



ELIZABETH RYLAND PRIESTLEY,
EARLY AMERICAN AUTHOR ON FREE
SPEECH

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Two of the items in Thomas Cooper's *Political Essays*—the first part of *On the Propriety and Expediency of Unlimited Enquiry*,¹ and the reply to Cooper's *Observations on the Fast Day*²—are written by Elizabeth Ryland Priestley (1769–1816³), the daughter-in-law of Cooper's friend and eminent chemist and philosopher Dr. Joseph Priestley.

Cooper gave credit to his coauthor by labeling the items as having been written by "E.P.," and by noting her more specifically ("Mrs. Priestley") in the preface to *On the Propriety*.⁴ But her work has since gone unremarked. Leonard Levy cited *On the Propriety* as "a two-part essay," but credited it entirely to Cooper.⁵ An essay in

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¹ *Infra* pp. 466–492.

² *Infra* pp. 408–413.

³ Priestley Toulmin, *The Descendants of Joseph Priestley, LL.D., F.R.S.*, 32 NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY HIST. SOC'Y PROC. 1, 15 (1994).

⁴ THOMAS COOPER, *POLITICAL ESSAYS* 61 (2d ed. Philadelphia, R. Campbell 1800). The essays do not appear in the first edition, which was published in 1779.

⁵ LEONARD LEVY, *EMERGENCE OF A FREE PRESS* 332 (1985).

The Press & the American Revolution cited several passages that it credited to Cooper, yet all but one of the citations were to Priestley's part; Priestley's name was not mentioned.⁶ One of the few works on Cooper and free speech, a master's dissertation published by the University of Wisconsin, discusses Cooper's work extensively but doesn't mention Priestley's contribution.⁷ Cooper's biographer Dumas Malone mentions her only very briefly.⁸

The source through which Cooper's work has been recently known, *Freedom of the Press from Hamilton to the Warren Court*,⁹ reprinted only Cooper's portion and didn't mention Priestley's contribution. I could find no law review articles that mention her.¹⁰ A few articles in other disciplines mention her in passing, chiefly in discussing her illustrious father-in-law.¹¹ A few books mention her in connection with the Joseph Priestley House.¹² Her writing is

⁶ Richard Buel, Jr., *Freedom of the Press in Revolutionary America: The Evolution of Libertarianism, 1760-1820*, in *THE PRESS & THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* 59, 91-92 (Bernard Bailyn & John B. Hench eds., 1980).

⁷ ROSEMARY KENDRICK, *THOMAS COOPER: EARLY LIBERTARIAN WRITER ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND PRESS* (1965).

⁸ DUMAS MALONE, *THE PUBLIC LIFE OF THOMAS COOPER 1783-1839*, at 94 (1926), (mentioning Priestley as the author of the reply to *Fast Day*); *id.* at 95 n.65 (as the author of Part I of *On the Propriety*).

⁹ *FREEDOM OF THE PRESS FROM HAMILTON TO THE WARREN COURT* (H. Nelson ed. 1967), cited in Frank B. Cross & Stephen M. Griffin, *A Right of Press Access to United States Military Operations*, 21 *SUFFOLK U. L. REV.* 989, 1011 n.142 (1987), Thomas Blaisdell Smith, Note, *Reexamining the Reasonable Access and Equal Time Provisions of the Federal Communications Act: Can These Provisions Stand If the Fairness Doctrine Falls?*, 74 *GEO. L.J.* 1491, 1505 n.105 (1986), and Barbara A. Pinkerton, Note, *Constitutional Law - Freedom of the Press and a Reporter's Ability to Gather News*, 26 *WAYNE L. REV.* 75, 90 n.157 (1979).

¹⁰ That's so whether one searches for "Elizabeth Ryland," "Elizabeth Priestley," "Mrs. Joseph Priestley," "Elizabeth Ryland Priestley," or "Elizabeth R Priestley."

¹¹ See, e.g., Jenny Graham, *Revolutionary in Exile: The Emigration of Joseph Priestley to America 1794-1804*, in 85 *TRANSACTIONS OF THE AM. PHIL. SOC'Y* 54, 87 n.234, 164 (1995). Two recent biographies, ROBERT E. SCHOFIELD, *THE ENLIGHTENED JOSEPH PRIESTLEY* (2004), and STEVEN JOHNSON, *THE INVENTION OF AIR* (2008), do not mention her. JOHN CORRY, *THE LIFE OF JOSEPH PRIESTLEY* (Birmingham, Wilks, Grafton & Co. 1804), mentions her very briefly, *id.* at 36.

¹² See, e.g., ALISON DUNCAN HIRSCH & KYLE R. WEAVER, *JOSEPH PRIESTLEY HOUSE: PENNSYLVANIA TRAIL OF HISTORY GUIDE* 19, 23, 30, 31, 33, 43, 45 (2003); GAIL LEE DUBROW & JENNIFER B. GOODMAN, *RESTORING WOMEN'S HISTORY THROUGH HISTORIC PRESERVATION* 257, 259 (2002).

briefly noted in Jane DuPree-Begos's *Joseph Priestley's Feminist Legacy*, a pamphlet published by the Joseph Priestley House,¹³ and in *Esteem, Regard and Respect for Rationality: Joseph Priestley's Female Connections*, an article in the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* cowritten by Professor Kathleen L. Neeley and Joseph Priestley House's M. Andrea Bashore.¹⁴ Nor could I find any original sources from that era mentioning Elizabeth Ryland Priestley, except for a fleeting reference that sheds no light on her intellectual interests.¹⁵

English and American women of the late 1700s participated in public intellectual life only rarely. There were a few who did write history or political commentary: Mercy Otis Warren was a prominent American playwright, historian of the American revolution, and (though under a pseudonym) critic of the proposed Constitution.¹⁶ In England, Catharine Macaulay was a noted historian and reformist political writer.¹⁷ Macaulay's *Letters on Education, with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790)¹⁸ and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)¹⁹ were leading early political works in favor of women's rights. And of course there were important women writers of fiction, most notably

¹³ See JANE DUPREE-BEGOS, JOSEPH PRIESTLEY'S FEMINIST LEGACY 3-4 (1996).

¹⁴ See Kathleen L. Neeley & M. Andrea Bashore, *Esteem, Regard, and Respect for Rationality: Joseph Priestley's Female Connections*, 30 BULL. HIST. CHEM. 77, 85 (2005).

¹⁵ See *Extract of a Letter from a Respectable Gentleman in Northumberland*, AURORA GENERAL ADVERTISER (Phila.), May 1, 1800, at 2 (reporting on an apparent poisoning in the Priestley household). Many thanks to my research assistant Briana McGinnis, who searched the Library of Congress's holdings of the *Northumberland Gazette*, where Priestley's two essays were published, looking for more references to Priestley; unfortunately, no such references could be found.

¹⁶ See JEFFREY H. RICHARDS, MERCY OTIS WARREN (1995); MERCY OTIS WARREN, HISTORY OF THE RISE, PROGRESS AND TERMINATION OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION (Boston, E. Larkin 1805); Larry M. Lane & Judith J. Lane, *The Columbian Patriot: Mercy Otis Warren and the Constitution*, 10 WOMEN & POL. 17 (1990).

¹⁷ See BRIDGET HILL, THE REPUBLICAN VIRAGO: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CATHERINE MACAULAY (1992).

¹⁸ CATHARINE MACAULAY, LETTERS ON EDUCATION, WITH OBSERVATIONS ON RELIGIOUS AND METAPHYSICAL SUBJECTS (n.p. 1790).

¹⁹ MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN (Boston, Peter Edes 1792).

Fanny Burney.²⁰ But despite these examples, when it came to discussion of political theory, or of free speech in particular, female commentators were very rare.²¹ Priestley deserves attention; at least she deserves not to be forgotten. Perhaps some historian can uncover more on this intriguing woman, if something survives to be uncovered. All I can do is note her contribution to the essays that follow.

I can also note that at least three of Priestley's descendants have not languished in obscurity. Elizabeth Priestley's granddaughter, Bessie Rayner Parkes, became a prominent English feminist author of the mid-1800s. Parkes in turn was the mother of noted authors Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes and Hilaire Belloc.

²⁰ See, e.g., FANNY BURNEY, *EVELINA, OR THE HISTORY OF A YOUNG LADY'S ENTRANCE INTO THE WORLD* (London, Thomas Lowndes 1778).

²¹ Warren's pamphlet, *COLUMBIAN PATRIOT, OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEW CONSTITUTION, AND ON THE FEDERAL AND STATE CONVENTIONS* (Boston, 1788), mentioned the liberty of the press only in passing as something that the Constitution had failed to secure, *id.* at 7.