

# Constructing Women in Library History: Responding to Julia Taylor's "Left on the Shelf?"

*Evelyn Kerslake*

This paper is a response to work on women library workers in the United Kingdom. It suggests that recent concerns about the need for library historians to extend the analytical and interpretative side of their work contain an inherent demand to develop the theoretical frameworks in the field. A discursive feminist approach to library history is outlined as one such approach, and developments of a paper by Julia Taylor using this framework are outlined. Central benefits of using such a framework are that it helps historians to avoid reinscribing women into oppressive discourses. The need for women's and feminist library history in the U.K., where little work has so far been carried out, is suggested, particularly as the profession in the U.K. largely tends to avoid the gender politics of library employment.

Merely to paint a broad backcloth against which library activity took place is not enough. Such an approach might explain very superficially "how" libraries came to be. It does not necessarily explain the fundamental "why" of development and practice. Ideally in addition to it being given sufficient depth, context should not simply be described but interpreted, in an effort to pin-point the social functions and micro-worlds of libraries, and their professionals, providers and patrons.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of context to library history cannot be doubted: understanding the reluctance of local government electors to increase local taxation by a library rate, for example, depends in part on awareness of the nineteenth-century laissez-faire economic attitudes turning on low wages and low taxation.<sup>2</sup> As Black contends, context in itself is insufficient in historical writing, which must be accompanied by analysis and interpretation. However, interpretation is problematized by post-modern doubts about the existence of "truth" and objectivity in history,<sup>3</sup> thus giving rise to pluralities rather than absolutes, histories rather than history. It is further problematized because, as Jenkins summarizes:

Epistemology shows we can never really know the past; that the gap between the past and history (historiography) is an ontological one, that is, is in the very nature of things such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it.<sup>4</sup>

Like Jenkins, I argue that the bridge historians construct between their present-minded selves and the past is based on theory/ideology.<sup>5</sup> Theoretical frameworks therefore underpin historical interpretation and analysis. The theoretical position may be explicitly adopted, as in some Marxist or feminist work, or it may be implicitly assumed, as in work grounded in established or “common sense” theories. Library history’s need for interpretation, therefore, also contains a demand for theory.

The development of “new” schools<sup>6</sup> of historical thought and practice, such as social, labor, and women’s history, arises from the recognition of the plurality of histories. A recent instance of women’s history in the field of U.K. library history is a stimulating paper by Julia Taylor<sup>7</sup> which investigates the position of women employed in English libraries from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s, thereby covering a period in which overt discrimination against women was standard throughout the labor market. Based on data and sources infrequently used by U.K. library historians,<sup>8</sup> the paper provides a vivid picture of that world, yielding glimpses of the extent to which work in this historical field is pertinent to our understandings of the development of contemporary information and library services.

Taylor states that her paper aims to investigate how oppressive images of the woman librarian came about,<sup>9</sup> and to some extent this is achieved. However, here I argue that while Taylor provides a glimpse of both “how” women library workers were oppressed and the context in which this occurred, a more developed exploration of this subject may be accomplished if the argument is moved even farther to address the problematic interpretative “why” question: why were women library workers oppressed and what did this mean? In particular, I argue that women’s employment in libraries could be usefully investigated from a particular theoretical position, utilizing theory developed by feminist writers throughout this century, who have extensively addressed the contemporary and historical position of women in the labor market.<sup>10</sup> These ideas are used later in this paper to explore data from Taylor’s work.

### **U.K. Library History and Gender**

Taylor’s paper stands out from most work in U.K. library history which eschews engagement with any gendered implications arising from

it. Black's extensive investigation of public libraries may be criticized for relegating discussion of gender issues to an "also-ran" position and privileging above all else the "crucial contextual area of class,"<sup>11</sup> after the way of many social historians.<sup>12</sup> While class is undoubtedly a significant factor, many theorists now accept that the impact of class has to be understood within a complex framework of intersecting oppressions.<sup>13</sup> Black argues that "the central purpose of library history" should be to facilitate "the comprehension of social processes, historical and contemporary."<sup>14</sup> The ensuing paucity of discussion of gender and race construction and negotiation, both key social processes, in the context of libraries—their architecture, staffing and admission policies, and so on—is, in the light of this comment, all the more striking. The omission is, however, in keeping with much other U.K. library history. The index to Kelly's<sup>15</sup> immensely useful work on U.K. public libraries contains just four page references under the heading "women library workers," two references to women readers and none to the gender composition of library committees. Similarly, although women library workers are included by name, the existing six volumes of Keeling's<sup>16</sup> bibliography of library history contain just four references under the heading "women librarians." The Keeling bibliographies, to some extent, even obscure work on women. Papers, such as that by Joynes,<sup>17</sup> containing extensive, valuable information on women library workers in special libraries, are not indexed under "women"—thus rendering them invisible. Indexing is certainly a feminist (and a class, sexuality, and race) issue.

### **Women's History or Discursive Approaches to History?**

Taylor, then, challenges a great deal of library history simply in choosing to work with the subject of women, and particularly in framing the work as an exploration of the oppressive image of women library workers. The need to make women library workers visible in historical studies is often based on the premise that women have been "overlooked" by library historians and simply need to be added to work in the field. This premise is based on an essentially liberal stand-point<sup>18</sup> which argues that "additive" work is necessary to correct a previous imbalance or oversight. Further, it is based on the belief that the omission may be remedied by extending existing structures and frameworks, rather than by issuing a fundamental challenge to established political and theoretical values. Taylor's approach is useful in that it renders women library workers visible. However, I argue that it is also limited because it does not address the power relations in society by asking a fundamental question: who benefits from the oppression of women?

With the aim of exploring this question, a discursive analytic approach could prove useful. Discourse is used here following Jenkins's explanation of the term's use in history as a "field of force":

a series of ways of organising the past by and for interested parties which always comes from somewhere and for some purpose and which, in their direction, would like to carry you with them. This field is a "field of force" because in it these directions are contested (have to be fought for). It is a field that variously includes and excludes, which centres and marginalizes views of the past in ways and in degrees that refract the powers of those forwarding them. Using the term "discourse," then, indicates that we know that history [and other discourses] is never itself, is never said or read (articulated, expressed, discoursed) innocently, but that it is always for someone.<sup>19</sup>

Jenkins further argues that a discursive approach to history is particularly pertinent because

if "doing history" is about how you can read and make sense of the past and the present, then it seems important to me to use discourses that have "readings" and the construction of meanings as major concerns.<sup>20</sup>

A discursive approach enables historians to interrogate the function of constructions in the text rather than presenting it as an "always, already"<sup>21</sup> transparent truth. Moreover, notions of marginalized discourses allow for individual agency, negotiation, resistance, and renegotiation which explain those people or groups who do not conform to dominant "common sense" ways of being.

A discursive approach informed by feminist concerns may be particularly helpful in an investigation of women's position in the labor market. This area has been extensively addressed by feminist writers, as noted above. Feminism is used here to encompass an awareness of women's oppression by the intersecting forces of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and heterosexism. Women are variously situated in these discourses according to their social position. Bennett argues, however, that it is possible to usefully work with this acknowledgement of differences between women because

Some women have more capital or status than some men; some women wield more political power than some men; some women

enjoy racial or sexual privileges denied to some men. But within each group of men and women—whether the group is structured by commonalities of race, class, sexuality or whatever—women as a group are disempowered compared to *men of their group*.<sup>22</sup>

Feminism then, in general terms,

is the ideology of women's liberation since intrinsic in all its approaches is the belief that women suffer injustice because of our sex.<sup>23</sup>

Discursive techniques may be employed in a development of the arguments in Taylor's paper to explode, for example, references to the suitability of library employment for women. Taylor explains that this was based either on the profession moving toward those skills women were presumed to have for domestic work and so was "a role at which they could excel";<sup>24</sup> or alternatively, she writes that "the perception of the librarian was modifying as women moulded the profession around their specific skills and traits."<sup>25</sup> Both are pertinent points to make; however, an explanation of how they come to have currency is needed in order to understand their significance.

A feminist discursive approach would leave no doubt that these domestic skills were not innate feminine traits, but rather were learned as a result of nineteenth-century social pressures on women to acquire an appropriately "ladylike" education, i.e., one based on "catching" a husband and retaining one by carrying out domestic tasks. Taylor's wording, however inadvertently, reinforces the notion that domestic skills are some of the *essential* qualities which belong to "woman." Essential differences, as has often been noted, are rooted in binary oppositional terms where women or feminine terms are placed in a negative or marginal position and men or masculine terms are positive and central.<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite the obvious intention to validate and legitimate the history of women library workers, Taylor's paper can also be seen as trading on and reinforcing dominant oppressive discourses. This is, of course, one reading of this text, framed against a particular theoretical framework. It is not the only reading, and others may wish to challenge it from their particular standpoints.

A further development of issues in Taylor's paper might be to take issue with the notion—popularized by Dee Garrison<sup>27</sup>—that feminization of the library profession is problematic. Buying into the discourse that the preponderance of women in librarianship caused it to become a poorly remunerated profession depends on a sexist acceptance that women's labor is problematic and of less value than men's. A discursive approach

is useful here in offering a framework in which it may be argued that women workers are constructed as lesser than men—rather than being *intrinsically* of less value—and that this construction is used to justify their lower remuneration. The decrease in the cost of labor was essential for the expansion of public libraries within a standstill budget. Rather than women's labor being constructed as less valuable than men's, this discursive analysis argues that women were paid less than men because such exploitation was seen as legitimate in achieving the aim of public library expansion. Thus, in this way, the emerging public library movement benefited from the exploitation of women library workers.

Moreover, recent analysis of the feminization of professions suggests that such feminization was necessary to cope with the proliferation of routine work accompanying expansion, yet without devaluing male patronage. As Jordan<sup>28</sup> indicates in her work on women clerks in the insurance industry, expansion of routine work jeopardizes the promotion opportunities of men appointed through patronage, and so devalues patronage. Preserving the patronage system necessitated the creation of an "unpromotable category of clerk." Far from being problematic, the introduction of women clerks was an "answer" to this male-defined problem. Jordan's work indicates that the feminization of a profession occurs against complex, even competing, factors which cannot be explained simply by blaming the low-paid worker. The investigation of the history of women library workers in this vein, as another pink-collar profession, might prove a useful way of investigating the feminization debate, perhaps to explore how the underremuneration of women library workers was legitimized to the benefit of those (men) in positions of power in the public library movement.

Taylor's paper makes quite evident her opposition to the oppressive image of librarians and engages with political concerns about equal pay and women's access to the labor market; however, several further challenges to the data reported there can be offered. The discussion of patriarchal control of women's bodies as a prime source of women's oppression might be extended. Although there are references to this, further work might be carried out, particularly given the emphasis on the primary data reported in Taylor's paper. Such analyses might, for example, explore the issue from a feminist perspective (where an analysis of patriarchal oppression would be central) or from a Marxist perspective (where an analysis of the relations between capital and labor would be central). Of course, these categories overlap, so we find feminist historians working from a Marxist perspective and Marxist historians also concerned with the gender implications of their work.

Taylor highlights the control of women's bodies, for example, in her discussion of Henry Tedder's 1882 recital of the objections to women

working in libraries, and she challenges his assumption that women "are weak in both a bodily and mental sense."<sup>29</sup> A further challenge is made to a later complaint about the presence of "Woman" in the Reading Room of the British Library:

The frou-frou of her silken raiment is censured; she shall not walk in silk attire amongst the books . . .<sup>30</sup>

Taylor understands this as "women disturbing the atmosphere of cerebral calm by their physical presence" and being prevented from occupying a legitimate, "intellectual" space within the institution of the library. This is an extremely interesting line of thought, and further analysis might include explorations of the way that this discursive construction of women library workers both legitimated their presence in libraries (because they were thought to have a calming influence which was useful to public libraries' function of social control<sup>31</sup>) and simultaneously constrained the right to that place (because Woman is constructed as sexual, not cerebral, as attached primarily to unpaid domestic work, not to paid employment, as noted earlier in Taylor's paper).

### **Reinscribing Women Library Workers**

Taylor's paper challenges the oppression of women in the labor market. However, it could be argued that it simultaneously reinscribes women into oppressive sexist discourses<sup>32</sup> by describing all women as essentially the same, rather than highlighting differences between women from various classes or ethnic groups, or of different sexual orientations or physical abilities. Three examples of reinscription in the paper are discussed here.

First, the discussion of women's access to education:

With compulsory education now the law of the land, women were beginning to improve their minds, to fill the gap of ignorance.<sup>33</sup>

The assertion that *all* girls were uneducated before the 1870 Education Act, and similarly that *all* girls were educated thereafter, is inaccurate. Before the act, some girls from wealthy families were privately educated, while some from poor families were educated by Sunday schools and charity schools such as those established by the National Schools and British and Foreign Schools Society;<sup>34</sup> and after the act, some girls from poor families continued to work—at least sporadically, say when harvesting—instead of regularly attending school. Similarly, Taylor's assumption that all women in nineteenth-century Britain were in positions of eco-

conomic dependency ignores those women who provided for dependents and those who had independent means. This is seen in her statement that:

Women began to break away from their recognised positions of dependency as sisters, daughters, wives, aunts and to seek independence through employment.<sup>35</sup>

The failure to recognize the impact of varied economic positions on the category of woman and an insistence on understanding women through their familial roles close down the possibilities of what it was to be a woman in nineteenth-century England. It also ignores work by Hakim<sup>36</sup> and others (such as Hecht's<sup>37</sup> work on domestic servants) demonstrating that throughout most historical periods, most women have engaged in paid (as opposed to only unpaid) labor. By ignoring this, Taylor's paper renders all women the same, and they may then be categorized as "woman." Failure to resist this definition plays into the hands of oppressive understandings of gender. Essentialist constructions of men as strong and active and of women as passive and weak are a primary justification for the oppression of women, which Taylor's paper to some extent challenges. This challenge is, however, weakened by the assessment that women were to blame for their own lack of success:

Trained by society to care and foster, women were victims of their own success.<sup>38</sup>

The power of library committees, other librarians, councillors, families, and wider societal pressures in actively preventing or limiting women's employment is ignored, and the real fault is identified as women's inability to shake off the caring role. The relatively powerless woman, rather than the economically and ideologically powerful labor market and social systems, is blamed for her failure to progress in the library profession. Thus "blaming the victim" is an example of rewriting women library workers into oppressive discourses, which then reinforces apparently common-sense evaluations of women's labor as being lesser than men's. This can be argued as benefiting the capitalist and patriarchal exploitation of women workers.

A second example of reinscribing women within dominant discourses concerns established periodization. It would be interesting to challenge the idea that the 1870s were "a time of great advancement in the library movement."<sup>39</sup> While this may be so *for particular aspects* of the library movements—for example, for the number of public libraries established and for men working in them—it was not so for everyone

concerned with libraries. A time of great advancement for women library workers, for example, came about during the First and Second World Wars.<sup>40</sup> Taylor herself makes the point about women's increasing employment during periods of war, saying that the First World War "showed them [women] one possibility of a promised land."<sup>41</sup> However, this observation does not lead to a questioning of the usefulness of established periodization. Such differentiation in the periodization imposed by library historians on their subject is necessary to encompass realities experienced by different sections of society. When pronouncing a period "great" or "poor," it is necessary to ask the question: for whom was it a great time? An exploration of the concepts available to historians for framing their work would show a huge debate on this subject within the literature on feminist history<sup>42</sup> and also generally within postmodern theories of history.<sup>43</sup>

Third, the role played by the image of the librarian-spinster is not explored in any detail, although possible justifications for the introduction of this image are given.<sup>44</sup> The image of the repressed "dowdy spinster . . . left on the shelf"<sup>45</sup> is seen as something to be explained—if married women librarians left the labor market, then only unmarried ones, constructed as being without dependents, remained, thus justifying the lower wages paid to women—if not excusing them. It is not seen as something to be angry about or as a glaring example of dominant, sexist power relations in action which need to be challenged. Neither does Taylor's paper validate those women who wanted to be economically independent and to live alone or without a male partner. Thus, here too the paper reinscribes women into limited oppressive constructs of what it meant to be a woman library worker.

The importance of Julia Taylor's paper in bringing to the surface a much-neglected area of U.K. library history cannot be overstated, but the use of dominant discursive constructions of women weakens its impact in addressing its goal of understanding how women workers were oppressed in the library labor market. Here, I have suggested that the use of feminist historical theory and discursive techniques could be used to challenge oppressive discourses of women library workers. Taylor makes significant points in discussing the historical context of issues which continue to plague the sector today,<sup>46</sup> and she demands answers to new questions about old problems: of how the profession deals with equal pay and equal opportunities; of how systematic oppression is still entrenched in today's "glass ceiling" rather than yesterday's legislative brick wall; of how the profession in the U.K. still fails to attach great importance to these, and other, oppressive issues, instead remaining fixated on the—very masculinized—professionalization/scientificization debate. Engagement with these issues should mark the start of an assess-

ment of the politics of library employment and move that argument forward rather than simply providing a missing piece of the library history jigsaw.

## Notes

Many thanks to Dr. Anne Goulding and Professor Margaret Kinnell for their constructive comments.

1. Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library. Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850–1914* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 17.

2. *Ibid.*, 20.

3. For a summary see Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 28.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

6. Of course, some work in these fields was carried out earlier, e.g., Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, first printed 1930). However, such work was not incorporated within the history canon. Women's history, particularly in the U.K., remains marginalized.

7. Julia Taylor, "Left on the Shelf? The Issues and Challenges Facing Women Employed in Libraries from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1950s," *Library History* 11 (1995): 96–107.

8. A literature review revealed that Taylor's is only the third full-length paper focusing on women library workers in the United Kingdom to be published. The others are Nigel Webber, "Prospect and Prejudice: Women and Librarianship, 1880–1914," *Library History* 6:5 (1983): 153–162; and Alan Clarke, "Few and Far Between: Women Librarians in the Nineteenth Century," in Michael Wise, ed., *One Hundred Years: A Collection to Celebrate the Library Association Centenary*, Occasional paper number 8 (Aberystwyth: College of Librarianship, 1977). Shorter papers have appeared, such as Ann Harrold, "Bright Ribbons and Thin Shoes," *Library Association Record* 96:2 (1994): 90. There have also been investigations of gendered library provision, for example, Lindy Moore, "The Provision of Women's Reading Rooms in Public Libraries," *Library History* 9:5/6 (1993): 190–202. A brief discussion on the Sharp-L discussion list confirmed the dearth of papers. I would like once again to thank those who responded.

9. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 96.

10. See, for example, Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution*; Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto, 1983); Shirley Dex, *The Sexual Division of Work* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985); and Sue Sharpe, *Double Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

11. Black, *A New History*, 5.

12. For an early critique see Sally Alexander and Anna Davin, "Feminist History," *History Workshop Journal* 1 (1976): 4–6.

13. For example, bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End, 1983); Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

14. Black, *A New History*, 17.

15. Thomas Kelly, *A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845–1975* (London: Library Association, 1977).

16. Dennis F. Keeling, ed., *British Library History: Bibliography 1962–1968* (London: Library Association, 1972); Dennis F. Keeling, ed., *British Library History: Bibliography, 1969–1972* (London: Library Association, 1975); Dennis F. Keeling, ed., *British Library History: Bibliography, 1973–1976* (London: Library Association, 1979); Dennis F. Keeling, ed., *British Library History: Bibliography, 1977–1980* (London: Library Association, 1983); Dennis F. Keeling, ed., *British Library History: Bibliography, 1981–1984* (London: Library Association, 1987); Dennis F. Keeling, ed., *British Library History: Bibliography, 1985–1988* (London: Library Association, 1991).

17. Sara E. Joynes, "The Sheffield Library, 1771–1907," *Library History* 2:3 (1971): 91–116.

18. For a powerful critique of this approach to history, see Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

19. Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, footnote 1.

20. *Ibid.*, 3.

21. *Ibid.*, 33.

22. Judith Bennett, "Women's History: A Study in Continuity and Change," *Women's History Review* 2:2 (1993): 177.

23. Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), 94.

24. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 102.

25. *Ibid.*

26. For further discussion of biological determinism, see Gisela T. Kaplan and Lesley J. Rogers, "The Definition of Male and Female: Biological Reductionism and the Sanctions of Normality," in Sneja Gunew, ed., *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* (London: Routledge, 1990).

27. Dee Garrison, "The Tender Technicians: The Feminization of Public Librarianship, 1876–1905," in Kathleen Weibel and Kathleen Heim, eds., *The Role of Women in Librarianship, 1876–1976: The Entry, Advancement and Struggle for Equalization in One Profession* (Mansell, London: Oryx, 1979). For a critical assessment of Garrison's work, see Suzanne Hildenbrand, "Revision versus Reality: Women in the History of the Public Library Movement, 1876–1920," in Kathleen Heim, ed., *The Status of Women in Librarianship: Historical, Sociological and Economic Issues* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 1983).

28. Ellen Jordan, "The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-century Britain," *Gender and History* 8:1 (1996): 65–81.

29. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 99.

30. *Ibid.*, 100.

31. For a discussion of the controlling discourse of public librarianship, see Black, *A New History*, chapter 9.

32. Kum-Kum Bhavani, "Tracing the Contours: Feminist Research and Feminist Objectivity," *Women's Studies International Forum* 16:2 (1993): 95–104.

33. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 98.

34. Thomas W. Laqueur, "Working Class Demand and the Growth of English Elementary Education," in Lawrence Stone, ed., *Schooling and Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

35. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 98.

36. Catherine Hakim, *Occupational Segregation. Research Paper No. 9* (London, Department of Employment, 1979).

37. J. Jean Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956). Liz Stanley notes that in the mid- to late Victorian era around one-third of all women aged fifteen to twenty were employed as domestic servants (*The Diaries of Hannah Culwick. Victorian Maidservant* (London: Virago, 1984), 4.
38. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 107.
39. *Ibid.*, 98.
40. Weibel and Heim, *The Role of Women*, 70.
41. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 105.
42. See, for example, Kelly, *Women, History and Theory*; Sylvia Walby, "From Private to Public Patriarchy. The Periodisation of British History," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13:1/2 (1990): 91–104.
43. For a summary see Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*.
44. Taylor, "Left on the Shelf?" 107.
45. *Ibid.*
46. For a recent exploration see Veronica Fraser and Fiona Poland, "Exposing the Invisible Ceiling in LIS," *Library Association Record* 97:8 (1995): 434–5.