

VIVE LA FUSS*

Judith Finlayson

A la lecture d'un discours prononcé en 1916 sur les difficultés des premières étudiantes en médecine à l'Université de Toronto, l'auteure comprit soudain ce que les hommes veulent. Les pionnières qu'elles furent n'étaient autorisées à être présentes aux cours que si "elles ne faisaient pas d'histoires". Les hommes ne veulent pas que les femmes dérangent leur confort: c'est ainsi qu'ils peuvent ignorer les besoins des femmes, et continuer à être protégés de la peur de leur propre insuffisance. Les femmes qui ne font pas d'"histoires" condamnent les hommes à être aliénés d'une grande partie de l'expérience humaine.

Just because Freud immortalized the question, "What do women want?" doesn't mean that men have a monopoly on confusion concerning the needs of the opposite sex. Women have remained consistently baffled by the often conflicting demands men make of us, perhaps best represented by some of their fantasies concerning the feminine ideal. The lady at dinner who transformed herself into a tiger in the bedroom has traditionally summed up the masculine dream. Injecting a note of realism, I would add that she should also aspire to the role of willing household slave.

Despite the challenge of juggling all these balls at once, I have always felt that there is something more fundamental that men as a group have wanted from women. Until recently, its exact nature persisted in eluding me. But when I discovered a speech delivered in 1916, which outlined the difficulties experienced by the first female students at the University of Toronto's School of Medicine, I knew I'd struck paydirt. These female pioneers were only allowed to attend lectures on: "the condition that whatever happened, they

would make no fuss."

I was all but overcome by the shock of recognition. To make no fuss says more about what men want from women than any single statement. Men do not wish to be reminded, however briefly, that women may not be happy with our second class status. They prefer to protect themselves from the painful experience of collective masculine guilt.

Even the most cursory examination of myth reveals that a great deal of it addresses itself to this topic, warning as it does of the dire consequences to mankind (I use the term deliberately) when women get out of hand. Pandora, for instance, a woman who made a fuss by opening her box and unleashing havoc which destroyed the world. (More precisely the masculine status quo).

Men don't want women to rock their comfortable boat. So long as the second sex doesn't make a fuss, men can comfortably continue to deny the reality of our needs. I remember, for instance, a woman advertising executive describing the difficulties she experienced trying to persuade her male colleagues that depicting women singing and dancing through the household chores was ridiculous. They couldn't accept her point of view because they really believed that their wives enjoyed cleaning the oven.

Clearly, this illusion has practical value. Its motivation, like that of similar myths, stems from more profound needs. If a woman suddenly hands her husband the Easy-Off and tells him to do it himself, he is likely to experience alarming feelings of powerlessness. Without doubt, this is the feeling that men try hardest to avoid. Consequently, their great fear of women who make a fuss.

This fear of female fuss carries over to the workplace where women's so-

called "emotionalism" is a constant concern. If we allow our feelings to show, women are dismissed as "unprofessional." And yet my own experience suggests that men are at least as emotional.

Just yesterday, a woman told me of encountering a male colleague who was practically in tears over a conflict with another man. "But he won't accept my authority," he wailed. At one point, I was involved in a business relationship with a man who used to jump up and down and yell on a fairly regular basis. However, when I once raised my voice because of a serious problem which resulted from his failure to follow through, he accused me of "screaming" and "harassing" him.

Clearly, I was a woman who made a fuss. But in this context, the real meaning of making a fuss is the refusal to protect men from fears about their inadequacy. In the short term, women who don't make a fuss may be doing men a favor, but ultimately the practice has a disastrous effect. Men who are consistently shielded from painful feelings are alienated from significant aspects of the human experience.

Men may feel damned as women make a fuss. But the truth of the matter is that they are damned if we don't. Vive la fuss.

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Feminist Judith Finlayson, a Toronto freelance writer, contributes to a popular weekly column "Between the Sexes" in the Toronto Globe and Mail. She is also a regular contributor to the Homemaker's Magazine where her two major series "Post-Liberation Sexuality" and "Women and Power" have appeared.