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## Women's Studies, a divisional report

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**Women's Studies Retreat  
September 20, 1997  
Mulberry House**

**Women's Studies? — "A Divisional Report"**

In response to the task of saying something about the relationship between Women's Studies and the Humanities, we circulated two questions among our colleagues.

1. In what directions is women's studies/feminist studies taking your discipline?
2. What is the purpose of women's studies programs? Might women's studies eventually become so successful ( in raising women's issues in various disciplines, in establishing feminist scholarship as fully legitimate, in being recognized and respected --and integrated into "home" disciplines) so as to become obsolete?

We received the following responses.

**Cathy Dollard, History**

1. In 1986, Joan Scott advised the profession that historians should embrace gender as "a useful category of historical analysis." Scott argued that we needed to move beyond "Her-Story", simply inserting women into the established narrative, and instead ask questions that require consideration of the evolution of gender roles and the relationship of gender to more traditional categories of analysis (political, economic, military, intellectual, etc.). In the historical profession today, Scott's recommendations have gained prominence, if not dominance. At the AHA last January, 35 of 120 panels dealt with gender. About 1/3 of graduate students I know (a biased sample, admittedly) write about gender issues. The 3 youngest members of our department at Denison have focused their research on gender. And I emphasize "gender". Much of the most recent research brings men into the picture as well. Examples that come to mind are the crisis of masculinity in the French 3rd Republic in response to the new women's movement (Berenson), or the shifting meaning of the marriage contract in colonial Mexico (Kuznesof). Gender studies has become increasingly central to the training of historians over the last decade or so.

2. I guess I come from the Scott school. I believe the purpose of women's studies is twofold: to legitimate gender as a category of analysis and to encourage interdisciplinary study. The longer we're around, then, ideally, the more women's studies programs should focus on the latter. As long as we emphasize the importance of comparative & interdisciplinary studies, women's studies isn't in grave danger of becoming obsolete. It's what we all should be doing anyway, in my opinion -- with the old categories of politics, economics, military studies, diplomacy, as well as the "new" categories of race, class & gender. Women's studies has the advantage of coming late to the party, and can continually defend its existence as one of the unique institutional opportunities to engage in cohesive & coherent cross-disciplinary studies.

One final thought. I worked at a Barnes & Noble for a year and noticed that EVERY book dealing with women is shelved in women's studies. A book on women in the French Revolution would appear in WS, not French history; as would books by feminist literary critics, books about the evolution of the bikini, about prominent female scientists, etc. Only biographies appear elsewhere (in the biography section). This demonstrates the success of WS in the popular mindset, but also raises a problem. Books about manhood -- my earlier example about the crisis of masculinity in the 3rd Republic, would be shelved in history. So to the eye of the consumer looking to read about history, women still are not party of the story, they have no presence on the shelves. As men's studies gains prominence, more books about men WILL appear on those shelves, thus reifying the frustrating distinction that men count in history, women simply don't appear. It's an odd dilemma; one for which I don't have the solution, but maybe you do?

### **Barbara Fultner, Philosophy**

Feminism still has a long way to go in philosophy to becoming a fully legitimated sub-discipline. Nonetheless, I would argue that feminism is having an immensely positive influence on the field. In part its ghettoization has been due to the fact that much feminist philosophy has been influenced by continental (postmodern) thinkers and that it has been perceived as dealing with "women's issues" (as opposed to universal timeless truth or whatever). An encouraging change is the current development of the Society for Analytic Feminist Philosophy. Recent anthologies such as *A Mind Of One's Own* seek to present feminist scholarship not so much as an *additional* sub-field of philosophy as a *perspective* that can inform whatever one is philosophising about. Further examples of such work include Louise Anthony's work on Quine as feminist, Charlotte Witt's work, as well as Linda Alcoff's recent *Real Knowing*. Philosophical naturalism and its growing popularity have, to some extent, paved the way for this development. (Thus one sometimes hears that feminist epistemology, for example, says nothing new, nothing beyond what the likes of Quine or whoever have already said.) Yet one might also say that feminism has helped the popularity of naturalism... Similarly, the gradual bridging of the Analytic/Continental divide is facilitated by (as much as it probably contributes to growing acceptance of) feminism.

It may also be time for new readings of the canon. Some no longer insist that Descartes, say, is the arch-enemy of situated knowing. This is not a backslide to a disembodied knowing subject, but an attempt to develop a richer reading of some of the major philosophers. Feminists, it seems, are now in a position to give more considered readings of more "traditional" philosophical issues. A paradigm example may be Judith Butler's most current work. Butler's motivations are intensely political and most of her work till now has been firmly situated in gender studies. Her latest two books, however, focus on the theory informing her work on gender. *Excitable Speech*, which is about hate speech, is only secondarily about gender. This is not to say, of course, that we can rest easy now that gender issues have been resolved. But it does mean that feminist philosophy has reached a certain level of maturity that allows it to venture onto some new ground.

### Amy Green, History

I don't think--given the "retro" tendency of our culture--that the ideal state in which WMST becomes so normative it all but disappears as a "special," "protected" discipline will ever occur in our lifetime. Obsolescence, if only! At the same time, we need to remain aware of how it (WMST) echoes the tricky problem of addressing women's issues without at the same time according women "special" treatment or status, much like the inherent problem in "protective" legislation for female factory workers.

I also don't think that the academy has much to do with this socially entrenched problem; in fact, our role is to keep WMST programs alive, so that issues relating to women and power do not go dormant. Where do I think WMST at Denison should go?-- definitely a more inclusive notion of GENDER, an inquiry into maleness and male identity as well, not b/c men need to be given equal time (they already have had that and more). But, historically and theoretically, I don't feel women's studies is complete home, etc); it's also incomplete w/o understanding how male and female identities are constructed in terms of each other, and that such constructions can be either empowering or disempowering for women and men. To my mind, creating a gender studies program is *unnecessary* and potentially evil, co-opting women's studies and turning it away from some of its primary goals-- restoring women to history, assessing power relations along gender lines. I think more attention to gender studies can and should be achieved under the umbrella of WMST.

Those are my thoughts. Have a great retreat.

### Linda Krumholz, English

It seems to me that certain aspects feminist/women's studies are central to new directions in the discipline (English and American literary studies) because it is primarily in studies that consider themselves feminist (or in some cases, with the disputed term "womanist") that there is real coordination between an analysis of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Although these terms have become a kind of catch phrase of the nineties' academic, truly using these as categories of analysis together in complex and thoughtful ways is the most important contemporary work of feminism, in my opinion. Obviously I'm stealing this definition of feminism from others, such as bell hooks -- and some of these analyses, like hooks', are coming increasingly under the category of Cultural Studies, rather than feminist or women's studies. Nonetheless, the analysis of gender and sexuality, both of which have been foregrounded in women's studies, even when race and class have not, are so important that I would be hesitant to suggest that Women's Studies are in any way obsolete.

A great example of the directions of this analysis is in the book *Female Subjects in Black and White*, eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, and in earlier similar anthologies like Teresa de Lauretis' *Feminist Theory/Critical Theory* (is that what it's called?).

The thing that disturbs me in Women's Studies is when people evoke these terms more as catch phrases than as categories that involve research, study, and commitment to be understood and employed in analysis.

### **Sandy Runzo, English**

Feminist literary theory has been commodified to such an extent that graduate students (and some undergrads) learn how to "do" a feminist reading by following a checklist. For those of us who abhor (and resist) the ten-easy-steps approach to feminist literary studies, the question of what constitutes a feminist reading becomes more befuddling. Feminist studies/women's studies promotes this unclarity by encouraging a breakdown of those categories that used to seem so neatly defined: theory/literature, culture/text, art/trash. What distinguishes feminist studies from cultural studies? I don't know. From queer studies? I don't know. From multicultural studies? I don't know. Women's studies used to primarily encourage us to find so-called lost women writers and to examine images of women; these enterprises continue although women's studies now pushes us to scrutinize topics to which we had been oblivious or leery: whiteness, queerness, "the unnatural," women's complicity.

### **Anne Shaver, English**

Women's Studies continues to take my sub-discipline in a direction that seeks to answer Virginia Woolf's cry for foremothers. We find out texts by early women writers in English from the Middle Ages to the Pre-romantics of the late 18th century, especially those that have not been republished since their inception, or those that have been misrepresented (like Aemylia Lanyer, whose poetry was reprinted, unedited, by A.L. Rowse in the '70s as *The Poetry of Shakespeare's Dark Lady*.)

These excavations take us into cultural criticism, especially into a study of how women found public voice in a climate so adverse to women in the public sphere: what women wrote about, what approaches they took, what the circumstances of their lives were. It is significant that one of the most important books in the field is *Writing Women in Jacobean England*, by Barbara Lewalski, Kenan Professor of History and Literature at Harvard. I began this term's senior seminar with historian Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. Women' Studies has not taken us away from the texts, but has enriched our readings with history and biography, and has asked us to value texts in new ways.

Medieval and renaissance scholarship, from the evidence of many specialized conferences, major conference programs and publications, is well permeated with feminist concerns. Many of the best young men as well as women in the field are engaged in gender study. Yet I would not like to see Women' Studies as a discipline disappear for some generations yet. We need it for energizing ourselves and our students: it may be a ghetto of sorts, but its existence inspires cross-listed courses in disciplines, and its conferences and grant-backed efforts help feminists in disciplines where the perspective is more difficult to change find ways to do so.

### **Marlene Tromp, English**

When I was at UF working with several groups of feminist activists who were "unrelated" to the university, we spent a lot of time considering the role that activism outside the institution had on the institution itself. (I'm going to use the language of "inside"/"outside" here with the understanding that they really are inadequate; they fail to provide a full sense of the complexity of these issues, and they give a falsely dichotomous way of framing the subject, but its a gesture, at least.) They believed, with great conviction, that feminist work needed to be done

both outside and inside the academy. In part, they felt that the academy was always already complicit in the institutional structures that oppress women and, therefore, required the pressure of women working on the "outside" to force the boundaries in academia. Furthermore, they felt that academic women had a kind of privileged status, though they still experienced sexism and violence, and that women outside the academy grounded the discussion by returning it to the lives and experiences of women living beyond the limits of the "ivory tower."

At the same time, they also believed that the work being done in the academy was vital to rethinking activism "outside." The cutting-edge scholarship gave them new ways of imagining their goals and vision. Furthermore, they saw the significance of the opportunity that feminists in the academy had to reach young women and impact the way people thought in academia, but also those who were emerging into the "real world" after getting a degree. Significantly, they also believed that we had access to such resources as to be a valuable "provider" for feminists outside the academy.

Though I think not all institutions have such a reciprocal relationship with activists "outside" the university, I think it provides a metaphor for the way in which Women's Studies and our own home disciplines might operate in the institution. Women's Studies provides a pressure within the academy, and, thus, not only does important work within its own walls, but also reshapes other disciplines. Because women are always at the center of the work they do, they offer a sure site for the kind of "single-minded" work that activists do. In addition, disciplines put pressure women's studies as well, with all the important intellectual work that's being done and by funneling in exciting new theory and ideas. Furthermore, the other disciplines provide valuable resources for a Women's Studies program--teaching, energy, funding, etc. I think this relationship closely mirrors the one I saw between the activist community and the institution--a vital and revitalizing relationship for both.

I laughed out loud when I read the second question. Not because it was foolish, or even because I'm darkly cynical. As a person who studies language and pop culture, it seems that the likelihood of being able to "erase" the need for women's studies, even if programs are doing the most amazing intellectual and social change work in the academy and beyond, is so minimal. These are patterns we have built into the fabric of so much of who and what we are. It would require radical alteration of literally every aspect of the economic, social, and political structure. For me, that doesn't mean change isn't possible--I think we make inspiring changes all the time, and it's precisely that kind vision that shapes much of my work--but eradication of the problem? Not bloody likely. I think we'll always need activists on the "outside," and we'll always need Women's Studies.