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IDEAS

Who's afraid of Emily Brontë? On the recent termination of NEH Public Scholar grants.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has backslid into the era of capricious monarchical patronage.

By **Megan Marshall** Updated April 16, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



Details from the April 3 letter from the NEH terminating Deborah Lutz's grant. HEATHER HOPP-BRUCE/GLOBE STAFF

Megan Marshall is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “Margaret Fuller: A New American Life” and “After Lives: On Biography and the Mysteries of the Human Heart.”

The words that chilled us the most in the terse, accusatory letter Deborah Lutz received by email from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) on April 3, terminating her Public Scholar grant for a biography of Emily Brontë “to safeguard the interests of the federal government,” were those of Executive Order 14168: [“Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”](#) The alleged violation of EO 14168 was one of “several reasonable causes” cited by NEH acting chairman Michael McDonald as grounds for cutting off Lutz’s funding midstream — and, by a wide stretch of the imagination, the one most closely related to Lutz’s and our own ongoing work.

We were three women biographers meeting for lunch on a Friday to discuss our projects: Heather Clark, a 2018 Public Scholar fellow for her biography of Sylvia Plath, “Red Comet,” a Pulitzer finalist, at work now on a book about Anne Sexton; Abigail Santamaria, recipient of a 2022 Public Scholar grant for her biography-in-progress of Madeleine L’Engle; and me, a veteran biographer in quest of a new subject. But conversation stalled as we kept returning to the text of the letter Lutz had posted on Instagram that morning: “Defending women”? Isn’t that what *we* do? Isn’t that what the NEH had done for us and our subjects by funding our books?

I still remember the day in 1987 when I opened an envelope from the NEH telling me I’d been awarded an Independent Scholar Fellowship to support my biography of the Peabody sisters, three little-known women of New England’s 19th-century cultural renaissance, Transcendentalism. I was two years into the project, which, due to the copious research required and the demands of parenting, would take another 18 years to complete.

The good news was an elixir that lasted. I used a portion of the NEH’s roughly \$20,000 in funding to hire a student researcher who photocopied articles and out-of-print library books I’d rely on in the years ahead. But most important, whenever I thought of giving up or feared I might never finish, I remembered that day and that letter and I kept going.

Published at last in 2005, “The Peabody Sisters” was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography.

I still remember the day in the late 1990s when the panel of judges the NEH had invited me to join debated the merits of an Independent Scholar Fellowship application from Stacy Schiff for a biography of Vera Nabokov. She got her letter. Her book won the Pulitzer.

In 2014, a half-century after its founding, the NEH initiated the Public Scholar program, opening up funds for more writers like Schiff and me with “grants to individual authors for research, writing, travel, and other activities leading to the creation and publication of well-researched nonfiction books in the humanities written for the broad public.” The first group of 36 fellows, who received their good-news letters awarding stipends of up to \$50,400, included Carla Kaplan for a biography of Jessica Mitford, Anne Boyd Rioux for a book about “Little Women,” and Gregg Hecimovich, for a biography of Hannah Crafts, author of “The Bondwoman’s Narrative.” Hecimovich’s “The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts,” published in 2023, received the National Book Critics Circle and Los Angeles Times awards in biography and an American Book Award in nonfiction.

Later NEH Public Scholar recipients writing on women include Janice Nimura, for “The Doctors Blackwell,” a Pulitzer finalist; Natalie Dykstra, for “Chasing Beauty: The Life of Isabella Stewart Gardner,” winner of the Marfield Prize for Arts Writing; and, along with Deborah Lutz in this year’s class, Charlotte Gordon, for a group biography of abolitionists Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. (Gordon’s funding period ended in January; she was not cut loose.) All of these works took or will take many years, some more than a decade, to complete, with the NEH providing material support in the short term and moral support for the long haul.

In one of the articles that my NEH-funded student assistant photocopied for me in the 1980s, “Claims of the Beautiful Arts,” from the November 1839 issue of Democratic Review, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody argued that in the young American nation, arts and

culture deserved government funding to replace the arbitrary and capricious system of patronage that held sway under European monarchies. The resulting works would represent the spirit of a democratic people and bolster its fledgling institutions.

Capricious monarchical patronage? Acting chairman McDonald's termination letter fairly gloated at the chance to shove Lutz aside in favor of "repurposing" the NEH's "funding allocations in a new direction in furtherance of the President's agenda."

After the weekend passed, I phoned Lutz to ask how she was handling her loss of funds and the rude letter, so unlike the initial good news email from the old NEH. She thanked me, then brightened. By coincidence, the day she received the termination email was the date her final NEH lump sum payment of \$20,000 was due to be released for direct deposit to her bank account. The termination email had not come from the secure ".gov" address from which all financial communications were meant to be issued. She guessed the new admins had failed to successfully navigate the secure system of payment set up by their predecessors. And lo, the \$20,000 appeared in her bank account Monday morning. She quickly transferred the sum to a different account, having heard from another NEH fellow that their own "pending" lump sum payment had disappeared.

Lutz is back at work on her biography, set for publication in 2026. By then, presumably, American women will have been secured against the threat posed by the likes of Emily Brontë, the Alcott and Blackwell sisters, Hannah Crafts, Sojourner Truth, and Isabella Stewart Gardner.

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