

## Sisters at odds

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**J**UST as the movement for “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” had its Jacobins, so too the feminist movement, with its parallel call for women’s liberation, the equality of the sexes, and politically conceived sisterhood. According to Christina Hoff Sommers, it is the final term of the triad that has inspired dangerous radicalism in the feminist camp and led to something on the order of feminism’s own Reign of Terror.

Liberty and equality, yes—those are the hallmarks of what Sommers terms “equity” or “First Wave” feminism: “the traditional, classically liberal, humanistic feminism that was initiated more than 150 years ago.” Original feminism demanded and won fundamental political rights for women and opened up educational and economic opportunity. Sommers considers herself and most Americans to be feminists of this sort—heirs to the Enlightenment and its principles of individual justice. Her quarrel is with the “Second Wave” or “gender” feminists who have abandoned universalism for gynocentrism and traded enfranchisement for seemingly permanent victim status. Solidarity with women has come to mean hostility to men, and particularly to that alleged system of male dominance: the “heteropatriarchy.”

*Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*<sup>†</sup> is an attempt to reclaim feminism from these female Jacobins (prominent among them, Catherine MacKinnon, Naomi Wolf, Andrea Dworkin, Alison Jaggar, Susan Faludi, and Catherine Stimpson). In her Girondist dissent, Sommers joins a growing number of women, from Katie Roiphe to Camille Paglia, trying to wrest power from the radical Montagnards.

Sommers claims that “misandrism [man-hating] ... was not a notable feature of the women’s movement until our own times”; indeed, she finds that “the idea that women are in a gender

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<sup>†</sup>Simon and Schuster. 320 pp. \$23.00.

war originated in the mid-sixties." Sommers may be right that the triumph of this perspective is new, but certainly its existence is not. There were Amazons of old, or, rather, there was the legend of such a tribe, bespeaking the antiquity of separatist sentiment.

More significant for Sommers' genealogy, this strain was present within organized feminism from the beginning. Many of her astute observations about the character of the current scene can be confirmed by a reading of Henry James's novel *The Bostonians*, which traces the peculiarities of American sexual manners and mores. Writing in 1886, James already discerned a split between equity feminism, represented in the figure of Mrs. Farrinder, and gender feminism, personified by Olive Chancellor:

Evidently Mrs. Farrinder wanted to keep the movement in her own hands—viewed with suspicion certain romantic, aesthetic elements which Olive and Verena seemed to be trying to introduce into it. They insisted so much, for instance, on the historic unhappiness of women; but Mrs. Farrinder didn't appear to care anything for that, or indeed to know much about history at all. She seemed to begin just today, and she demanded their rights for them whether they were unhappy or not.

In contrast to Mrs. Farrinder's practical campaign for the vote (a bold and far-reaching reform, but nonetheless quite concrete and attainable), Miss Chancellor's vision of the contest is more apocalyptic:

The unhappiness of women! The voice of their silent suffering was always in her ears, the ocean of tears that they had shed from the beginning of time seemed to pour through her own eyes. Ages of oppression had rolled over them; uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified. They were her sisters, they were her own, and the day of their delivery had dawned. This was the only sacred cause; this was the great, the just revolution. It must triumph, it must sweep everything before it; it must exact from the other, the brutal, bloodstained, ravening race, the last particle of expiation!

Olive's solution is not female suffrage, but male suffering: "after so many ages of wrong ... men must take *their* turn, men must pay!" In her perpetually offended sensibilities, her paroxysms of rage, even her privileged social status, Olive is reminiscent of the feminists of today, whose attitudes and activities Sommers documents so well.

One of her best chapters surveys the methods of feminist pedagogy. Following upon chapters which outline the feminist

project of curricular transformation and its questionable epistemological foundation, this chapter, "The Feminist Classroom," shows the outcome on the ground: the advent of frankly propagandistic teaching, the erosion of scholarly standards, the disgraceful treatment of student dissenters, and the policing of non-feminist classrooms.

In James's novel, gender feminism does not yet have institutional power, yet in Olive's tutoring of her protégée Verena, we can see our present foreshadowed. James was aware, for instance, that the discipline of history would be the first to be politicized. He tells us that the two young women

read a great deal of history together, and read it ever with the same thought—that of finding confirmation in it for this idea that their sex had suffered inexpressibly, and that at any moment in the course of human affairs the state of the world would have been so much less horrible (history seemed to them in every way horrible), if women had been able to press down the scale.

Sommers shows how this initial stance of resenting the past has been supplemented with an ideologically driven rewriting of the past (the move from his-story to her-story).

**T**HROUGHOUT the book, she highlights (though without the self-conscious provocation and raciness of a Paglia or a Roiphe) the anti-erotic character of gender feminism. Similarly, James's central concern in his "very American tale" was what he called "the decline of the sentiment of sex." Olive, "unmarried by every implication of her being," strives in various ways to dissuade Verena from romantic involvement with men, declaring for instance:

"I'll tell you what is the matter with you—you don't dislike men as a class!" Verena had replied on this occasion, "Well, no, I don't dislike them when they are pleasant!" As if organized atrociousness could ever be pleasant! Olive disliked them most when they were least unpleasant.

Now as then, however, the attempt to demonize men comes up against incontrovertible desire. Even if the gender feminists on campus succeed in labeling every young man a potential rapist, I suspect that young women will still consent to date them. (The advent of political lesbianism and the increased acceptability of homosexuality may have altered things, but I think not to any significant degree.) Olive experiences this as the problem of the generic suitor "Charlie":

In her researches among her young townswomen she had always found this obtrusive swain planted in her path, and she grew at last to dislike him extremely. It filled her with exasperation to think that he should be necessary to the happiness of his victims (she had learned that whatever they might talk about with her, it was of him and him only that they discoursed among themselves), and one of the main recommendations of the evening club [read "Women's Center"] ... which it had long been her dream to establish, was that it would in some degree undermine his position—distinct as her prevision might be that he would be in waiting at the door.

In the end, of course, Olive loses Verena to the charming and utterly unregenerate reactionary from Mississippi, Basil Ransom. In parallel fashion, Sommers closes her book with a defense of Rhett Butler's ravishment of Scarlett O'Hara in "Gone with the Wind." More particularly, she defends the many women who persist in "taking pleasure in Scarlett's enraptured submission" and hence decline the proffered feminist makeover of desire. Having encountered feminist intolerance, the dissenter Sommers articulates well the paradox of gynocentrism:

no group of women can wage war on men without at the same time denigrating the women who respect those men.... In the end, the gender feminist is always forced to show her disappointment and annoyance with the women who are to be found in the camp of the enemy. Misandry moves on to misogyny.

Another of James's creations, a Mrs. Luna, has an intuition of the illiberal authoritarianism to come and knows she will figure among its targets; she is certain that "if Olive and her friends should get possession of the government they would be worse despots than those who were celebrated in history."

If the agenda of the more militant feminists is so remote from the attitudes and concerns of most women, we might wonder why they have been so successful in pressing it. Sommers uncovers the nexus between the universities which house the movement's theoreticians, the educational bureaucracies which feminists have adeptly colonized, and the media. She sketches a sort of feminist version of the military-industrial complex. Aided by the complicity and laziness of the media, feminists have purveyed inaccurate and misleading data on the situation of women in America. Sommers critiques a number of widely disseminated studies on self-esteem, domestic violence, gender inequity in the schools, and rape statistics. In *The Bostonians*, James too shows himself well aware of both

the power and the deficiencies of the press. His journalist Matthias Pardon is a "delighted to be fooled" disciple of the new.

**I**N so persistently bringing Henry James into a review of *Who Stole Feminism?*, my purpose is not to assuage our worries over gender feminism by pointing to its long continuance among us. Certainly, the activities of the aspiring gynocrats are cause for alarm. Nonetheless, *The Bostonians* is of value, aside from the sheer delight of the work, in alerting us to the fact that gender feminism is not as novel as one might have believed. In her first chapter, Sommers explains that she regards the gender feminists' viewpoint as "more a matter of temperament than a matter of insight into social reality. The belief that American women are living in thrall to men seems to suit some women more than others. I have found that it does not suit me."

James agrees with this diagnosis, and he does not shy from labeling the temperament at issue "morbid." But James does not stop there:

It proved nothing of any importance, with regard to Miss Chancellor, to say that she was morbid; any sufficient account of her would lie very much to the rear of that. Why was she morbid, and why was her morbidness typical?

For James, that question gives rise to a philosophic and psychological inquiry into the nature of democracy, the sufficiency of liberalism, the articulation of public and private spheres, the battle of the sexes, and the formation of the national character (particularly its "Bostonian" side, influenced by Puritanism, Transcendentalism, and German thought). With respect to these larger issues, which circle just beneath the surface of her narrative, Sommers disappoints.

Even on the more limited topic of feminism's two waves, she skirts interesting questions. For Sommers, the first wave is wholly unobjectionable ("feminism itself—the pure and wholesome article first displayed at Seneca Falls in 1848—is as American as apple pie, and it will stay"), while the second wave is anomalous and illegitimate. Sommers' dismissal of the second wave relies a bit too much on ridicule rather than argument, and her defense of the first wave relies too much on the refrain "it goes without saying."

The metaphor of waves, moreover, might suggest a more complicated relationship between the two feminisms. Waves

emerge from the same element and flow upon one another. What precisely is the connection between these two waves? Was there something intellectually and humanly unsatisfying about equity feminism's radical individualism and abstraction from (or denial of) male/female differences that spurred both gender feminism and a reinvigorated conservatism? After all, radicalism and conservatism are both interested in the nature and extent of sexual difference, and its political significance.

In *The Bostonians*, James focuses on the battle between the radical and the reactionary. Mrs. Farrinder is quickly eclipsed, despite the fact that her supporters see her as a model of how to reconcile women's expanded public role with private and family life, "a shining proof ... that the forum, for ladies, is not necessarily hostile to the fireside." Despite what Sommers hails as the success of equity feminism, women still seem uncertain about how to balance forum and fireside.

It also seems that her presentation of the aims of first-wave feminism is partial. Sommers stresses the movement for sexual equality under the law. Feminism sought to open up the public sphere to women, not as women, but as concerned citizens, as individuals. It sought freedom from an exclusively gender-based definition of the self. However, the women's liberation movement had a second element as well: the emancipation of sexuality. Sommers says nothing of first-wave feminism's transformation of the private realm—its sponsorship of the sexual revolution and its assault upon the sexual double standard. (Again, this direction was already visible 150 years ago in the Short-Skirts League and free-love experiments.) Thus, feminism looked forward simultaneously to a liberal devaluation of bodily difference in the public sphere and a liberal celebration of bodily difference in the private sphere. One might wonder whether that combination is sustainable.

Despite its somewhat sanitized presentation of the original article, *Who Stole Feminism?* is a welcome book. Christina Hoff Sommers delivers a courageous and incisive criticism of those who have seized feminism and deflected it from a more mainstream course. Perhaps feminism's Thermidorian reaction has begun.