

ASECS WOMEN'S CAUCUS 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Interview with Dr. Judith Zinsser, Professor Emerita, Miami University

By Oriane Guiziou-Lamour

When did you first become involved with the Women's Caucus, and what drew you to it?

It was very serendipitous. I had more or less decided I wanted to work on Madame Du Châtelet. I had been hired in 1993 or 1994 by Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and I was really excited because I thought that I could now start going to conferences and doing many exciting things. I had been going to the American Historical Association for a long time and had been very active. At the AHA there was a man who published a journal and told me about ASECS. I got particularly interested in Madame Du Châtelet's translation of Newton and gave a paper on the topic.

I went to the Women's Caucus meeting in 1995 and they couldn't have been more welcoming or more cordial, and I just felt wonderful. I was really in over my head with Madame Du Châtelet and they couldn't have been more encouraging. It was perfect for me because one of the exciting parts of Du Châtelet is that she crosses so many disciplinary boundaries, and of course, in that case, that's what makes it so exciting to be at ASECS because they are all excited about that. Plus, these women had all been doing research on women. I know it's out of the Caucus that I made friendships that turned into requests for articles, two collaborative volumes, etc.

Out of that, from 1997 to 2010 at least, I was on committees in one way or another, and I was a trustee for a long time. And then I was on different prize committees. I'm very proud that I suggested that we have a prize for an independent scholar, because that's what Du Châtelet was, and that's why we named it the Émilie Du Châtelet Prize.

And although I was not involved, I was very excited that one of the outcomes of all this, which happened probably around 2011 or 2012, was the creation of the Science Caucus. And that was probably because of du Châtelet. She legitimized science in the eighteenth century.

What first drew you to the study of women intellectuals and authors such as Du Châtelet, at a time when their works were still largely neglected?

It started with the two-volume work that I did with Bonnie Anderson called *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (1998). I wrote about Du Châtelet. In each instance, what we discovered was that there were women who became very learned, in one way or another—autodidacts of one sort or another, or women whose fathers used them as prodigies, etc. I was fascinated by that.

At the time I wrote about Du Châtelet, I found a biography about her in a Salvation Army store in New York, and that was the beginning of my love affair with her. These women wrote books, poetry, etc. But there was some way in which a cultural twist cut it off. The Querelle des femmes is the most obvious example of this. In Du Châtelet's case, I wrote about how intellectual women were sexualized, and that's the final way in which they are discredited. How could you then take her seriously? It takes a while to wake up. That's how I got into studying Madame Du Châtelet, and that's how I got into studying women intellectuals.

How did academia respond to your research at a time when the field was still developing? Did you encounter resistance or pushback?

I think I was always surprised by my successes. Du Châtelet gave me so much that it's hard to separate me from the things she gave me. Everybody thought she was a great topic. Also, the study of early modern women was really blossoming. And as I say, I was lucky, because of Du Châtelet's association with Voltaire there were people who were interested in her.

There were various people interested in women in the early modern period and women in science. We were starting to uncover these wonderful things that had happened and that nobody had paid any attention to. Julia Candler Hayes and I edited a collection together. Also, because my university paid for one symposium a year, I invited all of these historians of science, who had never heard of me, to come and talk about topics like gender. We got a volume out of it, *Men, Women, and the Birthing of Modern Science* (2005). In short, one woman would lead me to another—it's the old girl network.

How have you seen the Women's Caucus evolve within ASECS over the years?

I think we got more aggressive. I don't know about the period before I joined the Women's Caucus, but it was a decision to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary and to make it a big thing. We did an issue of the *Eighteenth-Century Studies* journal. I believe we became more aggressive in putting ourselves forward.

Back then, if people worked on women, it was Shelley with *Frankenstein*, or the Brontës, etc. It was never the kind of people that we were studying. And we created all these prizes to encourage other women in the field, although they did not have to go to a woman. After all, the goal of a Women's Caucus is to have that sense of camaraderie. Now, women's writings are becoming more appreciated—or rather, they can't be ignored. Du Châtelet is used as an example of the Enlightenment. And as a famous historian said, "a token is more than none."

How has the Women's Caucus impacted your scholarship, your teaching, or other aspects of your career?

It is hard for me to separate out the impact on me because I was really doing two things at once: at the same time I was working on Du Châtelet and working on France, I was also

promoting world history. That's the other hat that I wore. I was doing a lot of things for the Journal of Women's History, about biography, gender in world history, etc.

But through the Women's Caucus, I can say that I formed friendships with people I would have never met, and I think that these things give you a lot more confidence. I felt that people had my back if I started writing about gender, for instance. In a sense, at the time we felt that we were hot! That's why the 2014 ball was so successful, because people wanted to come to it even though they weren't part of the Women's Caucus.

You have been involved in several professional associations and even served as a delegate to the United Nations. How did these experiences shape your involvement with the Women's Caucus?

The Women's Caucus was much more welcoming than the others, and the group was so interested in Du Châtelet. They wanted to figure out how it might fit with what they were doing. A lot of them were in the same position as I was: resurrecting someone who had been forgotten, however in most instances the person was not as famous, so they had different problems.

The problem I had was that Voltaire was the elephant in the room—he could take over any subject. Most of them were discovering people who had never been written about, or were looking at a topic in a different way. It was a very exciting time to be a historian working on women.

What areas of women's studies or women's writings would you like to see explored more in the future? What directions would you like to see the next generation of scholars interested in eighteenth-century women's writings take?

I think there is a lot that could be done with the French Academy (l'Académie des Sciences), because the only thing that people have done is count—pointing out who did this, who did that. But the politics of it are very interesting, and so are some of the characters. For instance, how can you ignore Fontenelle? He is a fascinating writer.

I have always wanted people to pick up pieces such as the topic of treatises on happiness, because that has been used to discredit Du Châtelet. It was a very popular genre. There is a lot to be said about that.

I also think that there's not enough said, in terms of the history of science, about what Simon Schaffer, the historian of science, brilliantly calls "the paths not taken." In other words, the kind of metaphysical questions that Du Châtelet engages with. Science evolved in a very narrow way. As if we decided: We don't know the answer, and if we don't know the answer, we won't work on it. We will just measure things. We will do what we can but lower our sights. I really wish that people who are knowledgeable about science would think about it in the long term and try to understand why certain paths weren't taken.

What do you think scholars today still misunderstand about Émilie Du Châtelet or her intellectual legacy?

It depends on who you talk to. In a way, she is still rejected. There's still a legacy, without question, particularly among people who are interested in Voltaire and the Enlightenment, of dismissing her and paying no attention to her.

The other complicated issue about Du Châtelet is that the definition of what a scientist is has become so narrow that people argue that she wasn't a scientist because she didn't make any original contributions or discover something. The fact is that synthesis is a form of originality, and the definition of originality is really predicated on a particular view of what it is that makes something original in that field, which often leaves women out of the discussion.

What advice would you give to young scholars who are especially interested in eighteenth-century women's writings?

I would say: seek out other people who are doing this kind of work. Network. Particularly with other women, since it's mostly women who are particularly attuned to the idea of finding people who have not been valued and writings that weren't taken seriously. The people are there. I would seek them out because they can write for you and make connections.

Don't be afraid to have a proposal and just send it to an established scholar. Most of the people who are involved in that kind of research or writing are very open and very eager to help younger scholars. What's the worst-case scenario? They ignore it. But if you don't ask, nothing happens. If you don't buy a ticket, you can't win the lottery!