Vassar Answers Nancy Fellers

"God and Woman at Vassar" by Nancy Jane Fellers, published in the Freeman for November 3, has attracted wide attention. On page 177 we print some of the letters on the article, which are overwhelmingly in sympathy with Miss Fellers. The editorial, "Let the Campus Listen," in our issue of November 17, reported the story of another student's "run-in with a McLiberal English Department."

In rebuttal to Miss Fellers's article, we publish herewith a letter from Professor Lockwood and an editorial from the Vassar Chronicle, printed at the request of its editor-in-chief, Miss Mary Musser—together with John Chamberlain's letter replying to Miss Musser, and Miss Fellers's answer to the charges made against her.

Failure at Vassar

(From the *Vassar Chronicle,* November 1, 1952)

Nancy Jane Fellers, who was a student at Vassar during her junior year and half of her senior year, has written an article for the November 3 issue of the *Freeman,* describing the circumstances of her withdrawal from Vassar. Nancy transferred to Vassar from Earlham College in Indiana, where she returned after her period at Vassar and from which she was graduated in 1952. In the *Freeman,* a magazine which describes itself as "an individualistic, traditional fortnightly review that [swims] resolutely against the currents of fashionable 'liberalism'," Nancy says:

> My experience at Vassar was not a case of personalities, of likes or dislikes. It was the clash of two forces diametrically opposed to one another, even as they are in the world.

This is a very grave charge. No one denies that there are two forces struggling in the world today, and if, as Nancy feels, her departure from Vassar was a victory for the forces that would destroy democracy as we know it, then Vassar has failed in its task of offering us a liberal education. A liberal education is one which frees the mind to examine values and ideals and to choose among them. No valid ideal can be harmed by dispassionate examination, and a mind which refuses to consider its traditional ideals is not free.

Whose Fault?

We feel that Nancy Fellers's case is a failure in education. Whose fault the failure is can be determined only from the evidence. There is an alarming tendency in the United States today to blame errors on an outside force. Perhaps the most obvious champion of this theory is Senator McCarthy. He would absolve the people of the United States, who have prided ourselves on accepting the responsibility for our own actions, from any share in the mistakes this country made in China or in Germany. Instead, he blames a vast conspiracy of outsiders, although he has so far failed to give us any evidence of this conspiracy.

On December 11, 1951, Nancy says, she was first told she might not get through Vassar. She wrote to her parents: "Frankly, I suspect a plot. . . ." Nancy's chief difficulty was with Contemporary Press, a course in which students are expected to try to evaluate objectively the currents of thought in American journalism today. The first assignment was a paper stating the student's basic values. Nancy wrote:

> I believe in God, Human Dignity, and the United States of America. Next June I shall believe in God, Human Dignity, and the United States of America.

This statement, in spite of its very admirable sentiments, is revealing in two ways. First, it declares blandly that the author has closed her mind to any possibility of change. No one, of course, will deny that these beliefs are very commendable, but in every human ideal there is room for growth. In the second place, Nancy has used three very general terms which she has not defined. What does "Human Dignity" mean? From her other examples of her class work, we do not think that Nancy formulated clear definitions for the generalizations she used.

Subversive Doctrines

One of her examples of the false ideology she was taught is:

> Miss Lockwood showed an extraordinary preoccupation with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. She paid it great tribute. She did not seem at all concerned that the Declaration might supersede the Constitution of the United States.

Is there any reason why the Declaration might supersede the Constitution? Is there any point in the Declaration which conflicts with the Constitution? If there is, we do not know of it, and Nancy has failed to point it out.

She also wrote:

> It is curious that *Fortune,* a magazine supported by the principles of a capitalistic society, would perpetuate an internationalist theory which may destroy the tenets of that society. Self-annihilation is the paradox of our age.

Why will internationalism destroy capitalism? There is a total lack of logic in that statement.

The misstatements in her account of the actual events of her withdrawal from Vassar are further evidence that she was incapable of objectivity. Nancy says that Miss Lockwood refused to give her an examination in Contemporary Press. There is never an examination in Contemporary Press, and students now in the course can certify that the material is such that an examination would be of no value. Nancy says that she was refused permission to take a special examination in geology. Page 6 of the Student Handbook of Vassar College says in italics: *No special examinations may be given at the request of individual students.* There are several other instances in which Nancy has implied that the standard academic procedure of the college was part of a plot against her. The new handbook has clarified that procedure, on pages 5 through 9; copies are available for all students. In cases where this statement is obscure, or where students feel that the procedure should be changed, the *Chronicle* will see that letters from its readers are brought to the attention of the proper administrative office.

The only exceptions to standard academic procedure were those made in Nancy's favor. She says that she was not told she was failing Contemporary Press. There is no official method of telling a student she is failing a course. The official communication is issued on her report card. However, by Nancy's own account, she had a number of interviews with her instructor in which her work was rather severely criticized. She also, presumably at the instructor's invitation, rewrote two papers three times and one paper four times. Most students in a similar position would realize they were doing badly in the course.

The administration does not seem to have been unconcerned about her. Nancy apparently saw a good deal of Dean Tait and of President Blanding. She told them, when she learned she was failing Contemporary Press, that she wanted to return to Earlham. Nancy had every opportunity to stay at Vassar, but if she had done so she would not have graduated in June with her class. This was because her credit ratio, which just barely met the graduation requirement of 2.0, would be lowered by her failure in Contemporary Press, and also because she would not have enough points for graduation. Cases like this have occurred before, and, as in Nancy's case, the college has permitted the student to receive her degree from Vassar after a summer course. Nancy, however, preferred to re-transfer to Earlham, from which she could graduate in June. Since no college will accept a student with a failure on her record, Vassar offered to remove Nancy's F. She writes:

> In my opinion this was not lenience; it was plain dishonesty. If the F was fair, it belonged in my record. By wiping off the course "as if I had never taken it," the administration admitted that my failure was the result of Miss Lockwood's unobjective marking.

Nevertheless, Nancy apparently accepted the erasure of the F and went back to Earlham.

From the evidence in her article, and from her record at Vassar, Nancy's failure would seem to have been the result of academic incompetence. The brief resumé of the first three years of Nancy's college career given at the beginning of the article does not make it clear that her lowest marks were received during her year at Vassar. Our standards are high, and many transfer students find that the marks they receive here, at least at first, are lower than the marks they have formerly received. In Nancy's case, her difficulties were further complicated by a conviction of persecution. The *Freeman,* in publishing her story without checking the facts, has done a disservice to the cause of education in a democracy, and has confirmed the reputation for irresponsible reactionism the magazine earned by its defense of Senator McCarthy and its attack on the United Nations.

There is a larger question: is there a possibility that a competent student would be failed because of political disagreement with the faculty? Nancy Fellers's case is scarcely evidence for this, and the *Chronicle* has not seen any basis for the *Freeman's* claim of a reign of terror against conservatives in college. The *Chronicle* printed Nancy's two letters disagreeing with our editorial stand on General MacArthur and on William Buckley, and we will continue to print any expressions of political beliefs we receive from our readers. There has never been any attempt at censorship of our editorial policy by the college, and this paper would resist vigorously if there ever were such an attempt.

If any student can present evidence that her political convictions have caused her marks to be lowered, or that she has been denied an opportunity to express her viewpoint when such an opportunity was granted to someone else, the *Chronicle* guarantees its full editorial support for a thorough investigation of the case.

Mr. Chamberlain's Letter

Thank you very much for sending us that editorial from the *Vassar Chronicle.* We will run it in our issue for December 1.

Though the *Freeman* may seem arbitrary to you at times, our main idea is to get certain things ventilated that have been hidden from public view lo! these many years. By all means we want both sides of every controversy to be thoroughly aired.

Since you have had at us with a bare blade, we would like to fence back a bit. You say you know of no point at which the UN Declaration of Human Rights might supersede the Constitution of the United States. I am sending you a copy of two articles from the *Freeman* bearing on this: one by Senator Bricker and the other by Joseph Ballew. I am also sending you a reprint of a review-article