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## **Gender and Change: Agency, Chronology and Periodisation**

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Caitriona Beaumont

This edited collection of essays, published to mark the 20th anniversary of the journal *Gender and History*, is a welcome and timely reminder of the way in which gender and women's history has successfully challenged historical orthodoxies, has been used to scrutinize and enrich established timeframes for the past and has vividly exposed the way in which female agency has too often been rendered invisible in grand narratives of the past. As we look back on 40 years since the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement and the subsequent, albeit slow, recognition of women's and gender history within academia, there can be no more appropriate a moment to reflect on how the writing of history has been altered and shaped by the gendering of historical research.

The essays included in this publication, which first appeared as volume 20, issue three of *Gender and History*, present a fascinating, wide-ranging and critical examination of the use of gender as a category for historical analysis. The essays demand that we as historians re-think and question long held assumptions regarding classic historical categorisation in light of what we now know about the different experiences of men and women throughout history. In the chapters that challenge standard periodisation, the criteria utilised to define the period is questioned now that the contrasting experiences of men and women have been brought to the fore and the existence of women's agency proven where little had been previously detected. This does

not mean that the overall objective of the authors is to reject the long view of history (no one is advocating throwing the baby out with the bathwater). Indeed, as the editors correctly argue 'the discipline of history cannot afford to be without the perspective this [the long view] allows, since the conventional timeframes are constructively enriched and challenged by gender history and the analysis of women's agency in the past' (p. 10).

A second but equally important objective of the editors, Alexandra Shepard and Garthine Walker, is to encourage a greater chronological depth when it comes to the field of women's and gender history. As Judith M. Bennett illustrates in her chapter, 'Forgetting the Past', there exists a contemporary bias when it comes to journals of women's and gender history, with a distinct under-representation of research on the premodern period, the decades before 1800. Bennett argues that the absence of articles in such journals on the premodern period has occurred 'not because of a lack of research on women and gender before 1800, but instead of our own lack of interest in that research'. (p. 273-4). There is a deliberate attempt here to counteract such bias and half of the 11 chapters included in this volume have a pre-1800 focus. This editorial decision is a success and requires readers to consider the often previously hidden lives and agency of women in the premodern era as well as reminding modern historians that there is much to learn from the rich and complex history of women before the 19th century.

The book is divided into 11 chapters with some focussing on theoretical debates surrounding the use of gender as a category for historical analysis and others looking in more detail at specific historical events spanning across Britain, Europe and India where the incorporation of gender has challenged historical orthodoxies. All of the chapters demonstrate that the traditional delineation of time, when viewed through the lens of gender difference, can be rendered much more complex and problematic than previously assumed within mainstream historiography. In the first chapter the editors reflect on the development of women's and gender history. Focusing on two key articles, Joan Kelly's (1977) essay, 'Did women have a Renaissance?' and Joan Scott's (1986) article 'Gender: a useful category for analysis?' (1), the authors highlight the early and significant impact that gender, and the different experiences of women in particular, has played on our understanding of history. Kelly's work illustrated that despite the major cultural advances associated with the Renaissance women's 'legal, economic and political conditions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries deteriorated rather than improved' (p. 2). This was not only a key moment in women's history but Kelly's work also led to a wider reassessment of the Renaissance by social and cultural historians.

Joan Scott's seminal article, familiar to all of those working on women's and gender history, is according to the editors 'one of the most cited historical works of all time' (p. 4). This is not surprising considering the importance of Scott's attempt to define the meaning of gender as a tool for analysis and its success, as the editors rightly point out, in identifying and analysing not only gender but other categories such as class and race and the ways in which they 'operate together discursively to legitimate or undermine historically specific relationships of power' (p. 4). The influence of Scott's work is evident in a number of the essays included in this collection and some of the criticisms of her analysis, for example the concern that gender analysis can result in women being 'locked' into a position of inferiority with no room for protest or change, are addressed. Indeed one of the most important themes of this new collection of essays is the evidence presented here of the existence of female agency in times, places and amongst groups of women that in the past have been overlooked in the grand narratives of historical change.

Where better a place to begin an exploration of the impact of gender on history than by exploring the early differences in representation of the female and male body in medieval history. Lynda L. Coon, in her chapter 'Somatic styles of the early Middle Ages' sets out to challenge the existing perceived divide between the Ancient/Dark Ages and 'to wear down the overstated premodern/modern rift' (p. 15). Using clerical texts c. 600-900, spatial and anthropological theories, Coon explores the concept of the 'one-sex' model so often associated with the premodern period. By arguing that the 'one-sex' model of the body was not as fixed or predominate in premodern history as has previously been assumed, Coon suggests that this classic division between the Ancient/Dark Ages needs to be re-considered and that the issue of gender difference can be identified in the 'one-sex' model just as it has been in modern 'two-sex' (sex/gender) dichotomy. There is much to fascinate those unfamiliar with early medieval history in this article, for example the ascribing of

different characteristics to male and female bodies: male bodies were 'hard' and 'dry' and female bodies 'porous' and 'wet'. The utilisation of spatial theory in the discussion of the virtual basilica of St. Gall is used to good effect to demonstrate the dangers of overlooking the possibility of female visibility in medieval history based on the assumption (possibly false) that women were prohibited from entering places of worship.

The assertion that the 'one-sex' model associated with premodern times was usurped by the 'modern' 'two-sex' system is also the central point of contention in Dror Wahrman's chapter 'Change and the corporeal in seventeenth and eighteenth century gender history: or, can cultural history be rigorous?'. Once again representations of the body are used here to reflect upon the gendering of history but the author also presents a critical assessment of the importance of 'the cultural history of the basic concepts in the field 'gender, sex and sexuality' (p. 166). This chapter presents an interesting critique of Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex* (2) and the 'British Continuity School' and offers what is really quite a complex argument (at least for the uninitiated) calling for a 'deep historical' perspective inspired by neurohistory.

In keeping with the overall theme of this volume, Monica H. Green's intention in her chapter on 'Gendering the history of women's healthcare' is to cast doubt on established historical categorisations by using gender analysis, this time in the field of women's healthcare in premodern Europe. One of the main objectives in this chapter is to find out 'who knew what about the female body' (p. 44) and to argue that men were much more involved in women's healthcare before the 18th century than has previously been acknowledged. Focussing on the history of midwifery and women's knowledge of contraceptive devices and abortifacients, it is argued that the pre-dominance of Western narratives of medical history has resulted in 'blind spots' that can hide the motives of medical practices and in this case mask the agency of women with regard to childbirth and conception. The chapter provides a detailed critique of the work of Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English which it is argued has defined the 'grand narrative' view of European women's medical history.(3) Green successfully argues that in this field of women's healthcare there has been too much a focus on women as the providers and experts when it came to women's health in the premodern period. By gendering the history of women's healthcare and accepting that men were involved in such practices it is suggested that there was no 'golden age' of women's healthcare before the 18th century. Coming to such a conclusion Green warns that 'it matters that we get these stories right' as our understanding of the past casts a long shadow over decisions taken regarding women's health and welfare in more contemporary times (p. 71)

Other themes and periods scrutinised in this volume include Martha Howell's exploration of 'Europe's commercial economy, 1200?1700?'. With much recent interest in the role and status of women as consumers in the 20th century it is intriguing to learn that women also played a major role in transforming commerce, deemed to be a morally hazardous activity in early modern Europe, into a much more respectable and honourable occupation. As Howell argues consumption was assigned to a female space (the realm of the 'virtuous' housewife) and production (money making) to a male space where men controlled working conditions of both male and female workers. In developing her argument Howell suggests that there was therefore no 'golden age' of women's work in early modern Europe and that women's involvement in commerce was 'gendered' in that women were associated with consumption to such an extent that their rights within the production process were severely compromised long before the emergence of the industrial revolution.

In her chapter 'Do women need a Renaissance?' Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks reflects on the work of Joan Kelly and argues that the term Renaissance, when looking at the experiences of women, isn't a useful historical category and instead argues that historians should consider replacing it with the classification of 'early modern'. It is argued this broader more inclusive timeframe much better describes an era which brought 'change to the lives of many women and stunning transformation to the lives of others, including their lives as women' (p. 125). Throughout this chapter Wiesner-Hanks also identifies important questions regarding the category of 'women' itself and how the experiences of some women may not reflect the experiences of all women, a salient point that gender historians, indeed all historians, should not forget.

The late Jeanne Boyston's chapter in this collection is pivotal and should be essential reading for any historian engaged in research on gender and women's history. Boyston provides a well argued, detailed and critical deconstruction of the phrase 'gender as a category for analysis'. She makes clear that she does not view the use of 'gender' as a distraction from the ongoing task of recovering women's history or that including the history of masculinity within this field of study undermines that central objective. Instead she is concerned about the dangers implicit in relying so much on gender as a subjective and contemporary category for analysis that the writing of histories of gender as an historical process is lost (p. 135). I agree wholeheartedly with Boyston's rejection of 'gender as a set of more or less universalised assumptions' and support her desire to instead interrogate gender 'as a set of relatively open questions applied to a discrete time and place of inquiry' (p. 135). What Boyston is advocating is using gender as a question of analysis. Not only does such an approach help ensure that historical sources are not at risk of misinterpretation in order to 'fit in' with the category of analysis but also allows research to be source-led and lets the voices of men and women from the past to be heard within their own historical contexts. This will, as Boyston suggests in her conclusion, make us better historians, an argument hard to disagree with.

Locating and listening to voices of the past, in particular to the voices of women, is a central concern in the remaining chapters of this book and, like the previous chapters, these highlight once again the very rich diversity and complexity that a focus on gender can bring to our understanding and re-evaluation of history. This is achieved by Padma Anagol, Lynn Abrams and Kevin Passmore in their chapters which explore the experiences of women in the history of colonial India, on the island of Shetland and in political religions theory. Anagol expertly demonstrates how the standardised history of Colonial India, written from an 'imperialism-nationalism' paradigm, has resulted in a skewed account of women's lives during the years 1885-1947. By focussing on gender as a historical process, as Boyston advocates, Anagol provides the reader with a clear account of the previously hidden agency of women in India which was evident long before the better known female activism of the Gandhian era. This spotlight on female agency in Indian history, beyond the nationalist struggle, allows Anagol to call for 'the periodisation based upon nation and nationalism to be discarded'. This she argues is justified due to the fact that women were 'contesting nationalist male reformist and conservative discourses; they were using the colonial state for their own ends and finally aligning with their imperial sisters to improve their own ends' (p. 214).

Seeking out and locating female agency and voices of resistance, where previously it was assumed by historians, including feminist historians, that none existed is crucial if we are to gain a full understanding of women's history and the part gender plays within such histories. Lynn Abrams's reflection on her contrasting experience of researching the lives of women on the Shetland Islands and writing a history of women and gender in modern Europe demonstrates once again the intricacies of writing women's and gender history which are the central themes of this collection. Abrams argues that local histories of women that don't 'chime' with the grand narrative shouldn't be marginalised as an aberration but used instead to acknowledge the diversity that exists between geographical spaces and, as Wiesner-Hanks reminded us, within the category of 'women' itself. In the penultimate chapter Kevin Passmore returns to the theme of female agency, this time in the context of political religions theory and the rise of fascism in Europe. Providing a wide-ranging review of various theorists including Durkheim, Freud, Talcott Parsons and Mosse, Passmore argues that political religions theory has failed to acknowledge the role played by women in far-right movements and in doing so overlooks the agency of women within fascist movements of the 20th century.

This book presents an at times quite staggering breath of historical coverage and debate bringing to light new and diverse histories of women and demanding that historians of women and gender don't become complacent. Instead we need to consistently question and re-evaluate our methodology and seek out female agency in unexpected places. In doing so we will be able to not only increase our knowledge about the lives of women in the past but question the validity of historical periodisation where required. As Judith Bennett argues we should not forget the importance of the premodern period and begin to consider 'the earlier histories of the specific subjects we study' (p. 281). This collection of essays is the ideal place to begin such

a process. I do have one criticism. Not all chapters of the book make for an 'easy' read and at times I found some of the arguments quite impenetrable due to the use of rather obscure language and a lack of explanation of specialist terminology. This could be off-putting to the more general reader interested in women's and gender history. As one of the main objectives of the work is to broaden knowledge of gender and history for this to happen would be a shame. Just as it is beholden upon historians to think critically about how they engage with their sources and think about gender as a category for analysis, so too is it important that when it comes to writing down those ideas the work is accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

## Notes

1. Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'Did women have a Renaissance?', in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Blumenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston, MA, 1977) and Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis?', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: a History of Women Healers* (New York, NY, 1971) and *Complaints and Disorders: The Sex and Politics of Sickness* (New York, NY, 1973).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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