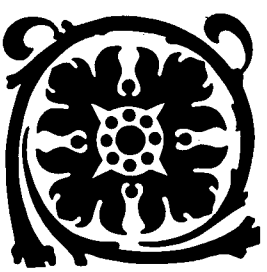
Ad Feminam



Atlantis sometimes receives statements of a more personal nature than the usual scholarly article. Recognizing that the "personal is political" and can serve as prima materia for further research and study, we are opening a new section, AD FEMINAM, on an occasional basis. We hope that such a section will stimulate debate and discussion and we invite responses from our readers.

The Professional Ethic and the Spirit of Sexism

by Thelma McCormack

I

Although I've been invited to talk about my own experiences, I'm going to resist the temptation, and instead, talk only very briefly about my own career, mainly to draw attention to the generation gap between women who, like myself, were raised during the Depression and a younger generation of women who were spared that trauma. Next I'd like to turn to patterns of adaptation by educated women who were living in university communities but were outsiders. I'm going to suggest that although their patterns were maladaptive, they, nevertheless, kept alive the true spirit of the term "professional." I then want to examine women's professional socialization with particular reference to sexual harassment and its long term effects. Finally, I'm going to look at our current situation of tokenism and its alternatives; specifically, affirmative action.

When I did my graduate work during World War II, classes were small and universities were delighted to have women fill their vacant classrooms. There was a shortage of professors, but an even greater shortage of male

students. We were, therefore, welcomed. I doubt if any of us were fooled by the hospitality, but we were not about to bite the hand feeding us fellowships.

Still very few of us took the idea of an academic career seriously. All of the action in those days was elsewhere; in government, for example, or in the media. Universities were dull backwaters, and the academic lifestyle was the very model of bourgeois respectability we were trying to escape. So, like many others of my generation of educated women, I took other routes and went to Washington, D.C., where I did research while supporting a Canadian husband who was finishing his degree. I continued doing research after we moved from Washington to Evanston, Illinois, where my husband was teaching English at Northwestern and where we remained until 1954 when he took a job in Montreal with the C.B.C. But it was also in Evanston that I began teaching again, more by accident than design. I regarded it as temporary since the demand for teaching would almost certainly disappear as soon as the big influx of returning veterans had moved through the system.

Eventually, the veterans did taper off, but their places were taken by the first wave of the post-war baby boom entering university. What I had thought of, then, as short term employment stretched on, but I continued to think of myself as a researcher, and university teaching never did satisfy the social conscience I acquired growing up during the Depression.

The Depression had another legacy. We all learned, but especially women, to keep our options open, to remain flexible, taking nothing for granted in terms of jobs, to always have something or someone to fall back on, never to invest too much emotionally in what you were doing at the moment. I am not surprised that we were perceived of as opportunistic by the generation of the '60s. But, more importantly, women who grew up during the Depression had no understanding about the dual market theory; i.e., how women and other minorities serve as a reserve labour force. I think there were two reasons. First,

the imagery of the Depression was male: parks, libraries, hallways filled with unemployed men. Women were invisible. One heard constantly of the tragedy of a grown man demoralized by unemployment. When my advisor at Columbia told me he had recommended a man for a job "because he has a wife and children to support," I was annoyed, but I did not question the principle that I had heard all my life: men, not women, needed employment and the self respect it conferred. Women did not lose their pride living on welfare, but men did.

The second reason was that the Depression was regarded as a crisis; it had no laws. You can fight a job market that functions according to some laws, inequitable as the laws might be, but you cannot fight chaos; you just cope.

Yet, I want to point out something often forgotten. As women yielded priority to men on the grounds that they had or would have families to support, to feed and clothe, the criterion of merit was secondary. Karl Polanyi is right in insisting that there have always been countervailing social forces undermining the operations of a rational market. I have sat through countless discussions of affirmative action where men who owe their education and their jobs to the principle that men should be given preference argue that merit is the sole basis of entitlement.

II

One of the oldest forms of university discrimination is the no-nepotism rule which bars couples from teaching at the same university. The loophole through which I and two other faculty wives were hired at Northwestern was to be designated as "visiting professors." In general, however, faculty wives were excluded from teaching positions despite their qualifications and despite the fact that their disciplines were different from their husband's. I want to look now at three of the patterns of adaptation among these women.

The first is what I would call <u>avant-garde romantics</u>. These women remained at home and did not seek employment. But they did not think of themselves as disadvantaged, and few fit the invidious stereotype of "frustrated faculty wives," the Elizabeth Taylor character in <u>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</u> On the contrary, they saw themselves as a privileged elite, as free-spirited intellectuals. Since we were free of the publish-or-perish ethos--and you'd better believe that was the iron law of academic oligarchy--we could, we thought, undertake better and more controversial types of research and writing than men. I recall having lunch one day with another woman and saying, "Having a husband beats a Fulbright any day. You don't have to write proposals in triplicate; you

don't have to report on your progress; you are accountable to no one but yourself. In return, all you have to do is a little housework and cook a few meals. And that isn't a bad deal."

We were not envious of our husbands who were we thought, unhappily caught up in "the system." Our role models were those upper class British women, Virginia Woolf or, in my case, Beatrice Webb, who led full and creative lives outside of institutions. Many of us had supported our husbands at some point and saw nothing improper or compromised about being supported in turn.

It was a naive egalitarianism. Very few of those great creative works ever got done; and many husbands, it turned out, were not all that alienated from "the system." Summers in Florence, sabbaticals in California gave "the system" a benign character. But when these women did rebel, it was an intellectual rebellion rather than a crisis in identity, for they were very much their own persons.

The second group were the underemployed martyrs, or as Hanna Papanek calls them, "gainfully unemployed." These women were sucked-up into their husband's careers, doing unpaid research, unpaid translating, unpaid editing, unpaid statistical computation, unpaid indexing, unpaid writing. And when the work was completed and tenure and promotion granted, they frequently found themselves unpaid divorcées. Or, with better luck, over-educated, under-employed faculty wives whose husbands were having affairs with students. Alison Lurie's The War Between the Tates captures this atmosphere extremely well. Nowadays when women are agitating for "wages for housework," I think of those women whose husbands were willing to pay for housework so that their educated wives could be free to do unpaid professional work. Who could question the cost-plus-benefits of that arrangement? Certainly not the wives who found more job satisfaction in the library than in the laundromat.

For these women to rebel was to rebel against marriage itself, and at a very high economic, social and psychological risk. It is no wonder that they bit the bullet when their husbands were philandering. And it was this group of women who eventually fled to consciousness-raising groups while the first type, the avant-garde romantics were reading Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex wishing they had written it.

The third type were the young technocrats, dual career wives; librarians, psychologists who worked for Boards of Education, social workers, primary school teachers. They were not interested in the creative or radical potentialities of leisure; nor were they interested in being unpaid research partners in their husband's careers. If they did unpaid housework, it was a trade-off: the savings in domestic

help would lead to a second car, a vacation in Europe or the down payment on a house.

Hard working, intelligent, these women lost any critical distance from institutions; they lost, as Virginia Woolf puts it, the "freedom from unreal loyalties." The intellectual or introspective insights which the first two groups acquired from their exclusion eluded them. But, so, too, did the big prizes which were reserved for men. Thus, their concept of liberation was almost entirely in terms of career advancement, of removing discriminatory barriers, but without any grand theorizing or without any personal identity crisis.

Looking at these three patterns from a contemporary perspective, each is, in its own way, maladaptive. When I meet these women today the conversations crackle with regrets. Some are more bitter than others, but I have never met one who did not say, "If I only knew then what I know now, I would have done it all differently."

Yet examining the three patterns closely, you will see buried deep within them the last flickering light of our classical definitions of professionalism. The avant-garde romantics have kept alive the creative dimension, the icy skepticism of established dogma, the notion of autonomy, the stubborn indifference to group and bureaucratic pressures.

The second group, the martyrs, express the humility, the dedication to service, the sublimation of personal careerism, the social altruism we talk about when we differentiate professional motivation from entrepreneurial motivation.

The third group, the technocrats, represent expertise. No group ever took the pursuit of knowledge so seriously; no group was ever more intent on improving their skills. They organize summer conferences, attend seminars, tootle off in their little Toyotas to Saturday morning workshops.

Now I put it to you that educated women who have so consistently been denied status, deprived of professional recognition, professional titles and professional salaries have been the carriers of its true meaning. They have been keeping alive in their own marginal subcultures that ideal-type described by Carr-Saunders which combines self-government, service and knowledge. The market is flooded these days with books coming out in sociology advocating a revision in our notions of professional and a restructuring of the professions. But is it restructuring we need or a new social composition?

I am always amused when I read about physicians threatening to go to the United States because they are not making enough money in Canada. The

solution is for the medical schools to triple their recruitment of women who have had centuries of experience sacrificing self interest for the social good. Give educated women the professions, and you will see changes taking place with a minimum of strain, not because our biology predisposes us differently, but because we have in our collective memories a perception of how power corrupts both the powerful and the powerless.

III

But what has been the record? Women who are now established in universities are not setting the world on fire. They turned their guns against the Czar only to become meek, mealy-mouthed Menshevicks. To understand this I think we have to look first at the processes of professional socialization, and second, at the structural problem of tokenism.

Professional socialization in graduate schools introduces women to a whole range of structural discrimination. The facts are by now well known to you. But I want to talk about one aspect which is seldom mentioned and which I think is critical if one wants to understand the passivity or ambivalence of women in academia. It is overt and covert sexual harassment.

Women graduate students in my day were sooner or later propositioned by one or more professors. They still are. And, then, as now, they had to act as if they were surprised and flattered. Some genuinely were, and many developed delusions of grandeur. Great literary history was made by Heloise falling in love with Abelard, why shouldn't immortality lie in having an affair with a current professor, especially if he is a "victim" of an unhappy marriage to (a) a Kinder-Kirche wife; (b) a mousey research assistant wife; (c) a castrating professional wife. The new line, according to one of my students is "My wife and I believe in open marriage." I don't recall any of the film critics even bothering to comment on Theresa in Looking for Mr. Goodbar having an affair with her professor, a relationship he terminated when it became inconvenient for him. The affair between male professors and female graduate student is almost a cliché. A few years ago I discovered that people at Berkeley in the !40s thought Columbia was one big cesspool of promiscuity, the assumption being that prestige gives men sexual rights.

Again in job seeking, it was not unusual to be interviewed in a car, or in a hotel suite where the chairs had been thoughtfully removed so that you either stood up or sat on the bed. Then, the job itself. One of my bosses in Washington was a distinguished anthropologist and a first-class lecher. He was also a drunk and it was his alcoholism we talked about. Another, a clinical psychologist, told me he did not like hiring women because

they became pregnant and left, but since he made an exception of me, and since I was the only professional woman in the office I might consider brightening up the place by showing a little cleavage. My department chairman at a university took particular pleasure in making passes at me and other women at parties in front of his wife and our spouses. The next day we used to sit around analyzing his personality, trying to understand why such a brilliant man would make a fool of himself that way, creating a myth of our flawed hero and, indirectly, of ourselves as femmes fatales whom the great man couldn't keep his hands off.

Academic women are a little like battered wives. They are too embarrassed to talk openly about sexual harassment, too worried about retaliation or too concerned that if they do expose it they will be accused of having invited or deserved it. Some may even be afraid, as battered wives are, that if they do call the cops, the cops will say, "O.K. We believe you. Now pack up the kids and get out," leaving the male aggressor to occupy the three bedroom suburban home.

What is wrong with all this is not just the sexual harassment. Most women are pretty smart about coping with "dirty old men" and infantile joking; office flirtations can take the edge of the boredom of work. But the consequence of coping is to create an inner existential crisis of authenticity. Women have very special feelings about their eroticism, and a woman who finds herself simulating or using erotic cues for non erotic goals creates within herself a form of self doubt that can take pathological forms of masochism or emotional frigidity. I have seen women colleagues at senior levels become extremely hostile toward the women's movement, going to great lengths to disassociate themselves from it. And I can't help feeling that what lies behind this is a latent fear that their own erotic complicity will be exposed, that, like me, they went out and bought the dress that was supposed to show cleavage. In short, the sex harassment that is part of women's professional socialization leads to the internalization of the double standard which keeps women silenced and submissive or allies of men in the male dominated professional world.

What lies behind this complicity is a machismo academic power structure legitimated by the belief that men are the only real scholars. Women academics are there to help the weak, the young or the failing students, to mother homesick Third World students, to keep enrollments up by finding the germ of a coherent idea in papers written by kids spaced-out on drugs or by jocks too busy with hockey practice. I have noticed that women T.A.s resist this by grading harder than men, but, on the other hand, they have more and longer office hours. Men may learn to make the coffee, but departments still

replicate the division of labour in the larger social structure where men perform cognitive and women expressive functions. The only change that has taken place in the last decade of feminist protest is to recognize that women are capable of cognitive functions, but low level ones.

Recently, I was the outside examiner on an M.A. thesis in psychology written by a woman who had studied attitudes toward menstruation by both men and women. Not surprisingly, she discovered that men were less well informed and more stereotypic in their views than women. So, my first question was whether, in view of her data, women should be the ones to decide whether women could be airline pilots. Before she could answer, the three men present exploded. One of these men is a very well-known humanistic psychologist who believes in the mystic wholeness of things and has profound respect for the insights of schizophrenics; a liberal who would have laid his body on the line for Blacks, Chicanos, draft resisters. But he could not have a monopoly on higher knowledge. Women might know more about menstruation than men, but not, if you please, how to interpret their knowledge. As I listened to him rant, I suddenly heard the voice of a patriarchal father declaring that his daughters and wife could be educated, but they could not have authority.

Tokenism is representation without authority. And one of the most devastating effects of tokenism, according to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, is to create a chronic insecurity among women about their work and themselves. Ultimately, it is divisive, turning women against women who exhaust themselves in factional disputes.

Tokenism is not better than nothing. It is like the culture of poverty. Over a long period of time, it is soul destroying, disabling, conducive to a permanent, self perpetuating condition of dependency and self hatred. Oh, we have fun down there in our inner city ghetto. We console each other. "You think you've got it bad in sociology with just three women," my friend in political science says. "In my department there are only two. And in economics there are none." We have lots of good jokes about the narcissism and pretentions of those in power; we develop a certain cunning to fool our public housing inspectors; we even have our smarts when it comes to chiselling on welfare. But tokenism has been more destructive for me personally than pre-tokenism when I was either ignored or regarded as "one of the boys."

IV

Short of social revolution, short of tearing down the entire structure of universities, short of becoming urban guerillas, our only hope of making structural changes is affirmative action. Affirmative action is not just a matter of reparations for past

injuries. It is the first step in reforming the institution, creating a true community of scholars, where knowledge is biased by history and human fallibility not by ascriptive roles, where young scholars can grow without threats to their identity, and where there is equal opportunity for achievement. Sexism is not the only distortion of modern academic life, but it is a major one.

But Canada has no Title VII; it cannot penalize universities or departments for failing to enforce affirmative action. Imagine what would happen if the Social Science and Humanities Council said, "No grants unless you can demonstrate affirmative action policies?" Imagine what would happen if academic women decided to blow the whistle on the Council itself? If affirmative action is a valid principle for universities, it had better be for funding agencies as well. How many times has the Council funded men to study immigrants, marriage, work, children, voluntary associations, health, consumer behaviour, social movements, unionization? What is the ratio of women to men refereeing these applications? And how often do these studies perpetuate the invisibility of women by focusing on the male immigrant, the husband, the male worker, the male offspring, the male consumer, the male unions. Does anyone believe that parallel studies by women would not be different? My own department passed a resolution on affirmative action which was promptly sabotaged by appointing a male visiting professor.

Without a commitment to affirmative action and without a way of enforcing it, we dissipate our energies. I have seen graduate women who call themselves feminists, who have proudly kept their maiden names, who wear large buttons saying "Biology is not Destiny" be persuaded by men that if affirmative action became the policy of the graduate programme they would be getting a second-class education.

Let me conclude by saying that as long as academic communities are dominated by one sex or one class or one race, there may be good work coming out of them, but not great work; there may be a few virtuoso performances, but not many. Excellence in the social sciences is dependent on a free society and democratic institutions, not just because it creates an environment conducive to the critical mind and creative imagination. Affirmative action is no more or no less than a belated recognition of the need for democracy in the work place. To call this "reverse discrimination" is to distort the meaning of democracy. That, briefly, is the sum of my experience, my dubious career in a challenging and socially worthy discipline.