

Fry's unsexing of Sex

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Once, there was no sex. I don't mean before 1963, but before 1631, in which year John Donne, first publicly used the word 'sex' in our sense in his poem 'The Ecstasie'. Interestingly enough though, unlike certain slightly older, somewhat cognate terms like 'lust' or 'venery', the new usage of 'sex' implied quite specifically attraction to the opposite sex.

Some way down the historical line, the British actor, comedian and TV personality Stephen Fry has caused a minor media storm in the UK by twittering to the effect that 'women don't really like sex'. They only do it to obtain influence, or else financial and emotional security. If they did like sex, he avers, they'd go cottaging on Hampstead Heath like homosexual males. Heterosexual males, it would seem, would be there every night, were it not for the absence of women lying in beguiling wait behind every gorse-bush.

Now Fry is the finest-ever Jeeves and a person of massive erudition and considerable wit, yet that is no excuse for such an adolescent level of reflection. Several responses occur to one in the face of his lurid slander upon the entire female sex. Most obviously of course, why has the learned Fry forgotten about Arcadia, where nymphs and sheperdesses are known to disport themselves? Though no doubt it is just too far beyond the West End for him ever to have ventured there. And in any case, for all its lush shady pastures in comparison to the windswept prickly heath, its rather different rules, its truly antique decorum and bizarre combination of the arch and the heterosexual might not be much to his liking.

Secondly, one may well reflect that, for good or ill, the response that *would* have been made by most of human history prior to say, 1973, can no longer be made. This is that, to go out on the heath in your tweed jacket in search of denim-clad youths for sundry erotic horseplay is itself precisely not to like sex at all.....in John Donne's sense.

My third response was that I was waiting to hear from other men, both gay and straight, that while they didn't much fancy the chill of the Heath of a November night, they really did rather enjoy sex back home, amidst all domestic comforts with a regular partner. Still more, I was expecting to hear from feminists that sex isn't something locked-up in its own furtive box (albeit sometimes popping out into the wide-open spaces like a Jack) but is really all the more enjoyable when linked to the emotions and woven into the whole tapestry of a life shared with someone one knows in depth.

But to my surprise, I waited in vain. It was as if the chattering classes did a quick turnaround overnight. They seemed to have thought to themselves, if Stephen Fry -- acceptably gay and cosy voice of Middle-Class England, muffins in north Norfolk and the values of *The Archers* (a very long-running radio rural soap) -- now says that *this*

is what sex is like, then he must basically be right. We already more or less accept his view that the Bible is a load of old cobblers, and so let's keep the horses, sexual intrigue and drinking down at *The Bull* in *The Archers* plot, but dispense with tense readings of marriage banns along with the equally tense meetings of parish councils.

As a result, seemingly, of this rapid revision in mores, all males remained in embarrassed silence, while many lightweight liberal feminists rushed into print in order to assure us that *of course* they were longing to have sex with strangers on the heath, but didn't Fry know about all the male dangers out there, which prevent women from realising the full potential of their libido? To which might well retort, don't these 'feminists' know just how dangerous consorting with rough trade etc so often is? It is true that some of them confessed that they rather lamely preferred the 'sharing a dirty secret' thing which fidelity allowed, but they hastened to add that this *was just their personal choice*.

Why should one find these responses perturbing? I suggest because here feminism betrays everything it rightly stands for by making a certain model (not of, course, the only available one) of specifically male homosexuality – since there are no lesbians out there on the Heath either – normative for 'sex' in general.

For surely this model involves maleness writ large. An *ubermachismo* which doesn't need to concern itself with women who just don't seem to get what life is really all about: pleasure without responsibility or commitment, variety of investment confirming a self-congratulatory preening in the ever-expanding exercise of personal choice and power over others. No-one has written more effectively than gay men themselves about how the wrong kind of gay culture of cultic secrecy and elite licence can reinforce a corruptly patriarchal British establishment, which includes a despising of women. I think here especially of Allan Hollinghurst's lyrically beautiful and yet chilling *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

Feminists ignore this danger at their peril. It is one thing to tolerate homosexuality, but quite another to make the most coldly promiscuous tendency within male gay culture culturally prescriptive.

And this should call forth a deeper historical and critical reflection. All of us must rejoice that no one any longer gets arrested, and few get harassed, for things which they get up to on the Hampstead Heights. Yet those, many of them Anglican Christians, who rightly campaigned in the UK to decriminalise homosexual practice and to make it socially acceptable, never imagined that this should mean a rigid parity between hetero and homosexuality in every respect -- for example with regard to marriage and procreation. This was because they did not as yet think of these two human tendencies as two different examples of one and the same univocal phenomenon of nature – namely 'sex', now newly understood as indifferent to gender. Rather they assumed that homosexuality is a particular orientation – whether natural or cultural or both – with its own specific legitimate needs that can be accorded corresponding legal rights and appropriate modes of social recognition. They sought geometric equity, not arithmetic equality, which is never truly just because it rides roughshod over human differences.

What we have today instead is the idea of ‘sex’ as something that either is, or else should be, implausibly independent of gender and procreation *altogether and in every way*. (And only poor readers will ignore these qualifiers and imagine that I am here attacking condoms.)

Implausible, because that would suggest that we can really will ourselves entirely away from our biology and our unconscious impulses. And undesirable as well as implausible, because this biology yokes our most intimate and egotistic passions to the most unselfishly ecstatic of ends – having children -- which ensures the continuation of the species and of human society down the ages. Equally, since our bodies as opposed to our souls are tied to a generic identity, they can most easily surpass narcissism at this generic level through attraction towards what is generically different in one particular and *opposite* respect: namely the difference of sex.

Without any reference *whatsoever* to these twin modes of joyful and yet selfless ecstasy, ‘sex’ must be desexed, unsexily reduced to the mere quirks of individual desires and satisfactions, such that the soul’s full capacity for the ecstatic is denied through being tied to a generic merely ‘human’ body that cannot in consequence escape itself. This mode of unsexed sex is, in essence, sheerly mechanical, impersonal and masturbatory. Indeed it is *more* self-bound than most masturbation, whose fantasy pays sad tribute to the real. In principle it might be of any body (not even necessarily a humanly animal one) for absolutely anything. This is one reason for our hysteria over the issue of child abuse: our new understanding of sex gives us no clear grounds for explaining why it is wrong, other than the vulnerable idea that sex with minors must, by definition, always be coercive.

In this context we forget that normal homosexuals do not desire simply ‘anything’, as if any desire was legitimate, but adult members of their own sex. Somehow, for whatever range of reasons, it is the specific otherness of other mature members of their own sex towards to whom they are sexually drawn. And narcissism of the body is often avoided here through a re-invention of generic difference in terms of age-difference, class-difference, national-difference, role-difference, simulated gender-difference and complementarity of opposite character etc. Likewise homosexual love is frequently orientated to the future either through various modes of child-rearing, the education of others or common shared projects.

Nevertheless, the new understanding of sex as fundamentally private and non-relational tends to be most of all exemplified by one particular ‘hard’ male gay culture of cold promiscuity. This is because it seems to nominalistically refuse all lure of generic alterity in whatever mode, and so all non-narcissism of the body. Thus it also refuses any sense of being ‘bound by the other’ as opposed to the other being the mere occasion for the incitement and exercise of one’s own desires.

Whether we are gay or straight, male or female, this surely opens up a bleak prospect, thoroughly in tune with the impersonal but narcissistic exigencies of late capitalism.

So let’s all take courage and agree to denounce Fry as for the present stuck in a hideous hybridity of fake-fogey and mock-modishness wrapped up in one awkward-if-dazzling human bundle. We need instead a more truly paradoxical mode of radical conservatism or conservative radicalism. This might give us the confidence to say

that, in the experience of most of us, sex doesn't usually work all that superbly well the first time round, and gets better – often over the course of years, not months – the more we feel secure enough to give free rein to our imaginations with someone we trust and resonate with on every level. After all, if sex is always partially in the head, it makes *no sense* to suppose that bodily responses are ever independent of intellectual and emotional ones.

Once, there was no sex. But Christianity, after 1100 or so, invented *romance*, and thereby enhanced with surprise even Arcady. Let's all of us today, straight or gay, try to rediscover authentic romance, beyond all the fake modern versions which fail to oppose brutality of bodily desire with weak sentimentality of the mind. It was, to the contrary, a heroic strength of mind and a tender vulnerability of the body in the face of otherness which the courtly stories once celebrated. Without this true romance -- without 'making love' -- we won't in the future be having any sex either.