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Teaching Latin with a Feminist Consciousness

As Latin teachers, we introduce our students not only to an ancient language and culture, which have profoundly influenced our own, but also to the field of Classical Studies. We owe it to our students as well as to ourselves to keep up with important changes in our field. Unfortunately, those of us who teach at the high school level (and even those who write high school textbooks) do not always do this. I want to talk about feminism and the way that it is transforming all types of intellectual work, including the field of Classical Studies. Then I would like to consider the direction I feel we need to go in the development of Latin textbooks and in Latin classes.

I will take my definition of feminism from Barbara McManus' wonderful book *Classics and Feminism*: Feminism is "a movement to create equal opportunity for women as well as men in all areas of life and ... an intellectual commitment to transforming androcentric structures of knowledge." The political and intellectual components of this movement cannot be separated, just as every intellectual activity has political implications. While feminists are currently debating the extent and implication of the biological differences between men and women, I think we all agree that no one can any longer afford to look at a world of women and men from an androcentric point of view.

What, you may ask, is an "androcentric" point of view? It is a view of the human world and its history that looks at men and women and sees only men. It is obviously a severely limited perspective on humanity. You may think that you would never look at the world that way. But I think that you most likely already have done so. I know that I have done this without any awareness, and especially when I was still in school. My teachers presented me with an intellectual, historical, cultural, and literary world which was exciting and lived in by men only. There were female characters, women created in the imaginations of men, but real women were conspicuously absent. No one seemed to think that this was astounding, so neither did I. But I questioned my worth as a female. And your students will do the same, unless you make a commitment to bring them a world, an intellectual world, a world of ideas, inhabited by real women and men.

In order to do that, you are going to have to go back and rethink a lot of things about the history and culture you teach. A helpful guide in all this is the historian Gerda Lerner. The introduction to her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* contains some of her ideas about the relationship of women to history:

- Women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization.

- Women have been kept from contributing to history-making, that is, the ordering and interpretation of the past of humankind. They have also been systematically excluded from the enterprise of creating symbol systems, philosophies, science, and law.
- Men have explained the world in their own terms so as to make themselves the center of discourse.
- Men are not the center of the world, but men and women are.
- Women cannot be put into the empty spaces of patriarchal thought and systems – in moving to the center, they transform the system.

This last point is the most important one for us to consider in our own teaching. Are we just filling in some gaps, some empty spaces, some extra time, with a look at women? Or do we grasp the fact that the whole enterprise of understanding and teaching history is transformed when women are moved to the center?

In other words, the problem is not the past itself, but what we decide has been important about the past, since history-making is an act of selection, an act of deciding what is important. The past itself it not male-centered. Women have never been excluded from life. They have been involved in every human venture. What they have been kept from is the writing of history, the act of deciding what is important and what is not.

Now, what happens when we realize this, attaining what I call a "feminist consciousness," and we go back to the history and culture we are teaching? We begin to realize that "adding" women to materials we have will not work, that the whole structure of what we are teaching has to be changed in order that the central place of women in history and culture is affirmed. This will mean examining closely the contributions women have made to the world, and giving these women and their contributions a central place in our account of human history and culture. It will also mean examining closely the exclusion of women from areas of political, economic, and intellectual power and giving the story of this exclusion from power on the basis of gender a central place in our account of human history and culture.

This necessary re-writing of every period of human history is now taking place; the contribution of feminism is and will continue to transform the making of history. It is making a great impact on Classical Studies. Please read Barbara McManus' fascinating book, *Classics and Feminism*, for a feminist history of the field and for a sense of how the field has already been changed.
Are we willing to be a part of this enterprise? If we are, we might begin to ask questions such as the following about what we are teaching:

- Where were women? What were women doing? What were women not doing, and why? What do we know about real women at this time, and how do we know it?
- What ideas about women were expressed in religion, literature, and art?
- How do ancient ideas about women, preserved mostly in the writings of men, compare with what we know of the lives of real women at this time?

One chapter dealing with these questions will not do. These questions must be asked about every topic that we teach. They must be made central.

These questions are of two kinds, both of which are important. We might be tempted, with our tendency to organize all our endeavors in classics around certain canonical literary texts written by men, to focus on ideas about women and ignore questions about real women. I feel that we need to focus on both kinds of questions, and that looking both at ideas about and lives of women will lead to richer and deeper understanding of the texts we read and the period we study.

Also, we need to continue to look at the texts we study and consider bringing new ones into prominence. We have all seen refreshing additions to the high school Latin curriculum that used to be limited to a sequence of grammar, Caesar, Cicero, and Vergil. Especially exciting have been the changes in the AP Curriculum which allow for a wider variety of authors. And Judith Hallet's essay in the book *Feminist Theory and the Classics* makes a persuasive case for reading more Propertius and more texts from the post-Augustan period. I would go further and suggest that we take a careful look at women writers in Latin, not only the few poems of Sulpicia that we possess, but also the seldom read works of abbesses and elite women of the Middle Ages especially in the ninth and tenth centuries of the Common Era, when spaces were provided and some women were encouraged to pursue intellectual work.

We must be careful to remember that the addition of simply mythological and legendary women into the curriculum will not provide the necessary gender balance. Classical mythology and legends reveal some interesting ideas about women, both positive and negative. They do not reveal real women.

Now that I have discussed some of the feminist work that is currently being done in Classics and will continue to need to be done, I would like to turn to beginner's Latin textbooks, keeping in mind the need to move women alongside men to the center of our thought.

I would like to focus on three major textbooks, the *Oxford Latin Course*, the *Cambridge Latin Course*, and *Ecce Romani*. These textbooks are widely used and they share a similar approach to the teaching of Latin: a primary focus on the acquisition of reading skills by means of extensive reading passages and some inductive learning, and an integration of the teaching of language and culture through the stories.

Of the three texts I am considering, the *Oxford Latin Course* does probably the best job of teaching the Latin language to students. Its combination of the reading approach with traditional explanations of the grammar really does succeed in giving a student the best of both the inductive and deductive worlds of language learning. Grammar explanations are clear, and the cultural material is rich. Unfortunately, the authors have chosen to develop a story line around one central character, Quintus, who is the poet Horace. They justify their decision to do this because they wish for everything in the course to contribute to "the overriding aim of preparing students to read the literature of the Golden Age with sympathetic understanding and intelligent appreciation." Their students' identification with the character (if that occurs) may indeed contribute to sympathetic understanding, but I would argue that true intelligent appreciation of Roman literature cannot occur when women and gender issues are ignored. It is clear that women in this textbook have, to quote Lerner again, been "put into the empty spaces of patriarchal thought and systems." In the second edition of 1996, the authors have added material about women to "give female

figures a greater role in the course." But the core remains unchanged, and the message that a man's life is at the center of our concern remains unchanged. Although there is some interesting material on marriage, divorce, and childbirth, areas of life which concern women and men, women are completely absent in the overwhelming majority of the course material.

I feel that the authors' intentions are good. They are aware of changes in their field, and have genuinely begun to respond to these with the new edition. But they have used a traditional, male-centered framework into which women fit awkwardly, if at all. They write well in English and in Latin; it is a shame that they have not produced a book that presents a human world in which male and female stand together in the center of the picture.

The *Cambridge Latin Course* has good cultural material and stories with interesting characters. However, from a feminist perspective it has serious flaws. Of the three textbooks mentioned, it has the least amount of gender balance, though it seems as if this balance could be redressed in future editions, since the stories basically center around particular places rather than particular people (Pompeii, Britain, Egypt, and Rome). The characters are overwhelmingly male. In Unit I, there are 33 male characters and 3 female ones. Unit II is only slightly better with 28 males and 8 females. I must admit that the character of Euphrosyne, the Greek philosopher in Unit 3, is one of the most appealing female characters in all of Latin textbook literature.

But she doesn't make up for the grave imbalance in the rest of the course. Also, the amount of violence in the stories is excessive and cannot be justified by saying it reflects the violent nature of Roman culture. It is obviously designed to keep readers' interest, but there are other ways to keep readers interested in a story.

Hard to take are some of the remarks in the Cambridge Teacher's Manual for Unit I, which seem to me to have an insulting tone. When introducing the characters to the students, such as Caeciliius' wife, Metella, the Manual warns, "Do not force a 'proper' interpretation upon them, but remind them if necessary, of the historical context that does not allow the editors of the course to present, say, Metella working, like a modern woman executive, at the bank in the forum." Well, perhaps not, but we could have seen her working, rather than sitting in the atrium. And we could easily have been introduced to a female character working at one of the many shops in Pompeii. Is that so far-fetched? In a later discussion of Metella, the Manual says, "Although the character of Caecilius is based on an actual historical figure, Metella is entirely fictional. Do not tell the students, unless they specifically ask, that Metella was not real. By emphasizing her fictional nature, you may diminish the students' curiosity about her." Well, then why not have female characters based on actual historical figures? We have a wonderful account from ancient law records found at Herculaneum of the freedwoman Vitalis and her daughter Justa; why not use "real" people such as these as the basis for story characters? Finally, when discussing the death of Caecilius at the end of the Unit, the Cambridge Manual says, "Some stalwart types will want to discuss the fate of Caecilius' beloved wife Metella or of his dog Cerberus; other more tender-hearted students will let these two quietly pass under the ash-cover, not without tears." The fate of the man is made visible; that of his wife and his dog, invisible. The underlying message here, that the man is more important, will not be missed by your students.

Ecce Romani I and *II* are in my opinion currently the best texts for feminists to use to teach beginning Latin with a reading approach. *Ecce* focuses on a family, and in its stories no one member of that family is given prominence over any other. Roman men may have had much more public visibility than Roman women, but that does not mean that we have to give them the lion's share of our attention. *Ecce* achieves good gender balance and draws students in not with violence but with the lives of characters their own age.

Ecce could be improved, however. Do we really want to read a story in which two girls run away from a wolf yelling, "Ferte auxilium" until a boy comes to their rescue? Or, in Book II, of all the Roman legends that could have been chosen to read in Latin, some of which have heroic female characters, do we have to read the legend about Papirius Praetextatus, a boy who out of loyalty to men refuses to reveal the secrets of the Roman Senate to his mother and other women? It is an interesting story, but young students may take it and its negative view of women at face value.

More positive female characters are needed. Euphrosyne in the *Cambridge Latin Course* is a start. The story of the dancing slave woman at the inn in *Ecce* I is a start. But characters such as these need to be at the center of the narrative, rather than at its edges.

I would like to see a beginner's text that has the quality of grammar explanations and exercises of the *Oxford Latin Course* combined with an interesting story which has a powerful, intellectual woman as a central character. A great setting for such a story would be northern Europe in the early Middle Ages, and actual excerpts from works by Hildegard of Bingen or Herrad of Landsberg could complement the adventures of an abbess. This material could then be placed in a historical context, which shows that with the rise of the universities in Europe, women were systematically excluded from access to Latin and to higher education in ways that had not occurred previously.

One beginner's Latin text has already used this time and place for its story: *Teach Yourself Beginner's Latin*, by Sharpley, published in 1997.His story, which involves a budding romance between a boy and a girl and a murder mystery, keeps the reader interested without resorting to the excessive violence of the *Cambridge Latin Course*. It effectively teaches and drills the grammatical structures we want beginning students to learn. And he includes in his book many excerpts from classical authors so that there is a sense of the great history of the Latin language.

A shocking thing occurred in one of my Latin classes this year: two girls were studying a paper, which I thought was a note of some sort, so I confiscated it. It turned out to be a list entitled "Reasons why it sucks to be a girl." One of the reasons listed was "no history for women." Perhaps you can imagine how upset I was to read that. I am determined in future that at least in my classroom, no one will leave believing that.

I would urge you to use as much material in your Latin classes as you can that will convey the truth: that girls can be central to the plot without being simply the virginal object of male affection, that women are half of the human race and always have been, that they are intellectual and have an intellectual history which includes the history of how they have been kept from intellectual pursuits.

Supplement the beginning textbook you have with stories about active, intelligent females or write such stories yourself. Look again at the cultural topics you teach. Be a part of the changes that are occurring the field of Classics.