Spinning in the Classroom: Recollections

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As a historian, scholar, and teacher I have always found the need to blend my research and writing with my class work. By allowing students to engage with the same questions and materials I use in my research I can not only better transmit my passion for history but I am also able to enrich my own research by hearing students' input and perspectives. With this philosophy I approached the teaching of my new course "History of Women and Work: From Prehistory to the Present" in Fall 2002. At the time I was a brand-new assistant professor at the University of Kansas, working on my first monograph, *Clothing the Spanish Empire: Families and the Calico Trade in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, four years prior its publication in 2006. The book narrated the lives and work of the almost two-hundred Barcelona artisan families of the late eighteenth century I had traced throughout several archives and libraries. The book showed how artisan families adapted to the working environment in the first cotton factories by replicating the same strategies they had learned throughout generations in the artisan workshop.

In my work, one of my research techniques has been to immerse myself in the world of the people I study. To write *Clothing the Spanish Empire*--based on the archival work for my dissertation--I first learned how to weave. This was an extraordinary experience. Creating a piece of cloth on a large loom was difficult, challenging and physically exhausting. It was also disappointing to realize the cotton piece that I yielded was, to put it in nice words, quite unimpressive. However, in the process of learning how to weave I understood the type of skill weavers needed before they could produce a quality cotton-cloth. When I read in the documents about the hours weavers spent at the factory and the number of yards they wove each week, I could physically feel what that meant. I wanted students to have the same experience. But it was impossible to take a class of about twenty students to the Fine Arts department, find looms for all of them and teach them how to weave. What I did instead was to find a way to teach them how to spin!

Before I began with the class exercise, I brought to the floor a fundamental question that had become central to the history of women and work and to my own research: Why have jobs that are mostly occupied by women--such as spinning--been regarded as "easy"; jobs that are thought to require little skill and therefore are expected to receive low wages? One of the arguments people have made throughout history is that spinning is a job innate to women. Women are supposedly born with that capacity. They must do very little to produce amazing thread. In fact, the spindle was such a symbol of femininity that a man depicted with a spindle or spinning became immediately effeminate and his masculinity questioned. To illustrate this point, I asked students first to examine several primary texts, the most relevant of which was Peter Paul Rubens' own interpretation of "Hercules Spinning at the Feet of Omphale" (c. 1602). Rubens draws on the early modern interpretation of the story of Hercules and Omphale, which emphasizes the ridicule and humiliating aspect of depicting Hercules, symbol of virility and strength, spinning, a task only performed by women. Artists before and after Rubens had been fascinated by the story of emasculated Hercules, who as part of his twelve labors in which he had to show his strength, courage, and wisdom by overcoming horrific challenges, he is forced to be a slave to Omphale, queen of Lydia. In the image, Omphale who have just acquired Hercules as her slave, is humiliating and making fun of him. The center of his ridicule is not so much Omphale's pulling of the hero's hear, but Hercules representation with the spinning tool. In this painting he does not need to cross-dress as woman for the viewer to understand the intensity of his emotional pain, even the servant next to him looks at Omphale in disbelief. The simple handling of the spindle and thread turns all-mighty Hercules into an object of subjection, just like many women were represented at the time. This is part of several images I showed to students to make the point how much spinning was thought to be something innate to women and those who spun became in fact "women," at least in a symbolic way. Students were amused by the expression and subdued gesture of Hercules, while they were also interested in the fact that no one in this painting is wearing

much clothing, the spindle does it all: it creates this amazing switch of gender roles. Next, I told my students we were all going to try a hands-on exercise to see if this assumption was right. If, in fact, spinning was not only a woman's job but if it was natural and innate to women.

Figure 1. "Hercules Spinning at the Feet of Omphale" Rubens (c.1602)

There were nineteen women in the class and a single man. That was going to be an interesting exercise! I did some research and found a local spinner (it helps to live in Lawrence, Kansas, a medium-sized university town with a hippie past). For a small honorarium, the spinner, Natalie, was willing to come to my classroom and teach the students, myself included, how to spin. The challenge: We all had to learn how spin in one hour and twenty minutes! But if authorities throughout history, from economists to theologians, declared that spinning was such an easy task to learn, then we would have no problem with that. I was worried about the only man in the class--Matthew. What would he do? In theory, his gender would prevent him from learning because it would not be innate to him.

The day of the spinning class arrived. It was a very hot morning in mid-September when I went to pick up Natalie, a former financial adviser who had dropped everything to move to the countryside to spend her days raising poultry and spinning. Natalie did not believe in deodorant or air conditioning, so the fifteen minute-drive to campus

was rather memorable, at least to my senses. Once in the classroom the excitement built up, the tools Natalie brought were rather mysterious: long needles, raw yarn, and apples! First, she attached the apple to the bottom of the needle and said this was the most basic spinning technique she was going to teach us. It was spinning on a drop spindle. We had to attach a piece of cord at the base of the needle above the apple and tie it to the bottom of the needle, below the apple. Then we had to attach the yarn to the bottom cord, keeping the apple at the top of the needle, drop the needle down to our knees so that the spindle's weight would pull the yard onto the spindle as we manipulated it around. This allowed the spun thread to accumulate at the base of the apple. In a few minutes we all realized spinning was not innate to women! It was an extremely difficult task (as some of the pictures I include will show) and most of us did not excel at all. For the thread to be viable at all the spinning must be even, a rough, uneven thread will not produce a good cloth. Besides learning how much skill spinning required, we also learned that the best spinners are sometimes not women. In our class the best spinner was Matthew! One could say he was born to be a spinner. He produced an even, perfect thread. Nineteen years have passed. Matt now works at the local coop. I see him every week. I need to ask him if he has maintained his spinning vocation.