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Beyond Fathers as Gods

By Richard Leader

Millions tuned in to the second season-finale of ABC's *Lost*, hoping to see Michael (Harold Perrineau Jr.) meet a horrific end. The African American character had betrayed the rest of his island-bound castaways, murdering two of them outright, all to rescue his biological son, Walt (Malcolm David Kelley), a boy he hardly knew before an airplane crash had stranded them together. Super-Dads, men who will go to any length to protect their children, are nothing new when it comes to society's collective fantasies: saving a loved one, or, just as often, getting revenge on their behalf, entitles "good men" to act out in the most horrific ways—all for our entertainment. It is the perfect setup for a variety of violent actions, typically climaxing in an energetic fit of justifiable homicide. As a black man, Michael's actions were seen as less justifiable than most. In fact, his character constitutes the marquee figure of a new genre: the father who goes too far in the name of fatherhood.

Such characters are not limited to television dramas, but so-called "reality" shows as well. The 12th season of *Survivor*, "Exile Island," featured Shane, a manic marketing executive who not only had his son's name, Boston, tattooed onto his chest, but urged his fellow teammates to swear fealty oaths on his son. Sylvester Stallone's boxing saga, *The Contender*, saw its most controversial moment when one fighter, Anthony Bonsante, betrayed his team by surreptitiously picking a match-up that everyone viewed as unfair. He defended his choice of a weak opponent by positioning himself as a father protecting the interests of his children, the beneficiaries of his boxing career. Like Shane, Bonsante was hardly the only father on the show, and none found his arguments especially compelling. Indeed, Stallone's mandate to NBC was to portray fighters

as good family men, in the sport for the sake of others, with Ahmed Kaddour standing as the lone villain, boxing to support a Hollywood lifestyle.

These new images of fatherhood, art and life imitating each other in equal measure, have no monolithic meaning, save patriarchy. As much as they reflect general male anxiety about having to live up to a more taxing model of fatherhood, requiring both sensitivity and active involvement, these Super-Dads are remembered for their failures in another sphere: the competitive arena of masculine honor. Indeed, speaking ill of these men *as* fathers is verboten (any attempt to attack them on those grounds is itself a breach of the male honor-code), but they are to blame for the various infirmities that put them in the position of having to balance, and failing, their twin duties to both their offspring and the patriarchal cult of brotherhood. The emerging archetype of the failed Super-Dad serves both as a warning, urging the men that society deems undesirable to avoid the balancing act altogether, and to normalize the occasional failures of those men, especially white men, who can now further establish their places within the masculine sphere of honor by using their children as lavish props.

The ultimate irony of this development is that pro-feminism itself has become utterly obsessed with fatherhood: while it has long been agreed upon that the protection of paternity was the catalyst for the construction of a patriarchal world, it has now become the preferred site for pro-feminist resistance. The most popular and influential group today is not the stodgy (and often dodgy) National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS), but Dads and Daughters, a group so exciting and meteoric that even pro-feminist luminaries without children are glomming onto it as “advisors,” hoping to keep their own careers on parallel trajectories. With a slick website that seems primarily dedicated to promoting Joe Kelly’s

book of the same name, not to mention cultivating \$3,000 speaking engagements for him, Dads and Daughters has no plans to create local chapters for their ethereal non-profit organization. Nevertheless, they have become so enviable that even feminist women are conducting their own activism under their banner, with actor Geena Davis running her See Jane media-awareness campaign as part of the Dads and Daughters brand name. Conversely, these men freely take advantage of infrastructure built by feminists, like New Moon publishing, in order to sell back-issues of their newsletter: information on how to become a better father always comes with a price tag.

Dads and Daughters is not a pro-feminist group: it is a group for nice guys. Acknowledging that fact does not diminish the positive contributions they have made, yet it is a fact that fewer people than ever see as relevant, even feminist women, who have enabled Dads and Daughters to reach phenomenon status. While there is a category of feminist literature today devoted to lampooning so-called “nice guys,” rants that depict men who self identify as such as boors who feel entitled to sex, the ascension of fatherhood as the ultimate act of pro-feminism stems from the desire of many women to find the genuine article. After all, the cuddly image of an older gentleman who cares deeply for his offspring (and likely his spouse, the institution of marriage being equally idealized) runs counter to the image projected by other self avowed pro-feminists, young anarchists obsessed with pornography despite their claims supporting gender equality.

Ms. Musings, a blog once operated by *Ms. Magazine*, had a small section of links devoted to “men we love,” with two of the three links being to a “Rebel Dad” and a “Daddy Zine.” Similarly, the Beastie Boys were able to capitalize on feminist angst, women who have long enjoyed the music despite their objections to the

group's sexism and homophobia, as they reinvented themselves as family men: they made their millions off of oppression and now, after a simple apology, they have been given free license by feminists to invest those millions in protecting their own genetic legacy. While "fatherhood as pro-feminism" has many flaws, all obvious in nature, perhaps one of the most ironic ones is that it makes patriarchs, literally, the best pro-feminists. It is always the men with the largest amounts of male-privilege who are entrusted to tell other men not to be sexist. The professional pro-feminists, the ones who attain the lion's share of both mainstream and feminist attention, as a demographic, are growing older with each passing year and actively discriminate against younger males participating as anything but star-struck pupils. Breeding has become the best way to circumvent that barrier.

Being a "good father" can itself be an antifeminist act. While Dads and Daughters talks a good talk on racism and class issues, despite their own lilywhite appearance, it seems unlikely that most of their members would be willing to put the livelihood of someone else's daughter on equal footing with their own. Childrearing today is seen as a competitive, zero-sum enterprise, where a man should desire to give his own children every advantage over those of his rivals. While sons have been the traditional vehicle for passing down both racial and class based privileges, daughters serve increasingly well in that capacity, no small thanks to good fathers. Feminism requires the violation this competitive ethic. Yet the masculine code of honor asks that men not embarrass themselves or other fathers—by questioning their capacity to "provide"—by pointing out the unfair nature of the competitive system.

With all the attention paid to fatherhood it is impossible to question how it is that men became fathers in the first place. Not

only are the sins of the past located ever more firmly in the past, as in the case of the Beastie Boys in their transition to Beastie Dads, it increasingly rewards those males who operated, both socially and sexually, from frameworks of privilege. In this climate it becomes unnecessary to ask whether or not the act of impregnating women is a pro-feminist act, a question that should be a fundamental one, and yet it is elided by presuming fatherhood as inevitable. While many pro-feminist writers are correctly attempting to de-gender parenthood in order to oppose Far-Right groups that are seeking to scientifically inscribe the "masculine-role" as vital for healthy children, the debate has already passed by an important point of contention. This is for the benefit of all men as men, no matter their feelings are on parenthood versus fatherhood, as they are all free to take advantage of societal-wide encouragement of women to engage in "high risk" sexual activities.

Progressive-fatherhood also pits women against their own interests, especially lesbian women. When two gay men, Michael Meehan and Thomas Dysarz, became the fathers of quadruplets in 2002, feminists were expected to cheer them on because their ability to enter institutional fatherhood, as men previously considered undesirable for the role, was supposedly cause for celebration for both lesbians and feminists. Yet the actions they took to become fathers were hardly pro-feminist choices, but acts of wanton patriarchal privilege: the woman they hired as a surrogate (and the biological mother of their children) was clearly their subordinate, over a decade younger and just beginning her education while already supporting three children of her own as a single mother—a stark contrast to the wealth and power enjoyed by an attorney and an owner of a successful salon chain. Her health was endangered further as the two Catholic men were initially loathe to terminate a fifth

fetus, the weight of *their* decision being ever so valued by the media.

While the first group of children was sired by Meehan, in order to be fair and allow both men to pass on their genes to the next generation, the woman was conscripted to bear yet another child, this time with sperm from Dysarz. Pundits in pseudo pro-feminism might go on and on with Hallmark style sentiments about how “anyone can be a father but it takes a someone special / a real man to be a dad,” but the above scenario demonstrates that no male raised in our society can truly transcend the messages we receive about biological parenthood: we all believe ourselves to be the fittest of the survivors. For all of the talk about new or alternative families entertained in progressive circles, all too often these efforts come out looking exactly like the families that Dr. James Dobson would like to legislate, only with different players cast for the parts.

All of this was supposed to be vaunted by feminists. Lesbian women might have an easier time becoming mothers, given the availability of sperm, but this does not entitle gay men—nor heterosexual ones for that matter—access to women’s bodies, especially as it is straight women, seen as the prototypical “bottom” in patriarchy’s sadomasochism game, who are typically recruited as broodmares for men of all sexualities. Though there is something to be said for women who choose to raise children outside of male influence, as much as such a thing is even possible, a good number of men are all too willing to let women take on that hefty responsibility, completely satisfied with their role of biological parenthood. While many sperm donors might talk of lofty and high minded reasons behind their decision, in reality, they are not much different from the cast of MTV’s *Jackass* who attended a fertility clinic in order to have their contributions rated against each other in some sort of contest.

Men are also able to use their status as good fathers to reject feminist arguments against their misogynist activities. This is not limited to the Hugh Hefners of the world who are able to embroil their daughters in their empires, but is something that operates on a more elusive level: the real power that results from men’s control the notion of “public” and “private” and the liminal space that is imagined between them. Family is always a private matter except whenever it is a public one. Such mercurial distinctions are made to benefit men and feminists always find themselves on the wrong end of the argument, rudely interjecting the personal into the political or the political into the personal.

Men, on the other hand, can simply decide something to be personal in one moment and public in the next, keeping the two spheres separate for their own convenience. As such, this topic deserves a more personal example than most: a friend of mine, a poet in the early stages of her career, recently had a poem accepted by the *Boston Review*, a prestigious accomplishment. She had attended a reading by the editor who had selected her work and later entered into correspondence with him over his choice to casually use the word “whore” in one of his own poems. The bravery of this act is not to be underestimated as she was weighing her position as an anti-prostitution activist with (or against) her career as a poet, something this man might have had mortal influence over.

He was not swayed by her arguments against the figurative use of “whore” (one that imagines the most privileged of parties somehow betraying a noble conviction, that “nobility” itself often associated with the bonds between the intellectual male-brotherhood), and predictably launched a counter-attack. The editor of the literary juggernaut was himself not particularly intelligent in his responses, preferring to use socially conservative ploys, asking why

it was that *she* was able to rhetorically employ “hateful words,” such as racial epithets given for the sake of example, somehow imagining that women like to sit around all day calling each other “whore” and that he was losing out on that bit of fun. But the words of hers that allowed him to fly off the handle, paradoxically, were among the most very hopeful: “Imagine your daughter in a world where that word couldn’t be used at her, because it didn’t exist.”

(Also I think it’s very problematic that you think women can perhaps use the word “whore” while men cannot — do you think there are no “prostituted males”?) In the end I don’t think the poem uses the word whore irresponsibly but I will probably think twice before using it in a poem again. However here’s something I am absolutely sure of: you cannot, in making your point, mobilize my 7-month-old daughter as a rhetorical point of reference. To my mind, that is deeply irresponsibly [sic], and in spirit, it is much much closer to the real problem. I think it might be worthwhile for you to think about that.

A good father can invoke the privacy argument to defend his daughter from all of the big-bad feminists out there who seek to do her harm; or more accurately, he can proffer his daughter as a shield to defend himself from feminists pointing out his privileged position in the world. His family is private when he desires it to be private and public whenever a rhetorical emergency of his own arises, as when he would later conjure the image of his wife: “Over lunch I

mentioned to my wife and a female friend of ours your critique of my use of the word ‘whore’ in that poem and they assured me that my response was, to their female minds, wholly appropriate and moreover, that I should have ignored you altogether.”

My friend, after deeply apologizing for mentioning his daughter, sought her own outside counsel, forwarding the debate to both me and a feminist associate, and, in turn, passed on some of our comments to the editor. Again, he was appalled, asking her never to contact him again. He was able to conceptualize their emails as private even when he shared them with others because he was entitled, with governmental sanction, to locate “his women” in the private sphere of family; because he controlled the definition of family and the exact situations that rendered it public or private, he was able to view the fledgling poet he was arguing with as the one violating professional standards of decorum: they were, after all, standards he had near absolute power over.

Fatherhood is a particularly dangerous site for pro-feminist resistance. This is because it is precisely the least dangerous sort of progressive male activism to be involved in. It is no coincidence that the most popular forms of corporate pro-feminism—including both prison rehabilitation for batterers and academic “after school” type programs, such as Men Can Stop Rape—all involve subordinate male populations. The hierarchy endemic to patriarchal fatherhood is not altogether absent in pro-feminist parenthood: getting the next generation to do the right thing is much easier, and personally safer, than locking horns with your own.