

OUTSIDE THE SQUARE

Ars gratia artis and the morgannatic marriage: ‘Let us not to the marriage of true minds...’

R. K. A. ALLEN

Private Practice, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

As a young boy, I, with my mates, used to queue up at the local Clayfield picture theatre every Saturday afternoon. Those days were the days when a ‘zack’ was a sixpence, admission was a shilling and a feast of lollies was tuppence. Unlike today, the flicks always had a trailer before the main feature preceded by the black and white Movietone News. We waited expectantly for the MGM lion to roar as the curtain drew back. Under the lion was the motto ‘Ars gratia artis’, which long sticks in my memory because years later I studied the so-called dead Latin language at school. ‘Art for art’s sake’, which brings me to the reason for this preamble. The succinct language of Ovid and Virgil, which was the source of such painstaking scholarship in my adolescence, captures an ideal that brings me to university teaching and teaching for the love of it.

When I was working as a staff physician in the public hospital system for many years, I applied for the university title of ‘Clinical Associate Professor, University of Queensland’. After submitting my burgeoning curriculum vitae (yes, Latin has its uses), I duly received this lofty title, which bestowed on me and my family the prestige of ersatz academia with which the unwitting public and lawyers would be impressed (I do medicolegal work for unsuspecting victims of asbestos and other noxious mineral dusts).

For years I taught and examined both undergraduate and postgraduate students gratis, in the true tradition of *Ars gratia artis*, for medicine in my opinion is still more an art than a science. The university used to send me forms to fill in every year to list my annual publications, that libation to the god of academia by which good omens and healthy chicken livers foretold

the next year’s fiscal harvest. At the bottom was a section where I had to outline the assistance given by the august body; a sort of ‘mentioned in dispatches’.

About 10 years later, when in full-time private practice, I developed the urge to immortalize my name in academic print by submitting for publication some papers I had managed to write between private patients and the intrusions of human misery. I was by this time teaching students in my private rooms, because the private hospital to which I am attached has become wedded to the university as a teaching hospital. On the day of an official ceremony unveiling the plaque at the hospital as a teaching institution, I happened to chat with some of the real academics at the hallowed assembly who enquired about my university email address. Bewildered, I admitted that I had never heard of such a preposterous notion. However, they had planted in my mind the seeds of discontent and, like the Boston Tea Party, this was to initiate the discontent that precipitated this article.

A few weeks later, after my excited phone calls, I was told that I would be given a university email address gratis. I waited and waited and to this day nothing has eventuated. To add insult to injury, I rang the university librarian to see if I could obtain a software program for bibliographies to facilitate my writing papers, that gold standard currency of this terra incognita (for me), which regards mere clinical tutoring as a sort of mindless babble clinicians engage in to move their protégés up the academic ziggurat to the final sacrificial pedestal dedicated to the god of the laurel leaf and to the strains of *Gaudeamus igitur*. The librarian abruptly asked me if I was a staff member and what was my staff number. Indignant, I became apoplectic to the point of precipitating a lacunar infarct in my internal capsule until I finally regained my composure and sky-rocketing blood pressure and retorted that I had been teaching and examining medical students since before swipe cards

Correspondence to: Sometime Clinical Associate Professor Roger K. A. Allen, Suite 299, St Andrew’s Place, 33 North Street, Spring Hill, QLD 4000, Australia. Email: rogerallen@ozemail.com.au

Received 25 June 2001; accepted 26 June 2001.

and bar codes were invented and that I was, wait for it, a Clinical Associate Professor of the University of Queensland. The librarian who sounded younger than some of my amalgams (or more correctly, amalga), replied that if I did not have a staff card I could not obtain access to the library or the university's library searches by email or even park on the premises. I was speechless and it took me some time to determine whether my Broca's area had infarcted or not. What a slap in the face. After some weeks of my largely fruitless entreaties, I managed to obtain a licenced version of EndNote, a bibliography program from my unfaithful alma mater who had so hurtfully spurned me. This was a real coup, a verum corpus. The reader will be enthralled to notice my indulgent use of Latin, but I have largely spared him/her (to be politically correct and gender neutral) from French, my other love with which I persecute my family.

This brings me to the morganatic marriage. For those of you well versed in the shenanigans of the House of Windsor, formerly Battenberg before those nasty battles around the Somme, a morganatic marriage is one where the offspring of the wedded union have no legitimacy or inheritance. Mrs Simpson fortunately was childless to Edward VIII. I went through my dusty filing cabinets looking for my appointment letter from the University of Queensland about 10 years ago and read my application and extant curriculum vitae. There were pages of small print in the document outlining my duties and responsibilities; however, as hard as I looked, I could not see any mention on the marriage certificate of the responsibilities and obligations of the spouse. I had married a cad! No mention of spousal maintenance or of any moral obligations to keep the bride fecund and 'purry' by showering her with gifts or even the annual anniversary flowers routine that keeps marriage from going stale. Even ladies of the night are paid after services rendered. I felt like a tart. But, as Virgil bravely said, 'Varium et mutabile, semper femina', or 'Women are fickle and forever changing', later popularized by the aria 'La donn'è mobile' in Act 3 of Verdi's opera, *Rigoletto*.

I was unable to share my feelings of being jilted with other Clinical Associate Spouses, because the communications with me from the university had always been one way. There was no real prostitutes' cooperative in Brisbane through which I could form an action group. That is why I fell back on my old

guild that has its roots in early Renaissance Europe, the Royal Australasian College of Physic and Black Bile, not to be confused with that lower class blood-letting Barbers Guild.

Our ever-threatened craft group is, to change metaphors and provide an Australian allusion, the very bedrock to which I cling, like a soft coral polyp enjoying a symbiotic relationship with my algal patients. I bask in the warm currents of commerce and pathology while the hostile cheeky parrot fish of health insurance funds and the Health Insurance Commission occasionally take irreverent hunks of coral in their beaks and more predatory gropers and reef shark politicians and health ministers lurk not far off in the sinister abyssal depths beyond.

To return to the former metaphor, because the medical schools of Australian universities receive enormous benefits from this unequal marriage, I believe that it is time that overworked housewives like me start to receive more than just the title of 'Associate Mrs'. We should be taken out sometimes and given some treats, such as email access to university libraries paid by the universities, car parking stickers so we can park near the library when we are battling with clinical demands, access to software such as EndNote, information about the students we have come to our rooms and feedback about their performance, provision of information about the university hierarchy and addresses and involvement at a local level about university activities on at a time that a busy clinician can get to.

These initiatives would not cost much, particularly as approximately 10 years ago I used to be paid for tutoring students. For my secretary to help me write and have a paper published would cost me personally many hundreds of dollars, if not thousands, as well as down time from my ever-pressing clinical and administrative demands. It is for that reason that I think the universities are outrageous to ask us to acknowledge them in the papers that we write unassisted for the love of it (*Ars gratia artis*). Perhaps the University of Queensland should have as its motto 'Universitas gratia gratis' or 'The University runs for nix'; or, judging by the amount of hot air issuing forth from the University Senate, 'Universitas gratia flatus'. To quote the great bard: 'Let us not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments'.