

## 'THEY SHARED A LABORATORY TOGETHER': FEMINIST COLLABORATION IN THE ACADEMY

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### *Biographical note*

Elizabeth Abel, Assistant Professor of English at the University of California, has published articles on contemporary women novelists and is working on a book on psychoanalytic and literary representations of female identity.

Marianne Hirsch, Associate Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College, has published essays on a number of modern writers, a book on Henry James, Michel Butor, and Uwe Johnson, and is at work on a book on mother–daughter relationships in literature.

Elizabeth Langland, Associate Professor of English at Converse College, has published articles on the novel, has co-edited, with Walter Gove, *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes*, forthcoming, University of Chicago Press, Spring 1983, and has recently completed a book-length manuscript, *Society in the Novel*. The three authors are co-editors of *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, forthcoming, Spring 1983, University Press of New England.

**Synopsis**—Virginia Woolf's comment that 'Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together' suggests both the dimensions of female friendship not represented in literary tradition and also a model of female scholarly cooperation. 'Feminist Collaboration in the Academy' looks at the ways in which feminists can relate to and combat the academy's prevalent image of the isolated and usually male scholar. Describing their experience of working together on an anthology of feminist essays, the authors discuss the theoretical implications and problems of feminist collaboration in the academy.

'Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together. . . .' Virginia Woolf not only suggests the dimensions of female relationships not represented in literary tradition; she also implies a collaborative model of female scholarship. Woolf's image of women working together violates deeply entrenched conceptions of the solitary author. The literary portrait of the isolated scholar from Milton to Yeats has created the academy's prevalent image of humanistic inquiry. How do we as feminists relate to these definitions, and how might we combat them? We would like to describe our experience of collaborating on an anthology of feminist essays and to discuss the theoretical implications and problems of feminist collaboration in the academy.

Just as feminist inquiry is intrinsically interdisciplinary, so it may be intrinsically collaborative. The scope of the questions we ask as feminists, the courage required to attempt such basic redefinitions, the lack of institutional support for our endeavors, all make

collaboration a logical mode of scholarship. The prevalence of co-authored essays in feminist journals and the growing frequency of enduring, prominent scholarly teams (Gilbert and Gubar, Diamond and Edwards, Maccoby and Jacklin, etc.) testify to the attractiveness of this choice.

Collaboration, moreover, corresponds to what recent psychoanalytic theory terms a distinctively female psychological style. Theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Jane Flax, Jean Baker Miller, and Dorothy Dinnerstein assert that women's early identification with and symbiotic attachment to their mothers promote more flexible ego boundaries and more relational modes of self-definition than are experienced by men, who define themselves through separation from the mother. The notion of the isolated individual scholar corresponds far more closely to the masculine than to the feminine ego. Recognizing these differences, the feminist program should, then, challenge the notion of the discrete scholarly ego, of autonomous intellectual authority. The claims of many contemporary theories of psychoanalysis, linguistics, anthropology, communication, and textuality question the concept of the isolated self or text. But while the proponents of these theories insulate their scholarly practice from the implications of their ideology, feminist scholars have tended to enact our more immediate relation to the claims of intersubjectivity and to demonstrate in practice as well as theory the notion of a communal self.

Countering the emphasis on the individual scholar is an important theoretical endeavor, but it raises serious practical problems. Because collaborative work does not mesh with the academy's conception of the individual mind producing discrete and measurable contributions, it frequently encounters opposition. We are going to discuss the most immediate of these problems, those involving scholarly evaluation. Decisions about promotion depend on assessing the individual's scholarly skills and accomplishments. Departments claim that collaboration prevents or seriously obscures this process. How are they to know who contributed what? There are no easy answers to this dilemma. One partial solution is to insist that all members of a collaborative team contributed equally to the final product, and that it is the product that must be evaluated. A written statement affirming this position, or describing the specific contribution of each person, and signed by all the collaborators, might assuage some concern. Perhaps some explicit consciousness raising about the reasons for feminist collaboration might also be effective. We might argue that it is as much a scholarly virtue to be able to work productively and creatively with others as it is to master the anxieties of solitary inquiry. We might challenge what has really become the fetishization of the single-authored book. For even when collaborators write individual chapters which comprise as many pages as independent books, they are likely to encounter the objection that the *conception* of a discrete, autonomous book demonstrates an important scholarly ability. We need to question the intrinsic superiority of a project conceived in isolation rather than cooperation.

In our own experience, the benefits of collaboration are huge. Although we work in separate institutions, the three of us came together to compile a collection of critical essays on the female novel of development. Some of us felt isolated as feminist scholars and needed to find an affirming community in the profession at large. All of us felt we could benefit from bringing our separate areas of expertise to a pluralistic exploration of the female novel of development. Our original plan was to divide our anthology into three sections, with each of us in charge of the section closest to our interests. Marianne Hirsch, who teaches in the Department of French and Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College and who has written on the theory of fictional genre, was to oversee a section on the tradition of the

*Bildungsroman*, its European origins, its modification as genre by the practice of women novelists. Elizabeth Langland, who then taught in the English Department and was Chair of Women's Studies at Vanderbilt University and who had recently completed a book on society and the novel, was to organize a section on the social and historical factors shaping the female novel of development. Elizabeth Abel, who then taught in the Department of English and General Studies at the University of Chicago and who writes on psychoanalytic and literary representations of female identity, was to supervise a section on the psychological dimensions of female development in fiction by women. However, when we actually came together for a week's intensive editorial meeting, we found that our perspectives meshed so thoroughly that we could not separate our project into these neat divisions.

This week's meeting was extremely important and enriching for all of us. Having each read all of the essays submitted to the anthology, we found it both reassuring and stimulating to discuss the distinctive merits and problems of each one. We faced many difficult choices, and having a forum in which to air our conflicts enabled us to proceed with greater confidence. Hard political decisions arose: did we prefer a more tentative analysis of a third-world author to an elegant essay on a classic Victorian novel? Did we prefer speculative explorations to careful readings of established texts? Did we care more about achieving a broad comparative perspective—which by nature could not be inclusive—or did we prefer to cover the major texts of a single tradition? Would we reprint significant essays already published elsewhere or reserve our limited space for unpublished, and sometimes less polished, endeavors? Would we seek out recognized critics for the privilege of boasting their names on our contributors' list? And could we be impartial in comparing them to unsolicited essays? Did we want to favor submissions from colleagues we knew personally, and from those we knew were imminently up for tenure and needed to bolster their vitae? All these, and many other, difficult decisions were immeasurably eased by hours of discussion.

As our week proceeded, we also found that our divisions of territory increasingly blurred. First we discovered that our individual perspectives were so complementary they became inseparable; then we found that the line distinguishing academic from personal discussion faded. Our original intention of dividing our introduction into three individually written sections rapidly changed, and we finally composed the introduction together, the three of us sitting around a table, collaborating on each sentence. We sparked each other's ideas and words and rechannelled toward productive interchange the energy normally given to anxiety. Another benefit of the collaborative writing process was the opportunity to observe other work styles intimately over a period of time, to see that our own blocks are not universal, to clarify our own areas of ease and difficulty. We also found that our original separation of 'work' from 'talk' time tended to dissolve as we discussed the distinctive course and problems of female development, frequently testing our theories against our own experience and gleaning from experience new models to explore. As we came to define our topic more clearly, we also came to know each other more completely. This interplay of personal and scholarly concerns has always been a distinctive characteristic of feminist inquiry; it is also a distinctive pleasure of feminist collaboration, which erases the boundaries between self and other, private and public, work and play.

The friendship of Chloe and Oliva, Woolf tells us, will be 'more varied and lasting because it will be less personal', situated as it is in a laboratory. Their work, we add conversely, will be richer and more satisfying because it includes their relationship as friends.