

"Dilemmas of the Educated Woman"

Commencement Address at Mount Holyoke College

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by David Riesman

Almost everywhere today, the viability of the single-sex college is being re-examined. Indeed, President Gettell is rather unusual in stating in his ten-year report last fall that there should be room for diversity, and that since there were young women, and especially brilliant young women, who could profit from a single-sex institution, Mount Holyoke College had no plans either to become a university or to go coed. Judging from comments in the Mount Holyoke News, and from my general sense of things, I would surmise that some of the graduating seniors in the class of 1968 have more ambivalence than that, especially as you look forward to a future that for virtually all of you will definitely be coed. However, the very term "coed" is a reminder of the still subordinate or ancillary nature of women in our society, for stag universities talk about admitting coeds, while women's colleges talk about admitting men. In what I shall have to say this afternoon, I shall seek to relate some of the dilemmas of single-sex or coeducational institutions to the longer life-cycle of women as they look forward to careers where they face discriminations more subtle than those of a traditional Jim Crow pattern, but at times hardly less destructive of accomplishment and feelings of personal worth.

One form of discrimination is well-known, and evident if one studies the budgetary projection of the women's colleges, namely, that while women generally outlive their menfolk, they are apt to leave dribblets to their own colleges, while the men are memorialized at theirs in opulent buildings and hardly less opulent chairs. In part, this reflects the ability of male alumni to put the pinch on each other through their corporate and philanthropic networks. I know one stag university in New England that hesitates to go coed, although its administration would like to, because it depends so much on alumni support to keep it afloat, and believes it must recruit affluent scions who are going to go into business and make money and leave it to alma mater. (This may be an obsolete bit of academic folklore, since alma mater may be more apt to profit from the grants that a bright physicist or psychologist can secure from the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health, but even there, the grants are more likely to go to male than to female scholars, for reasons we shall come to shortly.) Any liberal arts college has a hard time retaining capable faculty against the lure of the great universities with their graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and research institutes. In this competition for faculty, a women's college may have a slightly harder time-- although such a college has, as a minor reason for continued existence, its ability to offer opportunities for good academic positions for women faculty, who tend to be subordinated at coed institutions, and nearly shut out at all-male ones.

Nevertheless more important even than money in recruiting and keeping faculty at a liberal arts college is the opportunity for faculty members to teach able and sophisticated students, and perhaps especially students who will go on to graduate

school in one's own specialty. Indeed there is a conflict between recruiting the rich and the talented and the rare overlap who is so convenient to admissions officers. The presidents of some of the stag colleges seem quite aware that an all-male institution has become an obstacle to recruiting exactly those most able and reflective young men who will keep good faculty, those young men for whom the stag protections are increasingly seen as claustrophobia.

It is true that there are a few young men whose timidity needs protection at some point in their adolescence, and who feel almost unbearably anxious when invaded by girls and surrounded by reminders of the latter's availability, before being ready to move out of their single-sex enclaves. However, young men in colleges, as well as in secondary school, even in coed settings, have many traditional redoubts which do not generally include girls, such as team sports, hunting, hot-rodding, all-night poker games, and sundry hobbies such as stamp collecting or science fiction, which seldom attract girls. Conversely, in some secondary schools and to some extent in the South and West, boys tend to be steered away from the arts and especially from poetry, because these have been defined as the monopoly of the girls (I might add my enthusiasm about the poetry in Pegasus), or of actually or supposedly non-virile men. And in some of the elite prep schools and elite stag colleges, one can still discover what I like to call stag-hearty and stag-precious subcultures, of which especially the latter are threatened if young women are introduced--I noticed this especially in the British public schools, and the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The stag-hearty types are less threatened, because even in a coed college they may pursue women of lower social standing, willing to play along with what remains of the double standard, staying clear of the brighter and more demanding and more interesting coeds. The stag-precious subculture lacks this traditional defense against the perils of coeducation. But the loss to poetry if the stag-precious subculture is abolished is likely not to be very great, while the gain to the general academic and extracurricular life of the college may be large.

I have heard stag-precious types argue at my own institution that introducing girls into the dining rooms of the residential Houses would lower the conversational tone--much as medical school professors used to argue in the bad old pre-feminist days, that introducing women into a medical school would deprive the faculty of their best, most ribald jokes. And it may be true that when girls are a sometime thing, introducing them may lead to substitution of one kind of banter or frivolity for another. But where young women are an everyday presence, observers generally agree that they raise the conversational level and, being slightly different from men, with overlapping as well as idiosyncratic interests, provide bases for conversational variety. I believe that at this point no serious non-nostalgic argument can be made in favor of a stag college.

The case for the woman's college, however, is not so easily dismissed; I believe that there is a certain degree of asymmetry here. In the Commencement address at Bennington College which I gave a dozen years ago, I suggested that for a certain number of young women, it made sense to have a period in their educational development when they were not forced to compete with men in and out of the classroom. This seemed particularly true for certain kinds of shy young women, not equipped to compete with domineering young men, particularly since male students, as some of you who were in summer school commented to the News last fall, are quite free about talking, whether they have done the reading or not, and perhaps especially if they have not. Furthermore, since men matter even more to women than vice versa, college women have in general fewer defenses against being preoccupied with men; they have

fewer hobbies and same-sex diversions. However, such considerations seem to me today a diminishing defense for the woman's college. Women think about men whether they are around the place all the time or not. It is conceivable that blacks can develop a semi-autonomous culture in an effort to extricate themselves by choosing a temporary path of resegregation away from bothersome whites. But even in a woman's college, such an effort at segregation from men is impossible on the weekends, and unlikely on a weekday, when male faculty and male presences and male imagery will be omnipresent, just as thoughts about the weekend will be omnipresent. As we shall see more fully in a moment, there is no womanly counterpart to Black Power. It may be somewhat easier to take men more for granted when they are constantly underfoot.

The Mount Holyoke News interviews with last year's summer school students testify to the greater vivacity of classrooms when men are present, and to the greater ease, as well as occasionally greater strain, of relations to them on a day-in, day-out basis, compared with the weekend basis. Yet the fact remains that coeducational colleges, and perhaps our academic culture in general, suffer from largely unconscious male hegemony, and this imposes subtle constraints on the coeds who are admitted on the men's own terms.

If classes in women's colleges often lack the sharp polemic of male forensics, a young woman who does decide to compete with men may feel she is going through the sound barrier, becoming over-assertive and even defeminized. I recall in this connection the comment made by a Radcliffe senior that, as a freshman in a history course, she had discovered that one got ahead at Harvard by attacking both the book and the professor; reluctantly, she had taught herself to do this, but she felt that this was alien to her nature. It went against the grain of those qualities of receptivity and responsiveness to ideas and to people that may in some measure come naturally to women, as well as reflecting our social definitions of their position. One kind of responsiveness, indeed, may become particularly attenuated in a coed setting, and that is the existence of intense friendships among women. Another Radcliffe student examined for her honors thesis the values of a group of freshmen living in a Radcliffe dorm, and concluded that the competition for grades and for men tended to fragment friendships among the freshmen themselves. Men and the curriculum were both of ultimate seriousness; other women were often at best recourses in time of trouble, and sometimes not even that.

Women frequently say that they do not like other women, and it is well known among employers that women do not like to work for other women. (Men as the dominant group are not likely to say this about other men, and indeed I have never heard a man do so.) What women mean when they do say that they do not like other women is complex. It may be a way of declaring that they are really a man's woman, a subtle form of subordination or flattery in the guise of assertiveness. It may be an awareness of the tricks other women use to capture men, tricks some men seem blind to, an accusation that those other women, those tricksters, are Uncle Toms vis-a-vis the dominant male power. It may be the tomboy's identification with the oppressor, with his apparent power and freedom. However, as I have already suggested, women do not seem to be able in practice to create the solidarity that is at least adumbrated among other disadvantaged groups such as blacks. This is natural, since they are tied as daughters, sisters, girl friends, or spouses, to men, whether they like it or not; they cannot create an autonomous subculture of women, except perhaps in a convent, and seldom happily there. They live in the enemy camp.

A woman's college may provide a few islands of temporary solidarity among women, and some intense friendships, but we live in a less innocent time today, and

same-sex friendships are often viewed with a certain apprehension, just as cross-sex friendships without overt sex may be considered a bit old-fashioned. This is perhaps less the case in those coed institutions that possess residential sororities, which still serve in some measure to limit the access of males the parents might consider unsuitable, although these walls too are coming down. It might also be argued in favor of the woman's college that it can protect its students from immediate pressures for vocational career-oriented education, as compared with the situation of men, who must always think about making not only a living, but a working life. Yet paradoxically, it seems to me that on the whole the better the women's college, the less likely students will be to take advantage of the relative freedom and indulgence that is another side of their relative subordination. I would guess that the class of 1968 at Mount Holyoke has felt a certain urgency to make the most of its education, whether to prepare for graduate school or to acquire as much of a background as possible prior to marriage and its personal and vocational demands. In an earlier day, this was less true, and to some extent even now the experimentally inclined students at Bennington and Sarah Lawrence make use of their freedom to pursue an education at least superficially unrelated to later career choice. Moreover, since our society does not change all at once, there remains a willingness to be "feminine" and unstrenuous, for example in those somewhat less demanding colleges with a Southern exposure, such as Hollins, Stevens, Agnes Scott, or Mary Baldwin, although in all of these places, the academic pressures are rising.

In contrast, Mount Holyoke belongs to that group of women's colleges which has sought to overtake and surpass men at the latter's own academic games. Because of its traditional emphasis on the natural sciences, Mount Holyoke has been a leading example of this pattern--I say this knowing that science students are a small minority here and suffer from attrition even after they come as in all liberal arts colleges, and that a slightly smaller percentage of Mount Holyoke's students than of Bryn Mawr students go on to graduate school. I say this also knowing that Mount Holyoke has moved marvelously far in recent years to encourage work in the performing arts as well as in the verbal analysis of the arts. Many of the stag colleges are also loosening up in this respect, and of course artistic performance too can become a game like any other. The point I want to make is that, in all the leading women's colleges, women study as if their very lives depended on it, in spite of the ambivalence they also feel about the effect of getting too deeply involved, too deeply immersed in an academic pursuit, thus lessening the chances that they will be adaptable to the interests and the career of the man whom they will marry and to whom in a number of instances they may already be tied.

It is true enough that if one looks at the whole trajectory of both men's and women's careers, both sexes face dilemmas of undercommitment and also of overcommitment. Men may throw themselves into a line of work that becomes obsolete or unsatisfying, and have to change to another career in middle life. Women may throw themselves into a line of work that turns out to be incompatible with the demands of the men they marry, or of the children they will naturally regard as their main responsibility. I shall return in a moment to this question of second careers. But now I want to point out that the way women conduct themselves as undergraduates reflects not only their often very vague and unrealistic anticipations of the future, but also their experience as infants and children who have been raised and taught by people of the same sex, against whom they do not feel they must establish a separate identity in the way that many boys feel vis-a-vis mothers and female elementary school teachers: it is Huck Finn, not Baby Jane, who has to "light out for the Territory." Michael Maccoby, studying sixth grade boys and girls in a Brookline (Mass.) public school, concluded that the relation of the girls to what they learned

was less contaminated or blocked by struggles over authority and role of the sexes than was the case with the boys: the girls could respond both to the teacher and to the subject matter without fearing that they were being sissies or subordinated. One consequence of this which I have observed as a teacher of both sexes is that girls are far less likely to bluff or get away with bombast than are boys--something which is not invariably to their educational interest, since it may mean that it is harder for them to focus on the one exciting course they are taking and to shirk, but still manage to do well in their other courses.

A further reason is that women, as I have pointed out earlier, are more responsive and also more responsible than men--if they were not, the world would have come to an end long since. They respond to the teacher as a person: they hate to let the teacher down--one reason why, as the studies done some years ago at Vassar showed, undergraduates in a college like this may be reluctant to get deeply involved in their majors, lest they let their teacher down if they then dropped the field for marriage or for a less demanding career. I say all this in the face of our folk lore and of our novels, which are full of sexy college girls who beguile their male professors into giving them good grades for little work, or at least little academic work. One consequence of these tendencies is that women on the whole outperform men in coed colleges. Everybody knows that it is harder for a woman to get into a college like Middlebury, Oberlin, or Swarthmore, than for a man. Not to speak of Stanford or Pembroke or Radcliffe, where the numbers of women admitted are so much smaller. As a general rule, if a woman in a coeducational college goes out with a man from the same college, she is likely to be doing a bit of slumming academically and perhaps also socially. Indeed, only the very best men's colleges have the exalted academic standards of the Seven Sisters. Up to the time of Commencement, young women are given an education, if they get any at all, which is at least as good as that given young men, and often a good deal better. And, as I have indicated, they tend to make more serious use of what they do get.

At the next academic level, however, at the graduate and professional level, the proportion of women has not increased relative to the much higher rates of those who finish college and are intellectually capable of going on to further post-baccalaureate education. One reason is a certain amount of discrimination that sets in when it comes to graduate applications. Perhaps the one good possible effect of the draft is that it may minimize that. While the recent halt in graduate school deferments may change this, many departments up to now have felt that a woman is not as apt as a man to do them credit, even if she does pursue her studies through to the doctorate, and having to choose among scarce resources, they have felt it better to bestow these on a man. Such a judgment seems to me in some respects too individualistic, and in others insufficiently so. It is too individualistic in not taking account of the contributions of a catalytic sort which women can bring to an institution in making its atmosphere more endurable, less dehydrated, for both sexes. It assumes that each student will be completely self-reliant to the point of solipsism, without any need of communal support, and this in my opinion is one reason why graduate study often takes so long, suffers from such high attrition, and is sometimes so debilitating. But on the other hand, the discrimination against women is anti-individualistic in treating them as a cadre among whom there is a high statistical probability that they will drop out either before or after the PhD from pursuing professional work as men define it. It means discriminating against a particular woman because of the record other women have made, something which today would be regarded as indefensible vis-a-vis black or other minority applicants. It is important to take chances on women graduate students not only for the sake of those

who will contribute to the field as it now exists, but also for the sake of those who may slightly alter the field, by importing perspectives marginally different from those of the average capable man. To give one example, I have mentioned that there are very few women who study physics. This is a verdict on contemporary physics, or rather on how it is taught, as well as on contemporary women. Physics has not felt it necessary to consider its way of making abstractions interesting to people who do not want to put up with all its prerequisites, all the scaffolding or laboratory exercises which, for example, premeds have to endure. Physics, like other natural sciences, is usually taught to people as if all of them would have to do physics--a luxury of presuming captive audiences not available in the less powerful social sciences and humanities. But physics also needs to be taught to those who would enjoy it rather than do it, that is, do it as a career, and while there is some overlap between these approaches, there is also some distinction. And the fact is that the presentation of physics that makes it often unattractive to women also makes it increasingly unattractive to many men, so much so that physicists are troubled by the sharp drop in enrollment, and by the feeling among many able young people that it no longer provides a locale of intellectual adventure.

Furthermore, in the applications of women to graduate and professional schools, the possibility of what might be termed "back of the stove" careers is given insufficient attention. In such a career, a woman during the early child-rearing years may allow the intellectual and vocational pot to simmer, kept warm by occasional reading and meetings, so that she can go back to her work, perhaps not in a full-time way, since she will still have her husband and family, but in a serious part-time way, when the youngest child begins to attend school. Moreover, after the youngest has grown and flown, the longevity of women means that wives and mothers may still have thirty years of post-parental life to devote to a calling--a possibility that might make things easier for some of those widows who today miserably outlive their overworked husbands. Labor shortages have made employers more willing, but still insufficiently so, to make arrangements for the part-time work of married women, although it will be a long time before we surrender the mythology that men work full time, when they spend so many hours in make-work and expense account sociability, while many women who work energetically during the hours when their children are in school, accomplish at least as much as men whose hours are longer and whose pay envelopes are fatter.

A woman's career is often one that will have to be adapted not only to part-time work, but to part-time work itself interrupted when the children are sick or when the husbands are especially troubled or demanding, as indeed husbands generally are. And some careers are more and some less compatible with the lack of day-care facilities for children, the lack or distrust of servants, and the residual discriminations and burdens which women must carry at work and at home--all of which handicap professional women in America who, like most of you, want to be wives and mothers also.

I talk occasionally to women who are thinking of returning to their interrupted careers, and what often handicaps them is lack of confidence. They are apt to feel that they have become rusty, even mindless. Sometimes they will say, "think of all the literature I have missed." The very diligence which has made them good students in college here betrays them, preventing them from seeing that they have missed a lot of things which aren't so, and that it is not so difficult to catch up as they have been told. Both men and women, but women even more than men, need in college to learn how to learn. If one has learned a second language, the third comes more easily. This is true across the board. What college women require is confidence

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that they can take subjects in quickly, as someone does if he works for a paper, or in a law office, or begins, as I did, to teach a subject which he barely knows, keeping at best one jump ahead of his students. But here the better the college a young woman attends, perhaps the greater the chance that her confidence will be shaken and her sense of adequacy impaired by the intense competition, and by the ever-rising demands of the faculty. My guess is I'm talking now to a group, most of whom were valedictorians, and then you got here and got your first C. These demands reflect the better preparation of faculty members, and also their desire to teach graduate students in their own specialty, as to some extent Mount Holyoke faculty are able to do in the four-college syndrome, or in the Master's Programs. But in many liberal arts colleges, the undergraduates must do duty as de facto professionals, which in the best cases encourages their self-confidence, because the faculty has time to spend with students on what is blithely called independent study, but what is better regarded as highly dependent training in eventual independence. The serious academic style of Mount Holyoke does allow some of you to come forth with the belief in your own competence based on having done substantial pieces of work as undergraduates, even at the hands of a faculty which like other good faculties has forced you to live up to its rising expectations.

I have referred earlier to the adaptability of women, which makes them responsive to men's expectations. This adaptability may, however, allow women like yourselves to synthesize the stages of an interrupted career with the continuity of marriage and the discontinuities of motherhood. You may find in yourselves a flexibility somewhat less available to men. Indeed, I should add that not all young women suffer from excessive modesty and leave college with the feeling of not having lived up either to their teachers' expectations or to their own ambitions. There are some young women, as also young men, who suffer from grandiosity and the belief that if they really extended themselves and did not have so many dates or write so much secret poetry, then they could be distinguished biochemists, or medievalists, or whatever else. Yet it seems to me that this attitude of self-inflation is not common, and deflation is more common; the faculty is better at it vis-a-vis students; the students are better at it vis-a-vis each other.

Since I myself am an academic person, some of you may have taken my remarks thus far as a plea for careers, as a polemic against home and motherhood. That has not been my intention. I have known a number of nuns, of Sisters, who lead fulfilled lives, and a few spinsters who are not members of a religious order who are serene. But this is a rare gift. Most women rightly believe that they lack this gift, or do not want to depend upon it. What many young women coming out of colleges like Mount Holyoke desire is motherhood plus, not career minus. My interest is in exploring the nature of that plus. Will it be a job to support the joint menage, a job which requires no particular skill, nor provides any particular interest, although it does provide variation from domesticity and diverse kinds of human contact? Will it be something which draws on qualities of intelligence, devotion, meticulousness--qualities which are not a monopoly of women, but which are commonly found among them? There are many occupations our culture assigns largely to men, which I am convinced women could do better--many in the medical or dental fields are examples. Fine handwork such as surgery of certain special sorts is almost monopolized by men, women might be better at it. There are many careers in the law for women who are careful about detail and about human relations--in my observation, many men who are good at one are bad at the other.

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In what I have already said, I suspect you will have sensed my judgment that the "woman problem" is principally the male problem, just as the Negro problem is principally the white problem. And what diminishes women also diminishes men. Many men in academic life, for example, are led to define as masculine, and therefore admirable, styles of work which are vigorous, impersonal, repeatable, unsentimental, and so forth. And then some men react against this definition, and insist that they are intuitive and "human," that they have no truck with computers or machinery, or with systems or abstract conceptions--but this very rejection already defines them in terms of a fallacious definition of what is masculine. What I seek is a more pluralistic and individuated approach, in which people are prepared and willing to accept the necessary accident of their sex and the moderate push this may perhaps give them in one direction or the other, without believing it defines them utterly, or without feeling that they have to fight it utterly. My ideal is neither a color-blind nor a sex-blind society, but an unthreatened and highly receptive society, which takes account of both social definition and idiosyncratic variations, and sees the former not as a uniform, but as one pattern among many.

We might move a little more rapidly toward this ideal if we could present to young people throughout their schooling men and women whose roles contradict current stereotypes. For example, I would like to see many more tough-minded men teaching English, art and music in elementary school, and many more attractive married women teachers in the hard sciences and social sciences in universities.

And, as I have already hinted, I can imagine the improvement of many social arrangements, to make life less difficult for married women of intellectual capacity or artistic capacity who want to have a career, that is, a destiny, even if seen retrospectively, rather than a series of jobs. Nurseries, baby-sitting pools, co-operative schools and other shared facilities, all these would help. But as least as important, and probably more important, is a change in the anxieties from which men now suffer, which make most of us, that is, most of the men, anxious about wives who are pursuing careers where they might outdo us, outperform us, and establish an entirely different social and intellectual world from our own. This fear may in many cases be irrational and traditional, but that does not make it go away. Being the responsive and responsible people that they generally are, women take account of men's fear and, realizing that their men-folk are engaged in difficult career problems of their own, do not want to complicate these with their own problems.

Yet I see our society in the years ahead becoming less competitive, less demanding on men, and therefore freer for women. As we move into a post-industrial culture, services become more important than production, and a good and meaningful life becomes more important than either mere survival or getting ahead in the older styles. Hopefully, we are becoming more egalitarian, less hierarchical as between the sexes, and also as between the races and the classes. Our society may become less invidious, and perhaps less anxiety-ridden about personal achievement. It is true that the battles of feminism have never been completely won in the United States, and that still to some extent women have to be better than men to get half as good opportunities, though they do not want to be better than men, especially their man. However, the world into which the Mount Holyokers of 1968 will go is in these respects a more benign world than that of your predecessors, so that if the feminist battle has never been won, it may have been to some degree bypassed by changing values and modern technology.



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In view of the larger problems that face both men and women in our society and in the world, this may be small comfort. In a world not only of war and poverty, but of an awareness that these are wrong, the problems men and women share in the Class of 1968 are much greater than those which differentiate them. In the movements of student protest, whether over civil rights or peace or over intramural academic issues, students of both sexes have worked closely together, although one may still observe some tendency for the women to be subordinated and on occasion exploited. (In this connection there was an interesting episode in the first Columbia sit-in, when a group of white men who had occupied one of the halls sent out a call for women to come and cook for them; the women at first refused, but when the men then modified their request and asked women to come and help them cook and also to protest, the women gave in and went in.) In fact, if one looks at the society as a whole, if peace is attained in Viet Nam and on other cold war fronts, women will have had a disproportionately large hand in this, both in such direct action as the Women's Strike for Peace, and in more subtle influence on their men-folk in turning them away from martial glory and the fear of seeming to be cowards in not wanting to fight.

I hope for all our sakes that the world into which you are emerging as the Class of 1968 will become less warlike, and will improve on existing ways of non-violent resolution of conflict both at home and abroad. We all know that we live at a time when there is a greater possibility of total destruction of mankind than in any previous period of history, but we may be less aware of living in a time which presents greater possibilities of choice to more people than ever before. It is such choices which present you with the dilemmas of the educated woman, providing you with the education to ponder the dilemmas without being paralyzed by them, while moving toward destinations that I am sure will be interesting, often troublesome, and remarkably unforeseen.

David Riesman