

A Critique of Germaine Greer's *The Boy*
Focussing on the Proem and Chapter 7: Servant Boys

Charlotte Moss
2015

A Critique of Germaine Greer's *The boy*
Focussing on the Proem and Chapter 7: Servant Boys

Greer, Germaine. *The boy*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Germaine Greer's *The boy* argues the idea that we, as a society, have become unresponsive to the beauty of young men. Greer argues that our visceral response to the depiction of 'boys' has become clinical and that these images are now assumed to appeal only to homosexual men when originally they may have had a much different intended audience. The book also suggests that men are missing out by refusing to celebrate their own boyish beauty while striving to be men. This book forms part of a larger second-wave feminist narrative on the reclamation of women's sexuality and more specifically associates itself with the historical idea that women are expected to deny themselves pleasure – in both the act of looking and in wider sexual context. In many ways *The boy* is a continuation of themes found within Greer's *The Female Eunuch* published three decades before, and her 1999 book *The Whole Woman*.¹

The primary art historical approach used within *The boy* is feminism. Issues of gender are the central theme of the book as Greer argues the case for further liberation of women's sexuality through an enjoyment of 'the boy' as sexual fantasy. Captions accompanying the images throughout the book focus on what might be considered alternative feminist readings of works of art, such as the suggestion that *The Abduction of Ganymead* actually portrays a rape (or

¹ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006); Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Black Swan, 2007).

'treading') scene (p.150) or the way that an allegorical reading of 'puppy love' is prioritised in the caption for ter Borch's *Lady at her Toilet* (p.162). Unfortunately the art history is almost exclusively being done in the captions that accompany the pictures rather than the main text of the book. There are instances such as *The Abduction of Ganymead* where a fascinating observation is made and then the opportunity to follow it up with investigative research in the text is missed. This image, for instance, could have spawned a whole discussion surrounding the etymology of words and a debate on if the painting could indeed be depicting a sexual scene rather than just an abduction.

The book does contain art historical approaches other than feminism, although these approaches are usually approached from a feminist stance. Another common approach used by Greer is one of social history. The juxtaposition of Samuel Pepy's diary (p.149-50, 153-4) and extracts from Shakespeare (p.156) give social context to the imagery throughout the book. These historical text sources allow Greer to construct a picture of how 'the boy' has been considered throughout history as part of her campaign to urge the (assumed female) reader to find him irresistible again.

There are also discussions of iconography within Greer's text. In the Proem Greer introduces readers to the idea that works of art should be read in certain ways. It is often, for instance, assumed that the Greeks illustrated young boys in their art because they were pederasts but Greer draws a clever parallel with Netherlandish still life paintings; 'this is as absurd to assume that artist paint still-lives because they want to have sex with a shellfish and dead game or

because they are hungry' (p.8). It is a somewhat tenuous comparison but it does successfully help to open the readers mind to non-mainstream readings of works of art. It's quite clear here that Greer is aiming her book largely at those who have a background in feminism rather than a background in art. Greer also discusses the iconography of Eros being 'understood to be lust itself' and makes comparison with other iconographical boy subjects such as Gabriel or Raphael (p.9) who are considered less sensual in nature.

Unlike iconography Greer only discusses biography in passing, there is generally little consideration within the text as to what the artist intended, as opposed to the longer discussions on what they didn't intend as in the case of still life paintings. Speculation of the artist's motives could have led to a richer discourse on the subject of boys as sexual objects within works of art, however it would also move away from the established radical feminist style of rhetoric that Greer favours throughout the text. Additionally it may have weakened her proposal that boys have always been illustrated as sexual objects, since it may emerge through research that artists were specifically not illustrating boys as sexual objects within their work.

Greer's discussion about artist's motivations for painting young boys seems confused. On the one hand Greer suggests that it is wrong to think that the Greeks produced idealised boy figures because they were pederasts (p.8) but at the same time there is the continued suggestion that prior to the nineteenth century art was at least in some way produced for women's pleasure (p.11). Greer's underlying argument appears to be that the sexuality of the boy is

codified into artworks from history and that would have been recognised by people viewing those artworks – unless, of course, you were a Greek. The reason for these seemingly illogical views may possibly be related to Greer’s apparently uneasy relationship with male homosexuality. Greer has in the past made public snubs at the sexual preferences of homosexual men² and this book does seem to have an underlying disdain for the idea that artists might paint pictures of boys for men to look at sexually rather than women. Greer could have brought in queer theory to discuss the representation of the boy as sexual object for men in works of art, however again this may have destabilised her arguments by reinforcing the idea that men have historically been the consumers of works of art – a fact she does not seem to want to concede.

Within the text there are occasional references to reception theory. Greer notes that ‘the guardians of public morality’ noticed nothing historically when the subject of a nude is male rather than female (p.8). References to how audiences viewed artworks often leads to a feminist-leaning discussion of reception theory in this text, where it is assumed that nude male subjects in artworks were more often exhibited than fully nude female subjects because of the systematic denial of a women’s erotic agenda (p.8). Greer also raises an interesting point in that the audience of the twentieth century is very different to audiences historically.

² Heidi Blake, “Stephen Fry Angers Feminists by Claiming Women Do Not Enjoy Sex,” October 31, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8099784/Stephen-Fry-angers-feminists-by-claiming-women-do-not-enjoy-sex.html>, accessed on 5th December 2015; Germaine Greer, “Rimbaud and Verlaine’s Silly Fixations,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/mar/09/arts-comment>, accessed on 5th December 2015.

Highly visible images are most often produced now for advertising purposes rather than as works of art, and so they must potentially be treated differently to those that have gone before; historically the tendency has been to analyse all images as art, but now we might need to be more selective.

Greer uses the particular variation of feminist methodology that recognises men and women as being inherently different. She has no interest in either seeing women as being considered the same as men, nor in the French Universalist ideas of Parité which would avoid gender discussion completely. There is a sense throughout the two chapters though that Greer wishes history had been different in order to suit her argument. Evidence is cherry-picked and tenuously stretched to support the view that artwork was created for the female gaze as much as the male, a notion that many art historians would surely not agree with. There seems to be some attempt in Greer's writing to appropriate history, but an empirically inclined art-historian may well consider this to be a distortion of history.

The combination of an assumed female reader for this text, the presented historical social validation of sexual urges, and bold feminist rhetoric and readings of images come together to form an extraordinary powerful text. Greer successfully furthers the aims of her previous books *The Female Eunuch* and *The Whole Woman* by presenting her readers with historical and pictorial evidence that they are not unusual for being sexually attracted to boys. It should come as no surprise that Greer is successful in producing a persuasive art historical argument – her second book *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* published in 1979 was a bold text in which Greer wished to

reflect on 'the pathology of our oppression as women'.³ Here Greer pushes this subject further but turns the attention onto the viewer of art rather than the creators.

That said, Greer's strong rhetoric and slightly tenuous evidence might put many readers off and prevent her well-constructed points being read and digested by those who do not have such a strong stomach for feminist texts. While many might suggest that perhaps it could have been toned-down in places this would ignore that Greer is primarily interested in talking to those women who already have an interest in strong feminist discourse. It would quite simply not be a Greer text if it catered to those who think that women should temper their arguments so as not to offend men.

³ Lisa Tickner, "The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work," *Woman's Art Journal* 1: 2 (1980): 65.

Bibliography

- Blake, Heidi. "Stephen Fry Angers Feminists by Claiming Women Do Not Enjoy Sex," October 31, 2010, sec. Culture.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8099784/Stephen-Fry-angers-feminists-by-claiming-women-do-not-enjoy-sex.html>. Accessed on 5th December 2015.
- Greer, Germaine. "Rimbaud and Verlaine's Silly Fixations." *The Guardian*, March 9, 2009, sec. Books.
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/mar/09/arts-comment>. Accessed on 5th December 2015.
- Greer, Germaine. *The boy*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. London: Harper Perennial, 2006.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Whole Woman*. London: Black Swan, 2007.
- Tickner, Lisa. "The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work." *Woman's Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (1980): 64.