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Women, History, and the Humanities: An Argument in Favor of the General Studies Curriculum

By Carolyn C. Lougee

This essay was first presented as a talk at the recent meetings of the American Historical Association, on December 27, 1980. We think it is a bold approach to the issues of ‘mainstreaming’ women’s studies, and to the questions raised by advocates of and opponents to general education programs. It is also a plea for the importance of the humanities. We expect it will be controversial and plan to publish responses in subsequent issues.

During the past year, I happened to serve as Chair of Stanford University’s Committee on Undergraduate Studies, and in that capacity I was charged with putting the finishing touches on and shepherding through the Faculty Senate a new undergraduate general studies curriculum, which gained a good deal of national and international attention. Despite suggestions that, in the words of a London Times headline, “Stanford Stamps Out Sixties Liberalism,” what we did was more modest in both aim and achievement. And it was, I hope, more forward-looking than backward-turning.

I want to present briefly what we did last year at Stanford, to touch on the opportunities that curricular revision opens to historians, the obstacles to acceptable forms of curricular innovation, and some potentially effective ways of ensuring that the movement toward core curricula and other forms of structured undergraduate experiences includes what are now called “non-mainstream studies” in general, and women’s studies in particular.

Until September 1980, Stanford had virtually no undergraduate program outside the major. A highly structured program of disciplinary and distribution requirements for all undergraduates had been dismantled in 1969-70. And through the 1970s Stanford became an example of the post-Vietnam situation in American education that the Carnegie Foundation report called “a disaster area.” Without question, the greatest disaster of the period was the precipitous decline of undergraduate study in the humanities, as narrower professional and preprofessional interests increasingly captivated youth while general education requirements no longer mandated breadth. Between 1969 and 1979, the number of undergraduate majors in the humanities (including history) at Stanford dropped from 1,062 to 624 as the total undergraduate population remained roughly stable (from about 25 percent of the undergraduate declared majors at the beginning of the decade to just about 15 percent at its end—a drop in absolute numbers of 42 percent). Total course enrollments per year in the humanities plunged to about the same extent: from 24,550 in 1969 to 15,255 in 1979.

Last year Stanford’s faculty acted to put an end to this trend with a new set of Area Requirements which apply to all undergraduates, whether they are pursuing a degree in engineering, premedical studies, social sciences, or humanities. These requirements obligate every student to complete ten courses in eight areas ranging from Fine Arts to Technology: although the areas are not defined as disciplinary categories, the humanities fill three of the areas (in which students take five of their ten required courses), social sciences fill two areas, and sciences fill three. The list of courses certified as fulfilling all the humanities and social science areas includes numerous courses on women and on minorities. However, no particular category mandates “non-mainstream” study. Courses on women authors are, for example, certified because they teach literature rather than because they teach about women, and no student is obligated to study women or minorities at all.

These requirements fall short of Denison University’s new requirement that each student take at least one course concerned with the effects and causes of discrimination (in practice, a course in ethnic or women’s studies). This represents Denison’s institutional commitment to non-mainstream studies and recognition of their intellectual validity. It is the closest any institution has come to making women’s studies an undergraduate requirement. Stanford’s system does have one provision which speaks to a similar goal: the requirement that every student complete one course in a non-Western culture. This effort to move from an Atlantic-alliance curriculum toward a global curriculum is important, but it has little directly to do with women.

The centerpiece of Stanford’s new general studies curriculum is the requirement that every student complete a year-long course in what we locally call the Western Culture Program, which means essentially a Western Civilization course. In many ways, the new Western Civ course is a revival of a course taken by every Stanford undergraduate between 1935 and 1970. The long Stanford tradition of Western Civ facilitated its reinstitution after a decade’s absence, but the new course has certain special features. First, it is taught in small discussion groups led either by Stanford faculty or by postdoctoral scholars hired specifically for this purpose. Second, each small group reads the same core list of Great Works stretching from Homer to Freud, a list modeled on those used at the University of Chicago and at St. John’s College. Finally, the course deliberately integrates humanistic disciplines: it aims to teach students to recognize the relationships among developments in philosophy, literature, art, and music in their historical context. For this reason it is taught by humanists of all disciplinary specializations.

This is a marvelous course in many ways. It is rigorous and challenging. It provides us with an important means toward some of our general education goals in that it is the course in which we nurture freshmen’s ability to read critically, write coherently, and discuss cogently. The greatest of its virtues is that it reinstitutes the study of the humanities as central to the undergraduate curriculum. Its greatest weakness, however, is...
that in this as in other Western Civ courses, women are few and far between.

There are two main reasons why the centerpiece of the Stanford general studies curriculum ignores women. The first has to do with the process of curricular revision. The process was lengthy: it began on the very morrow of the 1969-70 dismantling of general studies; its basic outlines had been sketched by the time feminist faculty members achieved policy-making positions. Diversifying the subject matter of humanistic study was not a priority for the architects of the course. Timing, then, is crucial; for optimal results, feminist historians should get into the process on the ground floor. Unfortunately, this will scarcely be easier today than it was in the early '70s, due to the worsening situation for women academics and—at least at many institutions—the shrinkage or disappearance of that marvelously vocal group of undergraduates who used to support every move toward feminist studies.

The early and unrelenting involvement of feminists in curricular revision is necessary but not sufficient to effect a gender-balanced version of the Western Civ or general humanities course. For the issue is the very definition of the humanities, and unless this central intellectual issue is addressed, no amount of feminist advocacy or compensatory integration will produce lasting results.

The traditional Western Civ course is resistant to the inclusion of women because of three aspects of the humanities on which such a course is based. The humanities, of course, derive from the studia humanitatis formulated in the Renaissance on the basis of ancient letters. The ideal of the humanities was to cultivate what is distinctly human—to nurture the moral, spiritual, and aesthetic faculties through knowledge of language, the arts, ethics, and history. But from the outset this ideal was tied to three other ideals each of which in practice has impeded the recognition of women's place in the Western Civ course.

First, the ideal of the humanities has been tied to civic life and leadership in the public arena, and to the acquisition of skills and understanding necessary for success there: formal reasoning, eloquence, rhetoric. Western Civ courses limit themselves to the culture of the public—the ideas and texts aired, analyzed, and transmitted in public. Because the specific social conditions of the Renaissance and post-Renaissance West have made the development and employment of those skills the province of men, Western Civ courses feed upon the documents of male life in the past.

Second, the humanistic ideal has been tied from the outset to an unabashed willingness to make value judgments based upon criteria of excellence established within the various academic disciplines which composed the studia humanitatis. This means that the principle of selection among works is excellence in formal genres: excellence as drama, as poetry, as Orato or syllogism in technical philosophy, as a statue or a portrait in visual art. The result is an exclusive valuation of human expression, of human reflection upon the enigmas of life, only as they are embodied in Great Works. The typical Western Civ course confuses this disciplinary or genre-based principle of selection with selectivity per se, and assumes that without it there would be no standards at all.

Third, the humanities have been tied to an ideal of human commonality, a heritage transcending regions, vernacular languages and local cultures, time periods, and clerical or lay professions (not, however, transcending sex or class) which bind together a learned group across the barriers militating for cultural diversity. Seeking the uniform substratum beneath diverse humankind, the humanities tend to devalue diversity and celebrate a unitary image to which all should aspire to conform: that of the cultivated, educated gentleman.

These three features of the humanities ideal have buttressed it over the centuries and have contributed significantly to the revival of Western Civ courses and humanities core curricula in recent months. The ideals of responsible citizenship, firmly recognized canons of value, and the melting pot appeal to an academic world hit hard by the claims of diverse cultures with distinct criteria of value and particularistic loyalties. But need the return of Western Civ courses mean the acceptance of the definitions and values which make them relentlessly male?

At Stanford, feminist humanists proposed a number of ways out of this bind. First, following the dominant pattern for course development in women's studies, a separate course on women's culture was proposed as a corrective for those students who might have a special interest in women. This proposal was turned down on the grounds that it was undesirable to have a separate compensatory core curriculum for those with special interests. This would reaffirm the marginality of women's studies, and in a perverse way relieve teachers in the mainline course from the obligation to deal with women's issues. I supported the decision to reject a separate course, hoping for a better solution.

The kind of ad hoc solution most of us pursue focuses on the misogyny of the Great Works on the core reading list: 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. This is a valuable endeavor, for analysis of sex differentiation in Aristotle or Aquinas or Freud not only illuminates the history of thinking about women, but also illuminates all the rest of the thought of Aristotle or Aquinas or Freud. But I am less interested in three thousand years of misogyny than I am in women, and this strategy is not going to give us any women in our Western Civ courses. And we can't be content with a course that shows men thinking and women being thought about.

A third strategy is the integration of women into the Western Civ course, the goal of much work at the present time, including the giant OAH project to provide college and university teachers with materials for integrating women into their introductory survey courses. Here the technique is to talk about women alongside men from a feminist perspective by finding the nodal points in the traditional narrative framework where comparative treatment of men's and women's experiences is possible, noting along the way the record's incompleteness on women, examining the power relations in the past which caused that incompleteness as well as what in the last decade or so has led us to recognize it. This is a fruitful strategy because it demonstrates to the uninitiated how rich and valid, how vigorous and rigorous, recent research on women has been. It also speaks to a large
audience of students, larger than those who are motivated to enroll in separate women's studies classes. And it educates our colleagues, many of whom want to include women in their courses but do not know how to do so.

Nonetheless, integration is ultimately unlikely to provide lasting gains, except as an interim measure which holds the line while the underlying intellectual issues of male-centered curricula are worked out. In social history these turn on the problems of periodization and have been widely discussed elsewhere. Because the pace, shape, and direction of change in the past have not been the same for women and men, integrating women into frameworks developed to explain men's past will not work; the success of the strategy of integration will turn ultimately on its own failure, as instructors eventually perceive the need to reshape entirely a two-sex history. In the humanities, too, I think integration—in the form of the addition of a few women writers or artists who fall the least short of the male ideal—is but a short-range, stop-gap solution. Here the principal intellectual issue is not periodization but the very conception of the humanities.

Discussing the conception of the humanities with dedicated humanists can be a delicate undertaking. The assertion that the humanities as currently understood are male by definition usually provokes a defensive response, largely because, I think, the humanist (even when male himself) does not intend them to be so. Humanists will respond that the humanities are male because until recently women have not produced great works of art. Superficially, this seems to make sense, and indeed many feminist humanists have responded by advocating the inclusion of women authors on humanities reading lists. But I think we must challenge the notion that women could be included if only they would produce great works of art. And that requires an understanding of the humanities that will not exclude women, one which frees the humanities from the ideals of public life, disciplinary excellence, and human commonality.

First, we need to encourage an understanding of the humanities that encompasses the private as well as the public, because the two form a continuum in individual experience. We need to advocate recognition of the importance to Western Civ of the fragment recorded in private, unknown to contemporaries, perhaps little known to posterity, without traceable influence and therefore part of history though not of heritage.

Second, we need to question disciplinary standards of excellence according to which the highest expression of human achievement is judged by the criteria of a formal genre. Here the recent Rockefeller Commission Report on the Humanities unfortunately sidestepped the crucial issue. In the process of defending the application of standards of value to humanistic texts against charges that such distinctions in themselves were elitist and therefore undesirable, the report points out that "some Navajo myths [are] more profound than others, some Black autobiographies more enlightening than others, some Shakespeare's plays more effective dramatically than others" (p. 11). But the Report stops short of vindicating a place in the very inner sanctum of the humanities for that Navajo or Black creation, and it does not mention women.

What we define as the core of the humanities, what we select for the humanistic Western Civ course, must be authentic and compelling expressions of the human enigma in whatever form they assume. We need to persuade our fellow humanists that superior models of artistic creation are not the only modes of human expression, that limiting the humanities to this definition has impoverished them, as well as the Western Civ courses they spawned, and that to validate the full range of human expression outside the genres is not to abandon standards but to adopt more humanistic ones. If we can promote an understanding of the humanities which evaluates expressions according to their insight into any aspect of human experience rather than according to how they measure up to a predetermined canon derived from the professional experience of a small, highly educated, and privileged (and male) group, then we will be able not merely to "integrate," not merely to include women insofar as they write like men or create great works, but as voices of human experience.

Then we will be able to understand that women troubadours expressed the challenges of human life in the thirteenth century as well as Aquinas's quaesitos did; that accused witches gaped in their confessions of guilt to understand human life just as Descartes did with his cogito; that the French mothers of illegitimate babies wondered in their déclarations de grossesse about emotion and social change as acutely as Rousseau did; that Christine de Pisan's lament ("'Alas, God, why was I not born into this world as a member of the masculine sex'") expresses aspects of the human condition as poignantly as does Hamlet's "To be or not to be."

Third, we need to vindicate a pluralistic conception of the humanities in opposition to the unitary conception which seems to stand behind the revival of Western Civ with its efforts to reaffirm a common cultural core in the face of the diversity of traditions that have burst forth in the past decades. The humanities should be seen, like Cleopatra, in their "infinite variety," as a dialectic between the one and the many, the common and the special, in a simultaneous recognition of what binds together and what separates the various segments of humanity.

Only such a broadened and enriched conception of the humanities will vindicate a two-sex Western Civ course. Whether or not the particular lines of argument I have suggested are valid or productive, the effort can only succeed if it addresses the intellectual issue which stands at the core of the humanities. Demanding "equal time" or devising strategies for integration can only win limited concessions. Even the demonstration of the solidarity and legitimacy of women's studies in separate courses will not demonstrate that they belong in the mainstream. The problem is intellectual redefinition, and unless we can address it within the heart of the humanities, the best we will get is compensatory inclusion of a few women in spaces that can be carved out from the old Western Civ course. Working out this intellectual rationale and ways to implement it is our current agenda at Stanford.

In conclusion, my advice. First, vigorously reassert the centrality of the humanities, including history, to the undergraduate curriculum at your institution. No single solution
is applicable to our diverse colleges and universities, but if general education requirements are necessary in order to lead students into the humanities classroom, do not shrink from them. In 1950, 10 percent of all undergraduate majors in American colleges and universities were history majors; today the figure is 2 percent. Thus, we are not reaching 98 percent of all students through our specialized offerings. Unless we can reach them through general studies courses, they will have no chance of hearing what we want them to hear, no matter how well conceived and well taught our courses might be. Historians have the capacity to be generalists *par excellence*; they ought to advocate and staff general education courses.

Second, fight to see that your general education courses in the humanities are not bound by the ideals of the public, the genres, and the melting pot. Some kinds of help are available: Lewis and Clark College has received foundation funding for summer faculty renewal seminars for its own Western Civ instructors; the University of Arizona has begun a three-year faculty development program to transform its basic introductory course; programs for educating faculty to teach gender-balanced general education courses have been set up at Wellesley College, Georgia State, and Montana State. But again, in my view, resolution of the central intellectual issue, not tinkering, is prerequisite to lasting gains for women in the general humanities curriculum.

Third, get in on the ground floor if you can, so that general education courses mandated for your students will be gender-balanced from the outset. Since this is sometimes impossible, I advise supporting the reinstatement of traditional, unreconstructed, sexist courses rather than none. This is highly debatable advice. It may prove impossible to change such a course once it is established; if so, I will be proved wrong. This is precisely where we stand at Stanford. Many of us feminist humanists supported actively the introduction of something we knew we wanted to change. We did so because of our commitment to the importance of studying the humanities. We did so because we did not want our vision of the best to drive out our chance at grasping the good; but we weren’t without hope of moving toward perfection.

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**Women’s Studies International at Copenhagen: From Idea to Network**

*By Florence Howe*

Almost a year before the United Nations’ Mid-Decade Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen during the summer of 1980, Mariam Chamberlain of The Ford Foundation, Amy Swerdlow, Myra Dinnerstein, and I began informal discussions about holding meetings of women’s studies practitioners there. When we learned that an NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) Forum would be organized, I wrote to sixty women’s studies practitioners outside the United States, informing them of the badly-publicized NGO Forum itself, and inviting them to contribute to the planning of women’s studies seminars. Eventually, The Feminist Press, the U.S. National Women’s Studies Association, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University in Montreal, and the S.N.D.T. Women’s University in Bombay, India, agreed to act as sponsors of women’s studies sessions, and the May issue of the U.S. Women’s Studies Newsletter further spread the word.

From the beginning, the idea of what might be done in Copenhagen was both modest and practical: to make use of an extended occasion during which an international group might be able to meet to talk about women’s studies. Planners assumed also that it would be useful to share resource materials, and, of course, to include a formal ‘registry’ for participants so that the dialogue might continue afterwards.

Because planning began with only rudimentary knowledge of what women’s studies practitioners were doing in India, Canada, and several European countries, we envisioned a program that would function in a coherent, yet flexible, fashion. It would include three kinds of sessions: on research and methodology; on teaching and curriculum; and on the texts used in teaching. While sessions on research and teaching might focus on higher education, the session on texts would be concerned with elementary and secondary education, including literacy for adults. At the suggestion of several UNESCO staff members and other international participants, we added a fourth group of sessions—on public policy. We assumed that a group of approximately thirty persons would meet for several days on each topic, either in large sessions or in smaller interest groups. And, of course, we assumed that these participants would also attend other sessions of the Forum.

The Forum was planned for ten days in July 1980 at a site near but not convenient to the official meeting of the United Nations’ Mid-Decade Conference on Women. Its planners had hoped to avoid a repetition of some aspects of the Mexico City U.N. Conference’s Tribune, at which large groups held meetings that attracted the mass media and projected controversial political statements in the Tribune’s name. Thus, the Copenhagen Forum was organized in an institution without facilities for mass meetings, the Amager University Center, and the building was closed at night and on weekends. While the planners attempted to use the modern, horizontal facility imaginatively, the crowds