demanding that only politically correct and socially identifiable artists be allowed to publish poetry, fiction, history, music? Are we ready to dismiss Rimbaud from the curriculum because he was a promiscuous, homosexual drunk, drug addict, and illegal gun-runner? Out with Dickens and Tolstoy for their extreme cruelty to their long suffering wives? Down with Robert Lowell who was a bipolar misogynist and publicly cruel to his author wife Elizabeth Hardwick?

Might we weigh the public good inherent in having access to an amazing piece of culture over and against the importance of punishing the past criminal acts of its creator, acts that were, alas, tolerated?

However, long silenced, heartbroken, and outraged mobs are applying vigilante justice and their power is feared by movie distributors, publishers, theater, opera, and ballet companies.

What about all the sexual harassers and assaulters who are not great artists and who are rarely named? All the factory foremen, restaurant owners, and union bosses who continue to have the power to shame an innocent woman who is desperate to earn a living, and who rarely obtains any justice when she become a whistleblower. How do the politically correct mobs plan to “out” and punish them—men (more rarely, women), who do not contribute to culture and civilization in any way?

Is this the kind of selective vigilante justice we want to

rule us?