

L597: Libraries as Cultural Institutions
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Assignment 3:
Libraries, Culture and Gender

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Writing in 1973, 1985, 2000 and 2001, Dee Garrison, Rosalee McReynolds, Katherine Adams and Jacalyn Eddy (all women) give us intriguing historical perspectives on the perception of librarianship as feminine, and on what that perception means for the profession. Each of them discusses the stereotype of the librarian as plain, repressed spinster, but to differing effect. Garrison, writing in 1973, concludes that so long as our society is biased against women's equality with men, and so long as library work is considered to be female or feminine, there is no hope of gaining full professional status for librarianship. McReynolds shows in her 1985 article for Library Journal how librarians have been hypersensitive to the spinster image, and in their eagerness to distance themselves from the sting of that stereotype they have not only dismissed the value of the work done by pioneering (female) librarians but have validated the broader cultural disdain for women "growing old, being plain, never marrying." (p.30) Fifteen years later, Adams feels free to deploy the interpretive tools of poststructural and semiotic theory in a call for librarians to embrace the stereotype—and subvert it. In 2001, Jacalyn Eddy returns to Garrison's subject matter in order to analyze the nature of discourse about both gender and librarianship in the early years of the profession (1880-1920); with an interpretive perspective similar to Adams' she finds that the development of librarianship, and the expansion of women into that profession, both renovated and reinforced gender ideals of the day.

In 1973, Dee Garrison did not have poststructural theory or semiotics to draw on, nor was there a body of scholarship available that addressed the debates over femininity in the history of librarianship with any forthrightness (an issue that at least partially motivated her writing of this article, and which has been ameliorated since that time with a significant range of feminist historiography). The period of Garrison's study, 1876-1905, witnessed the emergence of the public library as a significant American institution, as well as the birth of

librarianship as a profession, during an era of great social and economic change. Women workers were welcomed into the library in large part because they accepted lower wages, and women seeking socially acceptable employment flooded in where they were welcomed. Garrison argues convincingly that librarianship itself was shaped by assumptions about the nature of Woman at the turn of the twentieth century. Because women were becoming librarians, and women were understood as domestic creatures, their presence in the public sphere (and the expansion of their acceptable activities) was justified by remodeling the library as an extension of the home. The librarian was to be a warm hostess, a guardian of cultural ideals and morality, a natural custodian of children and of social welfare, a cheerful servant, and a willing drudge—all women's roles. At the same time, however, women were distrusted as librarians because they were considered too inclined to sentiment, and disinclined to provide the intellectual stimulation the library must supply in its critical role as beacon of democracy. This distrust cast a shadow on librarianship as a whole, a shadow that continued to chill Garrison in 1973. To make a detailed and intriguing discussion very short indeed, Garrison concludes that women's acceptance of socially assigned roles of service and subordination has severely hindered the status of librarianship as a profession.

McReynolds' outlook, twelve years after Garrison's article was published, is less severe. In her study of librarians' responses to images of themselves in popular culture from 1876 to 1950, McReynolds finds just as Garrison did that librarians were never comfortable with the idea of their profession being considered female. The image of the librarian as meek, prim, fussy, and unattractive has been particularly galling. McReynolds asserts, however, that librarians have taken the stereotype far too deeply to heart, accepting the wildest and least-informed criticisms as unequivocally true, and agreeing with the judgment that condemned them as drab beings incapable of expressing themselves forcefully or of

having fun. In the 1940's this led to efforts to glamorize the profession; librarians could still be women, but they had better look good—and they had better not get old. McReynolds observes within the profession in the Forties an animosity toward older, single librarians—in other words, those who had placed their library careers over the conventional aspirations of marriage and family, and had the experience to potentially become administrators and leaders in the field in spite of their gender. In rejecting the “spinster” so vehemently, librarians not only rejected their own professional heritage, but they bought into the cultural assumption behind the glamour icons of the age that women in general (librarians or otherwise) had no right to not be young and pretty.

Katherine Adams urges librarians to go to the opposite extreme in her July 2000 article, “Loveless Frump as Hip and Sexy Party Girl: A Reevaluation of the Old-Maid Stereotype”. Rather than resenting and rejecting the image of the old maid librarian, we should appropriate it for our own purposes through parody and mimicry. While Adams’ suggested strategies for doing this may not inspire confidence (I for one am not certain that “deflecting inappropriately personal questions during a reference interview by assuming an expression of prim hauteur” would be received as Adams intends [p.292]), her exposition via poststructural and semiotic theory of how symbols such as the loveless frump stereotype are created, interpreted, and internalized is extremely helpful. Her historical profile of the stereotype and the response of librarians to it is equally welcome. Adams’ presentation of the troubled relationship between librarians and the “loveless frump” idea ends in conclusions reminiscent of McReynolds’. Just as librarians have, like an oppressed minority, internalized this “shameful” image of themselves (per scholar Pauline Wilson), effectively punishing themselves in their anger at the stereotype they somehow feel they have earned, they can liberate themselves from its derogation by deliberately and forcefully reinterpreting it (and

giving it the mockery that it deserves). Her analyses of the film “Party Girl” and the work of artists Deborah Bright and Cindy Sherman provide effective demonstrations of the kind of “ironic redeployment” she advocates. (p.292)

Jacalyn Eddy approaches almost the same material that Garrison did in 1973, but nearly thirty years later she can take advantage of intellectual perspectives and trends of thought that Garrison had not encountered—and she does so to excellent effect. Eddy stresses that metaphors of femininity played major roles in discussions of the library during this period (1880-1920), and that they need to be understood as such: metaphors. As Eddy asks in her introductory paragraphs, “What did the presence of ‘female’ signal in the library, a space at once public *and* private? How did concepts of gender provide an interpretive framework for defining the meaning of the public library?” (p.155) Like Adams, Eddy is comfortable with the strategies of semiotics, adding discourse analysis to her intellectual toolbox. Like McReynolds, she pays attention to how librarians have responded to their image and to standards of femininity. Like Garrison, she is concerned with contemporary concepts of male and female “spheres” and of masculine and feminine traits, and with how these concepts affected the developing professionalization of librarianship. She makes a point similar to Garrison’s regarding the affect on librarianship of the cultural tension over what were to be considered the strengths and weaknesses of women, but from the vantage point of 2001 she can do so with a different understanding of how those cultural dynamics were felt and expressed (and without, perhaps, some of the anxiety Garrison felt for her gender and for the profession). “The library’s language reinforced gender norms, but it also mirrored deep, culture-wide ambivalence about gender. . . .women were desirable as librarians to enhance institutional claims to authority at precisely the same moment gender

language was used to express fear that female influence would compromise those claims.”
(p.156)

Clearly, the dynamics between cultural ideas of gender and images of the library and librarians are still with us today. Women are still paid less than men; librarians are still majority-female, particularly those working with children; librarianship still seems to some a marginal profession, one that people often can't fathom the requirement of a graduate degree to pursue. But as McReynolds noted, we shouldn't take too much to heart the harsh assessments levied by people who just don't know us; and we also tend to overlook the overwhelmingly positive feelings so many people have for their public libraries (we wouldn't still have them if they didn't). Garrison presents feminization as debilitating for the profession, particularly insofar as the library is perceived as a recreational space and librarians are perceived (or perceive themselves) as servants. Thirty years later, however, entertainment and popular culture have gained the status of unabashed economic engines and fitting subjects for academic study; and the business model of good customer service, along with the elevation of “information” as a commodity, have combined to revise the formerly negative associations with both entertainment and service. Garrison might protest that this has only been achieved by the imposition of a “masculine” commercial standard on the “feminine” library; but such dichotomies do not apply as firmly now as they did in 1973. At the turn of the twenty-first century our ideas of gender are as much in flux as they were at the turn of the twentieth; old images and restrictions remain, but boundaries have been extended and roles are contested more than they are defined.

We have sharper tools for understanding these dynamics and new avenues for responding to them, but human beings are gendered creatures and librarianship remains a field dominated by women—ergo, uncomfortable stereotypes about librarians are still alive,

even if they sometimes kick in different directions than they used to. The current issue of Entertainment Weekly, for example, features an interview with the female stars of the “Charlie’s Angels” sequel about to hit theaters, in which the actresses celebrate their roles in the film as women who can have fun being both active and attractive. As Lucy Liu puts it, “You can be beautiful and you can be strong and you can also be capable. ... Capable yet not having to wear librarian glasses.” (p. 33) The modern incarnation of the ideal woman as kick-ass girl in fabulous lip gloss still can’t be seen to “look like” a librarian.

Modern librarians, however, are just as diverse as they ever were, and just as unwilling to accept the stereotype. Many of them seem to have taken Adams’ advice to heart, with associations of “modified” librarians (i.e., wearing piercings and tattoos) and bellydancing librarians, and a plethora of tongue-in-cheek websites poking fun at the “loveless frump” far beyond the Lipstick Librarian cited by Adams in her article (see <http://www.renegadelibrarian.com> for a good cross-section of links). I agree with McReynolds that reviling the stereotype does us no good, and can do great harm; it only makes us unhappy, and Adams is right that it’s much more fun to make the stereotype dance. We can’t eliminate cultural biases regarding gender, or gendered associations with our profession, solely by proclaiming them wrong and unfair. As Adams pointed out, the reason these symbols are so effective is that the assumptions on which they are based are not examined. By enjoying what we do and demonstrating its value, by promoting alternative understandings of what the library is and who librarians are, we can change not just the image, but the concepts that support it (and even if we can’t make them utterly go away, we can still laugh at them). If, as was felt at the turn of the twentieth century, the library is equal to missionary work, we should take it as our proselytizing mission to defeat the stereotype not by outright attack, but by simply being ourselves.

Sources

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I am aware that my citation style in this paper is irregular. This may be considered shameful for a library science student. I chose to leave it uncorrected rather than turn it in unfinished or after the due date. Apologies.