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Dangerous Delusions

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I have been hearing a great deal about the weariness and wariness of administrators, colleagues and students regarding feminism, both as a field of inquiry and as a methodology for engaging with eighteenth-century texts. Some of what I hear sounds straight out of *Mean Girls*: “it’s too old-fashioned, not sexy, not queer enough, not inclusive enough.” “Haven’t you heard? We’re past it. We live in a post-feminist age.”

I disagree. Feminism not only has a future as a discipline, but is necessary to the future of eighteenth-century studies. I refer here not to its relevance to academic scholarship—the generative nature of feminist scholarship in our field speaks for itself—but as a method of helping students access eighteenth-century texts and contexts. For many of my students, reading eighteenth-century texts through a feminist lens also leads to insights about their own lives. Thus my insistence on the continued usefulness of feminist theory comes with the caveat that doing so requires clarity and transparency about the various goals of the course. It also requires accepting the dual purpose of undergraduate education: college is a place where students are supposed to learn about themselves while they are learning about the subjects they study. Thus the relevance of feminism to the teaching of eighteenth-century studies makes a great deal of sense because it offers students—male and female alike—a way to see themselves in relation both to academic pursuits and to the worlds that they themselves inhabit.

My experience at Yeshiva University fuels these beliefs. I am an associate professor at Stern College for Women, the women’s college of a university in which ninety-nine percent of the undergraduate students are Modern Orthodox Jews.¹ The school embraces the concept of Torah Umadda—a phrase that roughly translates as Torah and secular learning. In practice, this means that students pursue a double curriculum. At the same time that they are taking courses offered by departments like Biology, English, History and Political Science, they are taking courses in Jewish History, Jewish Philosophy, Judaic Studies, Bible and Hebrew. At its best, Torah Umadda means that the dual curriculums inform each other, as when a student reading *Paradise Lost* in an English class draws on knowledge gained from courses like “Women and the Bible” and “Genesis.” In these instances, students’ learning experiences are enriched by the coexistence of religious and secular fields of study.

At worst, however, students can feel torn and confused by what seem to be opposing sets of norms and expectations. Many of the students enrolled at Stern College for Women plan on careers that require graduate education. They want to be doctors, lawyers, social workers, educators and scholars. Despite the fact that the women’s college has a higher rate of acceptance to graduate school than the men’s college, the perception exists among students (male and female alike) and among some faculty and administrators that the men’s college is a more rigorous institution; that the classes are harder and the students are more serious. Many reasons exist for this misconception, among them the belief that men and women are essentially different and that each sex has its own set of religious and secular obligations. For men, one obligation is to “learn” by studying religious texts; for women, the imperative is not as clear.² I suspect that the greater weight given to male learning in this sphere has colored perceptions about the quality of secular education and the seriousness of students’ application at both colleges unfairly.³

So does the seriousness with which my students treat courtship. Because men have a religious obligation to marry and propagate, the young women I teach experience immense pressure to

marry and have children while in their early-to-mid-twenties. This pressure is extremely hard to resist. Men who date “older” women are comparatively scarce. Young women who want to postpone marriage until after graduate school will have a comparatively difficult time finding a partner. And doing so is important for more than personal reasons. Since the majority of cultural and religious practices for adult women revolve around their position within the family, a woman who remains single by choice may lack fulfilling roles in her home and community. For these reasons and others, the students I teach take marriage quite seriously. Most date with marriage in mind (hence the bad joke that our students are earning their “Mrs.”). Like students at secular institutions, they may meet prospective partners through friends; however, a matchmaker or older adults may be involved. Whether they embrace or reject the situation, students know that they are on display—that their behavior and dress, their friends, and the courses they take are among the factors that determine which young men they will date. Along these lines, students have told me that the majority of undergraduate men at Yeshiva College will not date someone who defines herself as a feminist. “When I say that I am a feminist,” one student writes,

my marriage prospects immediately go down. If I tell people that I believe in equality for men and women in Judaism, and that I think it is oppressive to be forced to cover my hair and not be allowed to sing in front of men, those prospects go down even further. And if I put on pants, well, that is a whole other story. Announcing that one is a feminist is a sacrifice. And while it is easy for some women to say, “Well, I don’t want to marry a man who thinks that I should just stay home with the children,” it is not so easy in practice, especially when they go night after night, dateless.⁴

Clearly, my students do not exist in a post-feminist world.

Instead, they live in a world where feminism is, at best, problematic. Many members of the administration at Stern College for Women understand that women’s studies may empower our students without necessarily undermining the family and religious values embraced by the university. A case in point is that an administrative committee, which approves requests by all college affiliated organizations for speakers and special events, sanctioned a talk on women’s sexuality organized by the student-run women’s studies club. Out of student body of just under one thousand, eighty-two students attended. Evidently students felt a need to discuss this subject from secular, as well as religious, standpoints. Outside of school, several of my students volunteer at women’s health clinics. One spent last summer in Israel teaching Chasidic women—who know very little about their own bodies to—as she put it—“find their own breasts.” Another works at an organization that helps women whose husbands have left them in marital limbo by refusing to grant them a Jewish divorce (called a “get”). For these students, feminism—and feminist theory—is less about academics than it is about real life interventions.

The relevance of feminism to my students’ experience outside the university makes it extremely useful in the classroom. In women’s studies courses, it helps students define their own beliefs and assumptions. Regardless of whether they consider themselves feminists, almost all of my students are engaged in a rather fierce struggle to negotiate among the cultural imperatives that shape their identities as women living in New York City in the twenty-first century and as Modern Orthodox Jews. Thus in “Introduction to Women’s Studies: Theory and Practice,” I

require that they analyze events in their own lives in light of the issues addressed in the material. Determining whether or not these experiences resonate with the issue or argument under consideration often leads them to greater clarity not only about the issue, but about their own subjectivities.

It is also quite useful when teaching literature from the long eighteenth century. In an essay I wrote on teaching Jane Austen at Stern College for Women, I note that the lives of my students are—to some degree—shaped by ideas about female nature and conduct that resonate with those found in eighteenth-century literature. As a result, they tend to apprehend the women writers and characters I teach in ways that are both immediate and personal. For them, the question of whether Clarissa ought to accede to an arranged marriage, the spiritual importance of Pamela's physical virginity, or the fact that Charlotte Lucas would be considered an old maid at twenty-seven aren't just fictional representations of a distant past; they are issues that resemble those with which they engage. Indeed, at its best, this resonance results in a level of understanding and ease with the material rare among undergraduates.

It has drawbacks as well. As an eighteenth-century scholar, I believe that a large part of apprehending the literature I teach is by understanding the cultural and material differences between the world represented in the text and the world of the reader. Students who ignore these differences may easily miss vital information about characters, plots and themes. In addition, they may impose their own expectations and values upon the texts, and thereby judge and reject certain protagonists. Whenever I teach *Moll Flanders*, for instance, several students condemn Moll for bigamy and for abandoning her children. Initially, at least, their opinions are fueled by their own ideas about the actions that constitute moral behavior. Information about eighteenth-century laws concerning divorce and child custody pulls their attention back to the text. Underscoring the differences between Defoe's time and our own consequently enables them to apprehend the world represented by the novel in ways that would be impossible otherwise.

It also requires students engage in a practice integral to the dual purposes of undergraduate education. In my capacity as a teacher of women's studies, I am forever emphasizing the point that women need to acknowledge and figure out how to communicate across the differences that divide them. In classes populated by what the *U.S. News and World Report* has determined is one of the least ethnically diverse student populations in the U.S., one danger is that students can become insular, dismissing arguments made by members of other races, religions, ages, and cultures as not relevant to their own lives ("Campus Ethnic Diversity").⁵ Another is that students can be surprised, and genuinely upset to discover that some of their classmates hold beliefs with which they vehemently disagree. The stakes are quite high in this regard because the young women who disagree with certain positions—held by the "right" or the "left"—risk being judged by those who oppose them in terms of their level of observance as modern orthodox Jews. Needless to say, the concerns are quite different in classes on eighteenth-century literature. Nevertheless, by preventing easy judgments about female chastity in *Moll Flanders*, or challenging students' tendency to identify with Elizabeth Bennet, I am asking them to balance their tendency to look for moments of identification with female characters and their capacity to accept and talk about difference. In this sense, my commitment to feminist readings of eighteenth-century literature is one which is not only informed by but supports my work as a teacher of women's studies.

Although I try to achieve a balance between teaching practices which encourage identification and those that create critical distance, the two approaches vie for supremacy in each of my classes. In eighteenth-century courses, I tend to privilege difference; in women's studies courses, I often prioritize identification. The reason for these emphases is that many of my students find it easier to identify with eighteenth-century characters than to identify with the experiences of real women across race, religion, contexts, and class. These tendencies generally reverse as the semester moves on. Achieving balance also is paramount to courses that do double duty in the sense that they are literature courses which focus exclusively on women. In these instances, the choice to encourage identification or distance depends on the topic and on the way students apprehend the material. Unless I provide adequate background, period-specific courses like "The Courtship Novel in England," tend to invite identification. Survey courses like "Women and Literature," enable balance, however, because they model moments in which women from various cultures, and races address issues of common concern.

Regardless of which hat I'm wearing, I make my students aware that feminist literary scholarship is a specific, conscious mode of approaching a text or a topic. In this, I've been lucky that my department has created a gateway course to the major which focuses on different ways of reading a text. In addition, I recently created and taught a course called "The Women's Studies Interdisciplinary Seminar." In this course, faculty from various disciplines: economics, Jewish history, Jewish studies, French, English, art history, sociology, etc. teach classes on feminist work in their particular fields. My hope is that it will help students see women's studies as an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry and, in doing so, help those who are interested, to envision how they might themselves work as feminists within their majors and in their careers. In this context, the fact that the course is being led by me helps them see how women's studies may inform eighteenth-century studies and vice versa. Even more important, the makeup of the course includes representatives from both sides of Torah Umadda – and in doing so, suggests that one's identity as a feminist literary scholar (or historian, or economist) might not be irreconcilable with one's identity as modern Orthodox Jew.

I hope I don't sound patronizing, but the truth is that the question that inspired this piece—"is there still a need for feminism in eighteenth-century studies?"—practically makes me sputter with indignation. My particular school makes my situation clearer than most. My students, however, are far from the only young women I know for whom feminism—far from being over and done—is dangerous territory.

For more from this author, please see this [assignment on the courtship novel](#), [syllabus on the courtship novel](#), and [syllabus on novel heroines](#).

Other essays in this series:

[Introduction](#)

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Notes

1. In September 2011, the undergraduate faculty at Stern College for Women and Yeshiva College for Men were combined into a single undergraduate faculty; individual departments which were separate on each campus (eg. English, Psychology) were unified.
2. At Yeshiva College, mornings are designated solely for religious studies (all students matriculate in one of four religious studies programs); they take courses in Judaic Studies (eg. Jewish History, Jewish Philosophy) and secular courses in the afternoon. Undergraduate Women at Stern College are not required to enroll in a religious study program; courses in secular and Jewish Studies are interspersed throughout the day.
3. In an effort not to speak for my students, I made an earlier draft of this essay available to students in my class, Introduction to Women's Studies. This theory provoked considerable disagreement.
4. From a response paper for "Introduction to Women's Studies: Theory and Practice" (Fall 2011) written in response to Lisa Hogeland's comment: "Young women may believe that a feminist identity puts them out of the pool for many men, limits the options of who they might become with a partner, how they might decide to live. They may not be wrong either: how many young men feminists or feminist sympathizers do you know?" (656).
5. <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/campus-ethnic-diversity/page+11>

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