BECOMING A WOMEN'S STUDIES SCHOLAR: FROM STARDUST TO SECTION FIFTEEN

Thelma McCormack

Ce n'est pas mon intention, par cette présentation, de provoquer des crises de nostalgie auprès de mes collègues, qui, pour la plupart, l'ont déjà entendue auparavant, ou d'ennuyer les étudiants avec toute cette préhistoire.

Bien au contraire, j'aimerais passer en revue mes expériences intellectuelles datant d'une période pré-féministe, du temps où les femmes enseignantes faisaient tout leur possible pour éviter le piège classique (ne jamais enseigner un cours sur la famille, ou avoir quoi que ce soit à faire avec l'étude des enfants) au concept d'étude de la femme comme exemple de liberté académique.

Et enfin j'aurai quelque chose à dire sur trois tendances contemporaines: des détours dans la théorie féministe; la séparation entre la politique féministe et l'érudition féministe; et la naissance d'une érudition nouvelle issue des hommes.

I'm very honoured to be asked to give the keynote address tonight, although I would not have thought of myself as quite so eminent. Most of us here are first-generation feminist scholars. We all began together; there were no Mozarts and no Salieris. The legacy we leave to the next generation of feminist scholars is that they will cover the same ground faster and with less *Sturm und Drang* than we did. So, while I deeply appreciate the accolade, it does properly belong to all of us who began the work of reconstructing modern knowledge.

What we should be celebrating tonight is the Charter of Rights, Section 15. This week will be a famous moment in Canadian history, especially in women's history. The Charter says every individual is:

(E)qual before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination, and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Many of you in this room played a key role in educating our male legislators about gender equality *under* as well as *before* the law. Next year when we meet again, we may not be so euphoric after we see how the courts interpret Section 15, but at least tonight we can sit back and bask in the achievement. As Einstein said on the eve of testing his famous equation, "If it works, Germany will take credit for it. If it fails, they will blame the Jews." Here too, if it works, men will take credit for it. If it fails, they will blame us.

There is another section of the Charter which is of special interest to us as well. Section 2(b) guarantees freedom of expression. "Everyone," it says, "has the following fundamental freedoms:" *Freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication.*

For those of us in universities, freedom of expression is academic freedom and, as I have argued elsewhere, Women's Studies is a form of academic freedom.[1] It is a right, not a privilege – a constitutional right that does not have to be balanced against other competing rights such as due process.

Traditionally, we think of academic freedom as the right of any scholar to hold dissident or unpopular views, to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies, to stand up against what John Stuart Mill and Hariette Taylor Mill called "the tyranny of the majority."

Academic freedom also means the marketplace of ideas, a forum that cherishes and protects diversity. Our feminist theories, our doctrines are profoundly radical. We question two of the most sacred institutions of modern society: the nuclear family and the division of labour. Unless we have, then, within academia a culture of tolerance, we don't have a university, we don't have a vital community of scholars.

Finally, we think of academic freedom as an educational process which contributes to the development of creative and critical minds, a process which actively confronts major conflicts of ideas and ideology without fear, though not without abhorrence. We do not protect students from ideas; we do not remove books on rape from library shelves.

In the United States the Senate passed a bill which would withhold government funds if schools taught the doctrine of "secular humanism." No one, however, knows what secular humanism is, and it can be interpreted any way a principal or community group wants to, including Darwinian evolution and modern feminism. Academic freedom means, then, teaching people how to think, how to rise above those habits of self-censorship that silence our protests.

In the twentieth century, however, this classical model of civil liberties and freedom of expression is constrained by the giant media corporations. The censorship they impose is partly a matter of economic self-interest, partly a matter of rigidities in corporate bureaucracies, and partly a matter of a commercial mentality where decisions are guided by ratings.

Lately our universities have become microcosms of that world. Our curriculum gatekeepers have become less and less innovative, our senates have become more and more sclerotic, while our Provincial Ministers of Education do their body counts: How many students? What is the critical mass? The result is that although we don't have the R.C.M.P. "bugging" our classrooms, we do have a kind of organizational censorship that limits access.

Academic freedom is access, and for us that means Women's Studies programs.

Women's Studies, then, is not a temporary adjustment to correct an existing gender bias in our knowledge; it is not a series of courses that lie outside departments. Nor is it a women's intellectual ghetto. It is a discipline that stands on its own, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. It is not redundant, not replicated anywhere else in the university. Indeed, it is a university within a university as we create our own admissions criteria, adjust our teaching formats to the lives of women, and set our own standards of excellence. But if all we had was *one* course to offer, *one* book to read, and *one* student, Women's Studies would still be a measure of the academic freedom within the University. In that great liberal tradition we love to bash, the argument for us as a program is strongest, most logically compelling, when we are numerically weakest.

* * *

I want to turn now to my own discovery that the personal is political. I grew up in a world that was very romantic. I once had an evening gown that was a copy of a ball dress in "Gone with the Wind." Our high school dances all ended with the orchestra playing "Stardust." It never crossed my mind that I wouldn't marry. The only difference between my mother and myself on that point was that I thought thirty would be about the right age to get married. She thought six months after I graduated from college wouldn't be a moment too soon.

That romantic world of "Stardust" and white gloves had behind it the atrocity of illegal abortion. No one thought of abortion as murder. The shame was in the pregnancy; abortion was the punishment. We all knew about abortion: about those that were self-induced, about the backstreets and kitchen-table abortionists and we knew, too, that with the right connections arrangements could be made for you to go secretly to an out-of-town clinic. When I was in college I used to have a recurrent nightmare of telling my mother I was pregnant. The reality was that I hadn't slept with anyone yet – the magic age for that, I had decided, was twenty-three – but that is how powerful the fear was and how much a part of our consciousness and unconsciousness it was. So, the reason you see so many menopausal and post-menopausal women out on the pro-choice lines is that we were women without choice.

Behind the sentimental *schmaltz* of "Stardust" was a patriarchal world. Men were the center of the universe. Legally, politically and economically, they had the privilege and authority. Yet, ironically, they were powerless, for this was the Great Depression of the 1930's when millions of men were unemployed and millions more had lost hope. I've talked before about the male imagery of the Depression.[2] The pictures in our heads and in textbooks are always of men: men in breadlines, men lining up for welfare, men sleeping in parks, men loitering in doorways, men riding the rails, men selling apples, men bumming for coffee. We heard from our mothers, aunts, teachers and women's magazines how devastating it was to a man's pride for him to be unemployed or on welfare. And, apparently, it was, for what women worried about was not domestic violence or sexual abuse, but suicide – the suicide of husbands, brothers, fathers and sons.

When I think back to that world of the 1930's, the question I have is whether it is correct to call it a 'patriarchal' society. When men are powerless on such a scale, when they are victims of a system, does it make sense to describe it as a 'patriarchal' social order? Because of this experience I've always been interested in the concept of patriarchy. In my own work, I've differentiated between traditional patriarchy and modern patriarchy. And, within the latter, between *instrumental* and *expressive* patriarchy, or, if you like, between institutional discrimination and symbolic sexism in our cultural lives.[3] But now I think we have to look at the vertical axis, at the variations in male power which make for genuine experiential differences. And, in this work, we need to specify our indicators of power and powerlessness with more sensitivity.

Finally, despite the Depression, the period of the 1930's was probably the last best years of the public school system. The classes were the right size. The schools, which reflected neighbourhoods that were more socially heterogeneous than they are today, were really and naturally desegregated. And our teachers seemed very secure about the knowledge they were transmitting to us.

In that school system, there was no doubt that girls read better, spelled better, wrote better, did math and geography better than the boys. Primary school was a female domain, a sweet taste of matriarchy. And we were taught a great deal about women who had distinguished themselves in politics, sports, science and the arts. We were not, as Dale Spender apparently was, unfamiliar with our past or without role models.[4] Our aspirations were very high, and since I taught the boy next door to do long-division, I was confident that there was nothing he could do that I couldn't do better.

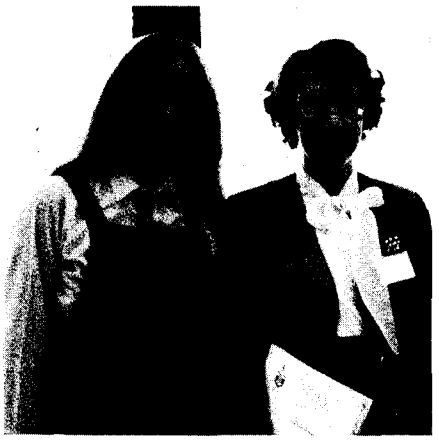
When I read about the education of women like Virginia Woolf or Simone de Beauvoir, I experience something like culture schock. The experience of European women with respect to formal education – the number of years, the social assumptions of a private school system, the lack of everyday interaction with boys in sex-segregated schools – is very different from ours. And it accounts, in part, for some of the differences between their feminisms and ours.

I am concerned that some of our students are so impressed by the erudition of European writers that they are not listening to themselves, and are becoming branch-plant feminists. Branch-plant feminism has a certain sophisticated intellectual chic, but it is ultimately alienating, and, like a branch-plant economy, it is, in the long run, impoverishing. For some time now I've enjoyed working with Marjorie Cohen, whose Ph.D. dissertation is based on an analysis of the economic activity of women in Ontario during the pre-industrial period and the later transition. Marjorie is questioning a model that has come out of studies of European economic development by feminist economic historians, and she is casting doubt on the universality of European models just as we learned to cast doubt on the universality of male models.

Well, so much for the pre-history of a feminist scholar. Eventually the Depression ended and World War II began. The powerless men became absent men. I decided I had better get married, but my mother changed her tune, too, as she told my sister and me that we were not to get married until the war was over.

* * *

I want to turn now to the future and to the shape of feminist scholarship to come. I'm going to suggest three trends. First,



Thelma McCormack (right) with Liz Brady

we are moving from a period of Grand Theory to a more modest middle-range theory. Second, there is a growing divergence between the politics of feminism and its scholarship. And, third, there is the emergence of a new scholarship by men within a feminist framework.

Great movements always begin with Grand Theory. And that was true, too, of the women's movement where a number of distinguished women wrote sweeping and comprehensive outlines of our oppression, and gave us that awesome splendour of a new Jerusalem, the concept of liberation. It was, on the whole, a brilliant, visionary, inspirational – sometimes, whacky – literature which helped to set agendas for discussion, political education, research and social action. What they accomplished was an intellectual transformation that can never be reversed.

But there is a natural evolution in the development of knowledge, and the first phase of Grand Theory is over. In the next decade we're going to be dealing with ideas on a less dramatic scale. Our own voices are going to change as we become more self-critical, and surround our statements with the usual academic disclaimers and caveats.

During this period of movement from Grand Theory to middle-range, we can expect some tensions between teaching and research, and between students and faculty. Our students who enrol in women's studies programs are searching for a large organizing framework; they still want ideology and the emotional fix they get from it. They seem to go through this phase faster than we did, but there is a lag as we grapple with a very different type of problem and a different solution. There will be, then, a kind of generational distancing which I don't think we can avoid. The older pattern of jointly exploring a new field, of teaching each other – a model we equated with sisterhood – may become a golden memory.

That is the bad news. The good news is that we will be dealing with problems we created ourselves when we began that great historic demolition of sexist knowledge. I'm going to cite just two examples: the necessity of developing a coherent theory of human nature, and the problem of the two spheres.

A feminist concept of human nature is fundamental for our knowledge. Whether we are working in the humanities or the social sciences, we make statements about our own natures. It ought to be something we can all agree on. Yet that is not the case. Having declared that biology is not destiny, we have failed to agree on whether anything is destiny, and if there is, what it is.

One group holds that when we threw out Freud, we threw out the baby with the bath. We should have rejected Freud and kept the psychoanalytic model. Others, however, regard any psychoanalytic model, Freudian or post-Freudian, as too determinist. They have emphasized instead the influence of environment and lifelong socialization. When I was doing my paper on androgyny, I realized for the first time just how far apart the two perspectives are.[5] Yet it was also clear that each had its own heuristic strength. The first accounts for personality development and sexual identity; the second for sex-roles and situational behaviour. The first gives primacy to infant experience and parental models; the second, to development and the impact of non-familial relationship. The first focuses on bonding; the second on relationships.

How do we integrate these? Or will we just continue down this schizophrenic road holding both perspectives?

The second area is the dual spheres one. When I was working on political sociology, I was confronted by a sexist literature that was particularly traumatic, since most of the big names in this field were old friends of mine, and some of them had been my professors in graduate school.[6] It was a personal crisis because I couldn't believe I had been so stupid not to see their bias, or that they had been so mendacious.

Nevertheless, I encountered empirical evidence suggesting that there were two political cultures: a male political culture organized around power and a female political culture organized around status. The bias in the literature was that there was one culture, the male culture, and the female political patterns reflected an underdeveloped form of political behaviour. In my analysis I pointed out that there were not only two distinctly different cultures, but that both were flawed, that the female preoccupation with status was as dysfunctional as the male preoccupation with power. And, further, that the division between the two cultures created a still deeper pathology for the polity.

Carol Gilligan in her recent book, *In a Different Voice*, also discovered that men and women, boys and girls live in different social realities and have different rules for resolving conflicts and different understandings of justice.[7] And she, too, concluded that it was a sexist bias to assume only the male model as the normal one. But there the similarity ends. For what she wants is to change the minus sign attached to the women's sphere to a plus, to recognize that the way women approach problems is more intelligent and humane than the male models.

The difference between us is a very important one for any kind of future theory building. The crux of it is the meaning of dependency, of marginality, of being the other. I was really quite shocked when I read the Gilligan book because I thought we had put that issue to rest, that it was part of a more defensive posture we took in the early days. I now wonder if there is something archetypal about the two sphere gender configuration that I am missing . . .

I want to turn now to the second trend, the growing separation between feminist politics and feminist scholarship. To some extent this, too, is an inevitable development. There are, for example, some issues like affirmative action where everything that can be said, has been said, and efforts to "study" the problem should be seen as diversionary, an old strategy to delay implementation.

Meanwhile, many of us want to get on with the newer problems which are less immedately political, and to get on with them in a nonpoliticized environment. What I have in mind here is the kind of feminist frameworks that were derived from politics within the movement – Radical feminism, Socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, Liberal feminism. These served a very useful purpose in an earlier stage of our development, but I think they have ceased to be useful categories now except

as descriptions of different political perspectives. Most women doing feminist scholarship can't be classified in terms of these political scenarios. They move very broadly across these lines; some, like me, tend to be very eclectic. And as we grope our way through some problem, none of us wants to be given invidious labels. Again, these may still be useful ways of thinking about feminist politics, but within the research community they add nothing and may be confusing.

The separation between feminist scholarship and feminist activism is not accidental. It is related to the pressures within political movements to grow, to increase membership by reaching out to new constituencies. Let me cite two recent illustrations.

A year or so ago, the Liberal government in its waning days introduced a new Bill on family reform that would have established no-fault divorce. It was the very Bill that the Status of Women Commission had recommended many years earlier. But there was no celebration. On the contrary, the reaction by feminist organizations was overwhelmingly negative. They pointed out that men who were already defaulting on child-support payments could continue to do so, while the new crop of male ex-spouses would feel free to renege on their parental obligations.

As far as I could see these and similar comments about the probable consequences of the legislation were correct. I've heard many bitter stories from divorced women who had raised dependent children twice disadvantaged: once by a sixty-three cent dollar, and once by former husbands who stopped sending money in spite of numerous court orders.

The only trouble was that the feminist leaders sounded like Phyllis Schlafly. Their criticism was based on a defense of the nuclear family, and on the assumption that it would, or could be patched up. Feminist research, however, makes no such assumptions. The social policy built on a critique of the nuclear family arrives at a very different political position, as Margrit Eichler's work has demonstrated.

In an effort to recruit new constituencies, political movements in our kind of system tend to fragment their programs and break them up into separate and single issues, and to find new coalitions around the particular issues. Feminists have been moving toward both the peace movement and the environmental movement as if they were one, even though members of the peace or environmental movements might not be too sympathetic to day care or equal pay for work of equal value or reproductive rights.

The most extreme example, however, which illustrates the problem was an anti-pornography conference held in Toronto during the Fraser Committee Hearings. It brought together Andrea Dworkin, Pauline Bart and Catherine MacKinnon with the most reactionary anti-choice Reaganite groups. The feminists who cooperated took a calculated risk that the coalition politics around the issue of pornography would not damage the credibility of the movement. But it did, for it was one of the factors that led to a coalition of feminists and civil libertarians.

There are other examples I could cite. My general point is that feminist scholarship and feminist politics are marching to different drums. We will be criticized for being too ivory-tower, and that is a distinct possibility. Wherever possible, we should keep the lines of communication open, to collaborate, but I think we should have no illusions about the different demands made upon us. And I think we have a special responsibility to see that action-oriented research meets acceptable standards.

The third trend concerns feminist research done by men. Lately, I keep meeting men who identify themselves as feminists. Now, to me a male feminist is like a Communist banker. Some of these men are simply getting on what they perceive is a bandwagon. If there is money available for research on women, why shouldn't they have a piece of the action? Some of them think they understand feminism better than we do since nature made men better at these high-order intellectual functions. All you have to do is read a book by Juliet Mitchell and you're an expert, ready to give courses, supervise Ph.D. dissertations and edit journals. Some of the men think they don't even have to do that. They already have the tune; it is just a matter of picking up the words.

Having said this, however, I think there is a younger generation of male students who is free of these prejudices and male *hubris*. They have something to offer, but it will be of a very different nature from the knowledge created by women and for women. The problem I mentioned earlier about powerless men in a patriarchal society is one I would like to see men write about. In any case, I am persuaded that in the future we will be accepting men into our Women's Studies programs. They won't be breaking down the doors, but the few who come may enrich our scholarship with a different kind of knowledge but free of a pejorative sexist bias.

* * *

These, then, are the three trends I see in this never ending process of becoming a Women's Studies scholar: the shift from Grand Theory to middle-range; the separation of feminist scholarship and feminist politics; and the emergence of a new scholarship by men. Up until now, I haven't mentioned what I regard as a regressive trend – the pressure to go back to disciplinary models and away from interdisciplinary research. This trend is the result of our economic cutbacks and of the new Draconian hurdles to getting tenure and promotion. When the devaluation of feminist research is compounded with the devaluation of interdisciplinary research, we are going to have a lot of brilliant young women whose careers end before they get started.

We are going to have our own political battle within universities to save our younger colleagues and to save our students. I would be happy if tonight those of us who got tenure by doing nothing more than avoiding what universities used to call "moral turpitude," those of us who became full professors by doing nothing more than producing an offer from another university, would pledge ourselves to all of those here without permanent status or professional recognition – and who well deserve both – to all of the future women who are going to make their own intellectual journey.

My pilgrimage has not been lonely or alone. I have had wonderful companions at York and other universities. I've had the inspiration of two daughters who declared themselves "person" at the age of eighteen months. I've had the benefit of our extraordinary feminist journals – *Atlantis, RFR, Canadian Woman Studies, Fuse, Status of Women News* – that have demonstrated a model of communication blending commitment and professional competence. They don't always come out on time which only proves that a collective of women is not *Time* magazine where men were writers and women were researchers. Then there have been the CRIAW conferences and special sessions set aside at the Learneds.

To borrow from the rhetoric of the 1960's, it has been one great teach-in, and one wonderful love-in!

[1]Thelma McCormack, "Two (b) or Not Two (b): Feminism and Freedom of Expression." Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies (in print).

[2]Thelma McCormack, "The Professional Ethic and the Spirit of Sexism," *Atlantis*, 5, No. 1.

[3]Thelma McCormack, "Development with Equity," in *Women and World Change*, ed. Naomi Black and Ann Baker Cottrell (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981).

[4]Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

[5]Thelma McCormack, "The Androgyny Debate," *Atlantis*, 9, No. 1 (1983).

[6]Thelma McCormack, "Toward a Nonsexist Perspective on Social and Political Change," *in Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science*, ed. Marcia Millman and Rosebeth Moss Kanter (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1975).

[7]Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1982).

Thelma McCormack is currently professor of Sociology at York University and president-elect of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association. Her publications include work on feminist theory and mass media studies. She is working on a feminist approach to civil liberties.