

# 'We're not here for Rap Sessions'

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Sarah Murdoch

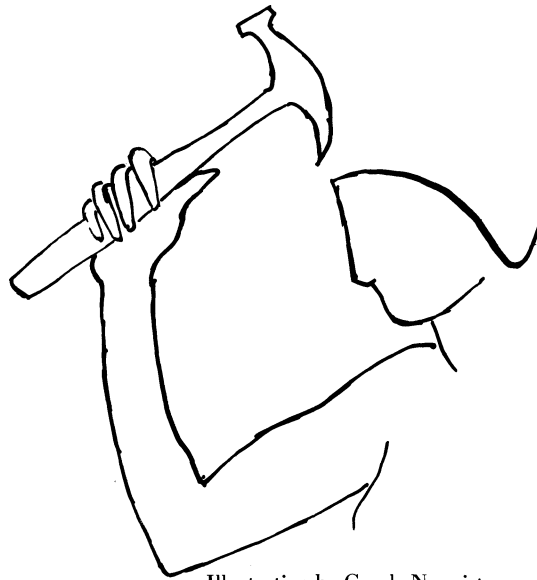


Illustration by Carole Nyquist

Professor Kathryn Morgan is teaching to a full house. Her tone is conversational, frequently punctuated with broad smiles. She has a friendly, open face, is sturdily built, and is wearing a below-the-calf blue peasant dress. Morgan looks for all the world like a teacher of rug-hooking or macramé. In fact, she is a philosopher who specializes in life's 'messy' issues. On this day, she is providing an ethical analysis of sexual infidelity.

Eight women have gathered in a New College seminar room for a discussion of housework, using as a springboard two essays offering a Marxist perspective of domestic labour. One participant says an economic approach is all very well but there can't be social change until women stand together. 'Women hate each other because they're all fighting for men,' she reflects. 'It's very hard for women to love other women when they don't even love themselves,' another observes. The talk moves back on topic but, because the class is small, the mood remains relaxed and informal.

A well-worn doctor's bag sits on the long table in Professor Edward Shorter's class. The student who is giving the day's talk has done her homework. There is little she doesn't know about modern day abortion techniques. As she speaks, sharp, shiny instruments from the bag are passed around the table — speculum, tenaculum, dilator, curette. She also passes around a book containing photographs of the products of first and second trimester abortion. Next, Shorter takes over with a historical look at how women aborted in times past.

Women's studies and this whole baffling question of sex and gender, have evolved from the early days of 'sisterhood' and liberation, through the thumb-sucking, self-contemplative early '70s to emerge, in recent years, as a legitimate area for academic scrutiny. From a once-a-week evening lecture series nine years ago, the U of T Women's Studies Program at New College has grown into a full-fledged interdisciplinary field of study with more than 30 courses offered in its calendar this year, most of them cross-listings from arts and science departments. Some, like the History of Protest, Psychoanalytic Approaches to the Study of Politics, Reproductive Biology, and Morality, Medicine and Law do not deal primarily with women. Others, on women writers, feminist theory, human sexuality, the anthropology of sex roles, hit dead on. The Introduction to Women's Studies core course, aimed at the theories of women's liberation, the history of women in 19th and 20th century Europe and North America and women's contribution to the arts, has 162 students this year, the largest enrolment of any New College course. A second core course, Scientific Perspectives on Sex and Gender, examining the biological, anthropological and psychological theories of sex and gender, has 35 students this year, twice what it had last year when it was introduced. The Faculty of Arts and Science gave approval to the introduction of a specialist degree in women's studies last year. And the instructors in the program hope one day there will be graduate school courses available.

The nine-year gestation has not been free of complication. Because it was conceived in social activism, its detractors say it still isn't sufficiently free of political taint. Then, too, some feel that a few of the courses are too subjective; and some departments have resisted setting up courses relating to women because they feel the scope is too narrow or believe that isolating material about women in a separate course effectively ghettoizes the subject matter.

The early program was the product of the '60s and did have a very large political component but in the last three or four years the program has become far more academic in its orientation, says Sylvia Van Kirk, a Canadian historian who will become chairman of the program committee this September. 'That doesn't mean

that it's lacking in political content but that's not the focus. It is important to give this message to students, that we're not here for rap sessions, to complain about how women have been oppressed or talk about personal problems. That might come out of the experience but what we're here for is really hard-hitting academic investigation of a very high quality.'

There is good evidence that science and the humanities have not always told the full story about women. A recent study pointed out that previous work on the effects of marijuana on humans used only male subjects. There is a 700-page history text on the shelves that has references to women on only a handful of pages. Compilations of John Stuart Mill's major works seldom mention *The Subjection of Women*. Research on motivation theory has, until recently, concentrated solely on men. 'Women have been obliterated,' says Van Kirk. 'It is as though they never existed. And that simply is not a rounded perspective from which to pursue any discipline.'

Chaviva Hosek, a past chairman of the program committee, says it's not enough just to fill in the blanks. Researches must now question the significance of the new findings. 'You don't just say "we've left out a section, let's stick it on with crazy glue". What do we think motivation is if our theories have worked for one group of people and are totally inappropriate for another group? Maybe we have to redefine what motivation is and how we are going to study it.'

She uses examples from her own field: 'The study of literature has been about "men of letters" and how they congregated in the coffee houses and the kinds of education they received. What about the women who never learned classical languages? Or the people who, because they were women, were never allowed to sit around in coffee houses? Maybe that just changed their contribution. A literature that comes from people who spent a lot of time talking to each other is different from the literature that comes out of writing from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. That's what George Sand did. Jane Austen wrote in the middle of her household chores. Harriet Beecher Stowe has a wonderful description of the baby being on the table, the butcher coming through the front door, the plumbing breaking down and the maid worrying about

the fire, all while she is trying to write.

'We are now studying authors who haven't been studied before. Many times we find the books are interesting, *but*. That happens with male authors too. But we may also discover, for example, that Louisa May Alcott did not just write children's books but a series of thrillers and melodramas. And if we put them next to her children's books, very interesting things are revealed about the shape of her creative mind and the tensions that prevented her from putting those kinds of energy together. Filling in the gaps is not a neutral activity. As soon as you fill them in, the map looks different and you must rethink what you've been doing all along.'

And the new map may well dismay some academics, she says. 'In the development of any discipline, you have an old guard with assumptions about how intellectual work operates. They have great fears that something called "interdisciplinary" couldn't possibly have any methodological rigour, any standards and criteria for its own verifiability, or a notion of excellence. These are reasonable worries because part of what you're developing is not just a whole new area of subject matter but new tools and techniques for thinking.'

But the academic community is more likely to give voice to concerns about a perceived lack of objectivity in the program itself. At one time, Professor Ann Robson was moved to note in the calendar description of her history course on Victorian women that it was *not* a consciousness raising class. She was concerned in the early years of the program that the core course had a strong bias. 'There was certainly a slant that I saw as a lack of objectivity. I don't feel any course should have a determined ideology. That's up to the students.'

Professor Edward Shorter, whose courses Women and Health in Past Times and the Social History of the Family are both cross-listed in the women's studies calendar, criticizes what he describes as the 'ideological homogeneity' that still exists in women's studies. 'I'm sort of put off seeing an important area of knowledge acquire a hortatory function, that is, using it to cheer people on to greater victories. I'm not against greater victories for women but I'm just a little uneasy about having an intellectual discipline yoked to that

particular harness because it happens very often that intellectual honesty is sacrificed to political expediency, ...'

Shorter says that for women's studies to acquire the respect it deserves, the program will have to 'come across as having the same academic professionalism one expects to find in accounting and organic chemistry. There's an enormous amount of objective information about the lives of women today. It's not as though this were a subject that has been plunked down in the last 10 years.' An example of the lack of objectivity, he says, can be found in the program's calendar which, in several cases, gives details of the professor's personal circumstances.

Van Kirk thinks such views miss the point. 'We're talking about the whole question of social relations between the sexes and the way our society is structured. We are trying to show that areas of our personal lives and areas of our work should be much more integrated than they have in the past. It would be so much healthier for all of us if there were more balance.'

'There's a tendency for academics to get very stuffy and think that we have to appear to be so serious and so professional that there's no room for any expression of warmth, humanity or humour. But that's not exclusive to the pursuit of intellectual excellence.'

Professor Armatage, who has been involved with the program since its inception, says it has always been closely watched by curriculum committees because they were 'very suspicious of a program that smacked of politics. They presumed we were preaching revolution without academic worth and we were subjected to yearly examinations but always did well. There are few people, except the most reactionary old dogs of the University, who question that now.'

Armatage believes academics may feel threatened by the program. 'Most of the studies that have been conducted are based on a set of assumptions the women's studies program is questioning. Educational institutions have been founded and perpetuated by men. Men have carried out their research and come to certain conclusions over the past 2,000 years and one of those conclusions is about women. We say their conclusions are wrong, their methods are wrong and they have not been objective.'

'Even the notion of academic neutrality is a conservative idea which acts to reinforce their position. We're

saying that everyone is biased. There is no such thing as neutrality or objectivity in my view. The issue is to be aware of your biases and goals.'

There's little doubt that there is a slop-over between the subject matter and real life. One day in the past school year, a student asked Armatage whether she could address the class. She had picked up *Toike Oike*, the engineering newspaper, and had been outraged to find rape treated as a joke amid other comments degrading women. Several women from the class spearheaded an unsuccessful campaign to run the paper off campus. Later, Armatage, doing research for a film she was making about strippers, attended the engineering students' 'slave auction', an event designed to raise money for charity. She subsequently wrote an article for one of the campus newspapers condemning the activity. When it looked like Kathryn Morgan would not get her contract renewed because of budgetary constraints, her students intervened with an 83-signature petition to the administration. Earlier this year, the students got together to prepare a submission to the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations that resulted in Morgan becoming one of the 10 professors in the province to receive an award for outstanding teaching ability.

Morgan's women's studies course has been developed pretty much from scratch — through government publications, scholarly journals, medical literature, law reform bills, the daily newspapers, even cartoons. Anything, in fact, that strikes her as relevant.

In the courses she teaches, she says she sees a clearer intersection between pure scholarship and personal relevance than is evident in most fields: 'We might be discussing premenstrual hormone levels and psychological states in a cross-cultural context. It's detailed scientific data but it also says something immediate to the 20 or 30 women who are sitting there menstruating at that very minute. It's very important to know what is culturally derived and what is physiological and why the research in the past hasn't been accurate.'

The current chairman of the Women's Studies Program Committee is ... a man. Ironically, Ronald de Sousa, a philosophy professor, was asked to take the job (following some hand-wringing within the program) because the few women interested in the area who had the requisite tenure

status already had other University commitments. Ironic, too, that the presence of a man at the top may lend credibility to the program: 'It shows that academically this is an area that does not just represent the interests of a few fringe kooks, all of whom are extremist women, fem-libbers and the like. And it shows it is possible for a man at least to declare himself as a feminist,' says de Sousa.

He believes a women's studies specialist has an edge in the job market in government, private agencies and firms interested in developing sensitivity to women's issues. 'The comparison should not be with something like computer science because most of our students don't regard that as their main option. The comparison should be with one of the humanities.' De Sousa also sees it as a good vehicle for pulling together a number of disciplines. 'For anyone interested in an integrated program, I think this would be one of the best things anyone could do and it's very regrettable that so few men have cottoned on to this so far.'

Will women's studies, if it does its job, eventually self-destruct? Armatage thinks not. 'I don't believe that day will come in my lifetime. I see the world in general as not improving at all in relation to women — ideologically, practically, economically or interpersonally. Men may be more sensitized or slightly more aware but I don't think they've changed their attitudes to any significant extent. And I think the University is an extremely conservative institution. To integrate completely an equal and representative view of women's contributions to the world, every discipline would have to be revised from the bottom up. The dilemma is whether you are going to have the polarization or whether you are going to have nothing. I don't believe integration is going to happen.'

Arthur Kruger, dean of arts and science, has a different vision: 'If the disciplines develop properly, a separate Women's Studies Program should not be required. We have to recognize there is a gap and the sensible way of filling it is to bring together in one place a group of dedicated people keenly interested in exploring this area. But I believe it would be wrong to find ourselves 50 years from now with women still being ghettoized in one program while men were everywhere else.' ©

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