CULTURE

Fidelity With a Wandering Eye

Love is noble, love is hard, and women cheat just as readily as men

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It's official: the conventional wisdom is false. It's not men who leave their wives for younger, blonder temptresses; it's women who leave their husbands for—well, just about anybody. Or nobody. The fact is, women initiate 66 percent of divorces between partners over forty. That, at least, is what they reported during a major AARP study, released last year. That is also the impression one gleans when contemplating a new spate of books and shows, from ABC's already classic *Desperate Housewives* to hot spring titles including most notably *Undressing Infidelity: Why More Wives Are Unfaithful*.

This is refreshing news—in some senses, at least. It puts a great big dent in sexual stereotypes with which we have been too long saddled: the security-besotted, marriage-angling, nest- squatting female and her counterpart, the freedom-loving, wild-oat-sowing male Steppenwolf. They made for an insipid image all along, but everybody seemed to conspire in it, from self-help authors (who assumed that their female readers wanted nothing more than tips on how to "catch" and "tame" a husband) to family counselors, magazine pundits, and, of course, evolutionary psychologists (who say it's all biology: girls are made to sit in the straw and warm their eggs; guys are made to fly through the heavens and spread their seed). Women have been told they are helpless and dependent for so long that we have begun to believe it—and to object vociferously when we are not treated as such. If men whose company we enjoy don't assume we want to be their wives and thus propose in short order, we consider it "an insult" (in the approving words of the sexpert-rabbi Shmuley Boteach) and declare ourselves aggrieved. The result? Women have grown dull while men have grown smug, offering their hands (when they do) as one might bestow a winning lottery ticket: "There you go, honey, I guess I've made *your* life." Having given that, they too often feel they have given all; they've done their bit in the kingdom of relationships, and their co may now live happily ever after.

Only they generally don't, as the books and studies make all too clear. Women need more than security to thrive, it seems. In fact, they often court the square opposite of security, as Diane Shader Smith learned when she began interviewing women for *Undressing Infidelity*. They court risk; they court intensity, variety, novelty, and disaster—very much like men. It is a peculiarity of our age to portray one sex as nature's safe and law-abiding partner—to cast it as the erotically muted, risk-averse nanny to man. A few hundred years before Jesus Christ, Aristophanes presented women as rowdy and ebullient sexual predators, fighting uninhibitedly over access to handsome boys. Utopia, as described by Aristophanes' *Congresswomen*, consists of "free fornication," with no grandma left behind. Nubile young girls can legally be seduced "only after the male adolescent has first applied his resources to the full satisfaction of a bona fide senile female." Ovid expends many lines in his *Art of Love* warning men against underestimating the ladies' amorous adventurism. In Dante's *Inferno* the circle of hell for sins of the flesh is populated in great part by women. It is the lust of a mother (not, say, an uncle) that so tortures Shakespeare's Hamlet ("Frailty, thy name is woman"), a girl's sexual fickleness that takes out the hero in *Troilus and Cressida*, a queen's love for an ass that brings down the house in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The greatest adulterers in the Western canon—Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Molly Bloom, Carmen—have, in fact, been adulter*esses*. Each had a faithful husband at home.

Why do women leave? "Verbal, physical or emotional abuse" is the first reason cited in the AARP study by wives who initiated divorces. And yet "abuse" played little role in the decisions of Smith's interviewees to risk their unions, most of which sound altogether more docile than violent. So why did they do it? Smith herself is remarkably unhelpful on this score. "The reasons women cheat," she concludes, "are as varied as the women themselves." Fair enough. But surely more-provocative hypotheses might be floated. Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, proffered a few as early as the end of the eighte[illegible]tury, and her words still resonate today. Women, she declared, are re[illegible]ove: the novels they read, the fairy

tales they hear, all prepare them for a future of fiery sentiments and gallant attentions. But "a husband cannot long pay those attentions with the passion necessary to excite lively emotions, and the [female] heart, accustomed to lively emotions, turns to a new lover, or pines in secret."

Is this so far wrong today? Don't women even now harbor romantic ideals that are tangibly more central to their lives than to men's, and thus more easily (and disastrously) disappointed? A man may dream of a passionate soulmate, as a woman does, but if he does not find one, he will rechannel that desire into his work, his sports, his substance abuse, his war-making—all things that define a man's identity more commonly than do his emotional efforts. A woman has these occupations open to her as well, but rightly or wrongly (and I think *rightly*) they are often subordinated to the love plot in her life. This is something a certain kind of feminist has lamented—and a certain kind of moralist might reasonably find dangerous, since it does indeed make women more sensitive to marital dissatisfaction. But on balance it is a noble hierarchy.

Romantic love has suffered a demotion following the wars of the sexes in recent decades, with the result that we've forgotten it is the source of some of our civilization's greatest acts of heroism and genius. For what else did knights slay dragons in the Middle Ages, did Petrarch write poetry, did Dante take on *The Divine Comedy*, Zeus turn himself into a swan, and Penelope weave her gorgeous web? Even evolutionary psychologists say we are never so strong as when we are in love, never so poised for high achievement or fierce battle. (It has to do with dopamine levels, apparently.) Instead of trying to curb the power of this love plot in one of the sexes, as feminists like the late Carolyn Heilbrun have done, might it not be better to re-sanction it in both?

But why re-sanction romantic love if it leads not merely to maladaptive perfectionism but also to a propensity for homewrecking? The easy answer is that it doesn't. If women initiate 66percent of divorces, they also initiate probably 96 percent of marriage counseling. For every new door they open to love, they have made several attempts to fix the old. That's what you do when you care about *eros*: you work on all fronts. The hard answer is that sometimes it's okay to wreck a home. Sometimes divorce is the brave and not the cowardly option. We all know couples who shouldn't be together but stay together anyway—excruciatingly, eternally, disastrously. The human animal is no more frivolous and irresponsible than fearful and lethargic. For every person who throws out a sublime relationship, there are two who masochistically cling to a visibly d[illegible]one. (Note the wild success of

books like *He's Just Not That Into You* and *How to Break Your Addiction to a Person*.)

Further, women are more frustrated with their marriages than men for myriad reasons—and only one (albeit a big one) is romantic idealism. Another is family culture. If the customer is supposedly king in American stores, the child is incontrovertibly king in American families. Of the women Smith describes in her book, many are overworked soccer moms. She interviews one as she drives—interminably—around town dropping and fetching her kids at after-school enrichment activities. Smith herself mentions in passing that she cooks and serves not three meals a day but three or more dietary regimens.

> Mediterranean for my husband Mark; red meat every two hours for our fourteen-year-old son, Micah; and four hot meals a day for our twelve-year-old daughter, Mallory. And then there are the kids' friends, who show up almost every day with their insatiable, and often picky, teenage appetites.

How can one doubt that these women—all of them attractive, we hear, and not long ago accustomed to lavish attention themselves—fantasize about escape? A place where they can be not just cogs in the domestico-pedagogic machine but colorful individuals, sexual entities, and romantic agents? A woman "cannot contentedly become … an upper servant after being treated as a goddess," Wollstonecraft observed. And in today's superchild culture the typical wife is not what Wollstonecraft (with her French maid, her cook, and her habit of calling children "animals") would have considered an "upper servant"; she's a lot more like a galley slave.

Abjection to children often correlates directly with churlishness to mates. Children are extensions of our egos, so we dote on them, but spouses are often merely co-managers of a home business. As such, they are part of the same unsentimental consumer culture that defines our relationship to, say, submarine sandwiches or coffee drinks. The explosion of Internet dating, in which you announce the traits you want in a lover as you'd announce the ingredients you want in a latte, and remorselessly exchange him if he's not made to specifications, has hastened still further the commodification of romance—and its desanctification.

This, alas, is the worst of the many reasons that modern women trade partners at such a clip: not because they are into ethereal romance but because they are into eternal choice. The mystery and the altruism of love have been subsumed into the ruthless commerce of self-gratification. "I was l[illegible]r three things when I married Don," says one woman Smith interviews. "I [illegible]ldren, I wanted a house, and I

wanted someone I could talk to. Don said he would give me all that …" We are intended to admire this self-knowledge, because it gets the speaker off compulsive affairs and up to the altar. But it does not do so in a way that could ever be moving—or flattering—to her mate. She might as easily have said, "I wanted a South Seas cruise, a masseur, and someone to keep me in Chanel"—and the person in her arms would have been another man entirely (as, for that matter, the man who fulfilled her domestic and maternal wishes could have been too). Most of the extramarital relations in Smith's book are, in fact, shallow, opportunistic affairs. What makes them cut so deep is the price at which they come.

Almost all affairs, or all that don't occur in what used to be called an open marriage, are cause for deception. And deception—far more than extracurricular sex alone—is the cardinal relationship killer. If a lover has a single vast advantage over a spouse, it is not that he is newer or more attractive to the woman who takes him; it is that she can be honest with him. He knows about her husband; her husband does not know about him. Result: she feels closer to the person who knows her most fully—her lover. With the man at her hearth she feels the way one feels with all people one tricks: either superior, because of one's imagined cleverness, or inferior, because of one's ostensible guilt. Or both. But what she rarely feels, either at the moment of deception or afterward, is joined. (All this, of course, is equally true when the sexes are reversed.)

Lightly started, affairs become heavy barriers between partners. If they do not destroy a marriage, as they did for several of Smith's subjects, they take the sap and spark out of it. They turn a soulmate into a dupe, a friend into a jailer, conjugal pleasure into conjugal duty.

At its best, matrimony is a quixotic proposition. The odds that it will go well—or, at least, *very* well—are slim. The best minds over time (and also the worst) have studied alternatives to it, official and unofficial, public and private. The medieval courtier wed one person and wooed another. Such Romantic writers as Shelley and Byron inaugurated a high-minded promiscuity that took little notice of who was joined to whom. A generation later the long and quietly married Emerson came down hard against formalized vows: "No love can be bound by oath or covenant to secure it against a higher love." Emerson's wilder-eyed contemporary, the utopian Charles Fourier, spent decades formulating theories of democratic sex—as non-possessive as it was non-marital. Even today social scientists who, like Helen Fisher, inform us that amorous loyalty does not naturally exceed twelve to thirty-six months predict a transition to different kinds of unions—for example, marriages contracted for one to five years and, like magazine subscriptions, renewable.

And yet for all the rational appeal of such a proposition, no one who has ever been in love, who has ever felt the transformative wand of passion tap his or her shoulder, wants to go to the altar and say "For l rse, until the next Olympics do us part." The very concept of love brings with it intimations of eternity, even allusions to

death. Lovers don't want only to live together; they want to die together. How diminishing it is to let our prudent, miserly reason trump our brave-hearted, generous passion. Perhaps in this case we should let instinct prevail over argument.

A second marriage, as Samuel Johnson observed, represents "the triumph of hope over experience."The experience of marriage is one of conflict between ideals: the ideal of loving companionship and that of erotic intensity; the ideal of unflagging devotion to a single person and that of emotional responsiveness to many. And yet some of these ideals are not as irreconcilable—or as irreconcilable with marriage—as they appear. Unshakable loyalty to a central partner does not preclude passionate responses to other people. If it seems that way, it is only because of the puritanism, the pious emotional parsimony, of our American era.

Diane Shader Smith's book provides, ironically, a perfect example of this. Her introduction is an alarmist confession of her attraction to a man other than her husband. She recounts in detail her nervousness around him, her supposedly dangerous fascination with his charm. She criminalizes her feelings. And so, one might add (albeit more understandably, since she has led the way), does her husband. In a different culture her attraction would be viewed by her readers, herself, and her husband as perfectly natural and even commendable. What sort of a creature would you be if, having once found a human being who stirs your heart (and whom you marry, if you follow Rabbi Boteach's example, by age twenty-one), you were never stirred again?

The key is to incorporate chemistry into our marital lives, not to snuff it out. We are erotic and emotional animals, and when we react most fully to people, we react to them erotically and emotionally. We react this way to teachers and to students; to pop stars and to politicians; to interns, novelists, and waiters; to our elders and our juniors. It is a part of what allows us to relate to human beings across the social, political, and cultural spectrums. To demonize this responsiveness is to truncate our sensibility, our humanity. Better to share our passing fancies with our mates, to turn them like colored glass in the light, lest they become blades in our pockets. For this we need magnanimous partners. And we need an 18-karat commitment to those partners, who over the years will inevitably seem less perfect than those glinting shards of novelty in the corner of our sight.

"To fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god," said Jorge Luis Borges. To love truly is to stay in love after the fall. It is to love more gratefully, more potently, because our god has come down to earth: the spirit has been made flesh and now walks—and slips, and flounders, and [redacted]among us.

It's a delicate proposition—counterintuitive, presumptuous, heady, unreasonable. And yet therein lies its nobility and, perhaps, its necessity.

Undressing Infidelity

By Diane Shader Smith

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