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Using Ancient Texts in Translation to Teach Women's Life in Greece and Rome

Most of us spend a large portion of our time teaching courses for students who do not know the ancient languages. But prose texts and texts about daily life suffer less in translation than does poetry. Using primary materials such as papyri, inscriptions, and medical and legal texts, brings students directly into contact with the past. Athenian drama, lyric and elegiac poetry, and novels can also serve as exciting source materials for ancient life, so long as they are translated literally, and are discussed in the same context as the documentary texts.

Although a distinguished ancient historian had doubts about whether the sourcebook Women's Life in Greece and Rome (London/Duckworth, Baltimore/Johns Hopkins, Ed.2, 1992) could be used as a textbook, I have for many years managed to use it for that purpose, though of course with supplementary readings, both ancient and modern, and constant references to the larger historical context. WLGR works as a textbook because it gets students involved directly with primary sources and encourages them to make connections with the lives of women in other cultures that they already know about. The texts themselves prompt students to ask questions that lead to reading in secondary sources. For writing assignments I give students translated texts that do not appear in WLGR, and ask them to write introductions and commentaries like the ones we provide in the book, with cross-references to the texts that they have studied. In that way they show what they have learned, and often manage to track down new information.

As a co-author of WLGR I shall talk about the way in which Maureen Fant and I have gone about choosing selections and about the process of writing introductions and commentary for them. I shall also talk about some of the issues involved in translating a wide variety of texts, including many in poetry. In particular I should like to concentrate on some of the materials that we would like to add to the third edition of WLGR, some of which we have already made available on the Diotima website (<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/>). I shall also show some examples of how in the last few years I been able to use digital technology to allow our students to see more ancient images of women's lives on the Wellesley College e-mail network, which supplement the relatively few plates that our publisher would allow us to include. The course, constructed in this way, does not attempt to provide a coherent narrative history of women's lives in ancient Greece and Rome, but it makes it possible for students to see for themselves what sorts of materials historians of antiquity are compelled to work with, and to realize why it is impossible to compose the kind of narrative history for ancient women that one can write for the history of the wars and politics that dominated the lives of ancient men.