

When We Protected Women from the Wolves

Okay, so with the holiday season coming to a close, we've now been through the entire dialectical sequence for the song "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

Featured in the film *Neptune's Daughter*, the song won an [Oscar](#) in 1950 and remained a popular standard for decades. That was the dialectical *thesis*.

Then came the *antithesis*. More recently, "Baby, It's Cold Outside" has been judged to be retrograde, inappropriate, even an [ode to date rape](#).

It is, in fact, revealing that songwriter Frank Loesser dubbed the singing partners as "Wolf" and "Mouse." Moreover, the [lyrics](#) include the potentially incriminating line, "Say, what's in this drink?"

To quote one critic, [Minda Zetlin](#), the scene in *Neptune's Daughter* "makes my skin crawl. He grabs her arm to restrain her no less than ten times. He physically blocks her access to the door. He repeatedly yanks her coat off her. He tells her to look out the window and then immediately closes some heavy drapes, as if to demonstrate that no one will be able to see what he does to her."

Thus the dialectal collision: *thesis meets antithesis*. Yet now it seems that the song, having had its head-on with loudly progressive culture, has gained a new kind of antihero status among the proudly regressive. In fact, the most popular version of "Baby" is a 1959 cover by [Dean Martin](#), that well-known Rat Packer who seemed to spend most of his ['60s variety](#) show ogling scantily clad women.

Thus we now see a sort of cultural synthesis: the song will be

duly scourged on politically correct campuses, and duly played in opposite precincts.

Yet if we step back, we can think of “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” as merely a milestone in the long process that brought the culture to where it is today.

From time immemorial, it was understood that women, especially young women, needed to be shielded from the sexual predations of men. Camille Paglia, the radical/conservative cultural critic, has been arguing for decades that key institutions in society, often derided as “patriarchal”—from marriage to single-sex education to exemption from military service—were mostly the result of a desire to *protect* women, not to pinion them.

Not surprisingly, legends and parables reinforced this cultural wisdom. For instance, there’s Little Red Riding Hood. After many centuries of telling and retelling, the origins of the story are obscure. Yet it doesn’t take a Freudian genius to see that there could be more than one meaning to the scene in which Red Riding Hood is tempted into bed with the Big Bad Wolf.

The fact that the story has a happy ending doesn’t mitigate its cautionary nature. (Interestingly, a pop song from the ’60s, [“Little Red Riding Hood,”](#) includes lyrics that restate the warning message: “What full lips you have/ They’re sure to lure someone bad.”)

With these dangers in mind, societies all over the world came up with rituals of courtship, aimed at circumscribing—if not proscribing altogether—impulsive romantic love. The bottom line was that parents, matchmakers, chaperones, clergy, and community were involved. Were these social systems confining to women? Perhaps. But they were also confining to *men*. Suppression was also protection. The overriding goal was for a vulnerable woman *not* to end up in the lair of a wolf.

Then came modernity, when most of the guardrails were trampled. Or, as Marx said of modern times, “All that is solid melts into air.”

We might think of this change, beginning in Europe in the 18th century, as the Great Unleashing, when young people left the farm and mostly ended up in mills and factories, there to meet a new kind of fate.

In 1731, the English artist William Hogarth issued his own form of warning. [*A Harlot's Progress*](#) consists of six engravings showing the descent of a young woman, from innocence to prostitution to death at age 23. Four years later, Hogarth published a companion set of warnings to men, [*A Rake's Progress*](#).

Two centuries later, on this side of the Atlantic, several novels by Theodore Dreiser also described the new times. Perhaps Dreiser's most famous work, *An American Tragedy* (1925), began with a look back at the old ways, shaped by family and faith. Describing a stern matriarch, Dreiser writes, “The mother alone stood out as having that force and determination which, however blind or erroneous, makes for self-preservation.” And then the family sings a hymn: “The love of Jesus saves me whole/ The love of God my steps control.”

The sorrowful message of the book, of course, is that once those restraining strings are untuned—as when boys and girls end up on their own in the big city—then hark, what discord comes. (The novel was made into a Hollywood movie twice, once in [1931](#) and again in [1951](#)—the second starring Elizabeth Taylor.)

In this modern vein, it's interesting to note that while “Baby, It's Cold Outside” is closely associated with the Christmas holiday, there's no mention of Christmas, or any holiday, in the lyrics. In these secular times, it seems,

“Christmas” is little different from “winter.”

In the '50s, '60s, and '70s, the Great Unleashing gained momentum. Indeed, “Baby It’s Cold Outside” was sometimes interpreted as [a song of women’s liberation](#), a lyric of empowerment—she being free to make her own choices.

Yet as Dreiser would have predicted, some of those choices were mistakes. Recently, *The New York Times* [published](#) an oral history of Andy Warhol’s “Factory,” a not-so-homey home for pretty vagabonds:

One day a drug dealer came up. He shot up this girl, and she for some reason passed out. It was in the bathtub. She went under water. We thought she was dead. We panicked because she was not waking up. Finally someone said, “We should send her down the mail chute.” We wrote little notes on her body and puts stamps on her forehead. Then we realized she wasn’t dead. I don’t think she would have fit in the mail chute. But we would have tried.

That nameless girl, of course, was a daughter, and it seems reasonable to assert that society could have done a better job of protecting her—including, if at all possible, from her own careless impulses. That is, after all, a basic reason that civilization exists.

By the 1980s, sexually transmitted diseases had slowed the pace of the sexual revolution. Many feminists turned more conservative on at least some sexual matters, led by law professor-turned-anti-pornography crusader [Catharine MacKinnon](#).

Today, we can draw a line from MacKinnon’s neo-Victorianism to the #MeToo movement, and from there to the monologues of comedian Hannah Gadsby, avatar of a new kind of vengeful anti-humor, perhaps better described as dire sermons against heterosexual men. (Some would say, to be sure, that many males

have it coming—that scorn is the price to be paid for the wolfish life that many have chosen.)

So perhaps now is the right time to put “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” in its most socially useful framework: it’s a cautionary tale, right up there with *Little Red Riding Hood*, Hogarth, and Dreiser. Sure, the song is fun and sexy, yet it describes a path that most young women probably don’t wish to be on—at least not in retrospect. And almost certainly, few actively wish that path for their daughters or other female relatives.

Some will insist, of course, that prudential safeguards—whether as matters of law or just custom—are inhibiting, even stifling. Others will say there’s something dubious about those who dwell too much on the dangers that might befall others. Still others will say that to focus on the harm done to unlucky individuals is to “blame the victim.”

Even so, cautionary tales are valuable because, after all, caution is valuable. Society can and should do its part to serve and protect, yet there’s no substitute for informed common sense. Oh, and let’s not forget: common sense and virtue are good for men as well.

So sure, people will continue to listen to “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.” Yet at the same time, they should realize that it can be perilous inside.

That’s a good synthesis of hard-earned wisdom for the holiday season—and any other.

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