

The “Woman Question”

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William F. Buckley’s recent collection of speeches recounts an experience at his fifteenth reunion that captures the flavor of women at Yale “B.C.”: before coeducation, as we used to put it. It was 1969 and he was seated next to the then Provost watching two “striptease artists, both of whom obviously put their hearts into their work.” After they finished, the Provost was asked: “what is the official Yale position toward this?” The Provost looked sternly in the direction of the empty stage and replied: “Yale’s position is that the Second One is better than the First.”¹

The introduction of women as equal members of this community did not occur without some difficulty and this publication is an opportunity to chronicle our partial progress. Yale’s experience is in many ways emblematic of the broader national struggle for equal opportunity, and it offers a chance to reflect on the past and present challenges for women on this campus, in the humanities generally, and in academic and other leadership settings.

The struggle for coeducation has been aptly recounted in a 1971 book, *Women at Yale*, inaptly subtitled *Liberating a College Campus*. When I arrived in 1970, the second year of coeducation, many of the natives appeared unaware of their liberated status. The decision to admit female undergraduates had not, of course, been greeted with enthusiasm on the part of all faculty, alumni, or students. The reasons varied. Some thought Yale’s responsibility was to produce leaders, which by (their) definition excluded women. From their perspective, it was “not an accident of history” that virtually all world leaders were men.² And as one professor explained, “I feel a greater sense of accomplishment when I direct my efforts toward those who will one day have a greater role than women in society.”³ A male student put it more directly: “Investing money in girls is a bad investment.”⁴

Another common view, expressed with uncommon candor by one disgruntled alumnus, was that male undergraduates who wanted to concentrate on important matters like “the basic principles of thermodynamics” would be diverted by all the “idiotic trivia that all women try to impose on men.”⁵ And the type of female student who might want to focus on topics like thermodynamics was equally unattractive. Women who were “assertive” in the classroom or too “intellectual” outside it were “unfeminine.”⁶ Coeds were captive to the perennial double standard and double bind: they were at risk of appearing too feminine or not feminine enough, and what was assertive for a man was abrasive for a woman.

There were turf problems as well, literally and figuratively. Many athletes and coaches were reluctant to share space and resources with women, who, in those pre Title IX days, were products of physical education programs involving hula hoops, rhythmic ring toss, and pep club rallies.⁷ Other university administrators cited the absence of adequate space and funding for women’s facilities as an insurmountable bar to women’s admission. The Yale School of Medicine was unable to overcome this obstacle until the father of a female applicant called its bluff and endowed a ladies’ room.⁸

In this cultural context, the administration of President Kingman Brewster deserves enormous credit for admitting classes inartfully described as including a “thousand male leaders and [250] women.”⁹ Yet it seems doubtful that either Brewster, or the administrators and trustees who embarked on coeducation, really grasped the transformations that it implied. Ironically enough, for two centuries, women had been excluded from institutions like Yale on the assumption that they were different. But once they were admitted, the assumption seemed to be that they were the same, and that few adjustments would be necessary to accommodate their presence. The dominant view was similar to that expressed by Harvard Law School Dean Erwin Griswold when female students first gained admission to that institution in 1950. To Griswold, this development did not seem “very significant.” After all, as he reminded anxious alums, “most of us have seen women from time to time in our lives, and have managed to survive the shock . . . I think we can take it, and I doubt it will change the character of the School or even its atmosphere to any detectable extent.”¹⁰

In a similar spirit, the Yale campus made modest preparations for the onslaught. The bathrooms got mirrors, the health service got a gynecologist, and the freshman dorm for women got a security guard.¹¹ As far as most of us could tell, that was about it, and we weren’t altogether sure about the function of the guard. Whether he was there to prevent mayhem or to protect morals seemed unclear to him as well as us. In the face of administrative ambiguity, he steered a prudent middle course. Male visitors were not barred at indiscreet hours but they were greeted with stern and reproachful glares, reminiscent of a vigilant junior prom chaperone.

Other issues were also left unresolved or in a state of unhappy compromise. Women’s access to athletic facilities was a source of particular friction. The women’s field hockey team requested practice space; it ended up in the Yale Bowl’s Parking Lot A, which often hosted cars and debris as well as the coeds. The women’s varsity tennis team insisted on court time, but gave

up on lavatory facilities, and settled for coaching by a local gym teacher. Her contribution was to bring iced tea and cookies to matches and murmur “good shot” at appropriate intervals. For years, the women’s crew team politely and ineffectually pleaded for shower facilities at the boathouse. Results required federal legislation and an inventive “Title IX strip.” Crew members arranged a meeting with the Director of Athletics, printed “Title IX” in block letters on their bare backs, and disrobed in the presence of invited guests, including a New York Times photographer. A picture ran the following day; showers followed quickly thereafter.¹²

Similar skirmishes involving traditionally all-male enclaves occurred in every corner of the campus, as well as its outposts in other cities. Sacred terrain was gradually, but not always gracefully, surrendered. The New York Yale club was a site of longstanding struggle. Women kept escalating their demands: first to use the main entrance, then to infiltrate the second floor lounge, and finally to have equal access to the swimming pool.¹³ Mory’s eating club held out for a valiant interval, unmoved by pickets, mass resignations, and boycotts. It was only the threatened loss of its liquor license that forced introduction of women members.

There were issues of sexual harassment as well, although women students had neither a name nor a remedy for the experience. They just had a “problem” with a professor. And the problem was always theirs, never his.

In fairness, it should be emphasized that men were responsible for solutions as well as problems in most of these struggles. Not only were they the gatekeepers who ultimately opened the doors to equal opportunity, they often actively supported women’s struggle for access and made them feel welcome on arrival. I could cite innumerable examples, but one captures the spirit. The Yale Corporation, the University’s governing board, traditionally held two-day meetings with a dinner in between to which spouses were invited. They were, however, seated at a separate wives table, presumably to prevent female trivia from interrupting male discussion of important matters, like thermodynamics, or the performance of the Yale hockey team. When Hannah Grey

became provost, her spot in this seating arrangement provoked much consternation. It was finally resolved to place her with the other male trustees. But the greater problem arose when her husband, a history professor, refused to join her there, and insisted on sitting with the wives. The arrangement was thereafter scuttled: Provost Grey was an acceptable honorary male but Professor Grey as an honorary female was too humiliating. However, not all the seating dilemmas were then put permanently to rest. Several years later I was elected as a trustee (the alumni voters presumably having forgotten that they'd already elected a woman) and my husband joined me for the first dinner. His place card listed him under my name, which required a good humored explanation to President Giamatti that this was an error; he had kept his own name after marriage.

The two contexts in which barriers to change were most pervasive and persistent involved the content of the curricula and the composition of the faculty. In retrospect, that should hardly be surprising. These are matters on which the University's most powerful constituency has the greatest stake and most actively resists external pressure. Yet the likelihood of conflict on these issues seems not to have occurred to many leaders of the coeducation initiative. I served on Yale's first Committee on the Education of Women, and it came as a shock to its administrative members that some women students wanted courses by and about women.

At that point in history, at Yale and most other universities, women's studies were noticeable for their absence. One of my own particularly memorable experiences involved a class on American Progressive Movements from 1900 to 1920. The professor was one of Yale's most distinguished historians. He relegated the entire women's suffrage movement to a single run-on sentence. It went something like, "Just after World War I, women's activism increased, and in gratitude for their war service, women received a constitutional amendment granting them the vote." My college art history text listed some 3,000 male artists and not one female. Several years later I graduated from Yale Law School without ever having a course taught by or about women.

My experience was not atypical. A survey of history texts at the time revealed a biological oddity: a nation with only founding fathers. Material on women constituted less than one percent of the total. In one leading text, the development of the six-shooter received more coverage than the women's suffrage movement.¹⁴ Many students graduated from the best universities unaware that there even was a significant movement. My own first foray into empirical research confirmed the extent of historical amnesia. Under the auspices of the Committee on Women, I surveyed a random sample of Yale undergraduates to determine how many could name two leaders of the women's rights movement. The result was about 10 percent and that involved giving the benefit of the doubt to answers like Joan of Arc. The standard curriculum at Yale and elsewhere remained hostage to "great man" historical frameworks. The texts were as Jane Austen once described them: "quarrels of popes and kings on every page; the men all good for nothing and hardly any women at all. So very tiresome."¹⁵

Issues concerning the representation of women on the faculty and in professional roles more generally proved equally problematic. Yale gave no indication of wanting to be at the forefront of change on these matters. The dean in charge of coeducation had been picked because, as a senior male administrator explained to the New York Times, she was a "girl with a lot of inner charm, a really brilliant gal who doesn't push it."¹⁶ The college had gone coed; it had not gone feminist.

The distinction was apparent in the interviews conducted by Lever and Schwartz. In a chapter titled "Yin and Yang at Yale," they chronicled the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles and the hostility toward those who actively challenged them. "Women's liberation types" were scorned and shunned by most male and female students alike. Even Kingman Brewster admitted to being somewhat "Victorian" in his attitudes. Although he acknowledged some basis for women's "gripes and agitation" about discrimination, he viewed the attempts to defy gender differences in men's and women's social, family, and occupational roles as "ridiculous" and "repulsive."¹⁷

His views were widely shared. Most male students wanted to marry talented and intelligent women, but expected them to stay home with their children, and take “feminine” jobs that would accommodate that domestic role.¹⁸ Secretarial work was acceptable, and so even was teaching in the humanities, as long as it was done at the elementary or secondary level, or perhaps at junior colleges.¹⁹ But women who wanted careers in law, medicine, or management were destined to become “cold and callous” and to lose touch with their femininity.²⁰

Those views were not, of course, universally shared. And even some of their adherents recognized the difficulty. One male student wanted a wife of equal intelligence, but also wanted her to occupy a traditional role. Yet as he acknowledged, if she were truly equal, “she obviously wouldn’t want to sit home and cook breakfasts [for me]. It’s a problem.”²¹

It was. And still is. The difficulties of balancing work and family responsibilities, and the struggle for equal opportunities in employment and educational settings are still with us. Over the last three decades, much has changed but too much has remained the same.

On a curricular level, the progress has been dramatic but by no means complete. Since 1970, when the first women’s studies program crept into a university curriculum, over 700 have gained a toehold.²² Research on women and gender has dramatically altered academic landscapes. Yet full integration of women’s perspectives and concerns remains an aspiration not an achievement, at Yale and throughout higher education. Recent surveys of women’s studies programs reveal that many lack adequate resources and support, and some are targets of significant harassment.²³ Women who raise women’s issues are too often dismissed, devalued, and demeaned. Gender-related issues are still missing or marginal in the core curricula of many disciplines at many institutions. Still less attention has focused on the intersection of gender with race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Yet there is no “generic woman.”²⁴ And it does not advance analysis

if those asking the “woman question” ignore the diversity among their subjects of concern.

It also matters who is doing the asking. And in the academy, as in other elite professional settings, women remain underrepresented in positions of greatest power, status, and security. Although women constitute a majority of college students, they account for less than a fifth of university presidents or tenured full professors.²⁵ The underrepresentation of women of color is still greater. Significant disparities exist even among men and women with similar qualifications and experience.²⁶ In many contexts, the problem isn’t the lack of women in the pipeline. It is rather that the pipe leaks. At Yale and elsewhere, if we simply wait for time to correct the problem, we will be waiting a very long time.

The same is, of course, true throughout American life. Ironically enough, our recent progress toward equal opportunity has created its own obstacles to further change. Women’s growing opportunities are taken as evidence that the “woman problem” has been solved. Yet this perception has itself become a major barrier to reform. This “no problem” problem prevents Americans from noticing that on every major measure of wealth, power, and status, women still are significantly worse off than men. Eighty-five percent of legislative office holders, and 95 percent of corporate executives are male; two thirds of poor adults are female. Twenty-five years after passage of the Equal Pay Act, women’s salaries still lag 25 percent behind men’s. Sexual violence remains pervasive, and reproductive rights are often available only to those who can afford to exercise them. Women continue to shoulder the vast majority of responsibilities in the home, a burden that limits their opportunities in the world outside it.²⁷

There is, in short, some room for improvement. And institutions like Yale which do, indeed, prepare the nation’s leaders, need to address those issues. The challenge of the next century is to inspire and equip those leaders to compete the progress toward equal opportunity that coeducation helped begin.

- 1 William F. Buckley, "Resolutions on the Side of Yale's Survival," in *Let Us Talk of Many Things: Collected Speeches* (Roseville, Cal.: Forum, 2000), 149–50.
- 2 Janet Lever and Pepper Schwartz, *Women at Yale: Liberating a College Campus* (Indianapolis: Bobb-Merrill, 1971), 243.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 186–88.
- 7 Deborah L. Rhode, *Justice and Gender* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 301; Mary A. Boutilier and Lucinda San Giovanni, *The Sporting Woman* (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Publishing, 1983), 32–42.
- 8 Susan Baserga, "The Early Years of Coeducation at the Yale University School of Medicine," *Yale Journal of Biology & Medicine* 53 (1980), 181.
- 9 Lever and Schwartz, *Women at Yale*, 57.
- 10 Erwin Griswold, "Developments at the Law School," *Harvard Law School Year Book* (1950), 10.
- 11 Women had been enrolled in Yale graduate and professional programs for a century, but it took coeducation to prompt the addition of a gynecologist. Lever and Schwartz, *Women at Yale*, 2.
- 12 Warren, "Women Athletes Tell of Fight for Respect," *Yale Daily News*, Nov. 30, 1989, p. 3, col. 1.
- 13 Karen Berger Morrello, *The Invisible Bar: The Woman Lawyer in America* (New York: Random House, 1986), 219.
- 14 Deborah L. Rhode, *Speaking of Sex: The Denial of Gender Inequality* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 56; Marilyn A. Hulme, "Mirror Mirror on the Wall: Biased Reflections in Textbooks and Instructional Materials," in *Sex Equity in Education: Readings and Strategies*, Ann 'O'Brien Cavelli, ed. (Springfield, Ill.: C. Thomas, 1988); Myra Sadker and David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Scribners, 1994), 72, 124–131.
- 15 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (London: MacDonal, 1818), 108.
- 16 Lever and Schwartz, *Women at Yale*, 250 (describing Elga Wasserman).
- 17 *Ibid.*, 218–19 (quoting Kingman Brewster).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 229–230.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 240–42.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 241.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 229.
- 22 Marilyn Jacoby Boxer, *When Women Ask the Questions: Creating Women's Studies in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Marjorie Coeyman, "Women's Studies Thrive Amid Trials," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 30, 1998, B8.
- 23 Boxer, *When Women Ask the Questions*, 191–224, 247; Coeyman, "Women's Studies," B8.
- 24 Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion and Feminist Thought* (Boston, Beacon, 1988), 114, 117; Rhode, *Speaking of Sex*, 41.
- 25 Center for Institutional and International Initiatives, American Council on Education, *The American College President: 2000 Edition* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2000); American Association of University Professors, *The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 1999–2000* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Professors, 2000), Table 8.
- 26 See for example, the studies cited in American Association of University Professors, *Summary of Recent Studies on Wage Gap between Men and Women Professors* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Professors, July 13, 2000).
- 27 For an overview, see Rhode, *Speaking of Sex*, 1–20.