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## The 150 Women Project - Holding Series

### Title

From the founding of the Department of the Comparative Literature through the 1970s:

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## *150W Comparative Literature*

*From the founding of the Department of the Comparative Literature through the 1970s:*

*I went to Columbia University in the late 1950s for my Ph.D. because it offered a rigorous program in Comparative Literature, located in the English Department and demanding fulfillment of all requirements for the Ph.D. in English, plus proficiency in three other literatures in the period of specialization (in my case the Renaissance). The Chair of the English Department was Marjorie Hope Nicholson; there were other women on the faculty, of whom I remember only Alice Fredman and Susan Nobbe, and about a third or maybe half the graduate students were women. I don't know how many women finished their degrees, but I know that my friends Susan Snyder, Blossom Rappaport and Joan Ferrante did, then proceeding to positions on university faculties. At that time, although there were no laws requiring it, many American universities wished to add women to their faculties, especially in the humanities; qualified women had little difficulty finding positions but there were many fewer qualified women then than there were later on.*

*My motivation for coming to Berkeley in the mid-1960s was partly its principle of faculty governance, but still more its unique department (not merely a program) of Comparative Literature designed by Alain Renoir, in which both undergraduate and graduate degrees were offered and the faculty all held joint appointments in another department, ensuring competence in more than one literature while offering students the possibility of earning degrees with combinations not necessarily Anglo-based.*

*The founding of the department was only one of several enlightened initiatives of Comparative Literature in Renoir's time, some less successful than others. A number of students, male and female, completed the M.A. and wanted to teach but didn't want to proceed to the Ph.D. With the idealistic hope of improving instruction in the public schools by providing the state with well-trained teachers of literature, the Comparative Literature Department proposed a Master of Teaching degree in collaboration with the School of Education. The School regarded this as an invasion and the proposal died.*

*When I came to the department there was only one other woman on the faculty, Janette Richardson. A few years later she became Chair of the department. Both of us had been unstintingly welcomed by the male faculty that invited us. Neither had had to fight to be accepted. I concurred in the departmental policy of treating male and female students equally and avoided contributing to segregated female enclaves or to proposals of curriculum changes substituting political or self-help texts for literary ones. In the 1970s among my female students there were some who campaigned for a special women's caucus and others in the same classes who rejected the idea as retrogressive, but they cooperated with each other in seminar discussions of the works of Renaissance women writers and some of them produced fine papers on the subject.*

*According to my roll-books from those years, there were slightly more women undergraduates than men and half-and-half women and men graduate students. More men than women completed their Ph.D.s. Not unlike most of their mothers' generation, many women I encountered then were primarily interested in cultural enrichment and perhaps in holding jobs after graduation as a preliminary phase before establishing families. In time I witnessed growing interest in finishing*

*advanced degrees and pursuing careers, as more women joined the Comparative Literature faculty and more women finished Ph.D.s.*

*During the 1970s the Dean of Humanities was Anne Kilmer, and the Comparative Literature faculty was augmented by Florence Verducci, Barbara Korpan, Chana Kronfeld and Francine Masiello. Today there is a total faculty of 21, of which 11 are women. The graduate students of that period who completed Ph.D.s were numerous: Françoise Meltzer, Karen Newman, Page Du Bois come to mind, but there were many others who likewise went on to distinguished careers at other universities. Some are now retired, which shows how old my memories are.*

*When a majority of women wanted degrees and careers, they achieved them in increasing numbers. I've observed that women usually get what they want, but it requires time and a majority to want it, as history shows. History, after all, is the basis of all the humanities, as mathematics is of the sciences.*

Louise George Clubb, Professor Emeritus of Italian Studies and Comparative Literature