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Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America

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Mary Kelley

In the spring of 1847, a year before her graduation from one of the many female academies and seminaries in the nineteenth-century United States, Bessie Lacy wrote to her father, the prominent Presbyterian minister Drury Lacy, about the future she imagined for herself. Edgeworth Seminary, the school she was attending in Greensboro, North Carolina, was providing her a formal education, and Lacy readily acknowledged her debt to one of the South's leading female educational institutions. Simultaneously, however, Lacy made clear that her informal education had been equally important. Undertaken through intensive reading, that education made possible the future she now imagined. Once she had completed her schooling at the seminary, Lacy proposed that she and her father begin reading "Locke, Bacon, Stuart, [and] Blackstone." They would take their "recreation," as she described it, in "the beauties of Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Cowper [and] Scott." They would also "*take a peep at the Classical writers,*" although that would be done "*only for old acquaintance sake.*" That she was delighted with the project she had designed was obvious: "Oh! won't we have a fine time reading together in your study," she wrote to her father. The reading in which Lacy was immersing herself would prepare her for a second project. She and classmate Maggie Morgan

Mary Kelley is the John Sloan Dickey Third Century Professor in the Social Sciences at Dartmouth College. Earlier versions of this essay were presented as the inaugural lecture for the Third Century Professorship, as the keynote address at the annual meeting of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic in July 1994, and as the Dorothy Collins Brown Lecture at the Huntington Library in December 1994.

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