Feminism embraces tribalism

Much as we lament the triumph of political correctness in academia, we must admit that it has done wonders to keep everyone’s sense of amazement well exercised. The latest challenge to credibility comes to us from that creaky bastion of academic orthodoxy, The Chronicle of Higher Education. In its issue for October 12, the Chronicle published a brief essay called “White Feminists Who Study Black Writers” in its “Point of View” department. Written by Katherine J. Mayberry, an associate professor of language and literature at the Rochester Institute of Technology, this specimen of feminist-cum-racial handwringing will, we think, test the capacity for amazement of even the most experienced connoisseurs of academic demagoguery. Had the essay been published on April 1st, we might have suspected a joke. Appearing when it did, however, we reluctantly conclude that both Professor Mayberry and the editors of The Chronicle of Higher Education intended this blunt compendium of PC sentimentality in earnest.

It is an extraordinary document. Professor Mayberry begins by noting that the practice of feminist scholarship, which was born of a radical political movement, is often more than a strictly academic undertaking. Readers of The New Criterion will not be surprised to learn that, on this point at least, we wholeheartedly agree with Professor Mayberry; indeed, we have often had occasion to make a similar observation ourselves. What goes under the name of feminist scholarship, we have argued, is typically more about feminism than scholarship. That is to say, women’s studies programs and almost everything else that proceeds under the aegis of feminism in the academy are essentially political, not scholarly, enterprises, and as such have no place in the college curriculum.

Needless to say, this is not the conclusion at which Professor Mayberry arrives. As her article makes clear, she, like so many of her colleagues, regards politics as the raison d’être of her professional life. But this is only business as usual in the academy today. What sets Professor Mayberry’s essay apart is not so much the presence of politics as the collision of two competing politics: specifically, the collision of feminist and racial politics.

Professor Mayberry’s ruminations were occasioned by an event that took place recently at an academic conference she attended. As part of a panel on African-American literature, she was to present a paper on Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved (a book that, she later suggests, implicates us all in racism). It happened that all the participants in that panel, except the moderator, were
white women. The moderator, a black woman, introduced the other participants and then announced her intention of leaving the room because she was uncomfortable with the appropriation by white women of literature written by blacks. Professor Mayberry writes: "She had come to the panel to hear black women talk about black writers, she said, and nothing that white women had to say on the subject could be of any use or interest to her." The moderator and the majority of black women in the audience then left; the session was canceled by the conference coordinator (another white woman, Professor Mayberry informs us), who suggested that the allotted time be used to discuss the difficult issues of cultural appropriation and racism within feminism.

Professor Mayberry admits that her first reaction to this event was shocked indignation: "Before ever being heard, the voices of the three presenters had been judged, silenced, and dismissed solely on the ground of race." Later, however, she experienced a wave of culpability for her failure to have considered the cruel ironies of a middle-class white woman professing to explain and to interpret a powerful slave narrative. Citing the ruthlessly reductive book about slaves that a fictional slave-owner writes in *Beloved*, Professor Mayberry concludes that it now seems to me that any white scholar writing about a work by a black writer may come perilously close to such reductiveness.

Indeed Professor Mayberry goes further, lamenting that, as critics, we are still in the business of controlling, organizing, and interpreting texts. Applied to mainstream works, she suggests, the effort to control, organize, and interpret literature leads at best to oversimplification; applied to works by marginal cultures, such criticism risks becoming a species of patronizing appropriation. Professor Mayberry implicates her graduate-school training in this indictment. Having been taught the tricks of textual mastery, she sadly acknowledges that, for many academic critics, it doesn't much matter what we write about, as long as we do it deftly and idiomatically. It is a small step from this position to one of assuming that, armed with the right code, we can write about anything, including those works that emerge from a history already deeply scarred by the arrogance of the privileged. Professor Mayberry concludes by calling for a revolution in academic criticism—or at least in feminist academic criticism. She wants to do away with criticism that seeks merely to interpret or explain a work of literature, in order to encourage more authentic responses that acknowledge, for example, racism and the divisive relationship of white, middle-class feminism and black experience.

In other words, Professor Mayberry wishes to reduce criticism to a species of ideological accommodation. By seeking to replace accuracy with authenticity as the goal of criticism, she seeks to replace a publicly accessible criterion of judgment with something inscrutibly subjective. Like many academics today, she confuses the issue by recasting the notion of independent criticism into a political melodrama where the goal is not so much understanding as expiation. This is one reason that words like power, control, and oppression loom so large in her verbal demonology. For Professor Mayberry, the ideal of objective truth is indistinguishable from political subjugation: hence the traditional goals of scholarship—responsible interpretation and explanation—must give way to the mysticism of an authentic response in which one's sex or race or
ethnic origin determines the nature of one's access to knowledge. Professor Mayberry is quite right to take exception to the idea that armed with the right code, we can write about anything. This 
technique, fostered especially by deconstruction and post-structuralist criticism, is a recipe for intellectual frivolity. But the legitimate alternative is careful interpretation and a respect for factual truth, not a descent into the new tribalism demanded by political correctness.