

Seductress or Schoolmarm: on the improbability of the great female teacher.

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**Abstract:**

This paper explores the question of the relation of gender and pedagogy by inquiring into the importance of gendered bodies in the construction of the great teacher as a cultural phenomenon. I ask whether men's teaching - male diction as a mobilising of desire becomes malediction (seduction) when it is produced out of the pedagogical performances of women. In examining this question, I do not adhere to the predictable tradition of critical feminist scholarship, given the extent to which, paradoxically, this tradition has made examination of the issue more difficult. I do allude to the newer tradition of psychoanalytic feminism, but, in the main, I draw on literary criticism as a more fertile theoretical terrain because of its potential to disrupt theory and to disturb the disciplinary boundaries which prevent feminists from 'saying it otherwise'. Questions raised include: Must the image of a great female

teacher be a contradiction in terms? Has it been otherwise? Could it again be so? What conditions would be necessary to achieve this?

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The inquiry of truth, which is the lovemaking or wooing of it; the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it; and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of mankind. I have inquired with you, I have known your presence, I believe and enjoy you.

from Rameau's Niece, by Cathleen Schine, 1993:264

Go to the movies and you'll learn a lot about great teaching. In 'Stand and Deliver', Escalante's educative efforts are excellent. Keating is charismatic and creative as 'My Captain' in Dead Poet's Society. And it doesn't even matter what size or colour the teacher is. Whether it's Arnold Schwarzenegger as 'Kindergarten Cop', Danny de Vito, teacher-as-hero in 'Army Intelligence', or Sidney Poitier's classic and triumphant pedagogical portrayal, we can warm to sir with love and say hello to Mr Chips all over again, compelled by the image of 'a teacher and his student[s], bound together, locked in the giddy embrace of pedagogy' (Schine, 1993:41).

Compare the pedagogical role of the principal in Hollywood's 'Lean on Me' to the role of the tragic Sandy Dennis in 'Up the Down Staircase' and you'll know what pedagogical horse to back. You'll learn to steer clear of fillies, for fear that they may not last the distance. And if there is evidence of real female strength, the pedagogical problem will be compounded. Maggie Smith's portrayal of Jean Brodie, the romantic radical at a conservative girls' school in Scotland in the 1930s, remains profoundly disturbing, an exemplar of the dangers of abusive pedagogy. One of her students is killed after all, fighting on the wrong side of a foreign war after being problematically inspired - pedagogically seduced - by her teacher! Hardly an impressive performance indicator for quality teaching! Keating's capacity to mobilise desire in his students, on the other hand, is unproblematic, even when one of his student opts for suicide after inspiration gives way to desperation! Keating is superstar; Brodie is sinister. The rich fruits of pedagogical labour turn to sour grapes at the hand of this powerful woman. The moral is clear. Inspiration has transgressed, has become seduction. Seductive pedagogy is abusive pedagogy. And abusive pedagogy ends

in the corruption and/or destruction of all participants, the always innocent students and the teacher as the 'body' of knowledge.

Now it may well be argued that, off the silver screen, it is men who are much more likely to have to wear the tag of abuser. This is certainly true. I believe that there are real tyrannies that make it almost impossible for men to do caring pedagogical work at the moment, particularly with young children. The chance of being found guilty of suspicion of being 'up to something', of being ready to violate trust, is much greater for men as a result of media sensationalism and genuine revelations about such violations in the past and present. It also, of course, is maintained through cultural constructions of the 'maternal' female teacher as a-sexual, an interesting paradox, given that there has only been one alleged case where the maternal had nothing to do with the sexual. However, my interest in this paper

is to explore more fully the gendering of the slippage between 'great' and 'abusive' pedagogy. Does male diction have to become malediction when women are the instigators of powerful pedagogical events?

I could answer this question relatively easily if, as a feminist writer and teacher, I adhere to a certain predictable tradition of feminist scholarship. I could work out of the position much favoured by critical feminists, which would insist that female teachers' work continues, unfairly, to be the unrecognised hard slog, the daily grind of institutionalised pedagogy. I would lament this fact as produced, indirectly or directly, out of unequal power relations in western (capitalist) society. I would provide a cautionary note that the point is not to become 'great' but to work against oppression in all its forms. I could add to this an element of family psycho-drama by using psychoanalysis to theorise the teacher's role as one which embodies the law of the father, and thus always privileges or legitimates the male teacher as authority figure over the female. I would demand that 'we' feminists eschew this role. I might include enough angst to turn this account into a lament, demanding that feminists be increasingly committed to 'a contract of progress which will nullify and obliterate..such oppression' (Le Doeuff, 1977:2) I want to indicate here that Le Doeuff is as much opposed to following in this tradition as I am..

My analysis will not proceed in this way, partly because much of what is worth saying has already been said. In particular I note here the work of Madeleine Grumet, whose powerful analysis of the pedagogical roles played by women in the last two centuries *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* (1988) documents sensitively the

challenge of reclaiming and transforming as the work of women a pedagogical role which has been stigmatised as 'women's work' (p.58). Grumet addresses a number of contradictions in the ways in which women have enacted pedagogical work in modern schooling culture. She argues that the disservice of Marxist analyses has been to 'collapse' the schooling system into an economic system. The result is a discourse which ignores both 'the experiences of family life, of bearing, delivering and nurturing children' and 'the language of the body, the world we carry on weight-bearing joints, the world we hear in sudden hums and giggles' (p.xv). In her long overdue analysis of women and teaching, she insists upon a place for intimacy, for the legitimacy of the lived experience of women teachers, with all of its contradictions, in a new politics of educational knowledge that is inclusive of personal identity.

Yet while there have been valuable contributions of this kind, some critical feminist work is actually unhelpful in ensuring that there will be a re-working of the 'great teacher' myth towards a plethora of powerful female teachers as the cultural icons of the future. In broad terms, this has been a feminism that 'refuses to acknowledge its own will to power' (Kirby, 1994: 17) in order to insist on 'defending [its] imagined virginity against the corruption of phallogocentric infection' (Kirby, 1994: 20). Such work cannot contribute to the project of claiming greatness for female teachers, except negatively by way of deconstructive critique. To move beyond this work, I want to ask some questions without a ready-made conspiracy theory to serve as response:

Must the great female teacher remain a contradiction in terms?

Has it been otherwise? Could it again be so? What conditions would be necessary to achieve this?

I want to address the social construction of the 'great' teaching through insisting on the 'embodiment' of pedagogical work, ie, on teaching as traditionally an engagement of some body with other bodies in institutional spaces. My reason for doing this is that the material body of the teacher seems to be a very significant factor in everyday textual constructions of effective and ineffective teaching. To illustrate, I draw on a recent newspaper article in celebration of International Teachers Day. 'Thank You Miss Murphy' (The Courier Mail, 4/10/94: 9) was written by Professor Kenneth Wiltshire, an Australian academic whose bouquet to one fondly remembered female teacher - the bunned Miss Murphy (presented in predictable, loving caricature) - was the descriptor 'dedicated'. By contrast, Wiltshire moved to a metaphor at once more compelling, substantial and imperious when

discussing the role of male teachers. He described children as 'gazing up at (the) towering figures' of male pedagogues of the sort that the media has celebrated. While male teachers 'loom large' as material bodies in the consciousness of this professor, there is a real shift in the sort of accolade paid to Miss Murphy. Some women may be delighted to be remembered as 'dedicated'. I for one can never quite get past the first syllable.

In the more 'academic' frame of the professional journal article, Clemson and Craft (1981) plunge into the murkier waters of pedagogical work and moral judgement. With exactitude born of rectitude, they differentiate the corrupting power of the unbanned and seductive Jean Brodie from any predictable and marmish Miss Murphy. Untroubled by the problematics of gender, desire and bodies, they speak of a theoretical 'good' teacher as 'one who employs effective methods with suitable content; on the other hand, the 'dangerous' teacher is 'the one who teaches unsuitable content effectively' (p.135). (An ineffective teacher - you've guessed it - teaches unsuitable content ineffectively.) Through this neat and unproblematic dualism (ie, a good teacher is always effective while an effective teacher not always good), Clemson and Craft are able to simultaneously explain and condemn the seductive power of Brodie as aberrant and transgressive. No doubt Brodie herself might well wish to respond to their service to pedagogical theory with a bouquet of chrysanthemums, which she faintly praises as 'such serviceable flowers!'

The simple binary of effective/abusive is doubly powerful when meshed with binaries associated with more traditional women's roles. Another recent media story 'Teacher seduced my boy, says Mum' (Sunday Mail, 25/9/94: 5) provides an example. In this report, a woman ('Mum') is 'sickened' by 'the alleged affair' a teenager ('her son') has had with a female teacher. This teacher had not personally taught the boy. Nevertheless, by the 15 year-old's own account, he was 'unable to say no to her and she knew it'. He suspected that he would not 'be able to have a decent relationship ever again'. What is fascinating about this is not simply the classical binary formulation of Mum versus Seductress (Mary/Eve), nor the way it acts as a reminder of teaching as the classic literary metaphor for seduction - but the insistence on infantilising the 'boy'. Both Meagan Morris (1994) and Jane Gallop (in Talbot, 1994) argue that this type of social construction of students is bound to be problematic because it implies that the teacher- student relationship is constituted out

of a one-way flow of power, despite all evidence to the contrary. For an excellent work of fiction which elaborates the seduction of a teacher by his student, see Cathleen Schine's *Rameau's Niece*

(1993). . As a female teacher who has taught 15 year old boys in a private school for over 14 years, I do know that not all male adolescents are childlike in their sexual naivety, nor do they function passively as the mere objects of the desire of others. Comments made after this item was published in 'Letters to the Editor' (Sunday Mail 2/10/94: 109) indicate some empathy with this view. The readership generated many oppositional readings, the most succinct of which was 'lucky bastard!'. Who knows? It may well have been written by one of his peers!

Why, though, the insistence on the inspirational pedagogy of Jean Brodie, who was not involved sexually with any of her students, as abusive 'seduction'? If we apply Jean Baudrillard (1979) theorising of seduction, it is Brodie's femininity, as distinct from femaleness, which is at the heart of the issue here. He argues that the sovereignty of seduction has always existed, despite its being condemned as a preoccupation of the aristocratic spheres, and that the strength of femininity is also the strength of seduction. Against the protestations of many feminists, Baudrillard argues that femininity, with its stronger claim of 'an alternative to sex and to power' (p.6), has been forsaken for femaleness since the sexual revolution, and that this has enclosed women in a structure that condemns us to either discrimination when the structure is strong or a derisory triumph within a weakened structure:

There is a strange, fierce complicity between the feminist movement and the order of truth. For seduction is resisted and rejected as a misappropriation of women's true being...in one stroke, the immense privilege of the feminine is effaced: the privilege of having never acceded to truth or meaning, and of having remained absolute master of the realm of appearances. The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and to turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand. (p8)

Despite my ambivalence about Baudrillard's insistence that women have much greater power by way of 'mastering' the symbolic universe (I'll take the real one, thanks!), nevertheless, the notion that 'seduction is stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal' (p46) is useful here. It may explain in part why villification is such a necessary cultural response to Jean Brodie's teaching and so unnecessary in the case of John Keating.

Now, just as I feel a conspiracy theory coming on, there is a voice that insists on speaking, a media image from the past that refuses to be exorcised - it is the alto voice of 'Our Miss

Brooks', the witty female pedagogue whose brand of cynical comedy dominated American television sitcoms of the 1950s. Miss Brooks (played by Eve Arden) I do recall as a 'towering figure', able to rise above the absurdity of a range of pedagogical and administrative events in order to stand and deliver parody in ways that marked her as transcending the mundane. My memory is not that she was shown to be a transformative teacher, but at least Miss Brooks was powerful as a media administrator/pedagogue and free from the taint of unbridled Brodie-ism. So greatness as

box office popularity is not impossible, just improbable, with odds of once every 40 years. However, the combination of the alto voice, the 'towering presence' and the absence of male suitors still worries me. Could it be that the real claim to greatness of Our Miss Brooks was her approximation to the masculine? If so, the femininity, the seductiveness, the abusiveness of 'their' Miss Brodie is merely exacerbated by 'our' Miss Brooks.

My critique, of course, responds to modern cultural stereotypes generated out of bourgeois educational arrangements in which a sexual division of pedagogical labour has been clearly established. There have been few scholarly attempts to look back further than the last two centuries for historical exemplars of modes of female engagement in and construction of pedagogical spaces. The presumption has been that there is little to be learned about women's role in teaching from an examination of pedagogical events before the birth of the industrial model school. If Michele Le Doeuff (1977:3) is right - that reference to woman's incapacity to theorise beginning to flower from 18th century on - then it is crucial to look at pedagogical models in earlier times. Le Doeuff's (1977) work facilitates this to some extent in her tracking historically the spaces available or unavailable to women in the teaching of philosophy. In *Women and Philosophy* (1977), Le Doeuff notes the fact that individual women's relationships with pedagogical knowledge was often through their love for a man, a particular philosopher/teacher. Pedagogy here amounted to an 'erotico-theoretical transference equivalent to an absence of any direct relationship of women to philosophy...(it was) mediated by a man'. In exploring the issue of pedagogy in philosophy as a erotic field, she argues:

There has always been - at school, at university, in the preparatory courses for university, most often the latter in fact - a teacher around whom there has crystallised something analogous to the theoretico-amorous admiration of women...This privileged teacher...the one who finally seduced you...captured your desire and turned it into a desire for [the subject discipline]. (p.4)

Her examination of the role of women and their tutor/lovers reveals a system of later discouragements for women that emanated from the affirmation of bourgeois values against a relatively ungendered permissiveness of the aristocracy in 18th century culture (p.5). For Le Doeuff, the central question that still needs explaining is 'why it was the bourgeoisie who were anxious to confine woman to the sphere of feelings when the psychology of the royal age (Racine) had not laid down any fundamental inequality between man and woman with respect to passion? (p.5)

In summary, the overwhelming trend after Descartes is the defeminisation of tertiary education, despite the fact that some women continued to be able to learn and teach in more intimate spaces (ie, the private rooms of the philosopher). Women were perceived as 'obscuring the clear light' with their 'old wives tales' (p.7), and therefore were suited only for nurseries - schoolmarms, not scholars. Since Descartes, women scholars have found it much harder to say 'what I know' than 'what is known' (p.12). (Thus Sartre becomes the philosopher, de Beauvoir the writer for women's studies. And thus the status of women's studies as the soft underbelly of university offerings.) The continued reverence of postgraduate women to the ideas of dead men (or living women), their humility about scholarship, their

refusal to 'manhandle texts' (p.11) might be appropriate to learning but it has not served women well in the 'greatness' stakes. One of my most constant challenges as a postgraduate teacher is to convince mature women that the shift from plodding student to dashing scholar involves not only engagement with new ideas but also a dash of healthy disrespect.

We need to look back before Descartes to find 'great' women pedagogues. Women were once powerful teachers, but in *ars erotica*, an area which remains problematic in contemporary culture for a range of reasons. Cryle, (1994:31) argues that 'a tradition of erotic literature shows women as having first had the power to know and teach the art of pleasure, then having gradually lost that power'. These women teachers instructed in seductive which 'might...have appeared disturbingly independent of patriarchal authority [eg, Sappho and her legendary *gynaikeion*], functioning effectively as a kind of didactic lesbianism, binding teachers and pupils in an erotic chain' (p.19).

In her confronting book *Whores in History* (1993), Nickie Roberts probes this autonomous pedagogical tradition more fully. Roberts describes the *hetairae*, as the elite whores - one of the more interesting oxymorons - of ancient Greece, as much renown for their intellect as their love-making skills (p.20). Indeed,

intellectual knowledge was forbidden to Athenian wives, 'for it was the sign of the harlot' (p15). Individual women within this group such as Phryne and Aspasia were certainly great intellectuals and teachers by any standards. The ability to move Socrates and his colleagues to attend a lecture would certainly be a pretty impressive criterion of greatness for a university pedagogue today. This would be particularly so for a woman, since, given Socrates sexual proclivities, he would hardly have moved in her direction in the interests of carnal knowledge. And the pay-off for these women? Roberts declares:

We know that the hetairae continued to follow illustrious careers, amassing fabulous wealth and enjoying a degree of power over their own 'sweet lives' that their 'virtuous' married sisters of Athens could never have dreamed of. (pp.28-29)

Even if we concede some author's licence here, it's enough to make a woman want to be a teacher! (Or at least a bad girl feminist.)

It would be clear to the reader by now that I have joined the swelling ranks of feminists who disavow 'victim' feminism. My reason for doing so in this case is that part of such feminist work (eg, Snitow, 1983; Dworkin, 1981) has involved an insistence that 'porn' be undifferentiated from erotica as a sex-weapon fashioned by men. In attempting to undo the distinction between the erotic and pornographic, feminists have allowed 'the narrowly instrumentalist view of women's erotic teaching...to prevail over the richer classical one' (Cryle, 1994:29). That is, such feminists have denied their own rich autonomous pedagogical traditions and thereby failed to challenge 'the final reductio ad rationem of ars erotica...to be found when its knowledge is displaced by scientific discourse, represented as the special property of male subjects' (p.30).

I am arguing that one of the ways to challenge gendered cultural norms of great or abusive pedagogy is to 'eroticise' teaching in

terms of theorising pedagogical work in the classroom. This may sound both ironic and dangerous, given the strong traditional association of feminists with the anti-sexual harassment lobby. Nevertheless, I hold that, beyond the historical patriarchal forces at work to defeminise the 'great' teacher, the failure of feminists to differentiate the erotic from the explicitly sexual, and that, in turn, from sex-as-weapon, has disallowed the reclaiming of a pedagogical tradition which offers up a real historical alternative for women. As feminists, we should not unwittingly give credence to the view expressed by Brantome in 1666, that 'women might...not ...be commanding teachers, but they

are remarkably good learners' (cited in Cryle, 1994:26). An alternative is to reclaim the traditional erotic authority of women, with its corollary moral responsibility, to be differentiated from a tradition in which women have enacted sexual agendas 'born of male desire, and executed by women in response to male desire' (Cryle, 1994:p.22). Cryle's (1994) challenge is apposite here:

If we can (re)-conceive of eroticism without being overwhelmed by the thematics of desire in its radically subjective forms, then we may be better placed to understand the discursive authority at work in transmitting received notions of refined pleasure.  
(p.viii)

I would want to add such a re-conceiving may allow women teachers to make a stronger claim to greatness...to 'our passion for power in learning, our delight in the flirtatiousness of intellectual debate, in the game of competing...in the sexiness of winning' (Kirby, 1994: 19). It may help us to say to our students 'I know', 'I have known your presence, I believe and enjoy you'. While Protestantism remains entangled with the redemptive feminist project, feminism's 'mawkish distillation of [its] reluctance to acknowledge its natural intimacy with power' (Kirby, 1994:19) will remain. And this will sustain the binary formulation of the 'dedicated' Miss Murphy or the dangerous Miss Brodie. Until feminists - and others who write about and do pedagogy - can distinguish 'the giddy embrace of pedagogy' from pedagogical abuse, female teachers will be lumbered, still, with needing to be Sir or simply staying Mum.

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