

“Weaving a feminist book history”

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Women, gender, and book history—SAA 2018

Most work on women and book history is focused on recovering the histories of women in the book trades or in the scholarship of textual studies and bibliography. The problem I want to explore, instead, is how do you enact a feminist practice of book history if you’re not looking to recover earlier women?

I started worrying about women and book history (and specifically that subset concerned with how books are made, which is to say, bibliography) as I was writing a textbook about how books were made in the first centuries of the printing press. Mine wasn’t a work about books or about the book trade, so there wasn’t a focus on authors or printers or book sellers *per se*, just a lot of information on machines and processes and discussions of why it matters. So how could I bring my investment in feminist theory and practice to the forefront of my current work?

Twenty years ago, Leslie Howsam published a brief but pointed call to arms in *SHARP News*. “In My View: Women and Book History” is Howsam’s advocacy for an explicitly feminist approach to studying book history. But Howsam isn’t interested in excavating women’s histories and deliberately sets it aside: “most of the women whose work in the book cycle has been so painstakingly discovered by researchers have been atypical individuals, outstanding anomalies in a cultural field dominated by men” (Howsam 1998, 1). Howsam might be overstating the assumption that such women were entirely atypical, but her larger point is still germane: adding to the scant list of women known to have been involved in the book trades only makes it slightly less scant. And such recovery work doesn’t necessarily help us confront the social and political forces that shape women’s lives. Instead of fleshing out the list of women in the book trades, she writes, “I want to suggest that book historians think about how the book has been implicated in those structures of masculine power and authority known to feminist scholarship as patriarchy” (Howsam 1998, 1).

For Howsam, the possibilities for feminist book history lie in working not with women, necessarily, but with gender. How are books conceived of as gendered objects, both as physical object and cultural product? She points to the language of conquest and courting used by collectors as one potential avenue. For instance, Richard Curle wrote of his passion for collecting in 1930: “Books without points [details that make them valuable] are like women without beauty—they pass unnoticed in the crowd. But books with points excite immediate interest and everybody, so to speak, turns to gaze at them” (as quoted in Howsam 1998, 2). As Howsam notes drily, “Perhaps we can also think

about the gendered, possessive, not altogether unsexualised way that book collectors have fixed their gaze upon the object of desire.” The tool Howsam uses to think outside this gaze is feminist theory, turning specifically to Jane Marcus’s theorization of feminist aesthetics.

As Marcus works through it, a feminist aesthetic is one that values process over product, one that avoids hierarchies and exclusions. For Howsam, this suggests a feminist praxis of book study that downplays possession in favor of utility. Instead of favoring first editions and famous authors, it might instead think in terms of less visible books that gain meaning through their social circulation. Perhaps “the way large numbers of readers, both men and women, make use of books may be just as interesting as the ways in which small numbers of authors, publishers and collectors work together to create, fashion and preserve books” (Howsam 1998, 2). This aligns closely with my own interest in books like Berlemonts (the very popular multi-lingual phrasebooks and dictionaries published across Europe) and my frustration with the obsessive tracking of Shakespeare’s First Folio, so it resonates with me, even aside from thinking about it in terms of feminist politics.

But I want to look a bit more closely at how Howsam incorporates Marcus’s theory of aesthetics into her own speculations, which she accomplishes largely by way of this excerpt from Marcus’s 1988 book, *Art and Anger: Reading like a Woman*:

This model of art, with repetition and dailiness at the heart of it, with the teaching of other women the patient craft of one’s cultural heritage as the object of it, is a female poetic which women live and accept. ... Transformation rather than permanence is at the heart of this aesthetic, as it is at the heart of most women’s lives. History is preserved not in the art object, but in the tradition of making the art object. (as qtd in Howsam 1988, 2)

It’s this account of daily making that leads Howsam to the observation that feminist book history could attend to how books are used—how they are written and read, but also how they are shared and recreated and turned to for solace and enlightenment—and attend to books that are part of the everyday and ordinary.

What catches my attention, however, is how much this scenario reminds me of the act of printing. The repetition and dailiness and patience of working the printing press and setting the type—this is the unavoidable nature of the actions without which printing wouldn’t happen. And Marcus’s emphasis on making the art object resonates strongly for me with bibliography, especially as I’ve spent the last couple of years writing primarily about how books are made and teaching students how to recover that process through the physical evidence left behind in the material texts.

So where does Marcus get “this model of art” from? Here’s the full passage, taken from “Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic,” the 1984 article that is one of the three pieces forming the basis of her book (“Lipking” below refers to Lawrence Lipking’s “Aristotle’s Sister,” in which he argues for a feminine poetics of abandonment, an important foil for Marcus prior to this point):

We could imagine another aesthetic, call it Penelope’s, which grew out of a female culture. Lipking says that Arimneste’s “cannot compete, of course, with her brother’s tradition.” Penelope’s aesthetic does not wish to compete, is anti-hierarchical, anti-theoretical, not aggressively exclusionary. *A real woman’s poetics is a poetics of commitment, not a poetics of abandonment.* Above all, it does not separate art from work and daily life. Penelope weaves her tapestry by day and takes it apart by night. Could Aristotle destroy his lectures and start over again each day? This model of art, with repetition and dailiness at the heart of it, with the teaching of other women the patient craft of one’s cultural heritage as the object of it, is a female poetic which women live and accept. Penelope’s art is work, as women cook food that is eaten, weave cloth that is worn, clean houses that are dirtied. Transformation, rather than permanence, is at the heart of this aesthetic, as it is at the heart of most women’s lives. (Marcus 1984, 84; emphasis author’s)

The ellipses in Howsam—the bits of the weaving that she has unpicked from this argument—are all the parts that are about Penelope. I can see why she would worry that it would be a distraction, that it would take too much explanation to give it proper context. But that this passage is about Penelope undoing her weaving every night makes it, for me, all the more about printing.

As an aesthetic about printing, Marcus’s account here works shocking well, even better than with the omissions. If you’ve ever done even the smallest bit of work on a letterpress, you know that it is entirely a process not only of repetition but of breaking down and starting over. Dab ink on the balls, work the ink, dab ink on the forme, dab, work, dab, and at the end of the day, take the stuffing out of the balls, soak the leather, and the next morning reassemble and start again. Pick the piece of type up, place it in the stick, place another, place another, put the line on the stone, put another, put another, tie it up, tie up another page, tie up another, lock it up, print it off, distribute the type back into its boxes, start all over again. Place the paper on the tympan, fold the frisket down, fold the whole thing down, roll it under the platen, pull the bar, roll in once more, pull again, roll it out, open the frisket, take the paper off, put the paper on, fold it down, fold it down, roll, pull, roll, pull, roll, open, hang the paper, go home, come back the next morning and do it all again.

Penelope’s weaving disappears every night, and a printer’s work does not, since the printed paper remains in heaps and gatherings, but the unmaking of the press’s parts are a key component to keeping the work going and the debtors at bay. And if you are, as I am, committed to the belief that every single copy of a text is unique, thanks both to inevitable printing variants and to the vagaries of its individual life, then an awareness of repetition and variation (there must have been variation in Penelope’s weaving as she worked on it every day in front of her suitors) makes an aesthetic based on Penelope’s weaving all the more compelling.

Oh, the suitors. And then there’s Penelope and her suitors. I wish I had time to think more about what it might mean for a feminist aesthetic to be based on a woman struggling to hang onto her home while her husband is off wandering and her son is crying, especially in the context of a feminist book history, a history in which women are almost always omitted as active agents and regular players. But I don’t.

If we’re going to think about the action of printing as one embodying a feminist (or maybe female) aesthetic, one of the first things that comes to my mind is Wendy Wall’s *The Imprint of Gender*. One thread of Wall’s argument is that male authors depict printing as feminine in part to assert their authority over it. The frequent rhetorical move to feminize the press and printed books is a relatively easy one to make, given that to “press” someone is to make them play the woman’s part when having sex. A book is pressed into being, therefore a book is female. The male author, who risks being turned into a woman by being pressed, instead asserts his dominance over the process—it is the book that is pressed, and the author who does the pressing.

The second thing that comes to my mind is Lisa Maruca’s “Bodies of Type,” the rare piece of scholarship that reads printers manuals not as transparent printing lessons, but for their rhetorical and ideological practices. The important part here is Maruca’s argument that while Joseph Moxon’s *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683–84) was part of the Royal Society’s project to rescue tradesmen from themselves by providing the expertise of intellectuals, it also continuously grounded that work in the laborers that performed it. That work was, in the case of type-casting, relentlessly heterosexual in the language used to describe the parts and the acts required to form letters. The gendering of making language continued to encompass the life of printmaking as a whole (although he erases women from the scene of the print shop); “It is the *coupling* of man and machine that produces the body of type” (Maruca 2003, 331; emphasis author’s).

This article, first published in 2003, was incorporated into her 2012 book, *The Work of Print: Authorship and the English Text Trades, 1660–1760*. I’ve referred to the article because it’s oddly easier for me as an independent scholar to get access to JSTOR articles through my alumna affiliation than it is to schlep an hour to the nearest research library and spend the afternoon there since I can’t check it out and I’ve got to get home to do household things. I’m sure there’s a feminist argument to be made about today’s scholarly publishing world.

Maruca’s project—here and in her book—is to consider the many ways in which the acts and agents of book making create an ideology of authorship that is gendered and politicized. But what I want to call attention to is how effectively she puts down the

wishful thinking that we can treat printers' manuals as transparent windows onto early modern acts of printing. So much of what we know about how books were made in the hand-press period are based on Moxon and Smith and Fertel and the *Encyclopédie*—bibliographers draw on their work to help them produce the works that become the basis of our study, like McKerrow and Gaskell and, if everything goes the way I hope, Werner. How do we escape the masculinist underpinnings of our knowledge?

It is super uncomfortable, by the way, to insert myself into this list, admitting publicly my ambition. That's another thing we can add to the list of feminist book history considerations.

Is it useful here to think about Diana Taylor's notions of archive and repertoire to deal with the tensions between reading ideological texts and a desire to recover acts of printing? Taylor's concepts are geared toward performance studies and particularly towards recovering Latin American cultural histories, and I sometimes get impatient with her dichotomy at the same time as I find it generative. The quickest and most superficial description of her concepts of archive and repertoire is that cultural memory is contained both in written archives and in bodily repertoire. It's a particularly useful way of contrasting the dominant history of conquest written into archival documents with an embodied history of experience that can be passed down from one generation of survivors to the next. Theater, dance, gesture—all can be valid forms of knowledge and history that capture what written documents do not.

If printer's manuals are part of the written archive of printing history (along with actually archival records of print shops and guilds), and if they have—as Maruca's reading says they do and as all things do—an ideological slant, can we counter that in the physical repertoire of printing? Is a feminist guide to physical bibliography one that emphasizes doing over reading?

Although printing practices have changed over the centuries, scholar-printers have long been interested in early techniques of printing, debating and rebuilding and relearning. There might not be an embodied repertoire that's been handed down to us directly from London's printers in the 17th century, but there's a repertoire living in bodies printing on wooden hand presses who are often eager to share what they know. On the other hand, books are hella more accessible than bodies, especially my book, which will be in print and in digital format (which will be available through screen-readers). There are only so many printers and so many presses; printers deserve to be paid for their time, presses are much too heavy to travel.

I feel like I've come dangerously close to suggesting that a feminist book history practice equates printing with weaving and repertoire rather than with writing and reading. Maybe that's what I mean to do? If you're looking for metaphors about printing, weaving is gendered but not sexualized, unlike the language Wall and Maruca uncover.

And it's hard to find an older feminist trope for the language of women's art, denigrated or celebrated. Nor should we forget the etymological connection, the word "text" deriving from the Latin word for "to weave," *texere*.

And yet printing is printing. I don't want to say that it is some other skill, some other art, some other language. I love it for what it is, I deserve to be the printer and the reader and the bibliographer as much as any man.

The fear I started off with in our SAA seminar was that I didn't have a way of writing about the practice of making books in the hand-press period that was consistent with a feminist politics. But if the book doesn't really feel visibly feminist to me, my teaching practice—which led directly to this book—does. My teaching book history is based on error and giving up expertise and modeling a generative authority. I had not realized when I started teaching in this field how overwhelmingly populated by women my seminars would be. I had more women-only seminars than I can remember off-hand; I had maybe 15 male students over the 16 semesters I taught my course. But my feminist praxis is not about who is in the classroom but about giving up authority and opening up to discussion a collaborative web of evidence. Students do the reading, students look at their books, we all look at more books together, we talk about what we see, we talk about what we don't see. It's inclusive, it's communal, it's repetitive, it doesn't build up to a grand conclusion with a big bang, it needs to be done and undone and redone, but over time it changes the way we experience the texts and objects and worlds around us.

It's also kind of terrifying.

Maybe the feminist way to write about bibliography is to do it in such a way that encourages readers to ask questions, to want to go out and experience books for themselves, that teaches how to do instead of only knowing that it is done. Maybe that's a cop out. But I hope that's what I've done.

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A postscript

Jane Marcus ends her thoughts on a feminist aesthetic with a poem from Catherine des Roches, "A ma quenouille," which she holds up as a way out from under a female anxiety about writing publicly. First published in 1579 in a volume of works with her mother, *Les oeuvres de Mesdames Des Roches, de Poitiers, mère et fille*, the poem is given here in the translation Marcus uses in her article:

This isn't precisely true. She ends this section of her article with this translation of this poem, but without naming its author, describing her only as "a sixteenth-century Frenchwoman"—a rather dick move, if you ask me. Des Roches is named in the footnote, along with the translator, "Professor Tilde Sankovitch, Northwestern University French Department."

To my Spindle

My spindle and my care, I promise you and swear
To love you forever, and never to exchange
Sweet domestic honor for a thing wild and strange,
Which, inconstant, wanders, and tends its foolish snare.

With you at my side, dear, I feel much more secure
Than with paper and ink arrayed all around me,
For, if I needed defending, there you would be,
To rebuff any danger, to help me endure.

But, spindle, my dearest, I do not believe
That, much as I love you, I will come to grief
If I do not quite let that good practice dwindle
Of writing sometimes, if I give you fair share,
If I write of your goodness, my friend and my care,
And hold in my hand both my pen and my spindle.

And according to Howsam, there was something of a “misogynist harrumph” in response to her piece, but the editors of *SHARP News* had the wisdom not to publish any of it. (Howsam 2017)

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