



IRIS OWENS: WIT OF THE BITCH

Words Izabella Scott

I cannot give a precise date of birth for Iris Owens, for she lied about her age so often that decades have been undermined. And she carried it off by looking distinctly timeless, as her friend and fellow writer Stephen Koch recalls. "She seemed never to change," he told an interviewer. "When I think of how she looked, I think of a line from *Antony and Cleopatra*: 'Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety.'" Indeed, like Cleopatra, Owens was not only ageless but equally various, and might be reliably described as any of the following: writer, pornographer, gambler, agoraphobe, satirist, Queen of Egypt.

But, to pin down some hard facts. Iris Owens, née Klein, was born in New York in the 1920s. Her father was a professional gambler, which meant the Kleins' fortunes were hung on one royal flush – or lack of. The family might relocate from Park Avenue to the slums in the course of a week. Owens was smart, attending Barnard College in the Forties, and Susan Sontag recalled in her notebook that she was "the brightest girl of her class".

By various male accounts, Owens was breathtakingly attractive. “Her Junoesque beauty,” gushes the writer Terry Southern. Or, Koch again, “She was also...” he falters, “She was beautiful.” She married twice before she was thirty – divorcing both husbands quickly – one of whom was an Iranian prince.

Owens wrote seven novels across her lifetime, populated by a cast of female protagonists who brandish an aggressive beauty. All her characters are devastatingly attractive, but Owens never assigns beauty casually. Rather, she demonstrates beauty as a slippery blessing, one that often works against its bearer. Her opus is populated by red-blooded anti-heroines who endure, and enjoy, abuse at the hands of men.

Owens moved to Paris in the 1950s where she fell in with a bohemian literary set. In particular, with a man named Alexander Trocchi, a Scottish expat, artist, writer, heroin addict, and editor of the literary journal *Merlin* – one of those now-legendary journals that published avant-garde men (Sartre, Miller, Beckett) over its short run of issues (1952–4). Photographs of Trocchi reveal an angular man with craggy good-looks, his hair raven-black. He and Owens had a long affair, by all accounts passionate and crippling. Trocchi himself is remembered for his role in The Olympia Press, a publisher established in the Fifties by a Frenchman named Maurice Girodias. In the Olympia catalogue, pornography and the avant-garde overlapped, for Girodias conspired with Trocchi to offer the impoverished, hungry writers of *Merlin* a new way to earn money: smut. Girodias, a “visionary playboy-buffoon”, paid writers two dollars a day to churn out dirty novels, published under *The Traveller’s Companions*. It was also through Trocchi’s influence that Olympia published the works of outcast writers branded with obscenity, including Valerie Solanas, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller and Nabokov – most famously the untouchable *Lolita* in 1955.

The Traveller’s Companions were populated by pseudonyms – the infamous Marcus von Heller, for instance, was ghosted by multiple jobbing, probably desperate writers. Heller’s specialty was the rape thriller. Iris Owens herself was welcomed into Girodias’ clique and began writing as Harriet Daimler. She was prolific, and knocked out five novels in just three years. To Girodias’ delight, she had a flair for the obscene: “Daimler struggles against her impossible tendency to write more explicitly than the courts will tolerate,” he crooned in the Olympia catalogue of 1957.

Daimler’s first porn novel, *Darling* (1956), follows in Heller’s footsteps as an unbridled rape fantasy. Its protagonist, a young artist named Gloria, is brutally raped in the stairway of her apartment in New York. We consequently follow her on an erotic journey through the city’s underbelly in search of her attacker – for revenge but also for sex. The novel was quickly followed by *The Pleasure Thieves* (1956), *Innocence* (1957), *The Organisation* (1957) and finally *Woman* (1958). Terry Southern, also writing for Olympia under his own pseudonym, marvelled at Owens’ ability to hold court in that inordinately male scene, “she had a rapier wit and devastating logic,” he remembers fondly. “She was a pre-Sontag Sontag.” Indeed, when Sontag encountered Owens again at a Paris gathering in 1957, she made note in her diary: “Iris, from New York, age 28,” Sontag records, taking stock, “Writes pornos under the name of ‘Harriet Daimler’, heavy black eye makeup (some carbon mixture) – once married.”

Daimler’s novels are a legend of 1950s obscenity and offer a fascinating insight into contemporary sexual taboos, which include sodomy, sex with prisoners, devil worship, improvised dildos and (bizarrely) pubic wigs. They feature American women in their twenties with model bodies and high sex drives, all who remain in offensive relationships with older men. Like all victims of abuse, they are unwilling and unable to leave. The plots are sloppy to the point of surrealism, and together they offer an increasingly vivid portrait of their author, Harriet Daimler.

In the last of Daimler’s novels, *Woman* (1958), the proximity between Owens the puppet master, Daimler the writer and the protagonist Martha, is at its thinnest. All three are twenty-something Americans, slumming it as impoverished writers in Paris. Martha is embroiled in an abusive relationship with a Scot named Macdonald (an obvious parallel to Trocchi). Martha and Macdonald live together in a dirty hotel room; she longs to leave him, or else the very opposite, to admit a definite ‘relationship’, but instead they fuck and fight in a rehearsed cycle. By porno no. 5, the ‘action’ is minimal, and those in search of palpable sex scenes might have been disappointed to find pages and pages of dialogue, of impossible, circular arguments between its two characters. At the butt of the book, Macdonald is heartlessly, sadistically attracted to Martha. “She had the magic of an American body,” he reflects. “Only America produces such women... with their hideous minds.” Here, hideous means shrewd – and Martha is hideous because she understands the basic brutality of her contract with Macdonald. “Don’t hit me again”, she says a page later, “Why don’t we fuck instead? It’s practically the same thing.”



Girodias’ own feelings towards Owens are telling. He claimed to have chosen her pseudonym. Some claim they had an affair. Girodias himself endured a begrudging attraction to Owens, as described in a 1989 interview:

GIRODIAS: [turns to me as we get up and leave the restaurant, and confesses] But my biggest mistake was not Donleavy, you know. It was Iris. I could have made her into a big-big star. She could have been something, if I had only, you know, taken the time... It was really Iris I loved... No! What am I talking about? Am I mad? I hate the bitch! But of course I love her too... Not as much as I hate her... perhaps... but... [Girodias shrugs as we step out into the street, then turns away from me and walks off alone, still arguing with himself.]

It's the kind of violence experienced by so many of Daimler's protagonists, women who are punished for their beauty and acuity alike.

Owens was very private about her 1960s. She left no memoir, and her friends offer no account. She remained in Paris with Trocchi, and spent time in Iran – a period mined for her last novel, *Hope Diamond Refuses* (1984), which is partly set in a fictional Arab country. But she did not write any more novels as Daimler.

Then, in 1970, she returned to New York, renting a one-bedroom flat on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village, where she remained for the rest of her life. She lived-up the early Seventies, fuelled by a relationship with a 'maths genius' called Jerry working for IBM. They went out gambling together, part of a Manhattan poker set that counted Woody Allen amongst its members. (As the film critic Nathan Gelgud speculates, the slinky, poker-playing writer in Allen's 1995 film *Manhattan Murder Mystery* was probably based on Owens.)



But Owens' relationship with Jerry dissolved – according to Koch's account, Jerry torturously married a close friend. Soon after, Owens got pregnant by somebody else, and agonised over whether to keep the child, convinced that motherhood would prevent her from ever writing another book. Finally, Koch accompanied her to Florida, where abortion was legalised. "When we took the train back," he recalls, "one of us started talking about the book she was never going to write. 'At least I have a first line,' she said, '*Claude left me, the French rat.*'"

Owens did write the book, and it opens with a version of the line. *After Claude* was published in 1973, this time under her own name. Its protagonist: Harriet Daimler.

"*I left Claude, the French rat,*" begins Daimler, in a subtle shift of agency. But Daimler is an unreliable narrator, and as the novel unfolds, we find those opening lines to be alarmingly inaccurate. For Claude, quite unambiguously, wants to be rid of her. Daimler gets things wrong, but as the single, myopic narrator, her mistakes are revealed by Owens obliquely, unpredictably, and with devastating effect. A back story emerges: Claude discovered Daimler in the stairwell of his New York building six months prior, and gallantly whisked her off to his penthouse (a kinder fate than the protagonist of *Darling*, who was raped in her stairwell). Daimler is, of course, a beautiful, leggy American, self-described as a kind of Cleopatra with "exotic cheekbones,

you'd wonder what Egyptian tomb had been pilfered". But her beauty is on the cusp of fading, as Claude repeatedly warns her (and she often checks her reflection, fearfully). Throughout the novel, Daimler delivers a steady series of manically hilarious one-liners, brutal observations that Claude himself finds unbearable. "I am essentially a lighthearted person who sees humour in this freak show called life," Daimler tells us. There is violence under every joke: "Scratch a Frenchman, find a German storm trooper", she hoots, and then reveals a startling awareness of her own dark contract with Claude. "I have since realised that he hoped I was a victim of rape," she says, recalling the day he found her in the stairwell, "or at least a junkie, those being two of his favourite American specimens." She clings to Claude and hates him in the same breath.

Perhaps most fascinating of all is the tone Owens conjures, a brutal humour that, forty years on, remains barbed. A satirist and cynic, Owens' humour is about and against women, as if to comment upon a sexism so structural and pervasive it's actually been internalised. But macho female comedy has never been popular. As the novelist Emily Prager writes in her introduction to *After Claude*, "this is so hard to believe now, it's like saying we all once owned horses, but until the Seventies, really, [as a woman] you could not talk or write about sex in public, much less make fun of it, without being arrested or charged with witchcraft." One exception is the comedian Joan Rivers, who made her TV debut in the late Sixties – but Rivers made her humour acceptable by turning it in on herself. Live in 1967, Rivers quips:

"Where I grew up, if you're not married after twenty-one then you're better off dead [*laughter*]. It's that simple. I was the last girl at home. The neighbours would say, "How's Joan, still not married?" [*laughter*] And my mother would say, "– if she were still alive". [*laughter*] You know how that hurts [*laughter*], when you're sitting right there [*laughter*]."

Like Rivers, Owens humour is equally self-berating. "Everything they say about women in a kitchen is true," Daimler chants, "women's lib or no lib, all great chefs are men." But Owens takes it steps further, moving beyond the acceptable bounds of self-derision by offering a wider critique of the violence against women that exists everywhere, unchecked. In the novel's final chapters, Daimler is dumped and alone in the Chelsea Hotel. Her mental state, we realise, is rapidly deteriorating. In a final twist, she gets caught up in a sex cult led by an ugly but charismatic man named Roger. Naked in his hotel room, Daimler begins to masturbate at his command:

"In my private production, I was surrounded by a large cast of naked men with the most obscene intentions... I was blindfolded and probably tied down, as well as being a helpful captive... none of them seemed to have the slightest respect for me."

The comedy is askance, because what Owens lays bare is the insanity of Daimler's desire. She juxtaposes one fantasy of abuse happening in Daimler's mind, with another that actually takes place in the room and on Daimler's body. And if in fantasy it's erotic, in reality it's horrific – pure, unmitigated abuse.

After Claude was popular and well reviewed, but a wry Owens sabotaged its success. She flung reporters a derisive line, "I'm specialised in being an interesting failure," and they pounced on this with glee. She also fell out with her editor Roger Straus of Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Koch recalls, "Roger had a kind of confidence that Iris was very interested in puncturing, and it didn't work.

She could have had a great career,” he grieves, “but she shouldn’t have fought with Roger.” There is an odd parallel between Roger Straus and the Roger of *After Claude*. If Daimler submitted to one Roger and was humiliated, Owens fought against another and was humiliated – a double-bind so cynical it inspires a kind of awe.

By Koch’s account, Owens was increasingly housebound by the early 1980s – an agoraphobe. She wrote one more novel, *Hope Diamond Refuses*, which met bad reviews and flopped. “One suspects,” writes the comedian Lisa Zeidner in an essay on Owens (2011), “that the bumpy plot construction was ultimately less of a problem than the tone... her neurotic, kvetching, sometimes cruel sense of comedy almost certainly sabotaged her chances of big-time success.”

Owens’ anti-heroines might self-destruct, but Owens proper was not so biddable – refusing to flinch, she maintained her interests in sex, misogyny and abuse. Discussing a male gossip columnist, the publisher Jocelyn Stevens once said, “He cannot hurt. His arrows have rubbery tips. He has the wounded wit of the bitch.” And it was this very kind of wit that Owens performs, exaggerates, unsettles, impregnates – reclaiming it for the bitch, the witch and the wounded alike.

It’s impossible to speculate why exactly Owens drew away from society. She did not re-marry, and as Koch revealed, *After Claude* quite literally took the place of a child. By the 1990s she barely left her flat at all. Owens died in 2008 in relative obscurity, without a *New York Times* obituary. But in 2010, *After Claude* was re-printed by NYRBC, bringing new attention to her awkward, fragmented opus. Her friend, the writer Emily Prager, touches on the koan of Owens’ work in her introduction to the new edition. “The predilection of bright women to twist themselves into bizarre submissive postures from which only humour can release them is something die-hard feminists will never address. But Iris and I were in agreement: there is nothing that warms a smart girl’s heart like the smile on the face of a sadist.”

