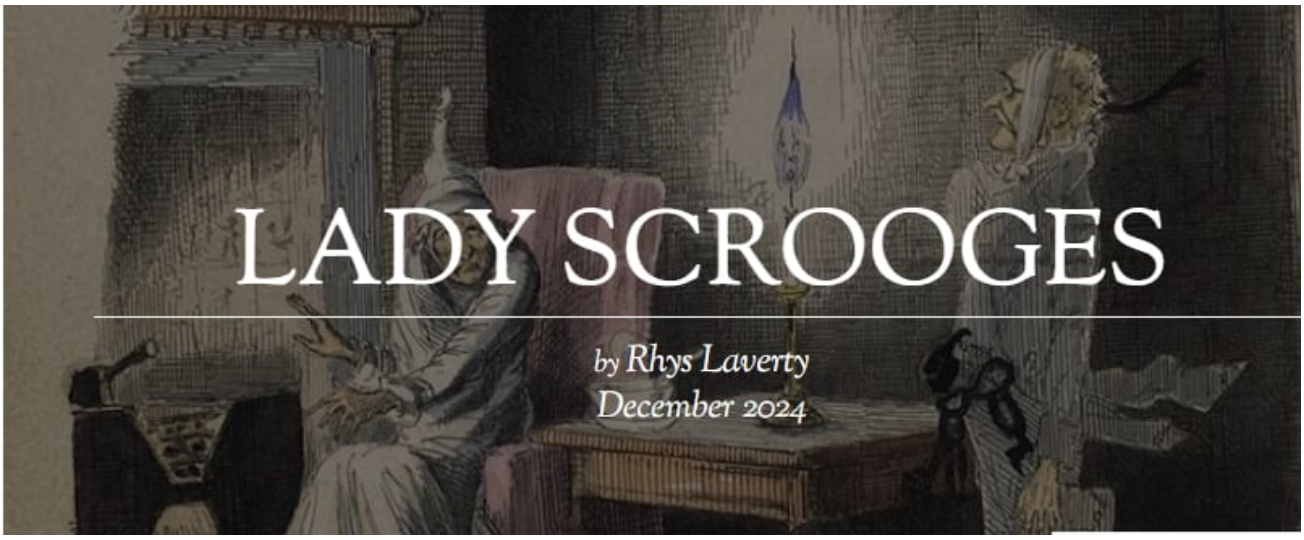
Recommendation: “Lady Scrooges” by Rhys Laverty

By Carl Nelson

I would like to recommend this essay “Lady Scrooges” by Rhys Laverty published in the journal First Things, December 2024.

This short essay, to my mind, has remarkably capsulized the armature of the Western cultural trajectory over the past one hundred years, culminating in today’s cultural/political atmosphere. The essay is clear, concise, and anchored near at hand in common experience. it’s the best, most concise analysis I’ve read in many years.



> *I noticed it last Christmas: It’s the women who really hate Ebenezer Scrooge. In the opening scene of Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, the main victims of Scrooge’s scorn are his nephew Fred and his clerk, Bob Cratchit. Fred enters Scrooge’s office with a “God save you!,” offers a warm but futile invitation to Christmas dinner, and departs “without an angry word.” Bob promises to be in early on Boxing Day and leaves in good spirits for his commute from Cornhill to Camden Town (quite the trek on foot, if you know London). At Christmas dinner the next day, Bob toasts Scrooge as “the*

Founder of the Feast" and won't hear a word against him. Fred, at his own dinner, expresses immense patience for his uncle, that "comical old fellow," and declares that "[Scrooge's] offences carry their own punishment and I have nothing to say against him."

By contrast, the ire of Mrs. Cratchit is legendary. "I wish I had him here, I'd give him a piece of my mind to feast upon," she cries, unable to tolerate such "an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man as Mr. Scrooge." Fred's wife has "no patience" with Scrooge, a sentiment echoed by "[her] sisters, and all the other ladies" present.

And all the other ladies. We imagine—or imagine a Victorian novelist would imagine—that women are more empathetic than men. Yet both Mrs. Cratchit and Fred's wife are, well, "unfeeling" toward Scrooge.

Why are the women of A Christmas Carol so much less eager than the men to extend forgiveness to Scrooge?

Scrooge, "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner," is not simply the neighborhood grouch. He is a political problem for the surrounding households, whether his family, his employees and debtors, or others who cross his path. Scrooge is estranged from the polis and must be reconciled, for his own sake and others'. It is not simply a matter of being friendly to an oddball. Scrooge's isolation results from his own choices. He is a sinner, a great sinner. He is in the polis but not of it, because he is against it. Aristotle again: "The natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war."

How do you solve a problem like Scrooge?

For Aristotle, Scrooge is a domestic policy problem, for Lewis a foreign policy one. But the point is the same: Scrooge is a rogue unit in the political community. He must be reintegrated. And this requires forgiveness.

For Lewis, inter-household foreign policy is carried out "in the last resort" by the husband, "because he always ought to be, and usually is, much more just to outsiders." Women, by contrast, have a remit to be "unjust" to outsiders. Women can tend toward isolationism: Household First, Make the Home Great Again. Although women form rich inter-household bonds, their vocation is ultimately to their families—a vocation so demanding in its mundane, concrete acts of sacrificial love that, quite rightly, the woman cannot concern herself with the business of other households when intractable conflicts arise.

Mrs. Cratchit and Fred's wife resist forgiving Scrooge because he has scorned (and in Mrs. Cratchit's case injured) their households. . . . Both women are in the right as far as it goes: Scrooge deserves their opprobrium.

Perhaps we wonder about the honor of Fred and Bob, who may be rather too tolerant of Scrooge's abuses of themselves and their families. Scrooge has yet to repent, and repentance customarily precedes forgiveness. But if Dickens's men err on the side of mercy, their error is preferable to today's censorious culture, in which some sins are publicly declared unforgivable, in a perverse extension of the woman's commitment to the welfare of her household.

Over the past century or more, we have lived through what many have called the "feminization" of society. The greater presence of women in public life has changed our public discourse, as women have entered (and dominated, in many cases) workplaces, universities, and politics. Many regard this development as an unalloyed good. But if public life can suffer from the vices of men, it can likewise suffer from those of women.

Women's entry into public life has coincided with their increasing childlessness. Causation may be complex, but the correlation is undeniable: Women are substantially less

likely to be mothers now than they were when they first entered public life. But their proclivity for righteous injustice, described by Lewis, has not gone away. It has merely been transferred. In the absence of children, many women now see themselves as the "special trustees" of minority groups with varying degrees of real and imagined victimhood.

In her 2021 book Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics, Mary Eberstadt observed that when family life breaks down and people cease to see themselves primarily through the lens of family, identity politics fills the void:

The damage is widespread. When indignation arises, not just on behalf of the home but on behalf of all members of some far less concrete group identity, Scrooges—perceived and actual—multiply endlessly. This is a recipe for political breakdown.

Our public life is currently marked by a peculiarly feminine form of unforgiveness—a maternal mutation. It is no stretch to imagine that part of the solution will be a reassertion of the male strength for forgiveness. Sometimes, that strength will need to make clear that some do not need forgiveness in the first place. But in either case, it will often be men, especially in their roles as husbands, fathers, and pastors, who must open the door, so that even a Scrooge might be welcomed in.

Read it all here.