

Academic Essays

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Feminist Historiography of Early Modern European Women

by Laura Chandler

The school of feminist historiography essentially began in the 1960's in conjunction with the broader women's movement. Since that time, feminist historiography has gained a measure of validity and legitimacy within the academy. Feminist historians have used their perspective to shed light on many parts of history. However, the focus of this essay will be influential developments and the use of feminist historical theory in the study of early modern European women. It will be demonstrated that feminist historiography has been and continues to be a useful and valuable addition to historical enquiry into the lives of early modern women. Feminist historians have challenged traditional scholarship in this area to uncover the nature of women's lives, and also to question and reconstruct conceptual categories of history. This essay will trace some of the major developments of the feminist study of early modern European women as well as investigate some of the analysis which has been informed by feminist theory.

The first objective of feminist historians was to make women visible within history. Feminist historians soon discovered that much of the history of early modern Europe, (indeed, of any period, anywhere) had been written about the male experience from the male perspective. Women were effectively "hidden from history".¹ It has been suggested that the reason women have been neglected by historians is that they are not seen to be connected with historically significant aspects of society, such as, foreign policy, industrial growth or politics.² Thus, the existing schools of history had not acknowledged women's contribution to history and the development of society.³ The first task of feminist historians, therefore, was to research the history of women and to give women a place in history as active and influential agents. Joan Kelly-Gadol (1976) referred to this process as restoring women to history.⁴ The first major influence that feminist theory had upon the study of early modern women was to view these women as a specific and valid focus of enquiry and to attribute meaning and value to their lives.

Feminist historians who sifted through both old and new material pieced the lifestyles of early modern women together. Hitherto unexplored areas of women's lives were studied. An example of an area previously not thought of as "worthy of academic study" is housework and the lives of housewives.⁵ "The History of the Housewife" was first written by Catherine Hall in 1973 and made use of concepts such as the sexual division of labour, the home as a site of unpaid production and the oppression of women through a dominant ideology.⁶ Hall's work on housewives is a prime example of the important work of feminist historians in illuminating previously neglected aspects of the lives of women in history. Historical investigation has

¹ June Hannam 'Women, history and protest', in Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson, eds., *Introducing women's studies Feminist theory and practice* (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 304.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴ Joan Kelly-Gadol, 'The social relation of the sexes: Methodological implications of women's history', *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (1976), p.809.

⁵ Catherine Hall, *White, male and middle class Explorations in feminism and history* (Great Britain: Polity Press, 1992), p. 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

always sought to recover lost knowledge and this is readily apparent in feminist historiography of the early modern period.

Feminism is a perspective which challenges the traditional male-centred interpretations of history. Feminist theory invites the scholar to observe a situation from an alternative perspective. This perspective encourages different questions about evidence. One of the aims of feminist scholarship is to produce destabilising questions that lead to a reexamination of historical content.⁷ Relations between women and men are examined from the female point of view. Jean Howard (1994) displays an example of new interpretations and challenging questions in her study of theatre in early modern England.⁸ Howard explores antitheatrical literature of the sixteenth century. She examines an antitheatrical text written by Gosson, which argued that respectable women should not go to the theatre, as they would be reduced to objects of scrutiny and desire by the male theatregoers of all classes.⁹ Gosson's argument is voiced in terms of paternalistic concern for the welfare of women.¹⁰ Howard uses female-centred questions to explore the deeper meaning of the text by asking:

*"But what if one reads the situation less within the horizons of masculinist ideology and asks whether women might have been empowered, and not simply victimized, by their novel position within the theatre? ... could men have done all the looking, held all the power?"*¹¹

This questioning come from an alternate perspective, from a female perspective. Howard suggests that the position of women can be redefined in this situation. Instead of powerless objects of male desire, women become active, powerful participants in the situation by looking critically at the men with an eye to their own desire.¹² This conceptualisation identifies a tension within this text. Women theatregoers no longer fall neatly into the patriarchal category of an object.¹³ Howard suggests that antitheatrical writings are responding to the fear of women in a space which does not control their behaviour.¹⁴ A possible alternative underlying meaning and purpose of this antitheatrical text has been uncovered. Howard has gained a further understanding of antitheatrical writings through the use of the alternate feminist perspective. The challenge by feminist historians to male-centred perspectives and meanings provides the opportunity to reevaluate evidence and gain new insights into the experiences of early modern women.

One of the bedrocks of feminist historical examination is the use of the concept of patriarchy to analyse material. Patriarchy was adopted by the women's movement to understand and explain the systematic subordination of women by men in our society.¹⁵ Feminist historians have used patriarchy as a conceptual tool to trace

⁷ Ann-Louise Shapiro, 'Introduction: History and feminist theory, or talking back to the Beadle', *History and Theory Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 31, 4 (1992), p. 1.

⁸ Jean Howard, *The stage and social struggle in early modern England* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the politics of history* (USA: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 33.

the historical emergence of this subordination.¹⁶ Patriarchy becomes a framework of analysis. The early modern period in Europe has been described as a “time of triumph for patriarchy.”¹⁷ Many studies have been carried out which focus on the strengthening of the patriarchal system, especially within the private sphere of the family.¹⁸ Households came further under male domination through legal, social and institutional changes.¹⁹ This is a vital insight for feminists. An examination of the process by which patriarchy was strengthened allows feminist historians and feminist activists to challenge the view that a patriarchal structure is natural within our society and has been an unchanging feature of human experience throughout history. If feminist historians can demonstrate that subordination of women is a socially constructed system, then the arguments for dismantling that system in our current society are strengthened. This interaction between historical scholarship and current political movements is an important aspect of feminist historiography as it ensures the continuing relevance of history in today’s society.

Feminist historiography has progressed through a number of developments which have challenged traditional history. Feminist theory encourages researchers to challenge assumed truths, deconstruct grand, universal theories and reconstruct more inclusive perceptions of history.²⁰ A feminist deconstruction of an accepted historical truth entails revealing previously hidden or marginalised knowledge which demonstrates the falseness of that truth.²¹ The feminist historian must question the underlying assumptions of accepted historical traditions. One of the greatest challenges to traditional history by feminist historians has been the reevaluation of current schemes of periodisation. In what has been described as a “pioneering essay”, Joan Kelly-Godal (1976) suggested that by looking at social change in relation to women’s liberation or repression, one could question currently accepted ideas about great ages in history.²² By and large, all periods in history had been assessed according to the male experience. When one examines progressive movements in history with emphasis on the experiences of women then a reevaluation of these periods becomes necessary.²³ The Renaissance in particular required reevaluation when the experiences of women were taken into account. Historical scholarship had traditionally held the view that Renaissance women enjoyed an equality of rights with men.²⁴ In her essay “Did women have a Renaissance?”, Kelly-Godal challenged this view by demonstrating that women’s social and personal options were reduced during the period of the Renaissance.²⁵ Kelly-Godal examined the female experience of the

¹⁶ Hannam, *Women, history and protest*, p. 314; Jackie Stacey, ‘Untangling feminist theory’ in Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson, eds., *Introducing women’s studies Feminist theory and practice* (Hong Kong: Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 54.

¹⁷ Merry E. Weisner, ‘Wandervogels and women: Journeymen’s concepts of masculinity in early modern Germany’, *Journal of Social History*, 24 (1990), p. 767.

¹⁸ Diane Willen, ‘Godly women in early modern England: Puritanism and gender’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 43, 4 (1992), p. 564.

¹⁹ Within Puritan writing, the family is defined in patriarchal terms which reinforce the husbands position as the head of the household. Puritan language portrays good wives as being subordinate to their husbands will. “If shee be not obedient she cannot be saued”. Weisner, *Wandervogels*, p. 767; Willen, *Godly women*, p. 564.

²⁰ Nan Van Den Burgh, ed., *Feminist practice in the 21st century* (USA: NASW Press, 1995), p. xix.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Judith C. Brown, ‘A woman’s place was in the home: Women’s work in Renaissance Tuscany’, in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance The discourse of sexual difference in early modern Europe* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 206; Kelly-Godal, *Social relation*, p. 810.

²³ Kelly-Godal, *Social relation*, p. 811.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Joan Kelly-Godal, ‘Did women have a Renaissance?’, in Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming visible Women in European history* (USA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 139.

Renaissance in comparison with that of men.²⁶ She looked at the regulation of female sexuality, economic, political and cultural roles of women and the ideology about women of the period displayed in the society's art and literature.²⁷ Kelly-Godal also provided a comparison between the Renaissance woman and the medieval lady, demonstrating a clear decline in the cultural and political power of women across the periods.²⁸ Renaissance women were gradually removed from positions of public power and placed firmly within the private power of their husbands and male relatives.²⁹ Kelly-Godal concluded that there was no renaissance for women.³⁰ The restriction of women's rights and options in relation to the rights and options of men, clearly means that the term "Renaissance" does not describe the experience of women as a group.³¹ The Renaissance only occurred as a renaissance for part of society.³² This presents a substantial challenge to the traditionally held view of the Renaissance as a progressive period for all and invites the scholar to reevaluate their understanding of the early modern period. This reevaluation and reconstruction of a major social change in early modern Europe is an extremely significant development in the study of early modern women. Kelly-Godal clearly demonstrates the value of the feminist challenge to traditional history, as surely, one of the main purposes of historical investigation is to reveal the truth, or many truths, of history.

This aspect of Kelly-Godal's work was extremely influential and encouraged other feminist historians to explore the lives of Renaissance women within this framework of analysis. A large body of evidence has been gathered which supports Kelly-Godal's thesis that women did not share in the progress of the Renaissance.³³ For example, Merry Weisner (1986) explored the decline of women's rights in the industry of cloth and clothing production in the early modern period.³⁴ Weisner chose cloth and clothing production as this had traditionally been women's work and therefore their exclusion from this area is more distinct and significant.³⁵ Restrictions on women working in this industry in Germany intensified throughout the sixteenth century to the point that women were relegated to areas of work which were low in status, unskilled and poorly paid, such as spinning.³⁶ Weisner's analysis of this evidence supports Kelly-Godal's suggestion that male rights and privileges during the Renaissance were often built upon the degradation of women's rights and the devaluation of both their work and contribution to society. Scholars who follow the path laid down by Kelly-Godal continue to challenge and deconstruct accepted historical truths. They uncover the fact that many historical generalisations of the past

²⁶ The comparison of women's lives with that of men is an important aspect of feminist enquiry. Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Women's history', *History Today*, 35 (June 1985), p. 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Women's history in transition: The European case', *Feminist Studies*, 3 (1976), p. 83; Davis, *Women's history*, p. 41.

³² Further to this, it is suggested that the Renaissance for men was made possible only by the restrictions to women's lives. Kristen B. Neushcel, 'Creating a new past: Women in European history', in Jean F. O'Barr, ed., *Women and a new academy Gender and cultural contexts* (USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 16.

³³ Wallach Scott, *Gender*, p. 19.

³⁴ Merry E. Weisner, 'Spinners and seamstresses: Women in cloth and clothing production', in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance The discourse of sexual difference in early modern Europe* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁶ Much of the drive behind women's work being restricted came from the journeymen who belonged to the guilds; almost exclusively male bodies which regulated the craft industries. These journeymen maintained part of their prestige and honour by differentiating their work from women and harshly degrading the work that women did. *Ibid.*, pp. 194 - 205.

are male centred whilst claiming to be universally valid and do not encompass the experience of women.³⁷ The inclusiveness of this approach to historical periods enhances our understanding not only of history, but also of how social change can affect all members of a society.

In the same essay in which she challenged the idea of a universal Renaissance, Joan Kelly-Godal also introduced a method of exploring the nature of the boundaries between public and private domains in relation to women's status in society.³⁸ Kelly-Godal draws upon anthropological theory which proposes that when societies are placed on a scale with the differentiation of domestic and public activities at one end and the merging of them at the other, then a consistent pattern of women's status emerges.³⁹ The more domestic and public realms are clearly distinguished the more women's rights and value within a society diminish.⁴⁰ Kelly-Godal's adaptation of anthropological theory for historical use has provided a methodology with which to examine the boundaries of the private and public life as well as an operationalisation of the private and public spheres. This work has proven very useful for later feminist historians. On one hand feminist historians have used this separation of public and private to understanding the declining position of women in the early modern period. On the other hand, feminists have also challenged this false dichotomy and sought to prove that the public and private spheres were not as distinctly separated in early modern Europe as Kelly-Godal suggests.

In her essay, "Women in the public sphere in early modern England: The case of the urban working poor", Willen challenges Kelly-Godal's assumptions about the dichotomy between the public and private spheres of early modern life.⁴¹ Through a study of the lives of women who worked as public employees in the dispensing of poor relief Willen suggests that the public and private spheres were far more interconnected than Kelly-Godal argued.⁴² The evidence which Willen uncovers indicates that the local authorities and poor working women had a close and interconnected relationship.⁴³ Poor women provided a large amount of the welfare services offered by the state in the form of fostering orphans or as nurses in poor hospitals.⁴⁴ Willen redefines the public sphere to include public work which did not necessarily challenge the patriarchal structure, but complemented it. Thus, while women were excluded from public office, they could, nevertheless, participate in the public sphere on behalf of the patriarchal state. Willen again challenges the absolute separation of the private and public sphere in her study of "Godly women in early modern England: Puritanism and gender."⁴⁵ Willen argues that the strong reciprocal relationships which godly women developed with the clergy allowed them to influence the Puritan community and thus, the public sphere.⁴⁶ Again, Willen redefines participation in the public sphere. She argues that their position as religious

³⁷ Uta C. Schmidt, 'Problems of theory and method in feminist history', in Joanna de Groot and Mary Maynard, eds., *Women's studies in the 1990's: Doing things differently?* (Great Britain: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 89.

³⁸ Neuschel, *Creating a new past*, p. 16.

³⁹ Kelly-Godal, *Social relation*, p. 818.

⁴⁰ Kelly-Godal observed that the development of the central state and private ownership of property coincided with a reduction of women's control over their lives. Women lose control over themselves and their property the more the private and public sphere are differentiated. Sexual inequalities between men and women also increase. *Ibid.*, pp. 819-822.

⁴¹ Diane Willen, 'Women in the public sphere in early modern England: The case of the urban working poor', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 19 (1988), p. 559.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 566-569.

⁴⁵ Willen, *Godly women*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

authorities and advisors to the clergy constituted a public role and therefore, the private relationships with members of the clergy led to public influence within their community.⁴⁷ Willen challenges a false dichotomy by redefining the public and private spheres and demonstrating the interrelatedness of each. In her work, Willen contrasts her model of the interrelatedness of public and private with that of Kelly-Godal.⁴⁸ Willen may use a new definition of 'public', but her keystone has been laid in the work of Kelly-Godal. This point demonstrates the influence that Kelly-Godal's work has had upon the historiography of early modern women. The conceptualisation of the separation of public and private lives provides a very useful and enlightening framework in which historians can explore the lives of early modern women and represents an important stage in the development of feminist historiography in his area.

A more recent, but quite influential development of feminist history in the study of early modern society, is the concept of gender as a category of study. In her influential work "Gender and the Politics of History", Joan Wallach Scott develops the concept of gender as an analytical tool for feminist historians.⁴⁹ Wallach Scott suggests that gender, rather than women, is a more useful concept for the study of history as it can be applied to all human relationships and societal structures and not just the study of women's lives. Gender is conceptualised as historically specific knowledge about sexual difference and is understood to be socially constructed.⁵⁰ Gender as a concept relates not only to women, but to men as well, therefore it can be used to understand other aspects of history than relations between the sexes. The way in which gender identity is socially constructed can illuminate relationships between people, groups and institutions. It can also help the scholar to understand people's daily experience of being a man or woman and the expectations which accompanied this identity.⁵¹ The early modern period was a time in which gender underwent many changes. The trend towards a stronger patriarchy was accompanied by transformations in gender identity.⁵² Lyndal Roper has described the sixteenth century as a time of gender crisis in Germany which lead to a stronger patriarchal structure.⁵³ In order to make sense of these long-term changes in gender relations and their effect on historical change, feminist historians have argued that gender must become a category of historical analysis.⁵⁴ If gender is conceptualised as a significant force within society then a study of gender can do more than inform the historian of relations between men and women, but can be applied to broader questions of history.

Diane Willen has used this concept of gender to analyse the interaction between gender and Puritanism. Willen uses gender as a tool to discover how gender relations construct religious practice and visa versa. Changes in the traditional practices of gender and the changes in religious practice influenced each other.⁵⁵ The practice of godliness created a context in which wider restriction on gender roles could not be enforced or were not relevant.⁵⁶ Women and puritan divines developed

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 578.

⁴⁸ Willen, *Women in the public sphere*, p. 559.

⁴⁹ Wallach Scott, *Gender*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination in England 1500-1800* (Great Britain: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 401.

⁵² Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination*, p. 401.

⁵³ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil Witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe*, (Great Britain: Routledge, 1994), p. 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Willen, *Godly women*, p. 561.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 567.

intense, long lasting relationships which, Willen argues convincingly, were reciprocal in nature and provided an avenue through which women could influence the clergy.⁵⁷ Godliness rather than gender qualified members of the puritan community to offer spiritual guidance.⁵⁸ Therefore, Puritanist religious practices influenced the conception of gender roles and the alteration in gender roles for women allowed them to share their particular perspective with the puritan community. Willen's study demonstrates how religious and gender constructions could influence and change each other. Willen's work demonstrates the usefulness of the concept of gender. The examination of the social construction of gender roles can provide new insights into structures, such as, religious practice.

One of the difficulties in analysing the impact of feminist historiography upon a particular field of study is that there is no one particular type of feminist theory. Feminism can best be described as a perspective from which one approaches evidence, rather than a rulebook by which to perform an analysis. It is important to acknowledge the interdisciplinary nature of feminist history, since other schools of thought have given so much to this area. Feminists often borrow theoretical frameworks and apply them from a particular perspective. For example, many feminists have drawn upon Marxist theories of analysis. Marxist feminists analyse gender difference as a product of material and economic forces.⁵⁹ Patriarchy is seen as developing according to changes in modes of production.⁶⁰ Louise Tilly and Joan Wallach Scott analysed the working and family lives of women in early modern England and France using production as a framework.⁶¹ Tilly and Wallach Scott explore the work of women within the context of the family as an economic unit. The kinds of work women performed is seen as a function of the family's economic strategies to cope with change and crisis.⁶² Tilly and Wallach Scott define marriage as an economic arrangement and the start of a new economic enterprise for which the wife worked.⁶³ The power which women held in this enterprise is constructed in terms of their economic control of the family's finances. The husband is the head of the household, but the wife's responsibility for procuring food for the family enabled her to exercise financial control over a large percentage of the family's budget.⁶⁴ Thus, power in the early modern family has many sources. The husband exercises physical and legal power over the family, but the wife exercises financial power.⁶⁵ Tilly and Wallach Scott suggest that the role as a provider of food put wives in positions where they participated in public, political actions.⁶⁶ Riots and public protests over the cost of food, especially bread, were often precipitated and carried out by women.⁶⁷ A wife's economic role within the family provided women with both financial control and avenues of political comment. This explanation of women's lives in the early modern period rests heavily on an analysis of their economic position and productive roles within the family. The combination of a feminist

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 570-1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 578.

⁵⁹ David Konstan, 'Review essay', *History and Theory Studies in the Philosophy of History*, 29 (1990), p. 75.

⁶⁰ Wallach Scott, *Gender*, p. 35.

⁶¹ Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, work and family* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1989).

⁶² In the popular classes the combined income of a family was often just enough to support the group. Thus, both daughters and wives worked to sustain the family unit. Unmarried daughters' labour was used within the family or they were sent away into service if the family required it in times of crisis. *Ibid.*, p. 6, 20, 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

perspective with the Marxist tradition proves very powerful in terms of analysis and interpretation.

Over the last few decades, feminist historians have developed a very comprehensive body of knowledge concerning early modern women. The lives of women in the early modern period have largely been uncovered through the work of feminist historians who noted that women had been neglected within the field of history. The feminist perspective has challenged male-centred views of history and generated new questions for familiar material. Patriarchy has been shown to be a changing social construction, a development which is very useful for current feminist efforts within our own society. The interdisciplinary nature of feminist inquiry has been acknowledged. Feminist as a perspective can be very powerful when coupled with a complementary theoretical framework such as Marxism. The work of Joan Kelly-Godal has been very influential in the field of feminist historiography. Kelly-Godal challenged the traditional view of the Renaissance and called general historical periodisations into question. Her work on the private and public spheres of life continues to be useful for feminist historians in this area. Recently, gender has been put forward as a valid category of history by historians such as Joan Wallach Scott. Gender as a concept has far broader implications for the study of history than a simple focus on women. Feminist historiography of the early modern period has certainly demonstrated the value of the feminist perspective in challenging traditional historical practice and expanding the field of history.

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