



THE IRRATIONALITY OF PROGRESSIVE RATIONALISM

HERE IS A HEADLINE from the *Times of London* (25 April 2013): “Rape charge for men who ignore women’s wishes.” “Ignoring women’s wishes” may seem an unsuitably mild way of describing rape, except that the “wish” that was ignored in the particular case under adjudication was that “the woman . . . had consented to penetration on the ‘clear understanding’ that her partner would not ejaculate.” Nevertheless, “while the pair were having sex—and without giving the woman ‘a chance to object’—the man had said: ‘I’ll do it if I want.’” Although the prosecutor had (understandably) declined to charge the man with rape, “The Lord Chief Justice and two other judges said that women had a choice about the type of sex they wanted” and “ruled in the woman’s favour, ordering a review of the case.”

Had the story been dated the first of April rather than the twenty-fifth, it might have been taken for an especially tasteless April Fools’ Day prank. Nevertheless, there the facts are, somberly reported by the august *Times of London*. Three senior British judges have gravely undertaken to lay down very precise rules for fornication, including severe legal enforcement of the sin of Onan. The prosecutor had deemed the accusation (again understandably) “impossible to prove.” No

matter. If moral decency is to be no obstacle to the demands of ideology, what chance has mere common sense? Even the impulse to satire is dumbfounded. Jonathan Swift could not devise a fictitious “modest proposal” to rival the actual doings of the judiciary of the nation revered as the “Mother of Parliaments.” The irony is intensified by the presence on the same page of the same issue of the *Times* of another story under this headline: “Doctor accused of raping girl aged 11 and telling her that she deserved to die.” Evidently, the three judges are incapable of distinguishing between the acts alleged in the two cases.

I mention these unsavory news items with a good deal of reluctance, but not without purpose: James Kalb’s advertence to a moral “antiworld” in the lead essay of this issue of *Modern Age* may at first seem somewhat extreme. Clearly, it is not. Conservatism, especially as it considers moral, social, and generally cultural affairs, seems to be losing traction very rapidly (in contrast to free market economics and limited-government themes, which still have wide appeal). Many commentators continue to insist that if conservative candidates are to campaign successfully, and conservative ideas are to achieve dominance in American politics,

then these “social issues,” which are essentially moral, must be de-emphasized or simply abandoned. This is very foolish counsel: the Founders knew that neither a market economy nor limited government could last long among an immoral, irresponsible people; and the example of the British judges shows that the effort to overturn traditional notions of order and decency in the interest of calculating rationalism will never be satisfied, never rest in a stable consensus. Progressivism leads inevitably to utter irrationality and eventually political, as well as moral, chaos.

The essays in this issue of *Modern Age*, which deal with a variety of topics and disciplines, all remind us that while tradition must be illuminated and renewed by rea-

son, reason must be tempered and steadied by tradition. Our reviews likewise take up books from a diverse range of disciplines and subjects. All are aimed at keeping our readers informed about intellectual developments that are important for gauging the health of our culture. We cannot assume that any of these essays and reviews will solve the problem of the preposterous jurists. We can, however, hope to keep our own minds and imaginations rich, insightful, and prudent; and we can share such wisdom as we have with family, friends, and colleagues, thereby keeping alive the heritage of Western Christian civilization despite its “cultured despisers” for the time when it will, most assuredly, be wanted again.

—RVY