

MAGNOLIAS AND GRITS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSE  
IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

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Liberal Education...what is it? What knowledge does it impart? What skills does it teach? Where does it fit into the world of the 1980s?

In 1982 when the Tift College faculty began to consider revising the college core requirements, those questions took on renewed meaning. Although the college had wrestled with designing a philosophy of education that was both theoretically consistent with a liberal arts tradition and pedagogically sound, we had not yet designed courses in which ideals would become reality. That was the task set before us.

After a great deal of contemplation and serious study of the options, spiced with some gnashing of teeth and mental meanderings, the faculty approved a three-course sequence entitled Liberal Arts 101: The Search for Pattern in Human Experience. Envisioned as a year-long experience during the freshman year the components were Liberal Arts 101: The Emerging Woman; Liberal Arts 102: The Scientific Method; and Liberal Arts 103: Artistic Expression.

Liberal Arts 101 is an example of how history can be taught across the curriculum. As a faculty, we had determined certain premises for the course: that it would be required of all freshmen in the woman's college, that the course would be most meaningful if it were developed around a common experience, that it would foster written and oral communication skills, that it would be interdisciplinary in content and in experience, that it would include a variety of teaching methods (recognizing the variety of student learning patterns today), and that it would emphasize the roles which historical thinking and interpretation play in modern life, e.g. in cultural perceptions, in the dynamics of power. What the Tift College faculty had done, to a great extent, was to recognize the validity of the "New History" that James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard had advocated decades ago. History was to provide the method and the foundation for the sister disciplines.

Among the most difficult decisions was the question of course content. What was the common experience that would provide the most meaning for Tift College students? As a women's college, we finally choose "woman" as the general category of interdisciplinary studies that would encourage our students to consider the questions of human experience. That choice, however, was not as simplistic as it might first appear. If we were committed to liberal education, then we knew we had to be committed to teaching inquiry, to teaching how to discern causal relationships, to encouraging value orientation, and to acquiring critical thinking. We knew that we needed to pose challenging questions--perhaps questions which provided no immediate answers. The more we discussed, the more obvious one question became: how accurately could historical scholarship mirror the period it attempted to narrate or to explain? Historian Gerda Lerner had dealt with that very question in her monograph published by the American Historical Association in 1981. She had written:

There are women in history and there are men in history and in the best of possible worlds one

could assume that one could not write of any period or place without giving equal concern and attention to the activities and experiences of both men and women. Were this the case, there would be no need for women's history. But history, traditionally interpreted and recorded by historians, has been, in fact, the history of the activities of men ordered by male values....[Women's history] must be understood not as being descriptive of a past reality but as a conceptual model.<sup>1</sup>

What we were attempting to do was to create an environment for "academic consciousness raising," to borrow a phrase from the faculty of Hope College in Holland, Michigan. When they began their program on gender equality in 1975, they wanted to design a program which would challenge both students and faculty alike. They also wanted a program which was concerned with the human condition. Director Jane Dickie explained, "Part of the Christian tradition is the recognition that we are not perfect; we need to care about our fellow human beings--and that includes women."<sup>2</sup>

As a course designed to provide academic consciousness raising, Liberal Arts 101 needed to be valid for our students. Although the participants in the course would be female at Tift, we believed that the implications of the course should not be gender specific. "What was important about women," according to Gerda Lerner, "was not that they were an oppressed group [a polemical and controversial discussion of this question belonged elsewhere she thought], but that they had made an essential contribution to the building of civilization throughout all of history."<sup>3</sup> That premise was equally important to us.

The mechanics of the course were as challenging as the philosophy. In the end, four professors in four distinct disciplines were appointed to develop and to teach the course. They represented English, history, biology, and religion; two were female and two were male. Because of the demands of the course, Liberal Arts 101 was treated as a five-hour course for each of the four faculty involved. A general plan for the ten week quarter included introductory lectures or presentations to be given by Tift faculty or guest lecturers to the entire group (eighty-four students), followed by discussions on the content of the lectures and readings (the students were divided into four groups and assigned to each of the faculty). Each topic concluded with a thought-provoking written assignment no less frequently than once a week. Students were reminded that grammar and clarity of thought were as important as content. Because we hoped that Liberal Arts 101 would introduce students to "writing across the curriculum," we also scheduled time for instruction in the mechanics of writing essays.

During the development of Liberal Arts 101, the faculty met at frequent intervals to determine the specific content of the course. As it was designed in its final form, Liberal Arts 101 included topics devoted to 19th and 20th century women's history (which served as an introduction to the course), topics on the biology of women, how women perceive spatial relationships, how technology affects and will affect women, how women are portrayed in the media, and how humans (who happen to be female) develop a religious and ethical

perspective. In many ways, during the quarter the course grew in complexity just as women's studies as a discipline has grown in the past decade. From the simple incorporation of historical primary materials on women, women's studies now includes analytical perspectives and systematically developed materials which are no longer gender specific. We hoped our students would develop their thought processes in similar ways.

We introduced the course with a multi-media presentation called the "Emerging Woman: Images and Realities." Using historical quotations from men and women (some known and some unknown), popular music, and visual images transformed into slides, we recreated the multiple images of women in 19th and 20th century America. Not only could students consider what influence the various images might have had on women and on society in general, but they saw in practice that popular culture is a form of history. What images, for example, do the words of Hall and Oates' popular song "She's a Maneater" reveal? Do they represent a woman of the 1980s who is part of the sex-goddess continuum of Marilyn Monroe or Brigitte Bardot? Are the gentle but poignant questions of Carly Simon in "That's the Way it Should Be" as much a part of the modern woman's dilemma today as they were in the 1970s?<sup>4</sup> After the half-hours presentation, students were encouraged to consider what relationships exist between images and reality. More importantly, how can historical methods help define image and reality? What evidence can be used to make these judgments?

The first unit giving historical perspective to the "woman question" dealt with definitions, e.g. woman, womanish, female, femininity, lady. Are the definitions used today the same definitions which might have been applied in the 19th century? Have the definitions included section, class or racial considerations? To begin the study, we chose a popular quotation defining the southern lady from Ms. Magazine:

I know of no place in this country other than the South where a girl growing up has an image of womanhood already cut out for her, stitched securely by the practiced hands of tradition, available for her to slip into, ready-made, and henceforward "pass" as a "lovely person." Who ever heard of the "Midwestern Lady" or the "Northern Belle"? They defy their stereotypes the minute you utter the words. Yet, everybody knows the "Southern Woman," "the Southern Lady," the "Southern Belle." People who have never set foot south of the Mason-Dixon line can tick off her typical characteristics. Typical, that's the key word here. There is a preordained typicality about Southern womanhood.<sup>5</sup>

Using prescriptive literature from the 19th century and current analytical articles, we began to sort through the images of women. How thoroughly did the "Cult of True Womanhood," for example, pervade society?<sup>6</sup> Literature warned "ladies" to avoid novels, particularly the "immoral trash" written by Voltaire, and to engage in appropriate pursuits or they might end up as "ugly, clever old maids who resemble men because they have employed what brain they had in a masculine

way."<sup>7</sup> Given this 19th century scenario on which the image of the southern belle has been based, we asked our students to consider whether or not the image of the pious, pale, and later tight-laced lady of the literature was a representative of her age. Did plantation mistresses fit this mold? What about the woman of the industrial working class or the non-white southern woman? Was the southern woman truly on a pedestal? Why then did Mary Chestnut write, "There is no slave, after all, like a wife?"<sup>8</sup>

The woman's experience of the 19th century also included challenges to the legally and socially defined roles of women. Students learned the value of primary sources through the words of the Declaration of Sentiments of the Seneca Falls convention or Charles Converse's efforts to take gender out of language by replacing him/her and he/she with thon. Other sources included Elizabeth Cady Stanton's writings, slides of the new fashion which was popularized by Amelia Bloomer, transcripts of the New York case against Susan B. Anthony in her first attempt to vote before the passage of woman suffrage, and graduation essays written by Tift women during the period.<sup>9</sup>

The reading assignment for this first unit of work was The Hard-Boiled Virgin, published in 1926 by Atlanta writer Frances Newman. By using Newman's heavily autobiographical novel detailing her conflict as a southern woman, the students in their discussion groups began to draw comparisons. One of the leading questions was how much the 19th century image of women had affected Newman as she tried to find her self-worth in the "age of flappers." Probably because of the inadequacies of textbook materials on women's history, students were surprised to learn about the decades of the 1910s and 1920s and the extent of the suffrage movement which built coalitions across racial and economic lines. Students also began to consider whether the agenda of political women has tended to remain the same or change during nearly two centuries of activity. "Are we [women of the 1980s]," questioned one historian, "the women are grandmothers were?"<sup>10</sup>

Although we were forced to reschedule our second major topic because of guest lecturers, we had originally planned to consider the image of women in the media as our next topic. The reading assignment was Ruth Cowan's "Two Washes in the Morning and a Bridge Party at Night: the American Housewife between the Wars." After the lecture, which was presented by the Journalism Department using advertising and movie excerpts, the discussions dealt with a critical question in historical analysis: does the media reflect the culture in which it works or can it be used to manipulate or adapt the culture?<sup>11</sup> A secondary question, but equally important, was to ask if advertising tended to portray either or both sexes as one-dimensional? The writing assignment dealt with the message and themes of advertising in the 21st century, and students were required to take a position and to use evidence from past periods to defend that position.<sup>12</sup>

To introduce the question of women and technology, we invited a nationally known historian. Using the most recent scholarship, he directed his remarks to our aim of "historical consciousness raising," and began by noting the roles of women in the neolithic agricultural revolution and in contemporary goddess cults. For the period of the 19th and 20th centuries, he looked at each of the major inventions as "liberator" or



"oppressor," and it soon became clear that the terms themselves carried inherent prejudices. Not only was that the case, but a new dilemma of historical research was uncovered: the problem of causation. Did the new or more advanced technology bring change in social patterns or did advertising create a technological ideology? In other words, what caused the American woman's obsession with "ring around the collar"?<sup>13</sup>

The discussion of technology, including the technology of the home, brought us to consider private space and domestic architecture. A woman architect introduced to the students the concept of spatial considerations and the changes which have taken place historically; a field trip to Jarrell Plantation near Forsyth showed students the actual development of domestic architecture in Middle Georgia. Discussions and writing assignments dealt with questions raised by the lectures and by the readings which were selected from The Ladies Home Journal (1928, 1933) and the American Historical Association's guide entitled "Approaches to Women's History."<sup>14</sup>

Besides the questions raised by popular literature dealing with "traditional roles," other questions were raised as well. Is private space an extension of personality? Does everyone need a "place of her own"? Is this a common human need, or is this need associated only with women? Although generalizations to these questions could not be made from historical literature, students were shown how to research these questions and how to use historical literature for clues to the questions during different time periods.

Two other more complex topics were designed to round out the exploration into women's studies. First, what role does biology play in defining the woman; and second, what role does religion play? A member of the biology faculty, who entitled his lecture "What a difference good genes make," surveyed the identification of certain qualities with sex (using the Greeks as his example) and then dealt with the genetics of sex, hormones and sex, and errors of sex determination. The latter topic provided thought-provoking questions concerning socialization and sex identification. Students also studied the concept of androgeny, and then considered the multi-faceted roles of women.

Based on questions raised from challenges between socialization and biology in defining the person (or the woman), we began our exploration of women and religion. To set the stage, a sociologist presented the various definitions of religion which have been developed in theology, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Is religion derived, she questioned, through the process of adaptation, following a pattern not so different from the development of the giraffe's long neck? Is religion a way of looking at the world through a screen which has been created by the group in power? Does religion reinforce societal norms or does it challenge them? Although this section of study proved the most troubling intellectually to some students, they began to discover that a historical perspective is not derived solely from what may appear or be promoted as fact. They began to discover the significance of theory and interpretation in the past as well as in the present.

How then, we asked, do organized religions define women in their doctrine and in their practice? As the lectures and discussions progressed, students began to consider the relationship of ideology and practice (a parallel to the

question of image and reality with which we had begun the course). This led logically, we hoped, into our final discussion of "Women and Ethics." How do we determine right and wrong? On what basis do we make decisions? Do women use the same basis for decision-making as male members of society? Is decision-making at least a partial function of culture? We certainly could not hope to address all of the questions which were raised by our study of ethical models, but we could encourage our students to broaden the base from which they made decisions. The method we employed was debate. We organized each of the groups into two topics sections (on abortion and on the efficacy and implications of nuclear power/proliferation); and then we appointed sides. Students, therefore, did not have the leisure to debate the issue from a preconceived, emotional position; they were required to use in their arguments the skills of research, synthesis, and communication that are elements of the historical perspective.

At the end of the course, we prepared an extensive evaluation which would be analyzed statistically and which elicited subjective responses from the students. Overall we were pleased, but the students' responses also confirmed some of our concerns about the mechanics of the course. We realized that an interdisciplinary course requires a firmer conceptual orientation than the one we had enunciated. We needed to be more specific about the objectives of the course--the new ideas; new perspectives, the skills development--which we envisioned. We need to strengthen our transitions between topics, so that students would be fully aware of the relationships. We discovered that we as faculty made intuitive transitions, but that our freshmen thought in much more concrete terms than theories of learning had led us to believe.

An additional problem was our inability to find an appropriate textbook for the course. Although we delved deeply into current literature, the books we found were inappropriate for the course in its entirety. Instead, we agreed to use articles, readings, and the novel with which the course was introduced. Although all of the materials were bound in loose-leaf notebooks, students tended to take the readings less seriously than standard textbooks. Obtaining copyright permission to duplicate materials was also a formidable task.

Students reminded us, as they are sometimes wont to do, that our objectives were too ambitious. Indeed, it was difficult to know how deeply we needed to address each topic, although we discovered that dialogues among faculty from different disciplines aided immeasurably in simplifying presentations without endangering their coherency. Although the faculty had considered teaching Liberal Arts 101 as an honors course or as a senior seminar, we agreed that freshmen needed to understand that education is holistic just as life is holistic.

Although we recognized the need for changes within the course, in a broad way, many of our objectives had also been realized. Of the students, 97 percent agreed that they "were encouraged to ask questions and express opinions." In fact, one of the most successful experiences had been the debate; 75 percent of the students agreed that "the research and the debating experience helped [them] to form an opinion about certain issues and/or changed [their] mind[s] in the process." Eighty-five percent said that they "genuinely thought about the

issues raised by the course." "Information and materials used seemed up-to-date," according to 86 percent and 88 percent agreed that "the professors were open to other viewpoints."

The greatest problem, according to the students, was the heavy requirement that they not only produce good papers judged on content but that they master the principles of essay composition and grammar in their writings as well. On this requirement, we had perhaps been too demanding because we had not been prepared to give extensive remedial and review work to students in need. Those students required more practice than individual professors in the course could provide. A second difficulty, which students noted, was the varying perspective of each discussion group. Although the four professors who led the discussion groups attended all the lectures and met weekly to review the topics and to discuss the materials among themselves, what happened in class could not be mandated beyond the outline which the four professors had developed. The diversity of focus and discussion within each group proved bothersome to some freshmen, although they knew that their particular professor would be evaluating them in light of their discussion experiences alone. Regardless of the problems, students agreed that the greatest strength of the course was the experience of discussing the readings and commenting on the content of the lectures. A second strength, they said, was the breadth of issues raised by Liberal Arts 101.

In spite of what the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Association of American Colleges have suggested in recent months, humanities have not lost their vitality, nor have inquiry, critical analysis, and historical consciousness been lost in some wholesale manner across all regions and in all institutions within American higher education.<sup>15</sup>

Although interdisciplinary courses like Liberal Arts 101 may require more rigorous mechanics and additional preparation (often out of field) for the professors who participate, the rewards for historians are significant. Students learn the value of historical perspective; and, we hope, they ultimately transfer that appreciation of method to an appreciation of history. Those who taught in the program at Tift--historian, biologist, linguist, theologian--recognized that the philosophy behind Liberal Arts 101 was sound. Courses which attempt to carry historical consciousness across the curriculum have been, and must remain, cornerstones of the undergraduate curriculum. They are also the "magnolias and grits" of life.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gerda Lerner, Teaching Women's History (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1981), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>For a summary of Hope College's women's studies program, see "Hope College: Gender Equality Through Self-Exploration," The Forum for Liberal Education 6(April 1984): 14-15. See also Marilyn Boxer, "For and About Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States," Signs 7(Spring 1982):661-95; and Sandra Coyner, "United States: The Institutions and Ideas of Women's Studies, From Critique to New Construction," The Journal of Educational Thought 17(August 1983): 112-132.

<sup>3</sup>Lerner, Teaching Women's History, p. 10, referring to Mary Beard's thesis in Woman as a Force in History (1946).

<sup>4</sup>The presentation was composed of a series of historical



quotations primarily from Judith Papachristou's Women Together: A History in Documents of the Women's Movement in the United States (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976). Nearly two hundred slides, selected by subject, were timed to six popular songs. The historical quotations alternated with the slides and music to form the half-hour presentation.

<sup>5</sup>Gail Godwin, "The Southern Belle," Ms. Magazine (July 1975), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," American Quarterly 18(Summer 1966) 151-162, 173-74. Recent scholarship on the "cult of true womanhood" questions its impact on the 19th century American woman in general. In that context, students can be reminded of the importance of historical evidence, the types of questions which must be asked of that evidence, and the purpose of revision in history.

<sup>7</sup>Quotations in this sentence are taken from the following two sources in the order given: Virginia Carey, Letters on Female Character Addressed to a Young Lady on the Death of Her Mother 3rd ed. (Hartford, Conn.: Henry Benton, 1831), p. 157; Alexander Walker, Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity, and Divorce (New York: J. and H. G. Langley, 1843), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Chestnut, as quoted in Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 46.

<sup>9</sup>Among the many books published in the last decade, Gerda Lerner's The Female Experience: An American Documentary (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979) remains one of the most useful.

<sup>10</sup>Anne F. Scott, "Are We the Women Our Grandmothers Were?" The Atlanta Historical Journal 25(Fall 1981), 5-18.

<sup>11</sup>Ruth Cowan, "Two Washes in the Morning and a Bridge Party at Night: the American Housewife Between the Wars," Women's Studies (1976): 147-172.

<sup>12</sup>See Joseph Seldin, "Ads Insulting Women: 'A Long Way to Go, Baby,'" Nation, 16 April 1977, pp. 464-466. Seldin's research and statistical analysis developed four advertising stereotypes: "women's place is in the home; women do not make important decisions or do important things; women are dependent and need male protection; men regard women primarily as sex objects are are not interested in them as people."

<sup>13</sup>This question is raised particularly by Ruth Cowan's "The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century," Technology and Culture 17(January 1976): 1-23.

<sup>14</sup>Anne Chapman, ed. "Approaches to Women's History: A Resource Book and Teaching Guide," (Looseleaf guide) Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1979.

<sup>15</sup>Association of American Colleges Committee, "Integrity in the College Curriculum: Test of the Report of the Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees," The Chronicle of Higher Education 29(13 February 1985): 12-30. The report of the National Endowment for the Humanities was carried in the 28 November 1984 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education.



APPENDIX  
Liberal Arts 101

Syllabus

Week 1: Introduction

Reading Assignment: Hard-Boiled Virgin

Week 2: Discussion Group: "Who Am I"

Lecture: "The Southern Lady"

Lecture: "Bloomerism and the Road to Degradation"

Essay Assignment

Reading Assignment: Newman, Hard-Boiled Virgin

Week 3: Lecture: "Magnolias and Grits: The Southern Lady comes home to Georgia"

Lecture: Tift College Through the Years

Discussion of Hard-Boiled Virgin

Essay Examination

Reading Assignment: Newman, Hard-Boiled Virgin

Readings from Monroe College Monthly

Week 4: Lecture: "Myth American: Women as portrayed in Advertising"

Lecture: "Women in the Flicks"

Discussion and role-playing (role-reversal)

Essay Assignment

Reading Assignment: Cowan, "Two Washes in the morning"

Week 5: Lecture: "Technology: Liberator or Oppressor?"  
Melvin Kranzberg, Georgia Institute of Technology

Presentation: "Blinded by Science"/  
"Electric Avenue"--technology represented through dance

Discussion of readings

Essay assignment

Reading Assignment: Cowan, "The Industrial Revolution in the Home"

Selections entitled "Technology: Liberator or Oppressor"

Week 6: Group Discussion: A Look at Women's Places using materials on architectural styles

Lecture: "Knowing Your Place--Women and Architecture" Merrill Elam, AIA

Field Trip: Jarrell Plantation, Juliette, GA

Essay Assignment

Reading Assignment: Collection of articles and clips on women and architecture

Week 7: Lecture: "Our Bodies, Ourselves"

Discussion of readings

Lecture: "The Modern Superwoman"

Guest lecturer, counselor on stress  
Essay Examination

Reading Assignment: "X: A Fabulous Child's Story"  
"Reproduction, Development and Inheritance"

Week 8: Lecture: "Religion: What is it; How do you get it?  
What do you do with it once you've got it?"  
Discussion: "The End of the World" or "How Values  
affect Behavior"  
Discussion of readings and values clarification  
Essay Examination

Reading Assignment: Vocabulary list and Study Guide

Week 9: Lecture: "Women and the World Religions"  
Group discussion  
Group discussion  
Essay Assignment

Reading Assignment: Readings on Hinduism, Buddhism,  
Islam and Christianity

Week 10: Lecture: "Women and Ethics"  
Discussion using case studies  
Discussion using case studies  
Essay Assignment

Reading Assignment: "Ethical Relativism: Is  
Anything Wrong?"  
"Sexual Morality: Personal Relations?"

Week 11: Presentation of Term Project  
Lecture: "Women in the Future"  
Conclusion presented by the four instructors  
Course Evaluation