

Scandalous Women

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Introduction

“Well-behaved women seldom make history,” wrote Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Harvard University history professor, in her article about little-studied Puritan Funeral services. The quote was noticed and soon appeared on coffee mugs, tee shirts, bumper-stickers, and the like.

I suggest we add “but scandalous women do” to Ulrich’s quote. Merriam Webster defines scandalous as “shocking or offensive: involving immoral or shocking things that a person has done or is believed to have done.” Dictionary.com adds disgraceful, shameful and improper.

Scandalous women make history because their actions, words, and ideas change the mores of society and society’s history. They defy gender expectations, challenge inequality, and promote change.

From the beginning of recorded time, many women have been considered scandalous. Often they upset the status quo, shook things up, and ran counter to convention. They weren’t afraid to take a stand. They changed the pages of history.

In my limited amount of time, I will tell the stories of the seven women who represent the multitude of scandalous women who confirm this theory. They are from a variety of backgrounds, fields, and geographical locations, and their lives span a period of 2067 years.

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, was one of the most famous rulers in history, ruling from

51 to 30BCE. When she was born in 67 BCE, the Egyptian Empire was on the decline. Conversely, the Roman Empire was on the ascent. Her father, King Ptolemy XII Auletes, ruled Egypt. The King died in 51 BCE leaving his throne to Cleopatra and his 10-year-old son, her brother Ptolemy XIII.

During the ensuing years, Egypt was plagued with economic problems, floods, and famine. Political problems increased as difficulties grew between brother and sister leaders, the Egyptian council backing Ptolemy. Realizing she was being forced out of power, Cleopatra fled to Syria. There she prepared to recover her crown. She gathered an army and returned to Egypt defeating her brother. At the same time, a civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey broke out in Rome. Pompey eventually fled to Egypt. Pompey was ordered to be killed by Ptolemy, Cleopatra's brother.

Julius Caesar had followed Pompey to Egypt where he met and fell in love with Cleopatra. Plutarch told the story of Caesar's first meeting with Cleopatra in Alexandria. Ptolemy's army blocked Cleopatra's way into the city. Not to be deterred, she took a small boat to the palace in the darkness. She was wrapped in a rug and carried into the palace unnoticed. When Caesar discovered her, he was enchanted by her wiles. As he got to know her, he appreciated her charm, spirit, intelligence, and knowledge of philosophy, literature, and languages. Caesar took Cleopatra to Rome where they openly lived together despite his being married.

Cleopatra's goal was to solidify the political relationship between Egypt and Rome while protecting her nation against Rome's threat. By forming a romantic and

political relationship with Caesar, Cleopatra was able to maintain her power and the relative independence of her country. The birth of their child, Caesarian, further solidified her bond with Caesar.

When Caesar was assassinated, civil war erupted. His assassins, Brutus and Cassius, tried to gain control but were defeated by Marc Antony at the Battle of Phillippi in 42 BCE. When Marc Antony's forces defeated Caesar's murderers, he captured Cleopatra's attention. Marc Antony was said to have a weakness for powerful women and was captivated by Cleopatra. They are reputed to have immediately fallen madly in love. Antony went with Cleopatra back to Alexandria.

The two had much in common and were strongly attracted, but there were additional factors. For Cleopatra, it was ambition. She wanted a strong leader to help her rule Egypt. By forming a romantic and political relationship, Cleopatra was able to maintain her power and the relative independence of her empire. For Marc Antony, it was his need for support, money and troops. Together they also shared a vision of an empire stretching from East to West. They married after Marc Antony abandoned his wife.

After much altercation, Anthony and Cleopatra combined their armies against Octavian but were not successful. It was an expensive defeat for Egypt, forcing Cleopatra and Antony back to Egypt.

When Antony again went to battle, he was wrongly told that Cleopatra had died. Despondent over the news of his beloved's death, he committed suicide by stabbing

himself. When Cleopatra heard of Marc Antony's death, she ended her life with the bite of an asp. She died on August 12, 40 BCE. They were buried in a single grave. Over 2,000 years after her death, Cleopatra still fascinates us as one of history's most famous and scandalous women who used all possible means to keep Egypt free.

Catherine II of Russia, also referred to as Catherine the Great, was born Sophie Friederike Auguste in the small principality, Szcenim, near the Polish-German border. Her mother paid little attention to her in her early years, but as Catherine matured, her mother saw Catherine as a means to improve her own social status. She finagled an invitation from Russian Empress Elizabeth for the two of them to visit her in Saint Petersburg. The Empress was curious to see if Catherine might be a suitable wife for her heir, Grand Duke Peter, later Peter III.

In 1744, mother and daughter traveled to Russia. Having studied Russian with her tutor of many years, Catherine was able to converse comfortably with the Empress and with Peter. A relationship developed between the two young people. Soon the couple became engaged. They married in August 1745 making Catherine Grand Duchess.

Peter was immature and childish, hardly an interesting companion for the brilliant and talented Catherine. Peter frequently played war games with his toy soldiers. He also had a mistress, so to speak, but sexual activity was doubted. Catherine followed her own interests, spending much of her time reading and enjoying her own relationships.

Catherine produced a son, Paul, in 1754. The paternity of the child has been the subject of much controversy throughout history. Unfortunately, Catherine was barely allowed to know her son, as immediately after his birth, the Empress took over the role of raising him herself.

After Empress Elizabeth's death in 1761, Peter III assumed the throne and Catherine became Empress Consort. Peter was openly unkind to Catherine and called on his mistress to rule with him.

He alienated many, with his ongoing strong support of Prussia. He also angered the Orthodox Church, by taking away their land. After 6 months, Catherine, aided by her lover Gregory Orloy, a Russian Lieutenant, led a coup to overthrow Peter. Catherine assumed control of the country. Several days later, Peter was strangled to death. Catherine's role in his death is unknown.

Catherine appeased opposing forces by calling back the Russian troops Peter had sent to Denmark. She promoted and gifted those who backed her as the new Empress. She also returned the church's property and land, a popular act that gained her additional support.

Although believing in absolute rule, Catherine worked toward social and political reform. Her document "Nakaz" addressed their legal system, capital punishment, and the mistreatment of serfs. The Senate protested her changes so she formed a Legislative Commission in 1767 bringing together different social and economic classes. This was the first time a cross section of people from across Russia had

convened to discuss Russia's problems and needs.

In foreign affairs, Catherine expanded Russia's borders by gains in Poland. She had earlier installed former lover Stanislaw Poniatowski on Poland's throne. However, this triggered military conflict with Turkey.

By her many victories, Catherine demonstrated Russia's power to the world. She reached a peace Treaty with the Ottoman Empire in 1774, giving Russia a foothold in the Black Sea. Gregory Potemkin, a war hero, trusted confidant and lover, played a critical role.

She valued education and created free schools across Russia. She loved the arts.

She built theatres, sponsored cultural projects and events. Catherine was an avid art collector herself, many of her works of art remaining in Saint Petersburg today.

In 1796 at age 67, Catherine the Great died. She is remembered for encouraging the arts, educational reform, extending the borders of Russia, and her powerful leadership. She was infamous for her lovers. Catherine never married as it would have jeopardized her position and power. Behind the scenes was another story. She is estimated to have had 12 significant lovers, smart, powerful men who were good partners for her and helped her to achieve her goals.

Now to another part of the world and someone quite different from our first two women. Wangari Maathai, born on April 1, 1940 in Kenya, was the first woman, in East Africa, to earn a doctorate degree. She was also the first woman in East Africa

to chair a university department.

Wangari worked ceaselessly to end the devastation of Kenya's forests and lands, launching the Green Belt Movement that encouraged women to plant trees. Her efforts created jobs for poor women while providing more oxygen for the environment. Her movement was responsible for planting 30 million trees in Kenya and giving 30,000 women new skills and opportunities.

She also challenged dictator Daniel arap Moi and his government on their development plans for her area. She was referred to as a crazy women and was beaten and arrested many times for challenging the dictator. What had started as an environmental movement became political when Wangari saw the linkages between problems she was dealing with and the environmental degradation caused by wide spread misgovernance.

Wangari continued to be a vocal opponent of the Kenyan government until Moi's party was defeated in the election of 2002. She earned a parliament seat the same year and became assistant minister of the environment, natural resources and wildlife.

In addition to her political and social activities being criticized, her own private life was attacked. During a lengthy divorce, Wangari's husband publicly accused her of adultery with a Parliament member. He said Wangari was "too strong-minded and cruel." He further added that he was "unable to control her." The judge ruled in her husband's favor. After the trial, in a magazine interview, she accused

the judge of being incompetent and corrupt. For this accusation, she was imprisoned for 6 weeks.

For “her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace” Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize. She was the first environmentalist to win this coveted award and also the first African woman.

Her involvement and impact extended to rights for all people. Everything was interconnected in her eyes. Environmentalism was linked to poverty, and poverty was both a cause and a system of environmental degradation.

Wangari Maathai dared to speak up, and she dared to act on what she believed to be right. Yes, she was considered scandalous and often suffered for standing up for her convictions, but her life made a lasting impact on the Kenyan people. In 2011, her life was cut short by complications due to ovarian cancer.

Again we make an abrupt change to a brilliant French existentialist, exploring the life of Simone de Beauvoir, born into a bourgeois family in Paris in 1908.

She left home at 21 to live with her grandmother and study philosophy at the Sorbonne, graduating in 1929, the same year she met her life-long partner, Jean Paul Sartre. They became best friends and graduated number one and number two in their Sorbonne class. Their influence on each other’s lives and work was significant.

After graduation, Simone taught at the Sorbonne then moved to Berlin to study German philosophy, always staying in touch with Sartre. Returning to Nazi occupied

Paris, she and Sartre continued to write prolifically. Both published well-reviewed books. Simone's book "Le Sand des Autres: (The Blood of Others), a novel exploring problems of political activists and the dilemma facing a French Resistance leader, was particularly popular. As people were grappling with moral issues of the post war, both Sartre and Beauvoir's books gained popularity.

Simone de Beauvoir was the French writer who laid the foundation for the modern feminist movement. She wrote both fiction and nonfiction and was an existentialist Merriam Webster defines existentialism "an analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right and wrong or good and bad."

Sarte and de Beauvoir never married as she believed their relationship shouldn't be defined by social mores or norms. They dated others, even had a ménage a trios in the early 40's with Olga Kosakiewicz, who was a student. Their experience with Olga led to Simone's first book of fiction, "Invitée," (They Came to Stay). The book describes the complexity of relationships and a person's conscience related to other existential ideas.

Her book "Le Duxieme Sex" (The Second Sex}, published in 1949, brought her name to the forefront. She examined why women in society are considered inferior to men. The 972 page book created strong controversy; some critics considered it pornographic. The Vatican listed it on the Index of Forbidden Books.

The first United States publication of “The Second Sex” was abbreviated, the translation being by a zoologist with a limited English vocabulary. In 2009, the unedited English translation greatly increased Simon’s United States feminist reputation.

As she matured, Simone wrote on aging. ““La Ceremonie des Adieux” (A Farwell to Satre) recalls her partners last years. On April 14, 1986, six years after Jean Paul Sartre’s death, Simone de Beauvoir died in Paris. They share a grave.

So as to feature women in a variety of fields, I include Mildred Babe Didrikson Zaharius. She was the most outstanding women athlete of her time, and perhaps of all time. She was born on June 26, 1911 in Port Arthur, Texas. Her parents had immigrated from Norway. The family was so poor that young Mildred worked at many part time jobs, including sewing gunny sacks earning a penny a sack.

At 13 she was a foul-mouthed girl who preferred to play sports with boys because they were better athletes than girls. She was brash and tough talking.

Mildred hit five home runs in one baseball game during the time when Babe Ruth was in his heyday. Her nickname, that had been “Baby,” changed that day to Babe which stuck with her the rest of her life.

On July 16, 1932, representing the Employers Casualty Insurance Company, where she had a part time job, she participated in the amateur track and field

championships in Evanston, Illinois. Other teams had up to 22 members, but she was a one women team.

During three hours, she participated in event after event. She finished first in five events- broad jump, shot-put, javelin, 80 meter hurdles, and the baseball throw. She tied for first in a sixth event, the high jump. Babe qualified for three Olympic events that day, earning 30 points and placing first as a team of one. The second place team of 22 women earned 22 points. The United Press said, "it was the most amazing series of performances accomplished by an individual, male or female, in track and field history."

Women were allowed to enter only three events in the Olympics. When Babe went to the Los Angeles Olympics in 1932, she actually broke four world records winning the javelin throw, and the 80-meter hurdles, twice breaking the previous world record. She also set a world record in the high jump, but they disallowed the jump (she could only enter three events) but awarded her second place.

Babe was subjected to criticism and ridicule, probably the most common accusing her of being a he instead of a she. Others attacked her thinking she was a lesbian.

An example of some writers criticizing her for not being feminine was Joe Williams writing for the New York World-Telegram, "It would be much better if she and her ilk stayed at home, got themselves prettied up and waited for the phone to ring."

Grantland Rice encouraged Babe to try the game of golf. She took to golf like a fish

to water, taking lesson after lesson and practicing hour after hour until her hands blistered. In 1935 she won her first tournament, the Texas Women's Amateur Championship.

After taking up golf, Babe began to change. Her personality softened and she began to change her image. Babe began to wear a little make-up and more feminine clothes. She admitted to not being pretty, but she thought she was graceful.

In January of 1938, Babe met the professional wrestler, George Zaharias, at the Los Angeles Open. She fell in love with him, and they were married in December.

The Associated Press named her Woman Athlete of the Year in 1932, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1950, and 1954. She began a string of consecutive victories, unmatched in golf, winning seventeen straight tournaments.

In 1947, Babe was the first American woman to win the British Ladies' Golf Championship in Gullane, Scotland. Following the tournament, she announced that she would turn professional. She dominated golf for the following six years.

She will also be remembered as one of the founders of the Ladies Professional Golf Association, the LPGA. Babe traveled the LPGA tour showing off her booming drives, her soft touch around the green, and her affable personality. She liked to say, "I just loosen my girdle and let the ball have it."

Her first three years as a professional athlete, she was the top money winner. But in

1953 came the horrible news that she had rectal cancer. Doctors told reporters that Babe would never play golf again. Fifteen months after her colostomy, Babe won her third U.S. Women's Open, by a record twelve strokes at the Salem Country Club in Peabody, Massachusetts.

In the ensuing months, Babe crusaded tirelessly against cancer during a time when most people were quiet about their disease. Twenty-six months after her U.S. Open victory, she died in Galveston, Texas at age 45.

President Dwight Eisenhower began his news conference in Washington with this tribute: "She was a woman who, in her athletic career, certainly won the admiration of every person in the United States, sports people all over the world, and in her gallant fight against cancer, she put up one of the kinds of fights that inspires us all."

Victoria Claflin Woodhull was born on September 23, 1838. She was one of ten children of an illiterate mother and a petty criminal father in the rural town Homer, Ohio. Woodhull was a clairvoyant, public speaker, woman's suffrage leader, advocate of free love, first woman to start a weekly newspaper, and an advocate for labor reform. In 1827, before women had the right to vote, she became the first female candidate for President of the United States. She was quite intelligent but had received only three years of formal education.

She and her sister Tennessee, were the first women stockbrokers, opening a brokerage firm on Wall Street in 1870. The women, assisted by admirer Cornelius

Vanderbilt, made a fortune. They used the money to found a newspaper, Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly. The paper's initial purpose was to support Victoria's presidential campaign. Their other purpose was to support feminism. The sisters were notorious for publishing topics like sex education, free love, women's suffrage, short skirts, spiritualism, vegetarianism, and licensed prostitution.

A newly formed Equal Rights Party nominated Victoria for President of the United States on May 10, 1872. Her nomination was ratified at the convention on June 6, 1872.

Victoria had been vilified in the media for her scandalous platform, namely free love, so in retaliation, she devoted the November 2nd issue of her weekly paper to an alleged adulterous affair between Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, a well-known New York minister, and Elizabeth Tilton. The article stressed the double standard between women and men.

The story was published on election day. U.S. federal marshals arrested Victoria, her second husband, and her sister for "publishing an obscene newspaper."

Victoria and her sister were imprisoned for a month. Undeterred, she attempted to run for President in 1884 and 1892. Both times she failed to be nominated.

Victoria espoused free love, speaking of it often on her lecture tours. At one point she lived with her ex-husband, her husband, and her lover in the same apartment.

Cornelius Vanderbilt died in January 1887. His children fought the court over his

\$100 million estate. Rumor had it that Victoria and Tennessee were paid off not to testify at the trial.

Victoria divorced her second husband, and she and Tennessee moved to England to start a new life. At her first lecture in her new country, banker John Biddulph Martin was in her audience and was immediately attracted to her. They dated then married, his family disapproving of his marriage.

Under her new name of Victoria Woodhull Martin, she published the magazine, *The Humanitarian*, from 1892 to 1901.

Victoria died on June 10th 1927. Among the posthumous awards she received from the United States was election into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Of the hundreds of women I read about while researching this paper, Josephine Baker's story is my favorite. On June 3, 1906, she entered this world in Saint Louis as Freda Josephine McDonald. Her mother was a washerwoman, and her father Eddie Carson, a vaudeville drummer, abandoned his family shortly after Josephine's birth.

Eight-year-old Josephine cleaned houses and babysat for well-to-do white families, not always being treated well. After briefly returning to school, she ran away at age 13. Josephine found a waitressing job at a club where she met and then married Willie Wells whom she divorced weeks later.

Josephine started dancing in clubs and in street performances. Then came a tour

across the United States with the Jones Family Band and the Dixie Steppers. In 1921, she married Willie Baker. After divorcing him a few years later, she kept his name.

While in the chorus of "Shuffle Along," she added a comic touch of her own to her performance. This caught the attention of the audiences and encouraged her to incorporate it into her routine. She was on to New York City and the Chocolate Dandies with Ethel Waters where, again, the crowd liked her.

In the meantime, France had become obsessed with American Jazz and the exotic. Moving to Paris, Josephine performed in the Theatre des Champs-Elysees. Dancing only in a feather skirt, she was a hit. At the popular Follies Bergere Music Hall, her career took a major turn when, in her performance of La Folie du Jour, she wore only a skirt of 16 bananas.

Soon Josephine was one of the most popular and most highly paid performers in Europe. Josephine sang professionally for the first time in 1930 and won roles during the next few years in the shows Zou-Zou and Princess Tam Tam. Among her admirers were Pablo Picasso, EE Cummings, and Ernest Hemingway.

She was wealthy enough by then to buy an estate in the south of France. She named the estate Milandes, and moved her family there from Saint Louis.

Her great success in France encouraged her to accept a gig at the Ziegfield Follies back in New York. She longed to establish her reputation to the United States.

However, instead of a warm welcome, the crowd was hostile and racist toward her. Heartbroken, she quickly returned to France. Josephine married Jean Lion, a French industrialist, and immediately obtained citizenship from the country that accepted and cared for her.

World War II had started so Josephine went to work for the Red Cross. A member of the Free French Forces, she also entertained service men in the Middle East and Africa. In addition to performing for the troops, she smuggled messages for the French Resistance hidden in her sheet music and in her underwear. In recognition of her efforts with the French Resistance, Josephine received the Croix de Guerre and the Legion of Honor with the rosette of the Resistance, two of France's highest military honors.

After the war, she spent her time with her family at her estate. She married orchestra leader, Jo Bouillon, in 1947 and began adopting 12 children from around the world. She called them her "rainbow tribe" and her "experiment in brotherhood."

In 1950 Josephine returned often to the United States to help the Civil Rights Movement. She boycotted segregated clubs, took part in demonstrations and sit ins, and fought against segregated concert venues. In 1963, she marched on Washington with Martin Luther King Jr. and was one of their speakers. The NAACP named May 20th "Josephine Baker Day" in honor of her efforts.

In 1993, Josephine Baker sang at Carnegie Hall, receiving a standing ovation. After years of rejection in the United States, she was moved to tears before her audience.

This marked her comeback in many ways.

In April 1975 Josephine performed in Paris at Bobino Teatre celebrating the 50th year since her Paris debut. Princess Grace of Monaco, a close friend, was one of the many celebrities attending the historic event. A few days later, Josephine died in her sleep at age 69 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

70 thousand people lined the Paris streets to pay homage to her procession. She was honored with a 21 gun salute by the French government, making Josephine Baker the first American woman in history to be buried in France with military honors.

Thank you, scandalous women. You inspired, you led, you opened doors, you broke the mold. You changed the pages of history.

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