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# *Learning and Research with Students: The Example of the Tilton/Beecher Scandal*

Carol Kolmerten  
Hood College

To read any number of Jeremiads on “the death of literature” or on “literature lost” lately might make most anyone believe that liberal learning is dead in English departments across the country. The twin evils of feminist scholarship (whose practitioners insist upon social readings of texts) and deconstruction (whose practitioners debunk “timeless truths”) have, according to such authors as Alvin Kernan or John Ellis, cheated students out of having a meaningful liberal arts education with old fashioned teachers who love their subject and impart it to their students.

In books like Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*, Kernan glorifies the single figure, sitting alone, silently reading as the apotheosis of teaching, a constant reminder of what we are missing today: the seasoned teacher who works and thinks alone and then saunters masterfully into a classroom to mesmerize rows of adoring students.

My take on liberal learning for the millennium is just the opposite of these writers and their glorification of the old-fashioned teacher/scholar in his ivory tower. My own experience (and the experience of many of my closest academic friends) is that collaboration, particularly with students, is a preferable model to the lone scholar model we all grew up with.

Most of us who have been at our colleges and universities for the past twenty to twenty-five years have, indeed, grown up with that model of the insular, aloof scholar; most of us emulated it quite well, teaching our classes and publishing our first books, essentially in isolation. We quickly became used to the scholarly conference, where we defended our ideas against the attack of others; where the lone “us” faced off against the many “them,” some of whom, at least, were simply graduate students learning the model themselves. Our dissertation defenses, our first conference papers, our march up the tenure ladder were steps in a battle. We conducted our research alone, we wrote alone, we taught alone. Like the students we were teaching, we did not like to share our work in progress, for we secretly believed that to collaborate meant to give away our positions and thus our strength.

I was, in my first two decades in the classroom, a demonstrative teacher—I lectured, I argued, I put on quite a show for my students. If there were a silence in the classroom, I filled it. If students would not discuss the topic at hand, I did. But in the 1980s I had begun to think about working with others because I team-taught a number of times, and I found such teaching exhilarating. Yet, it was only when I directed a collaborative program that I began to understand the true benefits (to myself and to my students) of working with students rather than teaching at them.

Planning the honors program at Hood clarified the value of the collaborative approach. My colleagues and I at Hood had spent over a decade figuring out how

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to structure an honors program. I had attended a number of NCHC meetings to see what worked at other colleges like Hood. What I had learned was that the most interesting programs, with the most enthusiastic students, were collaborative ventures. The notion I had buried away somewhere in my head about honors programs being terribly elite “clubs” where students listened to a master teacher discuss a difficult subject (gleaned from my college days in the mid-60s) had nothing to do with the reality of good honors programs in the 1980s and 90s. Students learned best, I kept hearing and reading over and over, when they were involved in their learning. Honors programs succeeded when students were involved in the day-to-day operations of them.

With the success of our collaborative honors program, my own teaching and scholarship seemed out of kilter with the direction my life was taking. I began to change the way I structured classes, making students responsible for more of their learning. We agreed that students would write a paper each class period. Together, we learned how to post the papers on a class listserv so that everyone could benefit from reading them. We experienced the joys and exhaustion of regular conferences where, together, a student and I talked about the class and about her learning in it. At the end of the term, each student had to evaluate her learning in the class and suggest a fair grade.

At the same time, I began rejecting the image of the solitary scholar, working (always) alone in some sort of ivory tower, unapproachable to all but those in similar towers. I had spent over fifteen years working alone on my first book, but I now sought out collaborations on my next two books. Then, I began involving students in the kind of research I love doing—searching primary texts (particularly journals and letters from the mid to late nineteenth century) to substantiate (or deconstruct) generalizations.

This past summer I was fortunate to receive a major grant to gather materials for my latest scholarly project—a study of the Beecher/Tilton scandal of 1874-75. I split my research money with one of my undergraduate students, who joined me every day at the Library of Congress. Nominally my “research assistant,” Marta was no more my assistant than I was hers. Together we grappled with the ethical issues that permeated the project. Together we tried to make some sense out of thousands and thousands of pages of trial transcripts, newspaper editorials, and personal letters. I am convinced that I would never have begun to understand these materials had it not been for Marta’s collaboration. On her part, Marta reports in long e-mails to me, now that she is living back home in Spain, that the summer’s project changed her life; that she can no longer imagine a life that is not based in research and teaching.

So Marta and I spent the summer of 1999 gathering thousands of pages from newspapers across the country in 1874 and 1875. We were, from the beginning, completely overwhelmed by the mass of material we found. In addition to the fact that every major American newspaper seemed to be obsessed by the story, giving it front-page coverage almost every day for six months, we also found hundreds of essays and books written about the subject. We often just looked at each other in despair, wondering how we could even read all the material we were gathering. If either of us had been doing this project alone we might well have quit, but together we kept plodding along, gathering during the weekdays and reading and analyzing over the weekends.

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Half way through the summer, a fortuitous event occurred. Exhausted by our morning's efforts, we decided to have a long lunch at a French cafe a block from the library. There, we happened to stumble across a colleague from our college, also having lunch. When Mark asked us, "so what are you working on," we began to tell him. First we had to clarify what the scandal was, who was involved, and what their stories were. We told him this:

The Beecher-Tilton scandal, as it was so named, was, simply put, the biggest national story in nineteenth-century America after the Civil War. For the first six months of 1875, every major newspaper in the United States followed the "trial of the century" in all its lascivious details as it unfolded in Brooklyn. Newspapers from as far away as Chicago hired special reporters to cover the trial; one newspaper was founded just to cover trial news. That the best known religious leader of the era was accused of a sexual affair with one of his parishioners, who happened to be the wife of one of his formerly closest friends, only heightened readers' interest.

This is a story where Henry Ward Beecher, the religious patriarch, ended up acquitted and still revered by his parishioners; where Theodore Tilton, the husband, ended up in France playing chess; but where Elizabeth Tilton, the wife, ended up blind (literally and figuratively), in poverty, and alone. It seemed to be an all too familiar story. It was also an open-ended story, we told Mark; we wondered whom to believe and how to know whom to believe.

### Principal Players

**Henry Ward Beecher** was either a heroically devoted minister, husband, and father who was maliciously accused of adultery, or one of the greatest evangelical hypocrites who ever preached in an American church.

**Theodore Tilton** was either an innocent cuckolded husband (guilty only of writing and speaking for liberal causes such as the woman's suffrage movement) who was devastated by his wife's betrayal, or a free loving, scheming blackmailer who would stop at nothing to destroy Beecher.

**Elizabeth Tilton** was either a pious, pure wife and mother, who put her children and her scoundrel husband before everything except her God, or a weak woman who capitulated to the sex urges of her frequent visitor, the Reverend Beecher, and then lied about her actions.

### The story

The story is not any easier to talk about than the "players." It comes in various versions, with differing layers of meaning. It is complicated by the fact that, during the trial, the story was told only by the two men—the minister (Beecher) and the man accusing him of alienating the affections of his wife (Tilton), as women were not allowed to testify for or against their husbands in late-nineteenth-century American courtrooms.

According to Theodore Tilton, he and his wife, Elizabeth, were married by the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher in 1855; their marriage was a happy one until the

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late 1860s when the frequent visits of the Rev. Beecher to their home, particularly while Theodore was out of town, led to an affair between the 55-year old minister and the 35-year old Elizabeth Tilton. The affair lasted two years until Elizabeth confessed to Theodore in the summer of 1870, unable to live a lie anymore. In December, 1870, Theodore extracted from Elizabeth a signed “confession” of adultery.

The “story” according to Beecher was completely different. His visits to Elizabeth Tilton, an unhappy young woman whose husband often left her for months alone, were strictly pastoral visits. He counseled her, advised her, and reinforced her spirituality at a time when her husband was questioning the divinity of Christ and befriending a group of women’s rights radicals (including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Victoria Woodhull) who challenged the sanctity of marriage and women’s roles in that marriage. It was Theodore Tilton, not the Reverend Beecher, who had an affair in the late 1860s. Upon seeing Elizabeth’s signed “confession” of adultery with him in December, 1870, Beecher raced to the Tilton home and demanded that Elizabeth retract her confession—which she did, in writing.

Then we told my colleague why I had been so fascinated with the scandal (other than the fact that it dealt with sex on the front pages of daily newspapers): it seemed, I told him, strangely appropriate to study a scandal about a woman who remains silent, without a voice, as I was particularly interested in women’s silenced voices.

In a book I wrote over a decade ago (*Women in Utopia: The Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities*), I had posited that if we would take the time to listen to women’s voices, we would learn a different history from the one that patriarchs told; that we needed to learn to take women seriously by not dismissing their complaints, by not ignoring their problems, by not relegating them to unquestioned cultural practices to be enacted without thought. I ended by saying that an egalitarian world has the power to transform objects into subjects and in this transformation lies utopia for women.

It seemed to be a good thing to say at the time and certainly had shaped my approach to the materials we were finding now. What we read in trial transcripts showed two men busy fashioning stories (diametrically opposed stories) about a woman’s beliefs and actions. What drew me to this scandal in the first place, I explained, was Elizabeth’s absent voice in “the trial of the century.” She is having a war waged over *her* words; yet, she just sits in the court every day, silent. Cipher-like, she allows us (the situation allows us) to imagine anything we want to about her. When her husband creates her story, repeats what he says are her words, he seems believable; when the Rev. Beecher fashions her story and repeats what he says are her words, he seems slightly less believable (but perhaps, I added, this is my own bias, I who have been taught to disbelieve the evangelical rhetoric of the Elmer Gantrys of the world). Both men talk about her as if she were a child, immature, not knowing her mind, not sitting right there in the spectators’ section of the courtroom.

I pointed out that contemporary scholars have only magnified this impression of Elizabeth as a cipher without a voice. University press books like the recent *Rev. Beecher and Mrs. Tilton*, by Altina Waller, focus on the war of words between the two men. Elizabeth is only a voiceless backdrop to *their* stories about her. Even well-known feminist critics have dismissed her. See, for example, Ann Douglas, who

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writes: "Attractive, charming, not particularly bright, emotionally unstable, and immature, Libby Tilton . . . died essentially of confusion, without a life" (292). I intended to "rescue" her and to retell the story from her perspective, thus creating new meaning. By telling Elizabeth's story, I explained, I would be able to right the wrongs of her historical elision and tell the "real" story of the scandal.

Then my colleague turned to Marta and said, "and what to you make out of all of this." And Marta replied, thoughtfully: "they are real people. Living people. That's what surprised me when I went to the manuscript room and found some of their letters. They aren't characters in a novel. They are complicated and contradictory, and I don't have a clue as to whom to believe."

And that was it for me—the moment I don't think I would have gotten to by myself as obvious as it now seems when I look back on it. I realized with the force of an epiphany that I had gone into this project with my ideological blinders on, expecting to find (and glorify) another voiceless woman. That when we heard her voice, we would *understand*. But Marta was right; the "characters" here were "real" and thus messy. No preconceived story-line seemed to work.

And then we both started explaining, words tumbling over each other: "I'm not even sure I like this woman very much," said Marta. "I feel sorry for her . . . but . . ." I added. Both of us stared at each other, surprised by the hesitation in each other's voices. How could we not like this voiceless woman? This silenced woman? This victim? All my previous thinking and writing had prepared me to glorify her and, of course, to give her a voice. Marta, who had not spent an entire scholarly life giving voice to silenced women, could say more easily, "I'm not sure I like her." We had both been prepared to hate her husband (faithless bastard . . . slime) and her minister (lying hypocrite). We had our categories all set, and we were ready to place her in the "innocent wife, betrayed by both her husband and her minister" one. We liked the story that we had created in our heads.

And we had liked her when we first read her words; she appeared, when we waded through all the men's language about her and made it through to her own words, a sincere, rather pious wife and mother. Even though she did not testify in the trial in 1875, Elizabeth did testify before the investigating committee of the Plymouth Church in 1874. She also wrote letters to local newspapers (for publication) and to her husband (not for publication).

The first of Elizabeth's public statements we found is from a letter she wrote to the *Brooklyn Eagle* (the Reverend Beecher's paper) dated July 23, 1874. In it, as one would expect from a member of the Plymouth Church congregation, she writes to refute the "malicious" statement that her husband had given to the church patriarchs who convened in July, 1874 (at Henry Ward Beecher's request to exonerate him). She writes clearly and emphatically that "I affirm myself before God to be innocent of the crimes laid upon me; that never have I been guilty of adultery with Henry Ward Beecher in thought or deed; nor has he ever offered to me an indecorous or improper proposal." She adds that her husband's testimony to prove her "insane, weak-minded, insignificant, of mean presence," show him to be "heartless."

A week later, meeting the "investigating committee" of the Plymouth church, Elizabeth affirms the statement in her published letter. She characterizes her life with her husband as that of a subordinate, always catering to someone who thought himself better than she was. She says, first, that she takes the blame for the

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"indifference" her husband showed to her "in all my life" . . . "I understood very well that I was not to have the attention that many wives have; I realized that his talent and genius must not be narrowed down to myself."\*

Elizabeth gives her evidence of a husband who was constantly "dissatisfied... there was nothing in our home that satisfied him" (190). Her husband was very critical about my language," so much so that, as she said "I do not think I ever said anything freely or naturally" (191). He was "fastidious, and must have the best of everything" (191), often "scolding" her then apologizing. In fact this pattern—criticism then apology—created the structure of their marriage (and of her life).

Elizabeth talks of Theodore's jealousy—of the Reverend Beecher as well as of several other men. When asked if Theodore made her feel "beneath him," she answered emphatically yes, citing a time in which, going to meet friends, Theodore turned to her and said "I would give \$500 if you were not by my side" (198). Constantly criticizing her for being short, he often said "I wish you would not keep near me." She adds that she suffered "ten years of misery in this home" that she had been ill treated since 1866, often "kept without food and fire, locked in my room for days together, etc." She talks about Theodore's advances to a young woman who lived with them; she tells the investigating committee of the woman Theodore brought into their home as a housekeeper who she feared was his lover.

Both Marta and I were moved by Elizabeth's story. Marta reminded me, though, that it was also Henry Ward Beecher's story, almost to the word, and that if we wanted to believe and "like" her we also had to believe him. We agreed that Theodore appeared as insensitive (at best) and a brute at worst. The twenty or so pages of her testimony in 1874 before the church fathers certainly did emphasize her innocence and her betrayal by a husband who appeared to constantly put her down.

At the same time, we also examined Elizabeth's private correspondence, letters written to her husband during the alleged "affair" with the Reverend Beecher during 1868-69. These letters, published in the August 13, 1874 *Chicago Tribune* (by Theodore's lawyer), affected us more than any other of the documents we found. As we read them again and again, we realized that it was these letters that bothered us the most. Here are excerpts of some of the letters we read:

### The Letters

Apr. 1, 1866:

*My darling, may God make me worthy to be your wife.*

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\*The testimony before the investigating committee of the Plymouth Church was published in many newspapers across the nation (and even in Europe) during the summer of 1874. Charles Marshall gathered all the testimony before the committee in 1874 and the trial transcripts from 1875 and published all the material with page numbers in his *True History of the Brooklyn Scandal: Being the Complete Account of Trial...*The page numbers in the text refer to the testimony cited in his book.

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Dec. 23, 1866:

*I have been thinking of my love for Mr. B considerably of late . . . and have you not loved me more ardently since you saw that another high nature appreciated me? . . .*

*It is not possible for any human creature to supersede you in my heart. Above all, you rise grand—highest, best . . . .*

*But to return to Mr. B. He has been the guide of our youth, and, until the three last dreadful years when our confidence was shaken in him, we trusted him as no other human being . . . . Of course, I realize what attracts you both to me is a supposed purity of soul you find in me . . . . Without you, I can be nothing. . . . without you, I can do nothing.*

Jan. 7, 1867:

*What a delicious way you have of rebuking and teaching me. [I am so] thoroughly satisfied when you praise me, though it be true or not, I am content. I go singing and light-hearted about my work. Every difficulty is straightened and life is sweet.*

Jan 10, 1867:

*I feel how poor and meager my letters are in comparison with yours . . . . You call me your heart's twin; I want to be.*

Jan . 11, 1867:

*Am I your soul's mate? . . . I cannot believe I have capacity to meet your soul's want, though you entirely fill mine. When I look at you, I say "Yes, my soul is satisfied, —our union is perfect." But when I turn and look at myself as supplying your need, I bow my head and pray God to add the needed grace.*

Jan. 13, 1867:

*Pardon me if so many of my letters are filled with accounts of the pastor's visits. It is because I would have you know all that fills my thoughts that I write so frequently of him.*

*Yesterday he made me very happy. It was Saturday. He came in about 11:30 a.m.,*

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bringing flowers, as usual. After visiting with me twenty minutes he said, "I am hungry to see your children." "Are you, really?" said I, "then come up directly and see them." I had set apart this day for doll-dressing, as I had not time before Christmas. So he followed me upstairs where, for one full hour, he chatted and played with them delightfully. After this he invited me to accompany him to Mr. Ointon's, which call he had inclined to make for some time. . . . Having been inspired by our dolls, he then wished me to go with him to the toy stores and advise him in selecting a doll for Hattie B. . . . I wish you would write him. . . . Oh if you two dear men were once more reunited in perfect sympathy.

Jan . 15, 1867:

Your letter expressing great patience toward me in reference to my finances came yesterday also. I thank you with all my heart. You are magnanimous and generous beyond all men. I long to be more entirely what you need. It is the wonder of my life that you are satisfied with me. It is your great goodness and not in my merit.

Jan 16, 1867:

Do all love as we do? And shall we continue thus, when we meet? This is the nightmare which abides with me. Good-night, your own pet..

Jan 24, 1867:

My husband, I believe I love you as well as you wish me to; I should be wretched if I loved stronger. I suffer enough as it is.

Jan. 26, 1867:

(On Mr. B): He [is] pitifully mistaken in his opinion of you. I can never rest satisfied until you both see eye to eye and love one another as you once did. . . . I do love him very dearly, and I do love you supremely, utterly—believe it. Perhaps, if I by God's grace, keep myself white, I may bless you both. I am striving. . . . I love you as Mrs. Browning loved. Don't you know it? Pray for me always. I pray for you . . . if I could sit in your lap and look into your dear eyes now—I'm afraid it would be more than I could bear. At

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any rate, I should have a good cry—*WAT*, I am now going to have without you. It always “baptizes me” to use your word.

Jan 27, 1867:

Mr. B called Saturday, He came tired and gloomy, but he said I had the most calming and peaceful influence over him, more so than any one he ever knew. I believe he loves you. We talked of you. He brought me two pretty flowers in pots, and said as he went out: “What a pretty house this is—I wish I lived here. ”

Feb. 3, 1867:

The church tonight was filled with medical students, Mr. B preaching before their Christian Union. . . Will you not on your return throw in your inspiration and join me in fulfilling our vows as members of this Christian church? Your beautiful spirit would help many there, as it does everywhere. And, to me, there is no spot so sacred as Plymouth Church.

Jan. 28, 1868:

My waking thoughts last night were of you. My rising thoughts this morning were of you. I bless you; I honor you; I love you. God sustain us and help us both to keep our vows. Yours entirely,

Feb. 14, 1868:

Yours [letter] from Crawfordsville came today. To hear that you are happy, cheerful, and love me, is more than even my faith could hope. I wept over it, I laughed over it, I prayed over it. . . . Mattie is hungry to hear from you. I think she feels a little care that Mr. B visits here. . . . she said “Lib, I heard through Mrs. Morrill that Mr. B. Called on you Wednesday. I believe he likes you ever so much.” Now my darling, I have often urged him to visit Mattie, believing he would find her more comforting and restful than I can be. *SHE* would be refreshed and cheered—while as for me, I who am rich in the fullness of your delicious love, have no need.

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Feb. 17, 1868:

*Yes, darling, I have fallen (why not say risen?) desperately in love with my husband. I have fallen quite long enough. I cannot tell why such lines as these in your letters depress me: "I am cheery, good-hearted, hopeful, and bright man." In my soul I rejoice that you are, but I cannot help thinking that it is because I am not with you!*

Feb. 18, 1868:

*I have felt so heart-sick that there are so few great men or women. The idea of a faithful, true marriage will be lost out of the world—certainly out of the literary and refined world—unless WE revive it . . . I shall have much to tell you of our dear friend, Mr. B. He has opened his heart as you would love and admire him.*

Feb. 24, 1868:

*My darling of darlings: . . . oh my beloved, I feel unutterable love and sympathy for you in your anguish and "heart-break"—as you say. It is too true you have given largely, grandly, and beautifully of your best love to friends, aye even to your wife—while in return you have received most often indifference, and, at best, love not deserving the name, in comparison with thine own. . . .*

*Again in one of your letters you close with "Faithfully yours"; that word "faithful" means a great deal; yes, darling, I believe it, trust it, and give you the same surety with regard to myself—I am faithful to you, have always, and shall forever be, world without end.*

Feb. 26, 1868:

*Mr. B put our baby to sleep, laid him down and covered him up.*

Feb. 28, 1868:

*How much I want to do to make you happy when you come home! I can do no great things; but all the many little things which love will suggest, these will I do for my beloved.*

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It was in discussing these letters where we both understood the true benefits of collaboration. Both of us found the letters deeply depressing but for different reasons. Marta pointed out that Elizabeth's voice sounds like that of a fifteen-year-old girl, infatuated with an older, popular boy, who sometimes notices her, but more often ignores her or criticizes her. They are not, she stated emphatically, the letters of a woman who has been happily married for the past fifteen years, as Theodore had suggested.

These letters distressed me for another reason. I agreed that Elizabeth's need for love and acceptance from her husband was obvious, but what is also clear in these same letters is that in place of a husband who was either critical or enraptured, Elizabeth found complete acceptance from another man. Elizabeth writes time after time of "Mr. B's visits." As she writes, "Pardon me if so many of my letters are filled with accounts of the pastor's visits; it is because I would have you know all that fills my thoughts that I write so frequently of him." But she adds, quite astutely on another day: "I have been thinking of my love for Mr. B considerably of late . . . and have you not loved me more ardently since you saw another high nature appreciated me?"

To be sought after, courted with flowers and presents, impressed Elizabeth more than it might have other women. With Beecher, Elizabeth was at ease; with Beecher, she could enjoy simple visits where he would read to her from his novel-in-progress. Where her husband didn't even want her in the room when his women's rights friends (the intelligent Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and others) were visiting, Henry Ward Beecher sought out her comments, her company. How could she have denied herself this, we asked each other?

The more we read the letters and talked about them, the more insight we got from them. As we told our colleague Mark about the letters, I realized with certain clarity that Elizabeth was, in our 1990s terminology, an abused wife. Given what we now know about abuse, we pieced together the specifics of their dysfunctional relationship. Their letters clearly chronicle what we now call a "cycle of abuse." This cycle begins with the batterer intimidating his spouse, withdrawing affection from her for her many shortcomings, putting her down. It then leads to an "explosion," which for Theodore was not hitting but verbal abuse and or locking Elizabeth in her room without food. This cycle ends with a declaration of love and begging of forgiveness and all appears well for the moment.

As we read these letters through the language of abuse, we did, perhaps, understand Elizabeth a bit better. But what was most interesting to both of us is that our response to her mirrored our culture's response to abused women: "something is wrong with the women to cause that abuse." Yet, even knowing that, we still felt ambivalent towards Elizabeth. On the day we talked with our colleague, we finally figured out our ambivalence: Marta pointed out that Elizabeth was no Innocent Victim that she portrayed herself to be. I added that her letters illustrated both her need for Theodore and her need to show him that another man, another man who was once Theodore's closest friend, another man who was one of the most powerful men in the United States, *did* enjoy being with her. We both agreed that about her fidelity, she appeared to protest too often and too much. Faithful spouses simply do not spend their epistolary time reinforcing their faithfulness.

Through these letters, we also began to understand Elizabeth's reasons for changing her story. What had bothered both of us the most about Elizabeth is that

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she first accused Beecher of adultery, then, when confronted, took it back, then changed her mind again. In total, she changed her story five times. We threw up our hands after about the third revision, saying “come on, woman, tell the truth.” But the truth for Elizabeth was relative; it was based on whatever powerful male gave her the pen to write with. These confessions and retractions finally made a certain kind of sense to us, once we saw her through the lens of abuse.

Our collaboration also helped us understand all three principal “characters.” After hearing Marta tell our colleague Mark about how the people whose words we were studying were people, not characters, I realized that we had created meaning by creating binary oppositions: Rev. Beecher, for example, we first saw as being one of two things: he could either a hypocrite or a loving minister; Elizabeth Tilton was either a loyal wife or a lying seductress. When we engaged in constructing these binary oppositions, we were assuming these living people were, somehow “characters” in a melodrama, characters who either had to be “good” or “bad.” Like many of our colleagues, we seem reluctant to give up our comforting either/or dualities; as devoted readers of Western popular literature, we do not want ambiguity, and we assume that we need both a hero and a villain in our stories.

In the Beecher-Tilton scandal we found no heroes and much ambiguity: Beecher was a devoted minister *and* also a hypocrite. Affair or not, he gave Theodore \$7,000 to hush the scandal. And despite his statements that he only visited Elizabeth “two or three times in several months” her letters suggest that such was not the case. He was at the Tilton home four or five times a week. Theodore Tilton may well have been a cuckolded husband, but he was also, most certainly, an abuser. Finally, Elizabeth Tilton was certainly a pious wife and mother, who, psychologically and verbally abused for close to a decade, did indeed lie—she lied whenever her husband or her minister asked her to. Given the pattern of her life—trying unsuccessfully to please her husband and her minister—how could she not continue to try to please? Yet her letters reveal that she is not simply a victim of Theodore’s abuse; she also egged him on. In letter after letter to him, she tells him of how wonderful “Mr. B’s” visits were, how loving he is, how much he cares for her.

Our response to Elizabeth was, in some ways, the response of the press of the 1880s. At best, she was ignored (as an unimportant, voiceless object); at times, she was pitied. Usually, she was criticized and often the criticism was heaped upon her with much more venom than that heaped upon the two men. “Degraded and worthless,” the *New York Times* called her, for example. In trying to analyze both our own responses and the responses of her contemporaries, we realized that we were, indeed, viewing the Beecher-Tilton scandal as one of the great melodramas of the late nineteenth century. Every day, during the six-month trial, the transcript of the testimony was published in newspapers across America. Like the sentimental fiction that was anthologized in popular magazines and newspapers, always with a plot twist at the end to keep readers coming back for a new installment, the Beecher-Tilton trial kept everyone coming back for six straight months. And the readers were looking for story and for character. And what kind of characters?—the flat, unchanging characters of melodrama, of course: either the “good” wife and “loyal” minister along pitted against the “evil” husband and his mistress, who are out to destroy all that is God-given in the world *or* the loyal husband who has been sorely deceived by his best friend and wife. Like the newspapers, we saw these real life people as unchanging characters because that is the way we understand

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symbolic representation in melodrama or morality plays. But as Marta pointed out the day we talked to my colleague at the French cafe, these were real people, not symbolic representations. I, too firmly grounded in the importance of hearing women's silenced voices, did not know how to listen to Elizabeth's voice, as it kept changing. I, who shaped her life as a "story" with a clear beginning (innocent bride), middle (troubled young wife who sought out her minister when her philandering husband would leave her), and end (innocent victim, ostracized by society), could not see the "life" outside the story. My anger at her, at least in part, is based on the fact that she would not "fit" into the categories that I had so carefully constructed for her.

And, of course, this is what happened to Elizabeth in her own time. She was so hated by the press because she fit no 1870s "story" either. To the reformers of the world, particularly to the woman's rights advocates, she was an albatross who brought down her husband; to the believers in Christian, evangelical religion, whose way of looking at women as virgins or whores; saints or sinners and whose rhetorical practices dominated the trial, she was the woman (the sinner) whose very presence almost led to the destruction of their minister. She, thus, had to be the opposite of a pious, pure woman, and therefore a woman to be ostracized outside of the physical and linguistic community.

Marta and I agreed that the most fascinating communication of all of Elizabeth's is her final public letter, with a final "confession." In April, 1878, almost three years after the end of the trial, where Beecher's testimony that he and Elizabeth had never had an affair prevailed, Elizabeth wrote a letter that was published on the front page of the *New York Times*. It reads:

*I now solemnly affirm "that" the charge brought by my husband of adultery between myself and the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, was true and that the life I had lived so well the last four years had become intolerable to me.*

She adds that she is now confessing to the "truth" because a sense of "truth and justice" necessitates it.

How satisfying it would be to end this little essay by saying "Now this is the truth; this time we hear Elizabeth's true voice." I could even end with a final irony, so beloved of English professors everywhere: the pious, religious woman who wanted only to be a good wife and mother ended up, after finally speaking the truth, alone, miserable, and blind. But, alas, this essay is not a "story" and it can't end that way. Also included in the *New York Times* front-page "confession" were a few additional articles concerning the veracity of this confession. A *Times* reporter argued that the letter was, indeed, written by Mrs. Tilton, unaided by her husband; whereas "a prominent member of Plymouth Church," wrote that the letter was "clearly Tiltonian," in that he thought "no one could doubt for a moment that Theodore Tilton was the author of it." The *Times* also included the rumor that the Tiltons had been about to reconcile. It is simply not clear that we can believe Elizabeth; the shadowy Theodore is still hovering behind the scenes, perhaps even drafting the letter, perhaps not.

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Sometimes when we listen to women's voices we hear not one, clear truth about who they are (that we would like to hear); rather we hear that they, like men, are extraordinarily complex human beings and our system of creating binary oppositions creates a too-easy version of the "truth" in a case like this. Similarly, the "old-fashioned" teaching that the writers of fashionable Jerimiads yearn for has been based for far too long on a comparable binary opposition: teachers and students, at opposite ends of the "ignorance/knowledge" pole. As Paulo Freire has so eloquently told us in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a true liberal arts education "reconciles the poles of contradiction between students and teachers so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students," so that neither is a receptacle to be filled and neither is the filler of "containers" (as quoted in Richter, 69). Thus, instead of cheating students out of a meaningful liberal arts education, teachers who truly love their subject will consider ways of actively sharing that love through collaboration.

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