

Introduction: The Hroswitha Club and Historical Significance

This project began in March 2019 when a Wikipedia editor marked the Hroswitha Club page for deletion because the group was not significant enough. I was just getting interested in the topic, as an extension of a project on women bibliographers, and was excited by how many prominent names were involved in the Hroswitha Club. The page was marked for deletion during Women's History Month, of all times, which fed into an annoyance that prompted me to spend a week in New York in the Grolier Club library, overseen by the Club's librarian Meghan Constantinou. The trip was self-financed, based on a gut feeling that there was more here worth exploring and that the Hroswitha Club's dismissal as "not significant" was likely a reaction in a long line of bookish misogyny I had come to know well. That feeling was correct, and this Element is the result.

The Hroswitha Club was a private club that met from 1944 to 2004, and membership included around 100 collectors, librarians, and bibliographers whose collections and labor have contributed to more than seventy-five institutions, including Harvard's Houghton Library, Princeton's Firestone Library, Carnegie Mellon's Hunt Library, and the Morgan Library & Museum. Despite this, institutions with collections from these women may be surprised to learn of their connection to the Hroswitha Club. It was common for a private women's social club of this era to prefer intimate rather than public attention, and members were rarely named as a Hroswithian in the articles they did appear in. These articles were almost exclusively about socially notable events — births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and occasionally philanthropic work — and obituaries defaulted to well-known organizations like the Garden Club of America. This relative silence is notable when compared to the Grolier Club, a men-only bibliophile club until 1976, and similar organizations that had exhibitions, journals, and numerous newspaper features. Deceased men from these clubs are usually named as such in obituaries. Arguments about the Hroswitha Club's "significance," then, is a gendered thing, tangled in rules of feminine propriety and assumptions about what makes something worthy of discussion, as women's history so often is.

This Element argues that the Hroswitha Club is the most significant group of women book collectors in US history. This is a novel argument only because of the idiosyncrasies of women's history in general and women and rare books in particular. The work of this Element is twofold. First, it engages in recovery work that details who the Hroswitha Club was and examines how the group impacted the study of rare books and artifacts in the United States. By working with the Hroswitha Club archives at the Grolier Club along with members' papers at Brown, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale, this Element constructs the first list of members that is printed outside the organization, uses women's full names rather than married honorifics, and tracks where their collections were deposited. The narrative that follows largely relies on undigitized documentary records, which consist of meeting minutes and directories; ephemera and material traces of meetings such as formal invitations; research conducted for the club's publications; and to a lesser extent the Hroswitha Club library. Much of this narrative will be through the members' own words, especially those of the recording secretaries: Bertha Slade, Anne Haight, Katharine Bull, Phyllis Gordan, Julia Wightman, and Chantal Hodges.

Secondly, this Element uses a feminist lens to examine how gender norms influenced members' engagement with the masculinized world of rare books. While only some of these women would have or did identify as feminist, their self-determined expectations as collectors resisted gender norms for middle- and upper-class women who were to be only wives and mothers. To consider their stories and the politics of book collecting and philanthropy, I rely on feminist writing that positions gender as one axis of identity enmeshed with race, sexuality, and class. My understanding of gender as embedded within intersecting axes of power rather than a single-axis framework pulls from the work of Black feminists, particularly the Combahee River Collective's *identity politics*, Audre Lorde's *mythical norm*, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's *intersectionality*.¹ Inspired by this work, I think about the act of collecting physical books as reflective of cultural beliefs about power structures related to

¹ I especially pull from theory by Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color in the United States from the 1970s to now for this understanding. See Lorde, and Taylor, and Crenshaw.

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identity. As books change hands, value is assigned and reassigned based on the cultural and economic capital these objects command. Cultural capital is reflective of social power structures: what price something commands and who is willing to buy it are complicated value judgments easily swayed by gendered, sexualized, and racialized power dynamics. Feminist analysis can explain some of politics of this circuit of exchange along with giving language for the casual neglecting or forgetting of women's collecting as meaningful labor in the process.

Through these dual interests, this Element reveals that in a period where women's formal education and participation in historical and cultural institutions were limited, the women of the Hroswitha Club created pathways for their own enrichment, scholarship, and fellowship. Their network repositions figures like Belle da Costa Greene, Margaret Stillwell, and Henrietta C. Bartlett as part of a community rather than gendered exceptions to the cis-male-focused norm in rare books. It links previously disparate records of collection donations and sales and allows us to see how much this largely untracked group has shaped the study of rare books and artifacts at more than seventy-five institutions in the United States and Great Britain. It is high time we told their stories.