A Moral Voyage: Proposal Part 1 - The Literature Review

20 trips to the library, 14 books, 6 articles, 5 (surviving) recyclable bags from the circulation desk, and countless hours later, I can officially say that I have written my spring proposal.

Essentially, to enroll in the spring semester of my honors thesis, I have to fill out a proposal. I did something similar to register for the fall semester, but this proposal is a much more involved and in-depth process. The proposal serves two purposes:

- It’s proof that this first semester of research hasn’t gone to waste – that I know what I’m talking about regarding the topic, that I know why it’s relevant and important to historians, and that I know that this is new and original research.
- It’s a syllabus – it gives a general overview of the thesis, what it will accomplish, and the dates and deadlines for a first draft and subsequent drafts.

I’ll get to number 2 next week, but number 1 is mostly answered in the literature review portion of the proposal. CHC asks for this section to be 5 to 15 pages, or really however many it takes to prove that you know your sources. It’s supposed to be an overview of the arguments or ideas that have been talked about before in relation to your research, so that you can strengthen your own argument by knowing why it’s new and original.

My thesis is trying to expand upon the established literature of whaling and spiritual reform by writing women into the narrative of seamen’s missions. So in my case, the literature review is a historiography of previous research on that topic of seafaring spiritual reform. But to do that, I have to talk about a few different topics - women and reform, women and whaling, and New Bedford and reform, and the city of New Bedford
during this period. To build this reading list, I talked to a lot of leading historians and my professors, worked off of footnotes and bibliographies, and even read some other literature reviews. I then spent most of the first half of the semester working my way through that reading list, taking notes on each source’s argument and its significance.

After reading all those books and articles, I drafted an outline using Post-It notes to see how some of these works were related. I took a thematic approach to my review – talking about each of the subjects mentioned above and the books relevant to that discussion, taking note of how the works build off each other to form an argument. I also talked about what these sources didn’t address - for me, it was that they all discussed one of the important themes, but not necessarily about these themes in relation to each other. And that’s the goal of my thesis – to be able to talk about these aspects of maritime studies and women’s history on a local level, and show how these two seemingly different stories are actually really important to discuss at the same time.

Blog Column:
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