A Feminist Invades the Halls of Phallocracy [1]

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"My Favorite Critic" by Emily Toth

Carolyn Heilbrun: Elegant Wit, Fierce Truth

It was at the notoriously fusty Modern Language Association conference in 1984 that Carolyn Heilbrun offered some of the best advice I've ever heard.

[5]She was one of the first women to be elected president of the MLA, and I attended her presidential address that year wanting to cheer her on, but expecting the usual blather: *great future, challenges before us all, we need the humanities now more than ever.*

Instead, Heilbrun looked feisty, even wearing a conventional dress. (Four years later, at 62, she threw out all her dresses, nylons, and high heels, vowing she'd never again wear "female drag.") At the MLA, she told us about a little boy who desperately wanted his sister's barrette. He kept poking and pulling, until finally an exasperated parent told him to stop carrying on about a hair ornament, because "After all, you have a penis."

"Everybody has a penis!" the little boy cried. "I want a barrette!"

The point of this story was—well, I don't really remember. But the point for me was that you could say what you thought, even at the MLA, and the earth wouldn't open up and swallow you and destroy your academic career. You

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could be a female professor *and* be outspoken. You could make fun of the phallocrats—a word we threw around a lot in those days.

In short, as an academic-in-training, I learned I could be me.

Carolyn Gold Heilbrun, born in 1926 in East Orange, New Jersey, was an emancipated thinker who wrote a kind of old-fashioned prose, rather like an Edwardian lady. Her sentences were balanced, precise, and genteelly correct. She never split an infinitive or ended with a preposition. But sometimes she'd end with a howler of a snapper, as in her 1988 review in the *Women's Review of Books* of a biography of James Joyce's wife Nora Barnacle. Heilbrun was judicious about the book, but ended one paragraph with the observation that Joyce was "a world class shit."

I loved it. I also loved her, because of her generosity when we met. It was in the 1970s in New York, when we both served on the MLA Executive Committee. I was one of two junior women, and I think she was the chair, but the loud voices, debating and pontificating and obstructing, came from the other committee members, all men. (One of those phallocrats had been a grad school professor of mine.)

I couldn't figure out why they were so exercised about whatever-it-was, and the other young female professor, Karen Rowe of UCLA, seemed equally mystified.

Then Heilbrun called Karen and me aside and interpreted the meeting for us. Phallocrat A was mad at Phallocrat B for some past feud, maybe about literary criticism or something more personal. Phallocrats C and D loved the sound of their own voices, and were famous for that. And so on. I still remember her delighted and conspiratorial smile as she explained how the academic world worked.

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