

Looking for Lily: Women and Ancient History

Why is there not a waiting line in the women's room when the AAH meets? Doubtless many factors contribute to the comparative scarcity of women doing ancient history as opposed to other forms of classical and historical scholarship, but surely one of the most important has to do with the variable location of ancient historians (as graduate students and later as members of faculties) within universities. In some places, one studies and teaches ancient history in the history department and in others ancient history happens in departments of classics, or classical studies, or perhaps Greek and Roman Studies. This variability can produce the feeling that ancient historians are marginalized in both locations. This perceived marginalization, in turn, intersects with broader gender issues in the academic world and in history and classics departments.

We have, in terms of the topic posed for the panel, few relevant hard facts and figures, particularly recent ones; AHA figures for women in history seem to be from 1999, Scheidel's figures on women doing ancient history were published in 1999, CSWMG's for Classics generally are from 2003. It would appear not only that there are fewer female ancient historians than literary classicists but also fewer female ancient historians than female historians generally. Whatever advantage exists for young women entering the job market does not endure; there appear to be fewer female ancient historians with full professor rank than women historians generally (11 versus 18 percent). The AHA reports more troubles for women in achieving tenure and reaching higher rank, suggesting that gender disparity across all fields of history now appears primarily after employment and plays out in terms of tenure, promotion, and salary. Scheidel thought that this unequal situation at the senior level would disappear, but it has not for historians in general and probably has not for ancient historians in particular. Thus, however shaky our information base, it would appear to suggest that particular attention needs to be paid to the critical period prior to tenure consideration and secondarily to promotion to full professor.

Inevitably much of what any of us says will be colored by our personal experiences which, in turn, has been shaped by our universities, departments (undergraduate, graduate, and professional), and academic generation. Let me summarize my own experience. I arrived at Smith College in the fall of 1965 with four years of Latin but planning to become an English major and ultimately a professor of English literature. Nonetheless, I continued to study Latin and took ancient history courses. I discovered a knack

for ancient history and that much though I loved English literature, I had less of interest to say about it. At various times I was a Classics major and a history major, but I finally settled on Ancient Studies, a major Lou Cohn-Haft invented for people who planned to be ancient historians. Though I fulfilled nearly all the requirements for a history major, I found myself more comfortable with classics majors. Years of small classes, taking turns shifting through volumes of *L'Annee Philologique* in the classics study, our shared interest in ancient texts and images, all made me feel a commonality with classics majors that I did not feel with history majors, especially Americanists. Though Smith was and remains a women's college, I had only two female instructors, one in Greek and one in Tudor Stuart history.

When I began to think about graduate school, I was frustrated by the difficulty of finding programs that suited my interests. For instance, at that time, I could apply to Classics or to History at UNC, but there was not really a joint program. In the end, despite acceptance from several history programs, I chose to go to the Duke Classical Studies department, where history was an integral part of the program. There I had absolutely no female instructors, though a considerable number of my fellow students were women. I completed a dissertation in political history, on Alexander the Great and the Macedonian aristocracy. As best I can recall, I had not yet noted how few women did ancient history, let alone political history, though I was well aware of how few women became academics in any field. I had some unpleasant experiences as a graduate student, but none seemed to relate to gender discrimination.

I entered the job market in AY 1972-73, in the worst academic job market previously seen and applied for both history and classics jobs. Having turned down a temporary job in a history department that had just offered a tenure track ancient history job to a male (and had interviewed only males for the tenure track job), I expected to spend the next year working for Duke Library while trying to finish my dissertation. Instead, after the end of a hiring freeze, Clemson University offered me a tenure track position in ancient history. I was the first woman hired for a tenure track position in history, though there were two women, both academic spouses with MAs, in the department of about fifteen. There was (and is) no Classics department at Clemson; Latin has sometimes been offered, but never by a classicist.

My first years at Clemson proved radically unpleasant, both because I encountered all sorts of prejudice as a woman in department and university that was overwhelmingly male, but also because for the first time I had colleagues who did not understand my field and its demands. The latter problem

persists to some degree; I have had to explain to the last two directors of our MA program, both specialists in Southern US, that we should not take on graduate students in ancient history because, among other things, we offer no ancient languages and no art history past the survey level. It occurred to neither one that these were essential skills for anyone dealing with antiquity.

The years since 1973 have transformed my department and university. We are now a department of 20 historians, 7 of them women; we offer many courses in women's and gender history (mine was the first); and, despite the fact that I have no degrees in history, I am the head of the undergraduate major, having overall responsibility for some two hundred fifty of them. Nonetheless I regularly attend the APA and CAMWS and, somewhat less frequently the AAH, but go to the AHA only when I'm on a search committee and then only when I can't avoid it. If people ask me what I do, I may say I am a classicist, that I do ancient history, or that I specialize in Greco-Roman antiquity or ancient Macedonia. I never say simply that I am a historian. On the other hand, my membership in a history department helped to make possible teaching a course in the history of domestic space and another in Egyptomania. I am contemplating a monograph on the Tut craze of the 1920s, a project that, had I remained in a Classical Studies department, I doubt that I would have entertained. In sum, while there have been benefits to my position in a history department and I am very fond of my current colleagues, intellectually and academically I remain something of an outsider. The connection between the thesis of this paper and my own biography is obvious, though whether that is a good or bad thing is a matter of opinion.

Before I turn to my main argument, I want to acknowledge some other factors contributing to the current demographic situation in terms of gender and ancient history. Scheidel's work has demonstrated how much continuity there has been in classical scholarship, that the distribution of effort by scholarly field has remained much the same for seventy years with 40 % of research involving work on classical authors, and a mere 15% in ancient history. Other kinds of continuity may exist. It is possible that the intersection of field and gender represented in college and university faculties at the turn of the twentieth century persists in part today. Does it matter that the more prominent role of women in archaeological research appears to have developed then as did, I suspect, the less prominent one of women in ancient history? Can the same be said of the tendency of women to prefer social to political history?

These initial and replicating patterns may connect to generational fluctuations in the number and prominence of all women scholars of Graeco-Roman antiquity. The founding generation of women classical scholars in the US, typically born in the later 19th or early 20th century remained active until about the middle of the middle of the twentieth century, women like Grace Harriet Macurdy. Born in 1866, she finished what would soon be considered a Radcliffe BA in 1888, accepted a position in the Greek department at Vassar in 1893, and in 1903 completed a doctorate at Columbia. Macurdy published her best known work *Hellenistic Queens* toward the end of her career, in 1932. She retired five years later but continued to publish until the year of her death, 1946. So far as I know, she never taught in a history department and had no degrees in history. As people like Macurdy retired, they tended to be replaced by men, often veterans who acquired doctorates on the GI bill after the war. Exceptions happened primarily at women's colleges though, as my own experience confirms, not always even there. Thus, at most colleges and universities, women of my generation were largely taught by men, though there were holdovers like Eleanor Duckett, a classicist and medieval historian, who long after retirement remained a formidable presence at Smith. The situation remained unchanged till the later 1970s. In the post-war period, many American universities had grown tremendously to cater to the baby boom but by the end of the seventies, the baby boom was increasingly past undergraduate age (the boom reached its height in 1957 and ended in 1964). In the post-war period, history departments had experienced growth, while Classics departments were already in some jeopardy or at least out of fashion. The initial pressure to consider hiring women came, in short, at the very time that academic jobs had become scarce, but when history departments were more likely to be able to hire than classics departments.

This brings me to my central thesis. As Nathan Rosenstein has discussed, at many colleges and universities, including my own, males typically constitute about 60 percent of history majors, despite the fact that women now constitute the majority of students at many schools and despite the growing number of female members of history departments and of courses in women's history or gender studies. There are exceptions, but this is certainly the dominant picture. Some historians suggest that the reason for this odd and even counter-intuitive lack of change is what one might term the History Channel affect, that is to say a perception of the discipline of history as something absolute to do with military and political history of a very simple, one might say pre not post-modernist sort, rather than as a more complex field, one in

which social and cultural history are fundamental. I would add that the war games (and the films to which which they are sometimes linked), particularly granted that gaming remains a predominantly male pursuit, also play a role in the preponderance of males. Others attribute the predominance of males in undergraduate history programs to the unwritten law in many state school systems that coaches, especially football coaches, teach history. Undergraduate classics majors or Greek and Roman Studies majors or Classical Civilization majors, whatever one calls them, do not generally fit any of these profiles.

When one factors in the practical consideration, in terms of graduate school, of the need for ancient languages, it seems obvious that a young woman interested in ancient history is still more likely to settle in an undergraduate major where there are also more women, more people of any gender with a more complex approach to the past, and where there is a greater availability of courses of use for admission to graduate school. Of course, in many universities including my own, this alternative is not available, but the minimum requirements for admission to graduate programs now often force potential ancient historians to take post baccalaureate certificates in classics, before they can apply to graduate programs, even interdisciplinary ones in ancient studies. Thus, even if they were history majors as undergrads, many apply to graduate programs from Classics departments. Despite the advent of doctoral programs in ancient history or ancient studies, the prospective female ancient historians I spoke to at a recent conference (some seniors, some in post baccalaureate programs) reported applying to a number of classics programs with some strength in ancient history, much as I had to do in the late sixties.

Once in graduate school, if in a conventional classics or classical studies department, literary scholars still tend to dominate. In a history department, the need for more language study, archaeology, and art history puts students at a disadvantage compared to their peers in more modern fields and in US history. Female role models in classics are more likely literary scholars who, in turn, may produce more female literary scholars. A student interested in ancient history may conclude that ancient history is the poor step child of the classics program. The message of the job market is certainly clear: there are far fewer jobs for ancient historians than for literary classicists, even in a good year. Many small liberal arts schools employ only one or two classicists at most and rarely is either one a historian, though either or both may teach ancient history or culture courses. With some exceptions, the main university home of ancient studies or history programs is in a classical studies department, not a history department. Put it

this way, there are programs in ancient studies or ancient history but only departments of history or classics.

All ancient historians serve two mistresses/masters, but for most, the APA, not the AHA, dominates. Some regularly attend the AHA (mostly those with history degrees), but can hear only a few poorly attended ancient panels. The AAH provides an alternative identity for ancient historians, but since it ordinarily plays no role in the job market because of its late spring meeting, the APA necessarily functions as the primary membership for younger scholars. I cannot imagine hiring an ancient historian without interviewing at the APA, whereas it would be easy to do so without interviewing at the AHA. While there are certainly ancient historians with history degrees who hold positions in Classical Studies departments, it would appear that far more ancient historians have some sort of classical studies degree yet have positions in history departments. Moreover, people who do ancient history often do their graduate work in one situation only to find themselves teaching in the other. Nonetheless, many, perhaps the majority, of jobs in ancient history are in history departments.

Once done with the degree and facing the job market, the dual identity of ancient historians contributes to the comparatively modest number of women holding positions in ancient history, particularly post tenure. While each academic context has its advantages and disadvantages, the cultures of history and classics differ considerably. History departments tend to be dominated by US or modern historians, many of whom look askance at the comparatively meager evidence base ancient historians often confront, fail to appreciate how many languages and methods we regularly employ, and remain puzzled by how interdisciplinary (from their point of view) our scholarship remains. Though book publication is far more important in classical scholarship than it once was, articles continue to matter much more for us than for modern historians who often consider articles negligible, have little familiarity with how time-consuming publishing an article can be, and certainly don't know that it is arguably easier for an American classical scholar to publish a monograph than to be accepted by *JHS*. For a young female classical historian who may be juggling pregnancies and the preponderance of child care (particularly in a commuting marriage), history departments' unquestioning commitment to the cardboard standard can be particularly difficult. Work on articles may better fit a young woman's available time

blocks, but it will not impress. The greater size of history departments probably also makes it harder to alter male dominance.

If we are to increase the number of female ancient historians, the remedy almost certainly must begin with graduate programs. Clearly we need more female ancient historians teaching in graduate programs. Role models, however, are important but not as decisive as one might think. Many history department chairs note that the increasing number of female faculty has failed to increase the number of female undergraduate majors. Besides, as I have suggested, the critical point seems to come after the acquisition of the first job, even if a young woman had an advantage over her male colleagues in acquiring that position. Women continue to encounter greater difficulty than men in achieving tenure and promotion to senior rank. Nearly forty years after my own experiences, young women continue to report experiencing the first real discrimination when they become members of university faculties.

Though I do not think that graduate programs cause these problems, they can act to prevent or at least mitigate them. Classics departments should provide discussions of field choice for beginning graduate students and real world advice for students about to confront a marketplace that includes jobs in both history and classics departments. History departments should do the same. Some panel discussions, held at the APA and perhaps at universities with major programs, about the differences between the two kinds of academic cultures might help. Frank discussion of the realities of academic life and of how gender relates to them would be helpful for students of all genders. Programs in ancient history and ancient studies need to develop meaningful identities, identities that might help people better cope with the transition from student to professional. Sadly, we may see change simply because, only in part because of the current severe recession, language departments are being scanted to a greater degree than virtually any other disciplinary category, and departments and programs in ancient history or ancient studies may prove more able to survive during the apparent pogrom on language studies.