

FEMINISM? “IF I MADE IT, YOU CAN TOO.”

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To what extent can we impose our own values on an academic woman whose career span the period of the late twenties through the seventies of the twentieth century?

Margaret Hastings and Elizabeth G. Kimball, in their article on Nellie Neilson and Bertha Haven Putnam wrote of these women as: “Not feminists in the meaning of the current women’s rights movement, they believed that women as scholars should be judged by the same standards as men and accorded recognition only if they earned it.”¹ Sylvia Thrupp was very much in the same tradition. To understand her lack of a feminist perspective, I present both a personal reminiscence as her first graduate student (PhD 1970) and something of a historical context for her generation.

Sylvia Thrupp, at the time I went to graduate school at the University of Michigan in 1963,

was the only tenured woman in the History faculty. Younger women came and went. Sylvia was not their supporter and sometimes was, as I learned in conversation with them, the cause of their short stay on the faculty. She held the Alice Freeman Palmer Chair of History. She much deserved the recognition, but there was an irony in this since the Chair was endowed by the American Association of University Women so that the department had to hire a woman as a full professor.

Her close friends on the faculty at Michigan were men, particularly Ray Grew, Jack Price, and Eric Wolf. She remained a close friend of Eric’s wife after he departed for greener pastures at Columbia. To Ray Grew and his wife, she entrusted the editorship and managing editorship of her child, *The Journal of Comparative Studies in Society and History*. She had cordial relations with her male

colleagues in medieval history, eventually marrying one, Joseph Strayer. But these men did not succeed (perhaps did not try hard) in making her a Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America. When I discovered in 1981 that she was not a Fellow, I organized her nomination and a series of letters for her. Lopez wrote a cordial letter to me saying a previous effort had been made but that it had not worked. She was made a Fellow. Strayer also agreed to write for her, but his letter to me (before the later marriage) was cooler. In addition to attending Medieval Academy of America meetings, she went to local meetings such as the Midwest Medieval History Association. Again, this was largely an organization of men, but she was well liked and remembered fondly as being eccentric, but extremely funny.

Can one blame an ambitious academic woman in the 1950s and 60s for seeking friendship among powerful men? If a woman wanted to advance, it was not as if there were women who could help her get where she wanted to go. But even this route was not an easy one. Sylvia

and other women found that if they were too challenging, too aggressive, or too much out of the mold, they would be attacked. So many of the early women in history printed their brilliant ideas in introductions to edited and translated volumes, rather than in monographs and major articles. Editing was considered a fit form of scholarship for females. Helen Cam and Nellie Nielson seemed to have been the most successful at moving into the male world. Cam was appointed at Harvard and Nielson became the first woman to be president of the AHA. Certainly, Thrupp made an excellent reputation for herself with the publication of *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* in 1948, but it was not until the early sixties that she was hired at University of Michigan.

Sylvia Thrupp sought a different path to recognition. She started her own interdisciplinary journal and made her friends and supporters among men in different fields than medieval history. She reached out to people like Bernard Cohen, Eric Wolf, Reinhardt Bendix, and the other famous men

who served on her editorial board. I was the beneficiary of meeting these men as a graduate student, when she invited them to talk. It was these men, not medievalists, who supported her election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. As editor of a successful, new journal, she acquired her own power as an arbitrator of publishing and of the new field of comparative studies. When I once asked her where she got the idea for the *Journal*, she told me that it was from Marc Bloch. When I read Maxine Berg's biography of Eileen Power, I realized that the idea was in the air and that she could just have well learned it from her mentor.² As an editor, Thrupp was always very gentle in her rejections, suggesting other journals where an author might send his or her work. I sat in her living room sometimes doing research as she wrote rejection letters.

She did not publish another book, telling me that she felt the *Journal* was more important. She said it with some regret. But she continued to publish articles that explored new areas of research such as

demography. Her reviews and articles sometimes showed an acerbic wit, but they were always carefully researched. J. C. Russell certainly fell under attack in her demographic research. I have always admired Russell for his pioneering work on demography, but she was good as well. Her article on replacement rates in late medieval England raised issues still being debated.³ It was she who comments, "If the fifteenth century was a golden age for anything it was bacteria." She said of her study of London, "it is all incontestable." Perhaps her sharp edge in reviews came from having suffered attacks herself early in her career. Her criticism of conference papers is legendary.

Did she find friends among women professionals as well as men? Her relations with E. M. Carus-Wilson and Helen Cam were cordial. She thoroughly disliked my undergraduate advisor, Margaret Hastings. Hastings was the better writer and wrote a review to that effect when she reviewed *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*. It was an abiding dislike on Thrupp's part—years

later she commented that Margaret Hastings, now retired, had “such dreary friends in Cambridge.” But the review could not have been all that bad, since it was quoted on the dust jacket of the paperback.⁴

Sylvia would never talk about Eileen Power, her mentor. I asked people like Rodney Hilton, Edward Miller, and Philippe Wolff, all members of Powers’ seminar about both Thrupp and Power. Philippe Wolff and Thrupp remained close friends and he had great admiration for her, but I got little information from the others. Philippe Wolff described Thrupp as athletic, great fun to be with, witty, and quite attractive. One has to ask, as Anne DeWindt has in her essay on Nellie Nielson, does personal charm matter?⁵ Does it tell us much about Nielson’s work and success that she skated, hiked, had blue eyes and prematurely white hair. Apparently male colleagues seemed to have made such observations and retained positive, physical images of these women.

Such observations also lead one to ask about the sexuality

of early female historians. From Michael Postan I learned that Sylvia took long over her dissertation, in part because she was in love with a poet and put off finishing her degree. But one wonders about this. She also finished a book in her ten years in London and began thinking about writing *The Merchant Class*. Again, we need a context for female scholars and sexuality. We cannot say that the professors in women’s colleges were happily lesbian. It was a discreet age, and no one would have talked about such things. But we do know that the barriers to marriage were huge. In the 1930s, a woman would automatically lose her job if she married. At Mount Holyoake and other places there were strong prohibitions against marrying. Hastings and Kimball point out that only one of the female faculty members married and she was part time. If a woman married a male faculty member, she, not he would be fired for nepotism (and this rule continued into the sixties and early seventies). Margaret Hastings was engaged to marry an art historian as he was about to retire. Sadly, he died before the wedding, and she took

their planned European trip by herself. The penalty for affairs, if discovered, would have been equally severe.

Sylvia was no prude. One summer in London when a number of graduate students were there we all went walking in Soho. To our embarrassment, she wanted to go into a strip club. We were too prudish ourselves to go along with the plan. She was a flirt. I spent the summer of 1966 with her at her house in New Hampshire. When my parents arrived for a visit, she took an instant dislike for my mother and flirted with my father. She very much wanted to marry, and when she married Joseph Strayer, preferred to be called Mrs. Strayer to Professor Thrupp.

Did she think of herself as being discriminated against because she was a woman? To that the emphatic answer is "No." During the summer of 1966 she talked a lot about her years at University of Chicago. When I asked her if she was not allowed to teach graduate students there because she was a woman, she denied it. She simply said that

she was hired to teach in the College. Others, of course, told me differently. And they were men in a position to know. She always maintained that if she could make it, so could any other woman.

In the 1970s, many female historians were anxious to honor her as a survivor, a pioneer, an intellectual giant. She was all those things, but she did not want that recognition from feminists and women's history. I invited her to the second Berkshire Women's History Conference in 1974. She came, lambasted my paper and several others, and thought that women's history was a bad turn in historiography. Several years later, however, she told me that she had never understood that there was discrimination against women until she saw some of the things that had happened to me in my career.

As a graduate advisor, I had no sense that she treated her female students any differently than the males. She had a certain equality of meanness that she spread around among her own students. I have come to attribute her attacks to a

personal unease that we would not turn out to be a credit to her and to inexperience in acting as a mentor. She never acquired that experience. None of us ever suggested a *festschrift*, and, indeed, there were not many of us who got PhDs with her. Instead, Ray Grew and Nicholas Steneck collected her essays in *Society and History* (1977). Each section is introduced by a male friend: Poston, Phillippe Wolff, Eric Wolf, and Thomas Cochran.

To other graduate students she was kind and generous, again equally. She had an enormous influence on my graduate cohort. She introduced us to ideas, people, possibilities, intellectual innovation that we could not have gotten anywhere else in United States or Britain at that time. Americanists, Byzantinists, and Europeanist alike praise her influence on their intellectual development, as do I.

But how does Sylvia Thrupp fit into the pattern of other women medievalists of her generation? To some extent she does very much. Some areas were safe and respectable for women. In

medieval history, local history, manorial history, economic history, editing, and even legal and constitutional history (until they became fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s) were allowable to women. One thinks of the great work of Nielson, Putnam, Hastings, and others. History was not alone in these prescribed areas for women. In sociology demography (dealing with women, children, and reproduction) were completely acceptable areas for female scholars, even as demography moved into a highly quantitative mode. In psychology, child development was a desirable area for women to seek research degrees. Thrupp followed in the tradition of the local and economic history.

One great difference is that Thrupp was not educated in the American system, nor did she entirely follow the English patterns for female academics. Born in England, she was raised in Canada where she received her BA. She then took her graduate work in London with Eileen Power in economic history. She was not in the tradition of “blue stocking” scholars that

characterized earlier generations. Although both Nelly Nielson and Helen Cam earned their living at scholarship, they did not undertake history with the goal of becoming professors. Eileen Power, similarly, had a background, if not wealthy, at least allowed her into the possibility of education for women. Cam and Power were clergymen's daughters. In United States the background of women scholars was the professional or capitalist class. Thrupp fit neither.

On both sides of the Atlantic, women's suffrage was an important issue in society at large. Many of these women were more actively interested in educational opportunities for other women, than voting rights and equality. Nielson did not initiate her nomination to the Council of the American Historical Association or finally to its Presidency. Indeed, judging by her correspondence with her male mentor, she doubted her capacity to do the job. But she agreed to advance women's recognition as initiated by others. She was selected as the most likely female scholar to be respected by male

colleagues. Helen Cam was a vocal advocate for education of women and also the working class. Eileen Power, according to Berg, was less influenced by the suffrage movement than by the experience of WWI and the need for internationalism. She was, however, the only one who wrote extensively in women's history. But her recognized contributions in her lifetime were the creation of the *Economic History Review* and the *Cambridge Economic History*. Both of these show her international interests—interests that Sylvia Thrupp perpetuated in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Thrupp brought international scholars to the attention of scholars in this country through translation of their articles.

In United States, as at Cambridge and Oxford, women were successfully contained in women's colleges. Their correspondence reflects a shrewd awareness of the limitations they faced (can we call these stained glass ceilings?). Certainly as an undergraduate at Douglass College in the early 60s Margaret Hastings and Margaret Judson warned me

about the limitations of women in academics. But it was the man who tried to sexually harass me at Michigan who put it most bluntly: "You should be a university teacher, not a college teacher. But you will have to publish twice as much."

I think that the women on both sides of the Atlantic were aware of the "stained glass ceiling," but feminism was not the most important, vital need to them. They grew up in a world in which limitations of their activities were an ingrained presumption. Instead, one has the sense in the first half of the twentieth century and into the 1960s of a flood gate being opened, not to professional recognition or to equal status on male faculties, but to the very availability of archives, of learning, of association in a professional world of academic scholarship that was heretofore barred to them. Access to knowledge, to being able to write and publish, to know archivists and sympathetic fellow learners such as Maitland, meant more to them.

To scholars in women's colleges in United States and in Britain,

the "stained glass ceiling," began to be obvious, particularly in the post WWII period. But theirs' was not a 1970s feminist complaint of equal opportunity, but rather one of "if I have done it, I want recognition as well." Some felt that, with the opening of jobs in the 1960s that they could not compete with men of their generations for distinguished professorships. They quite rightly complained that some of the men appointed did not have as distinguished publications as they had. Other complaints concerned lower pensions and lower salaries. Still others complained about relegation to all female colleges. Sylvia Thrupp, however, was not within this circle of confidences among other female faculty. She was isolated at Chicago and again, in her success, at Michigan.

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END NOTES

¹ See Margaret Hastings and Elisabeth G. Kimball, "Two Distinguished Medievalists—Nellie Neilson and Bertha Putnam," *The Journal of British Studies* 18.2(1979): 142-159; p. 159.

² See Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889-1940* (Cambridge UP, 1996).

³ See Sylvia Thrupp, "Problems of Replacement Rates in Late Medieval English Population," *Economic History Review* 18(1986): 101-110; p. 119.

⁴ Thrupp frequently made these sorts of comments about her book and its reviews/reviewers in general conversation.

⁵ See Anne Reiber DeWindt, "Nellie Neilson (1873-1947): A Historian of 'Wit, Whimsy, and Sheer Poetry,'" *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (U Wisconsin P, 2005), pp. 167-181.



“Nature [. . .] goes to her coffe and opens it up. She has at least a million molds there, and she has very great need of them, for if she had only one form, everyone would look so much alike that no one would ever be able to tell who was who or what their name was. But Nature takes such care that there is nothing to fault in her work.”

— from the *Roman de Silence*, ll. 1886-94 (translated by Sarah Koche Mahdi)

Quote provided by
Anne Askaya

