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Does Nature Abhor a Vacuum of Patriarchy?
Missing Fathers in the Films of Whit Stillman

Author’s preface: Prior to publication, Mr. Whit Stillman was kind enough to read this essay and offer his comments, all of which were incorporated one way or another into the final draft. Nonetheless, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of Mr. Stillman.

Hailed as the “Poet of the Urban Haute Bourgeoisie” and the “Jane Austen of indie film,” filmmaker and author Whit Stillman has garnered critical acclaim for works that are “rich, beautiful and surprisingly virtuous.” Stillman’s first film, the low-budget *Metropolitan* (1990), was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and also helped to launch the independent film industry as we know it today. Stillman’s cinematic comedies of manner are known for their erudite and delightful dialogue, Austenian sensibilities, and gently ironic humor. But one of the most recognizable features of Stillman’s first four movies—*Metropolitan* (1990), *Barcelona* (1994), *Last Days of Disco* (1998), and *Damsels in Distress* (2011)—is not a quality that they possess but a demographic they lack. Each film depicts young persons who are ill-equipped to face the challenges of
becoming happy adults because they are bereft of significant adult guidance. This pattern appears to be especially true where fathers are concerned: while the main characters’ mothers sometimes make an appearance (albeit briefly), fathers only appear as usually wistful subjects of conversation. The combination of youthful yearners and missing mentors produces, as one observer puts it, “a world reminiscent of the Peanuts cartoon strip,” where the adults are practically gone and the young are left on their own.

Stillman’s movies may be light-hearted, but they have never been called light-headed. We may therefore rightly suspect a deeper purpose to this paternal lacuna hidden behind the wit and whimsy of his art. To find out what that purpose might be, I will first trace the concept of patriarchy as it was originally understood. Second, I will survey the modern backlash against patriarchy and the more recent backlash against this backlash. Third, I will situate Stillman’s earlier films within this historical framework. And fourth, I will speculate about the significance of Stillman’s fatherless motif and what it reveals about his work.

Patriarchy Properly Understood

In contemporary usage, “patriarchy” designates any form of male headship over a family, clan, or society. More specifically, in feminist studies the term has become synonymous with men’s systemic oppression of women: this pejorative connotation has also affected the word’s meaning outside of academia.

Patriarchy, strictly speaking, however, denotes not male rule or misrule in general but a specific form of male authority found only in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The word πατριάρχης is itself a biblical neologism, appearing first in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in reference to: 1) the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel; 2) the heads of families within a tribe of Israel; and 3) Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the New Testament, St. Stephen confirms this convention by referring to the sons of Jacob as the “twelve
patriarchs,” and St. Peter, while preaching during the Church’s first Pentecost, develops it further by also calling King David a patriarch.³ Later Christian usage expands the patriarchal franchise to include pre-Abrahamic figures such as Adam, Abel, and Noah (the so-called “antediluvian patriarchs”) and to postbiblical bishops presiding over the chief sees of the early Church—for example, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. Today, a number of prelates in the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox churches continue to bear the ecclesiastical title of patriarch.

Initially, neither the Greek πατριάρχης nor the Latin transliterations patriarcha and patriarches were adopted outside of Jewish and Christian circles. Nonbelievers did not use the term for their male leaders, nor did Jews and Christians in the first centuries after Christ use the term to designate a male leader outside of their sacred history. The only exception to this rule that I was able to find was a sarcastic reference by Tertullian to the philosophers as the “patriarchs of heretics,” but even here he feels compelled to add the qualifier ut ita dixerim—“if I may speak this way.”¹⁰

All of which is to say that patriarchy in its strictest sense is a specific model of fatherly authority tied to divine revelation and anchored in a covenantal bond between God and man that—judging from how the term is used biblically and ecclesiastically—is essentially positive and beneficial. It is beyond the scope of this article to delineate all of the features of this model (especially in the complicated matter of the relations between husbands and wives or men and women), but we can at least identify one element of patriarchy that is relevant to a discussion of parenthood—namely, that a believer or disciple is called not so much to relinquish rule or hierarchy as he is to transform rule into a self-sacrificial act in which the ruler rules for the sake of the ruled rather than for his own sake. As Jesus admonishes his apostles:

You know that the princes of the Gentiles lord it over them; and they that are the greater, exercise power upon them. It
shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be the greater among you, let him be your minister: And he that will be first among you, shall be your servant. Even as the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a redemption for many.\textsuperscript{11}

Here “lord it over them” (κατακυριεύουσιν) signifies not rule per se but exploitative rule, a wielding of power for the sake of selfish gain.\textsuperscript{12} Christian rule, by contrast, may involve an exercise of power, but that exercise is directed exclusively to the betterment of the ruled even if it is at the expense of the ruler. The greatest example of this self-emptying and altruistic mode of rule is that of Jesus Christ, who “loved the Church and delivered himself up for it.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{The Attack on Patriarchy}

Needless to say, not every male believer in a position of authority has lived up to this ideal; indeed, not even the original patriarchs from the Old Testament were consistently patriarchal insofar as the exercise of their headship was sometimes sullied by self-interest and bias rather than genuine kenosis.\textsuperscript{14} The failings, both real and alleged, of fathers in the Christian West can even be considered one of the catalysts for the great intellectual, social, and political revolutions that define modernity. From Hobbes’s framing of “paternal dominion” in terms of “force, fear, death, and bondage” to Cambacérès’s declaration that “the imperious voice of reason has made itself heard [that there should be] no more paternal power,” a rejection of traditional fatherhood (along with a rejection of traditional monarchy and traditional ecclesiology) can be said to lie at the heart of the early modern project.\textsuperscript{15} And this rejection provided the subsequent foundation for an even more radical critique of patriarchy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As David Jeffrey writes:

\begin{quote}
Let us recollect: from certain Victorian and turn-of-the-century writers, such as Samuel Butler (\textit{The Way of All Flesh}}
[1903]), whose entire life’s work was motivated by hatred of his father and then, subsequently, his self-appointed surrogate fathers, on to James Joyce in Portrait of the Artist (1916) and Stephen Hero (1944), who extends his hatred to the Catholic Church and all paternity, fathers had become the representative enemy of freedom—political freedom, artistic freedom, and perhaps above all, sexual freedom. Death of the Father (Freud), the Death of God (Nietzsche) and the Death of the Author (Barthes) reflect a common and widely colloquialized impulse toward the rejection of any authority beyond the self.\textsuperscript{16}

Or in the words of Silke-Maria Weineck, “The male voice of the last century has been the voice of the son, speaking to and about the father in tones of anger and regret, rebellion and longing, contempt, condemnation, guilt, fear, and, at times, love.”\textsuperscript{17}

And as for the female voice: first-wave feminism as epitomized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton contrasted a primordial matriarchate as a “golden age of peace and plenty” with a succeeding patriarchy as the “source of tyranny, wars and [all] social ills,” while second-wave feminism, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, combined the aforementioned “contempt” and “condemnation” of paternal dominance with the abandonment of an “essentialist” anthropology.\textsuperscript{18} It is little wonder that by the 1980s even Christian theologians were bemoaning the patriarchal dimensions of their religion and excising male references to God in scripture and in worship.\textsuperscript{19}

As these changes in attitude and practice accelerated, however, a different criticism began to emerge that targeted not fatherhood but the paucity of good fathers. The 1965 Moynihan Report lamented the “crumbling” of African-American family structure due to rising illegitimate births and fatherless households.\textsuperscript{20} Psychological studies increasingly reported the damage to the family inflicted by absentee dads; one book, psychologist Paul Vitz’s 2000 Faith of the Fatherless: the Psychology of Atheism, argued that believers such as Pascal and Bonhoeffer had strong and loving fathers, while famous atheists
such as Marx, Stalin, Freud, and Hitler had fathers who were weak, unloving, or absent.\textsuperscript{21} And whereas Elizabeth Cady Stanton had put blame for all “social ills” on the patriarchate, the National Center for Fathering makes the diametrically opposite claim: that “almost every social ill faced by America’s children is related to fatherlessness.” Drawing from data gathered mostly by the U.S. government, the center notes that “children from fatherless homes are more likely to be poor, become involved in drug and alcohol abuse, drop out of school, and suffer from health and emotional problems. Boys are more likely to become involved in crime, and girls are more likely to become pregnant as teens.”\textsuperscript{23} One statistic popularly cited today by fathers’ rights groups is particularly telling: that eighty percent of rapists with displaced anger come from fatherless homes (fourteen times the national average).\textsuperscript{23} Displaced anger rape occurs when the perpetrator uses sexual assault as “a means of physically harming, degrading, or defiling the victim,” usually in reaction to a real or perceived humiliation suffered at the hands of a lover or mother.\textsuperscript{24} In contrast to the feminist tenet that paternal authority leads to violence against women, in these cases it is most likely the absence of such authority that leads to violent misogyny.

The crisis caused by a rise in fatherlessness also explains a noticeable shift in youth culture. According to Mary Eberstadt, while the popular music of the 1960s was often a protest against the patriarchal family, the popular music of the 1990s and 2000s was a protest against not having one. “To put this perhaps unexpected point more broadly,” she writes, “during the same years in which progressive-minded and politically correct adults have been excoriating Ozzie and Harriet as an artifact of 1950s-style oppression, many millions of American teenagers have enshrined a new generation of music idols whose shared generational signature in song after song is to rage about what not having had a nuclear family has done to them.”\textsuperscript{25}

In the same essay (entitled “Eminem is Right”), Eberstadt traces how the themes of misogyny, suicide, and drugs prevalent in rap are linked by the artists themselves to their own broken homes and dys-
functional childhoods. Eminem’s poignant albeit vulgar *cri de coeur*, for instance, center around “parental loss, abandonment, abuse, and subsequent child and adolescent anger, dysfunction, and violence (including self-violence).”26 “Wish I could be the daddy that neither one of us had,” the narrator of one of his songs laments upon watching his little sister color picture after picture of an imagined nuclear family. And elsewhere: “My *@$#& father must have had his panties up in a bunch / ’Cause he split. I wonder if he even kissed me good-bye.”

*Stillman’s Filmography*

To say that Whit Stillman is a cleaner version of Eminem would do an injustice to his craft; nor would it be any better to call his romantic comedies the WASP—or rather, UHB (Urban Haute Bourgeoisie)—counterpart to the Moynihan Report. For his own part, Stillman describes himself as “apolitical” and disdains “problem movies” that blatantly deal with social issues, arguing that such films are “boring and obvious” and—because of their “explicitly didactic function”—depressing.27 Nevertheless, Stillman strives in his art “to try to tell absolutely the truth as [he] know[s] it” at the same time that he is committed to a model of fiction that is not explicit but intuitive and indirect.28 It is therefore not surprising that his movies would raise thoughtful albeit subtle questions about matters of substance, such as the possible damage caused by an absence of patriarchy on family members and society.29

*Metropolitan*

Stillman’s first feature-length film *Metropolitan* (1990) follows the lives of several remarkably articulate teenagers known as the “Sally Fowler Rat Pack” during debutante season in Manhattan. Nick Smith, Charlie Black, and newcomer to the group Tom Townsend all have divorced parents, while others in S.F.R.P. have suffered the loss of a father.
Nick: Dead fathers are a common problem. Jane’s father died very suddenly last year.
Tom: Must have been awful for her.
Nick: Yes. It was tough on him, too.

The movie’s most hilarious character is Nick Smith, who tries to maintain a level of antiquated decorum in the face of cultural decay, holding on to the conventions of “deb season” and the wearing of detachable collars, which he concedes is “a small thing, but symbolically important.” Nick speaks of the latter.

Nick: Our parents’ generation was never interested in keeping up standards. They wanted to be happy, but of course the last way to be happy is to make it your objective in life.
Charlie: I wonder if our generation’s any better than our parents.
Nick: Oh, it’s far worse. Our generation’s probably the worst since the Protestant Reformation. It’s barbaric, but a barbarism even worse than the old-fashioned, straightforward kind. Now barbarism is cloaked with all sorts of self-righteousness and moral superiority.30

Nick strives mightily to fill the role of “judicious patriarch” left by the group’s absent parents, but he fails miserably.31 He and his peers commit the same kinds of mistakes as the unchaperoned young people in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park (a running motif in the film). Sexual freedom, David Jeffrey argues, is one of the chief aims of emancipation from paternal dominion, and such freedom is pervasive in the milieu of Metropolitan’s UHB. In the mescaline-taking, strip-poker-playing Sally Fowler Rat Pack, Nick is currently dating Jane but has also slept with the “very attractive slut” Cynthia. Cynthia, in turn, is now dating Rick Von Sloneker, a vile aristocrat whose mistreatment of a young woman named Cathy Livingstone included “pulling a train” with her (an act in which several men are engaged serially in relations with a woman); Cathy committed suicide not
long after. Liberation from paternal mores, it would appear, leads to destructive sexual behavior.

Nick is forced into exile from the Rat Pack because of a lie he has told about Von Sloneker (which, ironically, ends up being close to the truth) and must now spend time with his father and stepmother, a “woman of untrammeled malevolence.” But before boarding his train, Nick gives his hat (a symbol of male authority) to his protégé Tom Townsend and tells him that he is counting on him “to maintain the standards and ideals of the UHB.”

Nick’s complicated relationship with his father is to some extent paralleled by Tom’s search for his. Tom has thought that he and his divorced father were on good terms, only to discover that his father has moved to Arizona without telling him and has thrown all of his childhood toys onto a street corner. When Nick and Tom come upon the box of deserted keepsakes, Nick, unaware that these were Tom’s, exclaims: “The childhood of our whole generation is represented here, and they’re just throwing it away!” Nick also singles out one of the toys with joyful nostalgia: a Derringer gun.

Later, after Nick’s departure from the Rat Pack, Tom becomes concerned that the movie’s adorable heroine Audrey Rouget is being ruined by the cad Von Sloneker on his estate. When Tom and Charlie stage what ends up being a comical rescue, Von Sloneker punches Tom in the stomach without warning, the second time that he has used violence unchivalrously (the first is when he suddenly punches Nick in the nose). But Tom has come prepared, and from his pocket he produces the toy Derringer and points it menacingly at Von Sloneker. Although the gun is quickly recognized as a toy, the ruse has nonetheless served its purpose and Audrey and her maladroit knights-errant are free to leave. The symbolism is telling: Tom is able to act with gentlemanly valor because he has retrieved something that has been discarded (and hence previously kept) by his father. There is a “love among the ruins” quality to Tom’s growth as a young man and to the movie as a whole.

On a side note, it is significant that the only mothers who appear
on screen in any of Stillman’s first four movies are the mothers of Tom and Audrey. Although their appearances are brief, both mothers are portrayed as wise, patient, and consoling. If there are any deficiencies in their upbringing, they do not appear to issue from the maternal.

At one point in the movie, Rat Pack member Fred Neff complains about their female friends. In their eyes, “Men are dates, date substitutes, or potential dates,” he explains, lamenting, “I find that dehumanizing.” As with all of Stillman’s characters, one must take what Fred says with a grain of salt (as a soporific sot, he is no great catch himself), but Fred is right to notice that something is amiss with the general perception of men. The one thing that men are not in Metropolitan is fathers, adequate father substitutes, or potential fathers.

Barcelona
Stillman’s second film Barcelona (1994) centers on the misadventures of two American “only cousins” in the Spanish city of Barcelona: Chicago salesman Ted Boynton, who currently works there, and visiting U.S. naval officer Fred Boynton. Both Ted and Fred experience culture shock in post-Franco Spain. As Ted explains: “The sexual revolution reached Spain much later than the U.S., but went far beyond it. Now, I don’t know what it was like in other cities and towns, but here in Barcelona everything was swept aside. The world was turned upside down and stayed there.” Later and in unwitting corroboration of Ted’s analysis, Fred’s love interest Marta casually remarks, “I think it’s true that the height of the sexual revolution is over. I don’t just go to bed with just anyone any more: I have to be attracted to them sexually.”

Indeed, as with Metropolitan, sexual deviance lurks in the shadows of the fatherless world of Barcelona. The oily Ramon has kept Montserrat (the object of Ted’s affections) as a concubine of sorts since she was sixteen. His extreme philandering is partly due to the fact that, as Montserrat explains, “After he knows a woman well, he cannot have sex with her well.” But Ramon’s Don Juan behavior is also
driven by an obsession: “the idea of physical beauty.” Again Montserrat: “His thought was that beauty is the closest thing to divinity that remains in the modern world. All the old gods are dead. There is no God that we know. But in beauty, the memory of divinity remains.” Unlike the pious Presbyterian Ted, whose aspiration is to “to free romance from the chains of physical beauty and carnality and to stop doing harm,” Ramon wishes to deify physical beauty at all costs.

Ramon is also conspicuous for being the purveyor of a virulent anti-Americanism founded on outlandish falsehoods, such as his belief in a combined labor union and intelligence agency called the AFL-CIA. His silly delusions, which lead to a not-so-funny assassination attempt on Fred, recall the aphorism attributed to Chesterton, that the first effect of not believing in God is believing in anything. Ramon has rejected the fatherhood of Franco and the fatherhood of God and fallen prey to risible conspiracy theories, but neither his campaign against U.S. foreign policy nor his materialist ideological aestheticism proves to be a satisfactory replacement.

Ramon’s is an extreme case, but all of the Spanish characters share to some extent his antipaternalistic spirit. To the Spaniards, everything they disdain is “fascist” or facha, such as combing your hair, wearing a coat and tie, and above all, wearing a U.S. military uniform—this despite the fact that, as Fred points out, “Men wearing this uniform died ridding Europe of fascism.” The overuse of facha reaches its comic heights when Marta, upon hearing of Ted’s love for Montserrat, opines, “I think there is something fascist about a boy who immediately talks of marrying a woman he likes.” Ted and Fred’s Spanish associates are part of a culture that is defined by its reaction against the restrictive paternalism (real or alleged) of the Franco regime; it is a culture acting out like a rebellious and self-destructive teenager. The Spaniards’ inability to see the difference between American democracy and European fascism is of a piece with their inability to discern between the moral restraints enjoined by good fathers and the demoralizing restrictions imposed by despots.

Despite their own trials and shortcomings—and even despite
their cultural deficiencies as Americans—Ted and Fred eventually fare better than their Spanish friends in part because both have mentors of a sort. While the Barcelona natives revolve around the quasi-nihilist Ramon, Ted immerses himself in the “world of businesses and sales,” a world into which he has been inaugurated by two different mentors: “the charismatic [business] professor Woodward Thompson” and his employer Jack, “one of those magnetic personalities from the World War II generation” and “one of the last of the greats.” In sales, Ted asserts, he has found “not just a job, but a culture. Franklin, Emerson, Carnegie, and Bettger were our philosophers,” and thanks to this genre of literary mentorship, he has made friendships with his customers and come to appreciate old-fashioned virtues such as trust and honesty.

Fred mocks the facile language of Ted’s self-improvement guides (possibly because he himself failed at business), but he too is susceptible to ideals. A wisecracker throughout the movie, Fred does not laugh at one of the things his European friends find quaint: patriotism. He joined the U.S. Navy not simply because of his failure in civilian life but because of “all the fighting for freedom, defending democracy, ‘shining city on the hill’ stuff, which as you know,” he says to Ted, “I really buy.” Ted, genuinely surprised by the reminder that Fred has a serious side, replies, “Jesus. That’s right. You do.” Fred looks up to American ideals, especially as expressed by President Ronald Reagan, who popularized the “‘shining city on the hill’ stuff.” Fred has in a sense focused on the pater in patriotism, using patriotism as a surrogate father. This reliance has made him overly sensitive and (hilariously) obnoxious, for he reacts to anti-Americanism as if his own dad were being slighted. While Ted seeks mentoring in the economic realm, Fred seeks it in the political. Ramon, on the other hand, prefers a licentious ideal of physical beauty to both traditions of economic and political freedom and badly confuses the latter two with his muddled notion of an AFL-CIA.

Mentorship is relevant to our examination of patriarchy because it is, at least in its original model, a form of surrogate fatherhood.
In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Mentor was one of the two men whom Odysseus placed in charge of his son Telemachus when he left for the Trojan War. When Athena wishes to help the young Telemachus grow into manhood, she disguises herself as Mentor and leads him on a journey to Odysseus’s trusted comrades-in-arms so that he can learn more about (and become more like) his absent father. “Mentoring” emerges when the father does or cannot provide needed guidance.

Of course, mentorship in *Barcelona* does not work out perfectly for either Ted or Fred. Jack may be one of the greats in the eyes of Ted, but he is on the other side of the Atlantic with a terminal illness. Fred the naval officer is even more rudderless, having no single mentor to whom he may turn except perhaps the even more distant president of the United States. Yet even here there is hope thanks to surrogates who supplement the surrogates. A coworker named Billy Taylor directs Ted to a new mentoring book and befriends him in the process, while Fred, who never learned how to shave with a razor from his own father, finally learns this time-honored art under the benevolent direction of the U.S. consul.

And at least some of the Spanish characters learn something from Ted and Fred’s example. Ramon comes close to apologizing for his role in Fred’s assassination attempt, and Marta, the least reflective of the *dramatis personae*, feels regret after stealing money from Fred and being caught *in flagrante delicto* with another man. She even experiences a moral conversion of sorts, announcing that she has “decided to change [her] life completely” and describing her congress with the other man as “shameful”—a word that is noticeably absent from the rest of the movie’s dialogue. Finally, two of the Spanish women, Montserrat and Greta, marry Fred and Ted and move with them to America where they are surprised to discover that real hamburgers are actually quite good. Presumably, these brides are not only willing to tolerate “all those loud, badly dressed fat people watching their eighty channels of television and visiting shopping malls” but to see the two “ugly Americans” they have married as potential fathers who can pass on a knowledge of shaving and of still higher goods to their children.
Last Days of Disco

Last Days of Disco (1998) follows the friendship of Alice Kinnon and Charlotte Pingress, graduates of Hampshire College who are now working at a publishing house in New York as low-wage readers. Their parents are mentioned only in reference to the rent money that they provide. James Bowman exaggeratedly describes the situation of the heroines thus:

Their parents have been left behind in the suburbs with their third marriages and their recreational drugs. They have no guidance to offer in the reinvention of courtship rituals, which are to them just hypocritical obstacles in the way of untrammeled sexual gratification. The kids, left to themselves, are not entirely sure that such hypocrisies are necessary or desirable. They, especially the girls, are almost as vulnerable as their older sisters to the charge of “prudery.” But they cling for dear life to what few principles they have been able to salvage from the wreck of social order and decency.  

Alice and Charlotte are on their own in a world of cutthroat publishing and disco culture, with its distinctive combination of promiscuity, drugs, and early-1980s panache. The overconfident Charlotte eagerly fills a void in Alice’s life by providing parental guidance, acting as a passive-aggressive big sister throughout the movie by providing advice that almost ruins Alice’s life. The audience breathes a sigh of relief when Alice at long last emancipates herself from Charlotte’s hegemony, but not before Alice, following Charlotte’s suggestion to work the word “sexy” into conversation as a means of seduction, loses her virginity to a man whom she has liked for a while. But rather than relishing the experience of being “in complete control” (as Charlotte had claimed), Alice suffers a double humiliation. First, Tom chastises Alice for going to bed with him so readily, for it was Alice’s old-fashioned virtue that had made her so appealing. Second, Alice’s initiation into full sexual activity brings her a double case of gonorrhea and herpes, the latter having no cure. Both of these ills would have been avoided had the older “courtship rituals” still been normative.
One of the movie’s most humorous scenes is a highbrow critique of Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp* by Josh Neff, a character suffering from mental illness. “What is the function of a film of this kind?” he asks. “Essentially it’s a primer on love and marriage directed at very young people; imprinting on their little psyches the idea that smooth-talking delinquents, recently escaped from the local pound, are a good match for nice girls from sheltered homes. When in ten years, the icky human version of Tramp shows up around the house, their hormones will be racing, and no one will understand why. Films like this program women to adore jerks.” Des, who is a bit of a charming tramp himself also vying for Alice’s affections, objects: “Isn’t the whole point that Tramp changes? Okay, maybe in the past he stole chickens, ran around without a license, and wasn’t always sincere with members of the opposite sex. But through his love for Lady, and beneficent influences of fatherhood and matrimony, he changes and becomes a valued member of that rather idyllic household.” But Josh is adamant: “Maybe he wanted to change, or tried to change, but there is not a lot of integrity there. First he’d be hanging around the house, drinking, watching ball games, maybe knocking Lady around a little bit. But pretty soon, he’d be back at the town dump chasing tail.” Josh does not think that “fatherhood and matrimony” alone are sufficient to turn smooth-talking delinquents into responsible patriarchs. Another character, Jimmy Steinway, expresses a complementary concern in Stillman’s novel version of *Last Days*: “Oposites attract,’ they say—and it’s true. . . . Opposites attract, unfortunately, and the cost, in terms of subsequent despair, ruinous legal actions, divorce, fatherless—or motherless—families, cracks in the social welfare system and people falling through those cracks, even suicide and violence, is incalculably horrible.” Note the claim: the attraction of opposites is pernicious because it leads, among other things, to fatherless and motherless families.
Damsels in Distress

*Damsels in Distress* (2011) takes place at the fictitious Seven Oaks University where, despite being one of the “Select Seven,” “an atmosphere of male barbarism predominates.” Moreover, some of the university’s young men—notably those in the “DU” fraternity and the “Ed School”—are outrageously dim-witted: one frat boy in particular named Thor “valiantly” struggles throughout the story to learn primary colors. Significantly, it is his parents who are blamed. “I suppose,” says one classmate, “that they just assumed that colors are the sort of knowledge people pick up along the way.”

By contrast, the four heroines of *Damsels*—Violet, Heather, Rose, and Lily—struggle to keep “things civil in an uncivil world” by helping our nation’s future husbands and fathers master such basic skills as eradicating body odor. Their main bond is the staffing of the Suicide Center, but I agree with critic Christopher Morrissey that something more is at stake: what the damsels at the center are offering symbolically is a “suicide-prevention” program for the West, which is killing itself among other areas in its ever-coarsening relations between the sexes.

The center’s leader is Violet Wister, a quixotic idealist who relies on a variety of odd methods to ward off despair in herself and others: donuts, aromatherapy, and most of all, a “whole range of musical dance numbers which over many years have proven themselves effective therapies for the suicidal and hopelessly depressed.” Violet is clearly more wounded than healer, but her heart is in the right place. When admitting the truth of a friend’s criticism, she says, “It’s terrible how I’ve acted. I’m embarrassed. . . . humility should be our watchword, the essence of being a good person. The question is, how do you become humble if you’re essentially arrogant and . . . evil by nature?”

Parents again are unable to help answer this question because they are absent (Violet herself is an orphan, but since she has evidently been raised well by her grandparents, she retains a distinctive old-fashioned air.) Absent too are the university’s faculty and administration, which provide little guidance or wisdom. In one classroom
scene we encounter Professor Charles Black, the same Charlie Black from *Metropolitan* who was so riddled with anxiety. The screenplay describes Professor Black as “wise and elegant” but in a movie where colors are significant, Charlie’s surname would suggest that, for whatever reason, he is unable to shed much light on his students’ path. In his sole cameo, Black expresses approval of a student who admires Simone de Beauvoir and Margaret Mead and balks at Violet’s admiration of men who “started an international dance craze” because they brought “together millions of people in a joyous celebration of our God-given faculties and [passed] these delightful modes of physical expression down through the generations.” In both cases, Black (the absence of color) seems incapable of leading either young woman to a higher spectrum. For the most part, it is Violet along with her two friends Rose and Heather who try (albeit in vain) to act in loco parentis.

One recognizable purveyor of patriarchy, however, is discussed twice. When Rose describes the obsessively compulsive behavior of Violet as a girl, Heather asks, “Was she Catholic?” And when an “aspiring Cathar” named Xavier is explaining his beliefs to Lily, he states that the medieval Catholic Church “cruelly repressed” the Cathars with a crusade. Sympathizing and no doubt drawing from her college courses, Lily solemnly concludes: “Omigod, the Catholic Church is, like, always bad.”

Moments later, Lily learns more about the Cathars the hard way. As they begin to become physically intimate, Xavier explains that the Cathars reject the “cliché form of sexual intercourse” for one that proceeds “from the other side.” Catharism, the “very idealistic” movement that the always-bad Catholic Church had cruelly repressed, was a dualism that viewed the physical world as a sinful product of an evil demiurge and that rejected marriage and procreation for its role in bringing new souls into a sinful and evil world. Its association with sodomy is attested in the endurance of the term “bugger,” derived from the French word for the Bolgors, the Bulgarian inspiration behind the Cathar movement. Lily had initially applauded Xavier when
he told her that “Cathars dissent radically from Catholic teaching regarding procreative sex,” but now both she and the audience are invited to reconsider their prejudice against this teaching in light of the implications of rejecting it.

Finally, the title of the movie is revealing. “Damsel in distress” is a humorous expression for a young woman in trouble and in need of a man’s help. The trope is generally seen today as degrading to women, portraying them as feckless prizes to be won by a superior male. The damsels in Stillman’s film, however, may be in distress, but they are consistently stronger and more intelligent than their male counterparts. Nor are they mere pawns in a man’s world but free agents who have taken it upon themselves to educate the adolescent males in their lives in the hopes that they will become better men.

In some respects, then, Stillman’s damsels are more in continuity with the original damsel-in-distress trope, which was crafted under the influence of Eleanor of Aquitaine by medieval authors such as Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France to elevate women and to train men to aspire through virtue and chivalry to be worthy of their love. Like the powerful Eleanor, Violet lives among uncouth males; and like Eleanor, she strives to improve the situation through promoting chivalrous manners however awkward they may initially seem, like participating in formal dancing, cultivating good hygiene, writing letters, and buying a drink for a woman at a bar.

Conclusion

Critics have not failed to notice that the first four films of Whit Stillman are set in worlds that are passing away. In Metropolitan, we encounter a diminished debutante season attended by a social class “doomed to failure” in a New York City of extinct landmarks and institutions; in Barcelona, we witness the final decade of the Cold War in the cultural rubble of post-Franco Spain; in The Last Days of Disco, as one would expect from the name, we watch the end of the disco craze; and in Damsels in Distress, we learn that the fraternity system, handwritten
notes, dancing, and even decadence itself are in decline, so rampant has become the suicide of the West. These settings of demise lend to each film a “wistful nostalgia,” but Stillman does not indulge nostalgia for its own sake: his movies do not bottom out into sentimentality or naively pine for a bygone Golden Age. Rather, Stillman’s nostalgia functions paradoxically. By reminding us of a good that has passed away, Stillman indirectly awakens in the audience a yearning for human goods that do not pass away. As Mark Henrie remarks, “our longings for a remembered, better past also point to something real.” Nostalgia is Greek for “homesickness,” but in Stillman’s films home is not so much deb season or a disco club as it is something more permanent.

It is within this context of loss and hope that the theme of fatherhood in these four films is best examined. The absence of fathers is noticeable not because of any mawkish sentiment engendered either in the characters or the audience but because of the effect that absent patriarchs have on the characters’ ability to reach their more permanent home. It is fitting that films that gently lament the loss of tradition should also gently lament the loss of fathers, for the latter play a key role in safeguarding the wisdom of the past and in handing it on to their progeny. The very word “patrimony,” which is often used to denote a shared cultural and religious inheritance, means the “father’s estate”; and one of the functions of biblical patriarchy was to keep alive the memory of God’s covenant. In Latin and Greek, the words for a male human being (vir and aner, respectively) became roots for terms denoting strength or power (e.g., virtus); but in Hebrew, the words for a man (ish) and for male (zakar) are etymologically linked to the verb “to remember.” The male (zakar), Samuel Hirsch concludes in his study on the Pentateuch, is “the spiritual ‘keeper’ of godliness,” the one to whom it is entrusted to remember the Word of God and the sacred traditions and to pass them on to the next generation. When Violet, oblivious to the anti-Christian sentiment on her campus, declares “We’re all Christians—or, I should say ‘Judeo-Christians,’” she is drawing from a once-common Western moral legacy passed on by benevolent fathers.
None of this is to suggest that Stillman’s movies provide any concrete solutions to the contemporary crisis of fatherhood. “I know that people can have useful careers in many areas,” Violet declares, “even education”; yet both Violet and Stillman have higher ambitions than being “daily complainers” or agenda-setters. Stillman himself is less a policy-maker or an activist than he is “a latter-day Christian humanist,” one whose “quixotic commentary” has been likened to St. Thomas More’s *Utopia*. The comparison is apt, for More’s classic comedic fantasy confronted the follies and injustices of sixteenth-century Europe not with the bitter and abrasive satire of a Juvenal (or for that matter a Swift) but with the milder wryness of a Horace and the playful outlandishness of a Lucian. More’s intent was to help his readers digest unpleasant truths by smearing them with the honey of delectable flights of imagination; the purpose of his entertainment was to educate in the highest sense of the term, to hone the reader’s ability to recognize certain important principles despite the virtual impossibility of honoring all of those principles politically. Similarly, Stillman’s movies do not offer a program for the restoration of an idealized patriarchy that never existed but an indirect education in seeing anew the first principles or “primary colors,” especially where the unique dignities of men and women are concerned. In *Damsels* this is charmingly dramatized by Heather’s successful effort to teach Thor the colors that he never learned from his parents; and what he comes to appreciate are also the four young ladies in his life whose names denote colors as well as flowers. Earlier Thor had said:

I don’t know about you but I don’t think anyone should feel embarrassed about not knowing stuff. What’s embarrassing is pretending to know what you don’t—or putting down other people just because you think they don’t know as much as you. I’m happy to admit I’m completely ignorant. That’s why I’m here and plan to really hit the books. The next time you see me, I’ll know more than I do now. I’ll be older, but also wiser—or at least know more stuff. For me, that’s education.
And after he is able at last to identify the colors of a rainbow, he exclaims to Heather: “Education! We can learn the subjects we set out to master, no matter how hard or impossible they may seem. Thank you! Thank you—I wasn’t sure I was going to make it!” Stillman helps us see that if Thor, dullard that he is, can arrive at these insights, there is hope for the West even in a vacuum of patriarchy.45

Notes


3. Stillman’s fifth film Love and Friendship (2016) is a Jane Austen adaptation that will not be considered in this article.


6. As Iris Marion Young puts it, “The system of male domination, most often called ‘patriarchy’, produces the specific gender oppression of women.” Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 21, emphasis added. bell hooks explains that “patriarchy” has replaced “male chauvinism” and “sexism” as the preferred term for the male oppression of women in “Understanding Patriarchy,” TheWill to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 17–25.

7. See “Patriarch, n.,” 1 and 2a, OED, 3rd ed.

8. See 1 Chronicles 27:22; 2 Chronicles 19:8, 26:12; and 4 Maccabees 7:19, 16:25.
10. On the Soul (De anima) 3. 1: Nihil omnino cum philosophis super anima quoque experiremur, patriarchis, ut ita dixerim, haereticorum. It was only over time that “patriarch” was secularized. By the thirteenth century, the term was being applied in English without irony to male heads outside of Christianity; by the eighteenth century, it was being poetically extended to plants and animals, as when Dryden calls the monarch oak “the Patriarch of the Trees.” See “Patriarch, n.,” 3 and 52, OED, 3rd ed.
12. That the verb κατακυριευω connotes self-serving or exploitative rule but does not preclude every rule or exercise of authority may be seen in 1 Peter 5, where St. Peter exhorts the elders/presbyters to feed Christ’s flock, to have oversight over them (ἐπισκοποῦντες), and to be an example to them, but not to lord it over them (κατακυριεύοντες).
13. Ephesians 5:25. If such a rule were perfectly practiced by both the rulers and the ruled, the ruled would serve “in such a way that it would be embarrassing to give them orders,” and the rulers would rule “in such a way that it would be a delight to serve them” (Augustine On Order 2. 8. 25).
14. Here I am thinking of Abraham’s pusillanimous concealment from the pharaoh and Abimelech of the fact that Sarah was his wife (Gen 12:1 ff and 20:2 ff), of Isaac’s favoritism towards Esau (Gen 25:28), and of Jacob’s favoritism towards Joseph (Gen 37:3).
15. Silke-Maria Weineck, The Tragedy of Fatherhood: King Louis and the Politics of Paternity in the West (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 111. Weineck’s reading of Hobbes is that he does not reject paternal power per se but “de-essentializes” it, divorcing it from both natural and sacred bonds (ibid.). This divorce, in turn, undermines the traditional view of patriarchy, a point not lost by Hobbes’s contemporary and critic Sir Robert Filmer, whose extensive sed contra to the Hobbesian Leviathan is appropriately entitled Patriarcha (1680). Hobbes’s work therefore constitutes according to Weineck a “watershed in the history of paternity,” the importance of which can hardly be overstated (107). See also Glen Newey, “Not a Woman-Hater: Hobbes’ Critique of Patriarchy,” The Politics of Gender: A Survey, ed. Yoke-Lian Lee (London: Routledge, 2010), 10–24. The full quotation for Cambacérès’s declaration is: “La voix impérieuse de la raison s’est faite entendre; elle a dit: plus de puissance paternelle, c’est tromper la nature que d’établir ses droits par la contrainte.” In 1793, Jean-Jacques-Régis de Cambacérès, an early author of the Napoleonic code, proposed that this clause be included in the Code Civil. Although the draft was rejected, its spirit survived in modern politics in other ways. See Emile Mason, La puissance paternelle et la famille sous la Révolution (Paris: Libraire de la Cour d’Appel et de l’Ordre des Avocats, 1911), 227.
18. See Lois W. Banner, Elizabeth Cady Stanton: A Radical for Women’s Rights (Boston: Little,
Brown, 1990), 86–87. For a summary of Stanton’s thesis of a matriarchate, see Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 36–39. Note also, Beauvoir was also one of the first authors to use “patriarchy” (Fr. *patriarcat*) to signify not only an early tribal arrangement (biblical or nonbiblical) but a metaform of systemic male oppression against women throughout history. See *Le Deuxième Sexe* I (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 239, 397.


24. Knight and Prentky, 410.


26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

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30. Whit Stillman has told me that as an admirer of the Protestant Reformation he intended this statement to affirm the Reformation “as a restoration of virtue and morality”; the recurrence of Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” throughout the film serves to reinforce this idea. Some commentators, however, argue that the
reference also works well with the opposite meaning, namely, that the Reformation’s “overturning of a communal tradition of worship in the interest of the individual’s apprehension of personal righteousness imputed through his unique relationship with God” bears a resemblance to the generation of Nick’s parents who seek personal happiness individualistically and who were “never interested in keeping up” small but symbolically important standards such as detachable collars (see R. V. Young, 59).

31. See Young, 56.
32. Manhood or becoming a man is another current in the movie. When Cynthia chides Nick for his relentless disdain of Von Sloneker, she says: “Rick really threatens you somehow... Maybe by being more of a man than you are.”
35. See Chip Brown, “Whit Stillman and the Song of the Preppy.”
38. See Lemon McAlister, “Did you know the ‘Damsel in Distress’ trope has a feminist origin?” https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/2p41oh/did_you_know_the_damsel_in_distress_trope_has_a/.
39. Henrie, xiv. Stillman himself singles out the setting of Barcelona from the others on the grounds that the Cold War was not something over which to be nostalgic and the end of which is not to be lamented.
40. Ibid., xv.
42. Henrie, xvi.
43. More whimsically writes in a letter to Peter Giles: “I do not deny that if I had decided to write about the commonwealth and a story such as this had occurred to me, I would not have shrunk from a fictional presentation which would make the truth

44. See Morrissey, “The Decline of Decadence.” Regarding the significance of the heroines’ names and their association with colors, Stillman writes: “I’m not sure I was thinking about that consciously but it works. For me the focus was on flowers related to scents, perfumes, odors, and awfulness vs. loveliness. An alternative title for the film was ‘Diorissimo’ — the name of a particularly wonderful Dior perfume made entirely from the scent of Muguet—Lilies of the Valley. Another title was ‘Excelsior! (Higher).’”

45. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Brian Clayton and the participants of the 2015 Faith, Film, and Philosophy Seminar at Gonzaga University for their feedback on this thesis.