Sexual Friction, or Where Is Good Sense to Be Found?

by David Solway (May 2024)

Socrates, his two Wives, and Alcibiades –Reyer van Blommendael, 1660-70

Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer asserted in "Studies in Pessimism" that "Only a philosopher can be happy in marriage" since only a philosopher would be inured to disillusion. This seems probable if one believes, with Schopenhauer, that "love is a deception … and marriage is the attrition of love," and that philosophers are stoic by nature or principle. Schopenhauer was consistent and never married, which is one way out of the dilemma of how to negotiate a happy and fecund relation between the sexes. His is a pretty sterile path not many of us are eager to tread.

There is another issue to consider involving the male distrust of women in general, especially in an age in which feminism has taken over the culture. Long-term intimacy or a legally enduring and stringent relationship, Schopenhauer claims, does not augur well for men. Nature endows women with a brief "richness of beauty" in order to "ensnare the fantasy of a man" who will then provide for them as they give birth, age and grow unattractive. A man who marries will "halve his rights and double his duties." Schopenhauer's misogyny is most famously known by his pronouncement that "It is only the man whose intellect is clouded by his sexual impulses that could give the name of the *fair* sex to that under-sized, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped, and short-legged race." (One thinks of Shakespeare's phrase from A Midsummer Night's Dream, *Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind.*) Schopenhauer was consistent and never married, which is one way out of the problem he foresaw and feared.

Nonetheless, there is a kernel of good sense in his deposition. Women, he contends, believe that "the welfare of the species have been placed in [their] hands and committed to [their] care. They take the affairs of the species more seriously than those of the individual. The general bent of

their character is in a direction fundamentally different from that of man." Whereas a man who is mature enough to conquer his susceptibility to a woman's charms "tries to acquire direct mastery over things, either by understanding them, or by forcing them to do his will." Men evince an empirical tendency to deal with matters at hand, to focus on what needs to be done and to treat with others on a personal basis.

Having laid it down that men are more preoccupied with the individual than with society as a whole, Schopenhauer would not have been surprised, as modern researchers have deduced, that the welfare state that devours the resources of a competitive and flourishing society is largely the product of the woman's vote, a postulate for which here is much corroborative evidence. As John Lott and Lawrence Kenney depose in the *University of Chicago Press Journals*, "Suffrage coincided with immediate increases in state government expenditures and revenue and more liberal voting patterns … as women took advantage of the franchise." Schopenhauer did not have the statistical apparatus and research facilities of our time, but appealed instead to the authority of Aristotle who, in *Politics*, states that conceding too much to women and "giving them a great amount of independence … contributed to Sparta's fall."

This is a rueful fact we cannot do anything about. But why simply rest satisfied with the question of the female franchise? Why not go all the way and surrender power completely to the activist sorority? Bringing this about was the means adopted by the eponymous heroine of the classical Greek comic playwright Aristophanes' most famous play *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.). Lysistrata (the name means 'disbander of armies') persuades the women of the warring states of Athens and Sparta to withdraw their sexual favours from their husbands and lovers until they agree to lay down their arms and sue for peace—a strategy for the ages.

Those unfamiliar with the play may recall Spike Lee's 2015 musical comedy Chi-Raq (a portmanteau for Chicago-Iraq), based on the same theme, in which a bloody war between two rival gangs eventually comes to an end after Lysistrata, the girlfriend of one of the gang leaders, organizes a moratorium on sex until peace is declared. The watchword is: "no peace, no pussy." Or as Lysistrata puts it in the colloquial translation of the original play, "if we got our men all hard but we backed off, they would cut a peace damn quick." And of course, the women succeed, having duly weaponized sex.

The issue was parodically broached once again by Aristophanes' in his last play (392 B.C.) *Assembly of Women (Ecclesiazusae)*, which was far more satirically corrosive. The play humorously pilloried the female takeover of the Athenian Assembly and its dominion over the wider culture. Its instigator, the early feminist firebrand Praxagora, manages to persuade her beta-male husband Blepyrus of the virtues of female control and convinces the male Assembly to hand over the reins of power to the women. The results are as hilarious as they are catastrophic: society descends into mayhem, pagan rituals predominate, and meritocratic distinctions evaporate. There is ruthless feuding for freebies, including sexual favors for unattractive hags at the expense of their more beautiful rivals—an apposite metaphor for the war between mediocrity and merit. As scholar and translator Robert Mayhew summarizes, 'Misery is not abolished, it is merely redistributed.'

Neither attitude—male suspicion and disparagement of women nor female denunciation and revulsion of men—appears to be optimal. The dour, misogynistic attitude of Schopenhauer may work for a certain type of philosophical mind, whether cynic or stoic—indeed, according to Xenophon's *Symposium*, Socrates himself, that paragon of unflappable wisdom, refers to his argumentative wife Xantippe as "the hardest to get along with of all the women." Judging from the Platonic Dialogues, he didn't seem to have much to do with her.

Or on the contrary, for a timid and repressed predisposition like Blepyrus, submitting to the Praxagoran onslaught of sanctimonious feminism may be cowardly but it has its rewards in uxorious quietude, and even a certain celebrity, as enjoyed, for example, by current epicene specimens like Michael Kimmel and Michael Flood.

Yet neither option can lead to a rich contentment, an ordered mutuality in the relations between the sexes, a life without bitterness and rancor among intimates—at least for the vast majority of people for whom skepticism of the woman or contempt for the man are both losing propositions, parched and fallow arrangements of God the Father's or Mother Nature's ordained proximities. Of course, gender politics is a marketplace, just like everything else. The central question is inevitably: "What is the price that we are willing to pay for a fraught idea or a domestic misalliance?" The price for either alternative, male suspicion or female control, seems to me rather too high as we see all around us in the disintegration of amity between the sexes and the foundering of a productive culture. Where is good sense to be found? This is the dilemma that confronts us.

Table of Contents

David Solway's latest book is *Crossing the Jordan: On Judaism, Islam, and the West* (NER Press). His previous book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.

Follow NER on Twitter @NERIconoclast