DANGEROUS TERRITORIES: STRUGGLES FOR DIFFERENCE AND EQUALITY IN EDUCATION


by Sheila Cavanagh

Dangerous Territories: Struggles for Difference and Equality in Education is an exciting piece of work. The editors (Roman and Eyre) tell us that the idea for the book emerges from a panel presentation, at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. At this meeting, questions were asked about the "limits and possibilities of 'anti-oppression' pedagogies" in the context of higher education. It was suggested that progressive educators have been confronted by a Right-wing "backlash." This backlash was perceived to be a threat to progressive education. The book is meant as a follow-up to this discussion and attends to the important questions facing progressive educators in the university today.

The concept of backlash is central to the organization of the book. Roman and Eyre say that they have been forced to adopt a more critical understanding of the concept as it became clear to them that they had originally accepted rather unproblematically the transhistorical and binary oppositional framing of such terms as backlash/progressive, Right/Left, and so on, allowing them to function as "key words"—words that legitimated some radical social change struggles for equality and delegiti-
"knowledge gaps." Theobald herself views her work as an important departure in the study of women’s education. According to her, most previous historians have spent little effort exploring women’s education in Australia before 1900, and have failed to connect the women’s experiences to the political and social fabric of the period. In her introduction she explains that she wishes to provide new directions for feminist theory in this area, with the goal of “inspir[ing] a new generation of younger feminist historians.” Due to her theoretical objections to “generalist history,” Theobald pays scrupulous attention to the different experiences of women from different geographical, class, and racial backgrounds.

The strength of this book lies in Theobald’s attention to detail, but it also becomes a major weakness through her neglect of structure and organization. Theobald provides the reader with many fascinating details on a range of women’s educational experiences: the stories of working-class girls who were educated in inhospitable “reformatories”; the gradual marginalization of the woman teacher; the popular demand for ladies’ schools where girls could learn “accomplishments”; the moral debate over coeducational schools. The list of topics is large, and Theobald’s research on each is substantial. Once in a while the stories of the women get bogged down in too many details of names, places, and dates, but in each chapter there are many compelling moments (particularly when letters and diaries are used). Unfortunately, Theobald’s laudable emphasis on specificity over blanket generalization has resulted in a hodgepodge of structure that could easily have been avoided. Each chapter is organized differently, and none of the chapters is adequately introduced or concluded. Many times I found myself saying, “So that’s what she was getting at!” two-thirds of the way through a chapter, after struggling through a mass of detail that was seemingly unrelated. A simple “road map” introducing the agenda for each chapter would have eliminated this difficulty, and provided for a more enjoyable reading experience.

This lack of structure also limits the efficacy of Theobald’s use of feminist theory, which she is at such great pains to emphasize in her introduction. Once in a while a bit of theory is thrown in; Theobald does not use it to underpin the work, and her theoretical conclusions suffer as a result. Although I do not claim to be an expert on feminist theory by any stretch of the imagination, I was surprised at how basic many of her theoretical concerns were—I had heard some of the arguments and questions before, and only occasionally did her observations surprise and intrigue me (such as her compelling argument that women teachers’ need to justify female education in secondary schools resulted in the grooming of top students to win scholarships and prizes—which actually prevented the average girls from experiencing a true “education”). Theobald’s theoretical forays are also limited by her use of language. The text is rife with run-on sentences and convoluted paragraphs, and this makes her observations more obscure than they should be.

Knowing Women can be a frustrating book to read, and yet it is also full of fascinating detail. It is unfortunate that the contents of the book have been betrayed to bad organization and confusing diction, but the text is still worth reading. I will not soon forget the story of fifteen-year-old Annie S., who was beat across her breasts with a cane during a courageous and rowdy riot protesting the horrible conditions at the Bioela Reformatory. Nor will I forget the words of Louisa Macdonald, the first principal of the Women’s College of the University of Sydney, when the financial situation of the college was in doubt: “There is one great comfort I have. It seems to me that ... the College ... has a tendency to create a feeling of solidarity amongst the women of the country ... and I think if it accomplished that, all the labour of collecting for it and planning it have not been empty.”

TO THE GLORY OF HER SEX: WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE COMPOSITION OF MEDIEVAL TEXTS


GENDER AND IMMORTALITY: HEROINES IN ANCIENT GREEK MYTH AND CULT


by E. Lisbeth Donaldson

In 1405 Christine de Pizan initiated les querelles des femmes by publishing her Book of the City of Ladies. Peopleed by “ladies of the past and present” and guided by the muses of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, this City was to be a refuge for women of the future. The radical arguments this widowed mother of three presented included statements such as it “is as natural for women to write books as it is for them to have babies” and “the intellectual spirit” is “equally good and noble in the feminine and masculine bodies” because the soul, more so than the body, correctly represents the image of God. Thus initiated, these querelles provided a major topic of debate among scholars for nearly three hundred years. “Another standard topic opposed the ancients and the moderns” (Anderson and Zinser). Five hundred years after the publication of this incredible book, twentieth-century feminists are still learning about their intellectual and spiritual roots: many would not recognize Pizan’s name and many, hurt by patriarchal religions, still do not understand the profound connection between spirituality and creativity. Therefore, the two books reviewed here are valuable scholarly contributions but their contents are not easy