

# GENDER AND CHANGE

AGENCY, CHRONOLOGY AND PERIODISATION



Stages of Woman

the brink of the grave.

ed by

Alexandra Shepard and Garthine Walker

WILEY-BLACKWELL

# **Gender and Change**

## **Agency, Chronology and Periodisation**

EDITED BY

ALEXANDRA SHEPARD  
AND  
GARTHINE WALKER



**WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of Jeanne Boydston 1944–2008

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# 1 Gender, Change and Periodisation

Alexandra Shepard and Garthine Walker

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This volume marks the twentieth anniversary of *Gender & History* by revisiting and reasserting the potential of women's history and gender history both to complicate and, more fundamentally, to revise received narratives of change. As Ludmilla Jordanova has observed, periodisation hinges on the privileging of particular vantage points and the selection of 'symbolic markers' according to 'the weight given to distinct fields of human activity', and thus constitutes 'a form of classification of the past'.<sup>1</sup> Associated narratives of change are also determined by issues of scale, depending on whether the lens of analysis is focused, to use Fernand Braudel's calibration, on the *longue durée*, the *conjoncture*, or the *événementiel*, and depending on our formulation of the relationship between structure and agency.<sup>2</sup> Despite historians' oft-articulated dissatisfaction with traditional period markers associated with teleological accounts of western civilisation – 'ancient', 'medieval', 'renaissance', 'reformation', 'early modern', 'modern' – their usage persists even if the narratives recounted about them have undergone serious revision as a result of the inclusion of a wider range of historical actors and as the moral or analytical frameworks for the evaluation of change have been dismantled and/or reconfigured. The incorporation of women, and the beginnings of a broader gender analysis that encompasses masculinity, has done much to refine and challenge the characterisation of these epochs but little to question the validity of particular 'periods' as discrete units of study.

Questions of change and periodisation implicitly and explicitly informed women's history and feminist history from the beginning. The women's history that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was not only inspired by second-wave feminism but also reflected its trajectories and themes. In the UK, for instance, where historians of women frequently had ties to the political Left and the labour movement, women's history was simultaneously informed by and constituted part of developments in social and labour history. Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* (1973) began with the

words: 'This book comes very directly from a political movement'; she was motivated by the desire to 'unravel historically' questions that arose in 'the women's liberation movement and on the Left about the situation of women in contemporary capitalism'.<sup>3</sup> Such concerns had precursors in the work of early twentieth-century scholars, notably Alice Clark (1919) and Ivy Pinchbeck (1930), who investigated the impact on women's work and lives of industrialisation and technological developments. New editions of Clark's book were issued in 1968, 1982 and 1992, and Pinchbeck's in 1969, 1977 and 1981, when feminist interest in these issues was rekindled.<sup>4</sup> In the US, where feminist activism was commonly connected to the civil rights movement, much women's history of the 1960s and 1970s shared liberal concerns about women's claims to citizens' rights.<sup>5</sup> Earlier scholarship here had similarly focused on women's rights and suffrage, the *History of Women's Suffrage* (1881) being perhaps the best known example.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the 1980s, the contributions to a volume marking the state of women's history internationally, which spanned twenty-two countries and all continents, demonstrated the extent to which contemporary feminism not only stimulated women's history but also injected it with a particular flavour according to diverse national and cultural contexts.<sup>7</sup>

Histories of women inspired by feminism sought both to chart the changes over time that brought women to their present circumstances and to create change in the present in order to produce a future for them that was different from their past. The question of where women fitted into conventional accounts of change over time was rapidly reframed to ask, first, *did* women fit into such historical narratives at all, and second, were such changes positive or negative for women? Joan Kelly's 1977 essay on whether women had a Renaissance is perhaps the most-cited example. Indeed, Kelly believed that interrogating accepted schemes of periodisation from women's perspective was one of 'the tasks of women's history'. She argued that, while conventional accounts of the Renaissance presented it as a period of great cultural progress, women's legal, economic and political conditions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries deteriorated rather than improved. Kelly's work had implications for the history of the Renaissance as much as for the history of women. The association of the Renaissance as a period of great cultural progress is challenged if conditions declined for some half of the European population.<sup>8</sup> Over the past four decades, historians have applied similar questions to other centuries and regions.<sup>9</sup>

While familiar periodising categories have been declared inappropriate for the history of women, they have not usually been replaced by alternative schemas. Historians have been less diligent in investigating the role of women and gender in *constituting* change.<sup>10</sup> In work on women and gender in history, questions of periodisation and change appear often to have been jettisoned altogether in favour of continuities and stasis. Partly this

is a consequence of viewing History as a story of progress and women's emancipation as the standard by which 'progress' for women is evaluated. Hence Gerda Lerner's assertion in 1975 that 'all history as we now know it is, for women, merely pre-history'.<sup>11</sup> This not only applies to textbooks and surveys (where broad brushstrokes are typical and not reserved for women's history) but also constitutes a metanarrative favoured by certain kinds of women's history, especially that informed by radical feminism with its emphasis upon the transhistorical nature of patriarchy and women's oppression by men.<sup>12</sup> Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), for example, roared across periods and continents, finding and illuminating patriarchy's horrors in Indian sati, Chinese foot-binding, African genital mutilation, European witch burning and American gynaecology. In this story of misogyny, women are accorded little agency; or rather, their agency is punished by a society that insists upon their inferiority. For radical feminists, patriarchy, whatever form it takes, always and inevitably insists upon the oppression of women by men. Change over time from this perspective was insignificant as, over the centuries, patriarchy merely shifted to oppress women in new ways. Some forms of women's history did allow for the potential of women's agency and change within existing social, economic and political structures. Liberal feminists, for instance, emphasised the role of education in bringing about change in women's status relative to men, while socialist feminists viewed such change as the desired and possible outcome of a broader restructuring of economic and political life.

From the outset, historians of women lamented the inadequacies, limitations and inapplicability of existing explanatory and theoretical frameworks within academic history.<sup>13</sup> Women's history played a key role in the development of new methods and approaches to historical research in dialogue with practitioners of the then 'new' social history, the Annales School, and feminist scholars in other disciplines. Historians of women were also at the cutting edge of historical research in the 1980s and 1990s. One such development was that of comparative women's histories across nations and continents as well as time. The International Federation for Research in Women's History/Fédération internationale pour la recherche de l'histoire des femmes was founded in 1987 in order to foster such comparisons. Another was the cultural or linguistic turn, as historians of women, sexuality and masculinity were among the first to explore the implications of linguistic theories – especially post-structuralism – for History as a discipline.

The emergence of 'gender' as an analytic category is often associated with this shift as if there was a linear evolution from a focus on feminism (politics) to women (specialised history) to gender (theory). But this is an oversimplification of a far more complex trajectory.<sup>14</sup> However defined,

historians continue to explore and publish research categorised as women's and as gender history and, in many instances, the distinction between them is false. The concept of gender was not new in 1986 when Joan Scott first published her essay on gender as a category of historical analysis (nor did she claim it to be). Nor did it 'replace' or sideline women's history. In fact, both *Gender & History* and *The Journal of Women's History* were founded in 1989, and *Women's History Review* followed three years later. Issues of gender – the consequences of being male or female, the meanings ascribed to femininity and masculinity, the manner in which those categories are constructed, the practical repercussions of gendered language and concepts, and the relation of gender to power – were already present in women's history and feminist scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

The category of gender was most thoroughly defined and theorised for historians by Joan Scott in 1986, and rapidly became the most popular tool employed to dig deeper below the top soil that earlier women's historians had turned up.<sup>16</sup> Scott's article is one of the most cited historical works of its time, leading to comparisons with E. P. Thompson in terms of its influence on the discipline in general.<sup>17</sup> So great an impact has her definition had that twenty years later, the editors of one volume of gender history describe the concept of gender in Scott's words without acknowledgement in either the text or notes.<sup>18</sup> Scott's achievement was not to invent 'gender' but to define and theorise it as an analytic category in a more nuanced and sophisticated way than historians had done hitherto, and to present a *method* of analysing the concept at work in any historical period. A great strength of this definition and approach lies in its potential to identify and analyse not only gender but also other categories such as class, race, religion, ethnicity, or any other form of difference, and – crucially – the ways in which they operate together discursively to legitimate or undermine historically specific relationships of power. Gender thus offered a lens by which historians could explore not only relations between the sexes, women, or sexuality, but also markets, classes, diplomacy and, indeed, masculinity. An approach that disrupted what seemed to be fixed oppositions such as nature/culture and public/private, and the analysis of how such language and concepts changed over time and in different contexts, did allow for agency and change. However, not everybody has interpreted Scott's argument in this way.

The most heated responses to Scott's work are perhaps from those who made little or no distinction between her debt to post-structuralism and what they believed to be the grave implications for the discipline of History of post-structural linguistic theory in its purest form. In particular, critics suggested that the kind of gender history advocated by Scott locked women into a position of inferiority via binary oppositions in language, which allowed no room for change and, therefore, agency on the part of women and

other subaltern groups. A category of analysis that privileged language (and representations) rather than experience (and reality) at its heart was both 'difficult' and 'dangerous' when applied to women's history.<sup>19</sup> Some works of gender history may seem to (re)produce a history of gender that looks very much the same no matter which century or culture is examined. This, however, reflects a broader methodological shift that is not confined to gender historians. The cultural turn has brought with it losses as well as gains. While the influence of post-structuralism, literary and cultural theory, and symbolic anthropology has generated qualitative and textual analyses of particular historical moments, there is little attempt to explain change over time in much historical writing. It is perhaps this, rather than the concept of gender *per se*, that distinguishes much recent gender history from the women's history of the 1970s. Yet change and periodisation were already thorny problems within women's history: the tendency to measure change in terms of either progress or decline, liberation or repression, or alternatively to see these issues as transhistorical; the recognition that the category of 'woman'/'women' itself collapsed in the face of the plurality of women's experiences that defied generalisation about 'the position of women' and therefore its measurement over time. The fact that gender history proved not necessarily to solve all of these problems is not simply a matter of 'gender' leading us astray from what was otherwise a clearly lit path.

Neither have questions of chronology and periodisation been at the forefront of the history of masculinity since its dramatic growth out of the 'new men's studies' of the 1980s. Some of the blame can again be laid at the door of the 'new' cultural history. Emerging alongside the cultural turn, the history of masculinity has emphasised the multiplicity and contingency of male identities, rather than a category that might be traced in a singular way across a linear time scale, and has prioritised representation above the material and subjective realities of men's lives which provide the key to understanding historical agency and the link to questions of causation. As Laura Lee Downs has put it, 'without some way of connecting discursive process to social experience, historians are hard put to *explain* how the meanings of masculine and feminine might shift over time' – let alone how gender has been a constitutive part of wider processes of transition.<sup>20</sup> The most ambitious account of change over time has been undertaken not by a historian, but by the sociologist R. W. Connell, in an attempt to identify the long-term roots of hegemonic forms of contemporary Euro/American masculinity in the Reformation, the rise of individualism, and the relentless engine of imperialism.<sup>21</sup> As Konstantin Dierks has observed, the history of masculinity has tended to work within received metanarratives rather than engage or challenge them.<sup>22</sup>

This general diversion from issues of chronology and periodisation is reflected in the content and coverage of *Gender & History* over the last



twenty years. The inaugural volume of the journal included very little discussion of matters of change, with historiographical essays reflecting primarily on the relationship between women's history and gender history, alongside innovatory work in the history of masculinity. While less concerned with challenging established chronologies than with staking out a feminist agenda for the analysis of enduring systems of patriarchal oppression, Judith M. Bennett's landmark essay in that volume implicitly invoked the *longue durée* as the appropriate time-span for gender historians – a point to which she returns in her reflections below.<sup>23</sup> However, subsequent contributors have mostly retained narrower and largely conventional timeframes. One notable exception by Julia M. H. Smith, examining the place of women in the extensive cultural adaptation associated with the transformation of the Roman world, demonstrates the potential of gender history to illuminate key phases of transition without sacrificing complexity or resorting to generalisations about the position of women.<sup>24</sup> Several other essays have similarly sought to integrate gender analysis to enrich existing accounts of change, for example in relation to class formation and its associated modes of capitalist patriarchy, or the reconfiguration of the medieval into the early modern Italian church.<sup>25</sup> Yet the challenges of reshaping established chronologies, while repeatedly lauded as a goal of gender history, have largely been overshadowed by the more urgent imperative of widening coverage in order both to reflect the myriad forms of gender construction and varied experiences of women and men, and to counter the Euro- and US-centrism of gender analysis.<sup>26</sup> *Gender & History* has arguably achieved more success in broadening its geographical than chronological coverage with reference to its stated aims of displacing periodisation based on the dominant narratives associated with the post-Enlightenment west.<sup>27</sup> The only period term to receive any sustained critical engagement within the journal's covers is 'modernity'.<sup>28</sup>

This celebratory volume was envisaged as an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which gender analysis suggests alternative chronologies to conventional periodisation.<sup>29</sup> More fundamentally, the chapters it features explore the ways in which gender functioned as a force of endurance or transition in the past, and the ways in which it might have been constitutive rather than merely reflective of either continuity or change. It seems a fitting tribute to twenty years of *Gender & History* to engage with questions at the heart of the discipline of history as a means of showcasing the contribution gender analysis can make to our characterisation and classification of the past. In the chapters that follow, this has involved not only the rejection of some period markers and the confirmation of others, but also the interrogation of some of the foundational narratives of change associated both with women's history and the shifting construction of gender categories over time. Further, it has generated some theoretical discussion of both how we

are to approach women's agency in the past and how we might best deploy the concept of gender as a category of analysis in ways that avoid partiality and anachronism. Obviously, constraints of space mean that we cannot offer exhaustive coverage of these wide-ranging questions and what follows is both geographically and chronologically limited to a few select (albeit as varied as possible) times and places. Sadly, geographical breadth in this instance has given way to chronological depth, despite our many efforts to solicit articles with a non-western and more global range. However the chapters gathered here demonstrate the rich possibilities for rethinking the central tenets of European historiography – including several foundational claims of women's and gender history – even from within the perspectives generated by western scholarship. And the many general reflections on methods for the classification of change and its implications for the interrogation of gender as a category will be of relevance to periods and regions that are not represented here. It is therefore hoped that this collection of chapters will both re-open questions that were of fundamental importance to first- and second-wave feminist scholarship and stimulate further investigation both under and beyond the umbrella of gender history.

With one exception, the contributions that directly interrogate conventional chronologies reject rather than confirm the integrity of period markers in the light of gender analysis. Lynda L. Coon's exploration of early medieval 'somatic styles' challenges both the notion of a 'rupture' between classical antiquity and the so-called 'Dark Age' and the assumption of an alien pre-Enlightenment sexuality based on a 'one-sex' model of the body against which a 'modern' sex/gender system has frequently been juxtaposed, emphasising the eclectic and varied use of classical medical teachings even by the clerical elites whose voices dominate the sources surviving from the seventh to tenth centuries. Investigating the more recent past, Padma Anagol demonstrates how historiographical privileging of the nationalist response to imperialism in modern Indian history has obfuscated women's agency under colonial rule and created a truncated account and inadequate appreciation of feminism in India and the broader formation of Indian subjectivities. Anagol's chapter provides a model of the problems generated by gender-blind scholarship and the legacy of its chronological frameworks that, in this instance, actively inhibit analysis of women's agency. Critical too of discursive approaches to gender for their neglect of female agency and their lack of chronological moorings, Anagol goes on to place gender relationships at the heart of the formation of modern India, stressing its deep roots in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a corrective to an undue emphasis on the period from 1885 to 1947. Kevin Passmore is similarly critical of the way in which political religions' theorists, explaining the rise of fascism as a feature of the transition between tradition and modernity, have afforded no space for

women's agency. Cast as the embodiment of tradition on the basis of femininity's timelessness, women are associated with passivity and superstition in order to draw a distinction between the compliant (feminised) masses and the masculine elite. Passmore traces these assumptions back to the totalitarianism theory of the 1950s and 1960s and, more fundamentally, to the canonical thinkers of the sociological tradition from which political religions theory derives. Moreover, Passmore warns that conventional sociology presents a problematic legacy that also risks being unheeded by gender historians.

The one conventional period marker that receives any defence amongst the chapters below is 'early modernity'. While happy to dispense with the organising principles and disciplinary boundaries associated with the term 'Renaissance', Merry Wiesner-Hanks argues that there certainly was an 'early modern' period for European women and that gender analysis is critical to understanding the key transitions with which it is associated – in particular the Reformation, military revolution, and the dramatic intensification of global interaction. Wiesner-Hanks is concerned not to render women's history 'motionless' over the *longue durée* by contrast to the changes deemed definitive in men's lives, and argues not only that women's as well as men's lives were transformed by the key events associated with early modernity but also that women were key agents and gender played a constitutive role in these changes. These conclusions are given further weight by Martha Howell's chapter on the commercial expansion associated with the early modern west. The commercial revolution, she argues, was accompanied and *enabled* by the creation of a class-specific, normative gender binary that newly afforded honourable masculinity to the merchant by realigning production with the male householder citizen and domesticating (and thereby taming) consumption as the purview of the virtuous wife. Gender was inextricably bound up with, and a dynamic force in, the creation of the class identity of the European bourgeoisie.

Alongside concerns with conventional periodisation, several of the contributors are sceptical about some of the foundational narratives of change and accompanying chronologies produced by women's history and gender history. Monica H. Green takes to task western feminist narratives concerning the history of women's healthcare, and rejects the categorisation of the late medieval period or (more loosely) a pre-modern era as a 'golden age' for European women's medical practices in relation to reproductive health. Such accounts have come about, she argues, from a politically motivated and polarising perspective that has produced a partial story shaped by a moral framework which accords liberating potential to the deeds of women and patriarchal oppression to the activities of men on the basis of distorted evidence and, ultimately, in the face of improving medical



outcomes. Lynn Abrams wrestles with the stranglehold that the dominant narrative of 'separate spheres' has placed on the history of women in modern Europe and the paradox created by this model's failure to represent women's sense of their own past within local contexts. Exploring what happens when women's voices are prioritised by historians, Abrams seeks a path through the dissonance created by the relationships between the general and the particular, the mainstream and the margins that leads her to more than a simple confirmation of the heterogeneity of female experience. Rather than a timeless exception to a European rule, Shetland women's accounts of their own agency offer a situational corrective to the narratives told about modern European women and, more importantly, to the methodologies by which they are constructed.

Perhaps one of the most entrenched, albeit widely contested, narratives of change (re)produced by gender history has its roots in Thomas Laqueur's argument that eighteenth-century Europe witnessed a fundamental shift in the construction of the sexed body as a 'pre-modern', 'one-sex' model – based on a male–female hierarchical continuum – was replaced by a 'modern', 'two-sex' system of incommensurable difference.<sup>30</sup> Dror Wahrman revisits these claims, and the counter-arguments they have produced that emphasise either long-term continuities or enduring synchronic diversity (and which are also represented here in the chapters by Lynda Coon and Monica Green). He does so less to adjudicate the merits of each side of the argument than to explore the relationship between gender history and cultural history and the methodological and conceptual limits of the latter's 'uncompromising constructivism' which, he argues, lacks explanatory force when confronted with evidence of long-term continuity. Breaking one of the persistent taboos of feminist history against naturalising the body, Wahrman challenges gender historians to undertake a 'corporeal critique' in order to explore 'where the culturally constructed ends and the ahistorical and extra-cultural begins; and thus, most importantly, how they relate to each other'. This involves widening the lens of analysis to encompass the deep historical perspective afforded by neurohistory – an example of which Wahrman offers to complement other such forays on the basis of psychoanalysis or evolutionary psychology.

Jeanne Boydston's chapter is also concerned with the conceptual limits of gender analysis, but prescribes attending to local particularity above deep historical continuity. Claiming that gender's status as a 'category of analysis' risks ahistoricism by reifying a contemporary, western epistemological order, Boydston argues that we should instead approach gender as 'historical process' and historicise gender as a concept. If gender is the product of social constructionism, then it should behave differently across time and space. The appearance of long-term continuity for Boydston, then, is a chimera that has been produced by the inability of the category