

# IN SEARCH OF FEMINIST REFEREES

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*Atlantis, une revue multidisciplinaire dédiée à la publication de textes critiques et créatifs sur des sujets concernant les femmes, a vu le jour dans l'automne 1975. Le besoin pour une telle revue avait été clairement indiqué par le développement considérable de cours d'étude de la femme sur les campus des universités canadiennes, par les réticences démontrées par des revues bien établies à publier du matériel sur des problèmes ayant trait aux femmes, ainsi que par le besoin urgent de lectures pour les cours.*

*Bien des choses ont changé depuis l'apparition d'Atlantis il y a dix ans. D'autres revues acceptent maintenant des articles sur des questions concernant les femmes. Atlantis est maintenant aussi une revue "bien établie," soutenue par le CRSHC, et le nombre de textes soumis pour examen a augmenté de façon tout à fait considérable. Ma contribution à l'atelier va inclure une description des changements de format et de contenu subis par Atlantis avec le passage des années, les caprices du processus d'arbitrage dans une revue multidisciplinaire, ainsi que les limitations et les possibilités présentées par la façon dont Atlantis conduit maintenant ses opérations.*

I want to address the issue of the referee system which is used in assessing submissions to established, SSHRCC-funded journals such as *Atlantis* and to indicate ways in which the referee process poses problems for a journal which is cooperatively edited and multidisciplinary in scope. The problems of assessment and selection are a continuous concern to members of the *Atlantis* editorial board and should be of concern to Women's Studies scholars who wish to have their work published.

*Atlantis* was founded in 1975 as a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary journal for creative and critical articles on topics relating to women. Taking advantage of funds made available for International Women's Year, a group of women at Acadia University under the inspired direction of Donna Smyth, solicited

articles and literally pasted together the first issue. Many of us in the first editorial collective had participated in the epic struggle to establish a Women's Studies course at Acadia University in 1972-73.

Our initial goal for *Atlantis* was to publish Canadian material for the use of our growing number of women's studies students. We also expected to serve as a forum for feminist scholars who were unable to get their work published in traditional journals. Ultimately, we wanted *Atlantis* to reflect the cutting edge of feminist scholarship in Canada. Although we did not realize it at the time, we were an extremely fortunate editorial board. The explosion of feminist scholarship which coincided with the founding of *Atlantis* meant that we were never short of material to publish and rarely had to worry about disciplinary balance: in fact, we had an embarrassment of riches.

The early *Atlantis* years were exhilarating. We had limited funds and unlimited apathy from our host institution; but, at the same time, we had no formal referee process and no one to account to other than our readers. Decisions as to what to publish were taken by the editorial collective – consensus was easily reached because we gradually began to think alike on most questions of policy. We agreed that, ideally, each article should be feminist in its thrust, multidisciplinary in its appeal and readable. We wanted each issue to include a sufficiently wide range of articles to maintain our multidisciplinary audience. The early referee process was wonderfully flexible. When, for instance, Joan MacFarland submitted her excellent article on "Economics and Women," I sent a copy to a male colleague for his reaction. "That's a good piece," he announced. "Why is it being submitted to you?" That was sufficient endorsement for us, who were already sold on Joan's analysis. We often did considerable editorial work on articles submitted to us – especially if those articles came from students for whom we felt a special responsibility. In the early years, there was also very little time lag between submission and publication. When, for example, we were putting together our issue on research and women for CRIAW in 1978 we had not received Lorna Marsden's permission to publish her piece on Women and Sociology. We phoned her, typed her article for camera ready copy and pasted it down – all within the space of one rainy Saturday afternoon.

As funding moved from *Ad Hoc* to SSHRCC, *Atlantis* began to change. The anonymous referee process increased the time between receiving an article and its publication and offered scope for delays and misunderstandings. It also necessitated a more formal bureaucracy to undertake the documentary process. Acadia University was not enthusiastic about providing more support. Fortunately for *Atlantis*, Mount Saint Vincent offered to help. Thanks to the Mount, we are now efficiently typeset and have an executive assistant to keep the paper moving. Nevertheless, the referee process is in place and, despite its value as a means of assessing the growing volume of material sent to *Atlantis*, it does offer some perils. Let me explain.

From its inception, *Atlantis* has remained open to all feminist perspectives – radical, socialist, liberal and even, on occasion, conservative. It has been equally open to all disciplinary, as well as interdisciplinary contributions. In weaving such a wide net, we certainly keep ourselves open to "playful pluralism," but we also run the risk of eliminating the more imaginative articles which may fall through the gaps between various theoretical and methodological webs. The holes are sometimes enormous.

When an article is received in the *Atlantis* office the editors decide who is best qualified to referee the piece, ideally someone whose interests reflect those of the author. We often send the article to someone in a cognate discipline to see what the reaction is. Invariably the article gets a mixed response: one referee says 'publish as is' while another says 'borderline' or 'unacceptable.' The editors, one or more of whom have also read the article, have their own opinions. The board then has to decide whether the letter accompanying the referee reports should be couched in negative or positive terms.

An even "worse case scenario" occurs when the editors like an article and both referees turn thumbs down. The gap between our thinking on what is useful for *Atlantis* and what passes for good feminist scholarship in the wider Canadian Studies community is particularly disturbing. It is not that we are always right and our referees wrong. Indeed, in several cases we have been saved from making a narrow-minded decision by a sensitive and informed referee. Yet, on the whole, a disciplinary piece is more likely to pass the hurdles than the more daring one and

applied feminism, such as a textual critique of a male novelist, the biography of a found woman, or the content analysis of a women's magazine are more readily accepted than the tentative attempt to develop new theoretical insights.

In response to this problem, we have added the *ad feminam* section which allows unfinished thoughts and unusual methodologies to get into print. But this does not save everyone. In areas where methodological issues have become nothing less than a fetish, utterly appalling developments can occur. I have seen a good acticle – carefully researched, well written, internally integral – rendered virtually unacceptable by a desperate author attempting to address the criticisms of referees who come from the same discipline but who hold a totally different methodological perspective.

I am also aware that Women's Studies scholars experience similar frustrating experiences with the referee process used by SSHRCC. Just because we are scholars in Women's Studies does not guarantee, it seems, a single vision of what constitutes valuable and/or acceptable research. Even our most manipulative selection of referees cannot produce harmony in the land of Women's Studies. Hence, our "playful pluralism," so fruitful in its encouragement of various disciplinary and interdisciplinary pursuits, can come back to haunt us when we make submissions to editorial boards and granting agencies.

The solution to the problem of circling the square that pits disciplinary perspectives and the comforts of traditional methodologies against the feminist imagination and interdisciplinary scholarship is not readily apparent. One approach, frequently resorted to by multidisciplinary journals, is to focus on a particular topic, thus permitting various perspectives to be aired. This, of course, does not accommodate the solitary effort germinating in the intellectual womb of the pioneering feminist scholar. Another solution is to subvert the referee process with its bureaucratic notions of anonymous referees and objective excellence. By insisting that our names be attached to our assessments and that those closest to our own thinking be asked to assess our articles, we will perhaps be closer to the feminist ideal of a cooperative, supportive scholarship.

Ultimately, time itself may solve the problem by forging a common Women's Studies perspective that some claim must



Margaret Conrad (right) with Clara Thomas, Gerda Wekerle and Sylvie Arend.

accompany a mature feminist vision. Or conversely, several academic journals will emerge to accommodate various feminist positions. In the meantime, we must confront the question: How can Women's Studies scholarship maintain its disciplinary integrity, reach out to embrace the enriching insights of other disciplines, and achieve acceptance by feminist scholars and by those whose masculinist world we would hope to transform? (With questions like that no one can say we lack ambition.)

On a practical level, referees should remember when assessing material the forum for which they are doing their assessment. What may be inappropriate for a disciplinary journal may be just the item for a Women's Studies publication. I am not suggesting here that we should accept material that is obviously in some way inadequate. Rather, I am urging referees to keep an open mind to the ideas that may be valuable to Women's Studies and must be developed in a Women's Studies forum before being launched in the outside world. It goes without saying that feminist scholars should make themselves aware of various methodological perspectives and keep up-to-date on feminist scholarship. If we do not, we jeopardize the ideal of a genuinely interdisciplinary feminist scholarship. Referees can also offer constructive criticism and indicate how embryonic ideas might be further developed. I have seen

such constructive criticism improve many articles, to the benefit of both the authors and the field of Women's Studies.

Scholars in Women's Studies should bear in mind the bureaucratic morass in which they might become engulfed and respond as they would to any annoying inanimate object: work around it. Suggest appropriate referees for your work, send follow up letters if you do not hear back about the fate of your paper, respond sensibly to the suggestions of referees and editors, and never give up. Perseverance usually pays. The personal touch works with Women's Studies editors as it does with everybody else. If you feel that your work has been inadequately considered do not just complain to your friends: complain to one of the members of the editorial board. We cannot respond to your concerns if we are not aware of them until they get back to us second hand. If you feel uncertain about approaching editors directly, have a member of the advisory board do it for you. The number of scholars in the field is still sufficiently small to let the message get through. Finally, if all else fails, offer to edit a special issue. That will enable you to determine who referees what and give you a good idea of the pleasures and pains of publishing in the still unstructured and exciting world of Women's Studies in Canada.

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