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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT / WOMEN'S ENSLAVEMENT: STORIES FROM THE HISTORY OF LITERACY

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Now, what I want is, Facts. . . . You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. (Dickens 47)

So Thomas Gradgrind presents himself to his students—those "little pitchers" before him who were to be filled full of facts. When we read *Hard Times*, most of us laugh at the schoolmaster, a Facts peddler who never realizes that learning—literacy itself—is more than the consumption and undigested "pour-back" (48) of Facts. E. D. Hirsch might not laugh, for he opens *Cultural Literacy* by declaring that "literacy is far more than a skill . . . it requires large amounts of specific information" (2). A "new insight," writes Hirsch, central to his book. But Gradgrind shows us that the "new" insight of fellow Benthamite Hirsch is not so new. In fact, Hirsch's "new insight" has a long history. The traditional mainstay of both educational *praxis* and measurement has been that "literacy" requires specific knowledge imbricated on reading and writing skills—until recently, an untested assumption.

We lack consensus on how best to define literacy because we have differing views on its social purposes and values. The concept of literacy that I'll be using is necessarily reductive for my purposes today. Literacy can comprise only the process of learning "what to know": "what to know" is whatever knowledge of

oral and written forms the literati of any sociohistorical context consider culturally significant information. "What to know" is the usual goal and benefit of education—what Gradgrind and Hirsch would call "facts" and others, "functional" literacy.

But literacy can also comprise "what to know" together with "how to think," another component in the process of becoming literate. How far that process goes is determined by how well a student learns to extract, abstract, synthesize, conceptualize, and criticize the (a) "what to know" of literacy, (b) the assumptions that underpin that knowledge, and (c) his or her own assumptions that preexist that academic knowledge.

Calling the "what to know" functional literacy and the "how to think" critical literacy is a necessarily artificial method for examining the process of learning. Ideally of course, critical literacy incorporates functional literacy in its process, a process that I like to think of as active: *to literacy* (a verb), and not static, which is implied by calling *literacy* a noun. If we give people a verb instead of a noun, we give them power and consequences of that power, which include both the ability to realize a critical consciousness of language and the ability to recognize language as a force in human affairs, as a code for our values, and as a force for change.

Historically, most women fortunate enough to be educated have been willing to *accommodate* (Chase *passim*) the conventions of their education without questioning how those conventions privilege some forms of knowledge at the expense of others. They have learned to read or to write (a little) and to memorize their "facts," whether they be the *Pater Noster*, a few French phrases, the definition of "horse," or as Hirsch would have it, the difference between Irving Berlin and the Berlin Wall. They knew they would be rewarded for absorbing and regurgitating facts. Questioning, arguing, conjecturing on alternative possibilities have been at best uncultivated—at worst, discouraged and even punished. Hence, most women have received an education to become among the literate of their time; only a few of them "claimed an education" (Rich *passim*), *opposing* or *resisting* (Chase *passim*) the dominant ideology propounded in their course of study. Even fewer envisioned a critical literacy and realized the potential for power and change that lay beyond their functional literacy.

My discussion, limited to Western women from Antiquity through the Renaissance, focuses on the literacy experiences of those who belonged to the dominant class. As a whole, these women were not marginalized in the way that slaves, blacks, or other groups have been marginalized; rather, these women played an integral role in the dominant class—that's just my point. For most of these women, literacy was a means of acculturation, a potent tool for maintaining the hegemony of their class, of the men of their class. In fact, their course and measure of literacy was most often a derivative of the firmly entrenched male model, a model dispensed by their male teachers. Although the male model has evolved, its constant has been a canon of sanctified knowledge; the critical component was a variable—sometimes available to men, almost certainly withheld from women.

I'd like to tell you some stories about literate women, beginning in Classical Greece. In the transitional society of Asia Minor (600 B.C.), women of rank were freed from the rigidity of traditional marriage and from the identity that arose from that fixed role. Unlike Athenian women, who were kept in rigid seclusion, the Greek women of Lesbos met in literary societies to write and study music, poetry, epics, and drama—becoming literate by the standards of their time and class. At the center of

one such school was legendary poet Sappho, who knew not only the techniques of and suitable subjects for Greek lyricism, the "what to know," but also the "how to think," for Sappho thought of ways to resist those techniques: Sappho transformed the right-to-enjoy-and-live-life lyric into a distinctive personal form, the inner-life lyric. Fragments of her poetry reveal her expertise in and resistance to all the traditional, male-approved forms and subjects. She moved the lyric from a celebration of masculine heroism to the ardor and nobility of the feminine soul. As a teacher and poet, Sappho lived among women, outside the circle of male authority, yet within the realm of male influence. In her refusal merely to accommodate the male-dominated forms and course of literacy, Sappho activated the process of her literacy.

Some two hundred years later (400 B.C.), a respectable upper-class Greek woman could hardly show her face alone in the street. The intellectual women of Athens were *hetairai*, upper-class, foreign courtesans, who were neither entitled to the protection of nor subject to the restrictions of Athenian law. Upon emigrating from Miletus to Athens, Aspasia found herself considered—by definition of her foreignness alone—one such *hetaira*. The brilliant, highly educated, free-born Aspasia could ignore Athenian strictures limiting women's participation in intellectual society, and she quickly established a school of rhetoric and philosophy for young women and girls of good family, modeled of course upon schools for young men and boys. Co-architect of the Sophistic movement, Aspasia resisted marginalization by moving Athens' intellectual center from the heretofore male stronghold to her own academy, which soon became a popular salon, a resort for the intelligentsia—Socrates, Plato, Pericles, Anaxagoras, Sophocles, and Phidias. The popularity of her discussions was remarkable, especially within the context of fifth-century Attic culture, for her school directly violated strictures limiting women's participation in society and access to formal education, strictures that kept Athenian women "in their place," at home. Aspasia empowered her literacy, not by merely resisting the prevailing limits set on women but by accommodating the male-dominated education only so far as ultimately to revise and re-envision the prevailing male-informed models of rhetoric and philosophy, exposing the problems and shortcomings of each endeavor.

Like her Athenian sister, the Roman woman received only a limited intellectual education; legally and perpetually under male guardianship as she was, a domestic education was paramount. Besides, an assertively intelligent woman was thought to be self-indulgent and licentious. It is no wonder that those Roman women who achieved some measure of literacy go mostly unrecorded. One notable woman is Hortensia (42 B.C.), whose father encouraged her to model her education after his. In fact, in one of the very few women's speeches that have been preserved, Hortensia argues before the Roman triumvirs for tax relief for women, winning male approval by speaking so like her father that he "breathed in his daughter's words" (Valerius VIII.3). Significantly, she accommodates the male model of literacy by arguing exactly as her father would have; she does not argue against taxation without representation or for any feminist issues. In fact, her oration was probably "occasional" rather than professional, a public appearance to "show off" her talent on the strict understanding that it would not become a regular event. Co-opted by a male system of literacy, Hortensia knew the form but apparently had not developed the critical consciousness necessary for resisting and exposing the unethical behavior of the triumvirs.

The Christian Church solved the problem of educating and implementing its many female followers by establishing convents, where young women could receive a far-from-impressive education—one that discouraged that development of intellect that might lead them into temptation, or—by the way—into the critical consciousness that comes with learning "how to think." Yet despite the plans of the early Church Fathers, the convent governed by an exceptional woman became a refuge for female intellectuals, offering teaching opportunities and a concomitant (though perhaps quasi-) classical education. The world of the university being beyond the reach of women, that male system of classical education was available only to the very rich and highly motivated women placed in a convent. Hence, only a few women achieved a mastery of contemporary, male-conceived literacy, and the written work of those women who resisted was *never* foregrounded by their sponsor, the patriarchal Church.

Splendidly literate by the standards of any day, renowned for her wide and deep reading in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, history, and philosophy, Heloise (12c) continues to be a secondary character in history. An abess of intellectual integrity and *virtus*, Heloise wielded *ars dictaminis*, the codified medieval art of letter-writing to resist the church: she argued for the educational advancement of women, the right of nuns to go into the public realm, and for female superiority in double monasteries. She empowered her impressive literacy achievements with a critical consciousness that effected change. One of the few educated medieval women to create a strong sense of self, Heloise is, nonetheless, remembered more for her love letters to Abelard, the most dominant intellectual force of the day, than for her own intellectual accomplishments.

Erudite Christine de Pisan (14c) also took refuge in a convent to write her *Book of the City of Ladies*, an adept and powerful demonstration of women's worth and talents. Like Heloise, Christine argued for women's education comparable to men's. Yet, even as Christine sought advances for her sex, she was careful not to disturb the status quo or to encroach upon traditional male prerogatives. She seems to have no qualms about detailing the intelligence, creativity, courage, and accomplishments of women throughout history and then concluding that women must be obedient to men, humble, patient, and chaste. Although she opposed and tried to move against contemporary ideology that deterred women from educational opportunities, she did not move toward anything else. And opposition that "does not lead to a transformation of any kind . . . serves ultimately only to reinforce the dominant ideology" (Chase 15).

When Humanism brought Latin literacy and classical learning to noble daughters as well as noble sons, a young woman found herself no longer under the aegis of a great lady. Instead, she was placed, along with her brothers, under male cultural authority that capitalized on her private virtue. To go public was deemed indecorous. The paragon of a Renaissance educated woman was Margaret Roper, daughter of Thomas More. Fully accommodating to the male-inscribed currency of thought, she was a sensitive translator of men's works, a meticulous secretary for her father, and an exceptional grammarian. Functionally literate? Absolutely. Perhaps critically literate as well, but if Margaret ever resisted or questioned her father, if there were consequences of her critical literacy, such evidence has not been preserved. It seems then that like most other educated Renaissance women, Margaret readily acceded to her secondary role in society, accepting without question the ideology of her male-controlled education, willing to translate than write works of her

own, willing to use her education to enhance the happiness and prestige of her family.

Perhaps the only Renaissance woman who had every legal right to speak publicly her intellectual attainments was Queen Elizabeth. Living proof (albeit female) of the powerful results of a classical education, Elizabeth succeeded in emulating the male models of literacy, mastering nearly a dozen languages, the classics, mathematics, and the sciences, making her learning subserve the ends of queenship. Indeed, she embodied the time-honored idea that exceptional accomplishment is required of those born to rule: Elizabeth empowered her impressive measure of literacy, had a critical consciousness (be it innate or learned), and by virtue of her personality was the first woman to empower the English throne. Renowned teacher Roger Ascham wrote that her mind had "no womanly weakness, her perseverance is equal to that of a man, and her memory long keeps what it has quickly picked up" (Neale 14). Her poetry was deemed to be assertively and expansively masculine; her speeches "full of princely resolution and more than feminine courage" (Neale 15). In her Spanish Armada speech, she offers herself as an androgynous model of kingly courage: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman," she said, "but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (Pringle 80). Despite her remarkable literacy and political prowess, the most powerful queen who ever lived could explain her empowerment only in male terms.

So what? What do these pretty stories tell us?

They tell us that the acquisition of literacy — of reading and writing skills, of Gradgrind's Facts, of Hirsch's lists — is in itself no guarantee of power, personal advancement, critical thought, or cultural modernization — not even for the elite, the dominant, the rich. In most cases, women — just like most men — have used their literacy to accommodate the social, educational, and political boundaries laid out for them. Only a few men, and even fewer women, have opposed or resisted, have become new thinkers, inventors, revolutionaries. Access to intellectual culture, to functional literacy, guarantees nothing. It never did in the past; it doesn't now. If literacy holds no guarantees for the rich and powerful and literate, what expectations can we have for the poor and marginalized and illiterate? If these stories have told us anything, it's that literacy is a noun for most students, even for the best and the brightest.

How can we as teachers activate the concept of literacy? How can we, in other words, make *literacy* a verb, a process? We can do that by creating a classroom atmosphere conducive to critical questioning. We can do that by demonstrating to our students how to question: how to question the assigned material, classroom discussions, comments, and lectures, and how to ask questions that slice to the fatty heart of all assumptions — including our own.

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EXPLORING PLAGIARISM IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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The subject of plagiarism is most likely to appear in composition classrooms in the form of warnings or lessons in how to avoid it. I want to suggest that there are better approaches, one of which is to have students explore it through writing and through an informal collaborative research project. Investigating plagiarism in a writing classroom is justified by, and serves to test, a number of hypotheses about students, plagiarism, and learning. To begin with, the problem of getting students not to plagiarize or, to put it positively, to credit sources is much more complex than our usual advice makes it appear. The difficulties lie in two primary areas. First, the rules governing proper acknowledgement of sources are more complicated than may be thought and learning them is more difficult than it may seem. Second, students who violate these rules are not simply ignorant. They are usually following different rules, many of which spring from values they share within groups outside the classroom. These are matters worth exploring in a writing classroom.

Acknowledgement is a complex behavior, differing from discipline to discipline, learned — if ever learned — as part of initiation into a scholarly community or sub-community. A few simple principles, such as those found on syllabi or in handbooks, cannot touch the complex ethical decisions made routinely and quickly by experienced practitioners, decisions about how much can be taken for granted, whom to footnote, whom never to footnote, and so on. The rules of thumb and the thinly veiled threats that appear on syllabi in the guise of advice ("Plagiarism is stealing," for example) can only be considered "lore" as Stephen M. North defines it in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, as a non-rigorous, contradictory body of knowledge passed on by practitioners (23). Besides informing apprentices that this is a subject about which their mentors get crazy and upset, lore may serve one useful purpose, creating the kind of "metalinguistic awareness" useful in other learning of written language (see Hartwell 121-25). In general, however, the ability to make correct decisions in acknowledging sources is learned through practice and observation, by relatively willing apprentices.

Yet being an apprentice differs from being a practitioner. Expectations in performance are different, and rules are likely to be more rigidly enforced. In "A Dialogue on Plagiarism," A. E. Malloch suggests that the role-playing students do in learning about acknowledgement may be considered "impersonation," which, as he notes, may slip over into "disguise" (169-70). Becoming practitioners is further complicated by students' mental development, their partial understanding of subject matter, and their insecurity as experts. Dorothy S. Brown transcribes delightful conversation among perplexed students trying to figure out how to footnote and how not to plagiarize ("The Perils of Plagiarism"). In fact, it seems a tribute to the intelligence and character of some students that they actually learn how to credit sources and finally join the community of scholars.