Reading Women / Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America

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In the spring of 1847, a year before her graduation from one of the many female academies and seminaries in the nineteenth-century United States, Bessie Lacy wrote to her father, the prominent Presbyterian minister Drury Lacy, about the future she imagined for herself. Edgeworth Seminary, the school she was attending in Greensboro, North Carolina, was providing her a formal education, and Lacy readily acknowledged her debt to one of the South's leading female educational institutions. Simultaneously, however, Lacy made clear that her informal education had been equally important. Undertaken through intensive reading, that education made possible the future she now imagined. Once she had completed her schooling at the seminary, Lacy proposed that she and her father begin reading "Locke, Bacon, Stuart, [and] Blackstone." They would take their "recreation," as she described it, in "the beauties of Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Cowper [and] Scott." They would also "*take* a peep at the Classical writers," although that would be done "*only* for *old acquaintance sake.*" That she was delighted with the project she had designed was obvious: "Oh! won't we have a fine time reading together in your study," she wrote to her father. The reading in which Lacy was immersing herself would prepare her for a second project. She and classmate Maggie Morgan

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I am indebted to Jeanne Boydston, Mary Cayton, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, William Gilmore-Lehne, Robert A. Gross, Ellen Fitzpatrick, Louise Hamlin, Nancy Hewitt, David Nord, Michael O'Brien, Lewis Perry, Philip Pochoda, Joan Shelley Rubin, Louise Stevenson, Fredrika Teute, and Mary Trescott, whose discerning and remarkably generous counsel have made this essay a collaborative project. I am also indebted to the dean of faculty at Dartmouth College. In appointing me Third Century Professor in the Social Sciences, James Wright has provided me additional time for pursuit of my scholarship. David Thelen has been an exemplary editor. His guidance has helped me to sharpen the essay's focus. Still more important, he has always pressed me to explore the larger implications of my subject. Susan Armeny's exceptional skills as a copy editor have enhanced argument and language. This essay is dedicated to Ann Bremer, Elizabeth Dycus, Nancy Frankenberry, Judith McGaw, Susan Macvicar, Nell Irvin Painter, Sharon O'Brien, and Susanne Zantop, friends who have provided professional and personal support beyond measure.

had decided that they would go "to some of the southern states or somewhere, and establish an institution for young ladies." Lacy and Morgan would have a "snug little room [with] a studio adjoining" where they would house "all our books."[1] This, then, was a future that would be filled with reading. Equally important, it was a future in which reading would fill a life with meaning.

Bessie Lacy's life diverged from what she had anticipated at the age of fifteen. She did return to her home in Raleigh, North Carolina, after her graduation from Edgeworth Seminary in the spring of 1848. But the project she had so enthusiastically described to her father was deferred, and she was sent instead to Richmond, Virginia, for another year of schooling. And Lacy did teach after she had completed her education. Again, the circumstances were different from what she had expected. She returned to Edgeworth Seminary and taught there during the spring of 1851. Nonetheless, the divergences proved to be less significant than the signal continuity. Lacy's was still a life very much shaped by engagement with reading. After her marriage to Thomas Webber Dewey in 1853, she and her husband resided in Charlotte, North Carolina. There Lacy led in establishing the Social Reading Club, a literary society in which women and men gathered to read fiction, history, and travel literature. She organized the Ladies Tract Society, which distributed religious literature throughout Charlotte and environs. She served as librarian for the Public Library of the Charlotte Library Association. And she was instrumental in founding the city's Saturday Morning Literary Club. Whether imagining her future with the enthusiasm of youth or pursuing her path as an adult, Bessie Lacy placed reading at the center of her life.[2]

Roger Chartier has observed that one of the principal approaches historians and literary critics have taken to the experience of reading is to reconstruct "the diversity of older readings from their sparse and multiple traces."[3] Drawing on that approach, this essay reconstructs the world of reading inhabited by such women as Bessie Lacy in the seven decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War. In the traces that mark their letters, commonplace books, diaries, autograph albums, and journals, these readers left the record of a remarkable engagement with reading. Reading women embraced books, literally and figuratively. Choosing them as companions on voyages of discovery, they relished the play of ideas, delighted in unexpected insights, and meditated upon newly found knowledge. They looked to books to spark flights of fancy, relieve solitude, provoke laughter,

[1] Bessie Lacy to Drury Lacy, Feb. 11, 1847, Drury Lacy Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill). Bessie Lacy's devotion to reading had been instilled by both of her parents. Before her death in 1846, Williana Wilkinson Lacy served as an important model for her daughter. A deeply engaged reader, she sprinkled her letters to Bessie with references to other learned women, including the controversial Germaine de Staël. See correspondence between Williana Wilkinson Lacy and Bessie Lacy, *ibid.*

[2] The biographical information on Bessie Lacy is drawn from the Lacy Papers.

[3] Roger Chartier, "Texts, Printing, Readings," in *The New Cultural History,* ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), 157.

and furnish refuge. Consistently, books served as the ground on which women readers built a dense and diversified mental life. Sixteen-year-old Caroline Chester, a student at Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy in Litchfield, Connecticut, spoke to the profound value these readers attached to books. Books, as she noted in her journal, were the means by which "we learn how to live."[4]

Perhaps most important, reading women made books a site for experiments in personal transformation. Exploring the spectrum of ideas and personae that filled the pages of their reading, they sampled perspectives and measured their relevance for their lives. They made reading a vehicle for what the Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt has called self-fashioning: the achievement of a distinctive personality, a particular address to the world, a way of acting and thinking. Sometimes books confirmed an already familiar identity. Sometimes they became catalysts in the fashioning of alternative selves.[5]

The traces show that reading women made engagement with books a collective practice. They shared discoveries, exchanged volumes, and suggested titles. Together they measured and interrogated responses. Some institutionalized this practice in literary societies, sewing clubs, and reading classes. There they made the books they read together a medium of exchange as they constructed a common intellectual and cultural world. Frequently, it was the experience of that collective world, the acquaintance with other women who shared their engagement with reading and their aspirations, that enabled reading women to fashion themselves. They were sustained both by models they found in books and by the encouragement of other women with whom they read and exchanged opinions about their reading.

Nowhere is the fruit of their collective practice more apparent than in their use of reading to mediate between the gender conventions of their century and the new ideal they were creating, that of the learned woman. Limning a valorization of female intellect on a model of womanhood that celebrated women only in the context of domesticity, they constructed an alternative possibility. Sometimes their subjects were historical figures whom they had encountered in a biography, a history, or perhaps a novel. More often the subjects were contemporaries. Significantly, the individuals these readers cited most frequently were learned women. Inscribing them with both intellectual agency and more conventional attributes of womanhood, they made a Germaine de Staël, a Maria Edgeworth, a Felicia Hemans, and a Hannah More subjects for emulation. Simultaneously, they validated their own aspirations as learned women in the making.[6]

[4] Journal of Caroline Chester, in Lynne Templeton Brickley, "Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy," in *"To Ornament Their Minds": Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Academy, 1792–1833,* ed. Theodore Sizer et al. (Litchfield, 1993), 45. Reading can empower those who are not literate. For insights into how Sojourner Truth learned from the Bible "not through seeing words and reading them silently, but in the traditional manner, through listening to someone read writing aloud," see Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner's Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *Journal of American History,* 81 (Sept. 1994), 464–92, esp. 468.

[5] For the work that brought the concept of self-fashioning to the fore of scholarly discourse, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980).

[6] On the challenge that learned women posed to conventional gender relations and on female readers as a sympathetic audience for the writings of learned women, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to 1870* (New York, 1993), esp. 192–246.

There were constants in the world of reading inhabited by women in the decades from the Revolution to the Civil War. The sustained and sustaining engagement with reading, its many purposes, and its transformative potential remained the same, as did women readers' identification with learned women. However, there were changes in the larger context of that world. The number of sites where reading was privileged increased during these decades. The hundreds of exclusively female academies and seminaries that were founded between the Revolution and the Civil War schooled students in the importance of books. Sanctioning engagement with both religious and secular literature, teachers validated reading as a woman's pursuit and offered in themselves models of committed readers. Simultaneously, women themselves established literary societies, sewing clubs, and reading classes throughout the United States. Students founded them at academies and seminaries; adult women did the same in both rural and urban settings.

There were also changes in the reading that women selected. In contrast to their seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century counterparts who devoted themselves primarily to religious literature, women readers active after the Revolution began to immerse themselves in secular literature. This pattern became more pronounced in the antebellum decades.[7] The traditional "steady sellers," the Bibles, psalm books, and devotional works to which colonial Americans had devoted themselves, still constituted an important share of their reading. Simultaneously, however, they read widely in history, biography, and travel literature. And they read novels, tales, and sketches, both those that were popular and those later labeled canonical.[8] What little research has been done on their male counterparts suggests that the selection of reading matter was not sharply gendered. Men appear to have read the same history, biography, travel literature, and fiction. Conversely, newspapers had their devoted female readers. Of course, they were the exceptions. For agricultural manuals, men constituted the readership; for recipe books, women. But the purposes that reading served were gendered, in at least one crucial dimension. Female readers identified with learned women, and they modeled themselves on such women.[9]

[7] The letters, commonplace books, diaries, autograph books, and journals on which I have relied map the inclusive pattern of reading that other historians and literary critics glimpsed in their research on the decades immediately after the Revolution. See Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 235–64; Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989), 160–96; and Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986), 55–79.

[8] In their analysis of families' inventories in Vermont and Virginia, historians have found similar patterns. William Gilmore's study of Windsor County, Vermont, from 1780 to 1835 highlights the continued significance of "steady sellers." The Bible remained the most popular choice, and families who counted only one book in their holdings possessed a Bible. Larger holdings included such secular literature as volumes of history, scientific treatises, politics, moral philosophy, travel literature, and novels. Inventories in Virginia during these decades were similar. Ronald J. Zboray's analysis of records of the New York Society Library suggests that history, biography, travel literature, and fiction became dominant categories by the middle of the nineteenth century. See William Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville, 1989), 254–82; Joseph Kett and Patricia McClung, "Book Culture in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society,* 94 (1984), 97–148; and Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York, 1993), 156–79.

[9] Surprisingly little research has been done on the traces left by male readers, 1790–1860. But see Robert A. Gross, "The History of the Book: Research Trends and Source Materials," *The Book: Newsletter of the*

The world of reading reconstructed from women's letters, commonplace books, diaries, autograph albums, and journals challenges the still familiar idea of female reading as passive consumption of textually determined meanings. It shows that reading women exercised an agency that historians and literary critics, who have tended to focus on authors or publishers, have disregarded.[10] Reading women, in Roger Chartier's words, engaged in "a *creative* practice, which invents singular meanings and significations that are not reducible to the intentions of authors of texts or producers of books."[11]

The reconstructed world of reading also challenges the equally familiar idea of female behavior as reflecting an ideology of domesticity that sharply limited impulses toward self-determination. Historians and literary critics who have looked at women through this ideological lens suggest that prevailing conventions of femininity consistently and decisively shaped their behavior. Constrained by the conventions of deference and dependence, women supposedly led lives more as objects who *were acted upon* than as subjects who *acted on* desires for personal autonomy.[12]

The traces tell a more complicated tale. They show that antebellum America's ideology of domesticity served more as a point of departure than as a determining end in the lives of reading women. Recoding the ideology to serve more expansive ends, they incorporated it into a discourse that validated women's minds as equal to those of men, claimed enlarged educational opportunities for women, and looked to academies and seminaries as sites of female learning. Perhaps most

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Program of the History of the Book in American Culture, 31 (Nov. 1993), 3–7; and Zboray, *Fictive People,* 156–79. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Political News and Female Readership in Antebellum Boston and Its Region," *Journalism History,* 22 (Spring 1996), 2–14; Elizabeth R. Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History,* 82 (Sept. 1995), 494–521. I am indebted to Michael Kammen for observations about the genres that were gendered. The popularity of such texts as *Plutarch's Lives* suggests that men also used reading for purposes of self-making.

[10] On the misconception that women readers in general are passive, see Janice Radway, "Reading Is Not Eating: Mass Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor," *Book Research Quarterly,* 2 (Fall 1986), 7–29. On women readers' strategies in the construction of meanings and the significance of historical context in shaping the meanings that readers inscribe in texts, see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Barbara Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America," in *Reading in America: Literature and Society,* ed. Cathy Davidson (Baltimore, 1989), 201–25; Barbara Sicherman, "Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America: 'Cultural Consumption,' Conspicuous and Otherwise," paper presented at the "Conference on Constructing the Middle Class: Consumerism, Domesticity, and Middle Class Identity," New York, Jan. 15–17, 1993 (in Mary Kelley's possession); and Barbara Sicherman, "Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Female Heroism," *American Quarterly,* 45 (March 1993), 73–103.

[11] Chartier, "Texts, Printing, Readings," 156. Emphasis added. Sharon M. Harris has suggested that early American women's letters, diaries, and journals were "self-creating acts" and that "to articulate one's thoughts on paper is often to move toward a sense of self as distinctive from the prevailing cultural conceptions about women." See Sharon M. Harris, "Early American Women's Self-Creating Acts," *Resources for American Literary Study,* 19 (no. 2, 1993), 225.

[12] For a survey of recent scholarship on the ideology of domesticity, see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History,* 75 (June 1988), 9–39. For critiques of the assumption that nineteenth-century women were constrained by this ideology, see *ibid.*; *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, 1987); Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal,* 10 (Spring 1969), 5–15; and Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York, 1984).

notably, the traces map women's identification of sources for alternative models of womanhood. They mark the individual strategies and collective practices that enabled women to resist constraints and to pursue more independent courses of self-definition. And they register the substantial personal autonomy reading women achieved in their intellectual and cultural lives.

Entering the World of Reading: The Many Uses of Books

During the nearly seven decades of her life, Bessie Lacy claimed an unusually large number of the roles available to women who shared her race and social status. She was a student, a teacher, a social reformer, a wife, and a mother. But whatever roles she pursued, Lacy was always a reader. In this she was hardly alone. In the various social, economic, and regional communities of antebellum America, other women too were deeply engaged with reading. Some were students who were entering the world of reading. They joined those for whom reading had been a daily habit for decades. These readers lived in the North and the South, in cities and hamlets, and in towns large and small. Some earned their livelihood as teachers. Others belonged to elite planter or wealthy merchant families. Still others joined their lives with those of ministers, shopkeepers, or farmers.

What these socially, economically, and regionally diverse individuals shared was surely as significant as what distinguished them. They were female; typically, they were white; and variations notwithstanding, they were relatively privileged. Perhaps most notably, nearly all of them had received the most advanced education then available to women in the United States. Those coming to maturity in the late eighteenth century typically had been educated at home and at schools that instructed them in social accomplishments. These, of course, were decades in which women's educational opportunities were still decidedly limited. Public schools were only beginning to provide girls with the same opportunities as boys. Private female academies and seminaries, which were emerging in both the North and the South, were not yet common.

Often it was parents who introduced daughters to the world of reading. The daughters embraced that world with an almost tangible delight. Born in 1755, Hannah Adams spoke for many of them. In recalling what reading had meant to her, she declared "my first idea of the happiness of Heaven [was] of a place where we should find our thirst for knowledge fully gratified." That place was her father's library, where Adams spent much of her childhood. There she had read "with avidity a variety of books." Acknowledging that she was "passionately fond of novels," she hastened to add that she was also "an enthusiastic admirer of poetry." And she had attended to the reading that social and cultural commentators recommended most consistently to women. Noting that she had not "neglect[ed] the study of history and biography," she said that "in each . . . I found an inexhaustible fund to feast my mind." In the informal schooling that Adams had designed for herself, she made reading and education one.[13]

[13] Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams, Written by Herself with Additional Notices by a Friend* (Boston, 1832), 4–5.

Martha Laurens Ramsay, born in 1759, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, born exactly three decades later, also fashioned their learning on reading done in their households. Compiled by Ramsay's husband shortly after her death in 1811, the *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay* present a woman fully engaged with reading. In describing the relish for books that his wife displayed from an early age, David Ramsay claimed that "in the course of her third year she could readily read any book." And, he added, "what is extraordinary, in an inverted position." (Ramsay's obvious pride in his wife's powerful mind may well have led to exaggeration in this instance.) The record of reading that Martha Ramsay compiled leaves little doubt that from an early age she was "indefatigable in cultivating an acquaintance with books." She made that acquaintance permanent (and in the process disciplined her mind) "by means of abridging, transcribing, and committing to memory" the books that she read. Ramsay attempted to cultivate the same rigorous approach to reading in others, also from an early age. Telling the readers of the *Memoirs* that his wife "was very much in the habit of giving books as keepsakes," David Ramsay noted that she included "a short memorandum in her hand writing, pointing out their important contents."[14]

Unlike Ramsay, whose education took place almost entirely in her family's household, Catharine Maria Sedgwick was sent to schools in New York City, Boston, and Albany. Nonetheless, she considered her formal education "a waste, my home life my only education." The latter education was distinguished by a father who read aloud to the family. Sedgwick remembered listening to him reading passages from Miguel de Cervantes, William Shakespeare, and David Hume when she was eight. Three years later, Sedgwick herself was reading constantly, "chiefly novels." She was twelve when she added to her reading list Charles Rollin's multivolume *Ancient History,* which introduced her to "Cyrus's greatness." Lighter fare included the increasingly popular children's miscellanies collected by Anna Barbauld and Arnaud Berquin. Reading, then, had constituted her "education," as Sedgwick declared in her autobiography.[15]

By the early nineteenth century, members of the generations that succeeded those of Adams, Ramsay, and Sedgwick had begun to attend female academies and seminaries. Nearly four hundred of these schools were established exclusively for women in the North and the South between 1790 and 1830. Hundreds more opened in the three decades before the Civil War. Welcoming female students into the world of learning and introducing them to such subjects as history, geography, mathematics, and the natural sciences, these institutions had a profound impact. With the exception of Oberlin College, the nation's colleges began to admit women only after the middle of the nineteenth century. The earliest women's colleges, Vassar, Smith, and Bryn Mawr, opened their doors in 1865, 1875, and 1884 respectively. Founded as a seminary in 1837, Mount Holyoke became a college in 1888. For more than half a century, then, the hundreds of female academies and seminaries were the only institutions that provided women with

[14] David Ramsay, *Memoirs of the Life of Martha Laurens Ramsay* (Charleston, 1812), 12, 13, 24.

[15] Mary Kelley, ed., *The Power of Her Sympathy: The Autobiography and Journal of Catharine Maria Sedgwick* (Boston, 1993), 84, 74, 82–83.

Jacob Maentel's pen and watercolor drawing, *General Schumacker's Daughter* c. 1812, dating from the period when female academies and seminaries were inventing a world of reading, highlights the significance of reading for women.
Courtesy National Gallery of Art.

advanced learning. These schools enrolled substantial numbers of women. Indeed, the percentage of women attending female academies and seminaries between 1790 and 1830 was larger than the percentage of men enrolled in male academies and colleges. In an 1819 letter to a younger cousin, Maria Campbell of Virginia registered the significance of these educational institutions. Reminding Mary Humes, a student at the acclaimed Salem Academy in Salem, North Carolina, that hers was a world very different from that of earlier generations, Campbell told her, "in the days of our forefathers it was considered only necessary to learn

a female to read the Bible." Institutions such as Salem Academy made Mary Humes a reader of many books. In the process she made herself a learned woman.[16]

Those who had been welcomed into the world of reading by their parents found that world expanded and their habits of reading reinforced during the years they attended an academy or seminary. Still others relied on their schooling to introduce them to the world of reading. Teachers at these institutions privileged reading. Caroline Chester, a student at Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy, rehearsed the convictions that Pierce and Pierce's nephew, John Pierce Brace, had instilled in her. Books, she declared in a journal kept during 1816, inform "us of all important events which have taken place since the creation of the world." Precisely because they did so, they served as the means by which "our understandings are enlarged and our memories strengthened."[17] Teachers such as Sarah Pierce and John Brace encouraged students to educate themselves through reading. In their academies and seminaries, the self-education students acquired through reading and the more formal education to which they were exposed in classrooms intersected, supplementing and reinforcing each other.

The character of this intersection is manifest in the journal of Philadelphian Charlotte Forten, an African American who began recording entries shortly after she went to Salem, Massachusetts, to complete her education. Prefaced by an epigraph in which the sixteen-year-old Forten dedicated her journal to marking "the growth and improvement of my mind from year to year," the initial entry, dated May 24, 1854, described a day in which Forten had studied arithmetic, recited lessons, and practiced music. She had "commenced reading 'Hard Times,' a new story by Dickens." And she had "spent the evening in writing." In the month that followed, Forten pursued her formal education at Higginson Grammar School, studying English grammar, modern geography, and American history in addition to arithmetic. Simultaneously, she read the Bible, the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the sermons of Theodore Parker, and the antislavery newspapers. She devoted herself to Thomas B. Macaulay's *History of England,* John Greenleaf Whittier's "Moll Pitcher," and Lydia Maria Child's biography of Germaine de Staël. During the nearly three years she attended Higginson Grammar School and then Salem Normal School, the pattern remained the same. So too did Forten's

[16] Nearly two decades ago, Anne Firor Scott alerted historians to the significance of female academies and seminaries. Nonetheless, much research remains to be done. See, Anne Firor Scott, "The Ever-Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary, 1822–72," *History of Education Quarterly,* 19 (Spring 1979), 3–25. On the number of academies and seminaries founded between 1790 and 1830, see Lynne Templeton Brickley, "Female Academies Are Every Where Establishing': The Beginnings of Secondary Education for Women in the United States, 1790–1830" (unpublished qualifying paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1982), 48–49, and appendix C. Brickley notes that this list "is just a beginning and only meant to be suggestive." There is no count of academies and seminaries founded in the last three decades before the Civil War, but my research in the American Antiquarian Society's extensive collection of catalogues indicates that hundreds more were established then. See also Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States* (New York, 1929); and Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1994). Maria Campbell to Mary Humes, Sept. 21, 1819, Campbell Collection (Manuscript Department, Duke University, Durham, N.C.).

[17] Brickley, "Sarah Pierce's Litchfield Female Academy," 45–46.

pleasure in marking the growth, the improvement of her mind, that had been accomplished through reading.[18]

As students at academies or seminaries, many of these women shared a decisive experience—engagement with a female teacher who, having already built a life around reading, became a model. Jane Barnham Marks was one such instructor. Like other teachers in antebellum America, Marks rewarded excellence with tokens of achievement. Some instructors gave students elaborately inscribed certificates. Others gave autograph albums. Marks, a teacher at the South Carolina Female Institute, in Columbia, chose Priscilla Wakefield's aptly titled *Mental Improvement* as a gift. On the flyleaf of Harriet Hayne's copy, an inscription dated June 4, 1821, tells us Hayne had achieved the highest status in Third Class in Geography. Years later Hayne, following Marks's precedent, presented the volume to her sister Sarah, who carefully inscribed her name on the title page. Bessie Lacy reversed this pattern, giving the *Personal Recollections* of English author Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna to her most valued teacher at Edgeworth Seminary. Describing the gift as a "testimonial of gratitude," Lacy told her father why a book was appropriate and Julia St. John an equally appropriate recipient. At St. John's invitation, teacher and student had spent their evenings reading together. Lacy also informed her father that St. John had been "highly gratified and surprised—said she would prize it as a gift from Bessie and also as completing the set of Charlotte Elizabeth's works." In Lacy's selection of Tonna's *Recollections* and in St. John's delighted response, the attachment to reading was manifest, as was the identification with a learned woman.[19]

In giving books to reward accomplishment, in sponsoring literary societies, in using reading to forge bonds with students, and in sharing personal libraries, teachers at female academies and seminaries defined reading as a *female* enterprise. Martha Hauser, a student at Greensboro Female College in Greensboro, North Carolina, testified to the impact of these practices. In a letter she sent Julia Conrad Jones, an aunt who had graduated from Salem Academy, Hauser described her studies. "American Geography, Smellie's Philosophy of Natural History, Algebra, and modern Geography" occupied her. Hauser allowed that she was "pleased with all my studies especially Algebra." (In a striking reversal of gender stereotypes, she claimed mathematics "is the only thing I have any talent for." Composition was dismissed as "the pest of my life".) Nonetheless, it was the reading done in addition to her studies that most engaged her. The reason was obvious, at least

[18] Brenda Stevenson, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke* (New York, 1988), 58, 59. See Nellie McKay, "The Journals of Charlotte Forten-Grimke: *Les Lieux de Memoire* in African-American Women's Autobiography," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York, 1994), 261–71.

[19] For the argument that women are attracted to teaching as a means by which to achieve intellectual and cultural objectives, see Jo Anne Preston, "Domestic Ideology, School Reformers, and Female Teachers: Schoolteaching Becomes Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century New England," *New England Quarterly*, 66 (Dec. 1993), 531–51. The volume that Jane Barnham Marks gave Harriet Hayne is deposited in the South Carolina Female Institute Papers (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia). Bessie Lacy to Drury Lacy, Jan. 27, March 2, 1848, Lacy Papers.

to Hauser and, she presumed, to her correspondent, "I think it one of the essentials of a female's education that she be well read."[20]

The epistemology of nineteenth-century gender relations labeled as inherently female such attributes as intuition, sensibility, and empathy, which women supposedly expressed spontaneously. Conversely, attributes that were considered masculine, including closely argued reasoning, critical inquiry, and disinterested reflection, required that an individual, whether male or female, deliberately cultivate, enlarge, and discipline the mind. In telling her aunt, "I intend to employ all my spare time reading something that will prove beneficial to me," Hauser countered the dichotomy inherent in this epistemology. She looked to her education to cultivate, to enlarge, and to discipline her mind. In making herself a *learned* woman, she was not necessarily casting aside the conventionally feminine. Instead, she was claiming that a learned *woman* was also able to acquire and to practice the attributes deemed masculine.[21]

After education had been completed and adult life had begun, these readers continued to inhabit the world of books. The same engagement, purposes, and identification with learned women that had informed their reading during childhood and adolescence continued unabated. Simultaneously, reading began to serve still other uses in their lives. It shaped the practice of teaching, the profession chosen most frequently by these women. The books that in earlier years had provided them with models of learned women found their way into their classrooms. Sarah Pierce called upon her students to cultivate their minds so that they might "emulate their sisters in Europe in moral and intellectual acquirements, that on this side of the Atlantic Hannah Mores and Mrs. [Mary] Sherwoods will arise to instruct and enlighten the world." Shortly after she began to read a biography of Hannah More, Julia Parker introduced her students to the tale of this learned woman's life. Parker's reasons reflected her aspirations for her students. Recording her admiration for the attributes that More displayed, she hoped that "emulation of them may conduce to [the students'] present and eternal good." Julia St. John's invitation to Bessie Lacy spoke to the same ideals. The act of reading Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Personal Recollections* together prompted Lacy's and reinforced St. John's emulation of yet another learned woman.[22]

Sometimes reading opened outward to a life of visible engagement with print culture. Reading propelled an adult Bessie Lacy into a public world of literary societies, voluntary organizations, and public libraries. It had a similar impact on New Englander Susan Huntington, a leading member of Boston's Female Education

[20] Martha Hauser to Julia Conrad Jones, March 9, 1853, Jones Family Papers (Southern Historical Collection).

[21] *Ibid.* On the debate surrounding this epistemology, see Mary Kelley, "'Vindicating the Equality of Female Intellect': Women and Authority in the Early Republic," *Prospects,* 17 (1992), 1–27. See also Susan Phinney Conrad, *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America, 1830–1860* (New York, 1976), esp. 3–44; and Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Oh., 1976), 71–82.

[22] Emily Noyes Vanderpoel, ed., *Chronicles of a Pioneer School from 1792–1833* (Cambridge, Mass., 1903), 219; E. Latimer, ed., *Life and Thought; or, Cherished Memorials of the Late Julia A. Parker Dyson* (Boston, 1871), 62, 65.

Society, Female Tract Society, and Female Bible Society.[23] Most strikingly, African Americans who founded literary societies in the North used them to mount challenges to slavery. When they published the poetry and prose they had written as members, when they held public exhibitions that included poetry readings, music, and speeches, they made all that they had learned serve the cause of freedom.

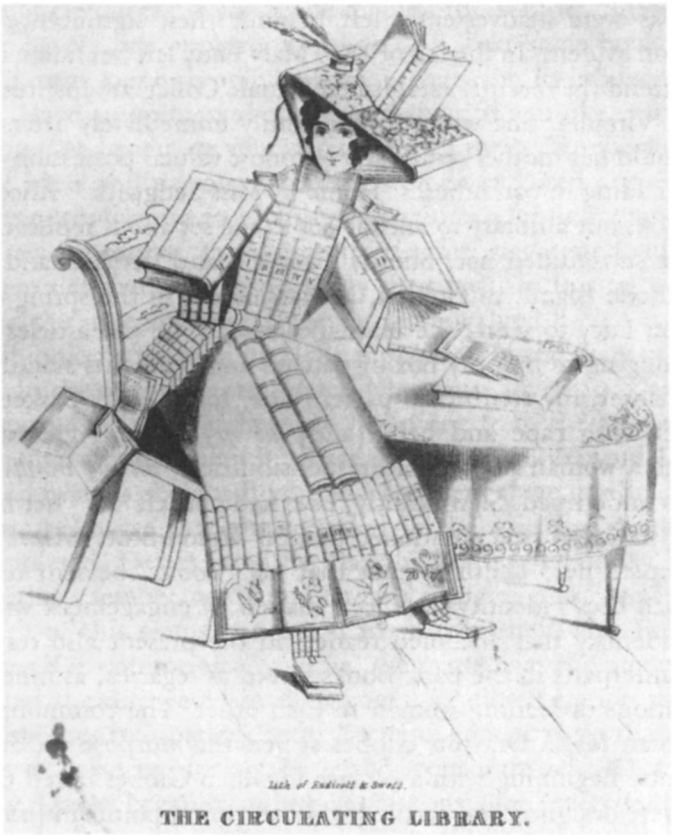
Sometimes reading turned inward, stimulating the invention of an expansive world set apart from external life circumstances. When she remarked upon "the privilege of reading," Caroline Howard Gilman of Massachusetts and later of South Carolina signaled the character of this dimension—"a privilege, which not only gives a spring to the happiest thoughts, but peoples solitude, softens care, and beguiles anxiety." Novelist, essayist, and biographer Margaret Bayard Smith made books her most intimate companions. Describing her library as "my supreme delight," Smith explained that whatever the circumstances, she had been able to rely upon "my books! when forsaken by other friends, they were with me still—when happy, they made me happier—when sad, they enlivened—when sick, they amused—when troubled, they soothed me." Mary Eliza Sweet, who also likened books to companions, looked to them to provide an intellectual and emotional compass. "Come then my Books," this resident of Savannah, Georgia, declared in a commonplace book filled with poems, philosophical musings, and religious commentary. Surrounding herself with books, Sweet relied upon these "companions safe / Soothers of pain, and antidote to care: / Friendly to wisdom, virtue, and to truth." Books might provoke laughter. They might secure relief from loneliness. They might bring a glimpse of the sublime. They might steady the course in a moment of uncertainty. Invariably, they availed readers with possible alternatives to the quotidian.[24]

Three decades ago, the historian Richard Hofstadter reminded us that the mind has at least two capacities. Distinguishing between intelligence and intellect, he noted that the latter "has a certain spontaneous character and inner determination" that sets it apart from the more instrumental intelligence. It has as well "a peculiar poise of its own, which I believe is established by a balance between two basic qualities in the intellectual's attitude toward ideas—qualities that may be designated as playfulness and piety."[25] The carefully chosen passages that fill the pages of commonplace books and autograph albums illustrate what Hofstadter called piety. These entries also reflect the highly purposeful engagement with books. The laughter, the drollery, the whimsical experiments with language and perspective sprinkled through diaries and journals partake in the contrapuntal playfulness. Here the more anarchical appears. The reactions were spontaneous, the ends unanticipated. However the balance was struck between piety and playfulness,

[23] Benjamin Blydenberg Wisner, ed., *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Susan Huntington* (Boston, 1826).

[24] Caroline Howard to Ann Maria Howard White, [1810s], Caroline Howard Gilman Papers (South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston); Margaret Bayard Smith, "My Books," *Ladies' Magazine,* 4 (Sept. 1831), 404–5. Fredrika Teute, who is writing a cultural biography of Margaret Bayard Smith, shared this essay with me. Mary Eliza Sweet Commonplace Book, [1820s] (Georgia Historical Society, Savannah).

[25] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963), 27. Some of the ideas explored in these paragraphs have developed from conversations with Michael O'Brien. I am indebted to his insights.



The expansion of print culture in the early nineteenth century made both religious and secular literature more widely accessible. Reading women, as represented in this lithograph, used books for a range of purposes, including the fashioning of newly distinct identities.
Courtesy Library Company, Philadelphia.

reading became a means by which a woman could explore the varied dimensions of her mental life.

Whether books led reading women outward to a public world or inclined them inward to a world of their own making, women relied upon the artifacts themselves to secure their identity in times of transition. Never was this more apparent than when readers left households and communities with which they were familiar and embarked on journeys into the unknown. Serving as tangible symbols of the world from which they had been separated, books sustained these readers no matter the circumstances in which they found themselves. They reduced the sense of dislocation many women experienced and grounded their lives as they confronted unfamiliar settings.

When books were inadvertently left behind, their significance as cherished objects was soon evident. In the fall of 1839 Mary Early left her home in Lynchburg, Virginia, to attend the recently established Female Collegiate Institute in Buckingham County, Virginia. She wrote to her family immediately after her arrival at the school. Could her mother send Early her most valued possession—my "Book," she declared, adding in parentheses "Home by Miss Sedgwick." Alice Aldrich Lees had, not a book, but a library to anchor her as she set about replicating the world that had once surrounded her. Shortly after she and her husband moved from Smithfield, Rhode Island, to Holden, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1830, Lees asked her sister Lucy to send "the Marseilles spread, all the articles in the garret cupboard belonging to me, my box of patches and remnants standing on a shelf in the upper closet, my comb box, pattern box, round work basket, piece book, gingham frock with cape and belt, [and] *all my books.*" Preceded by goods associated with a woman's household responsibilities, "*all my books*" stood alone and alone was underlined. Significantly, Lees had not left "*all*" her books behind. At the end of the letter, she mentioned that Sir Walter Scott's *Anne of Geierstein* currently occupied her. The insistence that her "*books*" be sent testified to the degree to which Lees's identity had been shaped by engagement with reading.[26]

The same identity that anchored readers in the present also connected them with their counterparts in the past. Books served as legacies, as inheritances, that linked generations of reading women to each other. The commonplace book of South Carolinian Maria Drayton Gibbes served this purpose for at least two of her descendants. Beginning with a preface in which Gibbes noted that commonplace books were designed "especially [to] note capital points in [one's] reading," this reader filled one hundred and eighteen pages with quotations from William Paley's *Moral and Political Philosophy,* Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education,* James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson,* Lady Fanshaw's *Memoirs,* and the earl of Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son.* Decades later, Emma S. Gibbes inscribed on the flyleaf "Notebook of my Grandmother Maria Gibbes (1784–1826) given to me by Aunt Louisa." The preservation, by female kin, of the commonplace book that is the only extant document of Maria Drayton Gibbes testifies to identification with a mother and grandmother who had been devoted to reading. Gibbes's legacy, the inheritance left to later generations, was both the object itself and the devotion to reading that was encoded in it.[27]

Fashioning the Self: Matters of Appropriation

In a letter that she wrote to a classmate at Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1839, Julia Hyde spoke to self-fashioning, one of the most significant uses of reading in the lives of these women. Telling Lucy Goodale that she ought to "cultivate

[26] Mary Early to Elizabeth Early, Oct. 26, 1839, Early Brown Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond); Alice Aldrich Lees to Lucy Aldrich, March 8, 1830 (Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence).

[27] Maria Drayton Gibbes Commonplace Book, [c. 1820], Gibbes-Gilchrist Papers (South Carolina Historical Society).

independence of character," Hyde made reading the vehicle: "In our intercourse with books we have a fine opportunity to do this. Take some book, for instance, and read it and form your own opinion as to its character, its influence, its beauties and its faults. Have an opinion about it, and then, if you like, you can find out what others think and compare your decisions with theirs." Immersing themselves in a variety of ideas and personae, reading women explored a world of possible selves, sometimes confirming an identity, sometimes adopting a newly discovered possibility. They rehearsed, they interpreted, they negotiated different selves, fashioning identities that were distinctively their own. In this important project, they cultivated the independence Hyde so clearly valued.[28]

The self-fashioning advocated by Hyde is manifest in the diary of Mississippian Maria Davies. In the opening entry, dated November 14, 1850, Davies explained the volume's purpose: "I was induced to begin one from the advice of friends as a means of mental improvement."[29] That the seventeen-year-old Davies accomplished this and more is obvious from the subsequent three hundred and seventy-five closely written pages that she recorded in the next five years. Her formal education completed, Davies filled her days by keeping a Sunday School, going to lectures, writing a temperance pamphlet, and studying music at a local seminary. In the diary all of this seems ephemeral when compared with Davies' reading. Immersing herself in volume after volume, she made texts the pretext for meditations on all that she discovered in their pages. The deliberation with which she crafted her responses is apparent, as is the independent voice that emerges.

The entries in the diary during the initial six months of 1851 are illustrative. In late January, Davies began recording her responses to George Gilfillan's *Second Gallery of Literary Portraits,* a volume devoted to sketches of British and American writers ranging from John Milton to Sydney Smith to Ralph Waldo Emerson to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Davies did not defer to Gilfillan, a noted Scottish critic. Presuming instead that she was an equally capable commentator on matters intellectual and cultural, Davies recorded her own opinions. Such was immediately apparent in the skeptical eye she cast on Gilfillan himself. He had not been a "lucid writer." He had not provided "biography but speaks of [the figures] as authors and nothing else." Worst of all, he had not helped her cope with the frustrations that readers then and now have experienced with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Instead, Davies had been forced to adopt Gilfillan's method of reading Emerson: "skip that [which] I couldn't understand and be the happier for the bright spots that follow."[30]

Davies was decidedly more pleased with Gilfillan's treatment of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He had spoken "encouragingly of our sex and boldly dare[d] to say,

[28] Julia Hyde to Lucy Goodale, Sept. 26, 1839 (Mount Holyoke College Archives, South Hadley, Mass.) An essay on the reading done by a circle of prominent Elizabethan political figures shows that, like Hyde's reading, it was "an active, rather than a passive pursuit." See Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," *Past and Present,* 129 (Nov. 1990), 30–78.

[29] Maria Davies Diary, Nov. 14, 1850, Special Collections (Duke University).

[30] *Ibid.*, Jan. 28, 1851.

woman may yet cope with man's brightest genius and produce as the offspring of her own intellect a second Principia or a Paradise." Davies, who obviously shared Gilfillan's aspirations for women, considered Browning a candidate for such exalted status. Davies' initial reaction to Browning had been ambivalent—a "masculine writer, though good." She then revised that opinion for reasons that were still inflected by gender. In some of her poetry, Browning rivaled the revered Milton, yet she brought something more, expressing "as a woman only could the voice of the factory children."[31]

By early April, Davies had turned to Germaine de Staël, Margaret Davidson, and Manon Roland, each of whom earned her admiration. In May, the poets William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and George Gordon, Lord Byron, were read in conjunction with the social and political commentators William Godwin, Thomas Malthus, William Hazlitt, and Henry Peter Brougham. The same dispassionate scrutiny and authoritative tone that Davies had practiced on George Gilfillan marked these entries. Having read broadly and deeply, Maria Davies had enlarged her knowledge, had measured her opinions against those of others, and had cultivated her perspective. She had achieved a notable ease and confidence in interpreting the ideas and personae that filled the pages of her reading. Most significantly, she had written herself into an independent voice.[32]

The presence of a Browning, a de Staël, a Davidson, and a Roland in Maria Davies' diary suggests the degree to which these American women readers identified with learned women. A nascent poet herself, Charlotte Forten appropriated Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a model. Browning's poetry was likened to "music to reach the depths of our nature, to give us earnest, holy thoughts, and increase our love for the good and the beautiful." Browning's indictment of slavery was equally inspiring to this African American. Reading Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" at the time of the trial of a fugitive slave in Boston, Forten declared that "no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost on behalf of the oppressed." Julia Parker filled the pages of her journal with tributes to other female poets. Graced with "such astonishing powers of mind," Margaret Davidson had impressed her as "all that was lovely, as well as intellectually great." So too did Felicia Hemans, who was described as "all that was lovely and interesting." Parker lamented Hemans's premature death, although she consoled herself with the conviction that "*early death* is the destiny of genius." Parker was still more taken with de Staël, one of France's most famous women of letters. In July 1841, she recorded in her journal this learned woman's signal influence: "I cannot contemplate a mind like hers without the most ardent longing to turn aside from the beaten track of life, and explore those rich fields of observation, those secret recesses of thought, that the gifted *few* alone may enter."[33]

[31] *Ibid.*, Feb. 3, March 26, 1851.
[32] *Ibid.*, April 1, 7, 25, May 15, 16, 21, June 4, 1851.
[33] Stevenson, ed., *Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke,* 105, 63; Julia Parker Dyson Journal, July 5, Nov. 15, July 24, 1841, in *Life and Thought,* ed. Latimer, 60, 74–75, 62.

In a letter written when she was but sixteen, Margaret Fuller asked her former teacher Susan Prescott if she would "rather be the brilliant de Staël or the useful Edgeworth?" Of course, as she told Prescott, de Staël was "useful," but Fuller thought she operated "on a grand scale, on liberalizing, regenerating principles," while the novelist Maria Edgeworth's more narrowly gauged didacticism brought her the more "immediate," the more "practical" success.[34] The distinctions that Fuller made about the relative impact of de Staël and Edgeworth were perceptive. Edgeworth's legacy is manifest in a variety of female institutions that bore her name, including the seminary in Greensboro, North Carolina, that Bessie Lacy attended, the Edgeworth Literary Association, an African American literary society in Philadelphia, and the Edgeworthalaen Society, another literary society in Bloomington, Indiana. There were no antebellum institutions, female or male, that so honored the more radical de Staël.

Yet it is Fuller's act of self-fashioning that is most striking. In de Staël and Edgeworth she had discovered alternative personas, both of whom she later made her own. When Fuller the transcendentalist invested literature and the arts with the power to transform America, she adopted a strategy like the one she had identified in de Staël. She also acted on that grand scale, on those liberalizing, regenerating principles. Simultaneously, Fuller the supporter of antebellum America's most controversial reforms sounded a more specific note, insisting on the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women. Here she hoped for the more immediate, more practical success that she had associated with Edgeworth.

The powerful responses of Davies, Forten, Parker, and Fuller highlight the identification with such learned women as de Staël, Davidson, Roland, and Edgeworth, who were appropriated for self-fashioning. And well they might have been. These women were perceived as agents of their own fate. Reading them and then fashioning oneself upon them validated a female self who made herself heard in the discourses that shaped her society. The author of evangelical tracts, plays, and a novel, Hannah More was a common choice. The identification with More is not surprising. As much as any of the women whom these readers appropriated, More had evolved a self-presentation that mediated female learning and nineteenth-century gender conventions. A writer who exercised considerable authority in the English world of letters, More used that authority to proclaim the selflessness, piety, humility, and dedication to domesticity that were the hallmarks of conventional womanhood. Little wonder, then, that the image she projected appeared to reconcile intellectual and cultural accomplishment with attributes of femininity. One of Savannah, Georgia's prominent residents, Mary Telfair described the self-fashioning by which More had elided possible contradictions. A collection of More's letters led Telfair to exclaim that this learned woman was "the greatest as well as the best of women." More's "greatness" derived from her many accomplishments as a learned woman. Simultaneously, she exemplified the "best" of women because

[34] Margaret Fuller to Susan Prescott, May 14, 1826, in *The Letters of Margaret Fuller,* vol. I, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth (Ithaca, 1983), 154.

This pen and watercolor drawing illustrates women engaged in reading as a collective practice. *Miniature Panorama: Scenes from a Seminary for Young Ladies,* c. 1810–1820. *Courtesy Saint Louis Art Museum.*

she embraced the conventions of femininity. Readers might well have discerned that More had made a strategic choice. She had not openly challenged the prevailing system of gender relations, choosing instead to negotiate its boundaries.[35]

Susan Huntington, a New Englander, spoke to a specific dimension of More's appeal. Daughter of one minister and wife of another, Huntington was an experienced participant in theological discourse. In the debates that swirled about early-nineteenth-century Unitarianism, she offered a spirited defense of orthodox Congregationalism that was compatible with the opinions expressed by More, an equally committed evangelical Protestant. Predictably, Huntington was especially taken with More's religious essays. Declaring that one of those essays ought to be "engraven on every professor's heart," Huntington asked a friend: "Is it not excellent? How much of Christian knowledge and Christian feeling she manifests?" Williana Wilkinson Lacy enlisted More for more secular purposes. Shortly after Bessie Lacy enrolled at Edgeworth Seminary, Williana dispatched a couple of flannels to her daughter. Concerned that Bessie might balk at wearing this unfashionable apparel, the mother mounted a campaign on behalf of flannels. Her

[35] Mary Telfair to Mary Few, Jan. 30, 1835, Mary and Frances Few Papers (Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta).

weapon was none other than the sartorial habits of the learned. Thomas Jefferson had "dressed by the thermometer every morning." Then there was Benjamin Franklin, who "would wear his blue yarn stockings, horrifying all the Parisian ladies rather than subject himself to cold." Still more pointedly, she declared that "great women too, as well as great men," had suffered until they learned to do the same: "Miss Hannah More spend many a day, with her head bound up, unable to do anything but dot her Is and cross her Ts."[36]

The trajectory from admiration to emulation of this learned woman marks the correspondence between Evelina Metcalf and Anna Gale. Classmates at Providence, Rhode Island's Greene Street School, they had shared much. Perhaps most notably, Margaret Fuller had been their teacher. In Fuller's classroom, Metcalf and Gale had been introduced to Hemans, de Staël, and More. Fuller had made the last a symbol of all that was possible for women. Metcalf then claimed that possibility for her friend. Insisting that Gale continue to pursue literature, she told her: "Someday the name of Anna Gale will be even more celebrated than that of Hannah More."[37]

Performing Ideas: Reading as Collective Practice

Early in the spring of 1805, nearly twenty young women gathered to establish themselves as the Boston Gleaning Circle, the nation's earliest female literary society. Convinced that "nothing makes a greater difference between one human being and another than different degrees of knowledge," members of the circle looked to reading as the means to enlarge their knowledge. They included within their domain "any book favorable to the improvement of the mind," reading theology, astronomy, history, poetry, geography, and travel literature.[38] Members also practiced their newly acquired knowledge. Rotating responsibility for the reading done at meetings, they recited from the texts they had chosen. Simultaneously, they posed a series of questions and used their reading as the basis for preparing responses. Together, then, the Gleaners engaged in a self-education designed to make them learned women. That they did so collectively belies our conventional sense of reading as an isolated activity.[39]

[36] Wisner, ed., *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Susan Huntington,* 95; Williana Wilkinson Lacy to Bessie Lacy, Aug. 4, [1845], Lacy Papers. Williana Lacy also cited Germaine de Staël.

[37] Evelina Metcalf to Anna Gale, [May 10, 1838], Gale Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.).

[38] Mirroring the convictions of those newly independent Americans who deplored the reading of fiction, members of the Boston Gleaning Circle declared that novels were "absolutely forbidden." Later literary societies displayed little compunction in this regard. Regulations of the Circle, [1805], Boston Gleaning Circle, Manuscripts (Boston Public Library, Boston, Mass.). Although Karen Blair mentions a female literary society established in Chelsea, Connecticut, in 1800, the earliest records that I have located are those of the Boston Gleaning Circle. Deposited at the Boston Public Library, they include regulations, listings of regular and honorary members, minutes, recitations, treasurer's reports, responses to questions posed by members, and short essays. See Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914* (New York, 1980), 12; Regulations of the Circle, Boston Gleaning Circle Record Book, Manuscripts (Boston Public Library); Transactions of the Circle, Boston Gleaning Circle Minute Book, *ibid.*

[39] For a challenge to the common idea that reading is necessarily an isolated activity, see Elizabeth Long, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," in *The Ethnography of Reading,* ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley,

Even earlier, New England women gathered to share their interest in reading. Hannah Adams recalled that as a young woman in Medfield, Massachusetts, in the 1760s, she had joined with others who "like myself had imbibed a taste for reading." They were all "fond of poetry and novels." Many of them also "wrote verses, which were read and admired by the whole little circle." Hannah Mather Crocker described a similar phenomenon. Dedicated "to cultivating the mind in the most useful branches of science, and cherishing a love of literature," the circle to which Crocker had belonged in the 1770s or 1780s had been designed as a substitute for the more advanced education not yet available to women. Crocker proudly declared that it had given "the first rise to female education in [Boston], and our sex a relish for improving the mind."[40]

In letters they exchanged with each other, reading women forged more informal associations that also made reading a collective practice. Perhaps the most illuminating account was written by Sarah Brown of Philadelphia to Priscilla Brownrigg of North Carolina. Addressing the subject of reading at the beginning of their epistolary relationship, Brown asked her friend to write about "the works which you have read, tell me what they are, and what you think of them, point out those passages which please you most." In return, Brown promised to do the same. Reading women did all this and more. Sharing books both literally and figuratively, they recommended volumes, exchanged ideas, and celebrated the pleasures of reading. Abigail Adams sent Mercy Otis Warren a volume of Jean Baptiste Molière, telling her friend that she "should be glad of your oppinion." Adams herself did not hesitate to express an opinion. Molière displayed a "general want of spirit," she said. Worse still, he "ridiculed vice without engaging us to virtue." Amelia Pringle asked Sarah Lance Huger to lend her either David Hume's *History of England* or David Ramsay's *History of the United States,* both of which were widely read in the early-nineteenth-century United States. Pringle hastened to add, "I shall take particular care of them knowing the value of such books." In response to Eleuthera Du Pont's inquiry, Sophia Cheves confirmed that she had read Scott's *Waverley* twice. She recommended Scott's other novels, some of which she had found equally pleasurable. And Eliza Mordecai Myers told her sister Rachel that she had completed de Staël's *Corinne* in the original French. Her sister should do the same: "I know you will be charmed by it." Myers was now contemplating de Staël's *Delphine,* presumably in French.[41]

White and black women formalized this collective practice in the literary societies, reading classes, and sewing clubs, that dotted the landscape of the United

1993), 180–211. On the social character of reading in women's literary societies in late-nineteenth-century America, see Ann Ruggles Gere, "Common Properties of Pleasure: Texts in Nineteenth-Century Women's Clubs," *Cardozo Arts and Entertainment Law Journal,* 10 (no. 2, 1992), 647–63.

[40] Adams, *Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams,* 7; Hannah Mather Crocker, *Letters on Free Masonry* (Boston, 1815), n.p.

[41] Sarah Brown to Priscilla Brownrigg, Sept. 28, 1818, John Lancaster Bailey Papers (Southern Historical Collection); Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, Dec. 11, 1773, *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections,* 72 (1917), 19; Amelia [Pringle] to Sarah Lance Huger, [c. 1820], Bacot-Huger Papers (South Carolina Historical Society); Sophia Cheves to Eleuthera Du Pont, Nov. 27, 1822, Cheves papers, *ibid.*; Eliza Mordecai Myers to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, May 22, 1831, Myers Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society).

States in the early nineteenth century. In the meetings of these organizations, reading's varied purposes were woven together in a richly textured fabric. Established in 1812, the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Female Reading Society was representative. Like others who joined such societies, classes, and clubs, the society's members gathered to read both religious and secular literature. The volumes that occupied them were typical, as was their emphasis on newly available history, biography, travel literature, and fiction. Oliver Goldsmith's *History of Rome,* Edward Young's *Night Thoughts,* Count Friedrich Leopold Stolberg's *Travels,* Benjamin Trumbull's *General History of the United States,* and a biography of the already legendary Catherine the Great were read aloud at the meetings.[42]

Simultaneously, members of these organizations pursued related enterprises that contributed to the making of learned women. Members of the Colchester, Connecticut, Reading Class prepared commentaries on the texts that they read together. Students reading together at North Carolina's Lenoir Female Institute published a periodical. Those who joined the Female Literary Society in Deerfield, Massachusetts, studied science and literature in order to address questions about the larger implications of these subjects. Participants in the Sigourney Club at South Carolina's Limestone Springs Female High School maintained a library. Their counterparts at New Hampshire's New-Hampton Female Seminary presented essays to be read at weekly meetings.[43]

In an antebellum South where state laws made it illegal to teach enslaved African Americans reading and writing, it is hardly surprising that members of literary societies were almost always white. Yet free African American women, most of whom resided outside the South, established these institutions in cities throughout the North. Founded in 1831 by members of the city's African American elite, Philadelphia's Female Literary Society was the earliest such society. Similar institutions were established in Boston in 1832, in Rochester in 1833, in New York City in 1834, and in Buffalo in 1837. All of these societies were committted to the same objective—the making of learned women. Dedicating themselves to the development of "the talents entrusted to our keeping," the members of Philadelphia's Female Literary Society produced original essays, many of which were later published in the *Liberator.* The Ladies Literary Society of New York

[42] With the notable exception of two articles on African American women's literary societies, these antebellum institutions have yet to be examined by historians (See note 44, below). On their late-nineteenth-century counterparts, see Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs, 1860–1910* (Boston, 1987). On the social activism of those organizations, see Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist;* and Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, 1991), esp. 111–40. On those late-nineteenth-century societies that maintained a focus on self-education, see Gere, "Common Properties of Pleasure." See also Ann Ruggles Gere, *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* (Carbondale, 1987). Elizabeth Phillips Payson Collection (Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.).

[43] Records of the Female Reading Class, Colchester, Connecticut, Manuscripts (Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford). For the founding statement and the minutes of the literary society of the Lenoir Female Institute, see Washington Sandford Chaffin Journals, Washington Sandford Chaffin Papers (Special Collections, Duke University). Documents relating to the Deerfield, Massachusetts, Female Literary Society (Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Society, Deerfield, Mass.). Jere Daniell generously shared those documents with me. Sigourney Club Papers (Southern Historical Collection); reports of New-Hampton Female Seminary's Young Ladies Literary and Missionary Assocation (American Antiquarian Society).

City sponsored a public exhibition to display the breadth of members' achievements. And the members of Philadelphia's Minerva Literary Association did readings and recitations at their weekly meetings.[44]

In exploring the significance that enslaved African Americans attached to literacy, the historian Janet Duitsman Cornelius has noted that reading and writing meant more than individual freedom. They were equally important as collective acts of resistance to oppression. Free African American women designed their self-education to serve the same larger social purpose. Those who joined the New York City Ladies Literary Society were told that mental cultivation challenged "our enemies [who] rejoice and say, we do not believe they have any minds; if they have, they are unsusceptible of improvement." In dedicating themselves to that same mental cultivation, the members of Philadelphia's Female Literary Society stressed "that by so doing, we may break down the strong barrier of prejudice." Simultaneously, they made the plight of enslaved African Americans a signal concern and transformed their societies into vehicles of resistance to slavery. Sarah Mapps Douglas, one of the founders of the Female Literary Society, registered its impact on her perspective. Before her involvement with the society, she told the members, she had "formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts." Now, however, "the cause of the slave [has become] my own." Douglas presumed that involvement with the society had had a similar impact upon the other members. "Has this not been your experience, my sisters?" she asked rhetorically.[45]

Whatever the race of their founders, the meetings of these literary societies, reading classes, and sewing clubs provided occasions for grafting onto the conventional model of womanhood a powerful female intellect. The records of the Colchester, Connecticut, Reading Class are filled with representations of women that were based on reading done at its meetings. The commentaries prepared on such learned women as the Countess of Suffolk and Lady Mary Armyne tell us much about the aspirations of the twelve young women who founded the Reading Class. The members recorded that the Countess of Suffolk's "powers of judgment, imagination, and memory were extraordinary." They noted that none excelled her in a "livelier sense of relative duties; none discharged them [in a more exemplary fashion] than she." Armyne was represented in similar fashion. She combined exceptional "natural abilities" with dedication to the "management of domestic concerns."[46]

[44] See Dorothy B. Porter, "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828–1846," *Journal of Negro Education,* 5 (Oct. 1936), 555–76. On Philadelphia's Female Literary Association, Female Minerva Association, and Edgeworth Literary Association, which were founded in the 1830s, see Julie Winch, "'You Have Talents—Only Cultivate Them': Philadelphia's Black Female Literary Societies and the Abolitionist Crusade," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America,* ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, 1994), 103–18.

[45] Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C., 1991). Although Cornelius focused on enslaved African Americans, her point is also relevant for free African Americans, including those who established literary societies. Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984), esp. 104–19. Both of these organizations were models for the other literary societies formed by African American women. For Sarah Mapps Douglas's statement, see *Liberator,* July 21, 1832.

[46] Records of the Female Reading Class, Colchester, Connecticut.

Mrs. Leonard Wiltz of New Orleans, 1841, a work by the female painter L. Sotta, limns the model that readers fashioned for themselves—a learned woman who joined a powerful intellect with conventional attributes of femininity.
Courtesy Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans.

Those who joined the Literary and Missionary Association at the Philadephia Collegiate Institution for Young Ladies went further than their counterparts in Colchester. Leaving aside a celebration of familiar conventions of femininity, they made intellectual accomplishment their exclusive concern. Meeting weekly to hear essays prepared by the members, the participants schooled themselves in that accomplishment. The society's corresponding secretary left a record of the meetings' exceptional impact. In a circular that was included in the association's annual report, Sarah Sleeper declared that "with this impetus, we see no reason why we may not secure, as ornaments of the coming age, a Joanna Bailey, a Sherwood and Edgeworth, a Sigourney and Hemans, a Hannah More and a Jane Taylor."[47]

[47] *Literary and Missionary Association of the Philadelphia Collegiate Institution for Young Ladies Annual Report* (Philadelphia, 1839), 34 (copy in Library Company, Philadelphia, Pa.).

With learned women as their models, and with other reading women as companions in aspiration, these readers took on a challenge. In the process of emulation, they looked to making themselves anew. Together they looked to becoming the learned women with whom they had so deeply identified.

In a letter to his ten-year-old daughter Isabella, Kentuckian John Price made a telling comment about the relationship between readers and books. "Books," he told Isabella in 1853, "are the best company you can have—they never tell tales upon you, and you always have them at command."[48] Price's comment captured an important truth about women and reading in antebellum America. The exchange between reader and text could be as private or as public as the reader desired. More important, the reader could shape a text to her purposes. She could exercise agency in many ways. Reading could be a highly self-conscious act. Employed to achieve a variety of ends, it could be a means of education, a source for self-fashioning, or a basis for collective practice. Simultaneously, reading could be much more anarchical. Dedicated to no specific end, it could kindle the imagination and lead to totally unexpected outcomes. The spontaneous idea, the fleeting connection, the shock of recognition—all could be generated in this unpredictable play of the mind.

In a journal that she laced with meditations on her reading, sixteen-year-old Martha Prescott left the following entry. "I would be a learned woman," she declared on March 30, 1836. A student at a Concord, Massachusetts, academy, Prescott was determined to "have much treasure in my own mind."[49] In this, as in her meditations upon her reading, Prescott's sentiments were broadly representative. Tailoring their readings to self-defined needs and desires, antebellum women engaged in the creative practices that Roger Chartier has ascribed to readers more generally. Perhaps most notably, they used reading to make themselves learned women. Having discovered a More, a de Staël, or a Hemans through their reading, they made those learned women the basis of models of womanhood in which learning was consonant with more traditional gender conventions. Simultaneously, they appropriated the women themselves for their own self-fashioning. In both of these projects, they exemplified Prescott's aspirations. They stored their minds with much treasure.

[48] John Price to Isabella Downing Price, May 29, 1853, Charles Barrington Simrall Papers (Southern Historical Collection). Price might have added that the "command," the meaning derived from a text, was also "a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world," as Jane P. Tompkins has aptly phrased it. See Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, 1980), xxv.

[49] Martha Prescott Diary, May 30, 1836 (Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Mass.).