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Aphrodite in Academia

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**Helen Haste Interview**

We’re interviewing Helen Haste, who is a professor emeritus at Bath in Bristol and is in the Education faculty at Harvard as a visitor since 2003. We wanted to ask you three questions, and you can choose which ones you’d like to respond to.

*First, what are your own experiences with gender equality? Second, what do you think universities can do to make things easier for women through institutional reform? Third, what are the things that women themselves can do that will inoculate them against the negative cultural cues that we all get? You can answer in whatever format you’d like.*

Well the first question was “Have I ever experienced gender inequality?” Are we talking about my whole life, so not just my post-school level?

*Anytime*.

When people ask me this, I go back to when I could first read, let’s say, nonfiction. But even when I could first read fiction, I very early on became aware, I guess around the age of eight or nine, that the generic human was male. Everything I read talked about “him,” and about boys and men. They talked about the human as being man, basically. Even when I was quite young, I felt a little irritated by this, and increasingly I think I began to feel really excluded. I was always feeling that I was a guest, a visitor, on the outskirts of the real things that were happening. And whatever I did, even though I was a pretty successful kid—I was a pretty bright kid—even though I was often top of the class, there was still a sense that there was a male world out there which I was “allowed” to be part of.

I say this even though my parents were very good. My parents were very much into the idea that both sexes can achieve, and my father and mother had expectations of all of us; I was the oldest. So there was nothing at home about this. But I had this early feeling of being excluded by virtue of the pronouns, basically: “him” and of course the use of “man.” We look back at that time and it really creaks if we read stuff before about 1970. In everything, in newspapers, in academic books, in non-academic books, there is this generic male person who is the human being. I hadn’t at that point quite teased out that by being a woman I was a not-man. In a sense, I was the antithesis of man. I was a bit older than that when I realized that not only was I excluded by the pronoun but that the qualities that I had and was *supposed* to have as a woman—both desirable in a woman but also just womanly qualities—were by definition the antithesis of man. Therefore I was a not-man. I was a thing that men didn’t want to be, a thing that men avoided. In order to be a man you had to not be a woman.

All the things I was being told I had to be as a woman were immediately excluding from things I wanted to be because that was a man’s world. I mean the obvious things are things like rational vs. intuitive. Intuition was not valued, emotion wasn’t valued, sensitivities to a whole variety of issues weren’t valued, and that sort of sense that the qualities that were admired in women—and I would’ve thought should be admired in humans—were often seen as undesirable to men and to be avoided by men. So that sense really extends into my teens.

As far as overt discrimination is concerned, I think there were subtle things I wasn’t really aware of at the time. Like, for example, in many situations—though actually not at my school—the head monitor, the chief prefect, would be a male, and the female would be a vice prefect. In fact in my school, we had a Head Boy and Head Girl, but we had a Headmaster and a Deputy Headmistress. That kind of thing conveyed the sense that women were the deputies or the secretaries, that women were not the leaders if there were men around. That was a “fact of life” I became very aware of in my teens. So I was living in a world whereby I was positioned, as a woman, as being different, other, less, and supposedly deferential to men. Now, on top of that of course I got all the messages that one got in the 50s about “Nice girls don’t do this, and nice girls don’t do that.” That was partly about being a “nice girl,” in other words being properly brought up and not being vulgar or common. Is that a common expression used in America? Meaning tarty, too much make-up, wrong kind of clothes, wrong social class?

*Yeah, I think it’s the same word, though not quite as strong.*

That was part of it. The other part of it was that we were supposed to be nice to boys, in other words not showing them up, not arguing with them, not disagreeing with them ever. Otherwise, part of not being nice was that you wouldn’t get a boyfriend. Boys didn’t like intelligent girls. So if you showed yourself to be intelligent, you were on the road to spinsterhood and loneliness and isolation and ridicule. There was one incident—a couple of incidents, actually—when I was about 15, and I was at a co-educational school, and I was noisy. Not noisy noisy, but I spoke up and didn’t hesitate to put my hand up and didn’t hesitate to express myself forcefully, or this that and the other. One of the girls in my class—and by the way, this is a top class, top stream, like an AP stream here, so these are very bright girls— one of them sidled up to me one day and said, “Helen, we wish you wouldn’t be quite so forceful in class,” and I asked why not, thinking they were thinking I’m a bit uppity or whatever. She said, “Well, if you’re so bright, the boys will think we’re all bright and they’ll be put off us.” So I was letting this side down by being too bright because boys might think girls could all be bright like me and this would be disastrous for their social life. I think at which point I threw my hands in the air and just expired. I didn’t stop talking in class, by the way. It’s kind of subtle, that discrimination. I have to say I don’t recall much in the way of very explicit discrimination at that point. But it was pervasive. The main thing was that it was so pervasive that it was like a fish in water. You don’t even notice it because you’re swimming in it and you don’t notice that the water is a distinctly murky color until you get out of it and say, “Hang on. That was a very muddy stream I was in.”

Now when I became an adult, I had the occasional experience of discrimination. In the social sciences, which I was in, there wasn’t so much a difference as there was in the natural sciences. I mean, at the time a few years ago now that all the fuss that then-President of Harvard Larry Summers made unfortunate remarks about women, what happened was very interesting. A lot of women, particularly women who were then late in their careers, who stood up and said, “Actually, it was pretty awful.” And some of the stories that I heard—these were from women only ten years older than me—things like, “Well, University X had twelve scholarships for doctoral students, and only one was allowed to be given to a woman.” This is in chemistry or something in the hard sciences. The woman in question had gotten the scholarship, but she said that even the interviewer had asked things like, “Well why are we giving this to you? Won’t you have babies and give up your career? Are you capable of being a doctoral student in chemistry?”

Well you heard this again and again throughout the whole summer after Larry Summers had done his unfortunate bit. I think these stories came from my generation, or actually from the generation ten years older than me. Women who’d come to adulthood in the 50s. I was still a teenager then. I didn’t experience that. I think there were subtle ways in which even in my generation—I was at college basically all through the 60s, so that’s my period of higher education---there was a sense in which male students were expected to do better. Not necessarily achieve better but do more. The whole thing then of course, when you get into your career as a professional academic, it’s publication, publication, publication. One of the constraints on this intensive workaholic world of the academy at that stage in your life is you’re probably going to start building a family. It’s really quite hard to be a true workaholic when you’re raising small kids. In those days, there was an expectation that women would not demand equal treatment.

Although I was quite fond of my husband while I was married to him, he never had the expectation that he would take equal babysitting roles. So, I signed off doing my degree in the sort of usual way at 18, and then I dropped out and went back when I had a small child. It never occurred to me or him—to me *or* him—that he should pick her up from school or nursery, or take her there, or be there when she was sick. He was a doctoral student; it was always me. And it wasn’t because he was particularly oppressive, it was just that this was the norm. So I did it. I organized my university, both undergraduate and post-graduate, around being the primary care-giver in terms of time spent with our daughter. Now again, I wouldn’t want to accuse my husband of being particularly sexist; he wasn’t. He was just of his time. And I accepted it. That’s the thing: I accepted it. That’s the real way it works, isn’t it? It’s not just that someone oppresses you externally, but you accept the role which you’re put into. And you say, “OK if I’m going to do this, to be a professional person in whatever form, I have to take an extra burden of doing it on top of my familial roles,” which also include cooking and shopping and washing and housework. I mean, he didn’t actually expect to do all those things. He did a bit, but not really. Again, I’m not blaming him; he’s just of his time.

Then the women’s movement came. Everything changed in the 70s when we all began to think very differently and we all began to get very angry…I think subsequently, later on in my career looking back, people said to me—by this time I was a well-entrenched, well-recognized, well-published feminist, and very active—somebody pointed out to me, “Why’d it take you so long to get promoted?” I said, “Well, I didn’t think it had taken me that long.” They said, “Well, look, compare yourself with him, him, and him.” That’s when it suddenly occurred to me that actually, quite subtly, I was being somewhat underprivileged, and I hadn’t noticed. That was the thing: I hadn’t noticed. It’s worrying: you don’t notice, you don’t realize until it’s called out to you. So I was fighting very strongly for everybody else’s equalities, certainly for my students, but in a sense it was a question of: was it a completely fair promotion in my institution? Were the opportunities equally open to both sexes? Now psychology is one of the fields where there has been pretty much equality in the sense that there were more undergraduates majoring in psychology, even then and certainly now, who are female than there are males. In biology it’s equal numbers roughly speaking, still. In math it’s about 2/3 to 1/3 male to female. This is in Britain; I don’t know about here. In physics of course it’s much more skewed towards males. When you get into the humanities and of course it goes the other way again; there are more females than males. But within psychology, there should—on the basis of undergraduate distribution—there should be equal numbers of male and female professors. There are not. So I’ll go back to the promotion thing, just to give you a figure. When I was promoted to full professor in Britain—full professor doesn’t match because you have in this country, assistant, associate, and full professor. But about a third of academics are full professors. Is that right?

*No… I think if you put in lecturers and instructors it would be more like a fourth.*

A fourth. Okay, but it’s between a fourth and a third.

*It’s no more than a third.*

Yes, but it’s certainly no less than a quarter. All right. Now, in Britain, the system is slightly different because there are fewer full professors. I’ve forgotten the exact ratio, but I think one in eight academics were full professors, rather than one in four or one in three here. So the promotion point is staked higher, basically. There were about one in 12 lecturers who were female. So, eight times 12 is 96. Now that meant that when I became a British professor, which is more senior than an American full professor because it’s further along the line, when we talk about the proportion of people making it to that grade, one in 100 women in the academy in Britain were like me, full professors. And that was 1997, by the way. It has changed, but I think the American system may be a bit better. So again, person’s accumulation, I’m not sure, but if you look at the figures there’s certainly a considerable inequality, particularly at the higher levels. It’s true in business, too: how many CEOs are women? How many people in top industrial or administrative posts are female?

*It’s about 5%.*

 Yeah, just about 5%. Right around the same as the academy… I can go on lots of endless anecdotes about social aspects of discrimination. There’s a lovely story I love telling. As I said, I was a fairly outspoken young woman; it hasn’t gone away. I’d been at a party, and I was about 19, and there was this really gorgeous guy; he was really lovely, beautiful. I thought, “Wow, lovely.” He was in physics and for some reason we got into a discussion with something to do in the history of physics, which I didn’t know much about but I was talking about it anyway. But I was having a serious conversation with him, and after about 10 minutes he said, “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a conversation like this?” I thought, “What?” And it goes back to that idea that nice girls don’t look intelligent. He was so surprised that a woman could actually talk about something as ‘complicated’ as some historical issue in physics. Anyway, I decided he wasn’t gorgeous any longer. But that kind of thing happened a lot… So that was I guess the first question, which I think I’ve comprehensively answered. What’s the second question again?

*What policies would you like institutions to adopt that would open things up and make them better for women, and give them more opportunities?*

I do have to say that things have vastly improved. I think my stories tell that. The world I described back in the 70s when I was beginning my career was very, very different… Let me just add a story from my research to the first part, because I think it’s kind of relevant. I mean, I haven’t explained to you how I got into the women’s movement, what fired me politically, which might be quite interesting. \*\*\*\*stopped 19:09\*\*\*