

H-Net Reviews

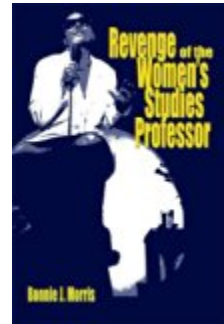
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bonnie J. Morris. *Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xii + 167 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35295-8; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22062-2.

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A Celebration and Defense of Women's Studies

It is important to study women because the male experience does not constitute the entire truth of human existence. Throughout her career as a scholar of women's history, Professor Bonnie J. Morris has encountered surprising resistance to this simple and seemingly inoffensive notion.[1] What is worse, she has found that sexist backlash against women's studies continues to keep otherwise interested students away from the field. To counter the barrage of insults, misconceptions, and stereotypes, and to "celebrate teaching women's history, against all odds, and despite situations of hostile or hilarious bias" (p. 138), Professor Morris developed in 1993 a one-woman play, which she dubbed *Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor*. Her latest book, based on this play, bears the same title and is the subject of this review.

Professor Morris's book, like her play (and indeed her career), seeks to educate as wide an audience as possible about the nature and value of women's studies while using humor to both expose and mitigate the sting of the backlash. Accepting her role as "a sort of international advocate for the women's studies profession" (p. 142), Dr. Morris challenges the stereotype that feminist scholars are angry, humorless, hairy-legged feminazis by presenting herself as a "cheerful, upbeat, approachable soul with a friendly face" (p. 8). Rather than gripe about discrimination in academia or condemn those who perpetuate hatred toward her field, Dr. Morris sagaciously points out the relevance of a women's studies degree to jobs in law, diplomacy, international development, HIV/AIDS

education, counseling, psychology, and workplace management. She encourages skeptics to read her syllabi and attend her classes so that they may make more informed judgments about women's studies courses. Facetiously recounting what were undoubtedly painful and disheartening experiences, Professor Morris invites her audience to consider the absurdity of the colleague who treated her like a student because he thought she was "too young and pretty to be a professor" (p. 81), or the student who felt that devoting 10 percent of an American history class to exploring women's perspectives was "too much" women's history (p. 65). Although generally buoyant and jovial in tone, *Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor* addresses serious problems, including sexism in academia, violence against women, and the unceasing backlash against feminism and women's studies in both the academic community and the population at large. Based on her own and her students' actual experiences, Dr. Morris's examination of such concerns is as revealing as it is insightful.

Professor Morris structures her book around ten scenes from her play, devoting a chapter to each scene. This format works well with the chronological development of Dr. Morris's story; however, wide-ranging chapter themes at times result in a lack of focus. Nevertheless, Dr. Morris's anecdotal account of her experiences first as a student and later as a professor of women's history is both engaging and illuminating. In chapter 1, "Scene One, 1973: My First Women's Studies Class," Pro-

Professor Morris examines girlhood and the women's studies profession. Acknowledging that she was fortunate in that she "came of age as a woman along with the women's movement" (p. 15), Dr. Morris compares her early identification as a woman and corresponding interest in women's studies with her students' present-day unwillingness to consider themselves women, much less feminists. In chapter 2, "Scene Two, 1983: You're Getting a Ph.D. in What?" Dr. Morris offers fellow women's studies scholars some strategies with which to "countenance derision toward our work throughout long years of study" (p. 24). Her advice is to be constructive and persuasive rather than confrontational; to use verbal attacks as fodder for writing, research, and presentations; and to find motivation in the disrespect and contempt. Chapter 3, "Scene Three, 1986: Exams and Evaluations," takes a similarly practical approach as the preceding chapter. Here Professor Morris shares a couple of her actual syllabi to demonstrate to her reader how to structure a successful women's studies course, and to prove to skeptics that women's studies classes are more than mere "ideological navel-gazing" (p. 38). Dr. Morris emphasizes the heavy academic loads and high standards expected of women's studies scholars, often to the chagrin of students hoping for an easy A.

Chapter 4, "Scene Four, 1987: Can I Talk to You in Private?" is a painful reminder that scorn for women's education—and indeed violence toward women—is not limited to groups like the Taliban militants in Afghanistan, but is "alive and well in America" (p. 57). From husbands who harass their wives about taking a night class in women's history, to boyfriends who humiliate their girlfriends at the gym by flicking their arm fat, to male athletes who sing vulgar songs about female athletes, to sexually aggressive t-shirt slogans, to strangers who slip drugs into women's drinks at parties, *Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor* identifies the myriad ways sexism rears its ugly head in America today. In and of itself an argument for the need for women's studies courses, Professor Morris's main concern in this chapter is coping with this sexism when it intrudes into the women's studies classroom, as it is wont to do. Her advice is to maintain a boundary while creating a safe space where students can engage with the topic to whatever degree they feel is relevant to their lives and the world around them. "The professor is not a therapist," she cautions (p. 59). This advice also holds true in chapter 5, "Scene Five, 1989: Do We Have to Have So Much Women's History?" in which Professor Morris considers, among other issues, how male students handle

the guilt and anger that is so often generated by course material on institutionalized sexism. In this chapter Dr. Morris astutely points out that, contrary to the misconceptions and stereotypes heaped upon women's studies by ignorant critics, the actual "male bashing" is done by those friends and family members who would criticize a male student for his interest in taking a women's studies course (p. 70). She is surprisingly understanding of the "cognitive dissonance" some students experience when encountering women's perspectives in academia for the first time (p. 67), and happily reports that many of her initially hesitant male students ultimately become her biggest advocates.

The next three chapters can be thematically grouped as "Perils of the Profession." Chapter 6, "Scene Six, 1990: Driving a U-Haul to Harvard," provides an informal history of attitudes toward women in academia, including the nineteenth-century myth that education damaged women's ovaries and the infamous campus rules and regulations that once governed female behavior in co-educational environments.[2] This history serves as a backdrop for Professor Morris's more recent experiences as a woman in academia, facing the dual responsibilities of challenging the good-old-boy network while simultaneously needing to succeed (and therefore find approval) within this traditional academic climate. In chapter 7, "Scene Seven, 1992: Fear of the Word *Woman*," Professor Morris reflects on the difficulties of a job market that can be especially brutal to scholars in fields like women's studies, which many consider a special interest or supplemental discipline. This is perhaps the most depressing chapter for tender-footed women's studies scholars as it points out the dearth of women's studies departments (courses usually fall within interdisciplinary programs) and, consequently, tenure-track teaching positions. Ever the helpful instructor, Professor Morris goes so far as to suggest a low-budget grocery list for the adjunct struggling to make ends meet on a tenuous shoestring salary. In chapter 8, "Scene Eight, 1993: Teaching Where Hell Freezes Over," Professor Morris reminds her reader that in addition to being poor, women's studies professors have to live and teach in places no sane or progressive-minded person would hope to so much as view on a map. (Although to be fair, this fate seems to await most aspiring historians and cannot be claimed solely by those specializing in women.)

Chapter 9, "Scene Nine, 1993: Women's Studies Goes Global," and chapter 10, "Scene Ten, 1995: Educating President Clinton," speak to the practical applications of women's studies and the field's potential for

opening minds and broadening perspectives. In chapter 9, Professor Morris relates how first-hand observations of women's lives in places like India, Egypt, Turkey, and Morocco helped her students better appreciate the lessons of her women's studies classes. In chapter 10, she tells of the time she persuaded President Clinton to watch the George Washington University women's basketball team play their homecoming game.[3] Later that year, Mr. Clinton became the first president to call and congratulate the winning NCAA women's team, a stride towards further recognition of women in sports in which Professor Morris rightfully feels she had a hand. Her conclusion, "Mainstreaming Women's Studies in America," notes some promising changes in attitudes towards women's studies since 1993. Less suspicion and a greater level of acceptance suggest that "the subject of women in history has at last gone mainstream" (p. 144). Yet Dr. Morris cautions against complacency and asks her reader to consider: "What can you do to improve the climate for women's studies?" As one has by now come to expect from Professor Morris, she also supplies some helpful suggestions.

Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor is an appropriate and effective response to the sexist backlash that haunts the field of women's studies. One wonders, however, whether Professor Morris's mission "to put a friendly face on women's history" defers too much to the critics (p. 101). By some tragic Hellerian irony, does this struggle for acceptance undermine the progress of the women's studies field by diverting energy and focus from more scholarly pursuits? As Professor Morris herself laments, "serious scholars of women's history spend as much time defending their chosen field as they do pursuing important research.... Clearly there's work to be done" (p. 8). Perhaps the most productive work involves disengaging from the backlash rhetoric to concentrate on developing new perspectives on women's experiences. Nevertheless, Professor Morris's frustrations and cele-

brations will no doubt resonate with other women's studies scholars. Historians will value her book as a resource guide for teaching specific topics in women's history—women in Western civilization, women and war, athletics and gender—and for its helpful advice on how to handle challenges of the profession. Ultimately, however, *Revenge of the Women's Studies Professor* works best as a primary source that documents, through its author's account of her personal experiences as a feminist scholar, a particular stage in the evolution of the women's studies profession.

Notes

[1]. Professor Morris specializes in women's cultural and social history in the post-World War II era. Her books include: *Lubavitcher Women in America: Identity and Activism in the Postwar Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), *Eden Built By Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals* (New York: Alyson Books, 1999), and *Girl Reel* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2000).

[2]. For a more formal account of the history of women in higher education see Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in Higher Education," *Signs*, 3 (Summer 1978): 759-773; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); and Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[3]. A version of this encounter appears in Rivka Solomon, *That Takes Ovaries!* (New York: Three Rivers, 2002).

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