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IN THE MAGAZINE:

who wants to marry a FEMINIST?

LISA MIYA-JERVIS



The winter I got engaged, a college friend was using some of my essays as course material for a Rhetoric 101 class she was teaching at a large Midwestern university. She couldn't wait to alert her students to my impending marriage. "They all think you're a lesbian," she told me. "One of them even asked if you hate men." I was blown over by the cliché of it all--how had we come to the end of the twentieth century with such ridiculous, outmoded notions even partially intact? But I was, at least, pleased that my friend was able to use my story to banish the stereotype once and (I hoped) for all in the minds of 30 corn-fed first-years. "To a man?" they reportedly gasped when told the news.

I'd been married less than a year when a customer at the bookstore where my husband works approached the counter to buy a copy of the feminist magazine I edit. "You know," a staffer told her while ringing up the purchase, "the woman who does this magazine is married to a guy who works here." The customer, supposedly a longtime reader, was outraged at the news--I believe the phrase "betrayal of feminism" was uttered--and vowed never to buy the magazine again.

MARRIAGE NOW

- Both Sides Now:

She married at 18 and instead of finding bliss, she became a shrinking woman. Now, at 54, marriage is on her mind again.

- Marriage Vegas Style

In this desert empire 295 couples marry every day.

-Who Wants to Marry a Feminist?

But the real question is why do feminists want marriage?

-Otherwise Engaged

The issue of same-sex marriage has sparked an impassioned debate.

Asked if she would marry if she could, this author takes a long hard look at the institution and herself.

-What, Me Marry?

A SPECIAL REPORT ON THE FERTILITY INDUSTRY

-What Price

Pregnancy?

Ms. goes behind the hype of assisted reproductive technologies.

PLUS:

-Inconceivable

When it comes to fertility treatments, gender makes all the difference.

BERLIN DIARIES

Her immediate family fled Germany before being swept up in the Holocaust, but they forever mourned the loved ones who didn't survive and the life they'd once shared.

Ms.Cellaneous:

- What?
- Women to Watch
- Word: Fuck
- Just the Facts

These two incidents may be extreme, but they are nonetheless indicative.

Although we are far from rare, young married feminists are still, for some, something of a novelty--like a dressed-up dog. We can cause a surprised "Oh, would you look at that" or a disappointed "Take that damned hat off the dog, it's just not right."

Let's take the disappointment first. Marriage's bad reputation among feminists is certainly not without reason. We all know the institution's tarnished history: women as property passed from father to husband; monogamy as the simplest way to assure paternity and thus produce "legitimate" children; a husband's legal entitlement to his wife's domestic and sexual services. With marriage rates falling and social sanctions against cohabitation falling away, why would a feminist choose to take part in such a retro, potentially oppressive, bigotedly exclusive institution?

What, Me Marry?

Ms. editors on marriage

Well, there are a lot of reasons, actually. Foremost are the emotional ones: love, companionship, the pure joy that meeting your match brings with it. But, because I'm wary of the kind of muddled romanticizing that has ill-served women in their heterosexual dealings for most of recorded history, I have plenty of other reasons. To reject marriage simply because of its history is to give in to that history; to argue against marriage by saying that a wife's identity is necessarily subsumed by her husband's is to do nothing more than second the notion.

And wasn't it feminists who fought so hard to procure the basic rights that used to be obliterated by marriage? Because of the women's rights movement, we can maintain our own bank accounts; we can make our own health care choices; we can refuse sex with our husbands and prosecute them if they don't comply. In the feminist imagination, "wife" can still conjure up images of cookie-baking, cookie-cutter Donna Reeds whose own desires have been forced to take a backseat to their stultifying helpmate duties. But it's neither 1750 nor 1950, and Donna Reed was a mythical figure even in her own time. Marriage, now, is potentially what we make it.

Which brings me to the "surprise" portion of our program. As long as the yeti of the antifeminist world--the hairy-legged man-hater (everyone claims to have seen her but actual evidence is sparse)--roams the earth, we need to counteract her image. And as long as wives are assumed--by anyone--to be obedient little women with no lives of their own, those of us who give the lie to this straw bride need to make ourselves as conspicuous as possible.

I want to take the good from marriage and leave the rest. I know it's not for everyone, but the "for as long as we both shall live" love and support thang really works for me. Sure, I didn't need the wedding to get that love and support,

NEWS:

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YOUR WORK:

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but neither does the fact of marriage automatically consign me and my man to traditional man-and-wife roles. Like so many relationships, married and un-, ours is a complex weave of support, independence, and sex. We achieve this privately--from the mundanities of you-have-to-cook-tonight-because-I-have-this-deadline-tomorrow to sleepy late-night discussions on more profound matters, like the meaning of life or how many steps it takes to link Kevin Bacon to John Gielgud by way of at least one vampire movie. But also publicly--with our name change, for example (explaining to folks like the Social Security Administration and whoever hands out passports that, yes, we both need new papers, because we each have added the other's name was, and I mean this quite seriously, a thrill). And it's this public nature of marriage that appeals. It's what allows me to take a stab at all this change I've been yammering about.

I won't pretend I meet with success all the time. Disrupting other people's expectations is hard, and sometimes it's neither possible nor desirable to wear the workings of one's relationship on one's sleeve. An appropriate cocktail party introduction is not, "This is my husband, Christopher, who knows how to truss a turkey, which I don't, and who, by the way, doesn't mind at all that I make more money than him. Oh, and did I mention that the last time our toilet got scrubbed, it wasn't by me?"

Plus, some people's perceptions can only change so much. My 90-year-old grandfather, who has been nothing but open-minded and incredibly supportive of my feminist work, persists in asking what my husband is going to do for food whenever I leave town on my own. Each time, I say the same thing: "Christopher knows perfectly well how to feed himself. In fact, he's cooking dinner for me right now." And then my grandfather gives a little surprised chuckle: those crazy kids, what will they think of next? And my accountant, who's been doing my taxes for years and knows my husband only as a Social Security number, automatically assigned Christopher the status of "taxpayer" and put me down as "spouse" on our first joint return. Yeah, it was a tad annoying, but so far it's the sum total of the eclipse of my identity by his. Not so bad, really.

By and large I do believe that we're culturally ready to accept changes in the way marriages are viewed. Increasing rates of cohabitation and the growing visibility of long-term same-sex partnerships are changing popular notions of relationships. Even trash TV holds promise: Fox's *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* debacle laid bare many ugly things about American capitalism and media spectacle, but there was one fairly unexpected result. The show was presented as a display, however crass, of old-fashioned marital values--a trade of youth, beauty, and fecundity for wealth, security, and caretaking, complete with the groom's friends and family on hand for that lovely arranged-marriage feel. But it turned out to be nothing of the kind. The bride, as it happened, just wanted the lark of a free trip to Vegas, and the groom, a boost to his moribund show-biz career. That the concept saw the outside of a Fox conference room proves that modern marriage is in dire need of feminist attention. But the widely

expressed outrage and disgust that followed the show are evidence that the general public is more than ready to discard the notion that a woman's ultimate goal is the altar.

It's true that the most important parts, the actual warp and weft of Christopher's and my relationship, could be achieved without a legal marriage (and I could have kept my third-wave street cred). In the end, though, the decision to marry or not to marry is--no matter how political the personal--an emotional one. I wanted to link my life to Christopher's, and, yes, I admit to taking advantage of the universally understood straight-shot-to-relationship-legitimacy that marriage offers. But it is a testament to the feminists who came before me, who offered up all those arguments about marriage's oppressive roots and worked tirelessly to ensure that my husband owns neither my body nor my paycheck, that I can indulge my emotion without fear of being caught in those roots. Instead, I can carry on their struggle and help forge a new vision of what marriage is.

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