Television and the Teenage Literate: Discourses of *Felicity*

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On our contemporary cultural pecking order, a television show aimed specifically at teenagers probably ranks low in the established scheme of literary value. Epithets range from the dismissive ("no better than a soap opera") to the outright derogatory ("utter trash"). Yet teenage television is engaging a social group that explores new literacies and crosses media boundaries more readily than most. If Frank Zingrone is right and "[a] one-medium user is the new illiterate" (237), then it may be that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed by viewers of teenage television series represent new ground in the complex area of how we interact with texts in a fast-changing world.

I explore this proposition using the example of the Warner Brothers Television cult series *Felicity*, created by J. J. Abrams and Matt Reeves. This program aired, sometimes erratically, over a period of four years until its cancellation in 2002, surviving for as long as it did at least partly because of pressure from fans. Its viewing figures were not enormous but its viewers were extremely loyal. In this essay, I investigate questions of what the New London Group calls "multiliteracies" through the lens of this case study. I look carefully at various texts associated with *Felicity* and consider what they have to tell us about contemporary popular literacies. *Felicity* acts as a kind of core sample, extracted from the broader soil of popular culture to help us explore some workings of contemporary literacies in particular and exhaustive detail. I also consider what the *Felicity* corpus may offer to our thinking about

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English teaching. Understanding and valuing what students bring into the classroom in terms of contemporary literacies is an important prerequisite to engaging them in developing those literacies further. It is also important for teachers to consider the implications of the new multiliteracies in terms of student access to different media, taking into account the implications of the digital divide.

Focusing on a single example makes it easier to tease out some of the complex strands of new literate behaviors. I describe these strands in some detail before turning rather more briefly to the theoretical and practical implications of this phenomenon for our understanding of literacy, both in terms of theoretical analysis and also in terms of "what to do on Monday morning." Although space does not permit an exhaustive undertaking in either territory, this essay represents a clearing of the ground in its description of an actual sample of literate practices.

Contemporary teachers know they are caught in a fast-moving revolution. Many of the *Felicity* texts I describe would not have existed ten years ago. Donna Alvermann, Jennifer Moon, and Margaret Hagood describe some of the complexities:

> Teaching critical media literacy using popular culture texts with groups of students who often know more than we do about current trends in alternative rock music, film making, computer technology, and video software can be challenging. [. . . H]ow do we catch up with a world that is moving quickly in many directions and on many fronts? Maintaining the status quo is not an option. (10)

General theories, critical principles, and pedagogical practices all struggle to take account of the speed of change. Young people have the advantage of not being constantly astounded by the nature of the ever-expanding textual universe in which they find their bearings; their teachers and other interested adults must make conscious efforts to keep up. Young people learn new literacies in the context of specific examples such as the world of *Felicity* texts, and a set of texts such as those built around *Felicity* offers rich territory for two-way educational exchanges between teachers and students. Teachers have much to learn about how their students navigate, select, and use such a vast textual universe. In return, teachers have the capacity to enrich the critical perspectives available to their students as they cruise this complex terrain. Even framing the terms for such a two-way conversation is an educationally valuable exercise.

Felicity

Felicity was in many ways a highly conventional television series. It began in the fall of 1998, and told of the adventures (mostly emotional) of a college student in New York City. Its characters are all incredibly beautiful and they live in implausibly spacious and comfortable surroundings, in the best sitcom tradition. (I complained about

this unrealistic tendency to a friend who replied succinctly, "Opera is also ridiculous.") Both the content of the series and the nature of many of its advertisements suggest that the target demographic is female and in late adolescence or early twenties. From time to time, certain social lessons are interwoven into the plot, as frequently happens with soap operas. The characters, with one or two strident exceptions, are warm-hearted, well-meaning, and articulate, even when they are making a big mess of their lives.

The initial impetus of the plot is romantic. Felicity has been an ordinary, relatively conservative high school student but when she starts university she impetuously breaks with her long-laid plans. She moves from California to New York to follow Ben, a classmate whom she barely knows but has long admired from afar, after he writes a friendly note in her yearbook. The series begins with this decision and we see Felicity settling into her new quarters and making new friends. In New York she begins to get to know Ben a bit better, and also meets Noel, who soon provides the third leg of the romantic triangle that forms a core dynamic of the series. Other friends and housemates include Julie, Elena, Tracey, Sean, Meagan, Richard, and Javier: a multiracial group of young people.

The makers of *Felicity* have chosen to air shows that roughly correspond to real time. The academic year and the television season coordinate nicely. We never see Felicity or her friends over their vacations, because the show is off the air at those times. Events such as Thanksgiving, exams and new semesters, and farewells until another university year all unfold more or less in accord with real time, although there are occasional discrepancies caused by the erratic filming and airing of the program. The catastrophe of September 11, naturally enough, was not foreseen by the producers, and *Felicity* made an involuntary departure from its real-life connections with contemporary New York City at the outset of the fourth season.

A serious study of the assumptions (regarding gender, class, race, education, and so on) that drive the program would be a very interesting exercise, but I am more concerned here with the issues that make such television programs as *Felicity* important to the development of contemporary literacy practices. In at least three ways, its evocation of literacy is of particular interest:

- the literate practices of the characters within the world of the story;
- the narrative devices used to frame the storytelling of the series; and
- the external but connected texts arising from three sources: those created by the publicity industry associated with the show; those created by the creators of the series; those created by the fans.

An exploration of these categories offers the opportunity to establish a detailed grounding for a consideration of where student literacies may be heading and of how teachers can most usefully address the new textual universe.

The Literate Practices of the Characters

Felicity is relatively unusual for a television series in that characters are sometimes seen reading and heard talking about their reading. They actually, from time to time, even *study*, and, while this activity often functions as a plot device to bring characters together over an extended period of time, it does also convey a genuine sense that print affects their lives in real ways. Furthermore, none of the students whose lives are featured in this program is "a one-medium user." We see them wielding video cameras, watching movies and television, playing computer games, and using and developing Web sites, as well as reading books. In addition, Julie writes, performs, and records songs. External cultural references, always current at the time of first airing, also abound. For example, one plot development took place in and around the line for *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* at exactly the time that film first appeared in the movie theaters.

To explore the characters' print-literate behaviors more substantially, let us turn to the episode "Finally," which first aired on December 15, 1998. This program, not surprisingly, is about finals and involves many kinds of reading. Elena develops a system of rewards and incentives for studying organic chemistry, Noel struggles with *Great Expectations*, and Ben is defeated by poetry. Felicity, who likes literature, is supposed to be helping both men, which leads to a variety of plot contrivances but also to some ongoing conversation about reading. For example:

> BEN: There's like this wall, in my head. On the one side there's the part of my brain that understands things and absorbs things—and on the other side of the wall is poetry.
>
> JULIE: What's the wall made out of?
>
> BEN: "Ode to Psyche," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn." My head is full of all these odes that I don't understand.

Ben's frustration continues and he is later amazed at how Felicity grasps meaning from words:

> BEN: Hey. Okay, I know what I'm about to do here is really stupid, but I need your help. I'm lost. We have a final on poems and I don't understand.
>
> FELICITY: What, the Keats?
>
> BEN: Yeah. And please don't say "the Keats" like it's the easiest stuff in the world.
>
> FELICITY: Okay. Have you read "The Eve of St. Agnes"? It's a good one.
>
> BEN: Yeah. Could that poem be any longer? I mean, I'm not the smartest guy in the world but I'm not a moron.
>
> FELICITY: Okay. It's, it's about the Feast of St. Agnes, you know, the young virgin who performs some weird ritual the night before the saint's day and she's granted a vision of her future husband.
>
> BEN: Really?

And later again:

> FELICITY: [reading] "Was it a vision or a waking dream? Fled is that music. Do I wake or sleep?" So, like with "Ode on a Grecian Urn," it's about contradiction, but, you know, um, fantasy and dreams can distract you from your painful reality.
>
> BEN: And you get all this from reading it? You don't even have to figure it out? [sighs]
>
> FELICITY: Poetry is the greatest.
>
> BEN: Well—pizza's the greatest. ("Finally")

Ben's frustration is a real part of his character, and his inability to work out how Felicity makes sense of the poems is all too recognizable. The discussion is not deep or significant but it is a marker that these characters are presumed to have an intellectual as well as a social life, an assumption that is repeated in many different ways throughout the series. These young people's print literacies are perceived as deeply canonical; unlike Carmela Soprano and her reading group, for example, the characters of *Felicity* do not read or talk about contemporary novels. Indeed, Felicity's expressed enthusiasm for literature is less persuasively conveyed than the impatience of Ben and Noel with their conscripted reading activities. Other multimodal literacies represent an enormous element of the characters' daily lives and feature importantly in their self-images; conventional print-on-paper is work.

More official literacies also affect the characters. Their student lives depend on grades and transcripts; Felicity works for a while in the registrar's office where student files are stored. They receive official letters of warning about their behavior or their academic status. They fill in job applications and add sample Web sites or promotional tapes in support. They write papers and assignments, and panic when the computer freezes at a late stage in the process. They pay the rent and the bills. Their futures depend on many different documents, and this dependency is often foregrounded as an essential plot element.

The Narrative Frames of *Felicity*

As a story, *Felicity* itself is multimediated. Many forms of media technology are integrated as storytelling devices, though less often in the fourth season than previously. Often the frame story is a sequence in which Felicity dictates an account of her life into a tape recording to send to her friend Sally. This device enables the show's creators to give us Felicity's own perspective, as she provides not just summary but also commentary on the happenings in her life.

Another running narrative structure is that of Sean's videorecording of his friends. Sean is an enthusiast and when he decides he is going to make a "docuventory" of college life, he ropes his friends into the project willy-nilly. Numerous scenes are shot and presented through the lens of Sean's camera, and several episodes alternate

between images recorded by his camera, which exists inside the story world, and those of the external cameras of the production team that exist outside of that world. Furthermore, characters are able, from time to time, to resort to Sean's video-recordings to provide multiple points of view on particular events. The video even serves as a medium of flashback on some occasions. The characters watch it on their television screen and also, at least once, on the screen of a laptop computer. On this occasion, during the third season, there is a point where we see the current activities of the characters on the main screen while, at the bottom of the picture, the screen of the open laptop, sitting on a table, silently renders events from the past that we have seen in earlier series. It is a surprisingly powerful and evocative narrative moment.

All kinds of communications media are roped in as devices for organizing the story: answering machines, e-mail, photographs, Web sites, all augment the audio- and video-recordings that structure so much of the series. An ongoing and very competitive video game is a major plot ingredient in one show. Felicity and Noel collaborate to create a computer animation project that keeps them working together at a time when they otherwise might realistically lose contact with each other. Exchanges between characters are literally *mediated* in a variety of interesting ways.

As with the extreme attractiveness of the actors and the sumptuously spacious apartments, there is something unreal about the way these struggling students surround themselves with the latest electronic gadgets. However, as a means to exploring ways of contemporary storytelling, the devices play an interesting role. In a way, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that just as a fairy-tale hero needs a magic tool to enable the story to proceed, these fictional students need all their technologies to help tell a story about today.

Another powerful force in the narrative of *Felicity* is the soundtrack. Current songs are carefully selected for their allusive impact (what resonances from other stories do they import into this one, and what are the effects on knowledgeable viewers?) and evocative charge (how are the vagaries of a romantic triangle made more poignant by a particularly plangent song at the right moment?). A repertoire of current popular music is a genuine component of the kind of cultural literacy that enhances narrative pleasure in this particular story.

Such approaches are interesting but relatively clear-cut. In some episodes, a different kind of media literacy is invoked. The most startling example is "Help for the Lovelorn," which first aired on January 30, 2000. Shot in black and white, with the familiar characters all interacting in recognizable ways yet dressed in clothes from the 1950s, it is a parody of *The Twilight Zone*. Plot, music, and sinister conventions all contribute to the effect. Obviously, the tone and content of this episode are radically different from any other installment of *Felicity*. There is never any explanation within the world of the story, though the plot does wind up very adroitly at the

end of the episode, in a way that assumes knowledge of the conventions of *The Twilight Zone* and also knowledge of the ongoing world of *Felicity*. It is simply assumed that viewers will be sophisticated enough to make connections and to follow the back story through this very idiosyncratic byway. The usual run of programming resumes at the start of the next show, again without a word of comment. Thus we see this reasonably ordinary television series mediated both through contemporary technologies and also through a set of assumptions about familiarity with popular culture. It is an intriguing mix, and one that rewards viewers for bringing a substantial repertoire of literate and cultural understandings to the television screen.

The Connected Literacies External to the Story World

Texts related to *Felicity* feature in familiar ways in the daily literacies of contemporary life in the West. Newspaper articles discuss the on-again, off-again scheduling, or the nature of the real-life relationship between Keri Russell and Scott Speedman, the stars of the show. Magazine interviews feature Keri Russell's take on makeup, fashion, and life at large. Web sites provide extra information about the making of the program, offering special features such as listings of all the music played in particular episodes. Short snatches from Sean's "docuventory" are also available on the official site (Buena Vista and Touchstone Television), extending the fictional boundaries of the story. Much of this material is standard-issue publicity, but it is clear that many different media forms are involved. A "one-medium user" who confined all her attention to *Felicity* as seen on television and only as seen on television would be missing out on a significant larger discourse. The producers, stars, and publicists of *Felicity* engage in all the standard discourses of public relations at the turn of this new century and they produce the requisite magazine articles, television interviews, and official Web sites. Readers engaging in standard texts of popular culture gain experience of a variety of approaches to a central fiction. *Felicity* does all this in the usual way, but it also plays very interesting narrative games with its viewers—and vice versa.

Reworkings of the Story World in Other Media

Bigger hit shows for teenagers, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, provide fodder for a grander publicity machine, but even modest *Felicity* has its spin-offs. There is, naturally, a soundtrack. There are books about the stars of the show. There is even a novel covering Felicity's summer activities at the end of her first year of college, a period of time not covered in the television program because it sticks so closely to university semesters.

The "book of the TV series" is a common phenomenon but this novel, *Felicity: Summer*, by "Felicity Porter," is unusual in more than one way. Season 1 of the

television series ends with a cliff-hanger; season 2 begins with a description of how events resolved themselves over the summer. *Felicity: Summer* tells the events of that summer in a first-person narrative, dictated by Felicity to her friend Sally, just as usual. However, the events of the novel contradict the "canonical" version of the story as told (but not shown) on television. The discrepancy is disconcerting. Nothing about the book suggests that this dual story is a deliberate metafictional device to foreground the fictiveness of the narrative (though that possibility cannot be ruled out). It actually reads more as if the producers of the show had themselves not decided how the plot should develop at the time the book went to press, and the writer simply guessed wrong. Felicity's voice in this book is convincingly familiar, which makes the anomalous plot development even more startling.

Whatever the origins of this discrepant segment of the story, the effect on at least this reader is a peculiar one. It is almost as if the book calls for a double suspension of disbelief. You need to agree to belong in Felicity's world, along the lines of any normal fictional "contract" between writer and reader. Then you need to agree that for this one case *it doesn't matter* that the book story contradicts the television story. Without at least some provisional kind of suspension of the right to be aggrieved by the discrepancy, it seems to me the book would be almost unreadable. In its headlong launch into the familiar tone of Felicity's and Sally's voices, it leaves no room for a detached reader. The fact that there is a canonical version of the summer's events, as described at the beginning of season 2, but no actual presentation of any events of that summer except in this noncanonical version, leads to an effect that can best be described as eerie. The contradiction cannot be resolved, yet the book's address to the reader invites a reading fueled by uncritical immersion, and it is hard to tell whether it might invite and develop greater or less sophistication on the part of the reader.

Young readers are probably more hardened than I am to similar discrepancies; the rush to produce cross-media spin-off texts often leads to a slipshod lack of attention to detail, though I have not often come across variations that manifest quite this degree of contradiction. Of course it is possible that many young readers will not even care that the book and the TV series are incompatible. Their commitment may be transitory—satisfied by any engaging way to pass the time in a general *Felicity* zone. This text could be the kind of writing that invokes what might be called the "whatever" school of literary attention, which places less value on coherence than on other qualities of immediate entertainment. Such a cavalier attitude to literary purity is fostered by many spin-off texts, and it would not be surprising to find readers responding to careless writing with noncommittal reading.

Our contemporary era can fairly—if counterintuitively—be described as one of *extreme literacy*. For many readers and viewers, reception is now intimately connected with production of their own reactions. Popular fictions, which used to stand

more or less alone, now exist at the heart of a huge infrastructure of composed and preserved reactions and amateur commentary. The processes of responding to a story are much more likely to be written and public in the age of the Internet. So it is with *Felicity: Summer*; it is easy to find written evidence of responses from young readers. As it happens, that evidence supports both of my arguments above. The Barnes and Noble Web site offers (as of June 2001) eight customer reviews for this book, split fifty-fifty between those who loved the book even though it contradicts the series and those who were disgusted with this discrepancy. "This book was great!!" says one anonymous reviewer. "It showed what could have happened over the summer. Although it is not consistent with the show it still is consistent with the characters. I loved it!" Melissa agrees, "The writing was still Felicity-esque, so I still enjoyed reading it." But the writing was not enough to salvage it for Rachel: "The writing wasn't bad really [. . .] it truly sounded like Felicity talking and like Sally's responses. Thing is, the book is totally a lie and not at all what is happening on the show. I was really disappointed by that." And Anastasia was even more vehement: "Let's just say I feel bad for the trees they wasted to make this book. The author obviously knew diddly about the actual series of *Felicity*. It was totally inconsistent with the premiere and was very boring. Don't even think of buying it" (Barnes and Noble).

Ontological Issues of Authorship

Another interesting component of this book, and one that is more clearly deliberate, is the confusion of authorship. On the front cover and title page, the author is given as "Felicity Porter." The book contains tapes from Sally as well as from Felicity, and on the last page of the book a note "about the authors" lists both Felicity Porter and Sally Pearson. The back cover refers to Sally Reardon, apparently nothing more than a careless slip. Yet other sources list the author as Janet Tashjian. For most readers, the "authorship" of Felicity herself would be well enough established. The effect is to expand the borders of this fictional universe beyond the edge of the TV screen.

This novel is not the only example of such claims at work in *Felicity*. Noel, who is a computer aficionado, might naturally be assumed to have his own Web site, and, sure enough, one can be found online at http://www.noelcrane.com. What is interesting is that there is no indication anywhere on the site that it is the "creation" of a *fictional* character. Noel is interested in fonts, and the fonts are named after various girlfriends we have seen in the series, but that is only useful information to those who already know the television series, not a tip to any other reader. There is no other mention of the show anywhere on the site. On the show itself, Noel made one reference to the site, thoughtfully providing the URL.

Such ontological blurriness has existed in different forms over many years. Old-fashioned frame narratives, stories told in letters, and other such narrative game-

playing have provided fiction with notional real-life credentials for centuries. It is interesting, however, to see the makers of *Felicity* altering the fictional parameters of their narrative at the moment they step across media boundaries. It is almost as if a character with enough life to step out of a television drama and into a book or a Web site *must* be more real than one who is simply confined to the screen.

Noel's Web site is interesting in other ways. It is written in the present tense and addresses Noel's need to get a real job now that he has finished college. Noel's chief interest is presented as fonts, and the site plays numerous games with font design. It also exploits the ways in which screen reading can be different from paper reading. Words scroll down the screen. They build, one letter at a time, and the letters sometimes appear backwards, then flip to the correct orientation. Words dance about the screen and change color to indicate links. Or they appear sentence by sentence, each fading before the next materializes at a different place on the screen. On one link it is possible to read Noel's commands to the computer as he designs the site itself. The Web site is small but much of it is devoted to what might be described as "special effects" of reading online. Even without its connection to the show, it would be an interesting small instantiation of the inherent instability of print on the screen.

One *Felicity* Web site provides access to a news release issued to announce Noel's site, though it does not offer a direct link. In this article, series creator J. J. Abrams talks about the borders of the fictional world, describing its origins in romantic terms:

> "When I would play video games, I was always intrigued by the areas of the chart you couldn't go," Abrams said. "Like if it was a driving game, I wish you could drive off the track and drive through that city in the distance. [. . .] This kind of felt like an amazing opportunity for Noel to go off the linear path, and to allow people on their own time in their own way to interact with him." (Adam)

In fact, use of associated Web sites as promotion and publicity devices is becoming more generally widespread ("Studios Grab Box Office"), and Noel is one of many Web inhabitants whose virtual existence serves more than one purpose. Web users know this is a game. Although it is not possible for Noel's own site to receive mail, viewers have responded to this site and written to him via the official *Felicity* site. Some even write in roles as residents of Kelvin Hall, where Noel was a student counselor for part of the series. If *Felicity* were unique in playing these various textual games, its assorted incarnations would still be interesting. However, most of what I have described so far is fairly commonplace in the world of teenage television. *Felicity* is merely one manageably small example of a widespread phenomenon. Teenage television viewers take such plurality for granted.

When I was a child, some of my paper dolls came with an extra piece of cardboard that slotted into the base of the doll at right angles. This extra support—while

still just cardboard—enabled the dolls to stand upright and thus to manifest one small component of an independent life. Looking at these cross-media supporting texts, I am reminded of that phenomenon. Meeting these fictional characters in more than one location does add to their virtual solidity. Even in the strange case of *Felicity: Summer*, it is interesting to hear Felicity's familiar voice coming from another quarter. Such polynarrative structures, where a story told in one medium is not repeated in another, though characters and situations cross over, are rapidly becoming more common. The monomedium fiction, though far from extinct, is but one form of storytelling nowadays.

Janet Murray predicts just such developments in her excellent book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. As home digital-entertainment systems increasingly integrate Web and television, she says, users will look for more dynamic narrative forms, at the heart of which will be the serial drama (254). The *Felicity* texts are early, small-scale, and relatively clunky steps in the direction of such a dynamic narrative form. Like other television programs aimed at teenagers (*Dawson's Creek* offers Web access to characters' home computers, for example), *Felicity* is exploring new narrative possibilities with viewers who are already open to experimenting with new media.

The Contributory Literacies of Fan-speak

The official texts of *Felicity* are complex and interesting in their own right. When we turn to the texts created by the fans, we gain an even more substantial sense of how contemporary literacies are mutating.

One function of writing is to preserve words and ideas that otherwise would be irretrievably ephemeral. The instinct that led people to *write down* oral texts such as *Beowulf* or the *Iliad* was almost certainly fueled by a desire to hold on to a story otherwise all too fleeting. *Felicity* is no *Iliad*, but it is interesting to see the same instincts at work on the Internet nevertheless. There are sites that provide transcripts (see, for example, "Finally") and also sites that offer highly detailed recaps of each individual show, complete with commentary (see, for example, Maggie). The transcript writers emphasize that these texts come from the screen and are not officially warranted scripts. The recap writers augment their detailed narrative accounts with their own opinions of different episodes.

It would seem arguable that videotape should obviate the need to record these television programs in such dense verbal detail. What are these textual accounts doing that is different? Neither transcript nor recap could be created *without* a video record of the show; there is far too much detail in both forms of reworking to be manageable from a single viewing. Clearly the verbal versions provide some added value beyond what is supplied by a simple rerun of the videotape. Numerous threads from the chat room discussions of *Felicity* attest to the fact that users are pleased to

have access to these verbal renditions of the program. This particular incarnation of literacy, like many of its perhaps loftier predecessors, appears to offer its users a way of *holding on* to something that is essentially transitory in its original telling.

There are two ways of thinking about why this form of reworking the televisual text into a verbal form is so appealing to users. One argument runs along these lines: for all our talk of the electronic evanescence of words on the computer screen, they are considerably more fixed in place than moving images, and it may be this relative permanence that appeals. Fans, of course, have the further option of printing off these verbal accounts, thus fixing them even more firmly on the page rather than the screen. The second line of argument is almost the reverse of the first, though I am not convinced that they are necessarily incompatible on that account. Janet Murray makes the argument as follows: "[L]inear televison will seem too passive once it is presented in a digital medium, where viewers expect to be able to move around at will" (254). In one sense words are fixed, but, at the same time, at least for the present, they are also more manipulatable than video—for example, it is very easy for recappers to insert opinions and asides. This commentary could probably be managed in video form but it would be much more demanding to produce and probably not as convenient to receive. Words are simultaneously fixed and flexible and therefore continue to play an important role in how we come to terms with changing media potentials. The scribes who produce transcripts and recaps obviously make a major investment of time and energy into what is clearly regarded as a public service by many fans. The Internet provides a natural home for these efforts.

Other forms of reworking of the programs also appear online, and give us a vivid sense of the multimodal future. Detailed songlists for each show are available (see Stovall), and at least one fan has created a set of collaged images of the stars, a visual text that also pins down and reworks elements of the original story ("Felicity's Hideaway"). A computer-generated picture of Felicity and Ben, presumably created by a fan, can also be found (Kimberly). It will be interesting to see how long it takes for some form of reworked digital video images to join this mix. Even without video manipulation, we can see a new multimodal vocabulary of image and music being used by respondents.

Layers of Opinion on the Internet

Internet use is widely believed to have reduced the time teenagers spend watching television (Ferguson; McHardie). The evidence of the *Felicity* sites, as well as countless others devoted to different television series, is that the Internet is also changing *how* people watch television. No longer need they sit alone in their living rooms and holler unrequited commentary at the screen. Now there is a forum where opinions—both complaints and ecstasies—can find an instant audience. Many teenagers barely wait for an episode to finish before they are online in the chatrooms, express-

ing their initial reactions at high speed. Furthermore, there is potential for more considered response, with an audience more or less guaranteed. It is instructive to look at examples of chat about *Felicity*. There is a considerable range of commitment, of sophistication, even of geographical distribution.

The slogan of many media educators is, "All media are constructed" (I even once saw this line on a T-shirt at a conference). This motto can be converted into a useful measuring tool for exploring the chatroom responses to *Felicity*. There are those who reject any idea of constructedness at any level, talking about the characters more or less as if they were real people, preferring Ben to Noel or vice versa. There is indeed a whole vocabulary for such choices: talk about Felicity and Noel is described as FAN, while Felicity and Ben is FAB, and so forth (see FanForum.com, for example). Contributors to such threads are probably well enough aware that they are talking about a fiction, but that fact is not announced in their discourse. The "Ben Covington Appreciation Thread," for example, probably doesn't much care if it is talking about Ben or Scott Speedman—or mixing them together, as in this contribution from "passion," posted on June 11, 2001: "Dovey, I love that pic of him. It is posted on the KTLA site and I just go over there just to look at it and drool! The man is sexy personified—Felicity and Ben—they are soulmates!!"

At a somewhat more sophisticated level, it is possible to register the show as a fiction but to remain oblivious to the constructed nature of the publicity machine. Many threads in the various Web sites talk, particularly about actors Keri Russell and Scott Speedman, in terms established by the show's makers and publicizers, and also by the general rhetoric of Hollywood fan material. Faeyth says, "Well I think it sucks that Keri is standing Scott up on their dates and all. (Well, one that was publicized anyway). Bottom line, I don't feel anything lately when I see their characters together in the show. Could that be a cross-over from real-life fizzle?" Gidget sagely replies: "In real life and on the show, they are a stunning couple and they show sincere feelings for one another. What I think people are actually complaining about is the fact that the last several scripts didn't offer any love scenes or special moments between them. There can't be much happening if it's not written into the script" ("Keri and Scott Speedman").

Some chat contributors take this issue of the constructedness of media a stage further, and talk about the literary decisions that make the show what it is. *Felicity* is not a particularly challenging or demanding show to watch. Its viewers might generally be expected to be less sophisticated in their analysis than those who write about, say, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *The Sopranos*. Nevertheless, they are happy to discuss a literary question such as, "What character on *Felicity* needs to be developed more?" ("What Character"). Other viewers favor virtual direct action as guidance to the program's producers. One site, billed as the "Save Felicity Porter and Ben Covington Campaign," offers readers a "dream book" to sign in protest at "why

they are breaking up such an intriguing element of the show." Viewers, of course, have always talked about last night's television. So what is so different about the Internet chat? In many ways, "chat" is an extremely exact name for the kinds of exchanges that feature very large on the fan sites. It is often inconsequential and lightweight. Yet the fact that it is written, not spoken, does have consequences. Relative to personal conversation, it is public and permanent. It is often moderated and/or organized into threads. Particular conventions and specialized etiquette are observed. In some cases, pictures and music can be drawn into the debate. And, although the fan sites are strongly self-selecting, there is still potential for a broader range and variety of comment than might arise from the same small group of friends standing around a school locker, week after week.

Also, of course, the fact that this chat is public opens the door for it to be co-opted into the commercial world of television programming. *Felicity*'s fans, for example, were recruited to help develop a slogan for selling *Felicity* merchandise. Kim, a network executive, wrote to MightyBigTV: "As you may have noticed, MBTV has opened a store featuring merchandise based around particular shows. We'd like to open a *Felicity* store soon, but we haven't come up with a good tagline yet! And since we have such clever posters here on the forums we thought we'd ask you for suggestions. . . . So, have at it! It's okay if there are a bunch of good suggestions—it's possible that down the road, we may have multiple pieces of merch for each show, and thus need multiple taglines." A week later, after eight people wrote in with a variety of slogans, Kim closed the discussion down with a choice that neatly crosses the fiction/reality borderline. "I'm going with 'It's not about her hair,' as a reference to all the hype when Keri Russell cut her hair and the rest of us knew the show was great regardless (most of the time)" (Kim). It is possible to think of this recruitment of fan enthusiasm to commercial causes as simply crass. Or it can be considered an opportunity to participate in the total production that is *Felicity*—the fiction and the real-life framing of actors, writers, and merchandisers. In itself, this kind of invitation is not completely new. As a child in Canada in the 1950s, I read books about the Famous Five by Enid Blyton. At the end of every book was a page inviting me to join the Famous Five Club. Blyton's club focused rather more on charity work (Stoney 143) than *Felicity*'s merchandisers seem to have in mind, but her other goal was a form of participatory literacy. Blyton readers, like *Felicity* viewers, were being co-opted into a larger framing of the fiction. Today's goalposts have moved, but are the rules of the interactive game so different?

One difference of course is the dissolution of national borders. As a Canadian child, I used to ponder the strange British price of admission to the Famous Five Club. The concept of currency exchange was completely outside my experience, and I knew I was excluded from the club because I had no idea what a pound or a

shilling was, and certainly no access to such a thing. There is no national bar to participation in the world of *Felicity*, however, and I have found *Felicity* sites in French, Spanish, and Portuguese, as well as separate sites for fans in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Most of the discussions from outside the United States that I explored raised questions of national access—when shows were scheduled to appear, whether the U.K. version was cut because of its early-evening showtime, and so on. I find it difficult to picture myself as a child on a Web site finding out how to become a Canadian member of the Famous Five Club, but I would certainly have welcomed the increase in control that comes with better information, and I suspect these national fans feel the same way.

Much of the material on the Internet recalls Samuel Johnson's gibe about the woman preacher and the dog walking on its hind legs: the issue is not how well something is done but that it is done at all! This critique applies particularly appropriately to the area of fan fiction—stories written by viewers who take the characters and setting from the original but then develop new plots and dialogue. Some forms of fanfic are scabrously irreverent, but from the examples I explored, *Felicity*'s fans appear to be a decorous and respectable lot. In "Slipping Away," by Lori and Stephanie, for example, a new character arrives from Felicity's past. Hawk was the first boy she ever kissed. In this story, Felicity has quarreled with Ben, so she is prepared to give Hawk more attention than she otherwise would:

> Ben's mouth dropped open when he turned and saw that across the room, [Hawk] had his hands resting on Felicity's hips as the two of them danced to a new hip-hop song that played on the jukebox. Hawkeye's pelvis thrust towards Felicity in rhythm to the beat and Felicity's face was flushed and glowing as she swung her hips before him seductively. They were both looking into each other's eyes and smiling, then laughing. Then, the song was over and they returned to their table in the corner. Felicity had not seen Ben watching them up on the dance floor. (Lori and Stephanie)

This kind of fantasy engagement in the life of somebody else's fiction is undoubtedly very old, both in terms of writing and also in terms of simple pretending. The ability to find such a ready public audience for personal riffs on an established story is what is new. Undoubtedly, the capacity to rewrite the story to suit herself conveys a feeling of power to the fanfic author; it is an interesting question to what extent the prevalence of fan fiction also alters other viewers' feelings about the canonical storyline. Of course, when the official creators of the story also play similar games, it affects the credibility zone even more broadly. One Amazon.com reviewer recommends that *Felicity: Summer* should be put into the same category as "Slipping Away": "Read it as fan fiction, nothing else" (Reader from New York). Knowing that there are alternatives to the canonical version probably increases the sense of the constructedness of the original story for many readers and viewers, though not for

all. The Barnes and Noble reviewer who called *Felicity: Summer* "totally a lie and not at all what is happening on the show" seems to be regarding the TV series as, at the very least, a different level of "lie," a fiction not to be tampered with.

The Impact of Popular Interactive Literacies on English Education

Felicity as content is a contradictory mix. The spectacular attractiveness of all the young people in this show should relegate it to the most trifling zone of romantic comedy, and Felicity's inability to choose between the two handsome young men who both want her is sheerest wish fulfillment for the audience. The direct educational subtexts—Sean's battle with testicular cancer, for example—put it into a slightly more substantial category of socially improving soap opera, a tried-and-true genre with a long history in print, radio, and television. Some subplots do raise genuinely complex contemporary issues in an engaging way. The story of Elena and Tracey, for example, deals with a believable and thorny problem: a relationship between two people in which the young woman wants a sexual bond and the young man, a committed Christian, has decided to wait for marriage. Tracey's difficulties and Elena's frustrations are convincingly complicated. The content is variable, nonetheless, and the quality of individual weekly episodes also ranges as broadly as in any series. In addition, the program is firmly aimed at only the female half of the population. Taken in these terms, it is hard to see why *Felicity* should be of interest to any classroom teacher. But as an exemplar of a set of literate practices, *Felicity* and its ilk represent new ways of processing texts in which the stand-alone story serves as the core of a much broader and more dynamic textual universe. At this level, a study of *Felicity* raises a number of stimulating questions, and serves as a reminder that many students bring into the classroom an ever-increasing sophistication in moving among a wide range of connected texts.

Vincent Leitch, writing a decade ago, spoke of a "protocol of entanglement" as a methodological approach to cultural studies that "construes objects and phenomena always in relation to complex temporal and spatial contiguities and proximities" (146). Many viewers of *Felicity* clearly possess a reasonably substantial toolkit for dealing with an intricate set of "entanglements" in a broad range of media. Why should this development matter to the adults who take an interest in their literate behaviors? *Felicity* is narrowly directed at a certain demographic—late adolescent, educated, affluent, and female. It addresses an implied audience that is familiar with the various "entangled" media that structure the telling of the story. At one level, such an address is exclusive, leaving out anyone loosely categorized as on the wrong side of the digital divide. In fact, however, the media revolution is sweeping all of us into its wake; the precise location of that digital demarcation is fuzzier than is often assumed.

Let us explore some of the implications of that fuzziness. The ways in which assumptions about literacy are built into the program in themselves provide a means of dissemination of new literacies. In the first place, *Felicity* actually *teaches* protocols of entanglement, and anyone with access to a television set (in other words, nearly every North American) can pick up some of the implications of the multimediation of our time, simply from watching the program itself. You do not have to have personal access to all the equipment owned by the characters to take note of its role in the storytelling.

In the second place, the digital divide is itself a moving target. The UCLA Internet Report 2001 says that 72.3 percent of all Americans use the Internet ("Almost Three-Quarters"). Similarly, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 73 percent of U.S. teenagers between twelve and seventeen use the Internet ("Internet"). Once on, they chat: 84 percent of U.S. Internet users have contacted an online group ("Most"). I could not locate precise figures for Internet access for college students in the United States, but in the United Kingdom, VirginStudent.com found that only one percent of college and university students had never been online, and it is hard to imagine that American students lag far behind their U.K. counterparts since Internet access is cheaper in North America ("Almost All").

I have talked with teenagers who are not online at home but who manage their e-mail and Web access relatively successfully through use of computers in school or public libraries. It is access to chatrooms that is most thoroughly facilitated by home ownership and constant availability; it is rather more difficult to linger on the instant messaging systems when you are operating on a time limit. Nevertheless, there are many young people who participate in chatrooms by means of their friends' computers, much as they shared computer games at the homes of the most affluent a decade ago (and indeed, much as I did my first regular television viewing at a friend's home in the mid-1950s). Some, of course, are still definitively excluded from active daily use of many new media technologies. Even these young people, however, are affected by the ubiquity of multiple, interlocking texts related to a core text; the protocols of entanglement are represented in our literate lives in many ways. Television makes constant references to associated Web sites, transcripts, books, and videos; viewers attuned to such references will take the implications of these announcements as essential elements of contemporary literacy.

Complex multimedia interweavings of texts are not new—the elaborate multitextual world of radio superheroes of the 1940s represents one historical set of entanglements. However, a text such as *Felicity* now exists in two clear forms: as a simple monolithic TV series, and as the core of a complex of texts, calling for capacities of discovery, selection, and response in the creation of a kind of self-assembly fictional world. The complexity of the options is relatively new, but it is familiar to young people nowadays from their earliest childhood, courtesy of such figures as Winnie-the-Pooh and Thomas the Tank Engine. Those young viewers who choose

to confine themselves to a simple viewing of *Felicity* without any further textual exploration generally know they are making a conscious choice, sometimes but not always grounded in economic contingencies. For those without reasonable access to the Internet, it is all the more important that their English teachers address the issue of cross-media story building if they are not to be relegated to the category of "new illiterates" by default.

In the English Classroom

In their development of "a pedagogy of multiliteracies," the New London Group establish their own framework: "Our view of mind, society and learning is based on the assumption that the human mind is embodied, situated, and social. That is, human knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts" (30). Learners are immersed in various forms of situated practice, extracting their understandings of the world from a variety of discursive explorations.

To consider the set of *Felicity* texts I have described as a potential home for a variety of situated practices is to raise a number of related questions for teachers. The first question involves the simple necessity for teachers to be aware of the kinds of literate practices from which their students are developing interpretive protocols. If every text in school is presented singularly (or at most doubled by the introduction of "the film of the book"), the gap between the practices of the classroom and many students' complex recreational interpretive activities will be wider than ever. Yet simply replicating the kinds of immersive practices the *Felicity* set comprises is not necessarily a useful option for students either. As the New London Group point out, situated practice on its own may not lead to "conscious control and awareness of what one knows and does, which is a core goal of much school-based learning" (32). Nor does it necessarily enhance the capacity to critique or even to stand back. In fact, the relationship between this explosion of varied literate activities closely tied to popular fictions and the official literacies of English classrooms is complex and interesting. Alert English teachers are already doing activities similar to those done for love by the fans of *Felicity*. It is possible to see traces of good pedagogical practice in many of the activities on the Web, so the traffic is almost certainly two-way. Even so, it seems likely that many teachers are not aware of the scale of reworking, commentary, and intervention that such contemporary literacy entails. *Felicity* was deliberately chosen as a relatively modest example, albeit one with a particularly rich internal vein of textuality, yet, despite its small audiences, it yields a wide assortment of related texts in many media.

One thing these assorted texts provide is a sense of engaged, sometimes obsessive ownership manifested by many young people toward their favorite texts. Whether critical adults would consider the texts worthy of so much time, attention, and emo-

tional investment is a different question. I would not say that *Felicity* itself is a completely shallow program, nor would I describe the engagement of its committed viewers as trivial or unimportant. However, the spirit of *critical* inquiry that dominates many of the online responses to the program *is* often shallow (and possibly too easily dismissed as a consequence). On most of the exchanges that I explored, fans criticize details but do not engage in much serious reflection. The critical pleasure is in some crucial ways superficial even if—or perhaps especially if—the engagement itself is intense.

Another issue is the question raised by Bill Green, Jo-Anne Reid, and Chris Bigum in relation to Nintendo games: "A distinctive 'Nintendo generation' must be understood as both an *audience* of a particular kind and a *market*" (23). Certainly it is easy to see this double identity at work in the reception of *Felicity*, and interesting questions about marketing and pleasure can be raised with students. But the same double relationship was true of Shakespeare's playgoers and Dickens's readers and listeners. Many canonical texts survive because they succeeded in a market of some kind, a fact that often gets smoothed out of sight in English classes. How different are the conditions of literature today? How does the marketing of *Felicity* soundtracks, screen savers, novelizations, and magazines affect the viewer's affective response to the program? What filters do *Felicity* fans (and *Harry Potter* fans, *Star Trek* fans, and all the many others) develop, and how can they articulate their reaction to the ways in which salesmanship interacts with their own playfulness?

There are other lessons in this mix of differing texts and responses for teachers. At most levels of education, English teachers are familiar with the complaint that "studying" a text ruins the reader's pleasure in it. Yet those readers represented on fan Web sites do not seem to be crippled in their enjoyment by the sometimes excruciating attention they pay to details and nuances. Is it because they refuse to tackle the difficult and challenging critical questions surrounding any television text, or is it related to their evident sense of ownership of the story and the characters? It might be interesting to question the students themselves about what interests and drives fuel their Web activities. It would also be productive to explore how they perceive themselves as consumers of a text such as *Felicity* and its associated merchandise. Can examples of popular culture shed light on the understandings young people bring into the classroom? Does a generation that values fanfic have the potential to hold radical views on Shakespeare's cavalier treatment of his sources? Does the strong contemporary interest in moving in and out of the fiction zone affect how young people may approach autobiographical fiction or *romans à clef?*

It is worth looking closely at what the contemporary literacy scene may offer the English teacher in terms of the possibilities of practical activities as well. Does the recap, complete with interpolated views and opinions, have a potentially honorable place in the English classroom, or is it still just the dreaded summary no matter

how you dress it up? (It is worth noting that a single recap serves as a resource for large numbers of correspondents; they show little interest in each recreating their own!) Is it possible to imagine the kinds of fan Web sites that might have been created to address the most popular works of Charles Dickens? What about discussing the kinds of interactive fan intervention that were made possible by serial publication in the nineteenth century? I am not arguing for anachronisms in the cause of being cute with the past, but I do think that we can draw connections between the popular literacies of the past and those of the present, and that this can be done in a principled and useful way that enables students to see their own times differently, as well as those of the past.

Attending to the "entangled" complex of literacies that attends popular television may also lead directly to questions about where contemporary print literacy is headed. Examples of what may be described as "print plus" abound across a wide cultural spectrum. It is now commonplace to meet add-ons to print in a variety of formats, directed at a broad spectrum of audiences. A few examples: the picture book *Baloney (Henry P.)* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith comes with a free promotional CD-ROM, which includes a reference to a Web site on its cover. Eoin Colfer's highly popular children's fantasy novel *Artemis Fowl* includes a line of code at the bottom of each page and directs readers to a Web site for guidance in cracking the code. Issue 6 of the literary magazine *McSweeney's* comes with its own soundtrack for listening to as you read, in the form of a CD inserted at the back of the book. The days of stand-alone print are certainly not over, but stand-alone print is no longer the only literary show in town. Meanwhile, the role of print as support for stories in other media is also becoming more complex. For example, a coffee table "TV tie-in" book of *The Sopranos* (Rucker) includes almost every form of discourse I have described in this essay: stories, graphics, e-mail correspondence, chatroom discussions, scripts, recaps, interviews, and many, many more. It reads like a fictional exemplar of the main points of this paper.

In the face of such developments, teaching literature is a richer and more complex challenge than ever before. Many adolescents now bring an extensive skill set into the classroom. We will be more usefully equipped to stretch and deepen their awareness (and more alert to how we can expand our own) if we first acknowledge and respect the vast textual world that many of them inhabit in their own time and for fun.

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