



Whose Women's Studies?

by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

Women's studies has emerged and, in large measure, won its place in the academy as an unabashedly political undertaking. "Teaching," according to Florence Howe, a path breaker in women's studies, "is a political act." "Education," Deborah Rosenfelt adds, "is the kind of political act that controls destinies." In effect, they insist that education as we have known it until very recently has been a political undertaking designed to empower men and constrain women. For education in the masculine voice propounded values tailored to the measure of man, and thereby denied women's identities and foreclosed women's aspirations.

Informed by a crusading commitment to redress centuries of bigotry and bias, women's studies programs and curricula have proliferated throughout the country, fueled by the mission to change the hearts and minds of students—primarily those of women students, but, to the extent possible, also those of men. For supporters, women's studies embodies the responsibility to help young women seize their destinies unencumbered by crippling assumptions about their second-class status. For opponents, women's studies embodies a dangerous assault on centuries of learning, civilization, and perhaps even human nature. Thus formulated, the debate over women's studies is easy to confuse with the interlocking debate

over feminism.

As an academic project, women's studies has contributed to the confusion. Born of a sense of oppression and exclusion, women's studies has, in general, retained a defensive sense of them against us. All too frequently, women's studies programs are much less well-funded and staffed than established departments. Often lacking independent faculty lines, much less adequate secretarial support, many programs have been forced to rely on volunteer labor. The sense of contributing to an important cause tends to promote élan and enthusiasm, followed by discouragement and burnout. Nothing has come easy. All of us who have participated in the attempts to launch programs remember the interminable meetings—described with disgust by a younger colleague of mine as "everybody bring a piece of cheese"; the exhausting struggles simply to get a course listed and to persuade departments to free a faculty member from normal departmental offerings to teach it; the ill-disguised contempt of colleagues for what they sneeringly dismissed as a passing ideological fad.

Small wonder in such a climate that so many of those associated with women's studies continue to view it as a feminist project. Small wonder that so many of those who oppose it continue to dismiss it as nothing more than an (inappropriate) exercise in feminist consciousness-raising. The pity remains that both sides are at once wrong and right. The participants in the debate are talking past each other.

Strong and dangerous pressures to ideological conformity notwithstanding, women's studies remains a vigorous and diverse undertaking. For every women's studies program that openly promotes a specific political agenda and emphasizes the transformation of consciousness over accomplishment, there is another that seeks to help young women to acquire an education and to prepare them to find a place in a world in which they are more likely than not to have to support themselves or to contribute to a family income. At LaGrange College in Georgia, middle-aged, middle-class women faculty members quietly work for a minimum attention to women's studies because they worry about the futures of daughters and students who have no higher ambitions than to attract

a husband who (statistically) has a 50 percent likelihood of divorcing them twenty years later, just when their own children are ready for college.

Nationally, to be sure, the dominant tone of women's studies is established by more militant programs. We hear horror stories about introductory women's studies courses that deny male students freedom of expression and focus on a range of personal questions, from sexual preference to aging, and some of these stories may well reflect a substantial reality. The more ominous truth is that even at their most alarming these stories capture only a small part of that reality. Feminism in the broad sense does constitute the mainspring of women's studies, and, defensive postures notwithstanding, is today flourishing on college and university campuses, not to mention at conferences and professional meetings. The heated debate over the canon, now being waged in books, on campuses, and in the national press, directly testifies to the impact of feminist concerns, according to which women have been fundamentally alienated from a culture that casts them as objects and with which they cannot identify.

Feminism has, in this respect, emerged as the cutting edge of the broad postmodernist assault on received notions about the status of knowledge, certainty, rationality, subjectivity, standards of justice, and the self. Feminism in this sense is increasingly challenging received notions about the fundamental structures of human knowledge, and some influential feminists are rejecting all of our assumptions about knowledge on the grounds that they represent an oppressive and outmoded "binary thinking"—a way of thinking that rests on the delineation of difference as the foundation of all knowledge and therefore promotes hierarchy, notably the hierarchy that places men over women.

The most serious problems that plague women's studies result from a pernicious combination of defensiveness and arrogance. Make no mistake: most committed participants in women's studies persist in the (not entirely unjustified) conviction that they represent an embattled minority. But like the abolitionists of the 19th century, with whom they have much in common, they believe themselves to be the custodians of a higher truth against

which no consideration for things-as-they-are-and-have-been should be allowed to prevail. The sense of embattlement doubtless accounts for much of their unwillingness seriously to address the responsibilities of running the world. Their mission is to transform it. Now. Like other zealots, they impatiently reject inherited niceties, including freedom of speech. The oppression of women has been such that the struggle against it justifies extreme methods. The weak, who are not bound by the obligations of the strong, are morally justified in giving no quarter.

Typically, proponents of women's studies resolutely insist on combating hierarchy in all its forms. The classroom becomes the laboratory for a new system of social relations. With the authority of received knowledge suspect, the authority of the professor (presumably justified by knowledge) becomes arbitrary. A wholesome classroom must become an open space in which students and professors alike share insights. In this atmosphere, the goal of teaching becomes to "empower" students to find and express their own voices, to make explicit their own silences. Unfortunately, this purported openness rarely allows equal time for the opposing views of women as well as men. With so much at stake, tolerance for opposition is reduced to a dangerous luxury. That all of this sounds a good deal like a general radical tendency in the academy only makes it the more dangerous. For notwithstanding the persisting obstacles to funding and credibility, it does converge with a powerful anti-authoritarian tendency in society and culture at large.

Women's studies began more modestly with the simple determination to restore women to the curriculum and the canon. In its initial stages, women's studies would probably have settled for the inclusion of (accomplished) women authors in literature courses and some responsible attention to women in history courses. These goals reflected two serious concerns: first, that the curriculum and canon had been fashioned to invite the identification of the young men who were to inherit leadership of the worlds of business, law, and politics, and, accordingly, emphasized male narratives and virtues; second, that even within that framework women's accomplishments and contributions had been

systematically devalued if not entirely ignored. The project modestly to revise our inherited tradition so that it simultaneously invited women's identification with it and helped to prepare women for positions of power and responsibility had indisputable merit. Since today most women must contribute to, if not entirely assure, their own livelihoods; since, in many instances, young women comprise half (at places like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, more than half) the undergraduate population and deserve as good a return on their parents' substantial investment as young men; and since our nation badly needs young women's professional contributions, not to engage young women's identification with our public purposes seems exorbitantly wasteful.

My experience of directing a women's studies program at Emory has steadily deepened my conviction that women's studies offers young women just such opportunities to take possession of their own educations. Emory undergraduates did not initially embrace women's studies, but those who have passed through the introductory courses during the last few years have derived important strengths from them. One of my students wrote in her final paper—a comprehensive review of the fifteen demanding books she had read during the semester—that she had begun with a deep mistrust of feminism, which she equated with "bra-burning," "lesbianism," and anger. "Today," she concluded, "as I turn in my last paper, I consider myself a feminist. Maybe not an *active* feminist, but a definite proponent of feminism." The course, she avowed, had offered her a rare educational experience. "Although I am al-

ways academically challenged by my classes at Emory, rarely have I ever been personally challenged. Not only has my definition and attitude towards feminism matured and changed from what I have learned and studied about women in this course, but my own personal self has been affected; I have been challenged to think and reflect on my past, present, and future life as a woman. I have not just learned about women this semester, but I have also grown as a woman."

Another student, from a Southern, Christian family, found the course especially exciting because of the new ways in which it helped her to read her Bible. She devoted her final paper to a number of biblical heroines and drew from her extensive research a new feeling for and identification with the faith in which she had been reared. Yet another took the occasion of the final paper to review all of the courses she had taken in Spanish and English (her double major). Treating the paper as her private commencement address, she assessed the place of women in the liberal education she had received. Never, she insisted, had she viewed that education as restrictive, but her women's studies class did open her eyes to "the limitations of my male dominated education." For until she read an article on the canon for that class she "would not have viewed the canon as a political statement."

Out of a total of 128 authors, her ten English courses had included sixteen women. She believed it predictable that her courses in Chaucer and Shakespeare included only male authors—she did not comment on whether any feminist critics had been

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read—and also noted that the numbers of women authors had recently begun to increase in all courses. She was not complaining about, certainly not berating, her professors, whom she obviously very much admired (and whose syllabi she had kept), but she did hope that things might be different in the future. “If inspiration can take the form of a charge or revelation,” she wrote in conclusion, “then my evaluations and this paper will have succeeded in creating a personal impact for me. While the insights that I have gained and the advances of any one woman do not make up for the countless and often unjustified exclusion of women and minorities from the canon today, it lessens the probability that such a reality will mark the canon of the future.”

This year, I was invited to give the address at the annual honors ceremony for Emory graduates. I owed the invitation to my having directed the honors thesis of one of the best students in the graduating class, a white man who had written on Kate Chopin and modernism. My student had never taken any women’s studies courses, although a number of men do, but the mere presence of the program had broadened his interests. Imperceptibly, as I watched the parade of accomplished students pass by to collect their prizes, I began to register that I was recognizing many more than I should have expected given the small number of students I have taught during my few years at Emory. The introductory women’s studies courses that I had taught reconstructed themselves in front of my eyes. There they were: the young women, and the few men, who had braved those first courses. I have done no statistical count, but it is my strong impression that the students in those courses were represented among the honors group out of all proportion to their numbers. If my impression is correct, women’s studies at Emory is accomplishing its most serious mission of strengthening young women in self-confidence and achievement.

Women’s studies at Emory has, during four short years, emerged as an important and respected part of the university and it enjoys the active support of some of our most conservative, as well as liberal, departments and faculty members. Its success owes

much to its political openness—to its commitment to the inclusion of any who chose to participate, regardless of ideology or politics. The program has no “line.” The women’s studies faculty have debated the policy, with some adopting the embattled view that women have suffered so much and are so systematically devalued that we should maintain vigilance about would-be participants’ commitment to feminism. But the inclusive position has prevailed over the exclusive, with the welcome result of an invigorating sense of academic freedom that strengthens our ability to provide a much needed sense of respect and support for our students.

The truth is that women’s studies has, during the past two decades, emerged as an academic specialization that boasts an impressive body of scholarship. Not for nothing do publishers wring their hands at the “women’s mafia.” Scholars and students in women’s studies buy and write large numbers of books, many of them good. They have assuredly uncovered a vast body of new information and developed an impressive range of interpretations of problems that many had thought were essentially resolved. Women’s studies, in short, constitutes one of the most dynamic and lively disciplines, and no amount of denial or contempt will diminish its vigor. But women’s studies scholarship, like women’s studies programs, has tended to fall to the preserve of committed feminists. Heated debates among feminists themselves assure that no single line prevails unchallenged, but the general tenor is set by the left, which has proved more receptive than the right to the academic discipline as well as to feminism. Yet as the Republicans are learning about a range of political issues, there is no reason to grant the left a monopoly of women’s concerns by default. Women, like men, differ significantly in their religious, political, and cultural values.

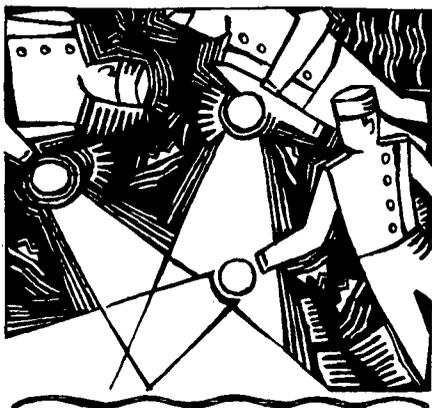
Unfortunately, the original women’s studies agenda of offering young women an education with which they could in some measure identify, met with outraged and bigoted opposition from many on the right, who established themselves as the defenders of the educational status quo. Those short-sighted opponents of modest change

now have a good deal to answer for. Ignoring the wisdom of Giuseppe di Lampedusa, “If things are to remain the same, things must change,” they have stumbled into the role of the sorcerer’s apprentice, conjuring up dangers much worse than the legitimate requests they were opposing. Their unyielding opposition has strengthened many proponents of women’s studies in their bunker mentality and left those of us who oppose the politicization of all academic programs in a dangerously exposed position.

Increasingly, the dominant presence in women’s studies is advocating war to the death with established (male) values and spearheading an alarming erosion of confidence in our inherited culture. But the self-proclaimed defenders of that inherited culture have been retreating into a rigid adherence to the time-honored status quo. Neither position will serve. Our inherited culture and values contain much that many feminists cherish—that many of us do, as have innumerable women before us. Yet we cannot hope to prepare young women to deal confidently with the world if we offer them a vision of themselves as dependent upon men for everything from material support to physical protection to a sense of their identities. Nor can we hope to preserve the essence of our tradition if we effectively insist that women of aspiration and modest innovation must be condemned as its enemies.

Women’s studies can be no better than we make it. Unilateral opposition will only drive it further down the road of stiffening opposition to Western culture as a whole. And the losers will be those who seek to preserve that culture with the measure of flexible adaptation upon which its survival has always depended.

*Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is Eleonore Raoul Professor of the Humanities and director of women’s studies at Emory University. Her most recent book is *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South, and her Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism will be published by the University of North Carolina Press in the spring of 1991.**



Jeanne Berg

Crimes and Punishments

by David R. Slavitt

The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Produced by Kees Kasander

Written and directed by

Peter Greenaway

Released by Miramax Films

The Plot Against Harry

Produced by Michael Roemer and

Robert Young

Written and directed by

Michael Roemer

Released by King Screen

Lust, greed, betrayal, murder, and revenge are not at all unusual as the subjects of movies, but Peter Greenaway's extension of these typical concerns to include cannibalism is a half-joking, half-serious gesture that reminds us of the Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies of blood or even, before that, of the goriest excesses of Senecan theatrics. Who knows? Maybe we are ready for a revival of *Thyestes*.

Albert is the eponymous thief of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. He is absolute appetite, pure impurity—which is, in itself, a fairly complicated piece of business. Greenaway's script calls for actor Michael Gambon to behave swinishly and thugishly of course, but that wouldn't be enough for us to despise him as keenly as we must if we are to be fully sympathetic to his wife's mannerist revenge. He is as gross and crude as

one could imagine, but what gives the behavior its singular odiousness is that his atrocious behavior is in the setting of a grand restaurant, Le Hollandais, the elaborate belle epoch decor of which is not only stunning but symbolic of that whole range of proprieties Gambon so blithely and unremittingly violates. His loud talk in a Cockney accent and his mispronunciations of French words on the menu are characteristic bits in a pattern of escalating desecrations. He belches. He makes crude remarks to and about his attractive and delicate wife, Georgina (Helen Mirren), observing to his band of thugs and cronies with him at the table that "the naughty bits and the dirty bits are so close together," and then looking at her as he demonstrates, holding his thumb and index finger an inch or so apart. There is no propriety or decency that he observes or respects—he even goes barging into the ladies' lavatory to look for Georgina when he thinks she is taking too long in there.

She is, as a matter of fact, taking a long time because she has contrived a way of getting back at Albert. With a rather delicate and soulful man whom she has seen across the restaurant sitting alone at his table and reading, she has engineered a chance meeting and then parlayed that into an abrupt affair that they consummate in one of the ladies' room stalls, as if to demonstrate that, for all of Albert's grossness, he and Yeats may be right after all about the proximity of the naughty bits and dirty bits.

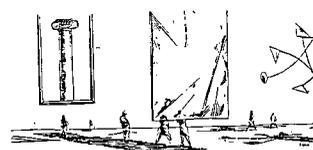
This simple enough set-up is presented with a great deal of panache—dark reds of the dining room give way, abruptly, to an eerie white of the lavatories, and Georgina's dress, a matching red in one shot, turns white and therefore remains matching in the next. There is no attempt at "realism," but indeed, a fairly strenuous effort to escape from its confines. The kitchen of the restaurant is a cavernous place, intimidatingly Hogarthian in its parody of overbearing 19th-century industrial architecture. And at one of the sinks of this grotesque and infernal workplace, one of the marmitons sings in an angelic boy-soprano: "Wash me / thoroughly / and cleanse me of my / iniquity . . ." while an invisible chorus of other voices (other souls? saved or damned?) provides lush harmony and

support. Meanwhile, there are corpses of dead animals hanging on racks, as intimidating and distressing as in any of those Dutch genre paintings' cozy and domestic versions of the *momento mori*.

Albert, the thief, owns the restaurant, whatever that means. At the least, it is a necessary condition for much of the action because if he weren't the owner, the chef (Richard Bohringer) would either throw him out or, more likely, prevent him from entering in the first place. But there is also some likelihood of a nudge toward allegory—appetite, let us suppose, is the proprietor of the graces.

The guignol zest of the picture is what makes it interesting and saves it from these allegorical tendencies that get heavier and murkier as the action unfolds. It turns out that Michael's reading is not simply a bit of business but vital to the structure of the piece. The solitary figure with whom Georgina is having it off in pantries and storage rooms in the kitchen is the proprietor of a book depository, whatever that's supposed to be. It isn't a book store or any conventional kind of library, but only a huge warehouse full of books piled up apparently at random, but all of them marked with bookplates. When the wife and her lover are betrayed—as was inevitable, after all—they flee together, stark naked in a truck full of garbage and

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Chairman John E. Frohnmayer, defending the National Endowment for the Arts from an attack by Bill Kauffman in the *Wall Street Journal* in May: "As for those who *have* received government support—authors such as Alice Walker, John Irving, Gloria Naylor and Raymond Carver—certainly they have returned our investment in them, both in the tax revenues generated by their works and, more important, through the enriching quality of their prose."