Cultural Daily

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Atalanta, Marlo Thomas & Cheering for the Mad Men Finale

Kathleen Collins · Wednesday, June 17th, 2015

The Greek myth of Atalanta tells the story of a young woman dead set against getting married. A famously swift runner, she offers to marry the suitor who can beat her at a foot race, while losers risk death by her spear. In the optimistic, feminist retelling on the 1972 album *Free To Be…You and Me*, Atalanta is a much sought-after athletic, polymath whose father wants to marry her off. She agrees to a race and ties with a young, progressive townsman who claims as his prize only the chance to hang out with her and would not dream of marrying her unless she was amenable. Atalanta likewise says she would never deign to marry until she sees the world, and even then, she tells her father, she might still choose not to. Seven-year-old me listened so frequently to that story – voiced with earnest and convincing emotion by Marlo Thomas and Alan Alda – that I anticipated every word, inflection and sound effect and could replicate it like a myna bird. But I never failed to feel an intense surge of victory each time I heard the ending.

I experienced that same feeling recently during the series finale of *Mad Men*. I audibly cheered when, in less than two minutes, Joan recognized in her lover a man who envisioned her as a wife on retainer rather than as an incipient entrepreneur deserving of his support and encouragement. “You act like this is happening to you,” Richard chided her. “You’re making a choice.” Yes, Richard. Exactly.

For Joan and her real-life peers on the cusp of the 1970s who finally got to do just that, it was indeed an event to celebrate. But when I felt the victory surge again, belatedly getting around to the *Girls* fourth season finale, my cheer was fueled by indignation when Shoshanna decided to pursue a career opportunity in Tokyo instead of a potential, tentative relationship at home in NYC. It is difficult not to leap off the couch and punch the air in triumph when our protagonists deliberately chose to “disobey” the men telling them not to go, from Atalanta defying the father trying to box her in to Shoshanna’s instant soup mogul gently commanding her to stay (“be the walker, not the dog,” Colin Quinn’s character counseled her, spouting from his *Lean In* gleanings).

Why am I still cheering for women choosing their own paths in 2015, even rooting for a young third wave feminist who chooses career over maybe-love? When Don Draper takes off on a soul searching road trip, there’s no high-fiving, because men have been doing as they please, taking off at the slightest provocation for millennia. Plenty of myths as well as actual historical accounts are based on that very plot device. It’s the natural order, seemingly written into our genetic code. Men roam and women stay home. So much so that a myth like Atalanta was needed at some point to explain these outlying unmarried, wandering wombs roaming the earth.

Television solidified this conformist ideology with its 1950s sitcoms revolving around families with cheerful and glamorous stay-at-home-moms. In the mid-1960s, TV offered a fresh scenario when Marlo Thomas starred as *That Girl*. Ann Marie was a new character on TV, a young woman who chose to be single and financially independent. Several years before she rallied her feminist comrades and instigated *Free to Be…You and Me*, predating her role as Atalanta, Thomas was adamant about keeping the options for her *That Girl* character open and won the argument with the network about *not* ending the series with a wedding. Mary Richards, Murphy Brown, Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw continued the small wave of iconic single professional women from the 1970s onward, for the most part happily eschewing marriage and focusing on their high-powered careers. (Stories were different for single working class women, like *Alice* and *Laverne and Shirley*, who were heroines in their own right, largely because they *didn't* have similar choices.)

The "Can Women Have it All?" debate is still scorchingly present in American popular, social and political culture. And why must women have to choose at all? Because myths die hard. Atalanta, Ann Marie, Joan and Shoshanna all faced the same fundamental decision at some or many points point in their fictional but representative lives, likely agonizing for at least a few minutes at each juncture. "I would never dream of making you choose," Joan said to Richard. What a poignant moment, in a simulated 1970, where a woman presented the issue at its most fundamental: it just isn't fair. The persistence of myths necessitates the Sisyphean retelling of truths which are harder for many to believe. *Free to Be…You and Me*, the album and the book, is still popular and beloved for more than nostalgic reasons. We *still* need to be reminded of each of those basic feminist lessons. Atalanta keeps trying to prove that she can outrun her male suitors just to earn the right to make her own decision.

Recent books corroborate the notion that women are still causing cultural upset when they choose work over love and/or family. While Kate Bolick's *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* and Meghan Daum's *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids* mean to celebrate and validate women making these choices, they (or their publishers) still couch it in a humorous phrase, coopting and reclaiming slurs as a presumed act of empowerment. The recently released *Primates of Park Avenue: A Memoir* wherein embedded informant Wednesday Martin reveals the habits and rituals of Manhattan's Upper East Side wealthy women who ceded the bread winning to their husbands despite their own business acumen and success potential, surely does not intend to suggest that some women are unevolved mammals, but it evokes the intransigent idea that women's place is in the home, or the playground, or are otherwise *kept* in some limited space. Are we still not allowed to be free, you and me? Despite the fact that millions of women choose stay-at-home motherhood over careers outside the home and millions of others manage some version of balancing all of it, I still feel a thrill when I see a Shoshanna or a Joan narrowly escaping captivity. But it is a thrill I would gladly sacrifice for a Coke and a smile.

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