Report on Faculty Research Grant 2005
“The Words of Women: A History of Literary Biographies

During July and August of 2005, I spent time reading and analyzing the 18th- and 19th-century analogies that I proposed studying in the grant. This proved to be both extremely productive and immensely time consuming. I began my investigation with Poullain de la Barre’s famous work on the Equality of the Sexes (1678) in which he details the contribution of women to literature and the sciences. Using Barre’s work as a kind of standard that encapsulated what the scholarly community knew about women’s intellectual contribution in the seventeenth century, I moved on and compared Barre’s compilation to several eighteenth-century analogies or dictionaries such as Jean-François de Lacroix 1769 Dictionnaire portatif des femmes célèbres, contenant l’histoire des femmes savantes, des actrices, et généralement des Dames qui se sont rendues fameuses dans tous les siècles, par leurs aventures, les talents, l’esprit et le courage (Portable Dictionary of Famous Women, Containing the history of learned women, actresses and generally Ladies who have become famous in all centuries by their adventures, talent, wit and courage) the anonymously authored , L’Esprit des Femmes célèbres Du Siecle de Louis XIV, et de celui de Louis XV, jusqu’à présent (Famous Women of Wit from the Century of Louis XIV, and that of Louis XV, until the present). These collections all make the claim that France’s pre-eminence as the wealthiest, most sophisticated and cultured realm in Europe is due primarily to its extraordinary women. To quote from one of the anthology’s: “The number of celebrated Women who contributed to the greatness of the century of Louis XIV and that of Louis XV until the present is one of the qualities which most honors our Nation.”

I then turned my attention to works authored by women themselves. Two very well known novelists, Stéphanie Félicité de Genlis and Germaine de Staël wrote literary biographies of women. Genlis’ 1811 book, De l’Influence des femmes sur la littérature française comme protectrices des lettres et comme auteurs; ou Précis de l’histoire des femmes françaises les plus célèbres, (On the Influence of women on French literature as patrons and writers: or a Short history of the most famous French women) was particularly instructive, given that she is often viewed as an arch-conservative. Like her earlier predecessors, she views women’s contribution to ancien régime culture—a culture that in 1811 was lost forever—as significant and exceptional in Europe. By contrast, Staël frames women’s partipation in culture as a harbinger of a coming modernity.

With these women’s voices in mind, I then turned my attention to the so-called great historians and cultural critics—all male—of the nineteenth century. In 1844 journalist and critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve published Les Portraits des femmes in which he paid homage to French women writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. In 1853 as part of his monumental twenty-one volume history of the French Revolution, Jules Michelet reserved a volume exclusively for the women of the...
Revolution. The prominent and influential cultural critics Jules and Edmond de Goncourt likewise authored a collection of portraits *Les Femmes au dix-huitième siècle* (1862) dedicated to the famous women of the eighteenth century. It would seem that integral to the work of any serious historian or cultural critic of the nineteenth century was a consideration of women’s talents and accomplishments.

I am happy to say that I was able to complete the initial stages of the research on this project. That is, I read and outlined each one of the works that I plan to include in an article for publication. While the summer did not afford me the time to write the article, it is my hope that I will be able to complete one during the academic year and not later than the summer of 2006.

(Up-date: Because I was involved in book revisions the summer of 2006, I have yet to complete the above mentioned article. It’s currently about half finished. I will be able to devote the summer of 2007 to finishing it).