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Lenskyj's "Femininity First"

"Femininity First: Sports and Physical Education for Ontario Girls, 1890-1930," an article by Helen Lenskyj, appears in Sports in Canada: Historical Readings.

Lenskyj's article is, to a large degree, an analysis of the formalisation of physical education and its implementation as a structural reinforcement of the perceived role of women in Ontario during the 1890-1930 period. Much of that perceived role lies in the definition of "feminine woman" and how that differs from the manly man. The feminine woman incorporates: the ability to propagate; a submissive role, both socially and particularly within the institution of marriage; physical beauty and graceful movement. Woman's sports therefore must be consistent with these qualities, and endeavour to both encourage and develop this view of femininity. Lenskyj offers two examples of contemporary research which provide a schema of characteristics prevalent in women's sports and activities which are in accord with this notion of femininity. The first focuses particularly upon upper class women and states that such activities must allow for graceful performance and not be so exacting as to result in perspiration. The second and more general is expressed in the negative: bodily contact, application of bodily force against either an opponent or object, and feats of endurance are all to be avoided. Another particularity to be avoided, which met with general agreement from teachers, doctors, philosophers and the Pope, was the competitive element, which led to the "danger of sacrificing some of the finer traits [of girls] for the peculiar boldness which outside contests bring about."(197) The manly male, alternately, incorporates: the "need to compete, to fight, to achieve, to excel,"(197) for his principal arena of activity lies not in the home but in the

outside world where he must do economic battle, as a provider, and perhaps also literal battle--in this period of war--as a soldier. The respective roles of female and male in society might be simplified as "wife and mother"(196) and worrier and provider, and are seen as quite distinct. The sports and activities deemed suitable for each demonstrates and substantiates their respective positions.

Besides the practical and philosophical differentiation engendered by the perceived differences between the female and male societal roles, there was another equally important motivational force: the medical concern. It was under this auspice that medical science generally bolstered the standard view of femininity. Because of the female physiology, it was suggested that only moderate exercise was appropriate to insure good health and fertility. Besides this broad conservative acquiescence, the medical concern falls into several categories. Foremost were the consequences of excessive exercise during menstruation, which was seen as threatening both physical and mental well-being. This does not necessitate the cessation of all sports, but teenage girls in particular should refrain from activities that involved either jumping and tumbling or induced unnecessary excitement--as would be likely with inter-school competition--which their already unstable emotional disposition could not accommodate. Closely related issues were the worrisome consequences of athletic activity to a woman's role as wife and mother and to her child-bearing experience. Another aspect of the health concern centred on the inherent dangers of females wearing tight clothing during sporting activities. Astringent garments, particularly in the area of chest and abdomen, were seen as the possible cause of indigestion, weakness, nervous debility and even consumption. In close association with this was the pandemic masturbation phobia. Organised sports and recreations, with their edifying and Spartan qualities, were seen as a means of distancing both boys and girls from such a sinful and harmful preoccupation. Tight clothing worn during physical activities--in relation

to females--was seen as undermining the virtuous influence of sports. And, of course, there was a pragmatic dimension to this medical concern: the promotion of "hospital births and the outlawing of midwifery"(196) meant that the male medical profession had achieved a virtual monopoly over the reproductive health of women. By dictating the activities of females they perpetuated general female subordination as well as reinforcing their own moral and intellectual superiority.

The issue of women's sports, of course, was far from static, and certain developments were manifest during this forty year period. These fall into two categories: negative, reinforcing the traditional view of femininity; and positive, encouraging women's development in sports. Of the former, the most apparent developments concern sports played by both men and women--separately, of course--which were modified in accordance with the dictates of femininity. The 1899 Spalding official basketball rules for girls and women, lighter curling stones, shorter golf courses, the attempt to eliminate body-checking in women's ice-hockey at the collegiate level, and non-interference rules in basketball are all such examples. Another method of ensuring femininity in the more masculine of women's sports was to require participants to wear clothes which stifled free movement and served rather to exalt aesthetic qualities. Finally, a number of national systems of physical education were adopted, such as the British, which stressed military inspired exercises, and further entrenching gender differentiation. Some of the positive developments involved the establishment of organisations outside the school system. An early example of this was the Young Women's Christian Association in turn of the century London. Holding lunch-time meetings in two local factories, the YWCA used physical culture as a means of promoting "the social and spiritual"(189) welfare of working girls. Other private clubs, some established both by and for women, allowed middle-class women to participate in bicycling, tennis and swimming. Even within the educational system, particularly

at the university level, opportunities for females were improving. By 1908, both the University of Toronto and McGill offered diploma courses for women in physical education. Activities offered women at that time included tennis, basketball, golf, fencing, field and ice-hockey. Although the availability of sports facilities and equipment continued to demonstrate a male bias, general improvements initiated by a department of education regulation in 1909--specifying minimum standards for colleges--augmented by the financial contributions of the Strathcona Trust Fund proved beneficial to both sexes. By the 1920s, high schools also were beginning to feel the effects of gradual progress, and most now featured girls' athletic associations. Concomitant with these developments, certain newspapers and essays began to recognise the physical abilities of females, as well as acknowledging that athletics could prove beneficial in areas other than reproduction.

Although Lenskyj makes use of both primary and secondary sources, there is a definite bias towards secondary texts. The *Ontario Department of Education Report, 1895* is an excellent example of a primary source, offering knowledgeable and pertinent information. Unfortunately, it is also something of an uncommon sample. Many other sources, both primary and secondary, have little relationship with Ontario school age girls. Mostly, as with Alice Long's *My Beautiful Lady* and Cochrane's *Women in Canadian Life*, they concern themselves not with girls but with women. Others refer not only to women rather than girls but American women, and we can only wonder if such distance from the purported subject of the article renders many of these sources entirely redundant. Another short fall is the lack of statistically based sources, leaving unanswered such basic questions as the boy girl ratio in Ontario schools, the percentage of female physical education instructors in Ontario schools, and whether or not this was typical of Canada and the United States. A final weakness is the references to sources within sources,

such as the 1900 *YWCA Gazette* article which was cited by Josephine Shaw in, *When Women Work Together*. We must certainly question the serious points made by Lenskyj by this and other such examples of third hand information.

In terms of structure, content and style, Lenskyj's article leaves much to be desired. Structurally it is often contorted, repetitious and meandering, leading to either vagueness or misunderstanding. A partial outline of the topics presented is a simple indicator of this: Manliness/femininity, medical issues, masturbation phobia, femininity, physical education systems, organisations, clothing, masturbation phobia, femininity, university opportunities, organisations, clothing, university opportunities, clothing, physical education systems. . . . As we see, the organisation is not topic based. The specific period mentioned in the title suggests a chronological structuring, but this is only true in the final sections. One particular paragraph demonstrates not only the dislocation of topics, but also the lack of chronological structure: beginning with University opportunities for women and locating itself in the first decade of the twentieth century, the paragraph concludes in 1899 with a discussion of bathing costumes. Elsewhere the focus is upon ideas which are often given no chronological context. This can lead to serious confusion. The 1910 *Public School Hygiene* text book, for example, warns against tight clothing. This is followed by an undated "masturbation-phobia" related warning also against tight clothing. Confusion continues, for we are shortly told that tight clothing was used as a method of restricting movement and so keeping women's sports "ladylike." If both text books and medical opinion warned against tight clothing, how might we explain the suggested employment of such? Is this employment prior to consensus? The outline of topics also indicates a tendency we see in the sources: although title and thesis suggest that the subject is Ontarian school girls during the stated period, the content of the paper actually has little to do with either. Not only this, but the

thesis actually states that domestic science was employed jointly with the systemisation of physical education in order to institutionalise “gender-role socialisation.”(187) Not only is domestic science then entirely cast aside, but the final paragraphs show decided advancements in women’s sports, thereby undermining the thesis. The confusion we have discovered in structure, historical context and content is not so much an issue at the more fundamental level of language. Lenskyj’s sentences and syntax are generally ordinary, though, as we shall shortly see, exceptional use is made of diction and even punctuation.

We now come to the major problem with Helen Lenskyj’s article. It quickly becomes apparent that her aim is not so much to shed light upon the subject or period of the essay, but the fulfilment of an agenda. That agenda is the expression of feminist philosophy. For this reason, historical context, as we saw above, is often deemed unnecessary, for it the indicative value of information which Lenskyj most values. Facts then become a means of implicitly expressing feminist notions. Tight clothing can be used therefore both to demonstrate male fears of female auto-erotic stimulation--meaning that such restrictive garments are not recommended; but also to demonstrate the male desire to keep women feminine and less able to challenge male superiority in physical activities--meaning that tight garments are an asset. This seeming contradiction is no contradiction at all, for it is only the indicative value of facts in so much as they express the feminist position that is of value. The hidden agenda--though such blatancy is hardly hidden--also leads to serious omissions. A physiology textbook--which notably has neither name nor date--suggests that bust development was one of the goals of physical education for women. Such a statement only has value within the context of feminism, and the omission, which might undermine that value, is any similar expression regarding boys’ physical education. It is difficult to believe that muscle development--as much a part of manliness as the bust is a part of womanliness--

was never mentioned in physical education literature of the time. Lenskyj also makes a point of stressing that men and women shared common swimming pools, but that women could only have access on designated ladies' days. There are two omissions here: firstly how many days were ladies' days and what percentage of clientele were ladies? Perhaps this information would lead to the conclusion that an equally fair statement would have been that men only had access during designated men's days. Besides omissions, which are numerous, Lenskyj occasionally makes entirely outrageous conclusions. One such instance is the assertion that wearing hats and gloves during bicycle riding somehow keeps the event and participants lady-like. It also fails to mention that men also at that time wore hats and gloves. Also the idea that winning, in girls' sports, should be secondary to educational value suggests to Lenskyj another example of gender differentiation, despite the fact that the traditional definition of good sportsmanship always placed more importance on playing fair than winning. But it is in the area of language that Lenskyj demonstrates most often her feminist agenda. This occurs in a number of ways, but we shall focus upon punctuation and diction. It quickly becomes apparent that the quotation mark is used as something more than an indication of quoted material. Repeatedly it is used in a manner which, though not unorthodox, is decidedly rare: that is to indicate special significance. It is a device which Lenskyj uses so often and to such similar ends that it actually becomes a code and directs the way in which we understand the words. Simply speaking, the code instructs us to read whatever is enclosed within these special significance quotation marks as a negative. Such words and phrases include: manliness, feminine woman, masturbation-phobia, acceptable, health and beauty, bust development, narrowed waist, excessive exercise. . . . We are to read each of these as an example of male opinion which is not reasoned but deliberately against the betterment of women. Accordingly:

. . . these exercises involved the use of dumb-bells (which the reader was advised should be “too light” rather than “too heavy”) . . . (189)

demonstrates not the common sense which we recognise, but the expression of male superiority, authority and condescension which the code instructs us to read. In terms of diction also the feminist agenda is displayed, most particularly in the use of loaded words. Thus, rather than using the standard terms: batons and hoops, Lenskyj instead uses “wands”(189) and “small rings” thereby suggesting the lightness of the objects and the implied male view of female weakness. Even bean bags cannot simply be bean bags but must likewise be light objects. Thus, baggy and close fitting clothes become “volumous and constrictive clothing.”(191) Thus, wearing stocking is described: “. . . the legs were concealed by black stockings.”(192) Notice also the objectification achieved by “the” legs--again suggesting a malicious male point of view.

If we examine both the title and the thesis statement, than we must admit that the main subject, school girls in Ontario between 1890-1930 was not adequately explored--in fact it was barely explore at all. Regarding the general thesis that the formalisation of physical education supported the institutionalisation of gender differentiation as manifest by the separate roles of men and women in society, then clearly this was handled with more success, though the progress which we see, particularly in the 1920s does suggest both of the weakness of the plan as well as the thesis itself. It is, of course, in the expression of the feminist view that Lenskyj achieves her greatest success.

Works Cited

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