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Review of Women's Films: A Critical Guide

Jane Williamson

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WOMEN IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS BEFORE 1930 — AND AFTER: A NOTE

[These remarks were prepared for a panel at the Modern Language Association Convention of December 1974.]

In at least the schools I know something about, mainly in the midwest, women were added to the permanent staffs of English departments rather frequently from 1900 to 1930, almost not at all from 1930 to the mid-sixties, and in steadily increasing numbers since the mid-sixties.

In the first of these periods, 1900 to 1930, women composed a fraction of the English staffs, maybe about a fourth or a third. Some of them became highly respected scholars. I'm thinking of persons such as Helen White at Wisconsin, Evelyn Albright and Edith Rickert at Chicago, and Nellie Aurner at Iowa. Such women ascended the professorial ladder more slowly than their male counterparts, and were probably paid less than the men, but there seems to have been no question about their deserving tenure and getting it.

The great bulk of the women hired before 1930 in departments of English, however, were engaged to teach freshman English and possibly sophomore literature courses. Most of these women did not have the PhD degree, had no intention of getting it and though many had to forego normal family life, they found considerable satisfaction in being able to say that they taught in colleges and universities. They seldom achieved tenure status, except as they were promoted to associate professorships as a gesture of gratitude shortly before they retired. But their jobs were about as secure as if they had tenure, for they were teaching courses that most men sought to avoid. Moreover, they taught them very well indeed. Carrie Stanley at Iowa, for example, has become a legend for her handling of the poorest students. The roughest and toughest football tackle recruited by Forest Evashevski would come swaggering into her writing laboratory, and leave a half hour later a shaken but wiser man. No man could have done what she did, and probably few men are so gratefully remembered by thousands of students.

In many respects the typical English department in those days was one of the last outposts of Victorian culture. Women were addressed formally and were treated with almost courtly deference. I recall when I first started to teach in the early

thirties that I was roundly berated by my chairman for not rising and putting on my jacket when a woman instructor entered the room. But all of this deference, of course, was not translated into pay and promotion. Far from it; these hard working women were miserably paid, sometimes less than half as much as their male counterparts. Yet the point should be emphasized that until 1930 or so, heads of departments of English *did* hire women, and sometimes a good many of them.

From 1930 to the mid-sixties relatively few women were added to the permanent staffs of most departments. The initial cause of this change was the Great Depression. If they were not inclined to do so themselves, department heads were often encouraged by their administrators to engage only those with family responsibilities, meaning husbands and fathers. Single men were preferred over single women because they were more likely to become "providers." Regardless of what women may think now, there was an element of realism and genuine compassion behind this practice during the depression. I can still remember the cold fear in my home when it looked as though my father might lose his job, and the family disintegrate. We never even discussed the possibility that my mother could become the provider. We knew she couldn't find a job, and even if she had tried to do so she would have been reviled in the neighborhood for trying to do a man out of work.

The trouble was not so much what happened in departments of English during the depression as that depression practices continued after the depression itself was an item of history. As a matter of convenience, some of the women hired in the twenties were kept on, but few new ones were added, in some departments *no* new ones. When pressed, department heads would explain that they couldn't find women who were adequately trained, or that women wouldn't be comfortable in the presence of so many men, or that one couldn't be frank in department meetings with women present. It became a vicious circle: Women were discouraged from taking PhDs in English because there were so few openings for them; and they weren't hired in numbers because there were so few with PhDs. Generally it was thought that women should teach English at the high school level and leave college and university teaching to men.

Happily, much of this seems to be behind us. With the mid-sixties came the revolution in values and attitudes that has brought about dramatic changes in the number of women doing graduate work in English. At Iowa, for example, from 1959 to 1963, 3 of the 42 persons receiving their doctorates in English were women, only 7 percent. In the next five years, 1964 to 1969, 4 out of 49 receiving their doctorates were women, about 10 percent. And in the last five years, 29 out of the 108 receiving doctorates in English were women, 27 percent. This figure will continue to rise. Of the 205 now working on the doctorates, 64 are women, or 33 percent. And of the graduate students already admitted for next year, slightly over 50 percent are women. Now and in the future, if Iowa is reasonably representative, no English department chairman can say that he cannot hire a woman because he cannot find one with a doctorate.

John C. Gerber, Department of English
University of Iowa

BOOKS (continued)

Women's Films—A Critical Guide. Indiana University, 1975. Available from Audio-Visual Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47401.

This attractive paperback is an excellent source for teachers, students or anyone else who is unable to cope with the problems in finding and choosing films about women. From January to June 1974, Indiana University students, teachers and counselors—men and women—met to view and evaluate films on women. Their evaluations were incorporated into annotations by film critic Carolyn Geduld. The lists of films are classified by subject and the guide includes the results of a similar project done in 1972-73 by the University of California at Berkeley. The guide has a title index, distributor list with addresses, a bibliography for further searching and a list of the latest releases with evaluative notes supplied by the distributors. An excellent place to start in dealing with the often unfamiliar world of women's films.
Jane Williamson