



Feminism Come of Age

MARY HULL MOHR

Luther College, Decorah, Iowa

The year 1988 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). Because of that fact, or perhaps because feminism has come of age, a number of women have reflected recently on the gains and losses of the period, the multiplicity of strands of feminism, and the tensions that now exist among these different strands.

The Feminine Mystique was primarily a consciousness-raising book in a decade that welcomed such reevaluations of existing social relationships. Friedan, in questioning and analyzing the expected roles of women, awakened many to the issues of sexual discrimination. In the '60s feminism was a later stage of the civil rights movement, begun as a drive for the rights of Afro-Americans. As it did in the nineteenth century when the first feminist movement grew out of the abolitionist movement, feminism in the middle '60s confronted people who had already become aware of discrimination in society. A language was in place to talk about the way in which one group exploits another.

Probably no one would disagree with the assessment that feminism and the women's movement that accompanied it have changed society and women's expectations in significant ways. Women have gone into the professions and political life in greater numbers, are in important managerial positions in large and small corporations, pursue an education with a broader sense of purpose; in short, women have opportunities in the world of work that they had not had before. Sensitivity in education to the contributions and roles of women has increased, and new laws give women more legal rights. But most feminists would probably also agree that they have a long way to go before they accomplish their goals. Equality in the social, political, and economic sphere is still not achieved. In fact the feminization of poverty is one of the realities of life in the United States. Certainly the liberation of women (and men) has not come about. And perhaps even more now than twenty-five years ago, feminists would not be able to agree on what liberation means or entails. Liberation for what? From what?

And yet there have been gains. Perhaps the most significant achievement of feminism has been the academic research which has accompanied a very active feminist enterprise in colleges and universities in the United States. It is to be hoped that this new scholarship will have an impact on education in this

country that will affect society as a whole.

In many of the academic disciplines, different approaches have emerged in the study of feminism and its incorporation into the academic curricula. This essay will focus on two such

approaches which sometimes find themselves in tension. On the one hand there are those who believe that in order to redress sexual discrimination, feminism must address and correct issues of inequality between men and women. On the other hand are those who argue that feminism can only have a transforming quality if it seeks out and affirms the unique characteristics of what it means to be a woman in our society. Josephine Donovan in *Feminist Theory* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985) has defined these two strands as “liberal” and “cultural” feminism.* Although both strands co-existed in the ’60s, liberal feminism is more characteristic of the earliest stage of feminism, growing as it did out of the initial concerns of the ’60s, and cultural feminism developed at a second stage as feminists sought to define and live out what it is to be peculiarly female in our society.

I. LIBERAL FEMINISM

There is little doubt that the earliest feminists were concerned with identifying the source of the oppression which was responsible for the systematic discrimination that characterized women’s lives. This involved both the raising of consciousness and strategies to combat and eliminate that oppression.

In my profession, the teaching of literature, these concerns led to the formation of a Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession as part of the Modern Language Association, the main professional organization. Similar organizations appeared in other disciplines. This group organized sessions at national meetings and did studies on the profession, pointing out the percentages of women in various teaching ranks, on faculties of different kinds of schools, and of publishing patterns in the various journals. In the classroom, such awareness usually led to separate courses in which images of women in literature were discussed, images created by men as well as those by women. In English literature, for example, much was made of the Mary/Eve image played out in much of literature (and life) where the woman was either depicted as the embodiment of virtue or of evil in the working out of the man’s story. An early anthology used in many classrooms was entitled *Images of Women in Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973). Mary Anne Ferguson ends her introduction to the anthology by encouraging readers to respond with anger to the stereotypes of women presented in our society. “The liberated woman,” she argues, “is aware of the choices open to her” (p. 28). A work of fiction that was extraordinarily influential in the ’60s and early ’70s was Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), a novel that carefully probed the fragmentation of a woman’s life as she tried to order her existence in a world where a woman was dependent upon and subordinate to men.

This analysis in literature and criticism of women’s oppression by a

*I shall use these words for the sake of convenience. Labels are very imprecise in defining feminism because there is overlap and because the connotations of labels are misleading. Cultural feminism shares its emphasis on what it means to be female with “radical” and “lesbian” feminism, two other labels that are sometimes used to categorize feminists.

patriarchal society was supported by political activity inside the academy. Political means had to be used to eliminate that oppression. The MLA Commission on Women worked for changes in the structures of university administration and lobbied for more of a voice in the profession, both

in its meetings and in its publications. On many individual campuses feminists from all disciplines organized to secure equal rights for women in every part of the academic community.

This professional political activity was paralleled in society as a whole. The most influential organization working for political change was the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966. In 1968 it presented a Bill of Rights to both the Democratic and Republican political conventions, a Bill of Rights which included such demands as an Equal Rights Amendment, maternity leave benefits, equal education for women, and equal job training.

The key word in this early activity was "equal." The principal agenda of liberal feminism was the elimination of discrimination by working to assure women the same roles in society as those of men. A work symbolic of this drive for equality was Carolyn Heilbrun's *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Knopf, 1973). Although many felt uncomfortable with it at the time, its analysis of characters in literature thought by Heilbrun to embody both feminine and masculine characteristics pointed to the possibility of removing gender differences in a changed society. This agenda for change was fairly widely accepted then and by some feminists today.

The key political agenda was, of course, the Equal Rights Amendment. Clearing the Senate in 1972 by a vote of 84 to 8, it was sent to the states for what seemed at the time to be easy passage. But when 1982 came, the required 38 states had not ratified it and the attempt to reintroduce it was blocked in the House of Representatives.

But by 1982 not all feminists agreed upon a political agenda. Heilbrun's thesis that there was a human nature that all individuals shared was believed by many to assume too much too early (and Carolyn Heilbrun had written another book entitled *Reinventing Womanhood* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1979]). Such thinking resulted, many argued, in little change. It allowed the inclusion of some outstanding female writers into the established curricula and the critique of certain male writers, but it did not result in any new vision of what it meant to be either male or female. More feminists began to focus, as some had from the beginning, not so much on gaining equality to what they saw as a man's world, but on what was called true liberation, the transformation of that world for women (and for men). For some feminists this involved a new way of thinking about society based upon gender. Women needed to define what it meant to be women. Those insights would help to transform society and lead to equality, but a new kind of equality which human beings had not yet seen.

For literary criticism, this new understanding of feminism meant the exploration of what it meant to have a female tradition in literature. Those who studied literature began to explore female writing and to trace the literary tradition as it was defined by women. This meant recovering women authors, whether those authors had written in the established genres such as the short story or the novel or whether their surviving works were diaries, letters, or autobiographies. Although sessions at MLA were still held on new interpreta-

tions of men's writing, feminist critics were more often talking about an overlooked or newly discovered female writer or the relationship between a younger and an older female author.

II. CULTURAL FEMINISM

In this second stage feminist literary critics began to develop a women's literary tradition.

As Elaine Showalter argues in her introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) feminist literary critics were celebrating “a uniquely female literary consciousness.” Scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar traced in the works of nineteenth century and more recently in twentieth century writers the sources and results of female creativity. Others explored relationships between language and language acquisition and women’s literature. A female aesthetic prompted the rethinking of the mother-daughter relationship, work influenced in part by *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978) by Nancy Chodorow. In women’s studies programs it became commonplace to question the established literary canon.

Linda Nicholson argues in *Gender and History* (New York: Columbia University, 1986) that what these feminists saw early on in their focus on what it means to be female was the important connection that needed to be made between the public and private lives of women. The movement of women into the work place in large numbers had not suddenly made women equal to men. Unlike men, women still had the home to maintain, the children to birth and rear, and the responsibility of establishing and strengthening commitments to personal relationships. Clearly some men had entered into equal partnerships with their wives, but studies confirmed that women had increasingly complicated their lives by entering the public world.

The political agenda was also reflecting this interest in what it meant to be female. The dominant concerns had become improved child care, female and child abuse, and pornography as violence against women. But these issues were not to become important political issues in the way the Equal Rights Amendment had. One of the dangers for feminists in focusing on women’s lives and concerns has been that such a focus has taken feminism out of mainstream politics with “women’s issues” becoming peripheral to seemingly more pressing national concerns. The only issue to retain its political importance has been abortion. Although a women’s issue, it has remained central to political life in the U. S. because of the way in which it impinges on religious belief and political and judicial decision-making. Such women’s issues as surrogate motherhood and other biomedical ethical issues which involve reproduction may have the same power.

Ironically, cultural feminism’s emphasis on what it means to be a woman developed alongside of the conservative movement to defeat the ERA. That successful political campaign also stressed the difference between men and women. There was much talk, in the arguments to defeat the ERA, about the dangers of common bathrooms and the imminent drafting of both men and women into the combat infantry. Some of this talk was alarmist rhetoric calculated to produce opposition, but much of it came from the deeply held belief

that men and women were fundamentally different. Although not all churches provided a biblical basis for these beliefs, many men and women in all denominations proved to be uncomfortable with the idea that men and women should or could become equal in all phases of society, including the church.

But there was also a new kind of neo-liberal feminism developing. In the early ’80s Betty Friedan brought out another book, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit, 1981), in which she argued that women should begin to rethink their relationships within the family both as wives and mothers. The drive for equality was important as the first stage of feminism, she argued, but now women must work out the conflicts these new freedoms had created for them within the family.

Cultural feminists, however, continue to place their emphasis on recovering and sustaining female values for the purpose of transforming society. Culture can be transformed, they argue, by what some call the “matriarchal vision,” a vision which can result in a more humane world. For these feminists the transformation means creating alternative institutions to marriage, family, and in some instances, the church.

The work of both liberal and cultural feminists has not only resulted in new criticism and scholarship. Many educational institutions have also experimented with new curricula. *Signs: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society* devoted its Winter 1987 issue to a discussion of “Reconstructing the Academy.” The models of curricular development described there suggest the influence of the feminisms and reinforce the notion that liberal feminism may only lay the groundwork for more radical thinking about change. Several curricular specialists define the stages of incorporating feminism into traditional curricula as follows: (1) recognizing the invisibility of women and addressing the sexism of male thinking, (2) searching for and restoring women and their work to the curricula, (3) analyzing women as a subordinate group as away to study women in their own right, and (4) reaching a stage (not yet achieved) of transforming knowledge into a way of seeing human interdependence and working for the common good of all.

III. FEMINISM AND CHURCH STRUCTURES

We should not be surprised that the structure of the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reflects some of the complexity found in feminism. The church in its attempt to be “new” reflects both the liberal and cultural strains of feminism. The liberal strain is seen in the attempts to treat women (and minorities) equally. Quotas are established to insure that women are elected to key boards and committees and appointed to important offices. Such a system acknowledges and seeks to perpetuate the gains that women have made in the last twenty-five years. But at the same time the church created a women’s organization, “Women of the ELCA,” and it has a deaconess community and a Commission For Women. These creations suggest a belief that there is something about women that is different. Women’s organizations have been around a long time as a part of church structures. They have often been responsible for much of the church’s mission, equipped to carry out tasks in the church that have been traditionally defined as “feminine.” In the process they have

developed women leaders and biblically educated lay people. It is probably not surprising then that Women of the ELCA should be in the new church. The deaconess community has also had a long history in the church, although its influence and membership have declined considerably in recent years with other opportunities for full time service in the church. The Commission for Women is institutionalizing what had been conducted in a more piecemeal fashion in the predecessor churches, a study of women’s issues on their own terms. It, rather than the Women of the ELCA, has the agenda of feminism. It also carries within that agenda the weakness of cultural feminism, that those issues will be “taken care of” by the Commission and no longer be a part of the larger church agenda.

But if it is true that there is something that women *know* and *are* that can be a transforming power for the church, the key lies in both the deaconess community and the Women

of the ELCA. What do women know about organizing themselves? About relationships? About servanthood in the church? For the cultural feminist, such secrets are not discovered by asking them of women who have joined male structures. Such secrets lie in female groups. The unanswered question is whether those groups have to be self-consciously feminist in order for such transforming power to be effective. At the very least, perhaps, there has to be a strong feminist group to identify these secrets and use them to transform the larger church structure.

Twenty-five years after *The Feminine Mystique*, much has changed. We all live in this present time with the prejudices, resentments, and excitement that feminism has generated. We also live with young people to whom the struggles of the last twenty-five years do not matter, but for whose well-being many feminists have spent countless hours. There are tensions created by changes that feminism has brought about, tensions in the way we think and feel and in the way we live. On balance the changes brought about by feminism have more than outweighed these tensions. But clearly much remains to be done. Finally the liberal feminist position of working to achieve equality in our present society still suits those among us who have not given up on the capacity of reason and education to change people's lives. The often uncharted territory of what it means to be female and the possibilities of that understanding to transform our society suits those who believe that women have something unique to offer and that feminists can somehow find the means and the will to transform the world with that gift. Both visions, and there are others, attest to the complexity of a feminism come of age.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Donovan, Josephine. *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985.
- Ferguson, Mary Anne, ed. *Images of Women in Literature*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1963. *The Second Stage*. New York: Summit Books, 1981.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*. New York: Knopf, 1973. *Reinventing Womanhood*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1979.
- Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963.
- Nicholson, Linda. *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Showalter, Elaine. "The Feminist Critical Revolution," *Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.