

A HISTORY OF THEIR OWN

WOMEN IN EUROPE
FROM PREHISTORY
TO THE PRESENT
VOLUME I



"A richly textured account...that leaves me overwhelmed with admiration for our foremothers' ability to survive with dignity."
—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

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BONNIE S. ANDERSON

As a woman who came to work in women's history in the early 1970s, I have been fortunate to be part of the supportive and sustaining networks of feminist scholars that make New York City such a marvelous place to be. The Curriculum Committee of the Columbia University Women's Liberation Movement enabled me to become a feminist; the CCWHP (Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession), New York City branch, enabled me to become a feminist historian of women. There I met Joan Kelly, whose vision and energy were inspiring. She supported this project in its early stages, as she nurtured so many other endeavors in women's history. Her scholarship helped shape my own and I have missed her deeply.

The New School of Liberal Arts and the Women's Studies Program at Brooklyn College first provided me with an academic home in which I could teach women's history and meet with other feminist scholars. During the

writing of this book, I belonged to the Columbia University Seminar on Women and Society, the Women's History Group of the Institute for Research in History, and the German Women's History Study Group. All provided the encouragement and support of other women scholars as well as the fun and excitement of shared learning.

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JUDITH P. ZINSSER

Everything in my professional life began at Bryn Mawr College where I learned about scholarship, determination, and the wisdom of patience. Over the years friends among the faculty, the administration, and the alumnae have always made me feel a valued, competent, independent woman. Katharine McBride, Caroline Robbins, Mary Maples Dunn, Phyllis Goodhart Gordan, and Barbara Thacher gave of their time and energy to help in the

realization of many projects. This book is but the most recent and represents for me repayment of a debt to them and to the institution.

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Introduction

Questions

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the French courtier and writer Christine de Pizan started her *Book of the City of Ladies* by calling attention to a disparity between the image of women presented by men and her own experience of women. While the men concluded that “the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice,” Pizan decided otherwise. “Thinking deeply about these matters,” she wrote:

I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman, and, similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes, who had graciously told me of their most private and intimate thoughts, hoping that I could judge impartially and in good conscience whether the testimony of so many notable men could be true. . . . I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women.¹

This book arose from perceptions of a similar disparity—the disparity between our own growing knowledge of women and their activities both past and present, and the almost total absence of women from the pages of history books. To rectify the adverse effects of centuries of vilification and misrepresentation, Christine de Pizan wrote a defense of women and chronicled the lives of the powerful and virtuous, from Eve to the Queen of France, her patron. To counter the subtly denigrating myth that women either “have no history” or have achieved little worthy of inclusion in the historical record, we have written these two volumes: a history of women in Europe.

These myths and false impressions were standard when we trained as European historians in the late 1960s. Then we did not think of questioning the traditional periodization, the accepted perspectives, and the masculine gender of the principal figures in history. Only the work and protests of

scholars and activists in the 1960s and 1970s caused many in the academic community to reconsider the ways in which history itself had been defined and delimited.

Historians like Joan Kelly and Gerda Lerner called attention to two important ways in which traditional history had distorted women's past. History, they argued, both left women out and was structured so as to make it virtually impossible to include them. Traditional periods reflected men's experiences; when women's were different, they were deemed insignificant and omitted. The resulting history presented "the quarrels of popes and kings," but had "hardly any women at all," as Jane Austen's heroine complains in *Northanger Abbey*. Following Kelly and Lerner's pioneering efforts, many historians began to discover the history of women. Since 1970, research and scholarship on women in Europe has produced hundreds of works.

We decided to synthesize this scholarship and write a narrative history of women in Europe. We began by asking questions, and these questions shaped the structure and content of these volumes. First, we wondered, what had ordinary women done as the "history" that excluded them unfolded? How had they lived? What tasks filled their days? What motivated their actions and determined their attitudes? Second, we questioned the startling contrasts between women's and men's lives in the same eras. How had women come to be, in the phrasing of the United Nations Decade for Women Reports of 1985, "the disadvantaged, invisible majority?"² Why had laws, economic systems, religion, and politics excluded European women from the most valued areas and activities of life? How had cultural attitudes evolved which defined women as innately inferior and placed them in a subordinate relationship to men? Why had men done this? And, perhaps even more importantly, why had women accepted or been forced to accept these limitations which devalued their activities, denigrated their nature, and subordinated them to men?

Third, we wondered about the commonality of gender. Did gender unite all women? What, if anything, linked a peasant raising her children in twelfth-century France to a craftswoman selling her wares in fifteenth-century Nuremberg to a university graduate contemplating a profession in late nineteenth-century England? Next, we looked at the "exceptions"—those women who had achieved prominence and were included in traditional histories: Heloise, Joan of Arc, Catherine the Great, Florence Nightingale, Marie Curie. Why had these women gained recognition? Were they exceptions because of their character or historical circumstance? Finally, we studied those women like Christine de Pizan who first became aware of women's disadvantaged and denigrated status. Why did some women come to question all women's subordination? How did they come to identify with women and

work for expanded opportunities for women? How and why did feminism begin and where might it lead, as it calls into question the basic values of European culture and society?

Our answers to these questions changed our entire view of European history. As Minna Cauer, the German feminist, wrote when she researched women's lives in the 1880s,

Often I was so deeply upset by it [women's history] that I did not want to read further. And then again, all seemed so wonderful, for I told myself: if all that is beneficial and all that is horrible which women have done in the world were included as a factor in history, how different history must be and seem!³

Answers

The central thesis of this book is that gender has been the most important factor in shaping the lives of European women. Unlike men, who have been seen as divided by class, nation, or historical era, women have traditionally been viewed first as women, a separate category of being. We came to this thesis reluctantly. Trained in traditional European history, we first assumed that differences between eras, between classes, and between nations would be as important for women as they were for men, that the gulf between a woman in medieval Europe and a woman in modern Europe, between a female aristocrat and a female day laborer, between an Englishwoman and a Russian woman would be as great as for their male equivalents. Our historical investigations proved this false. While differences of historical era, class, and nationality have significance for women, they are outweighed by the similarities decreed by gender. As the French socialist Louise Michel wrote in 1885, it has been "painful" for us "to admit that we are a separate caste, made one across the ages," but as we compared our findings from studies of different eras, classes, and nations, no other conclusion was possible.⁴ Over and over, we found constants based on gender shaping women's lives. Being born female is the first factor that defines women's experience, separates it from men's, and gives a basic commonality to the lives of all European women.

The second factor key to women is that, until very recently, all women were defined by their relationships to men. Many women—far many more than men—remain in the historical record only as men's women. The daughters of Priam, Lot's wife, the mother of the Maccabees are but a few of the earliest examples. And a woman is first identified as her father's daughter, her husband's wife or widow, her son's mother. No matter what the era in European history, what their class or social rank, what their nationality or

ethnic group, most women have lived their lives as members of a male-dominated family. Even those who joined religious orders were defined by their rejection of earthly marriage and were seen as the "brides of Christ." As a member of a family, a woman's primary functions and roles have been dictated by family. Child rearing and maintenance of the household have been seen as women's preordained, biologically appropriate tasks.

Defining women's primary duties as care of the family and the home have not precluded other work. In all historical eras, the vast majority of European women have labored at other chores and assumed other responsibilities. They have worked in the fields. They have earned wages. They have generated additional income for their families. Weeding, reaping, sewing, knitting, cleaning others' homes, raising others' children, working in factories or offices, women's labor has made the continuance of their families possible. This "double burden" of caring for a family and home and earning additional income has characterized the lives of most European women and differentiated them from men. It is women, not men, who have these multiple responsibilities and must find work compatible with these duties or arrange for substitutes to care for their children and their household while they earn income.

In addition, "women's work," whether in the home or outside of it, has traditionally been valued less and considered less important than men's work. Raising children and maintaining the home have been taken for granted and have never been valued as much as labor that men perform, whatever it may be. Paid labor available to women has usually been less prestigious than men's, has traditionally required less formal training, and has been more vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy. As a result, when they have been paid for their work, women have consistently received between one half and two thirds of what men earn. Sometimes connected by scholars to different economic systems, this factor has always been present in European history. In reckonings of female and male worth in the Old Testament, in the manor rolls of noble households, in account books of sixteenth-century merchants, in wage receipts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century factories, women received less than men. The amount which they are paid may vary; labor shortages or economic regulations may raise women's wages, but so far, they have rarely equaled those of men. All of these factors shaping women's work have limited European women's lives by curtailing their opportunities and resources.

Some women have been able to avoid these limits. A woman from a propertied Christian family could join a religious order. Wealthy and aristocratic women traditionally hired other women to care for their children and to assist in running their households. Some royal women ruled as queens in their own right. A few talented women achieved as artists and writers. But

all European women, whether queens or nuns, aristocrats or peasants, craftswomen or artists, were subject to yet another constraining factor—to European culture's largely negative views of women. Considered innately flawed, less valuable, and thus inferior to men, all women were supposed to be subordinate to men. This subordination seemed part of the natural order. A woman who did rule over men, who held a dominant role, whether from a throne or within a family, was seen as "unwomanly," as dangerous to the universe's natural hierarchy which made man come first.

These cultural views, expressed in the earliest writings of the Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews, changed remarkably little over time. The biblical injunction to Eve that "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16) is repeated in every era and every European nation. The view that "the best woman is she who is silent"—first written down in ancient Greece—reappears often in European men's writings about women. The assumption that only men are truly human—that "a hen is not a bird and a woman is not a person" as the Russian proverb puts it—echoes throughout European history. No woman could escape the impact of these views completely. Of all the factors that have limited women's lives, these negative cultural traditions have proved the most powerful and the most resistant to change.

Despite these limits and restrictions, European women consistently worked to give value to their lives. Many took pleasure and pride in their reproductive and nurturing role, in their tasks, however mundane, in sustaining the generations with their labor. Many claimed spiritual or moral authority as women, drawing on those religious or ethical traditions that empowered women rather than subordinated them. Most did not rebel, or their rebellion left no traces in the historical record. For the ideology of women's inferiority was so deeply integrated into the fabric of both women's and men's lives that few questioned it. European women have not, however, been victims. Rather, unable to see beyond their culture's attitudes, they have mastered the strategies of those in subordinate positions: manipulating, pleasing, enduring, surviving. Most European women took comfort in the institution of the male-dominated family, which guaranteed them subsistence, gave them a partner for life, and provided them with a sense of being protected from forces beyond their control.

But many also did more, giving beauty, value, and power to their lives despite the disadvantages of gender. In the process, they created magnificence: Sappho's poetry, Hildegard of Bingen's visions, Mary Wollstonecraft's defense of women, Paula Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits. Sadly, much of women's creation has been anonymous and evanescent: the basket of willow branches created to gather food, the weaving in hand-dyed wools that clothed

Europeans in the early centuries, the lace tablecloth for a daughter's trousseau, the household objects and children's toys designed to make life easier and more pleasant. And just as so many of the objects created by women have vanished, so too have women's lives. Absent from the record of men's activities and achievements, European women have never had a history of their own.

Methods of Organization

Undercounted and underrecorded, women have left far fewer traces than men in the historical record. This is one of the most significant consequences of the negative cultural attitudes about women. For if history is defined as the deeds of men and little value is given to the actions of women, then women's lives become "ahistorical," lived outside of the world of masculine achievements. Women will seem to have no significance, and the record of their past will be lost. But women do have a history that can be pieced together once new categories have been framed and new research completed. In addition, we and other historians of women have developed a new perspective that includes women by definition. For example, to remind ourselves and our readers that women are the focus of this history, we have reversed traditional patterns of expression. We write of "women and men," "queens and kings," "mothers and fathers." This simple step is but one way to counter the weight of a male-oriented past and male-dominant modes of expression.

Changing the use of language was the start. More had to be done to give European women their history. When we searched for the facts of women's lives in the past, we discovered a wealth of material, whole new areas of study and research, subject matter for thousands of doctoral dissertations. But this material loses significance if it is simply placed within traditional historical periodization, founded on the experience of men. "One of the tasks of women's history is to call into question accepted schemes of periodization. . . ." wrote Joan Kelly, "There was no renaissance for women—at least, not during the Renaissance."⁵ Continuing to use the Renaissance as a historical period forced women's lives into male categories and distorted their experience by defining them negatively, as lacking what men had or for not achieving what men did. Such traditional historical periodization makes the vast majority of women disappear. Their lives become lost, and only the limits on them seem a fit subject for historical discourse.

To place women at the center and make sense of their experiences meant reconceptualizing European history so that we could understand what history would be like "if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define," as Gerda Lerner writes.⁶ We used the concepts of

“place” and “function” to see women in this way. Looking at women’s place within the geographic and institutional context, we concentrated on women’s functions within European society. Whole new categories of organization emerged. Peasant women, for instance, became a group whose similarities in European history outweighed their differences in circumstances or across the centuries. Women within the Christian churches constituted another category united across nations and time. In the modern era, these new categories of place and function sometimes coincided with class: the experiences of middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth century differed so markedly from those of working-class women that they constituted separate categories of women. We called them “Women of the Salons and Parlors” and “Women of the Cities,” expressing our focus on place as well as function. The lives of working-class women in the cities differed greatly from those of “Women of the Fields,” the peasants, so they fell into separate categories, even though the same woman may have lived first in the countryside and then in the city.

Within these new categories, the same historical event may appear more than once, viewed from the different perspectives of different groups of women. Industrialization affected working-class and middle-class women very differently—it appears in both chapters as well as at the end of the chapter on peasant women. The same is true of numerous events: the Renaissance itself, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the World Wars.

As traditional historical periods and events receded in significance, others grew in importance. Factors often ignored in histories of men, whether contraception or clothing, diseases or the design of houses proved crucial in women’s lives. Use of sources changed as well. Since so few works of women survived, especially in the earlier periods, we used women’s poems, plays, and paintings as sources as well as their wills, diaries, and letters. We drew on the work of anthropologists, folklorists, archaeologists, and sociologists as well as historians. This book could not have been written without the prior work of hundreds of scholars, most of them women, working to rediscover European women’s history and their experience in the present. This research provides the foundation of our narrative.

Although we began in prehistory, examining the question of the origins of traditions pertaining to women, the focus of these volumes is on Europe from the ninth century A.D. to the present. We defined “Europe” strictly in terms of geography, not examining cultures in Africa, the Americas, or the Middle East. We present the lives of European peasant women first, for they made up the vast majority of the female population well into the eighteenth century. Part II, “Women of the Fields,” surveys peasant women’s lives, emphasizing the constants in their experience rather than local differences

in geography, patterns of landholding, or trade. Part III, "Women of the Churches," analyzes the experiences of women within the Christian religion and its institutions. Christianity provided women with a unique environment best understood as a separate category. Part IV, "Women of the Castles and Manors," argues that the lives of Europe's noblewomen from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries are connected because of their elite status and their function as "custodians of land and lineage." While these women sometimes acquired power and acted in the place of men, they also remained vulnerable because of their gender. Part V, "Women of the Walled Towns," distinguishes urban women of the twelfth to seventeenth centuries from their rural counterparts. From the poorest day laborer to the wealthiest merchant's wife, townswomen participated in the significant economic developments of their era, the formation of guilds and the evolution of commercial capitalism. Neither, however, freed them from the constraints of circumstance and attitude that traditionally limited women's economic lives. Part VI, "Women of the Courts," argues that the growth of dynastic monarchies and the development of elaborate court life provided some women with opportunities to become educated, to write, to achieve political influence, and to rule. Royal and court women of the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries were united by their common environment of the court. Part VII, "Women of the Salons and Parlors," examines the lives of middle- and upper-class women from the late seventeenth century to the present. Despite attitudes, laws, and economic constraints that sought to confine these women to their homes, some overcame the obstacles and won new authority and new roles for themselves and others. Part VIII, "Women of the Cities," deals with the lives of urban working-class women in the same era, focusing on their participation in the economic and political movements of these centuries. "Women of the Cities" parallels "Women of the Fields." Together these sections examine the lives of the two most numerous categories of women: peasants and urban laborers. Placing their lives at the beginning and end of the volumes reflects our belief in the primacy and significance of these women, so often ignored by conventional histories.

Parts I and IX mirror each other and provide a framework for the other sections. They exist because of traditions pertaining to women which we found recurring throughout the centuries. When Europe emerged as a separate entity in the ninth century, a wealth of traditions about women and their relationship to men had already been established. Part I, "Traditions Inherited," surveys this legacy of Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Celtic, Germanic, and Christian traditions about women. Examining the question of the origins of institutions and customs, it argues that the cultural legacy, the many traditions subordinating women, proved crucial in shaping the lives of European women of future generations. In the same way, once women began to ques-

tion these constraining institutions, customs, and attitudes, they also forged a tradition. Part IX, "Traditions Rejected," is a history of European feminism from the fifteenth century to the present. Its thesis is that feminism originated as a rejection of traditions that limited women, and that this process of rejection led to the creation of a feminist view of the world which is still being elucidated and realized.

While volume I focuses on the centuries before 1600 and volume II on those after, this division is not rigid. Chronology is not the organizing principle of this history of women; the categories of place and function demarking women's lives are. Thus, "Women of the Fields" ends with a consideration of peasant women's lives in Europe today, although it is located in volume I. "Women of the Courts," although it is the first section in volume II, considers the centuries before 1600 to explain the origins of the system of absolute monarchy and to describe the courtly world of Burgundy and Renaissance Italy. The two volumes complement each other and were designed to be read together, as a whole.

Choices

Even in a work of this scope and length, we could not give the same attention to the diversities of European women's experiences in different centuries, different nations, and different patterns of development. For instance, in dealing with subjects like the growth of commercial capitalism and its importance in women's lives, the similarities in women's experiences, not the different rates of change in different regions, have been emphasized. The same is true of such topics as the role of Christianity and its later secularization, the growth of dynastic monarchies, class formation, industrialization, and urbanization. Readers primarily interested in these topics should turn to specialized histories.

While we have tried not to emphasize distinctions, so we have not attempted to survey all women in all nations in all eras. In dealing with the French Revolution, we examine Frenchwomen, in dealing with industrialization, Englishwomen. We focus as much as possible on the lives of ordinary women, the women of the people, the women of the masses. Familiar heroines also appear, but they are often used to illustrate the lives of women like themselves. Joan of Arc is seen as an exceptional peasant woman; Queen Mary Tudor, known as "Bloody Mary," as a woman empowered by her Catholic faith. Some women's history could only be suggested because so much remains to be researched. For instance, the women who joined religious orders are only beginning to be studied systematically, and almost nothing has been written about their experiences in the nineteenth century.

We are aware of these gaps in the narrative, but they are for later

historians to fill. Much remains to be done. We hope to leave our readers unsatisfied, eager to learn more, full of questions. The lives of European women await further exploration and interpretation by this and subsequent generations of historians.

Benefits

In the course of our research we hoped to find a "Golden Age" for women, a time when European women were not subordinated to and valued less than men. While the possibility of a matriarchal culture in prehistory cannot be completely ruled out, we discovered no era in the historical past in which women dominated. In addition, the unequal relationship between women and men, present at the beginnings of history in Europe, intensified as time went on. The early nineteenth century marked the nadir of European women's options and possibilities. In earlier centuries, alternative authorities and customs, as well as regional, governmental, and religious variations created a range of circumstances that enabled some European women to achieve relative independence and relative dominance. Gradually, however, changes in government, law, economy, and religion tending toward centralization, rationalization, and uniformity worked to limit women's lives further and deprive most of them of powers and opportunities available to some women in earlier eras.

The centuries from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment broadened the possibilities for men, giving more men access to education and choices in occupation. They did the opposite for women. New national law codes denied women control of their property and earnings, gave primary authority within the family to the husband alone, outlawed any efforts by women to control their fertility, and barred women from higher education and professional training. During these centuries, the cultural ideals of the sexes became increasingly polarized. The image of the "angel in the house," the woman happily limited to the care of her home and children, idealized a very restricted life for women. The reality was different: most women continued to earn income, some "angels of the house" created paths out of the parlor and into the world, but the ideal remained for women of all classes and in all circumstances. The creation of women's movements in the nineteenth century was in part a response to this perceived narrowing of women's options. In the twentieth century, women's own efforts have changed the laws and institutions. Some improvements in science and technology have also widened women's options anew. While many limits still remain, most European women today enjoy full rights of citizenship, have access to education and employment, live longer, and face fewer risks from sexual activity

and childbearing than women in earlier ages. As the anthropologist Kathleen Gough observes, "It is not necessary to believe myths of a feminist Golden Age in order to plan for parity in the future."⁷

It is our hope that this book will contribute to the further realization of that parity. As Louise Otto-Peters, the German feminist, wrote in 1849:

The history of all times, and of today especially, teaches that . . . *women* will be forgotten if they forget to think about themselves.⁸

For too long, women have had no written memory of themselves. There can be no equality when more than half of humankind is without a history. This book details the lives of European women, the acknowledged and the unrecognized, from prehistory to the present. In this way the most subtle of Europe's traditions about women—the devaluing of women's lives, women's activities, and women's achievements—can be challenged and dispelled.

The benefits will be for women and for men. Learning the history of women changes irrevocably one's view of the past. "History" can never be the same again. Traditional approaches to history must be adjusted and augmented to include the female as well as the male. The result will be a retelling of the human past enriched and made complete, a retelling that will give us for the first time a true history of humanity.