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Sexual Politics and the Folklorist

Michael TAFT

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All writing is a political act. Certainly, all scholarship, especially social scientific scholarship, includes a political dimension, and readers ignore this dimension at their peril. Not that all reviews (especially reviews in folklore journals) should concentrate on this particular dimension—to do so would make tiresome reading indeed. But certain kinds of scholarship, published within certain historical and cultural frameworks, call for a political assessment.

Scholarship on women's issues makes this particular demand. All branches of learning have had to re-examine their philosophies, methodologies, ethics, and boundaries in order to accept the increased role of women in scholarship, the perspectives they bring, and the revisions they demand in scholarly activity. These changes in the way we think about things have often been dramatic—so much so that reading the works of previous generations of men requires that we continually sigh to ourselves, "remember that they were men of their times." The political implications of such a heightened awareness of the place of women in our society are to be seen everywhere.

In his presidential address to the Modern Language Association of America (*PMLA*, 102 (1987), 281-291), J. Hillis Miller recognized women's studies as being one of the major factors in changing the direction of literary scholarship, changing "the context within which we

will do our reading, teaching, and writing in the coming decades" (p. 285). Anthropologists, historians, linguists and theologians, among others, have expressed these same sentiments, and folklorists have not lagged behind in their own self-examinations on this matter. In their brief introduction to the twelve essays in this collection, Jordan and Kalčik devote considerable space to the examination of the history of sexism in folklore scholarship. Their examination reveals a bleak record, a "lopsided orientation" (p. ix) which the present volume attempts to correct.

Their introduction challenges us with its assumptions about the history of folklore studies. Have we (the collective *we* of over a hundred years of scholarship) been guilty of sexism, and has our guilt been as extensive as that of other disciplines? It is all too easy to lump folklorists in with scholars from other fields in the general accusation that women and women's perspectives have been ignored in the pursuit of human knowledge. And it is certainly true that folklorists of all generations have been "men and women of their times." Yet many of the blanket statements which the editors make in their introduction seem addressed more to political ends than to the ends of folklore studies.

The history of folklore scholarship fares better under the accusation of sexism than many other disciplines. For example, in literary studies, women authors of previous centuries have only recently been "discovered" and re-evaluated, and their canonization has been one result of the changes addressed by Miller above. Women informants, however, have been an important part of the folkore canon since the beginning—from Scott's Mrs. Brown to Azadovskii's *sibirische Märchenerzählerin* to Abraham's Almeda Riddle. Sociology, political science and economics have been fields perhaps correctly seen as the preserve of men until relatively recent times, but folklore, especially North American folklore scholarship, boasts of many women who were both founders and shapers of the discipline: Alice Fletcher, Fanny Bergen, Louise Pound, Elsie Clews Parsons. . .the list is long and impressive.

I am not suggesting that folklorists have, historically, been more tolerant or more open toward sexual equality in the workplace than have those in our sister disciplines. Yet because folklore has always been on the margins of the scholarly world, always the runt of the academic litter, men have been less anxious to make their mark in our field, thus leaving the door open to women scholars. I would not go so far as to say that folklore has been traditionally seen as "women's academic work"—history would quickly prove me wrong—but

our disciplines has not been as attractive an avenue to political power, social prestige, or monetary reward as have other, more "mainstream" disciplines, and thus men folklorists have not felt so intimidated by competition from their women counterparts.

Whether one agrees with my admittedly simplistic argument or not, the discipline today cannot be accused of domination by men, as well over half of all North American folklorists are women, and women hold or have held some of the most prestigious positions in the folklore learned societies. Every folklore class I have taught over the last ten years has been overwhelmingly composed of women (I've had some classes in which there were ten times as many women as men). One cannot attend a meeting of the American Folklore Society or the Folklore Studies Association of Canada without noticing the exponential growth of young women folklore scholars.

My point is that the tone and to some degree the substance of the introduction to this collection is a political polemic more than an assessment of the status of modern folklore scholarship. As a political polemic, it serves to remind scholars to be both aware of women's perspectives in folklore and wary of sexist scholarship; but as with most such position-statements, it oversimplifies and generalizes in a way which is bound to make the careful reader uncomfortable. What makes me particularly uncomfortable are the generalizations that men's folklore performances tend to be public, competitive, and individualistic, while those of women are private and collaborative, and that men have not bothered to study the kinds of private folklore which are the domain of women: conversational folklore, personal experience narratives, and popular beliefs, among others. These observations, although once again politically convenient, are dangerously simplistic, and the best studies in this collection actually refute such generalizations.

In the mid 1980s, do we even need the kind of call to the barricades which this introduction represents? Interestingly, almost all of the ammunition which Jordan and Kalčik use—that is, citations from past scholarship—come from the 1960s and 1970s; by contrast, their polemic is outdated and redundant. What would have been better as an introduction to a collection of essays, which, in fact, do not conform to the political style or content of the introduction as written, is a reasoned, and much longer, essay on the nature of the differences between the scholarship of men and women. How do these two perspectives differ and to what extent are these differences a matter of gender and not a matter of the countless other factors which make one scholar different from another?

Part of this unwritten introduction would have involved re-examining the question of the insider versus the outsider in fieldwork, since a man will always be an outsider as a student of the folklore of women. But to my mind a more interesting question is whether a woman's perspective is profoundly different from that of a man, profound enough to cause a quantum change in the direction of the discipline. I can't see much historical evidence from past folklore scholarship for this thesis. For example, was Elsie Clews Parsons' studies of Caribbean folklore so different from that of her male counterparts? Did Helen Creighton's techniques of song-collecting and annotating set her apart from male song collectors? (One could argue, in fact, that William Roy Mackenzie's concern for his informants *as people*, rather than as vessels of song, makes him less sexist than Creighton.) Perhaps there were subtle differences between the work of men and women folklorists of the past (a good topic for a graduate student), but I see no profound differences here.

What I *do* see are men and women who are, as I stated earlier, "people of their times." Middle-class and upper-class scholars, often of a romantic bent, who searched mainly among the lower-class or working-class "other" for survivals and quaint lore; annotators who were usually intent on compiling the least interesting, rather than the most interesting (and therefore most complex) information on texts and peformers; men and women inevitably shaped by social circumstances which made them the scholars they were. If I am overly critical of folklorists from past generations, I expect that men and women folklorists of the next century will be equally critical of my generation's scholarship.

The essays in this collection, rather than confirming the thesis of the editors, work against most of their generalizations. Although most of them are at least interesting and informative, there are none which strike me as being radically different or profoundly more revealing than the past scholarship out of which they have grown. Although all the essays were written by women, I see no overall consistency of vision nor anything expressly "female" about these studies. Perhaps most importantly from the point of view of the political stance of the introduction, these essays are rather conservative in their choices of topic. With the exception of Kalčik's study of CBer's "handles" (nicknames), the areas of study seem quite mainstream. In fact, the writers as a whole seem to suffer from "folklorist's preference"—a malady which strikes all folklorists regardless of gender, in which the folklorist *understands* that there is a world of creativity out there, but still persists in choosing a well-worn genre to investigate. Thus, nine

of the twelve essays concern narrative traditions, two concern material culture (textile traditions, specifically), and one, Kalčik's, the field of onomastics. None are primarily concerned with music, dance, belief systems, or drama—not to mention oratory, epistolary traditions, non-structured play activities, home interior decoration and environmental art, folk stupidity, community festivals and other infrequently-explored areas. In all, if the essays were printed without identifying the authors, I am not confident that I could guess that they were all written by women, although I would probably identify them as the product, for the most part, of mainstream folkloristic scholarship.

The best essays and the best parts of all the essays engage the reader in some specific folkloristic problem, rather than in the political polemics of the editors. For example, Linda Dégh's essay is a well-developed investigation of how two elderly, Hungarian-American women have adapted their narrative strategies to modern, urban, American life; they use the telephone as their major source of transmission, and they have replaced older narrative forms with gossip, memorates and jokes without foresaking traditional narrative elements in their performances. Nowhere in her analysis has Dégh felt obliged to justify her observations according to simplistic sexist or non-sexist criteria.

Kay Stone's essay also avoids simplistic answers and pat generalizations in her study of the effect of fairy tales on children. Her thesis that such narratives have a stronger effect on girls than on boys stems, not from vague, politically comfortable platitudes, but from listening to what her many informants have to say about the impact of fairy tales on their lives. Her conclusions, far from corroborating the simplistic notions of certain psychologists and feminists, show that "influence" is a complex phenomenon and that a character such as Cinderella is neither a wholly positive nor wholly negative symbol to her women informants.

Kalčik is equally reasoned and convincing in her analysis of the codenames or nicknames chosen by CBers (citizens band radio operators)—here there *is* a definite gender distinction, which Kalčik clearly demonstrates through her concrete examples. Similarly, Janet Langlois's classification of the narrative rationalizations people have used to explain the deadly behaviour of Belle Gunness—a Lady Bluebeard—and her categories of order/chaos and insider/outsider make sense because of her analysis of specific narratives and narrators.

Likewise, Karen Baldwin uses a dichotomy in her classification of family narrative traditions: the public/private distinction between

the stories of men and those of women in a specific family. Women tell stories about happenings within the family, whereas men relate stories about the impact of the family on the outside (public) world. Baldwin's conclusions would seem to support the views of the editors, but she has not presented her findings as a general model of general distinctions in storytelling, only as a model which seems to work quite well in one family. Conversely, Margaret Yocom's essay—again on family narrative traditions—suffers from the very fact that she has taken the traditions of *one* couple and has made generalizations based on this limited sample, generalizations which accord with the political aims of the editors, but not with good scholarship. At the end of her essay, Yocom rejects the value of generalizations—an about-face which shows how unsatisfying such politically simplistic studies can be.

Susan Roach's essay on a family quilting tradition begins in a similarly uncomfortable fashion in which she proposes that quilting is essentially a woman's activity. This opening position, however, seems little more than a bow in the direction of the editors' stance, as she then goes on to give a good semiotic analysis of quilting, an analysis which includes a discussion of the role of men and boys in this family quilting tradition.

Geraidine Johnsons' study of a rural woman rug-maker is a good, descriptive, workperson-like account in which there is no forced or unconvincing rhetoric. And Elaine Jahner's analysis of the life history of a Sioux woman, although at times romantic and a bit obsequious in her treatment on her informant, is based firmly on previous ethnographic studies of the Sioux. Her generalizations about Sioux culture are convincing because of the scholarly bases from which she has drawn.

Carol Mitchell's statistical study of the joking habits of men and women is inconclusive. Although she uses a computer to sort out factors of context, text and performance, her study is a prime example of the modern proverb, "garbage in, garbage out." Although she has collected a lot of jokes, her data base is still too small to support the kind of conclusions she reaches, and perhaps even more damaging to her study, are the hazy and subjective categories which she has used in her statistical, computerized study. These flaws, as well as her use of a poorly-defined group of joke-tellers (college students and others) lead to generalizations which, again, speak to political needs more than to scholarly ones. Like the editors, she feels honour-bound to represent a certain position, even to the extent of relying on simplistic arguments such as the following:

> Finally, probably because men must learn to participate in competitive public life, they seem to develope a sense of camaraderie with their fellow men rather than very intimate friendships, for a strong sense of competition seems to be detrimental to intimacy. (p. 168)

Her essay presents an uncomplicated world where cause and effect clearly manifest themselves; if anything, folklore should teach how complex we humans are.

Margaret Mills' essay is also statistical in nature, but hers is a delight to read because she has tied her data to a specific group—Afghan, Moslem women—and because she has confronted rather than ignored the complexities of her study. She too is interested in the differences in narrative theme and performance which can be tied to gender, but her understanding of ethnographic facts about these Afghanis, like Baldwin's understanding of her family or Jahner's knowledge of the Sioux, anchor her conclusions about the relationship of gender to narrative.

Rosan Jordan, unfortunately, continues the tone which we find in her co-authored introduction. Her essay on supernatural and bizarre legends and memorates told by Mexican-American women (the vaginal serpent, La Llorona, etc.) is reminiscent of superficial Freudian analyses of folk literature. She interprets her informants' narratives as protests against sexism and the oppression of women (especially Chicanas), using a facile analysis of sexual/political symbols. Her basis of analysis is the interpretation which political activists in the Mexican-American community might give to such stories, rather than the meaning which such stories have for her informants. Perhaps her informants are political activists, and perhaps they would agree with the simplistic analysis which Jordan presents, but we are given little information on who these women storytellers are. Jordan does include some stories which are clearly used by her informants as exempla of their social situations, and a more detailed examination of their use of these exempla would have saved Jordan's essay from the weaknesses endemic to her methodology and philosophy.

In all, there is more good than bad in this book. If nothing else, the book forces the reader to confront the political side of folklore scholarship, and to examine his or her own approaches. The bad scholarship is bad enough that it too serves as a lesson for the reader, in the same way that certain outdated scholarship is so clearly biased, ethnocentric, sexist, illogical or in other ways faulty, that the reader might learn by negative example from its weaknesses.

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