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Little Prairie Ronde, Cass County, Michigan, where Amalie Hathaway lived and wrote her philosophy papers in the 1870s and 1880s.



# Women Philosophers at the American Philosophical Association

*A Personal Account of the 111th Meeting of the Eastern Division by Carol Bensick*

**A**S A MEMBER of the Society for the Study of Women Philosophers and a new member of the American Philosophical Association, I recently travelled to Philadelphia to present a paper on nineteenth-century American Amalie Hathaway's lecture on famous German pessimist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.

Mine was to be the middle presentation of three on the society's theme of women philosophers. Each was strikingly different. The first was a paper on contemporary theorist of material culture and University of Georgia Professor Beth Preston by Hector MacIntyre, a doctoral student from the University of Ottawa, Canada. The third was a performance by Sabrina Misir-Hiralall, an adjunct professor from the Montclair State University, New Jersey, of a Hindu dance about a princess who after alienating her husband (really the god Krishna) attracts him back by showing she admits and repents her unspiritual behavior. My paper

was on a lecture on Schopenhauer by an immigrant woman at the 1881 session of the nineteenth-century Massachusetts phenomenon, the Concord Summer School of Philosophy and Literature. The program thus showed the great variety among women philosophers, as well as the range of genre characteristically accepted and advocated for by scholars of women's philosophy.

I arrived early, finding a business meeting of the Society wrapping up. Three members of the board of directors were present and one of the presenters. As the start time drew closer, the other presenter arrived. Unless I misremember, there were no other attendees. The chair of the panel had written to us that our panel was scheduled against at least one other panel of interest to the society's members, including at least one in which one of the directors was presenting. It is hard to imagine and impossible to know how different if at all the session would have been had it had a typi-

cal-sized audience.

In the hours since arriving for the convention, I had been trying to broaden my paper in order the better to bring out the great importance I had come to attribute to Hathaway. As I see it, Amalie Hathaway is important in two respects. Intrinsically, her existence challenges the existing record of nineteenth century American philosophy. It shows that German-American women as well as well-known German American men like Henry Brockmeyer educated their communities in German philosophy not only on the East coast but in the American Midwest in the middle of the 19th century. As well, I wanted to show that not all women philosophers before Pragmatism were either quasi-Kantian admirers of Ralph Waldo Emerson, neoPlatonist adherents of Bronson Alcott, Platonist followers of Hiram Jones, Hegelian proteges of William Torrey Harris, Aristotelian followers of Thomas Davidson, or personalist adherents

of George Holmes Howison. In addition, Hathaway adds to the number of nineteenth-century women who studied philosophy at the university level: before Caroline Miles, Mary Sophia Case, or the better-known Eliza Sunderland and Marietta Kies, there was already a woman student in the Philosophy Department at the University of Michigan. Hathaway's career also brings to light the virtually unknown because virtually undocumented existence of the Chicago Philosophical Society. Finally, Hathaway's existence reveals that there could exist in the nineteenth century a woman learned in Greek, Continental, and British historical and contemporary philosophy; talented and skilled in writing English expository, interpretative, and critical prose; and who based on nothing but her personal studies at the University of Michigan and her membership in a Chicago self-described philosophy club, had the confidence to publicly call into question the Harvard, "official" interpretation of a hotly controversial European philosopher.

To accomplish this, I had hoped to add to my paper a mention, for example, of the Chicago Philosophical Society where Hathaway lectured: of Rev. Benjamin Franklin Cocker, her part-time teacher at the University of Michigan in 1871-76; of the various journalists and later authors, mainly women, who mentioned or discussed her and her paper in newspapers and magazines across the eastern half of the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. I had also hoped to call

attention to other nineteenth-century German immigrant women, such as Olga Plumacher (a Hartmann specialist), who published and corresponded about German philosophers; to spark interest in other nineteenth-century American women--such as Anne Lynch Botta--whom the history of philosophical has not yet claimed but whom it should, whom evidence shows read, wrote on, listened to, lectured on, or seriously thought about canonical and/or contemporary philosophy. Finally, I had hoped to elicit feedback, from specialists on American philosophy, particularly on how Hathaway compares with German-American male philosophers such as Brokmeyer; from specialists in Schopenhauer, regarding Hathaway's interpretation in contrast with current views; and from specialists on women philosophers regarding possible connections with women from other eras and cultures and/or resonances with classic and contemporary feminist philosophy, a field in which I wasn't well versed.

This turned out to be asking too much of myself. Announcing for a new title "Rediscovering an Early German-American philosopher," I had to settle for my paper as written, publicizing the striking uniqueness of the second paper on Schopenhauer in English by a woman and the surprising career of a prolific, educated, historically unknown woman philosopher in the 1870s.

In a brief discussion after the papers I was led to reveal the shocking fact that Hathaway's manu-

scripts were not preserved by her husband after she suddenly died at the age of 40. This incited one of the directors (Professor Dorothy Rogers) to remark that the same thing was true as far as her manuscripts were concerned in the case of Marietta Kies, a woman philosopher of her own rediscovery who actually became a college professor. Otherwise, questions notably bypassed Hathaway's philosophical claims about Schopenhauer (and Harvard Professor Francis Bowen), but gravitated to the Concord School of Philosophy. I attributed this primarily to my failure to provide a handout of Hathaway's text and to the detailed, advanced, and technical nature of much of Hathaway's presentation. But I was struck by a rough similarity with the situation when Hathaway gave her lecture in 1881: the audience looked to the (male, senior) faculty of the School (Hathaway's was a special lecture) for comments on the philosopher Arthur, avoiding Hathaway's argument about his philosophy. But again, this could be explained by the lack of any samples of the writing of Schopenhauer and the highly detailed nature of her presentation.

In retrospect, certain things stand out about the panel from the point of view of the Center of the Study of Women. In regard to the dance, the fact is that the source tradition is *about* a woman, but not apparently by one. It does represent a woman expressing herself, however, and being capable of high spirituality, being a bride of Krishna. And it was presented by

a woman. So it was to this extent feminist. In regard to the paper on Preston, it took for granted the worthiness and importance of her thought--treated her, so to speak, like a man. Insofar it represented the acceptance of women philosophers as unproblematically equal to men. If I remember correctly, there was no particular or no strong attempt to tie Preston's ideas to her gender or to gender. In my own case, I had also declined to make gender the point of my reading, although I stated, and believe, that this can and should be done. Nor did audience questions take an especial feminist tack. But then they had not been encouraged to.

To be sure, the Society for the Study of Women Philosophers has not historically always stressed scholarly politics, being primarily historical and empirical. Other groups in Philosophy, including the worldwide Societies for Women in Philosophy, and the APA Committee for the Status of Women, do this. But I wondered, did this lack of a feminist slant have anything to do with our lack of an audience? Without this, the panel's appeal was to scholars of material culture, pessimism (or the Concord School of Philosophy), or Hinduism. (That there would be a dance wasn't on the program.) It made perfect sense that the main question about my paper was about the Concord School, because and as I had forgotten, I had made the Concord School a leading part of my submission title. In fact, I was shocked to belatedly discover, the program

had actually left out Amalia Hathaway's name.

Admittedly, my submission title was long and cumbersome: something had to be omitted. I expected it to be The Concord School, but in fact I had to admit it was more plausible to omit Hathaway, because her name is, after all, not known and that of the Concord School is. And so the sequel showed.

This suggests several thoughts. Why did I put the Concord School in the title? Because I thought I had better include something that scholars would recognize. The same reason the chair evidently foregrounded it in the program. We didn't trust the name of Hathaway to attract an audience.

If this means anything, perhaps it is that in presenting forgotten women philosophers, or women anything, it is critical to insist on them by name and to be explicit and forceful about their importance. This translates to belief in them. If we don't believe in the importance of our foundlings, we might almost as well leave the manuscripts uncollected.

In retrospect, it's apparent that I tried to present Hathaway as a Schopenhauerian. But if that was my goal, I should have tried to get on a panel about Schopenhauer or at least German philosophy. For the Society for the Study of Women Philosophers, I should have foregrounded gender. Why didn't I? Because I was anxious to show (off) how brilliant in her interpretations Hathaway was. And why was that? Evidently I did not trust

any audience to believe that this was possible. Unaware, I was still defensive about women's philosophical powers.

To see Hathaway's brilliance needs knowledge of Schopenhauer—and Kant, Plato, Hegel, Comte, Spencer, if not Bowen. But the gender question (I take it) is why did Hathaway—in Illinois, in the 1870s—choose to cultivate brilliance in Philosophy? And it does not require philosophical knowledge to pursue that.

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**Author's note:** At the conference, an editor from Lexington Press made an appointment with me to discuss a possible book. Thanks to CSW, I am now in touch with their consulting editor of *American Philosophy* to discuss doing a book on Julia Ward Howe.