

THE STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP

Conflict and Contradiction: Principles of Feminist Scholarship

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Despite the fact that the feminist political movement of the sixties has achieved remarkable success in generating an abundance of feminist scholarship in a wide variety of fields, and that the proliferation of women's studies courses and feminist books and journals attest to the energy and commitment of feminist scholars, two books under review here—Elizabeth Langland and Walter Goves, eds., *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and Ellen Carol DuBois, Gail Paradise Kelly, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, Lillian S. Robinson, *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985)—concede that feminist scholarship has so far failed in its larger purpose, which has been to “transform the existing curriculum from within” by revising the perspective of traditional scholarship (*FP* 3). So far, this transformation has not occurred; women's studies programs remain separate entities in the curriculum, and traditional scholarship largely ignores the work of feminist scholars.

Why, despite its growth, feminist scholarship has failed to achieve its goals is an important question and needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, neither of these studies does so. While both are excellent surveys of developments in feminist scholarship in a variety of fields over the last twenty years, neither seriously explores the reasons for the resistance of traditional scholarship nor looks for possible weaknesses within feminist scholarship itself. The sexist bias of traditional scholarship is assumed; and the fundamental assumptions of feminist scholarship remain unchallenged.

For feminist scholars to make the kind of difference they want to achieve, they would have to do what these two studies indicate has not been done so far: engage in real dialogue with the assumptions, methods, and conclusions of traditional scholarship, and develop a critical stance toward their own work. The general unwillingness of feminist scholarship to do either, that is, on the one hand to examine the bases of traditional scholarship rather than assuming it to be an entrenched male patriarchy, or, on the other hand, to examine the validity of feminist scholarship rather than assuming that all feminist scholarship is valuable because of

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its morally and politically superior position, is to reinforce the very bipolarity it claims to be trying to overcome. Despite the fact that more recent feminist scholars such as Carole Pateman, Jane Flax, and Jean Bethke Elshtain in political science, and Janet Spence in psychology, have begun to question the validity of bipolar thinking, the "us/them" mode prevails.

Feminist scholars believe that they have already established "incontrovertibly" the existence of male bias in traditional academic inquiry, and that "this bias, however inadvertent, accepts and perpetuates the ideology of female inferiority." They claim that, whether by almost completely neglecting women (as in history or philosophy) or by treating them as incidental to central issues of research (as in literature or anthropology), all traditional academic disciplines "use male behavior as the norm" and thereby "provide a truncated and distorted picture of women which reflects and justifies our society's oppressive stereotypes of what it is to be female" (FS 36).

To a nonfeminist, the difficulties with this statement are apparent. If, as the feminists contend, traditional scholarship merely "reflects" and thereby "justifies" the norms of society, then it would seem that the more effective way of changing these norms would be by taking direct political action within society itself. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of academic scholars, female as well as male, have remained unconvinced, despite the mass of "incontrovertible evidence," should impel feminists to reconsider their view of sexist bias in academia. Were they to do so, they might find that traditional scholarship, which allegedly "ignores" or "neglects" women as a central issue of concern, has not been the result of sexism, conscious or otherwise, but rather the result of the assumption that the issues raised and the facts discovered affect men and women equally: economic, political, social, and cultural forces have brought us all to where we are today. For many women scholars, this inclusiveness has enforced our sense of equality. The gender-blindness of the traditional academic disciplines should be especially liberating now that feminists themselves are unclear about "what it is to be female." Furthermore, as some feminists like Judith Shapiro have noted, by focusing on women exclusively, and especially by focusing on women outside of the context of the larger social economic and political currents, feminist scholars "mark" women as a problem requiring special attention outside areas of general concern, and hence defeat the purpose of transforming perspectives *within* the traditional academic disciplines. Issues of gender should be as important to social scientists in their studies of social differentiation as rank, class, and kinship, as Shapiro argues; but to treat their own gender as the sole issue of concern, as feminist scholars do, is to mark out a very narrow field which artificially separates women from the issues and concerns of the rest of humanity.

Although neither of the studies examines the root causes of the failure of feminist scholarship to change traditional academic scholarship appreciably, both illustrate the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the attempt to transform a political position into a scholarly pursuit. The political position is relatively simple

and clear-cut. Feminists want women to be treated equally, and they believe that this equality can be achieved by breaking sexual stereotypes. The difficulty arises when they attempt to transform this goal into a scholarly pursuit.

Patricia Meyer Spacks' opening essay in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy* illustrates this difficulty most clearly. Like most feminist scholars trained in the traditional academic disciplines, Spacks is aware of the need for sound methodological bases in scholarship. Consequently, she insists that, for feminist scholarship to "make a difference," it must be based on "impeccable scholarship, [be] quiet and logical, building a case on textual evidence" (FP 11). She notes that mere enthusiasm for previously unknown or neglected work by women is no substitute for traditional standards of literary value, and warns that, without establishing new standards of value, feminist scholars will fail to make their work effective. She warns also of the danger of making the same point repeatedly, particularly the point of women's victimization. Such a practice, she acknowledges, "can have disastrous intellectual consequences," limiting the critic to "one-note" work and subjecting the audience to increased boredom and resistance (FP 13).

In a clear articulation of the theoretical bases for traditional literary criticism, Spacks makes a legitimate place for feminist criticism, and, by extension, feminist scholarship in general:

We believe now in the multiplicity of interpretation: most students of literature think that the richness, the multifariousness, the ambiguity of texts make them compelling. . . . Critics illuminate aspects of texts; they choose the aspects they will illuminate. Feminist critics, by raising new questions, have brought unexpected shapes out of the shadows (FP 8-9).

Up to this point, much of what Spacks has to say about methodology would be accepted by nonfeminist scholars and critics alike. But the difficulty arises when she takes the feminist political stance. While warning of the danger of "confusing political and creative activity," and acknowledging that "passionate commitment" to political feminism "sometimes supports the worst criticism," she still maintains that it also "underlies the best" (FP 12).

How "passionate commitment" to a political ideology can be reconciled with "impeccable scholarship," which is generally assumed to mean a deliberate attempt to explore and present evidence with objectivity, is a question Spacks addresses but does not satisfactorily answer. For example, she endorses the feminist critics' use of the subjective approach, advising them to read a text with a mind "aware of the inequalities of the female situation," and "imbued with" concerns for "the perplexities about the nature of male and female." On the other hand, she warns that the conclusions reached by such a subjective approach must be presented in a way that "acknowledg[es] the uncertainties implicit in an approach which values the personal" (FP 15).

Apparently the recognition that feminism's personal approach to texts requires an unusual degree of tentativeness is what leads Spacks to characterize such values

as “multiplicity,” “partialness,” and “tentativeness” as the *female* way of doing things, and, by extrapolation, to characterize traditional academic scholarship as “univocal,” “authoritative,” “grandiose,” and “male-dominated.” As her earlier statement makes clear, however, Spacks knows that the possibilities of multiple interpretation, and the partialness and tentativeness of findings are also values of the traditional disciplines, particularly during the last thirty years, and her warnings to feminist scholars reveal her awareness that they, too, can be “authoritative,” “univocal,” and “grandiose.” This deliberate bipolarization, which appropriates some of the values from our common heritage and labels them “feminine,” while at the same time denying any negative traits in themselves but rather projecting them onto the other—the “male”—is feminism’s fatal flaw, both as a political movement and as a scholarly pursuit. The feminist view of life as a psychomachian drama where the forces of good (women) contend with the forces of evil (men) is a falsification of reality which no amount of argument, scholarly or otherwise, can validate.

The results of feminist scholars’ tendency to denigrate “male” academic criticism and scholarship and to exaggerate their own claims is illustrated by Spacks’ discussion of the fiction of Jane Austen. Claiming that traditional literary critics like H. W. Garrod have devalued Austen for her limited knowledge of literature and history and her narrow experience of life, she congratulates feminist critics who have valorized her “revolutionary articulation of the feminine ethos,” and her identification “not only with her model heroines but also with the less obvious, nastier, more resilient and energetic female characters who enact her rebellious dissent from her culture” (*FP* 7).

Most nonfeminist readers and critics would acknowledge Austen’s limitations and agree with Garrod that “it would be difficult to name a writer of similar eminence who possesses so little knowledge of literature and history, whose experience of life was so narrowly and contentedly confined.” On the other hand, to admit such limitations is not to “devalue” or to “dismiss” Austen, as Spacks claims. Since the nineteenth century, scholars and critics have admired Austen as much as any male novelist, and have found the reasons for her “eminence as a writer” elsewhere. The wit, the irony, the remarkable architectonics of her fiction are unsurpassed. By focusing on Austen’s treatment of women, feminist scholars have made a real contribution to our appreciation of her work. But when they go so far as to argue that she was “revolutionary” in her “articulation of the feminine ethos” and that some of her “nastier, more resilient and energetic characters enact her rebellious dissent from her culture,” they are clearly imposing their own subjective views and distorting Austen as much as they are distorting the criticism of those they would challenge.

Only feminist critics who bring their “own experience of inequality” to bear can find a “revolutionary ethos” in Austen’s fiction. They may identify with the “nastier, more resilient and energetic characters” like Lydia Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* rather than with the more finely balanced heroine, Elizabeth; but in doing

so, they have to ignore what Austen clearly presents as the awful consequences of such "rebellious dissent" from social norms. The result of such feminist readings, like all such subjective attempts, is the transformation of the text into the mirror image of the reader's values. The uniqueness of Austen, her difference from her 20th century readers, is lost. All that remains is another, too familiar, political tract. Such a result is, however, the aim of feminist critics who need to establish historical bases for their political goals.

The contradiction between political goals and scholarly pursuits among feminist scholars is apparent in the following statement which Spacks quotes from Annette Barnes and which she claims underlies the entire enterprise:

All feminists . . . would agree that women are not automatically or necessarily inferior to men, that role models for females and males in the current Western societies are inadequate, that equal rights for women are necessary, and that it is unclear what by nature either men or women are, that it is a matter for empirical investigation to ascertain what differences follow from the obvious physiological ones, that in these empirical investigations the hypotheses one employs are themselves open to question, revision, or replacement (*FP* 9).

The first three statements, that women are not inferior to men, that present role models are inadequate, and that equal rights for women are necessary, are fixed and clear-cut political positions, in the sense that they preclude further analysis, exploration, or debate, and hence are outside the realm of intellectual inquiry. On the other hand, the last three statements, which recommend open hypotheses and empirical investigation, fall clearly within the traditional methods of scholarly research. The more feminist scholars try to combine their political position with scholarly methodology, the more they fail to be convincing. To the extent that the scholars in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy* adhere to the open-minded approach reflected in the last three statements, they make valuable contributions to our understanding of the problems of gender.

Where feminist scholarship seems to be most relevant and most illuminating is in the disciplines where the issue is most appropriate: in anthropology, sociology, social history, education, and psychology. Awareness of gender roles seems to have made some difference in the perspectives of some social historians. According to Carl Degler, as a result of studies of the role of women in such areas as frontier history, labor movements, and population trends, the earlier view that these were areas dominated exclusively by men has been altered. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner's myth of the frontier has been undermined by attention to women's experiences of it as limiting rather than liberating. And histories of women's roles in the labor force in 19th century America reveal them to have been active contributors to the progressive achievements usually attributed to men. Similarly, their role in determining the decline in population trends in the nineteenth century is becoming increasingly realized. But after pointing out these and other areas where increased attention to women have altered social historians' perspectives, Degler warns of the dangers of focusing exclusively on women's

history. Like any other nonfeminist historian, Degler insists that "in the end there is only one history, not two or three." But he argues for a gender-aware rather than gender-blind history and urges feminist social historians to find a way of integrating their work with that of other nonfeminist scholars: "In an integrated, egalitarian society, which is what we aspire to today, we can only have an integrated history" (*FP* 82-83).

The most promising studies are those in sociology and psychology where, by questioning the validity of bipolarity, perspectives in feminist scholarship are themselves transformed. According to Nannerl O. Keohane, feminist scholarship in sociology focusing on women as active agents in the family and the community has tended to break down what the feminists see as the classic distinction between "private" and "public" spheres. And Janet Spence sees the increased focus on women as active agents both within and outside the family and in the labor force as resulting in a dissolution of what she sees as Talcott Parson's more clearly gender-based polarities, "instrumental/male" vs. "expressive/female."

Feminist psychological studies also tend to blur such gender distinctions as Erik Erikson's inner (female)/outer (male) model. According to Spence, the notion of masculinity and femininity as mirror images of each other has been largely dispelled, leaving the question of gender identity open to further empirical inquiry. Spence's own analysis of men's and women's images of themselves concludes that, while "gender is a central organizing principle," attempts of the subjects to "find" the sense of their own masculinity or femininity in specific sets of "masculine" and "feminine" behaviors and attributes have failed (*FP* 146-47). If this finding of vagueness about gender roles proves true for the larger population, feminist scholarship which continues to insist on bipolarity will become increasingly irrelevant. If, as the feminist position states, "it is unclear what by nature men or women are," the present stand-off between gender-biased feminist scholarship reflecting the alleged gender-bias of traditional scholarship might be resolved by gender-neutral scholarship. Feminist scholarship's real contribution of gender-awareness would modify the gender-blindness of traditional scholarship, and, in this way, feminist scholars' goal of assimilation in academic curricula and scholarship would be achieved.

Unfortunately, if the more recent study, *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe*, is any indication, such a goal is a long way off. In this study, the political aspect of feminist scholarship is more pronounced. Taking as its basis the "oppression" of women and as its goal their "liberation," five feminist scholars have surveyed the development of women's studies in anthropology, education, history, literature, and philosophy. Insisting that the feminist political movement begun in the sixties is its "lifeblood" and not its "tragic flaw" (*FS* 8) they attempt to defend the "integrity" of feminist scholarship, justifying their position by asserting that traditional scholarship is also political: "all of the disciplines, whatever their other differences, provide a truncated and distorted picture of women which

reflects and justifies our society's oppressive stereotypes of what it is to be female" (*FS* 36).

Despite the fact that this is a comprehensive survey of developments in each of the disciplines and includes an extensive bibliography of feminist scholarship, the study is flawed by the writers' failure to exercise critical judgment on any of the work. All findings are accepted in the explicit belief that all feminist studies are equally valuable since all are based on the same premise and work toward the same goal. Nevertheless, contradictions both within and between the disciplines are readily apparent, and the writers are forced to conclude that they "have found there is no one picture, no single integration of disciplines to be discovered in the realities of women's lives" (*FS* 200). Yet, despite this acknowledgment, the central contradictions remain unexplored.

The basic belief, for example, that societal relationships between men and women are primarily those of conflict, is at odds with the writers' expressed goal of integrating feminist scholarship with traditional academic disciplines. Furthermore, the fundamental political tenet, oppression by a male-dominated, sexist society, is contradicted by an increasing emphasis on women as active social agents, and therefore as contributors to their situation. In fact, this shift in emphasis from women as passive victims to women as active agents, a shift which the writers frankly admit to be politically grounded, leads to further contradictions. For if, as some feminist scholars contend, "women were present and active at every moment and in every aspect of the past," their position is more closely allied to the view of traditional scholarship which assumes that political and economic forces affect men and women alike. If women should be "properly seen as active agents in the world, shaping their destinies within restricted possibilities, resisting and overthrowing these restrictions" (*FS* 39), the complaint against the "oppression" or "victimization" of women by the male patriarchy is shifted to the lesser complaint against a "subordination" or "inequality" brought about in part by women acting "in complicity with the forces that keep them in a state of social inferiority" (*FS* 39). In fact, the more emphasis that is given to women as active agents the more likely the result is to be termed "sexual asymmetry," a less value-laden term than "subordination" or "inequality."

Perhaps the best example of this shift in focus can be seen in the case of women in frontier history. From having seen women as victims of this movement, as even feminist historian Carl Degler does, recent feminist historians have portrayed them as active participants, engaged during the journey in many of the tasks usually assigned to men, and sharing, to some extent at least, the spirit of adventure. More recently, Sharon Brown has argued that while women adapted to frontier conditions and necessarily experimented with nontraditional behavior, they deliberately attempted to preserve and perpetuate the stereotypic role model of the female.¹

Studies of socialist and communist countries, where, presumably, more equal economic and political opportunities are offered women, clearly indicate that sex-

ual inequalities persist, and, in the case of the Soviet Union, seem to be increasing. Here, once again, inequality seems to be the result not of the economic or political structure but of the choice of women. In order to cope with family responsibilities, women have opted for less responsible jobs and withdrawn from political involvement. According to Gail Lapidus, "Women have solved the problem of two jobs . . . by withdrawing from economic and political life" (*FS* 151). Such studies suggest that the causes of inequality or asymmetry are deeper than any political or economic structure. The causes seem to lie rather in psychological and biological factors within women themselves.

Ultimately the question for feminists seems to rest on how women can liberate themselves from what they see as oppressive psychological patterns of gender roles established within marriage and the family. Arguing that the family, rather than political or economic structures, is the "primary institution within which ideas about the subordination of women and the power of men are reproduced and externalized," some feminists like Juliet Mitchell and Adrienne Rich argue for the dissolution of the nuclear family altogether (*FS* 109). But if, as others like Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow argue, it is not the family but reproduction that is the source of sexual inequality, the dissolution of the family is not the solution either—unless women choose to liberate themselves from reproduction altogether.

And indeed, the goal of liberation, with its value of autonomy, has resulted for some, in this form of separatism, or, to use Carol Smith Rosenberg's term, "homosociality." The emphasis on "sisterhood," on "the rich and empowering culture of women," is strong among some feminists and being discovered and encouraged in histories of politics, in the labor movement, and in literature. On the other hand, conflicts arise between sisterhoods as to how far such separatism should go. For example, black literary critics attack such middle-class white feminist critics as Spacks and Gilbert for ignoring black women writers and scholars and they have consequently begun to develop their own tradition. And lesbian critics are claiming as their own such writers as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf. In response, heterosexual feminist critics are asking the kinds of questions traditional literary critics have been asking of them: heterosexual feminist critics want to know if the works of Stein and Woolf are shaped by their sexuality, and whether "all kinds of writing by lesbians, whether or not the subject is the relations between women" are to be appropriated by the lesbian critics' sisterhood (*FS* 63-65).

These quarrels over territory clearly belie the notion that sisterhoods, unlike their male counterparts, are free from politics, competitiveness, or rivalry. Indeed, as Israel Kugler's recent study of women's movements in the 19th century indicates, schisms, opportunist tactics, and diverse social outlooks characterized those movements in ways that are analogous to the divisive factors in women's political organizations today.²

Feminists themselves are aware of the dangers of valorizing "the rich and empowering culture of women" not only because such cultures seem to exhibit the same social dynamics they criticize when they find them in groups of men, but also

because such valorization “eclipses the emphasis on subordination and inequality” (FS 67). Further, the focus on women as a distinct culture magnifies the question of whether feminists want to retain or to eliminate gender differences. The more practical underlying consideration, though unstated, is the problem of membership. The majority of women, academic and nonacademic, choose not to be defined solely by their gender.

Just how far removed feminist academic scholarship is from actual social realities is most apparent in their view of marriage as “the primary basis for women’s subordination.” The fact that, despite other options, women continue to choose this state while an increasing number of men tend to avoid it, should raise some doubts about its oppressiveness to women. Studies by Nancy Cott and Julie Roy Jeffrey show that even in the 19th century women may have found marriage a means of improving their status and “an occupation that fitted fairly comfortably within [their] interests and purposes” (FP 81).

Underlying the belief that marriage is the central cause of women’s subordination is the belief that the relationship between men and women is essentially one of conflict. According to the writers of *Feminist Scholarship*, “the sociohistorical significance of conflict between men and women is the unique contribution of feminism. . . .” On the other hand, they also acknowledge that this view is “perhaps its hardest premise to absorb into general social analysis” (FS 183).

Why this view meets with such resistance is never examined. The possibility that relationships between the sexes may be complementary and interdependent, to say nothing of sexual, is not considered. Granted their view that sexual and family relationships may be viewed as power struggles, such relationships may also be viewed as complex networks of interdependency. How can anyone ignore the fact that women as well as men enter these relationships freely, and that they can be based on deep feelings of love, affection, and commitment? The fact that “the social implications of reproduction are such that in families with children, mothers and fathers develop asymmetrical relationships” (FS 129) does not necessarily mean that these relationships are oppressive. Whether, as Dorothy Dinnerstein argues, fathers should assume greater nurturing responsibilities and thereby rectify this asymmetry or whether asymmetrical arrangements are matters of mutually agreed upon divisions of labor is an issue that remains to be decided. What seems clear, however, is that as long as reproduction is a function of human beings, responsibility, rather than “liberation,” is the issue.

The problems and contradictions within feminist scholarship indicate that it has moved so far beyond the original dichotomies of “oppression” and “liberation” as to render the usefulness of the terms obsolete. The more we know about the issues, the more difficult it becomes to assign blame to either sex or to any particular economic, political, or social structure. To the extent that it has made us more aware of the role of women in a variety of fields and has raised open-ended questions about gender, feminist scholarship has been successful. But to the extent that it continues to insist, as the writers of *Feminist Scholarship* do, that it remain

bound to a fixed political agenda, it will continue to be viewed with suspicion by all scholars who attempt to avoid the pitfalls of gender-bias.

Notes

1. Sharon Brown, "Women on the Overland Trails: An Historical Perspective," *Overland Journal*, Winter 1984, Vol. 2 #1 35-39.
 2. Israel Kugler, *From Ladies to Women: The Organized Struggle for Woman's Rights in the Reconstruction Era* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1987).
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From *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* by Allan Bloom:

Marxists are right to say the "bourgeois university" is essentially related to "bourgeois society," but not in the sense they intend. The university does not defend that society because the university merely reflects its interests, but because the balance of forces within this kind of society is such as most to need, respect and, hence, protect, freedom of thought.