

Wrong Turn: How the Campaign to Liberate Women has Betrayed the Culture of Life

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During the early years of second wave feminism, feminist activists unveiled their passionate opposition to the very idea of Mother's Day and launched a vocal campaign against it. Mother's Day, they proclaimed, represented the very essence of women's oppression: while men had been free to lead countries, businesses, and armies, to pursue careers or simply to hold paying jobs, women had been imprisoned in a web of domesticity, for which motherhood had ranked as the primary justification. During the same years in which activists were launching their attack upon Mother's Day as an insult to women, feminist scholars were beginning to argue that motherhood—as an identity and full-time occupation—had been invented in a particular historical period or, as they would say today, had been “socially-constructed.” At the core of both of these projects lay the fierce rejection of any “natural” link between women and the children their bodies might happen to bear.

Even the angriest feminists have shown little enthusiasm for depicting their movement as a unilateral rejection of children. After all, women should be free to bear, love, and occasionally even rear the children they “choose” to bear, just as they should be free to abort those they choose not to. By their lights, the children who survive this process of selection should delight in the knowledge that they are the ones their mothers truly wanted. In defiance of this logic, however, many of the children born since the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 find these arguments entirely

unconvincing. Increasing numbers of them appear to be grasping the fundamental truth that to have been “chosen” by your mother is less a source of security than of insecurity, for it comes trailing the knowledge that you might not have been. The “chosen” thus live under the constant threat that any failure to please the mother who chose them could result in her rejection of them.

In this instance, the anxiety of the children deserves more serious attention than it has normally received and, assuredly, invites us to scrutinize the iron chains that bind the feminist hostility to Mother’s Day to the feminist insistence upon a woman’s right to abortion as the cornerstone—not to say litmus test—of the movement. Overtly, feminism emerged and cohered as an attack on male privilege—normally, if incorrectly, referred to as “the patriarchy.” Attacks on the ubiquity and injustice of male prerogative have indisputably abounded from the start, but beneath them lurked a more sinister program, namely, the attempt to liberate women from responsibility for children. During the early years of women’s studies courses, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s minor novella, *The Yellow Wall Paper*, rapidly earned a quasi-canonical status, which could only with great difficulty be ascribed to its literary significance.

The novella depicts a young wife and mother who has, according to the authoritative men around her, suffered an acute nervous or psychological collapse. To “cure” her, they confine her to a single room, and she spends most of the novella in an attempt to scrape the yellow wallpaper off its walls. At the end she is shipped off to endure the ministrations of the famed neurologist, Weir Mitchell. Commentaries on the novella have overwhelmingly focused upon the overbearing character and behavior of her husband and the doctors, blaming men for this previously engaging woman’s collapse. What passes virtually unremarked—most notably by the first-person narrator—is that the precipitating factor in her breakdown is not the marriage, which until this point has apparently been happy enough, but the birth of her son and the growing pressure of his demands upon her. For what it is worth, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, bears a striking

resemblance to Gilman's own life, in which, after a similar crisis, she left not merely her husband but her daughter, whom she barely saw again for years.

The unending feminist arguments in favor of abortion rarely acknowledge that their the primary goal may be the complete liberation of women from children. Hostility to Mother's Day is one thing, a natural aversion to children is quite another. To hear feminists tell it, they merely wish to have children on their own terms in order—to paraphrase the Wolf's words to Little Red Riding Hood—the better to love you, my dear. Their apparent understanding of how to love the children they choose to bear (and I am intentionally avoiding the morally problematic morass of artificial, *in vitro*, and other forms of insemination and surrogate motherhood to which those who defer childbearing often resort), however, may often appear to have scant relation to sheer delight in the child's company and his or her independent being.

In fairness, women of the upper classes of previous centuries and other countries were also more likely than not to assign the rearing of their children—and not infrequently even the nursing of them—over to servants or dependents of one or another variety. They were often wont to see the care of the material world, including human bodies, their own as well as their children's, as servants' work, and they lived amidst servants who did it. Such women also lived in worlds characterized by a sharp delineation between the nature and responsibilities of women and men—and frequently by the subordination of women to men. Typically, they would bear many more children than most women today—and would often lose a significant number of them to a variety of diseases and accidents, including bowel and other intestinal disorders or falling into open fires. Even for the most privileged—and sometimes especially for them if you remember the wives of Henry VIII—it is grossly inaccurate to claim that motherhood did not figure as an important aspect of their familial and social role.

The so-called invention of motherhood, which occurred in Western Europe between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries and which feminists deplore, primarily

concerns a sentimentalization of motherhood and the new possibility for some women, usually from the middle classes or bourgeoisie, to specialize in it. This specialization is what feminists have seen as imprisonment, primarily because it seemingly ensured women's exclusion from the exciting public world of men. Worse, it seemingly consolidated the natural difference between the sexes, which it endowed with scientific authority. In retrospect, it is difficult not to agree that the fanatical insistence upon sexual difference and the rigidity of sexual roles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has a good deal about it of "the lady doth protest too much." Earlier ages had assuredly insisted upon the difference, but by the middle of the nineteenth century—at least in professional circles—the significance of the difference was markedly declining. Thus the early woman's rights women, like their late twentieth-century feminist heirs, were above all women who sought to enjoy the same education and pursue the same careers as their brothers and perhaps their husbands. Differences between men's and women's physical strength did not preclude their pursuit of these careers, but their doing so did depend upon their liberation from the responsibility for children.

Well into the twentieth century—indeed, until the beginnings of second wave feminism in the 1960s—most women who pursued serious professional careers did choose between motherhood and their career, and many also chose between their career and marriage. With the passage of time, barriers to women's participation in the public world began to totter and ultimately fall, and they did so at an accelerating rate. Initially, however, virtually everyone assumed that a woman could not simultaneously pursue a full-time career and care properly for a family. And, in contrast to the aristocratic ethos of earlier times and other cultures, there was by now a widespread belief, among parents as well as experts, that children received the best care from their own mothers, who, being of the social and educational level the children should attain, were capable of stimulating their minds and shaping their characters. No one paid much attention to the plight

of poor and working-class women, who, married or single, almost always had to supplement the family income whether by going out to work or, more commonly for mothers, taking work in. Nor has it apparently occurred to contemporary feminists that women whose experience of paid labor consists not in glamour and prestige but in drudgery, bunions, roughened hands, and occasionally even lost limbs or damaged reproductive organs, may view the opportunity to stay home with children as an unattainable luxury.

The position of the official feminist movement has been inexorable and unyielding: abortion, up to and including the murder of the child who survives the abortion, constitutes the cornerstone of women's rights, and any diminution of its legality amounts to an attack upon the very notion of human freedom. The link between abortion and individual rights or freedom lies at the heart of the matter, for by associating access to abortion with "choice," feminists have succeeded in melding it into our prevailing concept of individual freedom—the very *sainte-nitouche* of contemporary American and Western culture. For years, feminists have waltzed around the full implications of their demands, often engaging in their own version of the sentimentalization, which they deplore in others. The right to choose falls comfortably on American ears, rarely raising danger signals even among those who should know better. For better *and* worse, the rights of the individual anchor our sense of ourselves and trump virtually all attempts to limit them in the name of some greater good. Consequently, nothing could have seemed more natural than for women to claim that full civil equality requires that they possess and exercise those rights as fully as men.

For most of the years of the movement, as in many feminist circles today, tremendous energy has been devoted to presenting abortion as innocuous and even innocent. It is, according to this version, nothing more than the protection of women's freedom and individuality—and it has the added benefit of ensuring that mothers freely love the children they choose to bear. Above all, most feminists try to dodge the dangerous admission that the

fetus the woman aborts is actually a living being—a baby. Occasionally however, and it would appear with growing frequency, another, and yet more disturbing note creeps in. Cynthia Daniels, for example, argues that feminists should acknowledge the fetus as a human life, for this admission opens the way to their arguing that it is a predatory life, one that is feeding off the vital sustenance of the woman and is, uninvited, sapping her strength and vitality. Her rights, according to Daniels, lie in her freedom to ward off the invader by any necessary means as an act of self-defense.

Feminists in general have not openly embraced Daniels's disturbing argument. For one thing, it does not project an appealing political image, and, for another, they probably understand that its rigorous logic exposes the full horror of their own premises. Increasingly, however, echoes of it are creeping into countless discussions of abortion and legal battles over the conditions under which it should be performed and the regulations that should govern it. Feminists today are opposing the requirement that a woman who visits an abortion clinic enjoys the same right to "informed consent" as any other person who is considering a medical procedure. Even my dentist is required to obtain my signature on a dauntingly detailed consent form before extracting a tooth or performing minor surgery on my gums. Abortion presents risks of an entirely different magnitude, including an increased—perhaps highly increased—risk of breast cancer, the risk of never being able to bear a child, the risk of serious depression, and even an increased risk to commit suicide.

And I am not dwelling upon the more immediate and graphically disquieting risks of death at the hands of an incompetent abortionist or from infection contracted in unsanitary clinics or death from hemorrhage after leaving the clinic.

The elite feminist movement as represented by the National Abortion Rights Action League, the National Organization of Women, Planned Parenthood, and their allies at the ACLU and other organizations claims merely to defend a woman's right to "choose to have an abortion," yet their tactics strip women

precisely of their right to choose since those who favor abortion oppose any recognition that a woman might wish to keep even an “unplanned,” “unchosen,” or, heaven forbid, less than perfect child. Although the claim would offend them, they promote the culture of death—not the culture of life. Even as I write, a suit is brewing against Planned Parenthood for its aggressive promotion of abortion for minor girls (thirteen or fourteen year-olds) who have been impregnated by much older “boy friends.” In so doing, Planned Parenthood is not merely circumventing the laws about parental consent for minors, but aiding and abetting statutory rape.

The theories that support abortion as a woman’s fundamental right rest on the assumption that abortion solves a problem—that pregnancy constitutes a violation of woman’s most important interests and rights. These theories do not allow for the possibility that, rather than freeing a woman from an unwanted burden, abortion deprives her of a great benefit and violates some of her most important interests. Just because the public discussions of abortion never acknowledge these interests does not mean that they do not exist or that abortion does not destroy them. If anything, the silence that shrouds them contributes to the propensity for serious depression that plagues many women who do have abortions.

A mother’s benefits from her relationship with her child throughout her natural life are unique and irreplaceable. Often—and many would say normally—a mother’s continuing relations with her child enhance her life and sense of self, bringing great joy and fulfillment, but even when children cause their mother pain, the mother continues to view her relations with them as integral to her sense of herself as a person—and as one of her greatest interests. It is inconsistent with the experiences of the vast majority of women to dismiss a woman’s interest in her relations with her child as in any way peripheral to her sense of self.

Feminists deplore these and similar arguments primarily because they include—and often rest upon—recognition of a fundamental difference between women and men and,

consequently, an assault upon women's claims to equality with men. With respect to motherhood and abortion, as with respect to other issues, many feminists defend radically incompatible positions, for most remain loath to relinquish women's claims upon the benefits of motherhood, even in the reduced form that feminists acknowledge them. But the premier premise of elite feminist activists remains the equality between women and men, and, through women's capacity for motherhood, nature has unforgivably violated that equality. Thus feminists support abortion without conditions or restrictions as the surest way to redress the injustice of nature. And the campaign to defend abortion has, willy-nilly, led them into an escalating war against any purported claims of nature. In their view, women's equality with men trumps all other considerations and justifies any casualties in the war to defend it. Single-minded in their belief that abortion can "save" women from their own bodies, they blithely ignore the fundamental Gnosticism (assuming that they even know the word) of their position, not to mention their role in eroding the very ideal of a culture of life.

Thoughtful consideration of our culture's experience with abortion leaves no doubt that it has woefully failed to effect the feminists' professed goals even as it has furthered alienation from a culture of life. Rather than securing women's sexual equality with men, the availability of legal abortion has decisively contributed to their sexual exploitation by men. The availability of abortion has freed—and even encouraged—men to view women as sexual objects and to exploit them for sexual pleasure. By throwing the responsibility for a pregnancy directly upon the women, abortion has liberated men from responsibility for the consequences of their sexual adventures. As the feminist movement has vociferously insisted, men's use of women for sexual pleasure constitutes as an especially objectionable form of exploitation. The availability of abortion has vastly facilitated men's freedom to exploit women in this fashion, for a woman's individual right to abortion represents a possible pregnancy as uniquely her concern.

The availability of legal abortion appears to free women from the consequences of their female sexuality by promising them the freedom to terminate a possible pregnancy. The appearance is nonetheless deceptive. For, by granting women the freedom to terminate a pregnancy, legal abortion divorces women's potential motherhood from their sexuality. Abortion advocates argue that the availability of abortion simply provides women with a choice and does not affect women who do not seek abortion. To paraphrase a bumper sticker, "If you don't like abortion, don't have one." But both common sense and hard evidence suggest otherwise. The availability of abortion is a matter of public knowledge that directly affects men's behavior toward women and, more subtly, influences women's feelings about sexuality and motherhood. Above all, the knowledge encourages men to view women's sexuality as independent of their capacity for motherhood. This attitude denigrates women and encourages and accommodates their virtually unchastised sexual exploitation by men. Much of the distress about "date" or "acquaintance" rape probably embodies some of women's deeply conflicted feelings about their own "liberation" to be sexually used. This is a moral universe in which the line between the sex they choose to engage in and the sex they wish not to engage in effectively disappears. In this sense, and in many real ways, abortion benefits men more than women, and it should come as no surprise that, statistically speaking, the most enthusiastic supporters of legalized abortion have consistently been the young single men whose interests it most unambiguously serves.

Under the urging of feminists, the Supreme Court, in *Roe v. Wade* and subsequent rulings on abortion, has embraced reasoning that depicts pregnancy and motherhood as encumbrances upon a woman's dignity as an individual and an illegitimate curtailment of her rights as an individual. According to this reasoning, a woman has a fundamental right to abortion because pregnancy and motherhood diminish her dignity and restrict her rights as an individual. Thus, to enjoy full dignity and rights as an individual, a woman must resemble a man as closely

as possible. It is difficult to imagine a more deadly assault upon a woman's dignity as a woman. For this logic denies that a woman can be both a woman and a full individual. In other words, it assumes that the individual is necessarily male and, consequently, confirms the view, traditionally opposed by feminists, that women are second-class citizens. Sadly this opposition to embodiment—the necessary unity of body and soul or mind—implicitly denies the value of the culture of life, which is inescapably grounded in the immediacy of sentient bodies.

The one incontestable, natural difference between women and men is the difference in their reproductive capacities and roles: Women can become pregnant and bear children, men cannot. Scholars continue to debate a range of possible natural differences between women and men, and empirical evidence suggests that some exist. Even in these cases, however, there is little agreement among scholars about how much of the perceived difference should be attributed to nature and how much to culture and socialization. During the last few decades, the general trend has increasingly been to minimize the significance of all differences between women and men, on the assumption that to acknowledge difference is to undercut women's chances to achieve full equality with men.

This strategy has strongly influenced public perceptions, public policy, and many legal decisions, preeminently those that concern abortion, but also those that concern single-sex education, maternity leave, and women's appropriate roles in armed combat. Presumably those who have embraced this reasoning believe they have done so with the noblest intentions of improving women's position in the world. Their commitment to a mechanical view of equality has, however, prevented their recognizing that their policies have led to the steady erosion of women's dignity as women. It is almost as if the courts, following the feminist lead, have come to view pregnancy as a disability from which women must be protected in every way possible. In this case, instead of assuming that the pregnant woman deserves the protection and respect compatible with her dignity as a

woman, the courts have assumed that the pregnant woman deserves to be freed from the pregnancy—from the baby she is carrying—which amounts to the claim that being a woman is itself a disability and inherently an undesirable condition. The emphasis upon a pregnant woman's right to an abortion effectively undercuts the dignity of the woman who is pregnant and, by extension, of all women who may become pregnant.

It is impossible to honor—or even to acknowledge—a woman's dignity as a woman by insisting that the dignity depends upon her access to abortion. Feminists typically defend a woman's right to abortion because it is falsely argued that only the right to abortion can ground women's equality with men and because only equality with men can assure women's true dignity. Thus, even while feminists argue that equality should not be confused with sameness, they defend abortion as a fundamental right on the grounds that pregnancy presents an insurmountable barrier to women's attainment of equality with men. Ironically, however, the existence of a woman's legal right to secure an abortion has coincided with—and arguably has caused—a dramatic increase in the number of children born to single women, which has led to the growing impoverishment of many women (and children) and to growing inequality between women and men. Advocates of abortion argue that the solution to this problem is to secure even wider access to abortion, but the evidence leaves little doubt that legal abortion has decisively undermined women's dignity in the eyes of their male sexual partners. It remains difficult to understand how the cause of a problem may plausibly be advanced as the solution to it.

Legal abortion has demonstrably led men to treat women as their sexual equals, notably with respect to the unintended consequences of sexual intimacy. The availability of abortion has released men from a sense of responsibility to the women with whom they have sexual relations. Men's sense of responsibility to marry the women impregnated included a respect for the dignity of the woman as a woman, which the availability of abortion decisively undercut. The increase in the number of births to single

women, notwithstanding the availability of abortion, confirms that these women do view pregnancy as an essential aspect of their sense of themselves as women. Why otherwise would they have chosen to carry the child to term? And why should so many of the women who do choose abortion experience debilitating depression?

With respect to abortion's relation to the culture of life, the paradoxes abound. Abortion advocates seek to present their support for murder as the true defense of life—the life of the mother. They further equate meaningful life with liberation from binding ties and responsibilities, apparently never suspecting that the life of the human person depends upon the mutual recognition between and among persons. For without that mutual recognition—without the understanding that the self exists only in relation to the other—the individual reduces others, and *ipso facto* him or herself to objects. Rather than providing the emblematic model and condition of freedom, abortion provides the emblematic model of enslavement. Freedom above all consists in the capacity to love and to serve and, as E. M Forster put it, to connect. In our time (at least in the Western world), enslavement lies in the inability to love, serve, or connect—the inability to recognize and honor the humanity of the other.

The years that witnessed the emergence of feminism have coincided with the rise of individualism and have promoted innumerable benefits including the abolition of slavery, a growing respect for the rights and dignity of women, and, in general, a growing concern for human rights. It remains to explain how they could also have resulted in a commitment to abortion—and increasingly assisted suicide and euthanasia—as the guarantee of a human freedom and dignity that it unilaterally denies.