Protestants. But how does a Church defend itself against the National Enquirer? One gets the impression that Bishops should have filed hundreds of lawsuits all over the nation before Protestant judges who also read the Enquirer. Roy calls the disapproval of mixed marriages parochial. She means religiously, not ethnically or racially, mixed. Actually, no matter what tactic was used to defend Catholics from falsehood and even, at times, violent persecution, Roy finds a way to argue that the tactic’s style, or format, or implications, or even content inadvertently served as more fuel on the fire. It’s as if, because guilty people deny the deed, innocent people dare not.

Roy does not ask if the Protestant experience of continual church breakups and multiplication of sects was not socially depressing and politically fearladen for them — if divided, they did not feel weaker and more vulnerable before the Other. But the answers she gives to what she does ask needed to be given.

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“Life Forevermore”: The Problem of Marriage

Marriage in America is in ruins. Marriage rates decline while divorce rates rise. Cohabitation without marriage becomes an increasingly acceptable option. Teen pregnancy, especially among minorities, skyrocketed at an alarming rate. Births out of wedlock are common. While we pay lip service to family values, we breed a culture of selfishness through “self-help” books, publicized pre-nuptial agreements, and sanctioned greed. Intellectuals attack nature and tradition, smugly describing all human endeavor, including love, in terms of politics and power. Broken couples attack each other physically on talk shows for our entertainment. Everywhere men and women are portrayed as means for our gratification and use. We foster voyeurism through web-cams, pornographic sites, and the newest lines of fashion. And we watch and enjoy with shameless satisfaction “real-life” shows such as Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire? and Temptation Island.

Could the situation be any grimmer? Possibly. Cultural decline, especially as it disintegrates traditional customs and
mores, shows no signs of stopping. Still, marriage usually manages to muster help even in its darkest hour, which is perhaps itself a testament to the naturalness of the love between man and woman so cynically attacked in academic circles. Ironic then that marriage finds its staunchest modern defenders in two members of the academy.

Amy and Leon Kass teach at the University of Chicago, and Leon Kass is known widely for his thoughtful biblical commentary and contributions to bioethics. Together, the Kasses teach a course on love and courtship, encouraging their students to think deeply on all matters nuptial. Their new anthology, *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar* (a title taken from Robert Frost’s poem, “The Master Speed,” written for his daughter’s wedding), is a series of “readings on courting and marrying,” collected out of their experiences with this course. They include a great variety of works, ranging from the Bible to Shakespeare to modern social criticism, all directing the reader toward a serious consideration of courtship, marriage, and the moral life. Seven sections, each introduced by the editors, divide the readings according to the central questions addressed: “Where are we now? Defenses of Matrimony”; “What about Sex? Man, Woman, and Sexuality”; “Is This Love? Eros and Its Aims”; “How Can I Find and Win the Right One? Courtship”; “Why a Wedding? The Promises of Marriage”; and “What Can Married Life be Like? The Blessings of Married Life.”

The Kasses wage war against the dissolution of marriage with what may be the most powerful cultural ammunition: our literary and philosophic heritage. Nearly every reading is drawn from the great texts of western civilization, rendering the collection a sort of liberal education in miniature. Extending William James’s principle that an education in books will, “teach you how to recognize a good man when you see one,” these readings engender not only the ability to recognize a good soul, but the means and reasons for a life well lived in the company of that soul. The voices of our western tradition raise questions and invite reflection about love in a way that nothing else in our culture can. In short, the youth of America “lack a cultural script whose denouement is marriage,” and great authors answer the call.

Many of the readings are well known. Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Abraham from Genesis, all great literature by any account, build the foundation. No less familiar are Aristophanes’ account of the circle-men and Socrates’ discussion of eros in the Symposium, as well as excerpts from Rousseau’s *Emile*, Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.

The editors still leave room for some sparkling little surprises. Charles Darwin’s rather practical fact sheet listing pros and cons of marriage, in “This is the Question,” makes for good advice: “Cheer up — one cannot live this solitary
life, with groggy old age, friendless and cold and childless staring one in one's face, already beginning to wrinkle.” While the introduction notes that Darwin, “was a rational and careful man, methodical, it seems, even about matters of the heart,” this reader finds his notes ironic: Where is the discussion of reproductive fitness? Can love conquer nature? Is marriage truly consistent with the principles of natural selection? Perhaps the Kasses put the passage in precisely to deliver a subtle message.

The inclusion of Major Sullivan Ballou’s letter to his wife Sarah only a week before his death at the battle of Manassas was a grand stroke. The heartrending message from Ballou ends with a heartfelt appeal:

But, oh Sarah! If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you, in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights — always, always, always, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.

Such words inevitably sensitize and stir the souls of some readers. But one wonders whether the struggle Ballou speaks of, between duty to his country and duty to his family, could be felt deeply, if at all, by youth in our culture? Might these youth, who live in a society where social status, careerism, and plain greed outweigh marital commitment, be entirely desensitized to the call of Ballou's letter? This collection works from the assumption, right or wrong, that they are listening and are able to be persuaded.

Other excerpts round out the work. Allan Bloom’s cogent commentary on “Relationships” still speaks true after fourteen years. Kant’s short excerpt, “On Shame and Love,” from The Conjectural Beginning of Human History, may surprise some readers — who might not otherwise ever read Kant — with its insight into Genesis 3:7. And the Kasses’ own essay, “The Marriage Name,” may be the most serious modern response to the essentially feminist rejection of sharing the groom’s family name.

All in all, Wing to Wing: Oar to Oar fills a vacancy that cannot otherwise be filled, as much as modern culture might try with self-help advice, psychiatric counseling, and talk-show hosts. The book provides, in this sense, the basis for a “cultural script” about courtship and marriage. While it is a surprise that such a collection has not until now been compiled (marriage having been in collapse for a good while now), we are lucky it was done by these authors and in this manner. Few understand better the urgency of the dissolution of marriage, and even fewer realize that the keys to the problem have all this time been sitting under our noses. They are the texts of our great tradition. Kudos to the Kasses for dusting them off and offering them up anew.

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