

THE DESCENT OF WOMAN: JOINING THE ACADEMIC CONVERSATION

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For centuries, women have been denied the right to formal learning, sentenced to watch their brothers venture off to university to obtain an education unavailable to women and girls. Many of these women have fought for the right to join the academic conversation. In developed countries, numbers of us have won that right, but we sometimes forget just how important our contributions to this conversation are. In “Claiming an Education,” Adrienne Rich delivers a commencement speech to the young women of Douglass College, a women’s college within Rutgers University. In this speech from 1977, Rich stresses the importance of being active in one’s role as a woman in higher education, arguing that passivity will not only slow our progress towards equal opportunity, but also reinforce the labels that society has historically placed on women: that we are “self-denying,” noncommittal beings who should be “acted-upon” rather than taking actions ourselves (299, 297).

Rich posits that to reject these labels and to “claim,” as opposed to “receive,” our education “as the rightful owner[s]” thereof, we must assume “*responsibility toward [our]selves*” (297, 298). But this ‘me first’ mentality is in stark contrast to the roles that women have traditionally played: the mother, the wife, and the lover, for example. In essence, their labor here may be perceived as a quest to become more like men in order to achieve the same rights, respect, and opportunities that men have been given by the cultures that they have, generally, constructed. However, it is important to note that Rich is not suggesting that we, as women, must become men, but rather that we must push to assume the roles that men have assigned to *themselves* through the construction of our patriarchal society. Men are not better suited to succeed in the academic world; rather, they have designed the system as one that primarily aligns with their values. Therefore, Rich states that setting ourselves up to excel in a man-made system may require the assumption of certain stereotypically ‘masculine’

traits, such as placing oneself first and valuing work at the same level as personal relationships. But did we not gain anything of value during our time in those traditional, assigned roles that we should carry with us in our progress? If we reject or suppress what might be called our 'feminine instincts,' however they may be defined, what will prevent women from becoming just like the men by whom we have been oppressed?

Virginia Woolf ponders this question in *Three Guineas* through a hypothetical letter to an honorary treasurer who has asked for money in support of a "society for helping the daughters of educated men to obtain employment in the professions" (113). Woolf says that she will only donate to this cause if the treasurer can promise her that the women to be helped will "practice those professions in such a way as to prevent war" (113). This admittedly vague statement is prefaced by the first part of the essay, wherein Woolf argues that the instinct to fight is quintessentially male, not held or enacted by women. Essentially, what such a demand truly stipulates is that any hypothetical society must ensure that the professional women it produces do not turn out just like professional men, who, according to Woolf, have lost their sense of humanity. It is the duty of these soon-to-be professional women to ask themselves very important questions about where their futures are taking them and what sacrifices they are willing to make on the pathway to those futures. Like Rich, Woolf sees the education and employment of women as essential to the quest for equal rights, an effort that comes with immense responsibility and sacrifice. However, whereas Rich pushes for movement away from the societal expectations of women, Woolf stresses the importance of holding on to what the task of being a woman has taught us. She urges us to listen to our "unpaid-for education," the lessons that our mothers, grandmothers, and the women before them learned first, and what these educations have enabled us to see (123). Woolf argues that this education, taught by "the four great teachers . . . poverty, chastity, derision, and freedom from unreal loyalties," will enable women to enter professions while remaining "uncontaminated by them" (124).

Though Rich does not directly praise 'feminine' traits, as Woolf does, she never suggests that we ought to deny our identities as women. On the contrary, Rich repeatedly emphasizes that the educa-

tion of the female mind has the potential to be even more enriching than that of the male, as there is so much untapped potential, so much to add to the conversation. In fact, she asserts that “there is no more exhilarating and intellectually fertile place in the academic world today than a women’s college—if both students and teachers in large enough numbers are trying to fulfill this contract” (301). This “*if*” illustrates just how much responsibility is placed upon those who seek (and provide) higher education. According to Rich, the potential of women’s education arises from our ability to remedy a “devastating weakness of university learning, . . . its almost total erasure of women’s experience and thought from the curriculum” (297). Ever since men decided that they were the intellectually superior sex, they have been the primary authors of academic texts, many of which we still study today. However, due to the prevalent sexist biases when these texts were written and published, women are often inaccurately written about or left out of the discussion altogether. Therefore, as women first entered into the world of higher education, they were presented with curricula that described only “what men, above all white men, in their male subjectivity, have decided is important” (298). The *new* role of women is to fill in the gap that has been left in academia because of the outdated view that our thoughts are not valid. However, in order to fill in this gap, we must always be cognizant of its existence, rather than merely grateful that we have been granted the opportunity to learn. And that requires actively engaging with everything that we consume during our academic careers, whether by thinking critically about books that fail to mention women, though they claim “to describe a ‘human’ reality,” or by refusing to be “erotized” by our male professors (298, 300). This action of “*think[ing] actively*” is, in itself, an objection to the outdated expectation that women should be passive (300).

Rich presents the opportunity for formal education as a chance to break away from the societal expectations that have held women back for so long. She speaks of assembling as the “courage to be ‘different’; not to be continuously available to others when we need time for ourselves and our work” (299). The demands associated with pursuing our education in this way might, according to Rich, elicit an urge to take the “easy” way out—to take easy courses, marry young, and get

pregnant (299). But, Rich insists, we must push forward. We must challenge ourselves and prove that we are more than what the past says we must be, and we must *not* become “the intelligent woman who denies her intelligence in order to seem more ‘feminine’” (299).

However, is it not just as detrimental to our identities to deny our femininity in order to seem more intelligent? Suppressing our basic instincts to care and nurture for a life of what Rich views as “meaningful work” may indirectly devalue the lives of all the women before us (299)—women who, as Woolf says, have always “thought while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle” (115). Maybe the real opportunity in the right to formal education is the power to choose which ‘feminine’ traits we want to reject and, possibly of even more importance, which ones we want to take with us as we embark on this journey. Though a fresh start may seem enticing, we must never fully let go of what makes us women: our unique understanding of human nature that has arisen from our roles as caregivers and our biological instinct to nurture. It is the qualities derived from our “unpaid-for educations” in conjunction with the insight that comes from centuries of being silenced that will allow women to contribute something new to the academic conversation.

Camille Paglia discusses the various ways women—both stereotypically ‘feminine’ and less so—and the discipline of feminism can and should be included in academia in “Academic Feminists Must Begin to Fulfill Their Noble, Animating Ideal.” In this essay, written in 1997, Paglia calls for the restructuring of gender studies (previously known as women’s studies) in American universities. Arguing against the curriculum of primarily theoretical feminism, which credits “gender differences entirely to social conditioning,” Paglia illustrates the failure of academic feminism to “keep pace with changes in the real world” (111, 113). She emphasizes the importance of “represent[ing] all sides of the debate” through the discussion of contrasting viewpoints on feminism and the inclusion of science as a basis for investigating differences between men and women (117). In her opinion, the failure to do so is “indoctrination, not education” (117). Though Paglia writes mainly about the subject of gender studies itself, her warning of the dangers of a static, one-sided education in feminism is equally important for women in other disciplines. If women are to

make informed decisions about which feminine traits they value and identify with, they must take the time to explore the roots of their woman-ness, to see how biology, social psychology, and history have interwoven to create the ever-evolving modern woman—whether they are directly studying women or not.

Furthermore, women within academia, whether students or faculty, must remember that the ‘modern woman’ is never any one thing. We begin to see just how limiting feminist theory can be as Paglia outlines the various “strains” of feminism adopted by the academic community over time, from the “elitist” French theory of the 1970s to the 1980s conversion to the “dated” ideas of “MacKinnonism,” which purported the “scenario of male oppressors and frail female victims” (111). For Paglia, these theoretical attempts to explain the complex role of women in society have failed, as they were “ill-prepared” to deal with the “controversial issues” facing women in the current world (113, 112). This is likely due to the fact that no one theory or viewpoint could ever possibly be representative of all women in this diverse and ever-changing world. Furthermore, to assume that all women should hold the same views about their femininity is to deny women the freedom to think critically and make their own decisions, essentially replacing the old set of societal expectations for women with a new one. In doing so, we run the risk of suppressing the active thinking necessary to make valuable contributions to our fields. In order to fill the aforementioned academic gap, differing, dynamic viewpoints are necessary. Such viewpoints can be achieved through the inclusion of a diverse group of women in the conversation.

Rich and Paglia agree on the point that active, critical thinking is necessary for an effective education. But whereas Rich urges us to be analytical about the “antiwoman” messages of a male-dominated university (300), Paglia reminds us of the importance of being critical of ideas and texts that claim to be pro-woman. These, too, can be misleading. Paglia directly addresses women like Rich, criticizing the feminist ideas that were largely embraced when “Claiming an Education” was written. Though Rich herself may not have agreed with all of these ideas, she fails to mention that there may be reasons aside from social conditioning that contribute to gender differences. Most importantly, she makes no reference to any type of science,

though subjects such as genetics and social psychology are key to a full understanding of the female mind. Rich tells us to reject what society has told us we should be, but she insufficiently remarks on the difficulties that may be involved in denying our feminine qualities.

Rebecca Solnit complicates this idea by asking us to reject this entire line of questioning, asserting that feminine success takes many forms. Solnit, a contemporary American writer who, like Rich, finds empowerment in her academic career, begins her 2015 essay, "The Mother of All Questions," by recalling a question-and-answer session following a talk she gave about Virginia Woolf. Instead of focusing on the "magnificent questions" posed by Woolf's work, much of the discussion seemed to revolve around the question of "whether Woolf should have had children" (762). Though Solnit found this discussion to be a "pointless detour" from Woolf's work, she notes that many women, including herself, are accustomed to this "line of questioning" (762). She refers to such questions as "closed," or "questions to which there is only one right answer, at least as far as the interrogator is concerned" (763). These types of questions are not limited to those who choose not to have children; Solnit also notes the experiences of mothers who are reduced to "bovine non-intellec[t]s" and professional women who are "told that they cannot be taken seriously . . . because they will go off and reproduce" (763). Later in the piece, Solnit explores the ineffective and constraining nature of "one-size-fits-all recipes" for happy lives, and the futility of using happiness as a measure for a fulfilled life (764). Women are repeatedly told that there is one specific vocation to which they should devote their lives, a "key to feminine identity," but in reality, "There is no good answer to being a woman; the art may instead lie in how we refuse the question" (765, 763).

Even so, Solnit's ideas open up the possibilities for a life of fulfillment, departing from the somewhat one-dimensional viewpoint of "meaningful work" held by Rich. Rich praises the women who are able to immerse themselves fully in their work, while criticizing the ones who may follow their instinct to nurture—those who, according to Rich, are "evad[ing] . . . already existing problems" (299). Furthermore, she makes these lifestyles seem incompatible. Perhaps this is because she believes that a mother could not afford enough

time to take on a life of meaningful work, or because she views the desire to succeed academically and the desire to raise a family as mutually exclusive. Solnit does not deny that a life completely devoted to academic work and the perfection of one's craft is meaningful; in fact, this is the lifestyle that best suits her. However, unlike Rich, she does not portray this lifestyle as more difficult or morally superior to a life of marriage and children. Moreover, she reminds us of "how spacious our lives can be," suggesting that our love and attention "can be directed at so many different things" (Solnit 767).

Rich's 'one-or-the-other' attitude may encourage some women to work harder, yes. But it also runs the risk of pressuring young women to abandon traits they value because they feel it is the only way to succeed in their field. Having been directed down a path not entirely of their own volition, such women may emerge from their educations unsatisfied. Perhaps, then, the power lies in our ability to choose freely what kinds of women we want to be. By fighting against social pressures, whether those that have been in place for centuries or those imposed by 'feminist' ideals, women will finally be able to allocate their talent, intellect, and passion towards the vocations that they deem most important in their lives. In doing so, we will end up with the best of the best: scientists doing groundbreaking research, writers calling attention to the serious problems of our time, and mothers raising the next generation of great politicians and artists. Those who truly care about their work, those who are unafraid to redefine their unique identities as women, are the most successful, for they are the women who will close the academic gap, and their daughters will be the ones who will keep it shut forever.

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