Summer 1981

Women, Literature and the Humanities: A Reply to Carolyn Lougee

Christine Froula
Adrienne Munich

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/529

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Women, Literature and the Humanities: A Reply to Carolyn Lougee

by Christine Froula and Adrienne Munich

We share Carolyn Lougee's goal ("Women, History, and the Humanities," Women's Studies Quarterly, Spring 1981) of a required "gender-balanced" course in Western Culture and Civilization which broadens the traditional conception of the humanities to consider women's contribution to and place in our cultural heritage. We would like, however, to offer a different conception of what such a course might be. While Lougee addresses the question from the point of view of "the opportunities that curricular revision opens to historians," ours is a literary perspective, from which the issues appear in a different light. In the University of Chicago curriculum, which Lougee cites as one model for the Stanford Western Culture Program, the required Western Civilization course is distinct from the freshman Humanities course. Lougee's assumptions seem to us better suited to the revision of the former than the latter. Since the Stanford course she describes apparently combines the aims and readings of both, we propose to balance her assumptions about reading texts as history with the very different assumptions informing a literary perspective.

While we agree with Lougee about the importance of recovering the lost documents, or "voices," of women in history, we wish to argue against her conception of the traditional literary canon as a collection which offers only "three thousand years of misogyny." We would willingly make room for the women troubadours, transcripts of witch trials, declarations de grossesse, and the writings of Christine de Pisan in the humanities curriculum; but we hope to establish here the equal importance of learning to read the literary classics of the Western tradition from a feminist perspective. Despite the fact that, before the last 200 years, few women were writers, women's presence in our literature is far from negligible, far from predictable, and far, we think, from understood. Much of the great literature of our tradition has expressed not only women's anguish but the unresolved tensions created by the inherently unstable hierarchic relation of male and female. These texts, we would argue, belong to us too; they are women's history in ways which we are only beginning to see, understand, and appreciate. For if, as Lougee says, women are largely absent in history-based Western Civilization courses, in Western Literature courses it would be difficult to escape them. The year-long freshman literature course which we teach at Yale, called "The European Tradition," begins with Homer and the Bible and proceeds through such texts as The Bacchae, Oedipus Rex, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Phèdre, Hedda Gabler, the Inferno, and The Aeneid, to end with Joyce's Ulysses. All these texts abound with women, and most have themes of love and sexuality at their very core. Although none is written by a woman, almost all of them are about women as much as men. Unlike historical texts, which tend to focus exclusively on the public, male domain, and unlike philosophy, which has a history of denying, devaluing, and suppressing the female, literary texts carry the imaginative life of the whole culture. They do not restrict themselves to the public arena: witness Penelope's subtle, ceaseless weaving and unweaving, Clytemnestra's domestic rearrangements, Hedda Gabler's parlor games, Phèdre's confidences to her nurse. Nor do such heroes as Orestes, Agamemnon, Don Quixote, and Leopold Bloom by any stretch of the imagination "celebrate," as Lougee says, "a unitary image to which all should aspire to conform: that of the cultivated, educated gentleman." Finally, it would be mistaken to think that any of these texts holds its place in the Western tradition by virtue of formal excellence—perfection as drama, as poem, or as novel. Their cultural importance could never be guaranteed by their form and style alone; rather, they are "classics" because they embody the working myths of our culture. They project the collective imagination, an imagination which has always been, and continues to be, preoccupied not with simple misogyny but with the tensions inherent in a patriarchal attempt to suppress, repress, and deny women.

While historical and philosophical texts may tend to be "relentlessly male," we would be mistaken to identify the "gender" of a literary text with that of its author. Virginia Woolf's perception that the great writer's imagination is "incandescent," and "androgynous"—qualities of freedom which historically have come more easily to the male writer who is not oppressed by his
culture than to the female—implies not only that the male author’s text transcends his personal being but also that Aeschylus’ or Homer’s sisters would rarely have had a chance to develop the imaginative powers of their brothers. That we are interested in whatever texts these sisters did produce must not prevent us from learning to use the texts which we already have, and more important, learning to teach both our students and our colleagues that the analysis of the presence of women in these texts is not a special interest or a subordinate theme to be given dutiful attention. While Lougee writes that the most we can find in the Great Works reading list is “the extent to which male authors asserted or implied female inferiority, how flawed their understanding of women’s lot, and real women themselves often was,” we find, on the contrary, that these texts often show a more profound and sympathetic grasp of women’s oppression than many of us have today. If it is true that some women have gone beyond what these texts have to tell us, it is also true that most of our students have not.

Let’s return, as an example, to our course in the European literary tradition. Since this course moves at a pace which challenges student and teacher alike, we sometimes find it necessary in our staff meetings to discuss the least damaging omissions a teacher might make in the syllabus. The first cut suggested in the past has been the last two plays of Aeschylus’ trilogy, The Oresteia, a text which lays a crucial groundwork for analyzing the structure and the symbolic rationale underlying our patriarchal culture. That this cut could even be suggested shows a blindness to the significance of the trilogy. Aeschylus reveals female values subverted and female fury transformed into “nice ladies”—Eumenides. By offering one myth of the origins of patriarchy and women’s relegation to the private sphere, The Oresteia helps students both to grasp the arbitrary nature of inherited social structures and to imagine a different future.

Similarly, the suggested cuts for Don Quixote include the episode of the irresistibly beautiful Marcela, who makes an eloquent—and fascinating—defense of her right to live alone and free. Whether any real Spanish woman of Cervantes’ time ever spoke Marcela’s speech, she did not (or could not) publish it, for we find it only in Cervantes’ text. But its status as literature rather than history does not make it any less true. Nor does it show “man thinking and woman being thought about.” Might not Marcela’s declaration of independence, even though fictional and male-authored, show “woman thinking” as well as Christine de Pisan’s historically true lament that she was not born a man? Penelope weeping, Teresa Panza resisting, Electra silent, Jocasta trying to cover up—these “voices” of women have no less to tell us about ourselves and our past than those of accused witches and mothers of illegitimate children.

An important part of our task as feminist teachers helping to shape a new conception of the humanities is to retrieve such texts as The Eumenides and the Marcela episode from the cutting room floor. (We would probably not be far wrong in speculating that we find them there not because they have not been understood, but because they have.) We must make the indomitable power of the feminine in The Bacchae, the lost mother motive in The Aeneid, the dark marriage comedy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, common coin in the teaching of these texts. To neglect to reclaim our past in this way would be to imitate Athena—to decide the case in favor of the male by claiming never to have had a mother, and to comply in the denial of our right to create a society which reflects our values.

Many classic texts offer a feminist perspective—a vital record of the tensions between male and female which have defined our culture. But we must learn to read this record, to take possession of it, and to help our colleagues and our students to possess it in common. This task will not be easily accomplished.

We were not taught to find ourselves in the classic texts because our teachers did not know we were there. Even now, the image of woman in literary texts does not belong to the mainstream of literary interpretation, and it is only by our influence that it ever will. But to recognize that women are “buried” not by our literary heritage but by our interpretation and teaching of that heritage is to see the problem of redefining the humanities in a new way. It is not necessary—indeed, we cannot afford—to take the idea of women’s contribution to western culture so literally that we can see it only in works composed by women. Rather, our literary inheritance preserves, in considerable measure, the “two-sex history” which, as Lougee says, we are seeking. From Genesis on, many of the Great Books can help us to understand how sexual difference has structured our cultural institutions. They do not merely “explain men’s past,” as historical texts tend to do. Whereas, according to Lougee, historians must seek “nodal points . . . where comparative treatment of men’s and women’s experiences is possible,” literary texts represent the dynamics of men’s and women’s experiences. As such, they are perhaps uniquely suited to serve as a framework for a new idea of the “humanities.”

Such a course would provide an exciting field for feminists seeking to redefine our male-oriented academic and social structures, for it would reach large numbers of students and bring colleagues into fruitful dialogue. As a forum for a new, and liberating, collective analysis of the most profound myths which define our culture, a new reading of the humanities has the potential to disperse the influence of feminist pedagogy far beyond the women’s studies classroom, and to contribute to the definition of feminist issues as humanist issues. We cannot change the past but, if we can help to change the way we understand it, we will perhaps save ourselves and our students from continuing it.

Christine Frosha and Adrienne Munich, who teach in the English Department of Yale University, were members of the Faculty Development Seminar in Women’s Studies at Yale in the spring of 1981.