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Title

Studying Women and Philosophy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16z60648>

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Publication Date

2011-04-01

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Studying Women and Philosophy

I earned a Ph.D. in English in 1982 with a specialization in American Literature to 1914 and a dissertation on Nathaniel Hawthorne. I came through graduate school without reading books (as opposed to anthology selections) by any woman writer except Edith Wharton.

My first explicitly feminist project, after more than a dozen years of teaching, came when I was invited to write an essay on the topic of “Hawthorne and women.” In preparing the essay, I had ideas and ambitions, one being “A Typology of Hawthorne’s Women Critics.” At that time (the

mid-late 1990s) I was only beginning to discover women’s literature and feminist criticism. I had no practice in talking about women’s texts, and so I really could not express or communicate what I perceived in a text by British novelist Mary Augusta Ward, which I had finally selected as my topic for the essay. Without feminism and its theory of interdisciplinarity, I felt uneasy about writing about a non-American and a woman.

Later, I was invited to write a biography for the American National Biography on the eighteenth-century American writer Esther Edwards Burr. The only piece of literary writing Burr had produced



MARY AUGUSTA WARD

was a journal. At this time I was also inexperienced with studying unpublished and personal writing and was again rather baffled about how to talk about this journal and its author. I understand now that these are areas feminist criticism has pioneered. My (non-feminist) experience with teaching Emily Dickinson positioned me in good stead with Burr and ultimately I was able to produce a piece of writing of which I am still proud.

As I thereafter developed an interest in the history of women and philosophy,



I read Mary Mahowald's 1994 collection *The Philosophy of Woman* and was introduced to the work of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill. I was moved to read Mill's *Autobiography* and Taylor's "Enfranchisement of Women." Further research led to my current project on Julia Ward Howe and other women of nineteenth-century New England in the contexts of gender and the history of philosophy that under the (awkward, but intended to be precise) title of "The Rise and Stall of Feminist Women's History of



HARRIET TAYLOR MILL

Philosophy." Part of this project includes working on a essay on "Why Howe Read Kant" (as she did, in German).

Carol M. Bensick has been a CSW Research Scholr since 2010. She received her Ph.D. in English and American Literature from Cornell University in 1982. She has taught at University of Denver, Cornell University, UCLA, University of Oregon, and UC Riverside. Her book, *La Nouvelle Beatrice: Renaissance and Romance in 'Rappaccini's Daughter'* was published in 1984.