The Best Warriors of All
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I began writing this lecture convinced that feminism was the force behind singlehood. It certainly was during the twentieth-century, but when I decided to find out exactly when this whole singlehood caper began, I found singlehood, if we consider it the opposite of marriage, has been around since the dawn of historical time, and patriarchy, little more than a recent, wild, and rather misguided experiment.

I also found that a tight yet dysfunctional relationship exists between singlehood and feminism. Singlehood, no doubt, brought feminism into the word, but once manifested, feminists almost immediately abandoned singlehood while driving the forces that foster it. Trouble is, we live with economic and climate uncertainty and in, quite frankly, dangerous times—times which demand feminist attention on singlehood. However feminist singlehood scholarship is scarce due to a resistance, I believe, has its genesis in deep time.

So buckle yourselves in, we are going to talk about the emergence of patriarchy, the feminist insurgency, how singlehood returned to the global stage, and why the twentieth century sisterhood forgot their single sisters in the fight against patriarchy.

Cecrops' Laws & Herodotus' Virgins

Let me set the stage with two startling ideas which provide a template to understand why feminist singlehood scholarship is scarce and troubled.

Firstly: There was a time long before the feminist revolution when women were full and equal citizens with the right to vote, children bore their mother's names, and there was no marriage.

That is, singlehood and parenthood were the dominant relationship forms embedded in within strongly connected communities. I say parenthood, not motherhood, because childrearing was a collective activity. I'm talking here, of the extensive matrilocal, matrifocal cultures that dominated for 300,000 years during the stone age—400,000 if you count Neandertal society.

We know women once had full rights from an old Greek story:

It begins around midday 4,000 years ago. The day was grey and the Athenians gathered at the edge of the Acropolis to watch the rising waters. In a fit of rage Poseidon had flooded Attica. The men were afraid. They turned to their king, Cecrops, and asked for a solution. Cecrops was back at first base. Only weeks ago he thought he'd resolved this matter, but here he was having to make another impossible choice between two gods.

Months ago Poseidon gave the people of the Acropolis a salt spring. Cecrops found it one morning, but there were no witnesses therefore no proof it was the god's gift. In return Poseidon made it clear he wanted patronage of the city. At first this was not a problem, but then Athena arrived with her olive tree and planted it right in front of Cecrops so there was no argument. She gave it, he saw it, she must be patron. He gave Athena patronage. Poseidon flooded Attica in rage.

So here Cecrops was again, a mere human having dealing with the rage of deities. He decided his people could vote on the matter. But, there was one more woman than there were men, and all the women voted for Athena. The plane remained flooded. No one could leave the Acropolis. All the

fields, all the sheep, all the olive groves, all the pungent herbs, gone. Cecrops was back at the beginning.

He called the Athenians together and announced new set of laws. Women will no longer have the vote. Every woman will marry. Children will not bear their mother's, but their father's name, and women can no longer call themselves Athenians.

Now I'm not so sure why this did not incur Athena's wrath, but as I read this story in Pseudo-Apollodorus', *Bibliotheca*, back in my twenties, the second-wave of the feminist revolution swirling around me, I felt I witnessed the moment women were stripped of their full humanity and became chattels. It hit me in the solar plexus, and to this day I wonder, What happened to the woman who swayed the vote. Who did she marry? Did her children keep her name? What did she call herself now she could no longer call herself Athenian?

Cecrops' solution was very specific. I understood disenfranchising women, since enfranchised women had incurred Poseidon's wrath. But to introduce marriage, replace maternity with paternity, strip women of their connection to their city—make them stateless—felt like punishments for some greater transgression. It struck me this story revealed the contours of history—the history of the Indo-European migrations from the Pontic-Caspian Steppes into the Mediterranean.

Now, in case you don't know, the Indo-Europeans did not migrate. Migration implies a consensual mix of cultures, and there was nothing consensual about the Indo-Europeans. A semi-nomadic, water venerating, horse-riding, warrior culture worshipping a supreme male god, the Indo-Europeans were a colonizing force. They imposed their beliefs and social structures on the locals, in particular oppressing and enslaving the women. Cecrops' story encapsulates the ascendency of the patriarchal Indo-Europeans in Minoan Greece. Before the moment—or rather many moments—that inspired that story, we can assume that within the Mediterranean culture there was no marriage, children bore their mother's names, women had the vote, and identified themselves by the name of the patron deity of the place in which they lived.

Second startling idea: There was a time when virginity had nothing to do with whether or not a woman had sex.

In Greece, the Indo-Europeans encountered the Minoan expressions of the stone age warrior—a huntress, and parthenogenic creatrix. The goddess who creates of herself without sex, often referred to as parthenos, always translated as virgin. Through the myths associated with Greek goddesses we can see the change in women's roles under the impost of Cecrops' laws.

Originally a parthenogenic earth mother goddess, Hera is repainted as Zeus' wife, queen of the gods, and goddess of marriage. Yet, even endowed with such power she travels every year to bathe in the Well of Nauplia to renew her virginity. The warrior creatrix, queen of heaven, Aphrodite, is repainted as shining beautiful wife—yet known for her affairs—also annually renews her virginity in the ocean at Paphos, the place of her birth. Curiously, Demeter, goddess of motherhood, never marries, and never renews her virginity, but her children now bear their father's name. It seems Athenian women felt the imposition of marriage sullied their virginity, and virginity, not motherhood, was essential to their womanhood.

Even more curiously, three of these goddesses retained the title, parthenos. Athena, Artemis, and Hestia. All rejected marriage outright, not sex or motherhood, marriage. They refuse.

Encountering these virgin goddesses in the nineteen seventies, the sexual revolution rushing through my genes, I wondered, What could virginity be, if not sexual purity? And it is Herodotus's description of the annual Ausean festival that reveals what virginity meant before the Indo-Europeans messed with the locals, and way before we conflated virginity with purity, and marriage with sex.

In his *Histories*, Herodotus writes of the Auseans who lived around lake Tritonis in Libya around 425 BC. By then Cecrops' laws had been culturally embedded in Mediterranean society for almost 2,000 years. So, little wonder he was shocked to find the Auseans did not marry, and worse, had little concern for paternity, and even worse, performed sex in the way of cattle.

I imagine the ritual took place on a dusty afternoon. The sun hot, the crowd sweaty, the ground muddy red, the turquoise lake in the background. The fairest Ausean virgin appears in a Corinthian helmet and full Hellenic armour, mounts the chariot before her and is drawn around the lake. Completing the circuit, she joins the other battle ready virgins standing in two teams awaiting her arrival. Then they fight each other with sticks and staves. Herodotus notes, the battle was a ritual handed down by their forebears, and they call the virgins who die of their wounds, false-virgins.

False virgins! I was stopped in my tracks when I read that. False virgins? You mean there was a time and a place in the world when a woman's virginity was not defined by when and with whom she had sex, but by her battle fitness.

Herodotus was describing a matrilinear, matrifocal culture where a woman's virginity—on pain of death—was defined by her personal sovereignty and integrity. No wonder Athena, Artemis, and Hestia defiantly refused marriage. Defiantly kept the word virgin. Defiantly kept the word parthenos. They were warrior goddesses who created of themselves. Virgins. And, their story of resistance suggests the visceral struggle of women throughout the Mediterranean against the inexorable waves of Indo-European invasion. Hera and Aphrodite's practice of renewing their virginity through bathing, now feels akin to washing away some sin of complicity and, perhaps, an annual statement of solidarity with the virgin sisterhood still fighting the good fight.

But in the end, even the virgin goddesses were contained. Athena, reborn from his head, becomes Zeus' strategist and advisor. Artemis, wild huntress, was only welcome in the city as midwife. And Hestia, the carer at home, or priestess enclosed in the temple. Rebellious virgins contained, single womanhood was relegated to teacher and strategist, wild woman, midwife, carer, or religious. Motherhood and marriage became prestigious—even for unfaithful wives.

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the conflation of virginity with purity, and sex with marriage consolidated. Virgin, only referred to single women who had not experienced sexual intimacy. A meaning solidified by the Victorian purity culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the twentieth century, virginity, had nothing to do with having sex, or maintaining personal sovereignty and integrity. On the other hand, marriage had everything to do with sex, and the supremacy of wifedom, and motherhood.

The complete ascendency of the patriarchal project over the sovereignty of women is no where more poignantly portrayed than on an amphora by Exekias. There in black clay fired on terracotta, the Trojan hero Achilles plunges his spear into Penthesilea's throat. No false virgin, the Amazonian Queen stares defiantly back at Achilles. But even this fierce resistance was reinterpreted in later versions of Homer's, *Iliad*, claiming that, held in Penthesilea's gaze, Achilles fell in love. After all, what is a woman if she is not possessed by a man, even for the briefest moment?

There once was a world where women were full and equal citizens, and their virginity had everything to do with their personal sovereignty and integrity, and their battle fitness.

Now: How the Enlightenment became the force behind women's singlehood, and women's singlehood, the force behind feminism.

As you know, Enlightenment thinkers imagined a society based on a social contract between individual citizens with the natural rights of freedom of expression and assembly, equal treatment under the law, and solidarity. These citizens consent to be governed in exchange for the protection of their rights and the maintenance of social order. And, if a government is found unworthy by its citizens, they have the right to revolt.

Problem was, Enlightenment thinkers did not imagine any of this applied to women.

Enter French politician and playwright, Olympe de Gauges, and her 1791 pamphlet, the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*. Mirroring the 1789, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, she reformulates Rousseau. She obliterates his, and his mates gendered conception of the citizen, and shudders Cecrops' institution of marriage which had, by now, become *the* legitimating institution for the structure at patriarchy's heart—the heteronormative family.

Man, are you capable of being fair? de Gauges begins. A woman is asking: at least you will allow her that right. Tell me? What gave you the sovereign right to oppress my sex?

Women have the right to mount the scaffold, they must also have the right to mount the speaker's rostrum, she wrote.

Woman, wake up, ... the bell of reason is sounding throughout the universe: acknowledge your rights. ...Marriage is the tomb of trust and love ... [it] should be a voluntary union between equal rights-bearing partners who hold property and children mutually, and dispense of them of the same by agreement. ...Children have the right to a mother *and* a father's name.

Penthesilea resurrected, it seems she had a dagger in Achilles' heel all this time and, now, gazing clear-eyed at her oppressors, she had occasion to twist it. But it was dangerous times, and though she was for the revolution, de Gauges supported a constitutional monarchy. Convicted of treason, she was one of the first guillotined in November 1793, during the Reign of Terror.

After all, she had the right to mount the scaffold.

Death did not silence Olympe de Gauges. Her clarion tones stirred women everywhere. In 1792, in England, Mary Wollstonecraft sat down and wrote, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She argued that women's intellectual capacity was equal to men and therefore they had the right to equal education and equal participation in public life. Although an advocate for individual freedom, and having had two significant affairs and an illegitimate child before marrying William Godwin in 1797, Wollstonecraft did not seek to rewrite marriage in the way of de Gauges, but reasoned that women are better wives when well educated.

I want to say the values and principles of the Enlightenment translated directly into sovereign virgin activism. That women heard de Gauges' bell of reason sounding throughout the universe and acknowledged their rights, immediately abandoning or, at least, transforming their tombs of trust and love. But it was Wollstonecraft's rallying call for the comprehensive education of women that led

to a remarkable increase in educated middle-class white women in Europe, the UK, and America during the early nineteenth century.

Middle-class society at the time was highly segregated which created an intensely exclusive feminine sphere in which women formed intimate bonds. These women engaged in a heady ferment of proto-feminist floundering to make sense of how women's lives could be. In north-east America a sisterhood of companionship emerged. On the one hand these women glorified wives and mothers as the guardians of culture, superior to their single sisters, and almost definitely superior to men. On the other, the concept of single blessedness claimed singlehood was so charged with prestige it was, indeed, a higher calling.

But here's the thing. All this education, all this ferment, on both sides of the Atlantic, resulted in a political solidarity that shifted power.

As America industrialized and urbanized, educated middle-class white women flocked to the cities, and the phenomenon of the Bachelor Girl emerged. In the UK and the US single women's education societies formed developing the elite networks necessary to create a power base. Many delayed marriage for an education and work, many chose against it entirely. This challenge to marriage rippled into increased divorce rates, and in America, there were more single white middle-class women than ever before.

For the first time in 4,000 years, women had the capacity to mobilize. In 1848, the first women's rights convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York. In England, in 1866, John Stuart Mill was persuaded to petition the parliament for women's enfranchisement. It was unsuccessful, but it ignited the suffrage societies of the late 1860s in the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

Singlehood had arrived, and it was female. The revolution was on**.**

But marriage was a problem for the suffragettes. Well, let me get that right. Men's worry that enfranchised educated women would no longer want to marry them, was a problem for the suffragettes. Although spinster spine mobilized the movement, the rhetoric was dominated by married women who were reluctant to disturb the status quo. Men should not worry, they argued, happily married mothers fought for enfranchisement too. After all, it will make them better wives.

It was a smart tactic, the Suffrage Amendment passed in America in 1920, the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act passed in the UK in 1928. Of course, the very first self-governing jurisdictions in the world enfranchising women were New Zealand, 1893, South Australia, 1894, and Western Australia—where I grew up—in 1899.

However, despite suffragettes' protestations that marriage was safe, laws making grounds for divorce more equal for men and women were introduced in the UK in 1923 and 1937. In 1918, in Russia, after the October Revolution, the first modern no-fault divorce system transferred jurisdiction from the Church to state courts. The divorce revolution had begun.

But in America the feminist movement collapsed. Most suffragettes married, and socializing was less segregated along gendered lines, eroding opportunities for women's solidarity. It would be four decades, a stock market crash, the Great Depression, and a major world war before women mobilized again.

This time, the reverse would be true. Instead of singlehood driving feminism, feminism would be the force behind singlehood.

There is no doubt about it, America was the major theatre of the second-wave of the revolution. During WWII, Rosie the Riveter showing her muscle and saying, We can do it, ruptured the prescribed work roles for women. Almost immediately after the war, sexologist, Alfred Kinsey at Indiana University, discovered that sex was not confined to marriage, homosexual activity was highly prevalent and diverse, women orgasmed and their orgasms were nothing short of erotic. Singlehandedly, Kinsey disrupted the ironclad notion that sexual activity was the sole province of marriage, let alone a woman's sexual activity.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published, *The Second Sex*, arguing, among other things, the importance of women's economic independence. Translated into English in 1957, it was re-printed pretty much every year during the sixties. Women's consciousness raising groups burst out in the US, UK, and Australia—as far as I know. In May 1960, the contraceptive pill arrived, and in 1963 the revolution took off with the publication of two wildly different perspectives of womanhood.

Helen Gurley Brown's, *Sex and the Single* Girl, promoted single womanhood as a transitional time of glamourous independence and recreational sex with unattached, or attached partners, before settling into marriage—preferably with a very wealthy man. The editor of *Cosmopolitan*, from 1965 she transformed singlehood into a prestigious temporary state of independence and autonomy for women, and busted the conflation between virginity and sexual purity. You might imagine this opened the way for permanent single womanhood to also become prestigious, but no.

Also in 1963, Betty Friedan's, *The Feminine Mystique*, described women's deep, pervasive sense of being buried alive in marriage and motherhood. Liberation, Friedan believed, would come through a family life where women found selfhood through a career that paid for a cleaner and childcare. The book had a gloss of Botticelli's, *Birth of Venus*, on the cover. Venus, once called Aphrodite, who annually renewed her virginity at Paphos. Unwittingly suggesting—I am sure--that in 1963 a married women's virginity was now renewed through a beautiful career—and maybe an affair or two.

When the woman-identified women of the Gay Liberation Movement turned up in their purple t-shirts arguing lesbianism was central to Women's Liberation, Friedan freaked. Fearing what she called the lavender menace, Friedan claimed their man-hating rhetoric, sexual politics, and lesbian proselyting, undermined the movement. It was a homophobic reverberation of the suffragette's defence of marriage. After all, she argued, it is economic independence, that makes for better wives.

Enter Germaine Greer and, *The Female Eunuch*, in which, with excoriating clarity, she articulated patriarchy's castration of women. And, Kate Millet's, *Sexual Politics*, exposed how women internalize misogyny thus, unwittingly, perpetuating patriarchy. And in 1972, Gloria Steinem's *Ms Magazine* turbocharged the revolution.

The battle was on—again. The ammunition? The rapid fire of publishing. Women's presses shot up everywhere. Book after book, magazine after magazine fed women's souls, fuelled conversations at home, and fired up rallies in the streets.

Economic independence was the first theatre of the revolution. The gains? The elimination of discrimination in education, equal rights in the workplace, equal access to social services and private credit. The second theatre was the return of women's fertility to women, and supporting motherhood. Access to contraception, maternity leave, and childcare, the gains.

And all the while, divesting itself of moral overtones, divorce became a simple legal process to release an individual from their unhappiness. De facto coupling increased. People delayed marriage

until wanting to parent, divorce rates skyrocketed, and this time single motherhood attracted the social legitimacy and economic support it deserved. Now, the children of educated, working, and voting women had the right to bear their mother's names.

Women, and men, for that matter, with or without children, moved in and out of the coupled state, or remained single their entire life. And all this movement led to extended periods of time spent without a partner.

It was the dawn of an unstoppable demographic transformation. It was the singlehood revolution, this time driven by feminism, and this time, singlehood was here to stay.

Forgotten Warriors

It looked, for all the world, as if Cecrops' laws, were dissolving. That patriarchy would become a thing of the past. But only marriage dissolved. Cecrops' trick had worked. The foundational economic and social unit of society, the family, remained unassailed. In fact, it was busy morphing into all manner of forms. Whatever the parental composition, the family created for raising children remained the locus of full citizenship, attracting social inclusion and economic support for childrearing through employment and corporate practices, the tax and transfer system, and inheritance provisions.

Despite the millions of images of Aphrodite floating on her shell circling the world, the original understanding of virginity as personal sovereignty, integrity, and battle fitness, was forgotten. The principal feminist concern became mothers, surviving or escaping familyhood. When singlehood did draw attention, it was promoted as uber-positive, and thwarted any discussion of its complexities.

Helen Gurley Brown's promotion of single womanhood as independent and autonomous never stretched beyond a certain age. Although the primacy of wifedom was dissolving, the prestige of motherhood remained in tact. Older single women remain tainted, marginalized, and increasingly economically insecure. Motherhood supplanted virginity as the essence of womanhood, and since a mother's prestige comes from having children, they had no need to renew their virginity.

But here's the thing. Patriarchy oppresses all women, not just wives and mothers. And it is a feminist duty to fight patriarchy wherever it oppresses. The motherhood focus diverted feminists from their internalized misogyny of women who, for whatever reason, quietly disrupt the heteronormative family by not coupling and not having children. And only the fiercest feminist of them all noticed. Germaine Greer, in her 1999 book, *The Whole Woman*, she critiqued feminists saying:

> Among the consequences of loosening sexual mores is that the singe state is now less respectable than it has ever been. When people can cohabit informally by mutual agreement, singleness signifies, not a lack of opportunity to pair up, but a failure to pair up... Though the free expression of contempt for 'old maids' is now anathema, fundamental contempt for the unattached female is still in place. Nowadays her miserable condition is explained as a result, not of her lack of appeal, but of her inability to commit herself through narcissism or frigidity or disrupted pair-bonding in childhood. Any explanation of her singleness as the willed consequence of the utter resistibility of the offers she has received simply will not do.

Third and fourth wave feminists, laser set on recognizing diversity, didn't even dream of relationship, or parental status as intersectional possibilities, all but disappearing single women without children. Then feminist scholars took a strange turn developing an impenetrable academic dialect and making their papers almost impossible to understand for the everyday advocate, let alone the very women they hope to emancipate.

However, in 2003, Jill Reynolds and Margaret Wetherell shone the first light on the internalized misogyny of single women in their paper, The Discursive Climate of Singleness. They revealed single women are expected to explain their status to other women. Placing singlehood within the current life-course trajectory, they said, hides single women within the dominant conversation on wifedom, motherhood. Describing single womanhood so positively around choice, independence, self-development, and achievement, curtails a woman's freedom to enter a relationship should one come along. And critiquing her desire for relationship defines her as deficient, desperate, and failing to achieve the life she wants.

This wildly polarized rhetoric excludes single women from the sisterhood, divides them into tribes—the single and proud, and single and deficient—and undermines their capacity for solidarity and political action. Reynolds and Wetherell called for a feminist politics of singlehood.

In 2018, Kinneret Lahad's paper, *Singlehood is a Feminist Issue!* confirmed the feminist resistance to embrace single women, arguing scholars remain in thrall to the notion that temporary singlehood is legitimate, but extended or lifelong singlehood is, and I quote, 'a disruption and unnatural social category'. Lahad is on the money. While Helen Gurley Browne emancipated the young virgin, the 4,000 year old privilege patriarchy endows wives and mothers enables them to oppress women who for whatever reason do not marry or become a mother.

Feminist scholars must woman up. Face the misogyny women visit on their daughters and their single sisters without children. They must examine the structural inequality at play. For the woman who stands alone also gives her consent to be governed, and also has the right to equality and solidarity.

And this must be done quickly. It is 2025. Times are uncertain, one-person households are on the rise, economies are designed on a dual income household. Economic independence for any single person is increasingly unattainable, let alone single women.

Even women without children living on a single wage struggle to create a buffer against economic crises, catastrophic weather events, pandemics, and war. Access to social security, emergency health and housing is less available for women without children. In Australia disaster support payments are based on the number of people in a household. One-person households receive around 560 euros, while a family of four, most likely with two incomes and savings, receives around 1,700 euros.

National, global, or even personal health crises threaten a single woman's income and housing security. Single women without children are disproportionately called on to fill in for parenting colleagues, while providing care for ageing and infirm relatives, and minding siblings' children, threatening their work-nonwork balance. And as a single woman ages, despite all the care she offers throughout her life, she has no guarantee of reciprocal informal support, or inheritance, if she does not have children.

We need good policy to ensure equality, and good policy comes of good research free of inherent bias.

I call on my scholarly sisterhood: Pay attention to your bias against single women who are not mothers. We have abandoned the female citizens whose womanhood is defined, on pain of death, by their personal sovereignty, integrity, and battle fitness. We must once more unto the breach and fight for them. It is they who will bring an end to this wild and misguided experiment with patriarchy. It is they who are the best warriors of us all.