

Margaret Drabble: The Sexual Revolution (1967)

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Emancipation is now a reality, and we ought to be entering on the golden age of adult sexual equality and companionship that feminists fought for.

It is no longer possible to deny that we face the certainty of a sexual revolution, and that this revolution, which much affects the institutions of marriage and parenthood, is caused largely by the development of contraceptive techniques. Until very recently the reliability of all known methods was highly questionable, and the act of sex was still an act of which the consequences could be unimaginably significant. Some of those consequences can now be prevented with complete certainty: and the method of prevention will become increasingly widespread. It is useless to suggest that this cannot affect the morality of sexual relationships, for morality is inseparably connected with the notion of responsibility, and an act which cannot have the consequence of conception, of producing a new helpless life, cannot be irresponsible in the same sense as an act which risks such an event.

This does not imply that sexual relations that don't risk conception are unrelated to personal responsibility and morality; clearly there is still room, in the most technically sterile relationship, for treachery and loyalty, generosity and abuse. But the fear of pregnancy, which has haunted women throughout history—and pregnancy, as we forget nowadays, used to mean a very real confrontation with death—is now a dispensable fear: a woman need no longer dread pain, or years of motherhood, or even, on the crudest level, discovery, as the result of her sexual activities. Nor, on a higher level, need she fear the guilt of bringing into the world a child for which she may not be able to provide. She is free now, as never before. As Simone de Beauvoir put it—for a woman, liberty begins in the womb.

This freedom is evidently connected to that other major revolution of our society, the emancipation for women. It is the final clause in the contract, the clinching argument.

Education, freedom to work, equal pay and social equality did not mean much when they could be negated by the arrival of one small unintended baby. Emancipation is now a reality, and we ought to be entering on the golden age of free adult sexual equality and companionship that the feminists fought for. Unfortunately, although the young—students, teenagers—seem able to achieve this, the relationship appears to break down when questions of careers and parenthood present themselves in the context of the real, competitive world. Entirely new problems have been created. As Inge Becker pointed out recently in “New Society,” men now feel a resentful hostility towards women in their professional lives, because although women are now free to compete, they are also free, as men are not, to opt out, to opt for home and family, when the career starts to bore them, or when their own inadequacy begins to be revealed.

Contraception

Men have not this freedom: successful or not, they must continue to work, with no possible excuses, until retirement. On a personal level, too, men feel threatened; with contraception in the hands of women, men can now be deceived and coerced into marriage, or threatened with paternity cases, even more effectively than before, by those women who wish to bear children: and they can no longer employ the same means of domination over those who do not. Some men used to regard a constant succession of pregnancies as the surest means of keeping their wives out of trouble, but this method could hardly be employed now without a very willing or ignorant partner.

Thus it would seem that although a new permissiveness in sexual relations for the young can be regarded without anxiety, it's a different matter when it comes to the problem of marriage and parenthood. The young today—or some of them, anyway—justifiably regard complete sexual experience as something morally indistinct from the milder forms of courtship which have always been regarded as legitimate, even when practised with successive discarded partners. Men

now don't expect to marry virgins, any more than they used to expect a hundred years ago to marry women who had never been kissed, embraced, or otherwise approached by any other man. (Some did expect just this, and some still do, but from personal prejudice, not from a sense of social expectation.)

But after marriage, what then? Because however permissive society becomes, people will go on marrying, they will go on having children. But the form of marriage itself must alter; it's hard to imagine that it will continue to exist as the exclusive sexual and domestic partnership of one man and one woman for life, when so many of the sanctions that formed it in this mould have been removed. But it's equally hard to imagine, at this point in time, what will succeed it. My own view is that whereas young unmarried people do live now with a relaxed, permissive attitude towards sex, marriage itself has become increasingly difficult, tense, strained, and neurotic. The standards are high; we have freedom of choice, control over the size of our families, a high ideal of husband-wife equality, a contempt for Victorian hypocrisy. Consequently the failure rate and the degree of suffering in this transitional period is high.

Fidelity, for instance, which is one of the major marital problems, used to have an entirely rational basis, which has recently been removed, leaving only the personal motive, one far more likely to be betrayed: an unfaithful wife used to risk bearing a child that was not her husband's, and thereby bringing upon him the burden of providing for a child that was not his, and for her the shame of living with the knowledge that he was doing so. This position has clearly now altered, as the act of infidelity has itself altered in significance, but the human suffering attached to it has not been lessened.

Matrimony

What, after all, is marriage for? The only sure answer that remains is that it is for the protection of children. Most of the questions involved in sexual morality, such as chastity and fidelity, were once directly associated with the protection of children, and it is the divorce of procreation and copulation, those two prayer book causes for matrimony, that has so disturbed us. Two of the most profound experi-

ences of human nature, which used to be inseparably connected, are now only marginally so, and then by choice. It is hard to see how morality will adapt itself to this alteration in its very structure.

But, meanwhile, as the adaptations are forming themselves, people are still marrying and producing children, and those children require the same attention that children have always required: most marriages in the twentieth century probably answer the description given by David Hume in the eighteenth, when he said: "Whoever considers the length and feebleness of human infancy, with the concern which both sexes must naturally have for their offspring, will easily perceive that there must be a union of the male and the female for the education of the young." This is an unemotional definition, perhaps: but the ideal it expresses is both relevant and high.