Academic Gore*

by Ellen Cantarow

It is Saturday, December 30, 1978. Inside the New York Hilton and the Hotel Americana, 1200 of the *Genus Professorum* are attending the Modern Language Association's annual convention. With over 30,000 members, the MLA is the biggest academic professional association in the United States. It is Very Important.

Certainly the Old Boys (whose ranks now include a few Old Girls) think so. In the lobbies of the Hotels Hilton and Americana you can easily spot them. Some are actually Young Boys, but they all have The Look. Since my arrival here I have been trying to find the right words for The Look and I have finally come up with what the literary trade calls a simile (comparison). Every Old and Young Boy looks a little like a camel that has just been forced to take some nasty-tasting medicine. Beneath a lofty brow the eyes peer down at you nearsightedly while the corners of the mouth turn down ever so slightly in well-bred disdain. The Look expresses the delusion that there is nothing so essential as knowing about "Christine de Pizan's Use of Sources" or "Nongeneric Formal Structures in Goethe's Work" (the MLA is running 659 forums and lectures this year and these are only two). The Look also expresses an acute removal from the real world. Sitting in one or another of such lectures, one wouldn't know, if one didn't go outside to the corner newstand, that the U.S. was preparing to send carriers into the Persian Gulf.

But never mind. In one quarter the Old Boys' delusion isn't a delusion at all. Christine de Pizan's use of sources really may be important if one is here looking for a job. You can tell the jobseekers—hundreds of whom come to the MLA every year for interviews—by another look, the look of unemployment. It is a kind of hat-in-hand, beseeching look, and when you see it on the face of an anxious jobseeker bustling about the heels of some Old Boy, you think of dogs in the rain, tails beating feebly, scratching at the door to get inside.

Unemployment is the MLA's biggest dirty secret. This year the big dirty unemployment secret is tucked away in a large room on the mezzanine of the Hotel Americana. There, little bevvies of the unemployed stand gazing at long strips of computer printout that hang here and there around the walls. For a second I have the impression I'm looking at spectators scanning the racetrack results. The computer printouts aren't encouraging. They tell one that if one wants a job one had better go to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to Melbourne, Australia, or—if one wants a "one-year terminal appointment"—to Houston, Texas.

Another MLA dirty secret is its misogyny. Like OB/GYNs the literary Old Boys are woman-haters. Until 1968 (on which more shortly) they did a fine job of literary castration, excising almost all women from the lists of Literary Masters. It is the Old Boys at the top who determine what goes into your freshman English reader and what you are taught in courses like "The Rise of the Novel." It was an Old Boy at a nearby prestigious university who, at fall hiring some years ago, told a male friend of mine, "Save the chicks until last and hire them for Freshman Comp. They always need the jobs." It was the pen of some

Old Boy that scratched, on a female job candidate's application to a California state college (the application was sent to me by a subversive department secretary): "She's a medievalist. But do we need just another medievalist? Perhaps we should rule her out on the basis that she's six feet high, rawboned and awkward."

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Well. To make the first part of this story short, ten years ago, in the revolutionary year 1968, women at the MLA got mad as hell and said they weren't going to take it anymore. Amidst a general radical uprising protesting the Convention's removal from reality (the Vietnam war was at its height, recall), a Commission on the Status of Women was formed. In 1969 women took over the closing plenary session of the convention and demanded, in a long series of resolutions, that the Old Boys recognize the worth of everything from paid maternity *and* paternity leave, to courses on women. In 1968 and 1969 merely giving an Old Boy a leaflet was enough to make him rear back and peer down his camelian nose as if he had seen a viper. The Professoriat were so frightened that they granted the rebels everything, allowing them space for sessions of their own at all subsequent MLA meetings. Some of the battlers muttered about "co-optation"—roughly translated: you are what you are eaten by—but ever since things haven't been quite the same in these particular groves of academe.

Each year the women return to get their own back. Over the past decade a veritable bacchanalia of female activity has become an entrenched tradition-within-the-tradition. There are lectures and discussions about well- and little-known women writers; sexism in language; black women poets and novelists; lesbian authors; and so on. There have been evening entertainment sessions featuring women's bands and singers, poetry readings, films. In brief, the rebellion within the doddering MLA has made parts of the venerable Convention a real alternative to a night out at the movies.

Some women call it "the other convention." You could spend your time going from "New Biographies of Women" to "Lesbian/Feminist Writing and Publishing," to "Women's Studies: Toward the Eighties," to "Black Feminist Criticism," and never know about the Old Boys if you didn't have to come out to ride the elevators. In 1978 the feminist opposition is still vigorously schpritzing acid ink into the gentlemanly convention atmosphere. In a lesbian poetry and prose reading attended by some 400 women, Judy Grahn, tall and very dykey, dressed in a man's suit and tie, stands with a hand on one hip and a book of her poems in the other and reads satires on love:

Love, you wicked dog

* * *

Whoever feeds you attention
gets you, like it or not
And
all your bad habits come with
you like a pack of fleas.
Wherever I turn for peace of mind
there is the Lovedog scratching
at the door of my Lonesomeness,
beating her tail against my leg
and panting all night with red breath...

Ah, how telling the gender of the Lovedog and how heady the feeling of self-sufficiency among women here, even if one is heterosexual! And ah! how sweet the feeling of revenge as, several times during the reading, Old and Young Boys tentatively look in, only to beat a swift retreat.

The women are giving them hell. They are giving them hell, and for a while it is like the best of the old days when feminists swelled with a sense of their own strength and sallied forth into the heterosexual world to sneer at The Enemy. If you weren't there it's hard to imagine, I know, but I'll tell you, the taste of power was wonderful.

You may remember the old saw: the purpose of poetry is to delight and instruct (Horace). The women rebels are proving in the very bosom of The Enemy that the old saw is true. What I find delightful in the foregoing, I've already made plain enough. The instruction comes from learning, for instance, about new women writers. There is Zora Neale Hurstone, for one. A black folklorist and novelist working in the twenties, thirties and forties, she started and ended her work life as a maid and in between rambled through the South and Haiti, collecting folk tales in lumber camps, bars, and the front stoops of working-class neighborhoods; learning voodoo; in brief, being a woman on her own, at home in the world. There is Agnes Smedley, a working-class woman from the southwest who wrote one great, autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth,* and participated in the Chinese revolution where she wrote reports that are as much poetry as they are journalism. There is Anzia Yezierska, a Polish-Jewish immigrant who wrote in the 1920s about women's lives on New York's Lower East Side. Resurrection—the rediscovery of fine writers buried because the Old Boys thought them "inferior"—has been one part of the business of women rebels in literary academe. Resurrection goes beyond the heady, immediate feeling of revenge and gets into the more enduring bedrock of accomplishment. The literary feminists haven't only provided an annual alternative to the movies, they have affected the way literature is being taught; they have helped put new lines of books on the market.

And yet in all of this there is a problem. The problem is the job market. Hard times put a crimp in the action. Perhaps, especially when jobs are scarce, you really do become what you are eaten by. The titles of some papers read at this convention—for instance: "Reference and Deference: A Study in Lexical Variation"—are handwriting on the wall if I've ever seen it and I assure you, I have. I attended two promising sessions on sexism in language, and they turned out so villainously academic that listeners all around were nodding and yawning.

And yet the future may still be neither this nor that, just yet, but teetering at that point where it could go in any of several directions. Apropos of ambiguities I went to a session aptly enough entitled "Strategies for Survival," which dealt with the future of black studies in the literary academy. I went because I was expecting to find my acquaintance, Harriet, recently canned at a prestigious women's college. I hadn't seen Harriet in a year. She and I had spent two wonderful hours over drinks at last year's Convention. We talked about the Civil Rights movement; about mutual problems with men; about abortion; about the revolution that might never come; about trouble on the job; about just living. Last year Harriet dressed in sleek, indubitably feminine garb, and as Harriet herself is tall, sleek and longlimbed, the effect was striking. I had expected to find her much the same this

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For these reasons, we in Science for the People began to organize in 1973 groups to expose the absence of any scientific foundation for the claims of a genetic basis for societal problems and to point out the political function of these ideas. In 1974-75 we were involved in a struggle at Harvard Medical School where researchers were screening all newborn baby boys at a maternity hospital for the XYY character and then informing the parents of the supposed "defect." As a result of our efforts, the screening was stopped and a good deal of publicity resulted, which helped to expose the XYY myth. Subsequently, with the much publicized appearance of E.O. Wilson's book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis,* in 1975, we initiated a variety of approaches in order to point out the lack of scientific foundations for sociobiological arguments, the political biases infusing it, and the resulting social consequences. We believe we have been successful to some extent in blunting the influence of this new "scientific" area, which is so reminiscent of earlier social darwinist and eugenics movements.

Our understanding of these issues, our sense of the class nature of science, and our approach to dealing with these problems has been tremendously aided by our work within Science for the People. Here, groups working on a variety of scientific issues—nutrition, energy, occupational health and safety, etc.—share their experiences and have been able to see the common threads uniting all of these issues.

Over the years, it has become easier to integrate my political concerns into my teaching. I am currently teaching a graduate seminar in molecular genetics. Though the main goal of the course is to discuss concepts and developments in this field, their relationship to broader social questions has become so vital to my own thinking that these latter issues have become a natural part of the course. Questions of the politics of cancer research come into a session on mutation; in a session on the development and uses of recombinant DNA, issues of public participation in science are brought up; in sessions on papers in my field which were later shown to be fraudulent, questions about the objectivity of science are discussed and related to such socially important cases of fraud as Sir Cyril Burt's IQ studies.[6]

Although I may be speaking from a somewhat narrow perspective, my impression is that scientists have become progressively more politicized over the last ten years, and that there has been no reversal of this trend. For instance, I find that each year students in the course I teach come with more and more awareness of the issues I have described. Just a few years ago, none of the students would have heard of the eugenics movement or have had any social issues brought into their genetics courses. Now, nearly half the students come in with some awareness of the issues. Controversies such as that surrounding recombinant DNA have resulted in widespread discussion of such questions as "freedom of inquiry" and public participation in decision-making in science. The pages of *Science* magazine and its English counterpart, *Nature,* are full of politicized discussions of scientific issues. Constant controversy and heightened political awareness are reflected in the fact that Science for the People is one of the few left organizations from the late sixties which has survived and is thriving.

Notes

1. Science for the People, an organization of people working in science—faculty, students, technicians, computer scientists, high school science teachers and others interested in science—has chapters around the country. A bimonthly magazine *Science for the People* is published and can be obtained from the organization office at 897 Main St., Cambridge, MA 02139.
2. J. Shapiro, L. Eron and J. Beckwith, letter to *Nature* 224, p. 1337 (1969).
3. G. Allen, *Science for the People,* v. 6, no. 4 (1974), p. 32; *Genetics,* v. 79 (1975), Supplement II, p. 29.
4. Ann Arbor Science for the People, eds., *Biology as a Social Weapon* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing, 1977). Available from Science for the People.
5. J. Beckwith, *Science for the People,* v. 9, no. 3 (1977), p. 14.
6. N. Wade, *Science,* v. 194 (1976), p. 916.

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year. Walking into "Strategies for Survival" I was surprised to see five men behind the table up front. No: on second glance there were four men and Harriet in a John Malloy Dress-for-Success suit, puffing on a cigarillo, her hair cropped very close, her face nearly hidden behind an enormous pair of tinted glasses. The workshop was about Respectability. The men reiterated the tired old message that the sixties are over. Ring out the new, ring in the old: black studies, they declared, must now become as rigorous, and must set standards as high as any other academic pursuit. When I hear the words "rigorous" and "standards" I shudder. It isn't that I don't like rigor, neither do I eschew all standards. But it does matter who is calling the shots. In this case the people calling the shots were New Boys hoping to be rapidly on their way into the Old Boys' club. Only Harriet, disguised as a New Boy in drag, delivered firebrands. In the language of battles of fourteen years past she said that in her tenure loss she's learned there's more than one way to burn a cross on someone's lawn; that lynchings can masquerade as Old Boy sherry parties and hiring-and-firing meetings. Afterwards, I approached her. "You look," I indicated her John Malloy suit, "encased. Armed for battle." "Not encased," she rejoined, smiling, "just well-armed."

This time around I'd prefer to end un-hardheadedly. I'd prefer to think that some of the MLA rebels, at least, haven't retreated, but have only gone underground. That is what subversion is *partly* about, anyhow. I'd prefer to think of Harriet going forth slyly in Old Boy drag, but armed with a razor-brain and a lightning tongue, uttering truths so quietly The Enemy wouldn't know they'd been hit until too late. I prefer this wishful thought for the moment because no definite losses have been charted yet, and because the alternative—the women rebels slowly turn to milktoast in the entrails of the MLA—is too awful to contemplate.