

Chapter 8

Unworthy of strong women

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The three things one should apparently never discuss at the dinner table are politics, religion and sex. I am very ill-mannered about this, as I believe that these are, in fact, the *only* three things worth talking about at the dinner table, or indeed anywhere else. They are the three most interesting things about human beings. Religion governs our very existence and our future if you are a believer, and gives you something to fight about if you're not; sex is how we got here; and politics is what we've been doing ever since. This essay contains varying quantities of all three, so the faint-hearted and the well-bred had best turn to another chapter.

Sexual antics in the university have similarly been making good copy in Australia for decades — the Orr case in Tasmania, the Ormond College affair in Melbourne, and the Bowdler case at the University of Western Australia. Rumour, counter-rumour and ghastly exposure after exposure show how fame (and infamy) destroys lives. What may have begun with something as apparently harmless as the touch of a hand turned into a life-destroying mess; a war of attrition that burnt up all involved.

And all of this serves as a timely reminder of the power of human sexuality; of maleness, femaleness, and the double-edged sword of sexual complementarity which for many becomes not so much a source of life as a sword of Damocles. There is simply no point in trotting out the tired old arguments that if only people became less hung up about it, sexuality would cease to be the torrent it is. You may as well tell the Sydney Harbour Bridge to stop obeying the laws of stress and gravity. It is those very stresses and tensions that keep the thing in place, and the same goes for human sexuality.

Thinking about universities, sexuality, feminism and suchlike naturally leads me to consider my own experiences as a young woman entering academia as my chosen profession. It also makes me consider the lives of the first wave of feminists who fought and flourished in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Women in Australia, and in many other OECD countries, enjoy what is, against the backdrop of five thousand or so years of recorded history, an unprecedented and unparalleled level of good health, wealth, ownership and education. I think this is a good thing, as I like being able to read, having all my teeth, and not being dead in childbirth, and I daresay some may find it significant that I am the sole woman contributor to this collection of essays. But cases of sexual misconduct at academic level offer some food for thought about women and men in higher education, in the workplace, and in any public arena where the sexes exchange ideas and opinions.

I completed a BA(Hons) from 1987-1990 at the University of Western Australia, and went straight into my PhD in 1991, which I completed in 1994. My honours year was a particularly eventful one. I was reprimanded in a class in 1990 for suggesting that male aggression was not simply the product of social conditioning but was connected to testosterone. This view is now more widely accepted, as medicine, science and other disciplines come to the conclusion that men and women are very different indeed — physically, endocrinally, skeletally. (The counter-argument that these sciences are themselves patriarchal, phallogocentric and oppressive, I feel constrained to dismiss as a load of hooey.)

During the same honours year, I caused another contretemps because I argued that oppression was a state of mind. It often perplexed me that women in the Third World did not complain more about their status, given that they had had some five thousand years in which to do so; that many Muslim women were ardent feminists according to the boundaries of their faith; and that I had never felt oppressed despite the awful patriarchal world in which I lived. So I came to the conclusion that perhaps the Western definition of oppression — flexible, all-encompassing, and, sadly, almost permanently aggrieved — did not apply to all women. Perhaps oppression by the male was indeed a state of mind. Eleanor Roosevelt (no-one's idea of a pushover) once said that 'No-one makes you feel inferior without your permission', and that made a great deal of sense to me. (The

counter-argument that I was a product of patriarchal brainwashing got the hooley treatment as well.)

I was also at UWA shortly before the Rindos-Bowdler war erupted in earnest: a sexual-harassment case with homosexual variations and academic discrimination thrown in for good measure. So I do not have by any means a blinkered view of what it means to be harassed. Like rape, sexual harassment has nothing to do with physical attractiveness or lack thereof; it is not some kind of inverted compliment. Like most women, I can be found somewhere on the beauty spectrum between underwear model and crone; nonetheless, I have never been sexually harassed as a student or in the workplace, from my days as a spotty and gormless undergrad in the late 1980s to the present day. Various people have either made offers, or had offers made them. But there was no question of ‘lays for A’s’ or anything of that kind.

How have women coped with sexual harassment in the past? After all, middle-class women have been in the workplace since the nineteenth century. I spoke to my mother, now in her seventies, about her experiences in the workplace in 1940s and 1950s Melbourne, in an advertising agency and in the police union movement. She worked for ten years before her marriage, surrounded by men. In that time, she was sexually harassed once, by a senior police officer about whom she had been warned. He made a pass at her one day in the office, and she simply stood back and said “Now that’s enough of that. We’re here to work, and if we’re not going to work, I’m off.” The informal mechanism of being warned about the potential harasser came to her assistance; an act of ur-sisterhood that proved timely. While she recollects that other staff were involved in consensual sexual relationships formed in the office environment — including one man who deliberately replaced her as clerk with a woman more to his personal taste, whose husband was away at war — she does not recollect any episodes of office sexual harassment. Instead, she was treated as an equal by the men with whom she worked. Outside of the workplace, she was active in the Labor Party and had a lively political career.

My mother is a strong woman, and wailing about how awful life was as an oppressed female of the pre-feminist revolution days is conduct unbecoming to a strong woman. At the working-class level, things could be different. My mother had an aunt who was in a relationship with her boss in a laundry, and the keeping of her job was an implicit part of that relationship.

But where does that leave us at the academic level? The conveniences of inter- and intra-class ‘understandings’ have been lost, and the world has changed, leaving many young women in a problematic situation. One school of feminism tells them that they are endowed with numerous inalienable rights — the right to get drunk, the right to live in university accommodation with men, the right to have sex when and wherever and with whoever they wish. But that same school of feminism can be remarkably short-winded on the responsibilities which accompany these rights. Academic and feminist Camille Paglia uses, as an analogy for matters such as sexual harassment and date rape, the case of driving to New York and leaving your car keys on the hood: “My point is that, yes, the police should pursue the thief and he should be punished. But at the same time, the police — and I — have the right to say to you ‘You stupid idiot, what the hell were you thinking?’”¹ Women who do not understand rape cannot defend themselves from it. The same goes for sexual harassment, in the workplace or in the teacher-student relationship.

Emily Davies, feminist and founder of Girton College, argued vigorously for the co-operation of men and women in education.² If a woman has the right to higher education and all the freedoms that go with it, then so be it. But she must bear in mind that these rights carry with them responsibilities — that she must take care walking through dark university car parks at night, that she must be prudent in her dealings behind closed doors with a member of staff, and that if she has had a consensual sexual relationship, then she has no right to destroy another’s career by later claiming that it was ‘lays for A’s’ or rape. These are, oddly enough, precisely the same conventions that apply to men. Men can be beaten and raped in dark carparks; we have no idea how often this happens because they are stigmatised more severely than women for reporting it.

Consensual relationships are a different kettle of fish. The important matter here is that of fairness: any student-teacher consensual relationship must be kept out of the classroom as much as possible. Students must change tutors or classes in order to ensure that other students are not discriminated against by any preferential treatment, whether it be punitive or over-compensatory. This, I believe, is where Sydney Sparkes Orr failed both as a man and as a professional. If he did have a relationship with his student, then he should have had the courage to admit it, and take responsibility for his action. He was a

well-educated man and not ashamed of flouting other social conventions. So why didn't he admit it and take responsibility? Unless, of course, he didn't have a sexual relationship with her, which will continue to be a tormenting possibility.

But there is a further question here — how consensual can any relationship be when one of the partners is in a position of legitimate authority and power over the other? As an academic, I would be very dubious of any such relationship with any student, however attractive, because there would always be the persistent doubts: is this student involved with me because they think it will improve their progress through the course? Do they love me, or my vastly superior pay packet? Are they trying to acquire sexual *cachet* with their friends? Have they in fact seen *The Graduate* once too often?

Same sex relationships are not immune from these abuses of power. An entire university was damaged by the mysterious and traumatic case of David Rindos and Sandra Bowdler at the University of Western Australia: “many of the students and academics have moved interstate or overseas, but the mere mention of the affair leaves some individuals physically sick and emotionally disturbed” noted Kate Legge in her article in the *Weekend Australian* on the matter.

Three female members of archaeology came to [Professor Parfitt, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor], complaining of inequitable treatment in the department. Rindos then confirmed their stories with tales of his own. One was a PhD student who had been involved as an undergraduate with the female head of department and who now felt badgered and intimidated.³

In a confidential letter to senior university administrators, Professor Neville Bruce and Professor Bernard Moulden wrote that:

It was alleged that a number of graduate and undergraduate students had had sexual relations with a member of staff and that this had been followed by favoured treatment of some (for example, in terms of grants and jobs within the Department) and apparent victimisation of others (including public ridicule and denial of fair opportunity).⁴

The real crunch comes with the following extract from the same letter:

It was alleged that an environment had been fostered in which cynicism and ridicule were used to promote certain theoretic

approaches and denigrate others, and that this stultified free academic exchange, damaged academic reputations and integrity, and ultimately severely retarded academic growth, particularly of some promising postgraduate students.⁵

This is perhaps the heart of the matter. When sex spills over into politics and the world of ideas — and how can it not? — the fallout for freedom of speech can be dire. From here it is a simple step to another celebrated academic sexual harassment case, the Ormond College affair.

Helen Garner's *The First Stone* and Virginia Trioli's *Generation F* are two responses to the case. Garner's book, asking for some moderation and clear-headedness in considering the facts of the case, led to her being ostracised by many of her feminist peers. Trioli, however, argued that the Ormond college women were not offered any appropriate way of airing their grievance. I don't agree, having been in a similar situation at a party with male academics. Here, now, for the first time in print, the Philippa Martyr Awkward Wine and Cheese D.I.Y. Feminist Anti-Grope Tactic:

Step 1. Examine his shirt front.

Step 2. Find a glass of red wine.

Step 3. Pour, while saying something like "Let's see just how much your wife doesn't understand you."

Step 4. Replace glass on nearby table and walk away, unruffled, without further comment.

I only ever had to do this once. I experienced no further problems, and oddly enough a number of people, male and female, told me afterwards that they'd been longing to do something similar to that particular man for some time. I was also ready to be hounded by that man because of what I'd done with that glass of wine, but I never was. So you don't need to put mousetraps on your garters, but you do need to realise that strong women take responsibility for their actions.

If even a semi-educated and almost adult woman can't make it clear to a man that she is not interested in him sexually, then she shouldn't be in the workplace or at a university. Some men and women, however, will not take no for an answer; a lecturer can say to a student, in essence, 'Sleep with me or you'll fail'. I am certain this has happened, and I am certain it does happen. Such sexual harassment is unprofes-

sional in the extreme — universities are places of academic learning, not brothels. *Then* is the time for sexual harassment lawsuits and as much noise and aggravation as you can make.

Some branches of modern feminism have failed women because they have taught them to think of themselves as intrinsically victimised. The truth of the matter is that both men and women should be taught the real nature of rape and of sexual harassment — that it does not shame the victim, but that in fact it shows the perpetrator to be cowardly and weak. Celine Farber, rape survivor, described the matter in this way:

But in that moment when he decides that the only way he can get what he wants from her emotionally, or sexually, or whatever, is to rape her, he is confessing to a weakness that is all-encompassing. She is abused, he is utterly tragic and pathetic.⁶

The authentic sexual harasser is in the same position — those in a position of academic power who say ‘Sleep with me or you’ll fail’ show themselves to be pathetic. They are saying ‘I cannot have a relationship with you, because you wouldn’t look twice at me, so instead I’m going to make you do what I want.’ It’s also an insult to the victim — it is a way of saying ‘you cannot succeed unless you sleep with me.’ To seduce a student into playing the supporting role in your own self-pitying personal drama is conduct unworthy of a human being, let alone an academic.

Ideally, students must learn not to put themselves in this position in the first place. If you have *any* twinges of doubt at all about a lecturer, then don’t see them in their room with the door closed; always make sure you have someone with you when you do see them; and discourage sexual behaviour, such as flirtation, from the outset of the teacher-student relationship. The last is probably the hardest, because it’s actually very enjoyable to flirt with a tutor, and anyone who denies this is a mendacious idiot. Rights have responsibilities, but so do pleasures, and it is a mark of increasing maturity to know where and when to draw the line.

This is a hard saying, and the difficulty in saying it stems, I believe, largely from the impact of the sexual revolution. The wide availability of reliable — albeit sometimes dangerous — contraception,⁷ is another of sexuality’s double-edged swords. Most swords are double-edged; that this one turned out to be so very sharp should come as no

surprise, except to those who propagated the use of contraception as the key to women's liberation. It was not so for many women.

Victorian feminism was way ahead of its time in acknowledging easy abortion and contraception as sources of female oppression. Their staunch opposition to prostitution was based on the argument that it promoted the double standard — that men could enjoy sex when and wherever they wanted without having to fear the social or physical consequences. They then came home and infected their wives with syphilis and gonorrhoea. Widely available contraception was, for this reason, often legally controlled in its sale to married women only for purposes of family planning. It was rightly anticipated that if it were available to unmarried men and women, sexual promiscuity would flourish.

Most women of childbearing age in Australia use some form of contraception in order to preserve their immaturity. This also makes them — in the eyes and minds of a great many men, despite all the best re-education available — sexually available 24 hours a day. Whereas the threat of pregnancy was often a woman's last (and sometimes quite effective) line of defence in the pre-contraception days, many women no longer are able to protest along these lines, when they find things have gotten out of hand in a sexual situation with a man. Add widely available pornography to this potent cocktail, and you have trouble. This may all seem terribly old-fashioned and puritanical, but I can guarantee you that the prospect of causing a woman's impregnation is one of the most potent aphrodisiacs I know of for the average unmarried man. Try it some time if you don't believe me.

Rene Denfeld has condemned what she called 'the new Victorianism' in feminism.⁸ *Au contraire*, I find the Victorian feminism espoused by strong women such as the Pankhurst family rather appealing. Striding purposefully through Edwardian England like Helena Bonham Carter on PCP, armed with a hatpin and ready for anything, the sisters Pankhurst gave as good as they got. They correctly identified men as the unpredictable variant in the female universe, to be treated with a due degree of caution. They also correctly interpreted contraception as potentially oppressive to women, not liberating. Young women today would do well to look at those Victorian feminists, especially the academics, in a new light — not for their contribution to enduring oppression, but as sensible, good-

humoured and hard-working women — strong women — who achieved academic and professional success when times were really tough.

Notes

1. Camille Paglia, 'The rape debate, continued,' *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays*, Viking, 1992, p. 57.
2. Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p 74.
3. Kate Legge, 'The dispute that split a university,' *Weekend Australian*, 28-29 October 1995.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Celine Farber, in 'The rape debate, continued,' Paglia, op. cit.
7. John Wilks, *A Consumer's Guide to the Pill and Other Drugs*, is an excellent presentation of the literature on the risks of contraceptive use even in healthy women. Feminist perspectives can be found in, among others, Michelle Stanworth, 'Birth pangs: contraceptive technologies and the threat to motherhood,' in Hirsch and Keller, *Conflicts in Feminism*, 1990, and Ann Oakley, 'Women, health and knowledge: travels through and beyond foreign parts,' *Health Care for Women International*, 14: 327-344, 1993.
8. Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order*, 1995, Warner.