

Margaret  
Cunningim  
Women's Center

## Feminist theory as revision

*Nancy Walker, Director of Women's Studies Program and Associate Professor of English*

To speak of feminist theory in 1990, one needs to recall the old joke about several blindfolded people attempting to identify an elephant while each touches only a small part of the animal. Virtually every academic discipline is witnessing an explosion of scholarship that has two central goals: to reclaim and reassess the heritage and significance of women in that discipline, and to develop theories capable of revising traditional approaches to study in that discipline. The Vanderbilt library alone lists 142 titles with the word "feminist" in them, reflecting scholarship in philosophy, literature, political science, sociology, medicine, psychology, and many other fields.

### Feminist theory in all disciplines

Not only is feminist theory developing in a wide variety of disciplinary areas, but within a single academic area it is far from monolithic. In literature, to take just one example, feminist theoretical approaches are variously derived from Marxism, psychology, linguistics, and even biology. A single novel may be read, then, as a statement of the economic oppression of women, as an investigation of psychological development unique to female experience, as an example of male or female discourse, or as a text that reveals the relationship between the body and the mind or the imagination.

Thus Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* may be seen as a record of Hester Prynne's entrapment in a hierarchical socio-economic system,

as a text in which the author's male voice interprets and therefore obscures Hester's own thought processes, and as a story in which a woman is betrayed by her own biology in a manner in which men are not -- for it is her pregnancy that marks her as an adulteress, while the identity of her daughter Pearl's father need not be revealed at all.

### Re-vision of feminist theories

If there is a common thread in the complexity of feminist theories, it is the need for revision -- or rather, re-vision, with the emphasis on seeing anew the totality of human experience, and recognizing the concept of gender as an arbitrary, socially-constructed principle that defines the nature and experience of woman in contradistinction to man. In other words, female biology,

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*"To question everything.  
To remember what it has  
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*Adrienne Rich*

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intellect, and even moral and ethical nature have been inscribed by male hegemonic culture, rather than arising from the actuality of female experience. Woman is thus "other" rather than central to the human enterprise.

Examples of this inscription of otherness abound, most closely in our own cultural history. From the early 18th century through the 19th

century, for example, we have a series of social commentators (all male) pronouncing on woman's "nature." Writing to his wife, Abigail, in 1783, John Adams frets about his daughter's behavior: "The more Silent she is in Company, the better for me in exact Proportion and I would have this observed as a Rule by the Mother as well as the Daughter."

A few years later, Timothy Dwight worried in print about the effects of novel-reading on women, expressing his fear that this would render them unfit for life in the "real world," making them too dreamy and idealistic for what Dwight proposes to be woman's proper relation to man: to "assume the marriage vow, do the honors of his table, direct the business of his family, or preside over the education of his children."

The very language of such a passage announces male hegemony, as Dwight pronounces even the children to be "his."

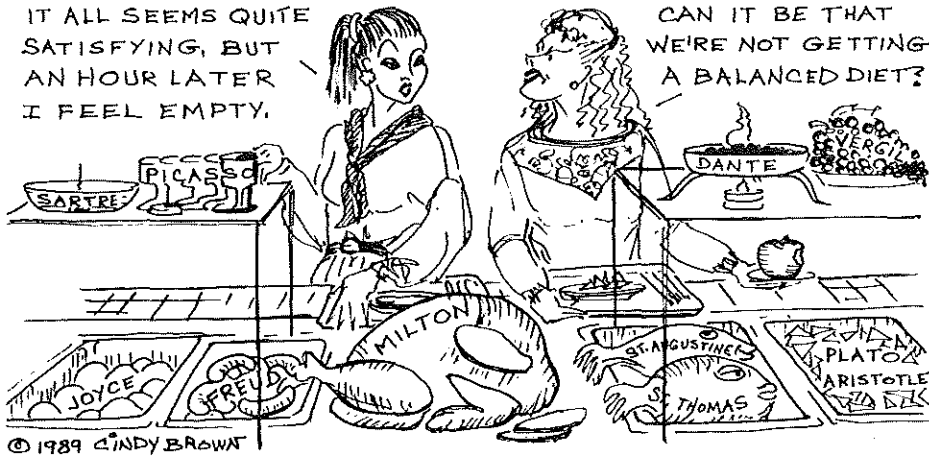
### Formulations of woman-as-other

The task of feminist theory, then, begins precisely in seeing the formulations of woman-as-other. Adrienne Rich described the task best more than ten years ago in her preface to *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*: "To question everything. To remember what it has been forbidden even to mention. To come together telling our stories, to look afresh at, and then to describe for ourselves, the frescoes of the Ice Age, the nudes of "high art," the Minoan seals and figurines, the moonlit landscape embossed with the booted print of a male foot, the microscopic virus, the scarred and tortured body of the planet Earth."

Rich's insistence on the questioning, the re-visioning, of "everything" -- from art to virus -- has led in turn to the multiplicity of feminist theory, as scholars in various disciplines have approached the task of re-vision from groundings in language, image, economic theory, sociology, psychol-

*(continued page two)*

## WELCOME TO THE CANON CAFETERIA



### Feminist theory (from page one)

ogy, biology and more. There is, in short, no single, unitary feminist theory, universally acknowledged and applied.

The question is whether this interdisciplinary multiplicity is a problem for scholars and for programs in Women's Studies. Does the lack of monolithic theoretical approach to the various texts and circumstances to which feminist scholars address themselves somehow confuse or delegitimize the feminist enterprise? The answer, I believe, is no.

To posit a unitary theoretical approach is implicitly to deny the very relativity and multiplicity that feminist scholars insist must replace the unitary authority that has itself led to the need for such inquiry. Also, as Andrea Nye reminds us in her introduction to *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, "Any theory we might use to understand our situation already has a history, a history in which its meaning was shaped in feminist and non-feminist practice."

The ferment of multiple feminist theories is an opportunity rather than a hindrance, because it provides a model in which one authority is not privileged over others, an organic model of dialogue and growth. ■

## It's your health

Reprinted from *The Johns Hopkins Medical Letter*, Vol. 1, Issue 10, December 1989

### Choosing a cough remedy

Coughs that accompany colds come in two varieties: productive and unproductive. Aggravating as it may be, the productive cough helps clear your lungs and air passages of accumulated phlegm--something to encourage since it can aid in your recovery. The scratchy, dry, unproductive cough does nothing to

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accelerate your recovery. It also tends to perpetuate itself, as continual hacking irritates the lining of the throat.

### The productive cough

Cough medicines aimed at easing the productive cough contain expectorants, which are supposed to thin mucus secretions in the air passages so that they can be more readily expelled. But these over-the-counter formulas may do very little to live up to their advertised claims. Only the expectorant guaifenesin has been approved as "safe and effective" by the FDA. The best-known single ingredient products containing guaifenesin are Breonesin, Naldecon Senior Ex, Robitussin, and Scot-Tussin Sugar-Free Expectorant.

### Cough remedy (continued)

The very best expectorant of all is simply water. Drinking extra liquid when you have a cough provides the body with the additional fluid it needs to thin out and break up mucus. Water vapor from a hot bath or shower, a humidifier or vaporizer, or even a pan of water on your radiator can loosen up congestion and facilitate a productive cough. Sucking candy or drinking hot beverages (such as tea with honey) can soothe your throat as well. Try these remedies, including time-honored chicken soup, before you resort to buying a bottle of expectorant. (In fact, chicken soup has been scientifically studied and found to improve the clearance of nasal mucus.)

### The unproductive cough

The unproductive cough is another matter, as it can keep you up all night, sapping the strength you need to regain your health. In this case, you want a cough suppressant, or *antitussive*. The only nonprescription drug of this sort approved by the FDA uses dextromethorphan, a non-narcotic chemical variant of morphine. This drug inhibits coughing by directly suppressing the part of the brain that controls the cough reflex. But because they can lead to a buildup of mucus in the lungs and thus increase the risk of infection, antitussives should be used only sparingly, however. Single-ingredient products containing dextromethorphan include Benylin DM, Delsyn, Hold, and Sucrets Cough Control Formula.

Avoid multiple-ingredient products, which may contain antitussive and expectorant combinations, along with an antihistamine or decongestant. These ingredients may work against each other--e.g., antihistamines are supposed to dry up secretions while expectorants are supposed to loosen them. Or they may be combined in mixes that offer less-than-effective doses of any one drug. Also stay away from codeine-based cough suppressants, unless one has been prescribed by a physician.

If a cough lasts for more than seven days, or if it is accompanied by a fever, skin rash, persistent headache, or sore throat, it's time to stop masking the symptoms with a suppressant and see a physician. ■

# Speaking of women . . .

Marie-Claire Orgebin-Crist, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, is interviewed by Laura Sickles, Computer Center, for Women's VU.

Marie-Claire Orgebin-Crist was educated in France and began research in male reproductive biology, specifically on the process of sperm maturation, while she was working toward her doctorate. Orgebin-Crist was instrumental in establishing that the various parameters of spermatozoa mature at different sites within the epididymis.

Marie-Claire Orgebin-Crist was one of few women on Vanderbilt's faculty when she came to the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology in 1963. In her lab in Paris there were as many women as men. "I was just like everybody else," she says. "That doesn't mean that France is perfect" [in terms of the division of labor by sex]. Few women reached the highest echelon, she explains. But in the university, and at the junior faculty level, men and women were equally repre-

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sented and worked on equal terms. France's free higher education made for more equal numbers of men and women students than was true in American colleges in the 1950s and 1960s, when Orgebin-Crist was studying and working as a graduate student. That was not true at Vanderbilt.

"I was absolutely flabbergasted because I was by myself. There were very few faculty women," she observes. Even the student body was predominantly men.

While she disqualifies herself from making effective observations about how women's status has changed here in the past twenty-six years, Orgebin-Crist doesn't deny the isolation she felt; she simply does not believe

it was attributable solely to her sex. She explains that language, not gender, proved to be her greatest impediment at first. She did not speak or understand colloquial English. "I went through the French school system which at that time concentrated much more on literature than on the spoken language. So when I came here I could translate Shakespeare but I could not order a hamburger. It was the most frightening thing . . ." she says.

As difficult as her early years were, Orgebin-Crist survived them, all the while making important contributions to the study of sperm maturation. In 1973, she was named to the Lucius E. Burch Chair of Reproductive Biology. The same year, she became director of the Center for Reproductive Biology Research. That center includes thirty-five faculty members in eight departments who work on various aspects of reproduction, both clinical and basic research.



photo by Lesley Collins

Marie-Claire Orgebin-Crist

Orgebin-Crist, herself, does basic research. "I'm interested in understanding the most basic processes."

She hesitates when asked about her extracurricular life.

"I work a lot," she says, then acknowledges that she takes time each year to go hiking in the Alps.

Still, "working a lot" is Orgebin-Crist's way. It is the secret to her success. And it is the advice she offers to other women. "Select carefully the goals that you want to achieve and work single mindedly at them. In each situation, you do the best you can." ■

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## Calendar of events

Call 322-4843 for further information on the programs listed below.

**Book Group** will meet on Monday, January 8, 5:15 p.m. until 6:15 p.m. at the women's center. They will discuss *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy Sayers. Kathleen Kitzmiller will facilitate the discussion. Light refreshments. New members are welcome.

**Lunchtime Book Review** will hear Valerie Traub, Assistant Professor of Renaissance Drama and Gender Studies, review *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan on Wednesday, January 17, 12:15 p.m. in Sarratt 118. Woven of voices in dialogue, the book explores the complex emotions animating the mother-daughter bond across a backdrop of cultural difference.

**Noontime Seminar** will feature Professor Margaret A. Doody speaking on her recent literary biography, *Frances Burney: The Life In The Works*. Doody will speak of the pleasures and the challenges of

trying to write the life of an eighteenth century author. Professor Doody is the Andrew W. Mellon professor Humanities and Professor of English. The seminar will be held on Thursday, January 25 at 12:15 p.m. in Sarratt 118.

**Women In Society: Perspectives From Four Religious Traditions** will feature a panel including Sister Kathleen Flood, University Catholic Chaplain; Rabbi Beth Davidson, The Temple; Dr. Kay Gray, United Methodist Minister of the Monroe Street and Scotsboro United Methodist Churches; and a representative of the Muslim tradition. Each panelist will speak on the evolution of the status of women in their religion. This program is co-sponsored by the Office of Women's Concerns of the Divinity School and will be held at the Divinity School, room G23 on Thursday, February 1 at 4:30 p.m. ■

# Southern Methodist University's annual women's symposium

Alice Kwok, '91 Peabody, and Monica Peek, '91 A&S, attended Southern Methodist University's annual women's symposium in March of last year. Below are their combined thoughts on it.

"Pathways to the Future" was the theme of Southern Methodist University's (SMU) twenty-fourth annual Women's Symposium last March. We were among the nearly six hundred participants from high schools and colleges, including one hundred students from southern universities such as Vanderbilt, Emory, and Tulane.

The symposium addressed women's roles in business, the sciences, politics, and education through lectures, workshops, and topical tables.

Major speakers were sociologist Daniel Bell of Harvard University, anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, president of the Institute for Intercultural Studies, and journalist Paula Giddings, book review editor of *Essence Magazine*.

Bell's lecture was entitled "2013:

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*Cross-cultural exposure is necessary to bring about world cooperation.*

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The Promise and the Challenge." He emphasized the importance of learning fundamental concepts as they can be generalized and re-applied to a broad spectrum of situations. He believes that concept formation rather than rote memorization is the best way to educate our youth for the future.

"Stretching Our Horizons: Preparing for a World of Change" was Dr. Mary Catherine Bateson's theme. Her speech centered on women's adaptability and versatility. She stated that the key to survival was the ability to adapt to new situations and the willingness to transfer what was learned from past experiences to the future. Cross-cultural

exposure, she believes, is necessary to bring about world cooperation. Bateson also encouraged participants to plan thoughtfully for about five years ahead instead of planning for an entire life-time.

Paula Giddings, the keynote speaker for the symposium, focused on the minority groups that are part of today's workforce in her speech, "Tomorrow Begins Today." Previously, persons of a specific race, sex and ethnic background were discriminated against by the business community. Giddings saw our goal for the future as merging these groups into the system to reflect a true reality. She noted that women traditionally held service-oriented jobs and that there is still much resistance to women in areas such as top-level management, engineering, medicine, and law.

Giddings saw education as a key tool for affecting change in future generations. For example, supplementing American studies with African and Asian studies is one means of promoting cultural understanding at an early age.

One of the best aspects of the Women's Symposium is the opportunity for small group discussion provided through the workshop seminars. One of the most stimulating sessions was "The Family of Tomorrow: Changing Structures/Changing Needs." This workshop emphasized the gradual shift away from the nuclear family and the new needs and opportunities that have resulted.

Today, people are living longer, healthier lives; therefore, many families have older relatives as members of the household. Another factor that affects the nuclear family is the high divorce rate. An extended family consisting of step-parents and half-siblings is quickly becoming the norm in America today. In addition, the majority of women now hold full-time jobs and this causes a greater demand for day-care.

The broad range of issues and diversity of subject matter covered by the symposium reveals that there are indeed many "Pathways to the Future." Women must consider these choices carefully. ■

The twenty-fifth annual conference on leadership for women will be held at Southern Methodist University on March 6 and 7. Among the speakers are Cokie Roberts of National Public Radio and her husband, Steven, who is a journalist with *U.S. News & World Report*. Also slated are Gloria Randall Scott, President, Bennett College, and Patricia Diaz Dennis, former F.C.C. Commissioner.

The Dean of Students and the Chancellor pay expenses and registration fees for two undergraduate women who are selected by the women's center to attend. Since the conference falls during spring break at Vanderbilt, arrangements may be made for students to travel to and from their home towns.

Any junior, sophomore, or freshman woman who would like to attend should call or write to the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center for an application. Additional information about the conference will be made available to you at that time.

## MTWSA Celebrates 4th Anniversary

The Middle Tennessee Women's Studies Association, (MTWSA), will meet on January 27 to celebrate its fourth anniversary with a special program beginning at 10:00 a.m. at the Belmont Mansion, Belmont College. New members are invited to attend the luncheon meeting. Call Diane Eberhard, 322-8435, for information about reservations and dues.

The program will be presented by students enrolled in *Women in Nineteenth Century America*, a course team taught by Belmont college faculty members Corrine Dale and George Sim. Students will appear in costume impersonating nineteenth-century women.

MTWSA is composed of faculty, students, and staff from area colleges and universities who meet on Saturdays, eight times a year. Programs vary from presentations of papers to informal book discussions. Ayne C. Durham is Chair for 1989-90. ■



photo by Berenice Abbott, 1926

## Eileen Gray: Architect/Designer

Naomi E. Heiser  
Women's center librarian

Our library has recently augmented its "women and the arts" section with a beautifully illustrated book about the life and work of Eileen Gray (by Peter Adam, 1987). Gray (1878-1976) was born in Ireland, and moved to Paris at the turn of the century in order to be on the revolutionary edge of the art world.

The work of Eileen Gray has once again come under critical scrutiny in recent years. With the sale of one of her early lacquer screens for over \$36,000 in 1972 (and with the parallel rise in the popularity of Art Deco), her peculiar forward-looking designs have experienced a sort of cult revival.

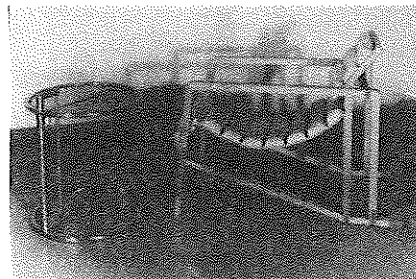
Because she was a person who desired privacy above all else, to the point of destroying most of her personal letters and photographs before her death, Gray is an elusive personality who can best be sought through her creative expression. Gray's work reveals her fierce individuality and her love of the new "modern" sensibility that emerged during the period between the two World Wars, a sensibility that particularly appealed to her ideals of practicality and simplicity of design.

Eileen Gray was certainly ahead of her time and was continually frustrated by the public's lack of response to her ideas. She began searching for ways to express herself when the French "were still mired in Nouveau" and seized upon decorative objects as an apt medium. It was the tasks of the craftsman that appealed to her, the attention to painstaking detail which lends itself to austerity of design.

Gray was originally fascinated with "precious" materials, such as ivory and exotic woods. The subtle

impact of these materials work *with and against* simplicity, contributing to a dynamism that subverts banality. It is this dynamism, this quality of animation that distinguishes Gray's work from that of the other "futurists" she knew and worked with. She refused to exclude the passionate, instead honing it into the symbolic line. The poverty of modern design, she said, "stems from the atrophy of sensuality. The art of the engineer is not enough if it is not guided by the primitive needs of [people]."

Her first exhibit of an entire room, a combination bedroom/boudoir was described by *Art et Décoration* magazine (1923) as being "comical and...abnormal. But it exudes an atmosphere and one cannot deny its harmony." Another critic, however, called it "maddening...the daughter of Caligari in all its horror" which revealed that indeed, the design world was not ready for Gray. She had provoked the public's resistance

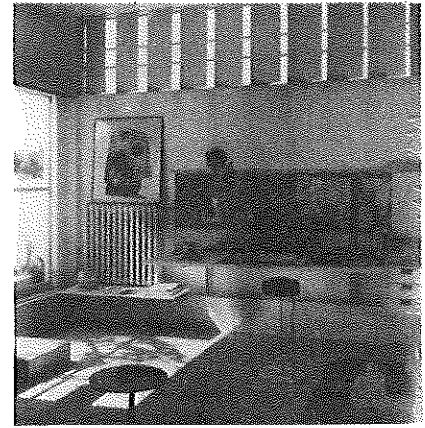


The Transat chair and E.1027 table

to what was perceived as the bleak and alienating qualities of minimalism.

Gray's progress from furniture and interior design to architecture was inevitable, as Gray's pieces had ultimately architectural qualities. She was never formally trained in architecture, yet she studiously followed the developments of her contemporaries, most notably Le Corbusier.

Importantly, Gray believed that interior space is of principal concern, and that surrounding architecture should be formulated to complement it. She emphasized this point by building objects, such as cabinets and headboards, *into* the architecture. As one critic said of her plans, "Lines of individual pieces are no longer frontiers; they extend into the lines of the whole. It is a richly realized totality of space [which is] organized through masses and zones in accor-



Gray's house, Tempe à Pailla

dance with a purely intellectual order." This order was premised on the contention that the *individual* should be the measuring unit of space.

When she was 54, Gray began building a house for herself on a particularly difficult location. She was intrigued with the problem it presented, and stated that she "wanted to create a dramatic dialogue between the home and its site." Her theories about environmental unity remained steady throughout her lifetime, leading her to criticize what she considered to be the assertion of idea at the expense of context in avant-garde architecture.

It is interesting to speculate on what it meant for Eileen Gray to be a woman in her field and in her time. Gray was not consciously involved in advocacy for women, and preferred to subscribe to the idea of "individual merit" as the primary critical viewpoint. Her guarded independence and reluctance to join "society" make it difficult to determine contextual effects. However, a comparison of her work to her male contemporaries reveals her desire to address something which they considered unimportant. This is what she loosely described as "instinct" or "heart".

One must ask why Eileen Gray, a woman who was internationally recognized for her work during her prime, was forgotten, even buried under mis-attributions, while her male counterparts remained in the public eye. It is true that she had no public relations skills and no sense of organization. Yet her work should stand on its own, most especially as an example of steadfast ingenuity. ■

# Announcements et cetera

**Rape and Sexual Abuse Center.** The center is looking for volunteers to work on their crisis line. A group of students will be starting the Rape and Sexual Abuse Center's training program in mid-January and are looking for more volunteers. If you are interested in working with this group, please contact Laura Warren (421-6225) or the Women's Center (322-4843).

**YWCA** will offer Assertiveness Skills training February 5,12,19,26. The instructor, Dr. Gloria Calhoun, a psychotherapist/management consultant, will help participants identify blocks to assertive behavior and develop assertiveness skills. Fee \$65. Time 7:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

In addition the YWCA's Winter Quarter offers a variety of Yoga classes. One of these is **Yoga and Yogurt**, a lunchtime alternative. This fun and fitness package includes a 45 minute workout including stretches, bends, and stamina-building routines to bring your body into a heightened state of well-being. Following the Yoga, yogurt will be served. This class will send you back to work full of energy instead of empty calories.

Seven Thursdays beginning January 25, 12:00 noon. Fee \$49. Instructor, Robbie Williams.

For more information or to register for these or other YWCA classes, call Suzanne Ezell at 269-9922.

**Women Helping Women Through Decisions.** Women volunteers (faculty, staff, and students) are needed for a course in positive decision-making and life-planning skills at the Tennessee Women's Prison. Would you work one-on-one with a prisoner/partner for an hour weekly during the 8-week course, February 5 to April 2? Volunteer training is scheduled for January 27-28. For information, call Candy Markman at 383-6393.

**Nashville NOW** is planning a signature ad in the Tennessean to demonstrate the majority's support for the right of women to choose abortion or childbirth.

The ad will say that "The Tennessee Constitution guarantees, in part, 'that no human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience.' We, the undersigned citizens of Tennessee; members of the clergy, the medical, legal, music, business, nursing, labor, services, education, and student communities, support the availability of legal and safe abortions for the women of Tennessee."

If you would like to be listed as a supporter, call Nashville NOW at 269-7141 for more information or send a \$10 check payable to "Choice Ad" and your printed name to Box 120523, Nashville, TN 37212.

**A Pro-choice Rally** will be held at noon on January 9 at Legislative Plaza, Sixth and Union Streets, sponsored by the Tennessee Alliance for Choice (composed of thirty-two pro-choice organizations). The rally is being held on the opening day of the Tennessee Legislature. For more information call 383-1979.

**Dissertation Writers** will accept new members for the Spring Semester. Women interested in joining the group may attend the initial meeting on January 17 at 4 p.m. or call the women's center for more information.

**Women's Faculty Organization** will hold a membership meeting January 26 at 4:00 p.m. in Godchaux Hall living room. Members should watch for an early January mailing. For more information contact Katharyn May at 322-2816. ■

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*"Virtue has its own reward, but no sale at the box office."*

*Mae West*

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Edited by JUDITH T. HELFER

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