

# THE LOST PASTS OF WOMEN'S HISTORY

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As it is practiced today, women's history mostly examines the world since 1900, with frequent glances back to 1800, and virtually no attention paid to the early modern, medieval, and ancient pasts of women.<sup>1</sup> This severe case of chronological myopia afflicts feminist scholarship generally, as well feminist history specifically. It also undermines the development of feminist theory, which is currently being built on remarkably shallow historical understandings. And it also, of course, marginalizes the work of feminist medievalists, by placing our studies outside what matters in the canon of feminist scholarship. I have no doubt that readers of the *Medieval Feminist Forum* agree that medieval scholarship is important, exciting, and productive, but our colleagues often see our work as "nothing other than antiquarian—and potentially politically incorrect—knowledge projects."<sup>2</sup> This unexamined presentism among

our feminist colleagues poses a huge challenge to feminist medieval studies, and I would like to share with *MFF* readers some brief thoughts on the problem itself, what has caused it, and how we, as feminists and medievalists, might best respond. I speak primarily from within my own discipline of history, but I hope that what I have to say will resonate for all of us, no matter what our home discipline.

## THE PROBLEM

In the main venues in which women's history is reported, discussed, and digested today, what counts as women's history is nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. The numbers in the table below are so stark that they tell the story better than words; they show that in the three main English-language journals devoted to women's history, virtually no history before 1500 is now being published:

CHRONOLOGICAL COVERAGE IN  
WOMEN'S HISTORY JOURNALS, 2001-2004

Topics By Era	<i>Gender and History</i>	<i>Journal of Women's History</i>	<i>Women's History Review</i>	Totals	Percentage
<b>Modern</b> (c. 1800-present)	74	81	96	251	87%
<b>Early Modern</b> (c. 1500-1800)	14	8	8	30	11%
<b>Premodern</b> (before 1500)	4	2	1	7	2%
<b>Total</b>	92	91	105	288	100%

NOTE: This count focused on research articles. Archive reports, forums, memorials, and other such miscellanea were excluded, as were seven articles whose chronological sweep defied categorization. If an article evenly spanned two eras, I placed it in the earlier one.

Women's history conferences also suffer from this truncated vision. At the 2003 meeting of the International Federation for Research in Women's History, 80 percent of speakers discussed the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; 11 percent treated the early modern era, and 9 percent (21 of 230 presenters at the conference) considered topics before 1500. Coverage was even worse at the 2005 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, where 88 percent of papers were modern, 9 percent early modern, and 3 percent medieval or earlier (16 of 588).

As feminist medievalists well know, this presentist trend

in women's history does not reflect a lack of research on women in earlier centuries. The study of women in early modern, medieval, and ancient cultures has flourished for decades and is flourishing today, but it is now being placed outside the mainstream of women's history. To judge from what is being published in journals and discussed at conferences, "women's history" has effectively become synonymous with "nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's history." For many feminists, the histories of women before 1800 are now lost pasts.

## CAUSES

Women's history was not always so relentlessly focused on modernity. In the 1970s, Joan Kelly's work—and particularly her electrifying question, "Did women have a Renaissance?"—profoundly shaped the development of the field.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s, the first journals devoted to feminist scholarship better balanced modern history with early modern, premodern, and transhistorical perspectives; in its first four years, for example, *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* offered four articles on topics before 1500, four articles on early modern subjects, seven articles that stretched across multiple eras, and 23 articles on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (*Signs* also then included a now defunct "Archives" section, a treasure trove of primary materials that stretched as far back, in those early years, as Hippocrates.) And in the 1970s, chronological coverage was also better at the earliest Berkshire Conferences, where Jo Ann McNamara ensured that every time slot had one session devoted to medieval topics and another to ancient topics. In the three decades that

have elapsed since this strong start, at least six factors have dimmed feminist interest in the intellectual possibilities of the distant past.

First, it is probably not accidental that the culture of the United States—where feminist scholarship has particularly flourished in the past thirty years—encourages a denigration of "Old Europe" and an admiration of all that is "new" and "modern." The presentism of U.S. culture stems partly from the self-evident fact that most U.S. History is modern history, but partly also from a nationalistic sentiment that attention to the world before 1776 harkens back to a tradition-bound, elitist, and un-American past. In such a view, any history before the revolutionary inception of U.S. democracy can easily be dismissed as irrelevant. Henry Ford put it best, in his quintessentially U.S. statement, "History is more or less bunk [. . .] the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."<sup>4</sup> Thus, one culprit in the present-ward tilt of women's history is the present-ward tilt of the national culture

within which it has most taken root in the last few decades.

Second, the historical profession itself, not just in the United States but also internationally, bears part of the blame for presentism in women's history. For members of a profession devoted to the study of the past, historians are now remarkably uninterested in most of it. As Lynn Hunt has noted, "history" in the United States and Europe little more than a century ago was mainly ancient history. But in the last few decades, twentieth-century history, once "consigned to the province of journalism," has entered the historical mainstream and taken it by storm.<sup>5</sup> As a result, when historians worldwide gathered in 2005 for the quinquennial meeting of the International Committee of Historical Sciences, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries dominated (75 percent of papers), with some attention to early modern (10 percent) and premodern (13 percent) topics. U.S.-based historians did much the same at the 2005 meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA): modern papers accounted for 75 percent

of the agenda, early modern 18.5 percent, and premodern 6.5 percent (just 38 of 592 presentations). The relentless modernity of women's history reflects, in part, the relentless modernity of practices in history more generally.

But the problem of presentism in historical practice is particularly pronounced within the history of women; note, for example, that the 2005 AHA meeting accommodated premodern topics in 6.5 percent of its presentations, whereas the 2005 Berkshire Conference managed to cover premodern topics in only 3 percent of its agenda.

My next three causes address why women's history should be particularly affected by this tilt toward the present. Some of the slippage has been encouraged by a steady chipping away at the notion that premodern eras were somehow relatively golden for women. When feminists began to advocate for women's history in the 1970s, histories of a lost golden age provided both intellectual support for a new academic field (Jakob Bachofen and Friedrich Engels

were particularly credible authorities) and inspiration for feminist political work (if women were once equal, they could be equal again). They also gave ancient, medieval, and early modern women integral roles in a feminist morality play that recounted how the primordial equality of the sexes was slowly undermined by private property, capitalism, and modernity. Even today, feminists can read popular books, attend public lectures, go on packaged tours, and buy statuary that evoke the memory of this once glorious matriarchal (or at least, sexually egalitarian) past. Yet academic women's history has abandoned this understanding of the past, and rightly so. In the 1990s, as grand narratives lost their appeal under the weight of postmodernist critique, this particular feminist narrative crumbled also under the weight of empirical research. As a result, feminists now have a distant past that is more historically plausible but less inspiring and less self-referential: a distant past that is, simply, more distant and, therefore, more easily ignored.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, history is no longer in vogue in women's studies circles. Some feminist scholars outside of history departments continue, of course, to draw on historical insights, but, as Jennifer Manion recently noted, "It is no secret that cutting edge feminist scholarship is more likely found in literature and American studies than history."<sup>7</sup> Jane Newman has similarly reported that history now has almost no sway in women's studies classrooms where the old grand narrative has been replaced by its inversion; instead of a lost golden age that feminists can work to recover, the past is now caricatured as a wretched abyss from which today's feminists have luckily escaped. In women's studies classrooms, history has little place (why bother with an abyss?), and the relevant past begins no earlier than 1945.<sup>8</sup> In such a context, the study or teaching of anything earlier becomes politically suspicious—and, at best, self-indulgent antiquarianism.

My fifth factor considers the possibility that our expanding appreciation of non-Western histories has encouraged a

waning attention to the West's distant past. In the 1970s, "sisterhood" tripped easily off our tongues, and virtually all women's history concerned Europe or North America. I think it is possible that the historical tunnel-vision of that time made it easier for us to look farther down the tunnel—only European and North American history, to be sure, but more of it. Today, studies of women in Europe and the United States still dominate women's history, but the field now extends to many more world regions than it once did. Might this expansion in spatial breadth be tied to a contraction in temporal reach? For example, *Signs* publishes today very different sorts of history from what it featured in the 1970s: proportionately less pre-1800 Western history, less history that crosses over several eras, and more non-Western and global history.<sup>9</sup> (Only the predominance of the modern West has stayed constant and, indeed, expanded a bit.) In raising this possibility of a symbiotic link between expanding geographical vision and contracting temporal depth, I do not want to revive the

"class versus gender" debates of earlier decades in a new "non-West versus early West" version. This is not an either/or situation; we need both more non-Western history and more early history (and sometimes, of course, we get both at once). But current practices in women's history suggest to me that as the vision of women's history grows more panoptic, too many feminist historians are failing to look deeply into the tunnel of time.

Lastly, we medievalists (and classicists and early modernists, too) are partly to blame for detaching ourselves from the historical discourses that now largely exclude us. The interdisciplinarity of medieval studies (and its ancient twin, classics) offers many intellectual and pedagogical benefits, but it has also encouraged us to remain apart from colleagues in more traditional disciplines. No matter in what department we might be housed, our intellectual energies often lie in cross-appointments to medieval studies programs and in the many medieval conferences and medieval journals that allow us to speak to no one

but ourselves. I think it is fair to say, for example, that most medieval historians in the United States think more about publishing in *Speculum* than in the *American Historical Review*. This interdisciplinary bent explains how medieval (and ancient) women's history can be flourishing but nevertheless eclipsed within women's history generally: studies of women before 1500 are mostly shared in conferences, journals, and books whose intended audiences are medievalists (or classicists), not historians. If we have not been talking with modernists, it is perhaps not surprising that they have not been listening to us.

#### REMEDIES

As readers of *MFF*, you are the choir for my sermon about the eclipse of premodern women within feminist scholarship. I suspect that all of us are sometimes frustrated by the darkness that descends whenever our modernist colleagues are forced to think back beyond 1800, as well as by the disinterest with which some undergraduates view the middle ages. But we will not remedy the situation by merely pointing out to dubious

colleagues and students that premodern lives are relevant to modern feminism; we need also to demonstrate this relevance to them. As feminist medievalists, we might be the victims of persistent presentism, but we can also—really, must also—confront and combat it directly.

This task requires us to reach out beyond the interdisciplinary enclave of medieval studies, both in terms of the work we do and the places in which we disseminate our work. We certainly do not want to abandon medieval studies; our interdisciplinary graduate programs provide vital technical training in such matters as philology, languages, and codicology, and our interdisciplinary journals publish extended technical discussions that would not find audiences in most discipline-bound periodicals. It immeasurably enhances the study of medieval worlds that scholars of medieval history, literature, art, philosophy, and archaeology talk so often with each other. But it is regrettable when this productive interdisciplinarity undermines our disciplinary connections; it is regrettable,

in other words, when medieval historians become so focused on matters medieval that we communicate little (or not at all) with historians of more modern centuries. Also, it is worrisome that the opportunities posed by medieval studies seem to have created a medieval/modern segregation that is dangerously comfortable on both sides. Many medievalists are content to withdraw into interdisciplinary encampments, and many modernists, tired of a distant past that seems merely “a site of pedantry and antiquarianism,” are content to be freed from sustained contact with colleagues they regard as elitist, effete, and out-of-touch.<sup>10</sup> For feminist medievalists, this comfortable segregation simply will not do.

We must try, to begin with, to break the loop (little medieval coverage → leading to fewer medieval submissions → leading to even less medieval coverage) that is now producing such pathetic treatment of medieval subjects in feminist contexts. When I have complained to editors and conference organizers about

their diminishing attention to medieval topics, their constant response is that they work with what they get and that they get precious few submissions from feminist medievalists. I think they should be responding more proactively—editors seeking out medieval submissions and defining special issues in time-inclusive ways, and program committees beating the bushes for medieval panels rather than passively reviewing what comes to them. But I also think that we cannot realistically expect non-medievalists to be very proactive on this issue and that we must, therefore, do the job ourselves. Let’s try to get ourselves into editorial and conference positions where we can do the bush-beating ourselves, and let’s also turn the trickle of medieval proposals now received in these venues into a stream. We can do it: the ever-weakening gaze of chronological myopia in feminist journals and conferences can be turned around.

Getting our work disseminated in these venues is one thing; getting it read by non-medievalists is another. I hope



we can also expand audiences for medieval feminist scholarship by pitching some of our work more explicitly toward non-medieval feminist scholars. We cannot expect our modernist colleagues to appreciate highly technical, detailed studies that engage in debates internal to medieval studies; when we do this sort of work, it still properly remains within our interdisciplinary enclave. We also cannot expect our modern colleagues to make leaps from medieval to modern on their own; we must show them the way. In 2001, E. Jane Burns (one of the founding mothers of *MFF*) published an essay in *Signs* on “Courtly Love: Who Needs it?” Burns has published many wonderfully detailed analyses of medieval French romance that she has aimed at audiences in medieval studies; in this 2001 essay, she turned her attention to non-medievalists. She caught the attention of *Signs* readers by linking medieval courtly love to the 1995 bestseller *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*; she then introduced them to the latest trends in the field; and she convincingly demonstrated that

new interpretations of gender flexibility in medieval romance can help feminists to break apart the “modern cage of rule-bound femininity.”<sup>11</sup> If more of us speak to modern audiences in this way, medieval work will not only appear in feminist journals and conferences; it might even—*mirabile dictu*—stand a chance of being read and appreciated by non-medievalists.

As medievalists, all of us would be delighted if more feminists knew more about medieval women and their cultures. But the challenge posed by the truncation of the historical vision of contemporary feminism is not just a problem of medieval marginalization. Feminist history is impoverished by inattention to the medieval past; many modernists still assume, for just one example, that contraception and birth control began in Europe sometime in the nineteenth century. And feminist theory is diminished when it is pursued without the insights generated by early history and without the theoretical benefit of the sheer distance of the distant past. Feminism has given a great deal to medieval studies in the past

thirty years; let's now return the favor by bringing back to the foreground of feminist scholarship the lost pasts of women who lived long before modernism.

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#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This commentary borrows freely from chapter 3 of my *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P and Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006). I thank Maryanne Kowaleski for reviewing a draft of this text on exceedingly short notice. Although I use "women's history" throughout, it is shorthand for "women's and gender history."

<sup>2</sup> Jane O. Newman, "The Present and Our Past: Simone de Beauvoir, Descartes, and Presentism in the Historiography of Feminism," in *Women's Studies on Its Own*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), pp. 141-173. p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly's essay on the renaissance and her other theoretical contributions to women's history were reprinted posthumously in Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Interview in *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism," *Perspectives* (newsletter of the American Historical Association) (May, 2002). Available online at: <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2002/0205/0205pre1.cfm>.

<sup>6</sup> For recent critiques of this golden age narrative, see especially: Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon, 2000); Lauren E. Talalay, "A Feminist Boomerang: The Great Goddess of Greek Prehistory," *Gender and History* 6.2 (1994): 165-183; Judith M. Bennett "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide," in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 147-175, and, in revised version, in *Feminists Revision History*, ed. Ann-Louise Shapiro (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994), pp. 47-72.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Manion, "Calling all Liberals: Connecting Feminist Theory, Activism, and History," in *Taking Back the Academy! History of Activism, History as Activism*, ed. Jim Downs and Jennifer Manion (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.145-159, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Newman, "The Present and Our Past."

<sup>9</sup> The comparative numbers for history articles, review essays, and reports in *Signs* are follows: (a) for 1975-8: Modern West, 18; Early Modern West, 4; Premodern West, 4; Transhistorical West 5; Non-Western, 7 (two transhistorical, 5 modern); Global, 0; (b) for 2001-4: Modern West, 5; Early Modern West, 1; Premodern West, 0; Transhistorical West, 0; Non-Western, 2; Global, 1.

<sup>10</sup> For a trenchant discussion on such enclaves within medieval studies, see Lee Patterson, "On the Margin:

Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,” *Speculum* 65(1990): 87-108, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> E. Jane Burns, “Courtly Love: Who Needs it? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition,” *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27.1(2001): 23-57, p. 50.



### On Various Kinds of Adornments

[. . .] In order to permanently remove hair. Take ants' eggs, red orpiment, and gum of ivy, mix with vinegar, and rub the areas.

— from the *On Women's Cosmetics* section of the *Trotula* (edited and translated by Monica H. Green)

