The distinguished professor

by Roger Kimball

On Jane Gallop & her book Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment

Every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being.
—Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind

Back in the days when I was sleeping with students, all the sex had taken place within a larger context of social and personal relations.
—Jane Gallop, Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee

Last Spring, when the trendy, neo-Marxist quarterly Social Text unwittingly published “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity”—a piece of deliberate, postmodernist nonsense by the physicist Alan Sokal—enough intellectual shame was generated to cover the entire pseudo-discipline of “cultural studies.”

Shame, but not, alas, embarrassment. Andrew Ross, the editor chiefly responsible for publishing Mr. Sokal’s brazen gibberish, ought to have stolen away at midnight and taken up llama farming somewhere in the mountains of Peru. After all, he had just been duped into accepting an essay arguing (among other absurdities) “that physical ‘reality,’ no less than social ‘reality,’ is at bottom a social and linguistic construct.” But here he is still, watching television, listening to rock music (in an interview in New York magazine a few years back, Professor Ross explained that he had more or less given up on books), and enjoying his expensive, tenured position as head of New York University’s American Studies Program.

Administrators at New York University ought to have been embarrassed, too. After all, they have employed and coddled an obvious charlatan like Andrew Ross, luring him away from Princeton, putting him in charge of an important academic program, and entrusting him with the education of
untold scores of undergraduates. But there’s been nary a peep from NYU: no sign of chagrin, no hint of contrition, no condign display of mortification. I suppose that as long as unsuspecting parents are willing to hand over those fat tuition checks, no dean or provost at NYU much cares what goes on in the name of education: night is day, black is white, “physical ‘reality’… is a social and linguistic construct.” It’s all the same to them.

And then there is Duke University Press, which publishes Social Text. By rights, the officers and directors of a distinguished university press ought to have been acutely embarrassed by what, from Melbourne to Malibu, has come to be called the Sokal Affair. But as anyone who follows the academic scene knows, Duke University has long since lost the capacity for embarrassment. For more than a decade, its literature and humanities departments have been among the primary sources of the poisonous ideas and hermetic, politicized verbiage that have so disfigured liberal education at the end of the twentieth century. It is grimly appropriate that the chief architect of Duke’s dégringolade, the literature professor Stanley Fish, should turn out to be executive director of the Duke University Press. For Professor Fish, a prominent Milton scholar turned academic buffoon, is so inured to embarrassment that he is willing to say anything to enhance his celebrity and extend his academic fiefdom. So it was that when the Sokal Affair broke, Professor Fish rushed off an op-ed piece to The New York Times arguing that “it is Alan Sokal, not his targets, who threatens to undermine the intellectual standards he vows to protect.”

I had reason to recall all this recently when a friend brought to my attention a story from the March 7 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education about Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment, a new book by a publicity-seeking feminist named Jane Gallop and published by Duke University Press. At first I suspected that this story, too, was a gigantic hoax: there were just too many academic clichés in one place. Could the author of the story in the Chronicle really be named Courtney Leatherman? Given the contemporary academic obsession with all forms of outré sex, “Leatherman” seemed too good to be true. Above all, there was Miss Gallop herself. This Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee had begun her academic career with—what else?—a dissertation about that great writer, the Marquis de Sade. In her new book, as the Chronicle reports, Distinguished Professor Gallop recounts her travails when two of her female graduate students—one of whom she French kissed at a lesbian bar in front of many other students—accused her of sexually harassing them. (To be specific, one of the students complained that Distinguished Professor had “mashed her lips against mine and shoved her tongue in my mouth.”) A look at the book confirmed what the story in the Chronicle suggests: that it is essentially a work of sexual exhibitionism masquerading as a meditation on the meaning of feminism and the virtues of consensual sexual relations between teachers and students.

I shall return to Distinguished Professor and her opus in a moment. But first a detour in the direction of her publisher Duke University Press. The story in the Chronicle noted that Duke had such faith in
the sensation the book would make that they devoted the cover of their Spring/Summer catalogue to it. And indeed, there it is: a woman intently reading a take-off on the *National Enquirer* with “Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment” and a likeness of Distinguished Professor splashed on the cover.

Leaving through the Duke catalogue, I gained a new appreciation of the difficult decisions that Professor Fish and others running the press must face. To be sure, Distinguished Professor’s book is subacademic sensationalistic trash. It might reasonably be expected to garner some small attention and even to sell a few copies. But is it really any more sensationalistic or barren of intellectual merit than other titles on the Duke list? What fine instruments of discrimination they must possess! How could they know that Distinguished Professor’s book would do better than *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship,* for example, which the Duke catalogue recommends as “a devastating critique of contemporary discourses of American citizenship [that] addresses the triumph of the idea of private life borne in the right-wing agenda of the Reagan revolution”? Or how about *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum,* The author of this important contribution to civilization, we read, removes “gynecology from its private cover within clinic walls and medical textbook pages [and] decodes the gynecological exam, seizing on its performative dimension.” Then there is *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* by Mira Schor, which “brings a maverick perspective and provocative voice to the issues of contemporary painting, gender representation, and feminist art.” The catalogue, alas, does not include a likeness of the book’s jacket, which turns out to feature *Slit of Paint,* a graphic—pornographic, really—representation of labia painted by the author (“oil on canvas,” in case you were wondering).

The Duke catalogue contains other delights: books on Marxism, gay studies, AIDS, gender theory, postcolonial theory: all those attractive items that substitute for genuine scholarship at the best university presses these days. It is the perfect list, really, for the publisher of *Social Text:* intentional or unintended, just about everything new they publish is some kind of hoax. But the primary dupes, as the current catalogue reminds us, are usually the public and what once upon a time could unironically be called the scholarly community.

Which brings me back to Distinguished Professor and her latest contribution to letters. She is quite frank, both in the interview in the Chronicle and in her new book, about wanting to create a “spectacle,” a “sensation.” Hence, for example, the tabloidlike title of the book: Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment.

At the center of Distinguished Professor’s book is her belief that there is some deep irony about the fact that she, a self-declared feminist, should be accused of sexual harassment. For her, the idea of a feminist sexual harasser “seems like a contradiction in terms.” After all, we usually think of sexual harassment as a predatory male activity, and feminists, of course, are by definition neither male nor predatory. Q.E.D. One of the most common phrases in this book—in all of her books, I’d wager—is “As a feminist …” (Another is “my sexuality,” but more about that anon.) For Distinguished
Professor, feminism is more than a political principle, it is a patent of moral vigor and existential authenticity. Just as certain Marxists profess to believe that, because they mouth support for the downtrodden and oppressed, they could not, as Marxists, be guilty of oppressing people, so Distinguished Professor seems to believe that, being a sexually emancipated feminist, she could not possibly be guilty of sexual harassment. The interview in the Chronicle puts this succinctly: “While Ms. Gallop acknowledges the power she has over her students, she says that her power, as a feminist, is different from a man’s. She says, for example, that as a woman she could never neglect to take seriously the work of a female student.” Is this breathtakingly naïve? Or merely self-serving? And which would be worse in a Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature?

Twisting a line from Tolstoy, Irving Howe and his coterie of Marxists were fond of declaring that “Socialism is the name of our desire,” “feminism” is the name of Distinguished Professor’s desire. In her book, she takes us back to her college days in the early 1970s. “As a good soldier in the sexual revolution,” she explains, “I had sex often, but with little pleasure and no orgasms.” Then she discovered Simone de Beauvoir: “In January 1971 I read de Beauvoir’s Second Sex, learned that women could masturbate, and had my first orgasm.” As Miss Manners might say, how nice for her.

A large part of Distinguished Professor’s book is taken up with tales of her sexual exploits. Readers of her other books will not find this surprising. Distinguished Professor likes talking about her—well, I was going to say her “private life,” but there is nothing private about it. In Thinking Through the Body, for example, a collection of essays published in 1988, she explains that one of the essays, “The Student Body,” had originally borne the dedication: “Aux hommes de trente-six ans” because “I had had a series of affairs with thirty-six-year-old men (at the time I was in my mid-twenties).” All of these men, she cheerfully informs us, were officially “unavailable”: some were married, some were her professors, and so on. (Perhaps I should warn readers that the cover of Thinking Through the Body features a photograph, taken by Distinguished Professor’s husband, of her giving birth to their son Max.)

In Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment, after Distinguished Professor learns that women can masturbate (it’s amazing what one can pick up from books), she tells her readers about a weekend-long feminist event on her college campus. She describes an all-female party that took place that glorious weekend, and how she and her new-found sisters stripped off their shirts and danced bare-breasted in “bacchanalian frenzy”: “I remember Becca that night, a gorgeous young woman a year or so older than me. ... she was the first to take off her shirt and start dancing. ... I was dancing with those beautiful breasts, dancing all the harder because I so wanted to touch those breasts.” Etc.

When it comes to sex, Distinguished Professor is what we might call an equal opportunity employer. In graduate school, she set her cap for her dissertation advisers. Both proved recalcitrant. At last, however, “the year I was writing my thesis, I finally managed to have sex with them (each separately, to be sure but, oddly, coincidentally, in the same week).” Although she does
not mention either of these gentlemen by name, one of them was Richard Klein, a well-known professor of Romance languages at Cornell. As the Chronicle story explains, Professor Klein felt “outed” when Duke University Press asked him to write a blurb for Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment. He readily complied. “For decades,” Professor Klein wrote, “I have felt guilt and shame for having performed toward her in a way that was unprofessional, exploitative, and lousy in bed. Her book has convinced me, with the cogency of its feminist arguments and the persuasiveness of her personal testimony, that she, on her side, feels only gratitude and admiration for my performance.” I am happy to share Professor Klein’s frank assessment with readers, because they will not find it on Distinguished Professor’s book or the accompanying press material: as Professor Klein explains, Duke rejected his blurb.

Distinguished Professor is not burdened by the sort of scruples that dogged Professor Klein. At her first academic job, long before she became a distinguished professor, she began by sleeping with an unnamed graduate student. (“Graduate students,” she once declared at a conference, “are my sexual preference.”) When this fellow tired of her company, she found consolation with an undergraduate named Scott. Scott, you see, had learned that the other fellow had up and left. He came to visit. “His idea was to cheer me up by sleeping with me. I was glad he came by and immediately took to the idea.” Then there was the lesbian couple Micki and Diane. Micki came by one day and “I was thrilled to let her seduce me.” About a year later, “Diane found occasion to invite me to spend the night with her. … I was extremely flattered and more than happy to accept her invitation.”

Although Distinguished Professor is careful to tell us that she has not slept with her students since 1982 when, one gathers, she got married, she makes it clear that her new-found continence has nothing to do with any scruples about student-teacher sexual relations: “Prohibitions against teacher-student relations seem based in a sense of sex as inherently bad.” Or again: “Telling teachers and students that we must not engage each other sexually ultimately tells us that … we should not treat each other as human beings.”

There is of course something deeply pathetic about all this. Jane Gallop is a casualty of the deceptive liberations of the Sixties: an obviously bright girl who was ruined, intellectually and morally, by the emancipationist ethos of that destructive era. She defiantly tells us that “it is because of the sort of feminist I am that I do not respect the line between the intellectual and the sexual.” She does not see that by not respecting that line she has trivialized both sex and intellect. Defending her pursuit of her dissertation advisers, she informs us that “screwing these guys definitely did not keep me from taking myself seriously as a student.”

In fact, Distinguished Professor never seems to have had much trouble taking herself seriously. On the contrary, it is taking anything but herself seriously that has proved difficult. Describing the work of one of the women who later accused her of sexual harassment, Distinguished Professor explains
that the student wrote a paper that “interwove love letters to an unnamed woman with an analysis of my own recent scholarly book, which contains a discussion of love letters between women.” What did Distinguished Professor think was going on in that poor student’s mind? And what, indeed, of her own “scholarly” work? Let’s return for a moment to Thinking Through the Body. Like so much academic work in the humanities today, this book is positively obsessed with sex and is festooned with sexual puns. In “Lip Service,” an essay we are told is “central” to the collection, Distinguished Professor expatiates on the views of the French feminist Luce Irigaray:

Ironically, we might say that Irigaray herself can see the male genitals only according to phallic parameters. But that is a question of the politics of the body. As for its poetics, we can perhaps recognize here that, if phallic logic is not based in anatomy but, on the contrary, reconstructs anatomy in its image, then Irigaray’s vulvomorphic logic is not predestined by anatomy but is already a symbolic interpretation of that anatomy. …

Thus do I succeed in registering the multiplicity of the female genitals as a textual production, construing it in accord with our modern conception of writing.

Sexual harassment creates an environment that is hostile to a student’s education. My experience was the opposite. I was in an environment extremely conducive to my education, a heady atmosphere where close personal contact intensified my desire to learn and my
In the end, the appropriate response to Jane Gallop is pity. But what should we feel for her students? And what about the University of Wisconsin, which has seen fit to honor this poor creature with a distinguished professorship? Cynical and sophisticated academic hucksters like Stanley Fish delight in celebrating the rubbish that Jane Gallop and her peers put forward as scholarship. Like Nero, he stands back, amused, while the empire he should help protect dissolves into chaotic decadence.

Notes
Go to the top of the document.

1. For an account of this hoax, see “Professor Sokal’s Transgression” in the Notes & Comments of The New Criterion for June 1996. Go back to the text.

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