

Professor Germaine Greer

The degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) was conferred upon Professor Germaine Greer at the Arts ceremony held at 2.00pm on 4 November 2005.



Professor Greer giving the occasional address after conferral of her honorary degree, *photo, courtesy University of Sydney Publications.*

Citation

Pro-Chancellor, I present Germaine Greer for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa. Germaine Greer is one of the most influential feminist thinkers of our time. Perhaps no other Sydney University graduate – male or female – has more pervasively and persuasively influenced lives in the western world through the sheer dissonant power of dissenting ideas.

'The Female Eunuch', first published in 1970, was 'a call to arms'. It condemned 'gender-encoded norms' and society's expectations that women should live vicariously through men. It caused a sensation in Britain, the United States and Australia, and thereafter was forever being reprinted and translated.

Today's graduands may find it difficult to comprehend that 'The Female Eunuch' was written when there were official differentials in male and female pay-scales, when banks would not lend to women without a male guarantor, and when women comprised an unwholesome low fraction of students at Sydney University.

Professor Greer asked the kind of off-beat fundamental questions which it is the proper role of a university training to provoke. Her answers frequently infuriated. She has not always been praised for consistency. But was Ralph Waldo Emerson correct to say that 'consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds'?

Germaine Greer was educated at the Universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Cambridge. She has been Professor of English at The University of Warwick, and a Fellow of Newnham College, University of Cambridge.

As a postgraduate, she became immersed in Sydney University review and theatre culture – then a vibrant milieu which nurtured the likes of Clive James, Bruce Beresford and John Bell. In 1963 she played the title role in Brecht's 'Mother Courage' in the then new Union Theatre, now the Footbridge Theatre.

Indeed Clive James and Germaine Greer were fellow students in the same small English tutorial group. It is reliably reported that no-one else could get a word in edgeways. Little wonder that Cambridge Footlights, that famous student review company, lists its two stars of 1967 as Germaine Greer and Clive James, still life-long friends and accomplices.

These are no inconsequential anecdotes. They illustrate the profound synergy which exists between classroom education and extracurricular activity in fostering the creativity and enduring relationships at the heart of our university's vocation and its contribution to society. It is a synergy which our Government is in danger of forgetting.

Greer holds no truck with authority. She was part of an anarchic counter-culture at Sydney University. She is a vehement opponent of women who ape men and join their hierarchies to become 'sisters in suits'. 'If women can see no future apart from joining masculine elite on its own terms, our civilization will become more destructive than ever'.

Professor Greer has built on the work of earlier feminists, perhaps most especially Virginia Woolf, just as twenty-first century feminists now build on Greer's. It was Woolf who asked that awful question of why 'Shakespeare's sister' produced no great plays or poetry. It is Greer who chronicles the minor role of women poets in 'Slipshod Sybils. Recognition, Rejection and The Woman Poet'. And in 'The Obstacle Race', an anthology of female artists, Greer asks 'If men and women are equally capable of genius, why has there been no female Leonardo, no Titian, no Poussin?' Perhaps, thanks to Greer's influence, there is a 'Judith Shakespeare' graduating today. For all their popular impact, Germaine Greer's writings are seriously academic and meticulously researched.

She may be contrary, assertive, sometimes even not entirely diplomatic – but also questioning, original, revolutionary and deeply intellectual - quintessentially Sydney University.

Welcome back.

Pro-Chancellor, I have the honour to present Germaine Greer for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa and I invite you to confer the degree upon her.