

## ASECS WOMEN'S CAUCUS 50<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

### Interview with Dr. Peggy Elliott, Professor Emerita, Georgia College and State University

By Annie Schultz

**AS: Professor Peggy Elliott, thank you so much for participating in the ASECS Women's Caucus interviews. You are a scholar of Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, which fits especially nicely at the intersection of eighteenth-century studies and feminism, our point of departure. You also have an impressive body of work on Voltaire, Proust, Madame de Staël, and others. Can you discuss how you first became interested in these authors?**

PE: I've had a very non-traditional academic career path. I lived in France for 10 years after college, then returned to the States where I spent twenty years working in corporate real estate before entering graduate school in my fifties. I began my graduate work studying nineteenth-century authors like Zola, Flaubert, and Proust, and fully believed that I would write a dissertation on Marguerite Yourcenar. But when I started reading Voltaire, I found myself drawn to questions of religious freedom, the role of choice in our lives, and social justice. From there, I continued to focus on the eighteenth-century and its women, which brought me to Émilie du Châtelet and then Marie Le Prince de Beaumont. I was primarily drawn to the questions of agency, voice, and equality that are written about so elegantly in the works of eighteenth-century women authors.

**AS: In the 2015 Women's Caucus History, Misty G. Anderson writes: "Margaret [Doody] taught me that the eighteenth century is not a period but rather a periodical that is still publishing." In what way do you see the eighteenth-century as unclosed; which ideas are still "publishing" or "thinking"?**

PE: In the eighteenth century, there were pre-defined roles for girls and for women in general. They were given specific instruction that precluded many subjects, and adult expectations challenged their desires for participation in male-dominated arenas. However, many were questioning these fixed roles by promoting equal education and taking part in the conversation of the day. That societal roles -- especially as they pertain to gender -- are pre-defined, and being challenged, is still very relevant. One need only examine the traditional canon of French classics to note the relative absence of women's voices in prominent places, leaving much room for new "publishing" on eighteenth-century thought and ideals.

One example can be seen in the tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, just one small part of Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's oeuvre but the primary focus of most studies on this author. The story is

certainly important, addressing the power that women possess to make their own choices, even as they concern the trickery of images and the deception that physical appearances can provide. An instructional tale written for eighteenth-century girls, it remains important, perhaps even more so given the ubiquity of imagery as a form of communication over text and the subsequent need to make personal choices about what is acceptable for oneself. Yet, in light of the question posed above, the focus on this short tale allowed many to close the door here instead of continuing to publish on the enlightenment ideals that Madame de Beaumont's oeuvre represents.

**AS: I'm curious what you think about recent work on consent in Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*.**

PE: While Beaumont's text is written for children and is not overtly sexual, the language within the text is modified from the earlier more adult-rated version by another woman, Gabrielle de Villeneuve. In Villeneuve's version, the Beast asks Belle whether she wants him to sleep with her; Beaumont's Beast more politely asks if she wants to be his wife. Although she did not have much of a choice, the question is still asked, and the Beast accepts the answer of "no" in both cases. This small yet powerful refusal and acceptance offer models to young girls that it is possible to make their voices heard.

**AS: The Women's Caucus celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year and will celebrate this year in Philadelphia. Can you discuss some of the societal changes that have taken place since its founding in 1975?**

PE: As far as general American culture, there have been huge transformations. In the '70s, women couldn't enter the Ivy Leagues; instead, they had to attend the "sister" women's college. In addition, women couldn't have their own checking account without their husband's signature. As part of that societal recognition of the need for transformation, the Women's Caucus was founded and has grown to be a prominent part of ASECS. Many recent presidents of ASECS came through the Women's Caucus, bringing WC goals and values to the forefront of the larger organization. As in the eighteenth century, finding a voice for women is just the beginning; the struggle to keep that voice is ongoing.

**AS: How did you first become involved in the ASECS Women's Caucus, and what drew you to it?**

PE: In 2008, I went to ASECS for the first time. I knew that I wanted to meet Judith Zinsser, whose work on *Émilie Du Châtelet* influenced me. When I saw her in the elevator next to me, I pushed beyond being starstruck and asked her if she could meet to talk about her work – even for

just a few minutes. She agreed to meet right then and there. We had a wonderful conversation over coffee, and she really helped me to feel included at ASECS. She invited me to the Women's Caucus business meeting, where I sat around the table with a group of intelligent, engaged women discussing the role of the Caucus. I was hooked! Since then, I have served as treasurer, co-chair, and on multiple awards committees. The Women's Caucus: it just keeps on giving!

**AS: How has the Women's Caucus impacted you?**

PE: The Women's Caucus has been instrumental in developing connections at all levels. These women understand the challenges of academic life. It has been a place for me to meet other scholars who share my research interests, something not always easy to find at one's institution. The Caucus really wants to support the careers of all types of women -- at all different levels -- and to have them feel welcomed and included at ASECS and in the profession. I personally have benefitted from awards, grants, and fellowships that I learned about through my generous colleagues in the Women's Caucus. Everyone needs support in life, and this is exactly what the Women's Caucus aims to foster.

**AS: Rousseau writes in *Emile*: "I give my dreams as dreams and leave it to the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake." Which of your dreams – or ideas – are you excited to develop further? To pass on to graduate students and early career scholars?**

PE: My work on Le Prince de Beaumont has just scratched the surface of what is contained in her texts and in her personal correspondence. All of this offers a huge area of study that needs to be evaluated, translated, and contextualized. I hope that young scholars will find this oeuvre as fascinating as I do and will use what I continue to publish and make available online to inspire their own research questions.

As an academic who had a late start, I also hope that my decision to obtain my Ph.D. at 55 and begin teaching, writing, and publishing as a "senior" will inspire others tempted to follow their dreams at any age!

**AS: Thank you, Professor Elliot, for your thoughtful responses in this interview, as well as your commitment to the field of eighteenth-century studies, ASECS, and the Women's Caucus.**