Girls just wanna have fun

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SPEAKING of the burgeoning feminist movement, Henry James's tough-minded female doctor in *The Bostonians* (1886) says:

> "Well, what it amounts to is just that women want to have a better time. That's what it comes to in the end."
>
> "And don't you sympathize with such an aspiration?"
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> "Well, I don't know as I cultivate the sentimental side," said Doctor Prance. "There's plenty of sympathy without mine. If they want to have a better time, I suppose it's natural; so do men too, I suppose. But I don't know as it appeals to me—to make sacrifices for it; it ain't such a wonderful time—the best you *can* have!"

In this posthumous collection of essays, *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism*,† Christopher Lasch explores the origins, permutations, and costs of the feminist quest for "a better time." Although most of these previously published essays date from the early 1990s, the theme engaged Lasch's attention from the 1960s forward. The very fine introduction by Lasch's daughter, Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, includes a letter in which her father spoke of his longstanding attempt "to trace the interconnections between the modern ideology of intimacy, the new domestic ideal of the nineteenth century, and feminism," a project he envisioned under the heading "The Domestication of Eros." The eventual title is perhaps to be preferred for the way it captures Lasch's concern for that threatened realm between the state and the individual—"the common life" increasingly overtaken by the expansion of artificially constructed public and private realms. Nonetheless, the original title better indicates Lasch's thesis about the direction of the last couple of centuries, during

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which love has settled down (not altogether happily) in marriage.

LASCH'S "domestication of eros" might also be called its democratization. Accordingly, like Tocqueville who always sketches democracy in light of the aristocratic alternative to democracy, Lasch begins by recovering the aristocratic conception of love and marriage, not as a live possibility, politically speaking, but rather as a crucial imaginative one if we hope to understand our own situation. Contemporary academic feminists, intent on finding patriarchal misogyny in the historical record and/or valiant (and precociously feminist) subversion of same, lack the freedom of imagination to see anything in the past other than a costume version of themselves and their "oppressors." Lasch's reading of the past is, by contrast, genuinely perceptive in that he discerns the different spirit of a different age.

We learn that both parties to the highly ritualized combat of the medieval *querelle des femmes* shared a common premise: "They took for granted the contradiction between love, which rested on sexual equality, and marriage, a hierarchical arrangement in which a wife was expected to submit to her husband's authority." According to Lasch, works from the *Roman de la Rose* (circa 1275) forward, which are often read as attacks on womankind, are better understood as diatribes against marriage. Moreover, the barbs directed at wives touch husbands as well:

> It is he [the jealous husband] who usually gives voice both to the stock criticism of marriage and to the stock vilification of women; and since he is himself an object of conventional satire, the satire against women also contained a satire against the male in his capacity as householder, husband, and cuckold. Far from giving vent to "antifeminist" prejudices, aristocratic satire rested on criticism of marriage and more specifically of jealousy, rightly believed to dominate relations not founded on the principle of voluntary, reciprocal submission.

On the other side of the *querelle*, Christine de Pisan, often hailed as the ur-feminist, turns out to have been an advocate of old-fashioned female honor, which is to say women's capacity for fidelity and "wifely submission." What is perhaps most notable about this centuries-long literary controversy is that neither the detractors nor the defenders of aristocratic marriage denied or sought to ameliorate the distance between love

and marriage, between freedom and necessity. Instead, they met it with "tears and laughter," courtly poetry and comic satire.

ONLY in the eighteenth century did the playful aristocratic contest of wits give way to the earnest democratic science of reform. What was new about feminism was not its assessment of male tyranny (or male sexual inadequacy or male bellicosity or male unreliability). The complaints were age-old; the cure—indeed, the very notion of a cure—was what was new. According to Lasch, feminism begins with the attempt "to reconcile marriage with sexual equality" (and thus, love). But the idea that feats of social engineering are possible may be traced back much further to Descartes (who gave us the disembodied, which is to say ungendered, mind) and Hobbes (who gave us the unencumbered self, for whom "right is of no sex").

In fairness it should be pointed out—and Lasch's second essay (a review of Jean H. Hagstrum's *Esteem Enlivened by Desire*) does so—that there had long existed a "countertradition" of marital love (remember Penelope and Odysseus): "From the beginning, it would seem, the West was able to imagine that marriage might rest on sexual attraction and mutual respect, instead of on the sexual subordination that was taken as the norm elsewhere in the world." To turn that imagined ideal, that rarely experienced exception, into a new norm was a task the rising bourgeoisie saw as eminently reasonable and moral.

In chapter 3, Lasch traces the two-pronged attack that secured modern, middle-class marriage. We are all familiar with the advent of bridal consent and the rejection of the aristocratic practice of arranged marriages. Less known, however, is that this "romantic" reform was accompanied by the suppression of another practice, that of clandestine marriage (marriage without witnesses, without parental consent, without publication of banns). The target here was passion. Young people could not simply be left to their own devices. There was the danger of seduction by bawds and sharpers, and the danger of imprudent alliances based solely on sexual attraction. So, consent must be "informed" consent—consent qualified by a requirement for parental consent, by a rise in the marriageable age, and by a general deemphasis of the erotic dimension of marriage along with a new stress on the role of friendship and compatibility.

By contrast, the opponents of the Marriage Act of 1753,

who vehemently defended early marriage and resisted the demand for public marriages, spoke for an older tradition that "conceived of love as a function of sexual attraction rather than a product of mature deliberation and long acquaintance." They argued that, particularly among the lower classes, passion must remain the catalyst of marriage. Moreover, they predicted that the attempt to delay and rationalize the process would lead not to sounder marriages but to a rise in illegitimacy and male irresponsibility (and indeed, the second half of the eighteenth century saw a sharp rise in illegitimacy). As a good historian, Lasch displays an admirable evenhandedness in sketching these debates; he thus counters our tendency to ascribe intellectual merit solely to the historical winners.

By the nineteenth century, the middle-class "cult of domesticity" had routed both the upper-class marriage of interest and the lower-class marriage of impulse. In chapter 4, Lasch proceeds to examine the relation between the newly dominant view and feminism. What he finds may come as a surprise: "Often misinterpreted in our own time as a reactionary ideology designed to keep women in the kitchen, the cult of domesticity generated feminist thinking among women who did not necessarily think of themselves as feminists." Meanwhile, self-proclaimed feminists, who began by denying the civic relevance of sexual difference, increasingly moved to accommodate their rhetoric to "the growing belief in women's moral superiority." (On the basis of Tocqueville's observation that Americans decidedly reject the unisex vision of equality, one might have predicted that equal-rights feminism would have to recast itself as female chauvinism in order to succeed.)

Lasch demonstrates the substantial agreement between feminists and antifeminists. They were at one "in condemning the doctrine that woman's highest aim was to please." Interestingly, their joint attack on the life of "fashion" was linked to the cause of abolition since slavery was held to exemplify patriarchy at its worst: male licentiousness (all those mulattoes) and female frivolity. Feminists and antifeminists alike called for women to be useful, not ornamental. Usefulness in turn entailed female education and serious work, not necessarily as wage earners but, rather, as full partners in the economy of the home and as stewards of civic culture and moral uplift. Although Lasch says that feminists and antifeminists were "bitterly divided about everything else," one wonders, from his presentation of the extensive convergences, what there was

left to disagree about (other than female suffrage). What Lasch describes might simply be termed Yankee womanhood—Henry James implied as much when he titled his exploration of American sexual mores *The Bostonians*.

HAVING sketched the victory of bourgeois domesticity in Part I, Lasch next explores the fate of this new dispensation. It seems that the special competence of women did not last long. There were others with stronger claims to expertise and at least as great an interest in social control. According to Lasch, "the achievement of 'individualism' and 'autonomy' for middle-class women represented part of a larger social and political process that ended in the ascendancy of professional experts." The common life has been invaded and annexed, with the consequence that men and women alike now depend on "the assistance of specially trained professionals [social workers, psychiatrists, marriage counselors, guidance counselors, child development experts, et al.] for the conduct of everyday life."

This theme of the therapeutic state, which Lasch treats extensively in his other works, is here illustrated through the nineteenth-century alliance of women and doctors. Women readily turned to doctors for help in gaining control over such matters as the number of children borne and the frequency of intercourse, but Lasch suggests, in rather dark Foucaultian terms, that the doctors had an agenda of their own:

> Women's role as cultural missionaries, closely bound up with their domestic confinement but simultaneously serving to justify demands for wider social influence and participation in public life, was to some extent the deliberate creation of doctors seeking to make wives and mothers agents of medical influence—of the medical "colonization" of the family.

Perhaps that ignorant, recalcitrant peasant in Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* had the right idea when he shut the door on the white coats who tried to institute "the pricking of the children" (a regular program of innoculations).

Although our version of social discipline never descended into a gulag, Lasch insists that "this new style of noncoercive, nonauthoritative, and manipulative control poses its own kind of danger to the democratic institutions it is intended to preserve." And it isn't only habits of democratic self-governance that are threatened. Eros is decisively displaced as well. Love is not just domesticated, it is scientifically scrutinized; it be-

comes sex. Our much vaunted sexual liberation has in truth led to a "drastic shrinkage of our imaginative and emotional horizon."

LASCH is not a thinker who denies human agency in history; nonetheless, reading this book, one gets a sense of the inevitability of our current plight. Feminism itself seems swept up in larger forces. Capitalism and class loom particularly large and ugly for Lasch. "The feminist movement," he says, "far from civilizing corporate capitalism, has been corrupted by it." Dissatisfied (and rightly so) with suburban isolation, women unwisely threw themselves headlong into the market. For the last 30-some years, they have formulated feminist demands in an attempt to rig the competition in their favor: affirmative action, comparable worth, sexual-harassment policies, abortion rights, and state-run day care. But, according to Lasch, there is no "empowerment," no "choice," to be found in the realm of work, for either women or men, since labor has been stripped of meaning "by the requirements of the corporate economy." Lasch wishes for a genuinely radical feminism—a feminism that would "question the ideology of economic growth and productivity, together with the careerism it fosters"; a feminism that "would demand a system of production for use rather than profit"; a feminism that would reject "progress." To bring about a "family friendly workplace" the current strict separation between home and workplace must be overcome.

Although Lasch's own language is not Aristotelian, it does not seem amiss to say that Lasch wishes to reunite the two halves of the *oikos* (the Greek word for the household from which our word "economics" derives) and properly subordinate the acquisitive element to the higher purposes of family life, particularly the inculcation of virtue in the next generation. For Lasch, the *oikos* ought to direct its members beyond themselves and their narrow individuality toward the common life and democratic citizenship. Put most boldly, Lasch would like to undo modernity's elevation of economics over politics (and science over religion).

Interestingly, given what seems to be his criticism of modern premises, Lasch evinces considerably more sympathy for gender-neutral "equality" feminism than for "difference" feminism. A feminism that acknowledges natural differences might seem to entail less in the way of social engineering, but in

fact, as Lasch shows in his demolition of Carol Gilligan, difference feminism in particular has become the agent of a destructive "feminization" of American life. By denigrating impersonal standards and notions of excellence as "male," difference feminism has furthered the democratic assault on such standards. Feminism has substituted an absolutely groundless "self-esteem" for the self-respect of men and women who hold themselves to "a demanding ideal of perfection." Lasch insists that this self-absorption hurts women.

> The demand for access to the great world of politics and learning derived its original force from the observation that narrow circumstances breed narrow minds. But when feminists began to argue for their rights on the grounds that it would give "maternal influence" a wider sphere, they sacrificed moral realism to political expediency. They turned conventional stereotypes to political advantage but lost the ability to explain what makes the world of women, unless it is integrated into a more impersonal world where the quality of ideas or workmanship counts for more than "relationships," so confining to the spirit, so productive of petty jealousies, so highly charged with envy and resentment.

What we desperately need is a feminism leavened by an honest and hearty dollop of misogyny.

CLEARLY, it will not be supplied by Naomi Wolf, whose new book, *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood*,‡ shows her to be still in quest of "a better time." The book is an evocative recounting of the sexual coming of age of Wolf and her friends in the San Francisco of the 1960s and 1970s, interspersed with potted summaries of the sexual mores of other times and places. In "A Short History of the Slut," for instance, we move from "the Great Mother, with her divine sexuality," circa 20,000 B.C.E., to Nicole Brown Simpson, all in five pages. Much of the memoir portion of the book is actually quite frank about the costs of the sexual revolution. Wolf describes particularly well the various ways in which children were neglected, bereft, forgotten, or abandoned as adults increasingly put their own gratification foremost. Her comments about the effect of divorce on young girls are perceptive:

> Just when the girls needed their fathers to be around to admire their emerging sexual identity from a safe distance—to be the dependable male figures upon whom they could innocently prac-

‡ Random House. 286 pp. $24.00.

> tice growing up—the fathers vanished.... To the female children on the block, then, there was a new kind of anxiety: How could one grow up to become, through sex, the kind of woman a dad would not want to go away from?... The fathers' departure created in many women my age a feeling of cynicism about the durability of the bonds of commitment and love and an almost blind religious faith in the strength of the bond of sex.

But Wolf wouldn't have had it otherwise: "In spite of all the wreckage, I am glad we lived through what we did, where we did." (This makes about as much sense as Wolf's position on abortion, which consists of a frank acknowledgement that abortion is murder coupled with an intransigent endorsement of the practice.) Wolf continues to believe that as a result of the sexual revolution female desire was "freed in some critical ways."

The problem, as she sees it, is that the revolution did not go far enough. Everybody learned the technical stuff about orgasms and g-spots, but did not really come to appreciate, nay "venerate," the distinctiveness of female desire. This is Wolf's answer to the pretty much undeniable fact that the sexual revolution's version of sexual equality unleashed male wolfishness. What we need according to her is to complete the sexual revolution by reviving "female sexuality's sacred and religious aspects." Thus will women affirm their superior and polymorphous carnality ("There are no good girls; we are all bad girls, in the best sense of the word"), and thus will men learn the delights of apprenticing themselves to such goddesses. Gallantry would return, not in the form of a man's throwing his coat over a mud puddle but in the form of hours of foreplay.

According to Wolf, history offers us plenty of examples of the enshrinement of female desire, from the Han Dynasty of ancient China and its Tao of Loving to the Zuni Indians of New Mexico. To her credit, Wolf is trying to rescue heterosexuality from "feminist commentators" who "equate heterosexuality with a set of assumptions that are innately degrading to women." In turning to the Kama Sutra and other erotic literature, she is looking for works that "give the lie to the message in *Penthouse*, the primary teaching text for the teenage boys we know, that female nakedness and sexuality are cheap, as well as those of some second-wave feminists whose wish to restrict images of female nudity is argued on the grounds that they are inherently 'objectifying.'"

BUT one suspects that her eclecticism is a bit sloppy. Wolf wants more respect for women without any sacrifice of promiscuous pleasures. Yet, from her own brief accounts of these other cultures, one notices that these elaborate sex manuals were used as marriage manuals by "inexperienced brides." In other words, womanly pleasure meant wifely pleasure. That observation should at least cause one to wonder whether both maidenly virginity and matronly fidelity might be important components of teachings about the sacredness of female desire. But Wolf, no sexual economist, wants pleasure to be both precious and plentiful. Hence she prefers the Babylonians, with their ritual prostitution, to the Jews, who thought prostitution unholy. One can't help wondering what she'll find a good word for next: maybe the liberationist potential of polygamy.

Wolf doesn't go so far as to recommend ritual prostitution for us today, but she does want rituals: rites of passage for girls, "wisdom initiations," "mentoring exchanges," and all-female retreats at which "older women would teach the younger skills and techniques, such as self-defense, contraception, sexual pleasure, and parenting." Again, she seems unaware that the things she wants don't necessarily cohere. It is difficult to combine real rituals with radical freedom. Peoples with rituals that matter are bound. They don't, as Carol Gilligan's blurb says of *Promiscuities*, "encourage every woman to tell it her way."

It is exceedingly easy to mock this book, from its opening invocation of Margaret Mead to its closing call for a sort of updated version of the Eleusinian mysteries. Nonetheless, I do believe that the dissatisfaction fueling Wolf's inquiry is serious. To some extent, she overlaps Lasch, and even the late Allan Bloom, in her concern for the fate of eros in the modern world. Like them, she returns to the thought and practices of bygone times. In the end, however, San Francisco retains its hold on her. As she says early on, "our town made it hard to have ultimate faith in any belief system that made claims beyond the pleasures of the senses." But a true education of the sentiments is not to be had in the City of Sybaris.