CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reassessing, transforming, complicating: two decades of early modern women’s history

When I wrote the essay that opens this collection, ‘Women’s defence of their public role’, a bit over ten years ago, issues of the boundaries between public and private were a hot topic in women’s history. There were a number of books with the phrase ‘public and private’ in the title, and the theme of the 1987 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, the largest and best-established conference on women’s history in the world, was ‘Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy: Reassessing Women’s Place in History’. By ten years later this was no longer an issue, and the 1996 Berkshire programme included only one session with the phrase ‘public and private’ in the title.

Because the theme of the Berkshire Conference influences the way sessions are titled, it may not be totally fair to gauge trends in women’s history from session titles, but the theme is also intentionally chosen to be as broad as possible and to capture key issues in women’s history at that point. The conference is held only every three years, a long span of time in a field that is developing as rapidly as women’s history. For the first six Berkshire Conferences, held between 1973 and 1984, the field was so new that there was no theme; in 1987 it was, as noted, ‘Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy: Reassessing Women’s Place in History’, in 1990, ‘Crossing

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented as the Erasmus Lecture at the Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies at Victoria University in the University of Toronto. I would like to thank Susan Karam-Nunn, Judith Bennett, and Heide Wunder for their comments on that version, and the Centre for its invitation.

2. See, for example, Eva Gamarnikow et al., eds, The Public and the Private (New York: Heinemann, 1983).

3. I was one of the programme co-chairs for the 1996 Berkshire Conference, and can report that even though the theme that emerged appears very general and rather innocuous, it was the cause of several hours of debate.
Boundaries in Feminist History’, in 1993, ‘Transformations: Women, Gender, Power’ , and in 1996, ‘Complicating Categories: Women, Gender, and Difference’. Like all descriptions and categorizations of knowledge, these titles both reflect and shape research. The word ‘difference’, for example, so important to women’s history in the mid-1990s, appeared in only a single session title in 1987, and that in a round-table discussion entitled ‘The Politics of Women’s History: Feminist Advocacy and the Meaning of Difference’. It appeared in no titles in 1984 or 1981.

Although the history of women in the United States has been the best-researched area of women’s history over the last twenty years and has thus shaped the dominant questions and theoretical perspectives of the field to a great degree, studies of women in early modern Europe have also been very influential in establishing key topics and approaches. The themes of the last four Berkshire Conferences can therefore serve as a way to describe what has happened in the field over the last decade, and I would like to use them to explore three questions that have been central in explorations of early modern European women: Did women have a Reformation? What effects did the development of capitalism have on women? Do the concepts ‘Renaissance’ and ‘early modern’ apply to women’s experience, and which is more fruitful? All of these questions hark back to the work of Joan Kelly, whose now twenty-year-old essay ‘Did women have a Renaissance?’ continues to be extremely fruitful as a springboard for discussion, both in her period of focus and in times and places far removed.”

**The Reformation**

Most considerations of women and the Reformation have tended to answer the question ‘Did women have a Reformation?’ with ‘yes’, and then go off in one of two directions. They either explore women’s actions in support of or in opposition to the Reformation and women’s spiritual practices during this period, or they explore the effects of religious change on women’s lives. Those studies looking at women’s actions have explicitly concentrated on what is rather unambiguously a public role, and found women active in the Peasants’ War, preaching in the early years of the Reformation, defending convent life in word and deed, writing and translating religious literature. This scholarship has also explored the boundaries between public and private in the sixteenth century, noting that activities in which women engaged within the household — such as pastors’ wives creating a new ideal for women or women converting their husbands or other household members — were not viewed as private, but as matters of public concern. Doing this kind of research tends to be very uplifting, confirming Mary Beard’s assertion that women are a force in history, and seeing the Reformation as a female as well as a male creation. It is carried out by scholars from many disciplines — religious historians such as Anne Conrad, Gerta Schaffenhorn, Elsbie McKe and Silke Halbach, literary scholars such as Barbara Becker-Cantarino, social historians such as Marian Kobelt-Groch and Siegried Westphal, intellectual historians such as Luise Schorn-Schütte and Peter Mathes. Because English-language scholars were often the first to explore women’s experiences, much of the theory has come from North America although in the last five years this has changed somewhat.

Research such as this — uncovering women’s experiences — has in the last decade been supplemented by more complex gendered analysis, as some historians of the Reformation explore the issues of power and difference that were highlighted as Berkshire Conference (Berks) themes. This has been most noticeable, not in studies of women’s actions, but in those of the effects of the Reformation on women. These studies began with explorations of the ideas of the reformers, and we now have both edited reprints, such as those of Joyce Irwin on the radical reformers and Erika Rummel on

7. References to most of these authors may be found in the bibliography which follows this chapter; the two which are not listed separately there are Gerta Schaffenhorn, ‘Im Gezeiten Freunde werden? Mann und Frau im Glauben Martin Luthers’, in Heidi Wünster and Christina Vajna, *Wandel der Geschlechtszugehörigkeit im "Beginn der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Sährkamp, 1991), pp. 29-169, and Luise Schorn-Schütte, ‘Gefährtin’ und ‘Mitregentin’: Zur Sozialgeschichte der evangelischen Pfarrfrau in der Frühen Neuzeit’, in Wunder und Vanja, *Wunder*, pp. 199-58.
those who have already focused on women. In the new Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation, Luther’s ideas about women are included in the entry on women but not in the entry on Luther, in contrast to his ideas about Jews, which are in both ‘Jews and Judaism’ and ‘Luther’. Thus some categories have been complicated, but not others.

One of the most dramatic ways that categories have been complicated is when the question ‘Did women have a Reformation?’ with a qualified ‘no’ rather than ‘yes’. This has been done most effectively by Heide Wunder, who does not base her ‘no’ on the idea that women’s lives did not change, but on a rejection of the Reformation as a major cause of that transformation. Wunder sees changes in family life and ideas about marriage, which are often viewed as the most important effects of the Reformation on women, as a result not of changes in religious ideology but of social and economic changes which allowed a wider spectrum of the population to marry and make the marital pair the basic production and consumption unit. Thus Reformation ideas about the family did not create the bourgeois family, but resulted from it.

Capitalism

Wunder’s turning on its head the standard explanation of new ideas about the family brings us to my second question: How did the development of capitalism have on women? In answering this, the first line of division is between those who see significant change and those who see more continuity — what we might in shorthand term the battle between capitalism and patriarchy.

Those who favour capitalism — who see, in other words, significant transformation in women’s work and women’s lives during this period because of the effects of ‘capitalism’ (however one may

8. References to most of these works may be found in the bibliography; the one which is not included here is Erika Rummel, ed., Ensam in der Welt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986). Though there are some theses and articles, there is still no book-length analysis — or even an edited collection — of Luther’s writings about women. This is certainly not due to any lack of material but, I would speculate, to tepidation, even outside Germany, about tackling so formidable a figure and inverting what would no doubt be harsh attacks or at least a sharp discussion.


10. References to most of these authors may be found in the bibliography; the one which is not listed separately is Dagmar Lorenz, Vom Kloster zur Kuche: Die Frauen vor und nach der Reformation Dr. Martin Luthers’, in Barbara Becker-Cammarino, ed., Die Frauen von der Reformation zur Romanik (Bonn: Bouvier, 1989), pp. 7-38.


choose to define or limit that word) — have tended to see these changes as negative. This, of course, is not a new idea, but was put forth by Alice Clark in *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* almost eighty years ago.¹⁴ Though some of these studies see capitalism as an unmitigating evil, pulling women down from a ‘golden age’ of pre-capitalist household production in which their labour and ideas were valued (here Caroline Barron and Susan Cahn are the clearest voices), most recent work has been more qualified.¹⁵ Here ‘difference’ has emerged as a key issue, for newer scholarship has stressed that women’s experience differed according to social class, economic status, and geographic region — factors that have traditionally been taken into account when examining men’s experience of economic change — and also according to age, marital status, family size, and lifespan. These latter factors have only emerged as axes of difference in the last decade of research in women’s history, and are rarely mentioned in works on men’s work experiences. Thus in economic as well as religious history, women’s categories are now more complicated than men’s.

Those who argue that capitalism brought significant transformations also do not completely neglect continuity. The majority of women and men in Europe during these four centuries continued to work in agriculture, for at least three-quarters — and in some areas more like 95 per cent — of the population remained in the countryside. Historians such as Michael Roberts, Keith Snell, Ann Kussmaul, and Christina Vanja are investigating the rural scene more closely, where they trace both structures and techniques that were slow to change and innovations which directly affected women’s lives, such as the introduction of the scythe, stall feeding, and silk production.¹⁶ Historians who continue to concentrate on cities — where, of course, the sources are more prevalent and concentrated — stress that much of the economy was still pre-capitalist, and many occupations, such as domestic service and selling at the public market, changed very little during the period.

For many historians, wide variety and strong continuities, however, do not negate the fact that this is an era of significant transformation in women’s work. Some historians, such as Bridget Hill and Pamela Sharpe, have focused on the economic causes and effects of these changes, while others, such as Martha Howell, Michael Roberts, Jean Quataert, Maxine Berg, and myself, have been more interested in changes in meaning.¹⁷ Ten years ago these changes in meaning were often conceptualized, as they are in my first essay in this book and in an essay by Martha Howell, ‘Citizenship and gender: women’s political status in medieval cities’, as women’s retreat from work that had public or political aspects, but now the issue is more complicated.¹⁸ Recent research stresses that it is in the meaning of work as much as the actual tasks that women and men were doing that we can see the most change during this period. As Clark noted some long ago, women were excluded or stepped back from certain areas of production, but, more importantly, their productive tasks were increasingly defined as reproductive — as housekeeping — or as assisting — as helping out. Thus a woman who sewed clothes, took in boarders, did laundry, and gathered herbs — and who was paid for all of these activities — was increasingly thought of as a housewife, a title that became enshrined in statistical language in the nineteenth century, when her activities were also not regarded as contributing to the gross national product or other sorts of economic measurements.¹⁹

One of the clearest results of the last decade of scholarship on women’s work is the discovery that transformations in meaning

were not accompanied by a retreat from participation in the labour market, however. Peter Earle’s recent study of the London labour market has found that 72 per cent of the women who served as witnesses in court in 1700 were doing paid work outside the home – most of it low status, but certainly not a withdrawal from economic activity. A few voices, Heide Wunder’s among them, note that the continuation or expansion of wage labour, despite its low pay, low-status nature, may actually have benefited some women, as it allowed them to support themselves without marrying. She thus sees the great concern with ‘masterless’ women and the laws which attempted to force women into service or into male-headed households as a result of the expansion of wage labour (and again, not as the result of the Reformation, which is a common explanation); such laws had not been necessary earlier because the opportunities for women to live alone and support themselves by their labour were much fewer.

Statistical data like Earle’s, and also that which confirms women’s lower wages for all types of tasks across centuries and countries, is often used by those who reject the notion that this is a period of dramatic change in women’s work or who at least do not see capitalism as the most important agent of change there was. How, Owenn Hufton, Katrina Honeymon and Jordan Goodman, Chris Middleton, and Judith Bennett have all been strong voices in favour of continuity, viewing gender ideology – what Honeymon and Goodman term ‘gender conflict’ and Bennett, more boldly, ‘patriarchy’ as the most significant shaper of women’s work experience. They are aware that even dramatic transformations in the structure and regulation of institutions and industries may not have been evident in the women working in them, who were often clustered in the skilled or poorest-paid jobs. Whether an industry was organized hierarchically or by guilds, or whether a hospital was run by the state or the city, made little difference to the women who spent

or washed bedding. Women remained in these low-status positions because they often fitted their work around the life cycle of their families, moving in and out of various jobs as children were born and grew up, or as their husbands died and they remarried. Work for many women during this period was a matter of make-shifts and expedients, a pattern which some historians see continuing with only minor alterations until the twentieth century, or even until today, considering the role of ill-paid women and children in developing countries in today’s global economy.

This position stems to some degree from the feminist critique of Marxism, and its exponents have been accused of being both depressing and ahistorical. The first charge – being depressing – may be warranted, for it is one of the most common criticisms of all women’s history, not simply of certain analyses of women’s work. The second charge – being ahistorical – is not as warranted, however, for it is scholars who stress the importance of patriarchy (or the sex/gender system, or gender hierarchies, or gender structures, or whatever other term they choose to use), rather than those who deny its importance, who have over the last decades argued most forcefully for its changing nature and historical specificity. This has led Gerda Lerner and a host of feminist anthropologists, archaeologists, and political theorists such as Sylvia Walby, Peggy Sanday, Christine Gailey, Joan Gero, and Margaret Conkey to search for the origins of patriarchy, and – perhaps more prudently, and certainly with more sources – historians of more recent periods to explore its variety. They have been joined by people who may not be quite as willing to accord patriarchy the prime place, but who have also gone beyond Joan Kelly’s call for a ‘doubled vision’ (essentially gender plus class), and beyond the ‘Holy Trinity’ of race, class, and gender, to analyse axes of difference that were simply not part of historical scholarship twenty or even ten years ago, such as age, sexual orientation, place of residence, physical ability, or marital status.


23. A recent example of this is the exchange between Bridget Hill and Judith Bennett in Women’s history: a study in change, continuity and shifting self, in Women’s History Review 2 (1993): 5-23 and 173-84.


The Renaissance/early modern debate

Many of the axes of difference now standard for feminist historians are shared by our colleagues in other fields, as feminist sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology, and political science become increasingly more ‘complicated’ as well. As historians we have one more axis, of course, the one that we often accuse our colleagues in other fields of ignoring or neglecting – time. Ignoring time – being ahistorical – is perhaps the worst thing one can call a historian, which is why the charge emerges only in rather vigorous debates. I would thus like to turn directly to the issue of time in examining my third question: Do the concepts ‘Renaissance’ and ‘early modern’ apply to women’s experience, and which is more fruitful? This, of course, takes us directly back to Kelly’s original question and to its broader version: Was there a Renaissance at all?

Questions of periodization regarding this era, beginning with just what to call it, are a hot topic within both women’s history and history at large at the moment – and also, judging by Leah Marcus’s recent essay in Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies, in literary studies as well.26 An entire session at the Berkshire Conference in June 1986 dealt with just this issue: ‘Complicating Categories, Crossing Chronologies: Periodization in the History of Women from Medieval to Modern’, as the conference was held in October 1996 in Frankfurt, ‘Defining Moments: Feminist Studies in the Late Medieval/Renaissance/Early Modern Commbunard’. This debate about the term ‘Renaissance’ is certainly not new. William Bouwsma surveyed earlier discomfort with it in his potential address to the American Historical Association almost two years ago, when he felt historians’ reservations about the term’s potential to a larger ‘collapse of the traditional dramatic organization of Western history’.27 Bouwsma was writing only a year after this essay appeared, and the critique of the term coming from within history is not part of his considerations. His justification for recting the Renaissance, however, nicely captures what has affected the thinking about it.

27. The Frankfurt Conference was held in October 1996 under the title ‘Zentrum zur Erforschung der Frühen Neuzeit’ at the University of Frankfurt, ‘Geschichterperspektiven in der Frühen Neuzeit’.

feminist criticism of the label. Bouwsma advocates a return to the dramatic organization of history, with the Renaissance as a key pivotal event, important because it created an ‘anthropological vision’ that culture is a product of the creative adjustment of the human race to its varying historical circumstances rather than a function of universal and changeless nature, and the perception that culture accordingly differs from time to time and group to group. So far this sounds simply as if the Renaissance created what we now call the ‘new cultural history’, but in a rewording of his idea later in the same article, Bouwsma notes: ‘as the creator of language, man also shapes through language the only world he can know directly, including even himself... the notion of man as the creator of himself and the world was heady stuff (my emphases). I am pointing this out not to criticize Bouwsma’s gender-specific language, but to note that he was right. As countless discussions of ‘self-fashioning’ since have pointed out, it was man who was to be the creator of himself, man who was the measure of all things.28

The highly gendered nature of the Renaissance’s ‘anthropological vision’ has been a steady theme in the work of Margaret King on women humanists, Constance Jordan on Renaissance feminism, and the huge number of studies of – mostly English – women writers.29 Although it appeared originally that most of this feminist analysis of the Renaissance would be a further move away from the ‘drama of history’ (Bouwsma’s words), dethroning the Renaissance yet again, in many ways it has not. The drama is still there, but the outcome is tragically rather than triumph. The Renaissance is still the beginning of a trajectory, but that trajectory leads to Rousseau, the banning of women’s clubs in the French Revolution, the restrictions of the Napoleonic Code, and separate spheres.30

Perhaps using the term 'early modern' is the best way to escape these Renaissance trajectories, whether positive or negative? This is the route increasingly taken by historians; literary scholars are more loath to give up the Renaissance, partly, as Marcus and others have pointed out, because it allows them to preserve literature as a separate discipline in these days of ever-increasing interdisciplinarity. But even the Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, which publishes many articles on literature, has recently changed its name to Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, and early modern is definitely the term of preference among scholars of women, myself included.

Other analysts, including Bouwsma twenty years ago, have pointed to some general problems with the term 'early modern'—its assumption that there is something that can unambiguously be called 'modernity', its retaining of a notion of linear trajectory with a final act. As Judith Bennett has recently noted, many historians are questioning the 'master narrative of a great transformation' from pre-modern to modern. She uses examples from women's work experiences and other areas of life to challenge what she terms the 'assumption of a dramatic change in women's lives between 1500 and 1700' and asserts that 'women's history should ally itself with those who are questioning the master narrative' because 'the paradigm of a great divide in women's history is undermined by many factual anomalies'. Thus pre-modern and modern could join public and private, nature and culture, work and family as one of the many dichotomies women's history should reject as it complicates categories.

In conclusion: two decades of early modern women's history

Perhaps women's history should reject periodization altogether? In this it could easily latch on to the Annales school historians, who have posited a longue durée stretching from the eleventh century to the nineteenth. A period Le Roy Ladurie termed 'motionless'. In fact, as Susan Stuard has recently pointed out, women already appear in some Annales school works as the perfect example of motionless history, primarily part of a household, serving as a means of exchange between families. This approach was adopted at least in part by Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser in their survey of European women's history, for they discuss peasant women from the ninth century to the twentieth in a single section, going beyond the time-frame of even Le Roy Ladurie. Motionless indeed.

Such wholesale rejection of periodization makes me and a number of other women's historians uneasy, however. In reviewing Zinsser and Anderson's textbook, Gianna Pomata comments: 'I perceive here the shade of essentialism, the idea of an unchanging female nature.' In discussing women in Annales school works, Stuard notes: 'By such formulations gender for women, if not for men, was assumed to be a historical constant, not a dynamic category that changed in Europe's formative centuries and changed again with the transition into modern times.' But here we are back to a medieval/modern transition again! We are thus not much further than we were with Kelly twenty years ago, critiquing periodization without finding a substitute with which everyone can agree.

Though you are probably now waiting for my answer to this conundrum— I have clearly indicated my stance on the first two questions in this essay, after all— I am going to end instead with what is the standard closing of every academic study, and call for more research. I opened this book by using the words 'explosion' and 'flood' to describe the amount of research in women's history over the last two decades, but this is only in comparison with women's history in the previous two millennia. In comparison with the amount of historical scholarship out of which the standard...
schemes of periodization were developed, this is less than a trickle. We still know almost nothing about women's lives in this period — whatever we want to call it — in eastern Europe or Portugal, or about rural women in most parts of Europe. Even in areas in which it seems we must be buried in material by now — women's work in England, for example, which one would surely assume to be an over-researched field as everyone engages with Alice Clark — there has been only one book-length study of the period before 1500, none for the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries and only two for the eighteenth century. 41 No wonder Alice Clark has seen three modern reprints, and that her 1919 theories remain the chief master narrative for the field!

Though a call for more research on women might seem both depressing and unsophisticated, coming right at the time when gender has become more respectable than women as a field of research and when deconstructionist criticism has made many historians doubt their enterprise, I think that it is the only way we can develop a periodization, and a view of the past, that is drawn from the lives of women as well as men. 42 Only more studies will allow us to question all master narratives more effectively, including those we develop out of women's experience, such as the dichotomies of public/private or nature/culture which have been so forceful in women's history over the last two decades. Our categories are now much more complicated than they were twenty years ago, as we may have crossed boundaries we did not then know existed. Women's history — and feminist scholarship more generally — has asked questions that now seem self-evident, but that until recent decades were rarely asked: Did women have a Renaissance, a Reformation, an Enlightenment? What effects did development of capitalism, or industrialism, or democracy, have on women? That we can't answer all of these, or that we are less willing to answer them for all women than we were ten years ago, is a sign that we recognize how important these questions are.


42. Amanda Vickery also recently advocated more research, noting that this would no doubt be interpreted as 'proof of my naïve belief in a phantom of 'real' history living in the [Laurence Record Office]' ('Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', The Historical Journal 36/2 (1993): 414.)

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