

SPRING 2002

AHA FEMINIST CAUCUS



NEWSLETTER OF THE FEMINIST CAUCUS OF THE AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

Samantha Smoot *Humanist Heroine 2002*

AHA Feminist Caucus Humanist Heroines

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Samantha Smoot
Executive Director
Texas Freedom Network

Samantha Smoot is Executive Director of the Texas Freedom Network, which advances an agenda of religious freedom and individual liberties to counter the religious right.

A grassroots organization of over 8,000 religious and community leaders, the Texas

Freedom Network acts as the state's watchdog, monitoring far-right issues, organizations, money and leaders. The Texas Freedom Network's grassroots organizing and research efforts have been instrumental in defeating religious right-backed initiatives in Texas, including private school vouchers and unfettered expansion of charter schools and "charitable choice."

The primary resource to the public and news media on far right activity in Texas, the Texas Freedom Network has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Ms. Smoot has appeared on The O'Reilly Factor, MSNBC, Fox News and PBS's Debates Debates.

TFN was founded in 1995 by Gov. Ann Richards' daughter, Cecile Richards.

A fifth-generation Texan, Ms. Smoot has more than a dozen years of experience in issue advocacy and political campaigns, including serving on the political staffs of EMILY's List and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Ms. Smoot has worked with dozens of candidates in twenty states, including U.S. Representatives Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, Ken Bentsen of Texas, and Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan.

Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Mystique of the Sheikh

by Annie Laurie Gaylor



Several years ago, biding time in a bookstore, I idly picked up a copy of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, searching for a particular romantic line, half-remembered. The book fell open to Sonnet no. II, and so did my mouth, as I read:

“When forty winters shall besiege
thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy
beauty's field . . .”

As someone who has lived through more than forty (hard, Wisconsin) winters, I read and re-read the sonnet with mingled incredulity, mirth, mortification and indignation, as Shakespeare gleefully depicted the deterioration and decay of a 40-year-old woman. Her youth was a “tatter'd weed, of small worth held,” her eyes “deep-sunken.”

Of course, life expectancies in the Western world have changed radically from those of the Elizabethan era. According to Anne Laurence, author of *Women in England 1500–1760* (St. Martin's Press, 1994) the overall life expectancy of men and women together ranged from thirty-two to forty. Laurence points out women were “four times more likely to die in the first ten years of marriage than were men . . . and twice as likely in the second ten years (between the ages of thirty-six and forty-six).” If they survived the childbearing years, they had a longer life span than the average man.

Childbirth was the great scourge. One can't read the various biographies and letters of Jane Austen, for instance, who lived at the beginning of the 19th century, without noticing the stark fear with which she and other female relatives greeted the news of a friend's or sister's upcoming “confinement.” Childbirth was a constant flirtation with a particularly gruesome death both for mothers and newborns, as 19th century tomb-

stones attest.

When I proved a medical freak by nearly dying myself in childbirth of eclampsia (quite rare today but still poorly understood), my doctor informed me that 1 in 4 women in the 19th century had died in childbirth. Caesarian sections, anesthesia, antibiotics, much-improved hygiene, nutrition and medical care have turned childbirth in the Western world into something almost all of us will live through, at least if we're not forced by religious creed into procreating indefinitely. What a transformation for women's lives!

Today, women can expect to live to nearly eighty in the United States, on average (with the poor always faring less well, of course). We are living twice as long, on average, as the women whose difficult lives inspired Shakespeare's humbling ode to womanhood at forty. Times have not changed so favorably for many Third World women.

But for privileged American women, the fifth decade is now becoming what the fourth used to be—the start of middle age. The baby-boomers are in charge: we set the standards, and we think we're still young! When I was a teenager, it was almost expected that by their forties, women would become matronly. (Among the many exceptions was my mother, who looked girlish into her 50s, even after four children—partly the result of genes and partly sheer “ahead-of-her-time” thinking, I guess.)

Very few women in their forties today impress me as “matronly” (I admit, my perspective has changed!). Lifestyles are more youthful. We can dress “young” if we like. Jeans offer an ageless uniform. Not to mention that widespread acceptance of hair dyes and highlighting certainly help maintain that youthful look. Women exercise more. When I was growing up, no one ever heard of a woman running for exercise, much less

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It is our expectations of “older women” that have changed the most.

*Annie Laurie Gaylor
is chair of the
AHA Feminist Caucus*

middle-aged women working out. I see youthfully middle-aged women in my neighborhood every day who “power-walk,” jog, bike or even roller-blade. Of course, there can be too much of a good thing. One wonders if the FDA approval of Botox for cosmetic use will create undue pressure upon women to stay youthful abnormally long, to pay big bucks to keep those “deep trenches” from besieging our brows.

More than anything, though, I think it is our expectations of “older women” that have changed the most. Women are employed outside the home in far greater numbers, with more economic opportunities, commanding greater respect. When I was in grade school in the mid-sixties, my mother was the only “working mother” in our middle-class neighborhood! Nancy Dickerson, who in 1960 was named the first TV news correspondent, was the sole public role model of a working woman the media offered little girls. Remember when Christine Craft, our 1983 Humanist Heroine and comely TV anchor, was told back in 1983 that she was “too old, too ugly and not differential to men”? Craft pointed out then that no woman could survive in TV news past age forty. A glance at CNN or other 24-hour news channels demonstrates that is no longer true. Some of the women in local news today are also nearly as plump as their news brothers have been permitted to be! We *have* come a long way, baby.

But despite all these lovely changes, coming just in time for me to take advantage of them, the Double Standard is alive and well. Films still pair the aging fifty-something actor with the twenty- or thirty-something actress. Men with high-visibility positions can be “distinguished” and esteemed with silvering hair, but few women dare to grey *au natural* (okay, Karen Hughes at 45 is probably the exception to any generalization about women).

There is still the mystique of the “sheikh.” I learned, when reading a transcript of one of those Osama bin Laden tapes, that the translation for the title “sheikh” is: “venerable man, over the age of 50.” If there are sheikhesses, we don’t hear

about them (much less see them). When will a “venerable woman, over the age of 50” rate a title of her own? We’re not there yet.

While still digesting the fact that my husband, at 52, is a “sheikh” (and that, when I reach 52, I will never be celebrated as a “sheikhess”), I happened to tune into that grim 1961 movie, Tennessee Williams’ “The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone.” The still chic, but emphatically aged Vivian Leigh portrayed a vulnerable, lost creature, a popular actress who becomes a has-been when she reaches forty-seven or so, who relives youth and love through a torrid affair with a callow Roman gigolo. Mrs. Stone announces blithely she has “a few good years” left, but then would be glad to be murdered. After her callow youth deserts her, she decides she has no good years left after all, and gets herself offed before she turns 50—evidently a fate worse than death for a once-beautiful woman. Has there ever been a more depressing movie made about women of a “certain age”?

While I found this movie nearly comical in its dated views toward women, it is telling that the film is being remade. It is disappointing that consummate British actress Helen Mirren—whose portrayal of “Prime Suspect’s” Chief Inspector Jane Tennison as sexy and confident has raised the bar for TV women in their forties—has been cast as the pathetic Mrs. Stone.

I can’t forgive Tennessee Williams for what he does to Mrs. Stone, but I have finally made my peace with Shakespeare. He didn’t know any better. And when I look into the dewy eyes of Sabrina, my twelve-and-a-half-year-old daughter, I cannot disagree with the consolation Shakespeare provides “sunken-eyed” women at the end of his sonnet:

“How much more praise deserved
thy beauty’s use,
If thou couldst answer ‘This fair
child of mine
Shall sum my count and make my
own excuse,’
Proving his beauty by succession
thine!”

Be A Humanist Heroine (or Hero)!

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(The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College)



“ . . . if you have an hour to spare, a dollar to give, or a word to utter—spare it, give it, and utter it, for the elevation of woman!”

— Ernestine L. Rose
Seventh Woman's Rights
National Convention
New York City, 1856

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