

BOOK REVIEW

The Tragedy of Heterosexuality

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Politics and culture in the United States of the 2020s continue to view LGBTQ+ people, particularly trans folks, as in need of “help” from straight, cisgender society—whether that is through the condescending trope of the Pride Month “ally,” or through labeling queer books as supposedly sick and unfit for library shelves. In a provocative reversal, Jane Ward’s *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* takes so-called straight culture to task, drawing a clarifying and at times entertaining picture of how heterosexuality, not queerness, has been in crisis since the term first came into wide usage in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century medical textbooks. At the time, the term connoted a shift from women as subjugated property to companions of men within relationships of mutual likability. However, as #MeToo and Trumpism sadly reveal, this shift never actually occurred, and instead what has sustained heterosexuality is a relentless misogyny.

This hatred of women creates straight relationships in which “coercive and male-centric sex” (151) is the norm, along with unpaid emotional and household labor performed by women. Seeing little to no change in this arrangement, Ward writes: “sexual relationships with men have been maintained by force, both through cultural propaganda targeting girls and women and more directly through sexual assault, incest, compulsory marriage, economic dependence, control of children, and domestic violence” (3). She offers reasons why LGBTQ+ people should cry “queer tears” of solidarity for straight women trapped in meaningless, boring, and/or violent and demeaning relationships. Ward insists that queer people are happier, more sexually satisfied, and more engaged with their lives and with the world than their heterosexual counterparts. Invoking John Waters, whose character Aunt Ida forms part of Ward’s archive, she proposes that queer culture can be the template for straight people, who, according to Ward, have a hard time reconciling desire, fucking, and mutual respect.

Ward’s historical archive extends from the late nineteenth century to the present and includes early-twentieth-century “marital hygiene” books, mid-century advertising campaigns, self-help texts, and “relationship science” to show the root systems of so-called modern, companionate marriage. In chapter 2, she shows how the fraught transition from “woman-as-degraded-subordinate to woman-as-worthy-of-deep-love” is unfinished, which plays “a central role in the tragedy of heterosexuality” (35).

The emergence of straightness was also bound up with racial projects (for example, the earliest “self-help” books about modern marriage were written by eugenicists). These writers and medical professionals wanted to remove any obstacles that prevented the flourishing of white, heterosexual relationships. According to Black feminist Michelle Wallace, as the century progressed, Black men involved in the Civil Rights Movement began to demand more power over Black women, to increase their patriarchal control and sense of innate manhood.

From there, Ward focuses on late-twentieth-century television shows and popular bestsellers of the late twentieth century, like *Sex and the City*, John Gray’s *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992), and Black comedian Steve Harvey’s *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* (2009). For Patricia Hill Collins, this was a period when Black women were solely identified with the “value of their booties in marketplace relations” (2004, 51). Gray’s book, which was translated into many languages, became a reassuring counterpoint to the feminist claim that gender roles are socially constructed and therefore changeable. At the same time, postfeminist television shows like *Sex and the City*, and its reboot *And Just Like That*, promise emancipation through conspicuous consumption and casual sex.

In chapter 3, Ward presents a sometimes comical, sometimes terrifying selection of field notes from her forays into the dating-science industry, rife with names like Modern Love Systems, with companion bootcamps, designed to help men improve their “game” and attract “hotter” women. She points out, however, that many of these companies (more than fifty in 2014) have now disavowed their relationship to “the art of seduction” or have disappeared entirely, after bad press in 2014 and with the rise of Tinder. She thinks that changing their brand to focus on personal transformation is influenced by #MeToo but carries with it new and present dangers: “today’s game is about exuding a more reserved and sophisticated masculinity, an irresistible merging of male strength with a worldly, near-feminist respect for women” (108). However, Ward cautions strongly that this is just the seduction industry’s latest “global recirculation of white-supremacist, heteropatriarchal constructions of women’s sexual desirability” (108). Always in pursuit of young, thin, blond women, a sign of one’s success at mastering Western masculinity, these men destroy the popular assumption that things have gotten better for straight women.

Chapters 4 and 5 bring forward a collection of reasons that queer people should feel sorry for straight people, which come in part from a crowdsourcing of Ward’s own social-media network. She calls this chapter a “tour of queer feelings about straight problems” (122), which ends with the possibility that heterosexuality can be queered. Straight men need the most help, she argues, and she prescribes the work of Black feminists, including the Combahee River Collective (Michelle Wallace, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins), Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Carla Trujillo, as well as contemporary Black feminists like Brittany Cooper. She seems emotionally drawn to the idea that straight men can read and benefit from lesbian feminism, becoming in the process “woman-identified.” She writes, without a hint of irony, “I call upon the wisdom of the dyke experience to illuminate for straight men the human capacity to desire, to fuck, and to be feminist comrades at the same time” (155).

Straight couples need to be more honest about their desires and gender-bending fantasies, including polyamory and kink. They could also refuse marriage and child-centeredness and learn to value chosen family over blood connections. Heterosexuality could then become a site of choice and political resistance, as straight

people learn “to relate to their heterosexuality as a cultivated desire of which they are agent, rather than victim or passive recipient” (161).

Because of its contemporary feel and accessibility, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* can attract a wide audience, both scholarly and popular. The chapter on “dating science,” in particular, would be a provocative—and depressing—review of what the current “men’s Renaissance” really is: a capitalistic rebranding of masculinity that will do very little to improve heterosexual sex or relationships. Ward even suggests that these men’s “boot camps” and their “required readings” do more harm than good. In an academic setting, the book will be useful for both undergraduate and graduate audiences, though the historical chapters are general and brief, useful mainly as provocation for further research. Queer theory and LGBTQ+ studies classes will enjoy the tongue-in-cheek humor and Waters-esque levity of Ward’s prose, which should not distract from the serious intent of the project.

In a time of intense backlash, it makes sense to put heterosexuality on the spot, to make it testify against itself. I don’t know of another contemporary book that takes such a pointed critical stance on heterosexuality’s development, current crises, and the need for intervention and allyship from the queer community, rather than the other way around. She works hard—and succeeds for the most part—at dispelling the myth that things have gotten better and women are happier and more satisfied in their heterosexual relationships than they ever were in the past. This assumption of change turns out to be a postfeminist fantasy that Ward successfully dismantles for a 2020s audience who may be less familiar with the Black and Chicana feminists she mentions. She’s also in tune with younger generations who are well-versed in intersectionality and the goals of Black feminism.

The message that women’s bodies need to be valued and adored, not just when they are waxed, perfumed, and toned, but for their diversity in shape, size, odor, and age warrants constant repetition—on billboards, leaflets, t-shirts, hats, tote bags, and lots of books like these. As a finalist for the 2021 Lambda Literary Award in LGBTQ Studies, Ward’s book clearly resonates with queer readers who might snicker in delight at this turning of the tables. Ward also grounds her argument in a historical archive that indisputably links past and present, as heterosexuality continues to be shored up and repaired, like an old Chevy, from one decade to the next. There’s a clear resonance, for example, between *Men Are from Mars* and the twenty-first-century “dating science” programs, both of which recycle the same tired gender essentialism as the route of escape for different generations of weary, exhausted, and often traumatized straight women.

Ward’s eclectic sampling of heterosexual propaganda also shows how capitalism became the engine responsible for heterosexuality’s collision course. The early twentieth century set the stage for “straight culture as a gendered mode of consumption” (47) and as she writes in chapter 3, the multilevel dating-science industry provides a neoliberal solution to men’s “heterosexual misery” (111). She helps readers to see how “the seduction industry also makes a kind of logical and familiar sense within the culture and political economy of the twenty-first century” (88) by emphasizing self-actualization and embracing neoliberal mantras. These may seem like radically different systems of messaging occurring a century apart, but both rely on the idea that straight gender roles could be easily marketed.

However, at times the argument often strays from collective solutions (e.g., dismantling capitalism) toward more individualistic ones—changing the minds of men and women as individual choice-makers—which she also regularly cites as part of the

problem. A good example of this tension occurs in the last chapter: “For straight women and men, accountability means piercing through the fantasy we’re all sold about the natural ease and happiness of heterosexuality and instead learning to recognize the structural and cultural conditions that have produced, but also stunted, their heterosexuality” (164). This could be taken as a criticism of individuals’ inability or unwillingness to escape the fantasy instead of an indictment of neoliberal excess itself. I also would have liked to see how the self-help industry aimed at women, and the “gaming the system” dating services for men, might have worked together as neoliberal, late-capitalist projects, which could be resisted by both men and women on a collective level, particularly if they are seen as interlocking rather than separately developing phenomena. In chapter 5, racial capitalism needed to be included as part of the structural conditions that prevent the cultivation of “deep heterosexuality.”

I welcomed Ward’s unapologetic celebration of queer exuberance, and yet at times she risks re-installing a hetero/queer binary in place of an “inescapable gender binary.” This hetero/queer binary edges toward caricature at times. In this well-worn fantasy of queer life, every self-identified queer is sexually satisfied, anticapitalist, and living their best life, while the straight-identified are by contrast sad, lackluster consumers engaged in empty, *Bartleby*-like existences. I would love to think that queer people are immune to the “obsessive gendering, empty expressions of solidarity, mansplaining husbands and boyfriends, addiction to mainstream media and mass-marketed tchotchkes, and self-improvement programs run on delusions and/or self-loathing,” that these are things that queers “just don’t understand,” but again, too many counterexamples came to mind for me to accept this generalization so readily.

Queer relationships also suffer similar intimate-partner violence, sexual control, and gender essentialism. Ward approaches these issues in the queer community as outliers rather than part of a pattern: “but the key difference between straight culture and queer culture in this regard is that the latter does not attribute these destructive behaviors to a romantic story about a natural and inescapable gender binary” (26). She repeatedly references the fact that what distinguishes straight from queer “abuses” (even garden-variety lying, cheating, and causing one another pain) is the fact that straight relationships are culturally, politically, and economically rigged from the start. This rings true, but internalized misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia also plague queer relationships. Even when evidence points to similarities rather than differences between queer and straight relationships, she quickly dismisses this possibility rather than enabling her readers to grapple with contradictory points of view. Acknowledging that we all live in a violent society would not damage her main argument that heterosexuality, not homosexuality, needs the most remedial attention.

Heterosexuality sometimes looked like a form of false consciousness (something lesbian feminists of the 1970s fervently believed). Although she repeats that heterosexuality isn’t just an illusion that can be broken, she does suggest that women would be better off as lesbians, which risks denying and/or critiquing their erotic attachments and engaging in victim-blaming—something for which queer people have been killed, imprisoned, and institutionalized. I wonder if straight women might feel as though they are being painted as chumps who have fallen prey to “conditioned responses” or to Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism.”

At the same time, I wondered if there needed to be more accountability for the ways women collectively might choose material and cultural privilege and thus align with men in the projects of misogyny, racial capitalism, and white supremacy. It bears remembering what Bell Hooks once wrote in *Feminism is for Everybody*, that her

mother was the strongest patriarchal voice in her own mind (Hooks 2000, x). I really wanted Ward to make this point when she discussed at length Kezia Noble, the female owner and head coach of the London-based Noble Art of Seduction “dating science” corporation, one of the more egregious examples of heteromascularity-gone-insane.

Ward does not hold back in her critique of straight men, something many readers will appreciate. As part of this critique, Ward dispels the erroneous claim that men are taking on more household responsibilities, and that the second-wave feminist term *second shift* is obsolete. However, she also admits that some of these dating-bootcamp participants were likable, showing “their vulnerability and mutual care once inside the protected space of the seminar” (80). She even contrasts these vulnerable men to those who “posture” in male-dominated faculty meetings, a point I savored as a queer, nonbinary university professor. Ward carefully untangles the real consequences of these dating services in terms of violence against women, but at times she clarifies how the garden-variety misogyny these companies spawn is more pervasive.

Overall, however, her critique of masculinity focuses on the extremes rather than on the misogyny displayed by a wide range of straight men. What about leftist men, who perpetuate the tendency in radical politics to fold in misogyny in ever mystifying and clandestine ways? I would have liked more elaboration on our dashed hopes that the “new, engaged father has been greatly exaggerated and that straight women across race, class, and job status still do the majority of the child-care work” (14).

Ward points out, correctly, in the last chapter that scholars across decades of feminist and antiracist interventions have taken little interest in masculinity. Through the work of sociologist Diana Scully, she reminds readers that “the ubiquity of rape should come as no surprise, given what limited training boys and men have in how to identify with girls and women or to reflect on what the world is like from women’s point of view” (93). As gender scholars, we need to include more of this research in our work to understand how white, class-privileged men, enabled by racial capitalism and political fraternity, receive little to no guidance on how to relate to women when they are young.

With these criticisms in mind, *Tragedy* is still a necessary book, a bold testament to heterosexuality’s failures, and by contrast, queer successes, in a time that is violent and exhausting for LGBTQ+ people. Queer exuberance won’t solve the current political backlash in the US, but it will help us to survive, as it always has. Knocking heterosexuality off its pedestal—once again—is a necessary and welcome intervention for this moment, and one worth celebrating, both during Pride month and all year long.

References

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