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## On Feminist Practice in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Trade: Buying, Cataloguing, and Selling

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## On Feminist Practice in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Trade: Buying, Cataloguing, and Selling

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# ON FEMINIST PRACTICE IN THE RARE BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPTS TRADE: BUYING, CATALOGING, AND SELLING

Rebecca Romney

In my career as a rare book dealer, others have often assumed that I specialize in the work of women authors. In fact, it is simply that I am a feminist bookseller. In this article I survey how feminist theory can be put into practice within the rare books and manuscripts trade.

For this purpose, I am taking a broad approach to the definition of “feminism” as it can be put into practice, based on the work of bell hooks and others: a structural philosophy underlying everyday actions that seeks to acknowledge, interpret, correct, and counter gender-based assumptions, disadvantages, and oppression.<sup>1</sup> Further, it must be noted that the trade functions around a marketplace, where dealers work to source material, catalog it accurately, and sell it for enough money that they are financially capable of sustaining their work. As a result, the practical application of feminist theory here must especially consider the role of labor and capitalism in handling these materials. Each of these stages of a rare book dealer’s labor cycle—buying, cataloging, selling—contains its own obstacles and opportunities.

## How Feminist Theory Applies to Sourcing Material

Many dealers spend a large portion of their work simply trying to find material. This process is known as scouting. Potential venues for scouting include everything from garage sales and estate sales to international book fairs, to regional auctions, to massive internet marketplaces. The sheer volume of material we pick through is so staggering that dealers become de facto filters of the marketplace. We choose that one book out of thousands.

This is not to say that institutions and collectors do not also scout and do not also make the hard decisions of editing. But collectors rarely collect full-time, and institutional buyers already work with limited resources,

in addition to prioritizing the maintenance and accessibility of their existing collections. For a dealer, scouting is the very foundation of the profession. We cannot manufacture our product; to remain in business, we must find it. Every first-class dealer appreciates this role in the marketplace of rare books and manuscripts: our experience, taste, and judgments about an item can influence wider trends of book collecting. A collector of Americana may or may not spend hours on eBay searching for material, but many experienced collectors of Americana make sure to read the catalogs of William Reese Company, even if only to sharpen their knowledge of the field. Those catalogs feature items that have been filtered among the thousands of other items that William Reese Company could have purchased, but chose not to.

If dealers do not handle a particular category of material, or do not put it in their catalogs, or do not talk about it as important, then buyers in large part may follow suit, whether because they trust a respected dealer's judgment or because they don't devote a comparable amount of time to dig into the "raw" material. Of course, there are always visionary exceptions. But in many ways, the editorial decisions of dealers in the rare book world are akin to the publicity apparatus of the new publishing world: which books reviewers decide to talk about, which ones are put up front in major bookstores, which ones are given a big marketing budget within the publishing house.

### *Principle 1*

*Feminist booksellers recognize their role as an editor within the trade of rare, collectible, and antiquarian books and manuscripts.* The power of dealers as editorial filters matters because it affects part of what ends up being saved—and therefore what becomes accessible for study—in permanent collections. Whether that material comes by direct acquisition from those dealers, or from institutions acquiring a collection that was built in part by someone who purchased from dealers, the role of the dealer is symbiotic with institutions and collectors in the long-term preservation of rare books and manuscripts.

#### PRINCIPLE 1 IN PRACTICE

Unlike other popular genres like science fiction and mystery, romance has a reputation as a highly feminized space.<sup>2</sup> The predominantly masculine

culture of the rare book trade has struggled to develop the expertise (or even desire) to study it. It was in this context that I researched, scouted, constructed, and sold a collection of rare books that traced the development of the modern popular romance novel in English. Before this, dealers at the highest level of the rare book trade categorically ignored popular romance of the post–World War II era. Many dealers handle Jane Austen and the Brontës, whose works have become the blueprint for much of the romance genre in English; and a few dealers regularly handle early twentieth-century examples.<sup>3</sup> But other than my own work, *The Romance Novel in English: A Survey in Rare Books, 1769–1999*, I have yet to see a single Harlequin romance advertised in a catalog issued by a member of the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of American (ABAA). Yet romance novels have two of the major traits that dealers and collectors seek: scarcity and impact. When it comes to scarcity, category romances were published in a model closer to ephemeral monthly magazines than the traditional approach for books, and thus many individual landmarks of the genre are surprisingly scarce. As for impact, popular romance represents the reading experiences, community engagement, and statistically dominant reality of millions of consumers across decades of book history. Yet the genre most associated with feminine perspectives, experiences, and creative output rarely receives the kind of coverage in rare book spaces that are commonly associated with prestige. My goal in building a collection centered around romance and selling it en bloc to an institution was to enable more opportunities for the genre to be used in teaching and research, as well as providing a cohesive overview for exhibitions and other educational events. In conjunction with the collection, I created a record of the material in the form of a limited-edition catalog—itsself nodding to “prestige” collecting—alongside an open-access PDF so that the information would remain widely available for others to build on.

### *Principle 2*

*Feminist booksellers reflect on the value books offer in providing historical examples of women’s experiences and incorporate that into what they buy.*

#### PRINCIPLE 2 IN PRACTICE

Romance has historically been one of the most fertile fields for exploring the social and economic pressures women must navigate, often within cultural

contexts that grant them far less power and autonomy than men. One of the items in my romance catalog was a set of 1960s mass-market romance novels themed around “career women”—books that depict women attempting to juggle what they want to do in the professional sphere with what they are expected to do. The lives of professional women evolved dramatically in the twentieth century, and these novels reflect that. Where others may see a pile of forgettable paperbacks with cover art they dislike, I see a topic well worth collecting and housing in institutions, where researchers can gain access to it for study and publication. Another terrific model of this is Jessica Kahan’s collection of 1920s and 1930s romance novels, which won the inaugural Honey & Wax Prize for book collecting.<sup>4</sup>

### *Principle 3*

*Feminist booksellers acknowledge women’s work in a broader understanding of what “rare book collecting” is.* Collecting isn’t just first editions of canonical authors and giant color-plate books by naturalists—that is, categories dominated by men as creators. Collecting can also extend to categories that have historically been associated with “women’s work”: scrapbooks and friendship albums, recipe books, needlework samples, and much more. Yet in the current marketplace, material that reflects these traditionally gendered aspects of life has been valued in consistently conservative ways by the trade.

#### PRINCIPLE 3 IN PRACTICE

Sheryl Jaeger, owner of Eclectibles, is a model bookseller of this principle, having built her business largely on ephemeral and “nontraditional” material that is often highly gendered. On the other hand, many more dealers will buy, catalog, and advertise a letter written by a male soldier to his wife back home over the letter from that woman at home to her husband at the front.

### *Principle 4*

*Feminist booksellers take the extra time to research when they run into an author they don’t know before refusing a book because they don’t immediately recognize it as important.* Feminist work in historical spaces is often

reparative, seeking to address silences or erasures. In other words, just because I haven't heard of an author before doesn't mean they aren't worth studying. Yet many dealers, partly in the interest of time, take the shortcut of focusing only on figures they're already familiar with.

#### PRINCIPLE 4 IN PRACTICE

A few years ago I came across an 1822 biography by David Hudson titled *History of Jemima Wilkinson, a preacheress of the eighteenth century* (Geneva, NY: printed by S. P. Hull). Biographies of preachers are generally not within my field of acquisition. However, I had never heard of this person before, so I stopped to research first rather than dismissing it. I learned that this was in fact a hostile biography of the Public Universal Friend, who was born as Jemima Wilkinson in 1752. In 1776, Wilkinson contracted a dangerously high fever, experiencing the “death” of Jemima and the birth of a new spirit named the “Publick Universal Friend.” The Friend adopted masculine dress and journeyed through New England as a prophet. Followers referred to the Friend by both masculine and feminine pronouns; the Friend, however, was averse to any gendered pronouns, “being neither man nor woman.” Hudson was one of the lawyers hired to undermine the Friend's estate, and this posthumous biography was an attempt to sway public opinion against the society: Hudson uses “she” pronouns throughout. (NB: Whenever possible, feminist booksellers note gender according to the statements of the person about whom they are writing.) It was only through reading the research of modern scholars that I learned the more complex history of the Friend, and understood the book's importance as a record of an early American queer public figure.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Principle 5*

*Feminist booksellers consistently remind themselves of the implications of intersectionality: that a woman's work is even more likely to be overlooked, undervalued, suppressed, viewed with hostility, or forgotten if she is a woman of color (especially a Black woman or an Indigenous woman), if she's also part of the LGBTQ+ community, if she is part of a lower economic class, or faces other kinds of marginalization.* Feminist booksellers consider the individual assumptions and privileges—some of which they don't always see or acknowledge—they bring to buying these works, which therefore calls for an extra level of due diligence in assessing material.

## PRINCIPLE 5 IN PRACTICE

I have found that I don't need to focus on acquiring more books from canonical or English-speaking, white, male, cis authors: its cultural momentum carries it to me naturally. But I have to work harder and more consciously to find material that is overlooked, undervalued, suppressed, or widely forgotten. This kind of material also requires consideration for the ethical implications of using purchasing power to move it from one owner—perhaps the original owner or descendant—to a new owner. For example, when working with those who might otherwise be at a disadvantage because of their unfamiliarity with the rare book world, a typical action would include going out of one's way to clarify the terms of acquisition to ensure the seller is in possession of the full knowledge of the facts to make an informed decision. It might also mean offering more for the material than one would otherwise, or donating a portion of the profits after sale to relevant institutions and reparative organizations.

## How Feminist Theory Applies to Cataloging Material

Dealers can choose from a wide variety of approaches to cataloging their material, from writing multiple-page essays, no matter the price of the book, to describing only the physical object, with little or no description of the book's context. I consider the inclusion of historical context in my catalog descriptions a key part of feminist practice.

*Principle 6*

*Feminist booksellers actively structure into their cataloging format the potential for opportunities to practice feminist cataloging.*

## PRINCIPLE 6 IN PRACTICE

While I prefer to include contextual information in my work, I don't take a "kitchen sink" approach, attempting to fit everything about the book into a single description. I pick a thesis that I believe will be compelling to my target market and shape my description around that, much like a persuasive essay. This is not just feminist cataloging; it is good bookselling.<sup>6</sup>



Centering a description on a thesis creates room for opportunities to bring feminist approaches into the pitch. For example, it encourages teasing out the literary ancestry of women writers, as well as the importance of visible models for underrepresented groups. When I acquired a first-edition copy of *Little Women*, I could have taken a number of strategies for its description. I could have engaged with the literary and historical background of the work, its context in the Civil War, its place in Alcott's career, and so on. Or I could have chosen not to describe that at all: *Little Women* is such a well-known book that there is little I can say about it that hasn't already been said elsewhere, and better, by Alcott scholars. Instead, I chose to write the description from the perspective of its impact on other women writers. This is why I felt my target audience might particularly value *Little Women*. The description therefore became focused on the power of Jo as a role model and how she has influenced countless women writers of the twentieth century, like Ursula K. Le Guin and Sonia Sanchez.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach has the additional benefit of creating a strong sales pitch for an otherwise well-known book whose significance is easily diluted by familiarity.

### *Principle 7*

*When feminist booksellers mention a woman in a description, they state her full name, and emphasize her individual personhood outside of her relationships. Feminist booksellers maintain uniformity in style when using first names or last names only.*

#### PRINCIPLE 7 IN PRACTICE

I recently cataloged a book written by Lemony Snicket (pseud. Daniel Handler) that was illustrated by Lisa Brown. Brown is an acclaimed artist, author, and illustrator who teaches at California College of the Arts. She is also the wife of Daniel Handler. For concision, the typical way a dealer might write this in the description would be: "Illustrated by Lisa Brown, Handler's wife." However, it takes only a very small tweak to shift the emphasis to her as a professional while still including the information, relevant to this particular book, of how they are personally connected: "Illustrated by acclaimed artist Lisa Brown (also Handler's wife)."

## PRINCIPLE 7 IN PRACTICE

In a letter to his editor, Ian Fleming wrote about the James Bond book *Dr. No*, which introduces Honeychile Rider: “[I]n the book Bond finds Honeychile reminds him . . .” A feminist bookseller would write this instead as “in the book Bond finds Rider reminds him . . .”

*Principle 8*

*Feminist booksellers work toward a world in which “woman” or “female” doesn’t need to be used as a qualifier.* In practice, the addition of this qualifier often has a tendency to devalue the subject—the exact opposite of the dealer’s goal.

## PRINCIPLE 8 IN PRACTICE

When a dealer describes Elizabeth Inchbald as “one of the most highly respected women playwrights of the eighteenth century,” the implication is that she’s only highly sought in comparison to other women playwrights. Instead, I call Elizabeth Inchbald “one of the most highly respected playwrights of the eighteenth century.” This is both more accurate and a stronger pitch.

## PRINCIPLE 8 IN PRACTICE

In 2016, I created an e-catalog on the theme of literary criticism.<sup>8</sup> Every author in that catalog was a woman. Another dealer would likely have labeled that catalog “Women Critics.” I simply called it “Criticism.” No dealer would earnestly issue a catalog called “Men Critics.”

*Principle 9*

*Feminist booksellers don’t imply that a woman’s primary accomplishment is her association with famous men.* Booksellers have long found that connecting a lesser known writer with a more famous one makes the former writer’s work easier to sell. I call this “the Shakespeare Principle,” since we rare book dealers will take any opportunity to mention a book’s connection to Shakespeare. But in using this strategy, we can easily

do a disservice to the work. This is a more common problem with women writers, who are typically less well known than their male counterparts.

PRINCIPLE 9 IN PRACTICE

Hester Lynch Piozzi's name has been tied by history to that of Samuel Johnson's, whose close friend and patron she was. However, when I catalog Piozzi's *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany* (1789), I arrange my description around Piozzi herself. Piozzi's first two book-length publications concerned Johnson directly, but this one did not. It is a book of *her* writing, not his: it ought to stand on its own virtues. After all, it was "the high point of Piozzi's literary career" and "confirmed her celebrity."<sup>9</sup> Further (in illustration of principle 7), I call her "Piozzi," her surname from her second marriage and the name used in the book itself—rather than the convention of calling her "Mrs. Thrale," the name she was known by (from her first marriage) while she was friends with Johnson.

*Principle 10*

*Feminist booksellers consider the often invisible supportive labor that has been key to the production of an author's work, especially if it played a critical role in shaping the nature of the work.*

PRINCIPLE 10 IN PRACTICE

In cataloging Robert Heinlein's book *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), I read the sections from William Patterson's authoritative biography about its development. Patterson quotes from Virginia Heinlein on how this futuristic political fable was developed: "[A]ll of this society in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* arose out of discussions that Robert and I had. What happened was that we held a number of discussions (and I remember them well) about ideal government."<sup>10</sup> Virginia and Robert, working together, shaped the theory that would undergird one of the author's most famous political novels. Because I had already chosen to focus on the book's political philosophy in my description, it would have been incomplete without including information on Virginia Heinlein's role in it.

*Principle 11*

*Feminist booksellers explicitly draw out the gendered implications of a book's production or use in their catalog descriptions.*

## PRINCIPLE 11 IN PRACTICE

I once cataloged an embroidered artist's book by Lois Morrison, in which she retells the story of Leah from the Bible from the perspective of the woman herself, using a medium Leah may very well have practiced: embroidery.<sup>11</sup> It is an act of feminist cataloging to recognize that an embroidered book about the story of a woman from this culture is using a medium likely to be of high value to that woman.

*Principle 12*

*Feminist booksellers acknowledge when a woman's accomplishment is exceptional for her cultural context—but without using a tone of shock or amazement.*

## PRINCIPLE 12 IN PRACTICE

In cataloging a book by Sonja Kovalevskaya, my description of her achievements is allowed to stand on its own, without editorial intrusions encouraging the reader to be surprised. While it is important to include contextual facts that made these accomplishments remarkable, it is not necessary to editorialize those facts. Thus my description runs, "She became the first woman in modern Europe to receive a doctorate in mathematics, quickly distinguishing herself in the field. For her innovative closed-form solution to a problem in classical mechanics, known as the 'Kovalevskaya Top,' she was awarded the Prix Bordin of the French Academy of Sciences, and was appointed to a lifetime chair in mathematics at Stockholm." A more "typical" dealer description would include an editorializing addition, like "a rare accomplishment for a woman of the era." This addition is not only condescending, it is also unnecessary: noting the fact that Kovalevskaya was the first woman in modern Europe to receive a doctorate in mathematics has already communicated that point.

*Principle 13*

*Feminist booksellers don't make assumptions about a woman's education, interests, or capabilities that aren't backed up by direct evidence.*

## PRINCIPLE 13 IN PRACTICE

I once saw an eighteenth-century Latin grammar offered by a dealer with the bookplate and dated inscription of a woman owner. The description did acrobatics to argue that it was more likely owned by the woman's nephew, who was then attending Oxford. While significantly fewer women learned Latin than men in that era, in this case the far simpler answer would have been taking the evidence in the book at face value.

*Principle 14*

*Feminist booksellers interrogate historical or critical statements that demote women's work or authorship.*

## PRINCIPLE 14 IN PRACTICE

If a critic has suggested a book written by a woman author was actually written by a man, that statement doesn't make it into my description unless I can track down solid evidence of its veracity. (I rarely can.) This is harder in practice than it appears. Recall the Shakespeare Principle: if the man in question is more famous than the woman, a dealer's sales instinct is sorely tempted. For example, for years some scholars believed that the penultimate chapter of the celebrated novel *The Female Quixote* (1752) was written by Samuel Johnson rather than by the author of the entire work, Charlotte Lennox. The evidence for this argument had always been more aspirational than concrete, but in the 1990s a letter was discovered that fully put to rest this theory.<sup>12</sup> Yet there are descriptions for this book on the marketplace at the time of this writing that still suggest Johnson may have written the last chapter—because association with a better known figure is a good sales tactic. A feminist description of this same book could certainly mention Johnson—for example, “Samuel Johnson, a champion of Lennox's novels who once crowned her with laurels at a book launch party in her honor, supported Lennox's decision not to make changes

suggested by one advance reader, who had recommended it not be published in its current form.” But note here the further application of principle 9: Johnson’s role is to support Lennox as the primary person of interest in a description of her own book, not the other way around.

### *Principle 15*

*Feminist booksellers are cautious about the attribution of “first.”* In the current context of rare book collecting, being able to hang a “first” statement onto a description is often the primary selling point. However, because women’s accomplishments are less often found in standard reference works, it’s easy to study all the usual resources we dealers use for cataloging and draw false conclusions because we haven’t properly taken into account that our standard references have, in many cases, left women out.

#### PRINCIPLE 15 IN PRACTICE

*The Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* says that Mary E. Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (serialized 1880–81) is “only the second known feminist utopian novel written by a woman (the first being Annie Denton Cridge’s *Man’s Rights*; 1870).”<sup>13</sup> This is exactly the kind of work a bookseller would reference in writing a description. The problem is that it leaves out, for one, Mary Griffith, who published the feminist novel *Three Hundred Years Hence* in 1836, thirty-four years earlier. Often when dealers call something a first, what we really mean is “the earliest we—or the sources we consulted—have knowledge of.” We must remember to account for this weak point in our research methodology.

### *Principle 16*

*Feminist booksellers maintain awareness that decisions from generations ago affect how we view rare books today.*

#### PRINCIPLE 16 IN PRACTICE

Despite their drawbacks, old reference books nevertheless remain an important resource for rare book dealers because they often contain

material not found elsewhere. *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (1887–89), considered the authoritative source for biographies of US figures for decades, does not contain an individual entry for Lydia Maria Child, one of the most influential activists before the Civil War. Instead, it contains an entry headed under her husband, the far less influential journalist David Lee Child, with her greater contributions (even as listed in that entry) subheaded under his. This organizational principle not only imposes an artificial hierarchy that implies inferiority but also creates unnecessary obstacles to finding information on Lydia Maria Child, whose entry can easily be missed if a researcher is unaware of this particular historical practice.

### *Principle 17*

*Feminist booksellers recognize that the contributions of those in power are statistically cited in disproportionate amounts.*

#### PRINCIPLE 17 IN PRACTICE

I actively seek additions to my reference library written by women, as well as additions from authors of other marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds and identities. In my final descriptions, I always explicitly cite sources used in the process of researching the book in question. As Sara Ahmed has written, acknowledging the genealogy of labor through citation is itself taking part in everyday feminist practice.<sup>14</sup>

### *Principle 18*

*Feminist booksellers recognize that their descriptions are original compositions, and weigh their choice of words carefully, like any professional writer.*

#### PRINCIPLE 18 IN PRACTICE

I do not use figurative language with gendered connotations to describe objects. A book may be in such pristine condition that it looks untouched, but I will never describe it as “virginal.”

*Principle 19*

*Feminist booksellers acknowledge that many great or influential works also contain problematic content.*

## PRINCIPLE 19 IN PRACTICE

Feminist booksellers are careful in how they present books with significant sexist content, especially involving violence, and precisely attribute the agent responsible for such actions. For example (cw: rape), in finalizing the description of a copy of *Banana Bottom* by Claude McKay (1933), we incorporated an edit to a line about the heroine, Bitá.<sup>15</sup> The difference was simply rewording from “After her rape by a village man, Bitá . . .” to “After a village man rapes her, Bitá . . .”

*Principle 20*

*Feminist booksellers consistently remind themselves of the implications of intersectionality: that a woman’s work is even more likely to be overlooked, undervalued, suppressed, viewed with hostility, or forgotten if she is a woman of color (especially a Black woman or an Indigenous woman), if she’s also part of the LGBTQ+ community, if she is part of a lower economic class, or faces other kinds of marginalization.* Feminist booksellers consider the individual assumptions and privileges—some of which they don’t always see or acknowledge—they bring to cataloging these works, which therefore calls for an extra level of due diligence in composition.

## PRINCIPLE 20 IN PRACTICE

At Type Punch Matrix, we created a house style sheet with guidelines for cataloging materials related to the history of slavery as enforced by European colonists and their descendants in the Americas. This document was informed by the work of specialists in the subject, then reviewed and refined via one-on-one work with a paid editorial consultant, a Black woman with professional expertise in nineteenth-century African American history and literature.<sup>16</sup>



## How Feminist Theory Applies to Selling Material

Bringing feminism into how I sell books does not mean talking about feminism with buyers. It also doesn't have to mean emphasizing the feminist points I've already made in a catalog description. When I speak of how I sell books, I am really speaking about how I interact with people.

### *Principle 21*

*Feminist booksellers don't assume that a woman looking at their books is not a collector.*

#### PRINCIPLE 21 IN PRACTICE

This idea may sound obvious, but I have heard many stories from women collectors over the years about walking into a bookseller's booth and being ignored in favor of her male companion. The seller has assumed he is the collector and she is simply tagging along.

### *Principle 22*

*Feminist booksellers don't assume that a woman collector focuses on culturally gendered topics, like women authors or children's literature.*

#### PRINCIPLE 22 IN PRACTICE

These are excellent ways to collect. But, as with any other collector, I ask people first what their interests are and let them tell me what they collect, instead of presuming I already know. Asking a question and then listening is simply best practice in any kind of sales. At a recent book fair, I was scanning the front case of a major dealer and longtime friend. Sitting comfortably behind the case, he watched me scan his material. Finally he said, "We have a number of good women authors here," which he then proceeded to point out to me. I responded, "The last item I bought from you was a \$20,000 Booker T. Washington manuscript on behalf of a regular client. So why are you pointing out women authors right

now?” Assuming the priorities of a potential buyer, no matter the gender, is often an obstacle to successful sales.

### *Principle 23*

*Feminist booksellers practice methods of interaction that respect their audience’s potential expertise or knowledge.*

#### PRINCIPLE 23 IN PRACTICE

Before pitching a book, I simply ask: “Are you familiar with X?” Launching into the publication history of *Pride and Prejudice* to an interested collector may seem to make sense, but unless I’ve asked that collector questions about their own knowledge base first, for all I know I could be talking to an expert in Jane Austen and making a fool of myself. When men do this to women, it’s known as mansplaining; in general, it’s known as condescension. It’s bad sales practice in any case. However, the gendered specificity in this vocabulary is relevant: statistically, we are more likely to assume a lack of experience in women.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is a feminist act to maintain an awareness that a woman (or really anyone) you’re speaking to may have expertise that you’re unaware of and to ask first.

### *Principle 24*

*Feminist booksellers considers perspectives beyond the “male gaze” in how they present books.*

#### PRINCIPLE 24 IN PRACTICE

Dealers know there are many ways to add or remove emphasis on a book by how it is displayed for sale. If I am selling a book that visually depicts an act of violence against women, I am very careful about how I show that at a book fair. Prominently displaying—or simply leaving out on a table—a book that can upset viewers is itself making a statement. There is a place for the argument that art that provokes is important. However, for many women (i.e., many potential customers), a statement like this can also be read as: “I don’t want you in my booth.” That’s rarely

the bookseller's intention. But the experience of the viewer is not determined solely by our intentions. Ignoring the effects of our actions doesn't help with sales; it only alienates potential buyers.

### *Principle 25*

*Feminist booksellers consistently remind themselves of the implications of intersectionality: that a woman's work is even more likely to be overlooked, undervalued, suppressed, viewed with hostility, or forgotten if she is a woman of color (especially a Black woman or an Indigenous woman), if she's also part of the LGBTQ+ community, if she is part of a lower economic class, or if she faces other kinds of marginalization.* Feminist booksellers consider the individual assumptions and privileges—some of which they don't always see or acknowledge—they bring to selling these works, which therefore calls for an extra level of due diligence in choosing how they present them and interact with customers.

### PRINCIPLE 25 IN PRACTICE

I recently completed a collection of the full run of romances published by the Black-owned small press, Odyssey, from 1990 to 1993. It took me years to untangle the history and bibliography of the Silver Spring-based company founded by Leticia Peoples, because there has been very little published about it. This press was the main venue for Black romances before a Black romance line from a major publisher, Arabesque, was finally rolled out by Kensington in 1994. Its influence is significant and far-reaching, publishing the first books of several authors who went on to distinguished careers. With a limited distribution system and a small output, the footprint of Odyssey Books has largely been unremarked in studies of romance history, as the books are rarely available in university special collections for study. Therefore, after I had completed the full run, I did not put it up immediately for general sale. I first offered the collection to an institution where I knew it would be put to immediate use.

### Conclusion

Each of these principles can be applied by anyone, not only women. Just as issuing a "WOMEN" catalog isn't necessarily a feminist act, feminist bookselling is not the same as bookselling as a woman. (Many of my male

colleagues put these into practice on a regular basis.) Feminist bookselling should become standard practice: it helps dealers find more interesting books that others overlook; it helps clarify the selling points for books that dealers already have; and it helps dealers develop relationships with more collectors who haven't been taken seriously by many of our peers (or who find evidence of sexism distasteful). As the principles here demonstrate, the work of feminist bookselling is also simply the practice of good bookselling.

*Rebecca Romney cofounded the rare book firm Type Punch Matrix, as well as the Honey & Wax Book Collecting Prize. She is on the Council of the Bibliographical Society of America and is a member of the Grolier Club.*

## NOTES

1. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
2. In reality, romance has always been a heterogeneous field: people of all genders have been involved in romance throughout its history. However, its feminized reputation plays a strong role in guiding the assumptions of those engaging with it.
3. Between the Covers issued several romance catalogs in the 1990s and as late as 2001, focused on pre–World War II examples; Babylon Revisited regularly advertises romance novels that fit its specialty, 1920s and 1930s literature.
4. The Honey & Wax Prize is an annual prize of \$1,000 for an outstanding book collection conceived and built by a woman, age thirty or younger, in the United States, cofounded by myself and Heather O'Donnell in 2017.
5. Herbert A. Wisbey, *Pioneer Prophetess: Jemima Wilkinson, the Publick Universal Friend* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Paul Benjamin Moyer, *The Public Universal Friend: Jemima Wilkinson and Religious Enthusiasm in Revolutionary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).
6. It is important to note that there are serious and contradictory implications of writing what is fundamentally a sales pitch but claiming, simultaneously, to apply feminist theory. While the scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth exploration of this very real conflict, I hope the principles here provide enough of a foundation for exactly such work to be built on it by future scholars.
7. Item 31 in *Print Catalogue One*, Type Punch Matrix, Silver Spring, MD, 2020, <https://www.typepunchmatrix.com/images/upload/tpm-print1-online.pdf>.
8. Honey & Wax Booksellers, *Micro Catalogue: Criticism*, Honey & Wax Booksellers, Brooklyn, NY [November 29, 2016], <https://www.honeyandwaxbooks.com/pdfs/LitCritMicroCat.pdf>.
9. William McCarthy, *Hester Thrale Piozzi: Portrait of a Literary Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 178.
10. William H. Patterson Jr., *Robert A. Heinlein: In Dialogue with His Century*, vol. 2, 1948–1988, *The Man Who Learned Better* (New York: Tor, 2016), 265.

11. Lois Morrison, *Leah* (Leonia, NJ: self-published, 1995).
12. See letter 10 in Charlotte Lennox, *Charlotte Lennox: Correspondence and Miscellaneous Documents*, ed. Norbert Schürer (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 29.
13. Toby Widdicombe, James M. Morris, and Andrea L. Kross, *Historical Dictionary of Utopianism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).
14. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 17.
15. This edit was suggested by Sarah Robbins.
16. E.g., P. Gabrielle Foreman et al., “Writing about Slavery? Teaching about Slavery? This Might Help,” community-sourced document, accessed August 15, 2022. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs>.
17. Birute Regine, “Why Is It that Women Are Seen as Less Competent?” *Forbes*, April 14, 2011, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/85broads/2011/04/14/why-is-it-that-women-are-seen-as-less-competent/?sh=5299a6b9394d>.

