

Feminist Follies

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A visitor making the rounds of the feminist sessions at the 1986 Modern Language Association Convention in New York City was greeted by a parade of reversals, contradictions, and downright absurdities, some of them acutely embarrassing.

One session on the 18th century, for example, took up the problem of “political correctness” in choosing subjects for feminist analysis. The consensus was that an author’s political correctness (i.e., her holding a point of view not overtly incompatible with modern feminist theory) no longer need be a necessary criterion to draw feminist attention to her work. This is not to imply any softening of the political stance of the critic; indeed, it was admitted that without a feminist approach there would be little justification for studying such minor figures as Hannah More, a pious, popular 18th century authoress, or at least for claiming any status for them beyond the literary-historical. Rather it is now deemed necessary to study all female writers of the 18th century in order to obtain a full view of the effects of patriarchy on feminine existence (which approach coincidentally has the advantage of providing additional subjects for feminist consumption).

Some critics take a more hard-line approach. A prominent feminist critic, for example, faulted Eudora Welty’s memoir, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, for presenting too gentle and tender a version of its author’s life and feelings. Women have too long suppressed their rage in patriarchies, explained the critic, for them to be served by a “Mississippi lady” who “fears” her anger. In another session, Louisa May Alcott was likewise denounced for presenting female characters who learn to control rather than vent their anger. This view of the urgency of women’s anger broadly conflicts with another view of women espoused by feminism, however—that of women as loving, gentle, and nurturant. At one session, a feminist poet read a poem extolling the disobedience of Lot’s wife in turning back to look at the destruction of Sodom because this act reflected her special female sense of sympathetic communal attachment.

Another contradiction, it grew clear at the MLA, concerns feminism’s relentless emphasis on the very gender designations from which it purports to be freeing women (with or without their consent, one might add). After reading her poem about Lot’s wife, the poet argued that women’s curiosity is often punished in patriarchal myths; the cases of Pandora and Lot’s wife were her examples. But when someone tentatively suggested that the same can be said for Orpheus, an air of consternation arose, and the session ended shortly thereafter on an indecisive note. Feminism is apparently unable to appreciate the fact that for centuries the gods of myth have pursued a policy of equal treatment of the sexes. Similarly, at the Eudora Welty session, one panelist presented an explication of a Welty story which hinged on the idea that while the main character plays at her piano, she is ascending toward a “feminine sublime.” But when someone in the audience com-

mented that the pianist actually *transcends* gender through the power of art, the speaker was unable even to engage with such an idea. The slightest challenge to feminism's crude gender approach proved unsettling.

One found a sense of restriction in attitudes toward men and masculinity as well. Again, in the Eudora Welty session, the prominent critic alluded to a feminist critique of "Moon Lake." In this lengthy, rambling story set in a girls' summer camp in the South, one of the girls nearly drowns. The lifeguard, the only male in the environs, saves her with a rather brutal application of artificial respiration described in terms of rape. The controlling idea of the feminist critique is that Welty is hereby establishing the central fact of male dominance even in an all-female enclave. Without giving an intimate explication of this story, it is possible to say in rebuttal that this interpretation is absurd; the lifeguard is, after all, saving the girl's life. But while for the average woman, male aggression and capacity to dominate is one of many elements in life with the opposite sex, for the feminist it is virtually the only one.

Myriad other contradictions surfaced at the MLA as well. Like the contradiction between anger and nurturance, the insistence that women be taken seriously in intellectual life implicitly contrasts with the characterization of them as mad-women and medusas who can subvert the system with feminine instability. One panelist suggested that feminists working within the structures of the academy can help destabilize the "rigid fascist world"; another in the same session warned that playing by the culture's rules, even in the hope of disrupting them, can eventuate in replicating them. Women must speak out and describe their experience after centuries of silence, said one critic, and then cautioned that they must resist naming and defining, since these produce "hegemonic discourse," although how long anyone can go on describing her experience without naming or defining anything, the speaker did not say.

But the grandest contradiction had a moral component. At a session on women in the avant garde, a journalist/teacher enthusiastically reported on a recent trend. Several women have separately created solo theatrical pieces in which they deliver monologues of extraordinary obscenity and invite the audience to touch and explore their intimate parts. The language the journalist used was so scandalous, the acts she described so humiliating, that the listeners were perceptibly shocked. When it came time for questions, however, there were only a few timidly voiced comments and a feeble conjecture about the propriety of doing this sort of thing for money (presumably the conjecturer was a Marxist). Feminism is about freedom for women, the journalist insisted, and these performers are exercising their freedom as they see fit. But members of a movement dedicated to advancing women's freedom proved unable even to articulate a defense against obscenity when this was presented under the banner of liberation.

A visitor to these MLA sessions might well conclude that the worst thing that could have happened to feminism was to be taken seriously. Despite insistence that the movement is still only in a state of evolution, a picture of women as scholars

and thinkers is emerging, and it is not a flattering one. When feminism consisted mainly of a series of irreverent complaints against traditional ideas of sex and gender, it was able to exercise a certain insouciant appeal. When it did little more than play on the guilt of men at the restrictions on women's lives, it managed to exert a quasi-moral pressure. But now that feminism has become an influential cultural force that must transcend negativities and establish a sustained, workable vision, its viability has become extremely dubious.

From a letter by L. A. Zaina, School of Modern Languages, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, to the *Times Literary Supplement*, March 27, 1987:

Sir,

—Although it is true that Savonarola is not a very appealing character in many ways (it is difficult to forgive him for the “bonfire of vanities”), nevertheless to stigmatize him as “entirely lacking in affection” and “distant from common human interests and feelings,” as does the reviewer of Franco Cordero's *Savonarola* (February 20), seems less than just.