

Margret Andersen

A New Subject: Women's Studies

Before relating my experience with a course on "Women in Modern Society," which I introduced at Loyola College in Montreal in 1971/72, I would like to explain how it happened that I became interested in this new subject, *Women's Studies*. Many will say that courses must be offered to satisfy the interests and needs of the students, not those of the professors. True. But is it not also true that professors' research — and we must hope that people do research on matters that are of interest to them — can be exploited in the classroom, and rightfully and fruitfully so? I believe that the ideal situation occurs when the interests of students and professors meet. In the field of Women's Studies, this seems possible.

Feminism was not my concern when I wrote my M.A. thesis on Marcel Proust, nor had it anything to do with my Ph.D. thesis on Paul Claudel. At least, I did not think so. To-day, I believe that feminism was dormant in my mind while I was tackling these literary giants. In both cases, I had been warned that the authors were extremely difficult. I was never told they would be too difficult for a woman, but I know to-day that this was indeed implied. During those years, I was living the life of a liberated woman without knowing it. Having been brought up by a very strong father, who educated me to be independent while always being there to assist me in case of a crisis, and by an equally strong mother who, for instance, did not allow me to learn typing and shorthand because she was afraid I would become the permanent helpmate of a male employer, I thought my life was like that of any other average woman. I was successful as a student, as a teacher, as a mother of three children. Like many other women, I was not too suc-

cessful as a wife and did not always feel perfectly comfortable with myself; but I always felt free.

Then, it must have been around 1968, I began to see that many of my female friends and students led different lives. I began to doubt whether I should be as free as I was. That cross-examination of my attitudes and feelings was not easy, especially since, while examining them, I was trying to reject them. I considered giving up work, or at least relegating it to a less important place in my life in order to assume a more typically female role. I came out of this crisis without the help of my parents who were dead by then, but with the help of my two sons, both in their late teens, who assured me that they liked my strength better than my weakness. Mainly, of course, I surmounted this period thanks to my rather strong instinct of self-preservation.

After that, I became an outspoken feminist, like many other women at that particular time. The simultaneousness of this change in so many women seems to me quite striking.

My new state of mind naturally influenced my teaching. My views on the French novel, for instance, underwent a slight change. The awakening of my feminist thinking, coupled with my awareness of the lack of freedom of many of my women students, changed my approach to teaching and, to a certain extent, my approach to literature. I should add here that the majority of my students were women. Loyola is an undergraduate institution and I was a member of the Arts faculty; women are more numerous at the undergraduate level and especially in Arts. Many of the Loyola students came from Italian or Irish families, that is, from Catholic backgrounds. In my particular department, French Studies, most of the students were either of Italian origin or were French-Canadian. Many of them represented the first generation of their families ever to attend a university; most of the female students were the first women in their families to have the desire and the possibility of higher education. They were not naturally liberated women.

The sociological and psychological elements in literary works had always been of interest to me. I had written on the aristocratic society in Marcel Proust's work and on the impact of Claudel's theater on German dramatic writing and German society. With the rise of feminism, in myself and in the world around me, my interest in such elements became much more immediate and more directly connected with my own ex-

perience. I have become acutely aware of the tragic hubris in the emotional and sexual lives of Constant's Ellénore and Flaubert's Emma, while Medea, Phèdre, the Princess of Clèves, Penthesilea, Thérèse Desqueyroux and so forth form in my mind a literary sisterhood which constantly increases its membership. This does not mean that I have ceased to be critical. I still do not appreciate Simone de Beauvoir's novels as much as her other works. On the other hand, I have overcome a certain literary snobbishness which prevented me from thinking of Colette as a serious writer. I had thought that she was facile and therefore popular and consequently rightfully excluded from the curricula of most departments of French Studies. I have reviewed and changed my attitude with respect to this particular author, just to name one example. In my regular literature classes, excursions into the study of feminist themes now sometimes take place. There is a slight undercurrent of Women's Studies present at all times, which I find constructive and which the students, women as well as men, seem to appreciate. The qualification "undercurrent" is important to me, as my training prevents me from emphasizing political elements when literary history and analysis are to be dealt with. Instead of the word "undercurrent" I could also have used the word "enrichment," for, indeed, both my teaching and my thought have broadened under the influence of feminism and thus seem enriched.

My own development or progress coincided with the growing interest, in general as well as on the Loyola campus, in the status of women. At the beginning of 1969/70, a number of women faculty members met and decided that we needed courses which would allow women and men to concentrate on the less well-known 51% of the human race. Ten of us crowded the office of our Academic Vice-President, explaining the need for a lecture series on women. He saw no obstacle. However, a few days later, it occurred to me that a lecture series was nothing but a token. Agreed, it would enable some women to hear and learn about themselves, some men would attend and display benevolent attitudes, but why, I wondered, could the question of women not be taken more seriously? Why, I asked myself, did I not request that a course in Women's Studies be accepted as a credit course by our curriculum committee?

I had always been interested in interdisciplinary studies and had been an advocate of their introduction at Loyola. It had been possible for us to introduce interdisciplinary courses on Social Change. Could the same not be done for Women's

Studies? Well, the department of Interdisciplinary Studies had no objection. The Dean of Arts, whom I visited in the company of a delegation of women, showed no sign of disapproval. By that time, a five page brief on the importance, relevance and validity of Women's Studies at Loyola had been written, public opinion was alive to women's activities, and the Royal Commission *Report on the Status of Women in Canada* was about to be published. In short, nobody could oppose a serious program of Women's Studies. But was it serious? Nobody dared ask me that question directly, but it was present all the time, in all minds, during all discussions. The Curriculum Committee, having received the brief and a three page outline of the proposed course, asked for more details, although the same committee had at other times approved courses on the basis of an outline of a few words only.

Two problems needed to be solved. One, the academic validity of the course needed to be proven. This seemed somewhat irritating to me, but I knew I could perform the task. The second problem was at the same time more serious and of a more practical nature. Would it be possible to find at Loyola enough interested and qualified people who would be willing to assume the responsibility for the various aspects of an interdisciplinary course on women and to add hours of work to their original teaching loads? If not, who was to finance the guest lectures of outside speakers? I am thankful to Prof. Gail Valaskakis of the Communication Arts department for having shown me the way out of this second dilemma. Gail was teaching a course on the native peoples of Canada under the auspices of the Social Change course and with the financial backing of our Evening Division. The course was, and still is, very successful and well attended by Loyola day and evening students, as well as by special students from the Montreal area. Why, said Gail, would I not try to follow the same administrative pattern with my course? I made an appointment with the director of the Evening Division. He liked the idea well enough, but voiced, like so many others, some doubts as to the academic validity of the course.

I was beginning to feel angered and even personally hurt. After all, I had a Ph.D., occupied the rank of associate professor, had taught for something like ten years at the university level, seemed respected by many of my colleagues and students, had published two books. And now I found myself confronted with the insinuation that I might be trying to introduce quite trivial subject matter. I felt insecure and defensive. Elaine

Showalter's description of that state of mind expresses what I was feeling. In her essay "Teaching about Women," she speaks of "the insecurity and defensiveness of many professors entering this new discipline, constantly aware that academia's long trivialization of subjects associated with women presents an obstacle to serious work, and even to the acceptance of WS by the university community."¹ Ruth Crego Benson speaks of the "condescension and paternalism"² with which men consider feminism in academia, how they not only "implicitly and explicitly question our intellectual and political sophistication,"³ but also seem "to doubt even our knowledge of simple facts and procedures."⁴ I was under the impression that my professional integrity was being questioned. I had been at Loyola for five years. One complaint that some students had expressed as to my teaching was that the workload assigned to them by me was too heavy. And now I was supposed to answer questions such as: "How are you going to make sure that the students will cover all the reading assignments?" "Will the students be required to hand in the usual amount of written work?" Women's Studies were suspected of academic anemia.⁵

Some teachers of Women's Studies will bend to similar pressures, will develop guilt feelings under them. They will be upset if, during a literature class on 19th century women, the students all of a sudden want to talk about such books as *The Female Eunuch* or *The Status of Women in Canada*. These teachers are constantly afraid that a women's class may turn into a consciousness-raising session. The same teachers would probably react quite differently, that is with neither fear nor guilt, were they teaching a subject non-related to women in particular. I believe that most teachers are indeed quite pleased when students relate relevant outside material to the subject matter of a course. Not so in the case of Women's Studies, especially in women's literature classes. For fear that the subject matter may be neglected because of a student's personal involvement, the theoretical aspect of the subject is constantly underlined. Intellectual overkill will often be the consequence.⁶

My own course on "Women in Modern Society" was no exception. I had decided to silence all doubts as to its academic quality by submitting a first, or rather a second, outline of approximately eight pages to all academic administrators, members of the curriculum committee and to all women faculty members asking for critical comments and suggestions. It was pointed out to me, for instance, that I had

neglected to include the discussion of the theological dimensions of "the woman question" into the program. I am still thankful for this criticism, as it prompted me to invite Mary Daly to speak on this aspect. Her lecture was to be one of the most radical ones of the entire year.

With the suggestions in mind and always desiring to prove the respectability of the course, I worked for two months straight, after classes had ended, on the outline and bibliography. I read as much as possible of the available material and ordered several hundred books for the library (a sympathetic administrator had allotted me a special budget). At the end of that period, I asked the director of the Evening Division to convene a meeting of all interested parties, i.e. the Academic Vice-President, the Dean of Arts, women faculty members from various departments and myself. I presented the meeting with my twenty-one page outline, explained the aims of the course which I saw as providing men and women with an intellectual, social, and historical mosaic of women's position in contemporary society. I spoke of the teaching methods which I hoped to use: lectures and introductions by myself designed to provide continuity; guest lectures by well-known specialists; discussion periods at regular intervals. I mentioned the kind of work that I expected from the students, pointing to a list of term paper topics combining field and library research. A few questions were asked, hardly any suggestions were made but an aura of distrust hung over the room. My perception of this was not caused by any oversensitivity of mine. Others who were present at the meeting were equally aware of it. Yet, encouraged by the support of some colleagues, I managed to smile my way through this ordeal, wondering silently how many professors had ever been forced to undergo this sort of trial when proposing a new type of course.

Finally, I was given permission to proceed, allotted an appropriate budget, and told that things could begin. They began well and continued to flourish. In September 1971, fifty students registered for the course: day students, evening students many of whom were teachers in Montreal schools, and special students who had never before taken any university level course. Some were barely twenty, others were well over fifty. There were forty-five women and five men, approximately forty-five anglophones and five francophones. How was this mixture of backgrounds, ages, occupations to become a group? I started the first session by distributing a number

of definitions of woman and womanhood by poets, politicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and others. Was I, maybe, guilty of running a consciousness-raising session? I did not really care, as I saw people getting involved and starting to voice opinions. The second hour of the evening was devoted to an explanation of the syllabus, of the work expected of each student, of the grading system I was proposing to use. Finally, the students introduced themselves to the group, stating their names and occupations and their motives for taking the course. A high school counsellor stated that she was concerned with what was happening to the female high school student. A newly married woman admitted that she wanted to know more about herself as a woman, since she was aware of the danger that marriage might mean to her as an individual. A graduate student in Science said she needed knowledge about women in general because of the discouraging attitude of some of her male fellow students and professors. A widow with four teenage daughters said she wanted to find out what women's liberation was all about. A department store executive revealed that she was concerned with the fate of women in the labor force. A male Communication Arts student said he had become interested in the woman question because of the strange image that our advertising industry projects of women. I must say it was really exciting for me as a teacher to see how much commitment was there, how highly motivated the students seemed to be. Let me add immediately that their enthusiasm and interest never faltered. The attendance was always excellent, assignments were handed in within the given time limits or almost, and participation in class remained lively throughout the year.

As the field of Women's Studies was new to all of us, including myself, we all had to do a lot of reading. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary character of the course meant that all of us, regardless of our own discipline, regardless of the number of credits or of the degrees already obtained, were continuously learning. I knew more about literature, but even a first year student was ahead of me in his or her own field of biology; when the guest speaker was an historian, a few history majors may have known more than the rest of the class, but knew, like all of us, very little about the history of women. We were learning and sharing a learning experience. Naturally, some were more articulate than others. I believe that about 10% of the women in the class never said anything. It was hard for me to first of all silence myself and also to

silence those women among the students who were confident enough to speak in front of a relatively large group. It was, by the way, interesting to see how many women find it difficult to speak in an audible fashion in a large room. I kept telling the students that here was one thing they could try to acquire, namely the ability to speak loudly, clearly and without hesitation, but many found it difficult. We had several women guest speakers also who suffered from the same problem of not being used to raising their voices. A marriage counsellor, for instance, who was not used to public speaking, had some difficulty participating in a panel discussion as effectively as she might have. Again and again, we had to ask her to speak louder. So even our guest speakers were sharing our learning experience! The men in the class remained relatively silent. Not because they could not raise their voices, but rather because they were, in our group, members of a small minority — something they had probably not had an opportunity to experience before. For once, the world was not concentrating on them nor was it centered around them. I am grateful to these young men for the sincerity that they showed in their approach to the subject and I realize how awkward their situation must have been.

My feelings about men attending Women's Studies classes are somewhat ambivalent. I would find it unacceptable to refuse access to a class to any student, male or female. On the other hand, it is quite obvious to me that women need to be with members of their own sex, for some time, in order to overcome the shyness which characterizes their approach to the study of themselves. I am also convinced that women need to learn to appreciate other women, to enjoy the company of other women and that this can be best achieved in an all-women's class. It was for similar reasons that I had invited many more female guest speakers than male, as I was trying to provide the women in the class with role models with whom they could identify.

It seems appropriate to say, at this moment, a few words about the Canadian content of the course. Obviously, the subject, "Women in Modern Society," transcends national borders. However, it is difficult to find one's identity if one has to look for most of the information abroad. While compiling the bibliography, I had been distressed to see that the majority of the books that I decided to list were European or U.S. publications. A bibliography of Canadian, non-fiction publications on women can, at the present time, list approximately

seventy-five volumes, which is very little indeed. We were fortunate enough to have such Canadian speakers as Jill Conway and June Callwood address us, fortunate also to find Marlene Dixon at McGill University. It does not mean that we did not think ourselves privileged to hear Mary Daly or Natalie Shainess; indeed we were. But all of us realized how important it is for Canadian women to say their particular say about themselves.

The perception of this need made us decide to attempt the publication of an anthology of writings by Montreal women in which we could include the most interesting papers submitted by the students themselves. This project has in the meantime materialised and has taken the form of an anthology of essays and poetry, published in December 1972 by Content Publishing, Montreal, under the title *Mother was Not a Person*. (We had been quite surprised to find out that, under the British North America Act of 1867, Canadian women were not considered persons until 1929 when, thanks to the energetic endeavors of Emily Murphy and four other Canadian women, the Privy Council in London, England, ruled that Canadian women were persons also and could, as such, occupy seats in the Canadian Senate.) The anthology contains, among other things, the results of one assignment that served to radicalize most of the participants in the course: I had asked the students to analyze a number of children's readers or children's books. This became a very valuable experience to most of them. We compiled certain excerpts of these essays into one collective critique of children's books. It is one of the best essays of our anthology.

The most valid aspect of the course seemed to me to lie in the possibility that we had to combine theory and praxis. We managed to overcome the exiguity of classroom and university and to relate our theoretical knowledge to that of the world in which we were trying to live, as women. In the words of Gerda Lerner of Sarah Lawrence:

Feminist Studies is ideally suited for breaking the artificial separation between theory and praxis, learning and being. If what we are teaching really means all women are sisters, then we must teach it in a classroom environment where competition is minimized and co-operation is stressed and rewarded. We should encourage anything that will detract from the homogeneity of the usual classroom and encourage a diversity of ages and educational levels among the students of different age levels, among the single girl, the young married and even the older woman and mother . . . Faculty members who work

in an interdisciplinary Feminist Studies program can contribute to breaking down the artificial hierarchies and vertical slots of the usual academic structure.⁷

The report on Women's Studies, published in the *Canadian Newsletter of Research of Women*,⁸ shows that more and more Canadian universities are offering courses in Women's Studies. This is heartening in the face of the Royal Commission *Report* comment that "no prejudice in human society is as deeply imbedded or so little understood" as the prejudice against women. According to the *Report*, a transformation of society's attitude "will be achieved only as a consequence of a continuing study of the position of women in society and continuous efforts to secure justice and equal opportunity." In a modest way, the Loyola course did its share to help achieve this necessary transformation of our Canadian society. In any case, it partially transformed Loyola: that institution now has a complete Women's Studies Program.

footnotes

1. Elaine Showalter, "Teaching About Women," in *Female Studies* IV, Pittsburgh: KNOW, Inc., 1971, pp. i-ii.
2. Ruth Crego Benson, "Pittsburgh Diary: Reflections on U.S.O.E. Institute Crisis: Women in Higher Education," in *Female Studies* IV, p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. cf., Wendy Martin, "Teaching Women's Studies — Some Problems and Discoveries," in *Female Studies* IV, p. 9.
6. cf., *Ibid.*
7. Gerda Lerner, "On the Teaching and Organization of Feminist Studies," unpublished paper, quoted from Elaine Showalter, *op. cit.*, pp. vii-viii.
8. Edited by Margrit Eichler (Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo) and Marylee Stephenson (Department of Sociology, University of Windsor).
See Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 1972) for the survey of Women's Studies at Canadian Universities.