Dominant Culture
and the Education of Women
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Edited by

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Dominant Culture and the Education of Women began as a conference panel for the 2006 Midwest Modern Language Association Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois, and, with the encouragement of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, has grown into this essay collection. A Gettel Faculty Research Grant awarded by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Marquette University for the summer of 2006 supported my initial research for this study. I would particularly like to thank the contributors to this volume for their hard work and dedication to the topic of women’s education. Several contributors, including Claire Emilie Martin, Karin Baumgartner, and Patricia O’Byrne, provided thoughtful commentary on the early draft of the introduction; I would like to recognize their insightful comments here. I would also like to thank my husband, Sumit Dhar, and my family, who make all of my accomplishments possible.
CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN WHO KNOW LATIN:
AN INTRODUCTION TO DOMINANT CULTURE
AND THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

JULIA C. PAULK

To study the education of women is to enter into an exploration of women’s relationship to society as a whole and of how female identity is shaped by a variety of factors, including class, race, religion, nationality, and historical era. Therefore, this essay collection, *Dominant Culture and the Education of Women*, is intended to be inclusive and to augment our knowledge of the great variety in women’s experiences regarding education in the Western world. In contrast to existing anthologies on this topic, which tend to focus on a more limited time period or single national tradition, this collection traces developments in the education of women from the fourth to the twenty-first century in Europe and the Americas. A comprehensive presentation of such a lengthy interval would be difficult to achieve; this collection offers something more akin to snapshots of different women at key moments in time. Ironically, despite the effort to address the diversity of female experiences, certain concerns regarding female education present themselves as recurring themes in these essays. Women who have sought to gain entry into educational institutions have had to negotiate similar obstacles when facing opposition from what might be called the dominant culture. Although notable differences arise and indeed need to be recognized, women are in many ways united in this struggle. Thus, in this introduction and essay collection, both shared concerns and important divergences will be examined in order to identify recurring problems and to promote greater understanding of the particular educational needs of women from marginalized cultures and communities.

Access to and control of language form one of the common threads tying together the studies included in *Dominant Culture and the Education of Women*. For centuries in Europe, Latin was the language of the educated
and therefore was the language of power. A woman’s efforts to learn Latin have become highly symbolic, and one cannot help but recall the Spanish expression in use as recently as the last century, “Mujer que sabe latín no tiene marido ni tiene buen fin”. That is to say, an educated woman is not fit to find personal happiness through her designated role in the domestic sphere; without a man to support her, this woman will meet a bad end.

This saying reflects the notion that a woman who has gained knowledge of the discourse of power is a threat to the dominant culture. Although formal education in the Western world has been conducted in the vernacular for quite some time, the issue of access to the dominant language through educational institutions still arises for women from marginalized cultures in the Western world. For example, fluency and literacy in the standardized, prioritized languages of English and Spanish are indicators of a woman’s level of education in many parts of the Americas today.

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned concern regarding the education of women in the studies included here is the question of the relationship between morality and education. From the writings of Jerome to the present day, virtue is intimately tied to female education and helps demonstrate the delicate balancing act women have had to perform over the centuries. Women have undertaken careful negotiations with the dominant culture in order to gain increasingly greater access to instruments and institutions of knowledge by attempting to allay fears that they, and therefore society, will be hopelessly corrupted or thrown into chaos in the process. As a result, those supporting female education have frequently argued that education preserves rather than undermines female virtue. Control over the bodies of both the female educator and the female student enters into the discussion of female education in a way that it does not appear to do in the education of male students. For centuries, women were taught in separate institutions and studied different subjects from men, beginning with convents and private tutors in the medieval era to women’s schools and colleges in the modern age, in order to safeguard respectability.

Closely related to notions of female virtue are beliefs in a woman’s principal and essential role as a wife and mother. Like those who argued that an education would help preserve and promote female virtue, supporters of female education have proposed that a highly literate woman makes a better companion for her husband and a better educator of her child. Following the move for women of all classes to nurse and raise their own children, women have been extolled as the most natural and best choice to educate their own children. Once again, the careful negotiations undertaken with and against the dominant culture come to the fore. In
order to justify seeking an education, women have had to take recourse to notions of a woman’s “proper” place in order to push the boundaries of that same sphere. Highlighting the benefits of female education for husbands and children is a tactic used repeatedly by the women studied in this collection. With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, a woman’s role in the home took on a new importance as those supporting female education were able to argue that women are nation-builders who raise future citizens. The debate over women’s roles continues today as the taboo against women working outside the home after marriage or after childbirth has persisted in some areas into the twenty-first century.

Despite the prevalence of the idea that a woman’s proper place is in the home, women from the Middle Ages to the present have discovered that marriage does not always guarantee financial security. Many of the women studied in *Dominant Culture and the Education of Women* were either widowed or married to men unable to support their families. In the fourteenth century, Christine de Pizan found herself with children to support after the death of her husband and undertook a career as a writer in order to do so. This pattern is repeated over the centuries. Writing and teaching, two careers requiring an education, have consistently been described as “appropriate,” “decent,” and “natural” for women, particularly those from the middle and upper classes. This argument aligns itself with the hegemonic idea that women should prioritize family and behave according to a certain decorum. However, as the years go by, greater numbers of women sought education and the “proper” careers that literacy makes available as an alternative to marriage in the first place. Female educators such as Mary Lyon and Catharine Beecher from the United States stand out as examples of professional women who never married and thereby provided alternative models for women seeking financial independence. Other women have pushed the boundaries even further by studying and writing about male-dominated subjects such as chemistry and anatomy. The question of whether or not a woman should work or marry or both is, of course, one of privilege and should be recognized as an area in which women of different classes and cultures have had varying experiences.

The association between men and what is generally termed the public sphere and that between women and the private or domestic space appears often in *Dominant Culture and the Education of Women* and thus would seem to be a continuing feature of Western culture. Education has traditionally been perceived as an activity that will prepare men for their more highly valued roles in the public sphere. To protect girls and women from the dangers lurking beyond the home, some early texts about the
education of women, such as the work of Jerome, advocated the cloistering of women in a private space to protect their virtue. Later works, such as Fray Luis de León’s *La perfecta casada (The Perfect Wife)*, which promoted silence and domestic isolation for women, were still being taught in the twentieth century. However, a number of women crossed the boundaries separating the male and female, public and private realms by pursuing careers as court writers, *salonnières*, professionals, and, most often, as writers and teachers.

*Dominant Culture and the Education of Women* begins with two essays addressing the education of women in medieval Europe. “Latin Literacy in Medieval Women’s Writing” by Jane E. Jeffrey and “A Cultural ‘Novelty’: Christine de Pizan, a Self-Educated Single Mom in Medieval France” by Dorothée Mertz-Weigel demonstrate the singularity of women seeking an education during that era and outline the barriers which they faced. In medieval Europe, access to literacy, particularly in Latin, was limited to the upper class and was understood as belonging to the male domain. In their quest for knowledge, women such as Radegund and Hildegard of Bingen had to seek the isolation of the convent in order to learn and, as in the case of Heloise, submit bodily to the authority of male educators. As Mertz-Weigel demonstrates, Christine de Pizan broke new ground for women through her career as a writer with royal patronage and as a feminist scholar who sought to elevate the status of women and increase their access to literacy skills. Pizan was particularly unusual in that her writings tended to have a more secular orientation and gained entry into the all-male literary canon of the age.

Many of the difficulties facing women seeking an education continued in the early modern era in Europe despite the spread of humanism and more egalitarian ideals regarding knowledge and education. Ulrike Tancke’s “But till some household cares me tie, / My books and Pen I will apply: Early Modern Women’s Writings and the Debate on Female Education” examines the tensions inherent in women’s writings about education in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Rather than suggest that these women are unsuccessful in their efforts to move beyond the parameters established for them by the dominant society, Tancke concludes that women’s ambiguity towards education, or their simultaneous self-assertion and adherence to convention, should be understood as a strategy of self-definition. Sandy Feinstein’s “Chemistry by a Lady for Ladies: Education in the Alchemical Arts” analyzes a text specifically written to educate women in the early modern era in France. Marie Meurdrac’s chemistry primer pushes the boundaries of both genre and gender through its concurrent reliance on the discourses of alchemy.
and of the developing, modern science of chemistry in a text intended for those who were at that time excluded from institutions of higher learning.

The nineteenth century marks a period of great change in Europe and the Americas in that women begin to make their way into the public sphere and educational institutions in increasingly larger numbers. Texts addressing the education of women reflect many of the major trends of the era, such as independence in the Americas, industrialization, the rise of nationalism, and the consolidation of universities in their contemporary form, to name just a few. Julia Kiernan’s essay, “The Liberatory Positioning of British Female Rhetoric: Bathsua Makin’s An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen, Mary Wollstonecraft’s The Education of Daughters, and Lucy Wilson’s The Education of Women” reflects these changes as she traces the move over several centuries in England to finally include working class women in educational institutions in the nineteenth century. Not only do supporters of female education continue to rely on more traditional arguments regarding the formation of successful wives and mothers, but proponents such as Lucy Wilson also address upward class mobility in their support of female education.

In the nineteenth century, women at all levels of the class spectrum pushed the boundaries of their assigned roles by redefining what constitutes the public sphere and female education’s role in it. Karin Baumgartner’s “Female Education in Nineteenth-Century Germany: Caroline de la Motte Fouqué and the Rejection of Bourgeois Models of Domesticity” examines Fouqué’s relocation of the family and social network into the public domain as she argued for women’s centrality and duty to the state. At the center of her family and in her salon, an educated, upper class woman not only raises dutiful citizens but also shapes public policy. Claire Emilie Martin also studies the formation of a salonnière in her essay, “The Education of a Young Creole: The Countess of Merlin’s Memoirs.” María de las Mercedes de Santa Cruz y Montalvo, Condesa Merlin, was born in Cuba to a wealthy family but required a European education to make the transition from life in the colony to that in the metropole. Her memoirs, written for publication, illustrate her understanding of and misgivings regarding Jean Jacques Rousseau’s theories on the education of women and the effects of his theories on her self-development.

As the century progressed, middle and working-class women broke new ground as they entered universities and pursued wider fields of study and professional work. “The First Generation of German Female Students: Autobiographical Perspectives on the Contested Space of Gender and Knowledge”, by Magdalena Tarnawska, analyzes the memoirs of the first
German women admitted to previously all-male universities. Their writings reflect their clear understanding of themselves as test cases for later women and the survival strategies they were forced to develop as “interlopers” into the male domain. Mar Soria López’s “In Their Own Ways: Emilia Pardo Bazán and María Martínez Sierra’s Struggle for Women’s Education in Turn-of-the-Century Spain” demonstrates the ways in which two influential female writers relied on both pressing national concerns, particularly the loss of empire and therefore national identity and prestige, and traditional notions of womanhood to promote female education. Hülya Yıldız traces the developments in education for Ottoman women in her essay, “‘Knowledgeable Ottoman Girls’: Ottoman Women’s Education in the Nineteenth Century” through an analysis of historical developments in the Ottoman Empire, women’s periodicals and Fatma Aliye Hanım’s novel, Re‘fet. As in Western Europe, the nineteenth century marked a time when the Ottoman Empire first established public schools that allowed lower class women access to literacy and the careers such skills made available.

In the same era in the Americas, women were not only entering schools and universities in increasing numbers, they were also establishing their own. After carefully studying other institutions for women in the United States, Mary Lyon developed a model for a female institution for higher learning that found enduring success, as Beatrice Jacobson describes in “Contradictory Designs: Mary Lyon’s Mount Holyoke Female Seminary”. Lyon’s Mount Holyoke reflects the paradox present in many projects related to female education in that it promoted both an ambitious academic curricula and proficiency in domestic chores. In Brazil, Nísia Floresta’s school and texts about female education similarly reflect the pressures facing female educators and female students, which Charlotte Liddell demonstrates in “Teaching, Preaching, and Practice: Nísia Floresta’s Shifting Vision of Women’s Education in Nineteenth-Century Brazil”. To be considered acceptable to the dominant culture, a girls’ school needed to prepare young women in domestic skills; to meet the high academic standards a female teacher has for her students, it must also incorporate demanding subjects. The goals and pressures shared by female educators in the Americas is also highlighted in “Beyond the American Home: The Contributions of Catharine Beecher and Clorinda Matto de Turner to Women’s Education” by Julia C. Paulk. As these two writers and educators demonstrate, conceptions of women’s roles and education became increasingly radicalized over the course of the century even while relying on more traditional notions of True Womanhood for acceptance within the larger culture.
class privilege was not the only unfair advantage being contested in the Americas in the nineteenth century. Restrictions imposed upon women that were based on a racial hierarchy were also being challenged in the realm of education. A woman who was very conscious of the role that education might play in promoting social change was Frances Harper. Terry Novak’s “The Struggle for the Independence and Education of the African American Woman in the Works of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper” analyzes Harper’s theories of the education of African American women, particularly as it appears in her works of fiction, and their unique needs both during and after slavery. “Work among the People: How Susan La Flesche Picotte and Zitkala Sa Used Boarding School Education for the Benefit of their Tribes”, by Sarah Jayne Hitt, analyzes the potential of education within the dominant culture to destroy or seriously undermine practices, languages, and beliefs of marginalized communities in her study of the boarding school educations of two Native American women. Like Frances Harper, Susan La Flesche Picotte and Zitkala Sa used the skills they gained through mainstream education to become advocates for their people.

Despite the great inroads made by women of varying class, race, and national origins over the centuries, the essays dedicated to women of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries indicate that entirely equal access to education and the corresponding power structures has not yet been achieved. Patricia O’Byrne’s “Education for Marriage or Education for Life? The Challenge of Post-War Spanish Women Novelists to the Francoist Approach to the Education of Women” examines the education of women under a conservative, totalitarian regime. Despite severe censorship and efforts to bar women from serious academic achievement or entry into the working world, women such as Carmen Martín Gaite, Carmen Kurz, and Susana March nonetheless found a way to critique limitations placed on women through their literary texts. Totalitarianism ended in Spain with Franco’s death in 1975 but certainly has not vanished from today’s world. In contemporary Mexico, increasing access to computer technology and reinvigorated commitment to solidarity has provided new instruments for the preservation and promotion of indigenous cultures, as Abbey Poffenberger outlines in “Cultural Preservation through Education and Literacy: Isabel Juárez Espinosa”. Writing in both her native Tzeltal and in Spanish, Juárez Espinosa prioritizes both cultural preservation and elevation of the status of women in her prose and theater works. Embracing the oral and theatrical traditions of Mayan peoples, Juárez Espinosa relies on activist theater to reach and
educate as wide an audience as possible, reminding us that the written word is not necessarily more powerful than the spoken one.

The United States Census Bureau recently reported that there are now more women earning bachelor’s degrees from universities in the United States than men but also that, above the age of twenty-five, men holding such degrees still outnumber women with similar qualifications. Similarly, studies outlining wage gaps between men and women indicate that men continue to have greater earning power than women in similar jobs and that race is a factor in earnings. Surprisingly, the earnings gap between men and women is the greatest for those who have achieved the highest levels of education. Although educated women tend to earn more and have greater autonomy than women who did not finish high school or earn bachelor’s degrees, theorists propose that the domestic and family expectations placed upon women still prevent them realizing their full potential with regard to salary. In other words, women’s increasing access to education is providing them with concrete benefits, but inequities between men and women have not yet been eliminated. Perhaps the struggles and successes illustrated in Dominant Culture and the Education of Women will inspire those who are interested in achieving full equality for women from all walks of life to continue to push the boundaries imposed by the hegemonic culture’s beliefs and practices.

Notes

1. The essays included in this collection address Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and several countries from the Americas. Henceforth, “the Western world” and “Europe” should be understood as including what is now Turkey. I do this for the sake of brevity and do not intend it as a political statement.

2. “A woman who knows Latin has no husband and no future” (original translation). The title of the introduction is adapted from this saying. A similar expression in English is the following: “Men don’t make passes at women who wear glasses”.

3. Hermes, “Young Women Outpace Young Men in Degree Attainment, Census Shows.” This information was reported in early 2008.

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The Middle Ages is an expansive historical period, usually defined as the period between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the invention of the printing press in 1455. Historical context is important when defining “literacy” because standards of literacy shift as cultural priorities change. For the history of women and literacy, the medieval period more accurately begins with the political rise of Catholicism, which placed a high value on Latin literacy, and ends with the political challenge of the Protestant Reformation, which encouraged study in the vernacular. Literacy in the early Middle Ages, when there was no formally organized school system, meant education in Christian texts: the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome; scriptural commentary and other writings by the Church Fathers; and lives of the Saints.

The etymology of literacy derives from litterator, a masculine noun meaning philologist or grammarian, and medieval literacy means knowing Latin grammar, its vocabulary, case endings, conjugations, and, at the advanced level, rhetorical and literary forms. The use of Latin by women allowed them to participate in the dominant Christian culture that required strict adherence to form, tradition, and authority.

In 384 A.D., Jerome wrote one of the earliest works on women’s education, the “Letter to Eustochium,” in which he emphasized the virtues of an ascetic life of silence, obedience, and, especially, virginity. Recounting the victories and rewards of virgins throughout the letter, Jerome asserted that Christ’s first sacrifice was spending nine months in Mary’s womb, where “For our salvation the Son of God is made the Son of Man. Nine months He awaits His birth in the womb, undergoes the most revolting conditions, and comes forth covered with blood….“ In other words, Jerome asked Eustochium, why would a woman marry when even a virgin birth produced abject bodily shame? The ascetic life was the only
way to ensure that one’s body never acted on hunger, thirst, companionship, or love, a severe restriction of human experience by stopping the flow of physical desire. Jerome’s instructions to read scripture and repeat prayers incessantly were intended to compel women to use their education to control, and thus save, their bodies. Moreover, Jerome believed in virginity of the whole body, exhorting women not to live among men. Following Jerome’s principles, Eustochium left Rome to reside in Bethlehem, where she pursued a life of asceticism and chastity and founded the first convent for religious women.

Jerome’s curriculum prohibited teaching classical Roman literature. In the “Letter to Eustochium,” Jerome described a dream wherein God punished Jerome for reading Cicero and Plautus. Jerome

...was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the judgment seat of the Judge; and here the light was so bright, and those who stood around were so radiant, that I cast myself upon the ground and did not dare to look up. Asked who and what I was I replied: ‘I am a Christian.’ But He who presided said: ‘Thou liest, thou art a follower of Cicero and not of Christ. For ‘where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also.’ Instantly I became dumb, and amid the strokes of the lash—for He had ordered me to be scourged—I was tortured more severely still by the fire of conscience....He might still, they urged, inflict torture on me, should I ever again read the works of the Gentiles.

Jerome’s abhorrence of classical writing was in part a result of early Christian condemnation of pagan writers. Yet more important than tradition for Jerome was his personal experience of not being in command of his desire to read non-Christian literature.

Jerome wrote a more detailed account of his pedagogical practice for girls in the “Letter to Laeta,” written to a woman who had asked Jerome for advice about educating her young daughter. Jerome told Laeta to teach her daughter the alphabet first by sight and sound. Laeta should place before her daughter

…a set of letters made of boxwood or of ivory and call each by its proper name. Let her play with these, so that even her play may teach her something. And not only make her grasp the right order of the letters and see that she forms their names into a rhyme, but constantly disarrange their order and put the last letters in the middle and the middle ones at the beginning that she may know them all by sight as well as by sound.

By tracing the letters over and over again, the girl would physically internalize the alphabet into memory:
...so [as] soon as she begins to use the stylus upon the wax, and her hand is still faltering, either guide her soft fingers by laying your hand upon hers, or else have simple copies cut upon a tablet; so that her efforts confined within these limits may keep to the lines traced out for her and not stray outside of these....

Stressing the importance of staying within the lines alleviated Jerome’s fear that a girl would read outside the Christian curriculum and fall defenseless into the works of classical writers whose language explored the physicality of existence. In his explanation of the Song of Solomon to Eustochium, Jerome argued that the Ethiopian bride was meant to show how a girl’s body was more receptive to physical sensation than was her mind, which must be filled in with lessons to discipline her body. Jerome’s letter persuaded Laeta to send her daughter to Eustochium’s convent, setting the precedent for convent schools as the best place to teach girls.

Convents were organized according to a Rule. A century after Jerome, the Rule of St. Caesarius was the first rule written for a convent. It required that every member of the convent learn how to read and write. Margaret L. King has argued that “the root of the modern female intellectual experience” might be found in convent communities, where girls and women heard Latin read, sung, prayed, and taught every hour of the day. The first convent to adopt the Rule of St. Caesarius was Radegund’s sixth-century Convent of the Holy Cross. While in the convent, Radegund wrote an epic on the war between her country, Thurgundia, and the invading Franks, who killed most members of her family. After eleven-year-old Radegund was kidnapped by the King of the Franks, who intended to marry her, she lived with other royal Frankish women, learned Latin, and began following the practices of Christian asceticism set forth by Jerome. The Frankish aristocracy admired pagan Roman culture and wanted their women to learn Latin as a way of maintaining Roman tradition, while the women learned Latin as a means of strengthening their knowledge of Christian culture. Later as queen, Radegund used her knowledge and influence to persuade her husband to build a convent for her. Adopting the Rule of St. Caesarius, Radegund was able to safeguard the convent from invaders, possible dissidents within the convent, and outside influence from the Church because the Rule emphasized not only literacy, but also enclosure, which was important for Christian women because unconverted Germanic fathers and husbands could otherwise remove their daughters and wives at will. Radegund’s final written work was the “Letter of Foundation,” which Gregory of Tours included in his History of the Franks. Fearing that one of the nuns would use family influence to dissolve the convent (which eventually
happened), Radegund stressed how important it was that, after her death, the convent follow the Rule of St. Caesarius so that women could pursue a more studious and contemplative life than that offered by marriage. One of the girls educated at the Convent was Baudonivia, who wrote about Radegund’s teaching, history’s earliest account of a woman teaching women:

> When the psalms sung in her presence ended, her reading never ceased, neither day, or night, or for refreshing her body with a small amount of food. When the lesson was read, she would say, showing pious concern for the health of our souls, ‘If you do not understand what you read, why not search carefully in the mirror of your souls.’ And if, out of reverence, the younger members presumed to question her, she, with pious concern and maternal affection, would not cease from teaching what the lesson held for the health of our souls.8

Radegund’s century marked the last time that Latin would be thought of as both a literary and a vernacular language. By the seventh century, according to Françoise Waquet,

> …Latin that shaped the liturgy was in a run-of-the-mill, popular register, remote from the classical tongue; but it was also, from its beginnings, a literary language, different from the one generally spoken. The difference was self-accentuating: the language of the sacred text became a language of culture and acquired a patina of archaism that ended by placing it outside time and withdrawing it from common speech.9

Losing its vernacular presence, Latin became the language of the literate elite.

By the tenth century, classical Latin, including the works of the Latin writers whom Jerome abhorred, had become part of the convent curriculum. The most notable example of the influence of classical literature on a medieval woman was Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, whose six plays written in Latin were, she said, inspired by her reading of the comedies by the Roman playwright Terence. She also wrote a Latin account of the history of the Ottonian Empire, the history of Gandersheim, and eight saints’ lives. There is debate over whether her plays were performed or, like her other writings, read aloud for the edification of the nuns. In either context, scholars agree that Hrotsvit used her writing to teach parts of the quadrivium (mathematics, geometry, astronomy, music); to reinforce the nuns’ vows of marriage to Christ; and to provide a history for royal religious women that corresponded to the lives of women living at the Ottonian court. Ulrike Wiethaus argues that Hrotsvit’s writings commemorate
…the patriarchal Christian idea of womanhood, defined as female strength in the service of male sexual ownership, female eloquence in the service of Christian ideology, female loyalty unto death to male authority figures who insist on their power over them.10

Although Hrotsvit used Latin to support the policies of the court and the legacy of the Church Fathers, her position as an aristocratic writer reinforced the idea that educated women were equal and sometimes superior to men, especially to men who did not understand Latin.

During the twelfth century, the evidence of women’s participation as writers, readers, and patrons of the Latin tradition is very strong. Joan M. Ferrante writes that the

…enthusiasm for education in the twelfth century is real, not just because it has practical applications in religious life and society, but because it is perceived as a good in itself. Knowledge can provide wonderful powers, sometimes magical....In this period at least, we are meant to root for the brilliant heroine.11

Having studied Priscian’s sixth-century Latin grammar, Marie de France wrote that she considered translating Latin stories into Anglo-Norman before choosing to translate oral tales into the written vernacular, marking an important change in the medieval definition of language literacy. Marie de France’s decision to write in a vernacular allowed her to write outside the constraints of institutional authority, at least religious authority. Yet the choice between writing in Latin or a vernacular language carried certain implications for women because a woman who could understand Latin would be taken more seriously and her writing more likely preserved than would writing in the vernacular, a language which risked not being written down because of its association with domestic matters.12

The twelfth century also saw several changes in higher education: the curriculum was augmented with translations of Greek and Arabic literature, there was competition with vernacular literature, and a new technique of teaching was introduced, Abelard’s dialectic method of scholarly inquiry, which advocated rigorous investigation in the place of unquestioning adherence to tradition and authority. Abelard’s use of dialectic is fully detailed in his autobiography Historia calamitatum as a competitive and antagonistic form of argumentation that produces winners and humiliates losers. Abelard writes that when his

…own teaching gained so much prestige and authority from [dialectic] the strongest supporters of my master who had hitherto been the most violent among my attackers now flocked to join my school...Within a few days of my taking over the teaching of dialectic, William [Abelard’s teacher] was
eaten up with jealousy and consumed with anger to an extent it is difficult
to convey, and being unable to control the violence of his resentment for
long, he made another artful attempt to banish me.13

In contrast to Baudonivia’s heartfelt tribute to Radegund’s teaching is
Abelard’s epistolary vilification of one of Paris’s most famous teachers,
Anselm of Laon. Over the years, according to Abelard’s description,
Anselm’s mind had become dry rot and his lessons empty:

Anyone who knocked at his door to seek an answer to some question went
away more uncertain than he came. Anselm could win the admiration of an
audience, but he was useless when put to the question. He had a
remarkable command of words but their meaning was worthless and
devoid of all sense. The fire he kindled filled his house with smoke but did
not light it up; he was a tree in full leaf which could be seen from afar, but
on closer and more careful inspection proved to be barren. I had come to
this tree to gather fruit, but I found it was the fig tree which the Lord
cursed, or the ancient oak of which Lucan compares Pompey:

There stands the shadow of a noble name
Like a tall oak in a field of corn. 14

The quotations cited from Jerome and Abelard are saturated with an
aggressive and violent language of learning that often characterizes a
masculine professoriate, a dominant culture, in contrast to a supportive,
tolerant way of teaching and learning described by Baudonivia, a way of
teaching thought appropriate for children, girls, and women, but not for
future ecclesiastical, court, and civic leaders.

Marie’s contemporaries Heloise and Hildegard of Bingen were
members of religious orders and wrote exclusively in Latin. The education
of Heloise presents one of the best documented accounts of a student-
teacher relationship; in fact, Heloise’s reputation for being educated is
what attracted Abelard, who wrote, “In looks she did not rank lowest,
while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is
so rare in women that it added greatly to her charm and had won her
renown throughout the realm.”15 As a girl in the convent school at
Argenteuil, Heloise studied scriptures and commentary written by Jerome
as well as classical authors who entered the curriculum in the tenth
century. To educate Heloise, Abelard modified the aggressive disciplinary
methods of the university to using the premise of education to seduce
Heloise. The rhetorical and physical violence expressed in Jerome’s
writings on acquiring an education is heard six-hundred years later in Peter
Abelard’s teaching of Heloise:
[Fulbert, Heloise’s uncle] gave me complete charge over the girl, so that I
could devote all the leisure time left me by my school to teaching her by
day and night, and if I found her idle I was to punish her severely....In
handing her over to me to punish as well as to teach, what else was he
doing but giving me complete freedom to realize my desires, and providing
an opportunity, even if I did not make use of it, for me to bend her to my
will by threats and blows if persuasion failed?16

Abelard’s physical punishments soon advanced to leaving “no stage of
love-making untried.” Women who learned to write in Latin engaged a
language established through history and by convention as a canonical,
authoritative language, yet, as in Heloise’s case, the pedagogical practices
of her day required the educated woman to submit to authority. If the
authority was a male tutor and he demanded sexual exchange, then
Heloise’s physical submission to Abelard would seem to her fundamental
for gaining status in the academic culture to which she aspired.

Although Abelard’s teaching required Heloise to equate erotic
submission with learning, as unfortunately has been a reality in higher
education for many women, it was not until Heloise became pregnant and
bore a son, after Abelard was castrated, and after Heloise was named
abbess of the Paraclete that she used her knowledge of Latin to confront
Abelard’s power over her. She wrote him two letters that not only justified
her love for Abelard, but also insisted that he fulfill his responsibilities to
her as her husband. In response, Abelard ignored Heloise’s many well-
supported appeals and proofs and demanded that Heloise cease her
mindless longing and concentrate her energy on praying for his welfare.

In a third letter, Heloise promised to say no more about love. Within a
few lines, she turned from lover to student and asked Abelard to instruct
her about needed changes in the convent’s Rule so that it could be adapted
to women’s lives. She wanted him to recognize her now as a teacher in
charge of the education of nuns, novices, and children. Heloise composed
the Problemata, forty-two questions on scripture addressed to Abelard.17
In these questions, Heloise shifted Abelard’s attention from their sexual
past to an intellectual and professional relationship. Heloise asked Abelard
to help her write a Rule for women, one which acknowledged gender
difference and held women to a high level of intellectual sophistication.
Using the philosophy of dialectic, Heloise questioned what she has been
taught concerning the differences between men and women, body and
mind, and sin and judgment. Heloise’s questions also raised textual and
interpretative complexities in the Old and New Testaments, which, Heloise
wrote, slowed down the nuns’ reading of the Scriptures.18 The final result
was a Rule that respected women’s bodies and their minds, not using one
to punish the other, as had been the basis of Jerome’s pedagogy. According to M. T. Clanchy, Heloise

...was probably the last medieval lay woman to be so highly trained in classical ‘letters’; a century later even many nuns had stopped learning Latin....until the end of the nineteenth century, women remained excluded from the academic world, with which Heloise had been familiar and in which she had gained such distinction.19

Heloise served as abbess at the Paraclete for twenty years. Under her rule, five dependent priories were established, and the monastery earned a reputation as one of the most important educational centers for women in twelfth-century France.

In Germany, Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098, the tenth child of a nobleman and his wife. When Hildegard was eight years old, her parents gave her to the Church as a tithe. She went to live with the anchoress Jutta in a cell attached to a Benedictine monastery. From Hildegard’s many writings and from a biography written shortly after her death, we know the contents of her education. Hildegard’s writings include quotations from the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and a number of classical Roman sources, primarily Cicero. In the preface her longest work, *Scivias*, Hildegard wrote that at age forty-two,

Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast....And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both the Old and New Testaments.... 20

Although her understanding seems to come instantaneously, for the previous forty years Hildegard had been listening to, reading, and reciting biblical passages and interpretations. Hildegard wrote that she kept her knowledge secret “because of doubt and a low opinion [of myself].” With the monk Volmar’s help and encouragement, she began to write. At the time of her death at age eighty one, she had written three books of visionary writing, a book on diseases and cures, chants, a play, over four-hundred letters, and a work on natural history that contains sixty-three chapters on trees, seventy-two chapters on birds, and 230 chapters on plants.

Hildegard always said that her knowledge of Latin endings and cases was weak and that she depended on Volmar for help. Clanchy provides insight into the problems facing a writer of a non-native language: even
though Hildegard might understand Latin when it was spoken or read, writing in Latin raises different epistemological problems:

For a medieval writer the difficulties of getting the text on to parchment were relatively simple compared with the initial problem of converting one’s thoughts into Latin. This required years of training. Because it was nobody’s mother tongue and its rules of style and construction had been established more than a thousand years earlier, Latin tended to take over anyone who began to write it. To the rhetoric of the classical authors (Virgil, Cicero, Ovid, and so on) had been added the even more powerful models of the Latin Bible and the Latin liturgy, with which every monk and nun was in daily contact through chanting and hearing readings.

In 1970, Peter Dronke described Hildegard’s Latin songs as “a highly individual language, at times awkward and at times unclear; the adjectives can be repetitious and limited in range, the interjections excessive. It is the language not of a polished twelfth-century humanist but of someone whose unique powers of poetic vision confronted her more than once with the limits of poetic expression.” Twenty years later, Barbara Newman explained Hildegard’s spiritual language not as meeting a linguistic limit, but as “unrhymed, unmetrical songs, wholly unpredictable as to line division, length, and stanzaic pattern, follow[ing] the rhythms of thought alone. Their content belongs to the twelfth century, but their form anticipates the twentieth.”

One of the most recent observations about Hildegard’s use of Latin comes from the translators of her letters in 1994. They write that

One of the greatest challenges in reading (and translating) Hildegard indeed comes not from her own difficulty with the scholarly language, but, as it were, from her very ease with it, her fecund and canny use of its creative possibilities….A marked feature of Hildegard’s style is a general looseness of sentence structure, with phrase attracting phrase, and clause, clause, all strung rather adventitiously together on the thread of the thought. This fact, in and of itself, poses no real problem for the reader, and, in fact, has its own kind of simple charm. Still, at times, this accumulation of qualifying or merely additive elements without clear or unambiguous markers...[or] logical relationships among the ideas results in a passage of almost impenetrable opacity.

Although “simple charm” resonates uneasily with Abelard’s description of Heloise’s education as “add[ing] greatly to her charm,” Hildegard, unlike Heloise, wrote on many different topics, in various genres, to many people, and for diverse purposes. Heloise wrote only in the epistolary
genre, to only a few people, and with a persuasive purpose, for which there were many Latin models to follow.

Nevertheless, Heloise and Hildegard used their education to resist, defy, and maintain uncompromising positions against male erudition that legitimated women’s lives only at a physical level. Both women wrote about women’s physical presence and how Church authorities tried to limit their movement educationally and spiritually. Although two famous medieval teachers, Jerome and Abelard, both known for their misogyny, devoted a large part of their teaching to women, composing religious and scholarly works at the request of women, Jerome and Abelard maintained that women should be educated so that they could rise above their sex.

The twelfth century marked the first time that women writers had a choice between writing in Latin and or in a vernacular. After the twelfth century, more women had access to the vernacular than to Latin, which required tutors, scribes, and convents, all of which were in decline. In short, Latin came up against its own dominant practices in medieval culture. Because of its associations with classical Rome and the development of Christianity, and its long curricular status as the essential language of learning, Latin conferred prestige long after it was a natural language. Yet its institutional authority was slowly and successfully challenged in the thirteenth century by a more equitable language of power, the vernacular.

Notes
1 Zieman, “Reading, Singing and Understanding,” 97.
2 Jerome, “Letter XXII.”
3 Ibid.
4 Jerome, “Letter CVII.”
5 Mother Maria Caritas McCarthy, The Rule of Nuns of St. Caesarius of Arles.
6 King, Women of the Renaissance, 175.
7 Radegund, “Letter of Foundation.”
8 Baudonivia, De vita sanctae Radegundis Liber II.
9 Waquet, Latin or the Empire of a Sign, 42.
10 Wiethaus, “Pulchrum Signum?,” 135.
11 Ferrante, “The Education of Women in the Middle Ages,” 34-35.
12 Katharina M. Wilson and Glenda Macleod write, Scanning women’s writing by what one might think the simplest principle possible--the languages used--unveils the level of complexity facing any surveyor of medieval literature. Like men, women wrote in a wide assortment of languages; to understand the importance of this variety, however, one must recognize that linguistic choice for medieval writers, as
for some modern writers in multilingual areas, carried philosophical and political implications. 331

14 Ibid., 62. In *The Envy of Angels*, C. Stephen Jaeger argues that the twelfth century marks a major division between the old learning of the Church Fathers and the new learning that Abelard advocated:

An entire system of education was caught in a conflict between a traditional kind of teaching that tended toward the acquisition of human qualities and a new kind that tended toward knowledge and rational inquiry. The clash between Abelard and Anselm of Laon exemplifies these tendencies strikingly. It is as if whatever forces of history shaped the general conflict designed Abelard and Anselm to embody it: they brewed the intellect and character of Anselm with an overbalance in favor of *mores* and eloquence (the products of the old learning), and then, like chemists performing an experiment, exactly reversed the proportions in brewing Abelard. Anselm and the type he represented may have lacked penetration and analytical sharpness, but they were masters of the discipline of living well. Abelard may have known a great deal and possessed a keenly analytical mind, but he was a failure at the discipline of life,” an indictment is supported by Abelard’s treatment of Heloise in the name of education. 236

15 Abelard, 60.
16 Ibid., 67.
17 McNamer, *The Education of Heloise*.
21 Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*, 178-179.
25 See Sara S. Poor’s discussion of the complexities of Latin and vernacular literacies in thirteenth-century women’s writing in “Mechthild von Magdeburg, Gender, and the ‘Unlearned Tongue’.”

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