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Megan Matchinske

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CHAPTER I

Strategies for survival: gender, ethics and history

This past, moreover, reaching all the way back into origin, does not pull back but presses forward, and it is, contrary to what one would expect, the future which drives us back into the past.

(Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*)¹

In 1603, perhaps anticipating the outcome of a difficult pregnancy, an English gentlewoman Elizabeth Grymeston, composed for her young son a series of meditations – meditations that would offer posthumous advice and reflection on everything from the nature of sin to the limits of royal authority. Six months later Grymeston was dead and her words memorialized not just for a small boy but also for an English audience eager for moral edification and enlightenment. As one of the first writers of the mother's legacy to make an appearance in England, Grymeston looked to history, in this case recent history, to find her answers. Using life experience as her witness, she drew immediate and powerful connection between yesterday's actions and tomorrow's possibilities. Nor was she alone in tracing that trajectory. Throughout the seventeenth century, scores of Englishwomen did likewise, exploring in their own 'histories' the shifting relationships between past and future, between what had happened and what could happen. *Women Writing History in Early Modern England* focuses on just this dynamic exchange, asking us to look seriously to the 'moral at the end of the (hi) story'.

In this study I consider what it means for early modern women writers and postmodern women critics to engage history, to make the past *mean* something now and in the years to come.² While scholars have long noted the erasure of women's lives from traditional historical narrative,³ I choose to reanimate female appropriations of the past, the legacies that women have left to posterity, by thinking about written history in its less explicit forms – as advice, counsel and memory. In the literary-historical-philosophical project that I am describing here, I draw on early modern England's loosely configured notions of genre and discipline to readmit

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into historical writing a wide range of alternate stories. To this end, I address a variety of women's literary-historical 'end narratives', including in my investigation mother's legacy, religious verse history, diary writing, closet drama and tabloid news. To render early modern women's historical writing legible once again means looking at the uneasy relationship between a masculinist history just coming into its own and the host of unacknowledged and extra-disciplinary discursive forms surrounding it.

INHERITING HISTORY

Written history is akin to inheritance; the past seen as something that has been left to us – something that we have inherited. Broadly speaking, philosophies of history often begin by conflating ideas of historical recovery with the heritable legacy that one generation bequeaths to another. Indeed, the will, a written testament of the deceased's wishes describing precisely how possessions are to be divided and distributed, alludes metaphorically not only to the recovered artefacts of the past, the written pieces of our inheritance that have been left to posterity, but also to the will of the dead in demanding that we listen. Historical inheritance is the matter that Hamlet has been asked to heed in Shakespeare's historically famous, rhapsodically historic tragedy when his father charges him to 'remember me' and avenge his death.⁴ I bring up history's connection to ideas of legacy here, and to the strategic impulse inherent in will making, because that association carries with it a particularly interesting resonance in regard to early modern women, a resonance that complicates critical assessment. Given a legal system where women could inherit but were not technically permitted to write wills themselves,⁵ where primogeniture and the practicalities of keeping estates intact meant that properties often moved horizontally across women, remaining with them for the duration of a lifetime only, renaissance scholars are faced with a philosophical and theoretical dilemma. How are we to interpret the writing of history when for its female practitioners the matter of inheritance has been compromised, when the normal courses of outlining the past have been systematically sabotaged?⁶

In seventeenth-century England, women were largely responsible for the sick and the dying, the infant and the child.⁷ Even those aspects of historical transfer that seemed most removed from female involvement (inheritance but also succession) depended on female bodies and matrilines for their legitimacy. Seventeenth-century women determined and directed such rituals both materially and metaphorically. Nevertheless, much of the standard documentation that early modern historians rallied

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to discuss testamentary procedure or dynastic transfer does not refer to women. Early modern women's voices were not inscribed in narratives of kings and counsellors; they were not cited to justify armorial right or valorize England's glorious past.⁸ This does not mean, however, that women were uninvolved. Rather women's participation in these processes often became a kind of palimpsest, a set of erased discourses still present in the textual residue of extra-historical documentation – of precisely the kinds of parahistories I discuss here.

To render women's historical writing legible once again means looking at the past through the lens of private lives, to trace 'history' as it gets 'co-opted' and versified from earlier chronicle accounts, and to take seriously the sometimes tongue-in-cheek appropriation of historical protocols in the popular press. It also means, at least peripherally, taking into account writings by 'mainstream' historians that naturalize women's absence in the historical record. Accordingly, in this study I juxtapose wider categories of history writing, with their general movement towards professionalism and disciplinary method, to historical operations that do not fit quite so neatly into those retrospective historical patterns. While two of the accounts in this study, Anne Dowriche's *The French Historie* (Chapter 2) and Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedie of Mariam* (Chapter 6), reside fairly securely within traditional history's boundaries and would be considered as such even by modern standards (they describe landmark events drawn from a public past),⁹ the remaining works, Elizabeth Grymeston's *Miscelanea. Meditations. Memoratives* (Chapter 3), Lady Anne Clifford's diaries (Chapter 4) and Mary Carleton's *An Historicall Narrative* and *The Case of Madam Mary Carleton* (Chapter 5), stretch historical limits by embracing extra-disciplinary formats such as personal narratives or private meditations or by gesturing back only as far as the immediate past.

Although early modern women's writing may seem to approach history at some remove from its disciplinary roots,¹⁰ I still want to insist on the 'historical' impetus that motivates it – an understanding of pastness that foregrounds its potentiality. All of the writers in this study recognize their works as historical recovery in one sense or another, gauging its efficaciousness in terms of that more formalized association. As I see it, even the extra-historical dimensions of the works I describe here resonate from a disciplinary perspective in recalling our attention to precisely that domain of historical work that has gone underground. Depending too heavily on academic protocols and procedures, we as modern scholars forget history's purpose, noted from its classical derivations on, its didactic connection to the present and its futures. We forget those aspects of its telling that are

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unrepresentable in traditional or expected forms. Renaissance historical 'truth', perhaps unlike our own, comes in many colours.¹¹

Because I am interested in how various early modern mappings of history shape both present and future events, how alternate narratives compel readers to act in particular and sometimes unique ways, changing behaviours, practices and policies in the process, I will do some comparative analysis across domains, surveying in brief the broad scope of renaissance history writing as professional pursuit¹² and locating several of its developing practices as exclusive and difficult to access by women. I will, however, not belabour that exercise, as I am throughout more interested in what happens beyond the boundaries of traditional history than what happens within them.

HISTORY AS DISCIPLINE

Early modern England could look back to a long tradition of historical scholarship. For centuries the chronicle had served as the pre-eminent voice of the past. Presenting readers with exemplary models of historical action and inaction, chronicles offered up accounts of famous men, significant battles and noteworthy events. In commemorating key moments in history, English chronicle writers ensured that future generations would remember and learn. Raphael Holinshed, probably one of the most familiar of these historians, understood his responsibility to the past as an impetus for future study. In his *Chronicles of England* (1577), Holinshed insists that regardless of its aesthetic failings 'this foule frizeled Treatise of mine, will proove a spurre to others'.¹³ Most chroniclers agreed, focusing particularly on the lessons that were to be learned from looking at earlier examples of appropriate conduct. John Bale's English translation of John Leland's *De Antiquitate Britannica, de illustribus uiris* (1549) is explicit in the didacticism of its charge. In his epistle to dedicatee King Henry VIII, Bale insists that 'I shall not nowe neade to recite to youre learned majestie, what profyte aryseth by continuall readinge of bokes, specially of ancient histories . . . for the treatyse here folowinge will plenteously declare it. They treat what is in ych comenwelth to be followed, and what to be chefely eschewed. What causeth a realme to flourishe, and what doth diminish the state therof.'¹⁴ History – chronicle history at least – offered its readers life lessons by positing the past as an exemplary model for future human behaviour and action.

Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, historical annals lost some of that special status. For later writers, from Sir Francis Bacon to the noted antiquarian John Selden, the relating of history

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meant attention to accuracy not effect, a move that downplayed both the chronicled past and its didactic relationship to contemporary events in order to seek out explicit evidence of its material survival. F. Smith Fussner understands this transition literally as a historiographical revolution – a revolution he charts in progressivist terms as a movement towards ever more careful, comprehensive and accurate representations of the past. Fussner's monumental study is interested in 'tracing the origins of certain modern problems of historical inquiry and with the development of critical historical methods'¹⁵ – a set of practices he sees implemented in the first half of the seventeenth century. For Fussner these newer methods include uniform techniques and special skills as well as a greater focus on evidence, proof, explanation and relevance. F. J. Levy and Arthur B. Ferguson agree, though both turn their sights more particularly to the introduction in early modern historical thought to developing notions of anachronism and contingency.¹⁶ Ferguson identifies what he sees as 'the beginning of a climactic change in historical perceptions, one associated primarily with an increasing understanding of change itself'.¹⁷ He credits renaissance thinkers with a willingness to look for processes of development in the history of society ... [a] feeling for the uniqueness and organic unity of periods and for the relativity of customs, institutions ... [and] values to the changing circumstances of time and place ... an acceptance of diversity and development as a proper objective of historical investigation; and more generally ... a willingness to view history in the light of human experience.¹⁸

Ferguson notes as well the structural and cognitive effect of such understandings – how the very idea of pastness helped to shape disciplinary protocol and determine its social meanings.

From Fussner's assessment to Ferguson's, one thing stands out – something key happened over the course of the renaissance to make people think of their relationship to history differently. As a result, writers of the past began to look at earlier moments with an eye to their textual recovery; to that end, writers began formulating a system of techniques and strategies that codified and defined the boundaries of proper historical work. While I am inclined to question the teleological trajectory that Fussner and others assert in documenting history's revision of its domain, it seems to me that the general outline they provide remains sound. English historians turned away from chronicle-based derivative models of writing the past towards greater notions of 'objectivity' and 'classification'. They looked for patterns, employed proofs, and sought to distance the expert testimony of the nascent professional from the invested bias of the amateur. They also began to separate the work that 'historians' did from

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the fictionalized and literary accounts of the past that appeared on stage and in print.¹⁹

While women were hardly active in the early chronicling of England's past, they had even less place in its codification. The majority of history's new rule makers were men – educated men with the contacts and skill sets to match. Formalized history, history as the discipline that it was on its way to becoming, had little room for inexperienced or poorly trained female practitioners. Underscoring the practical constraints that kept women at arm's length from historical protocol, Natalie Zemon Davis noted key absences – lack of education, limited access to documentary evidence, little firsthand experience, as well as the continued indifference of written history to female concerns.²⁰ While Zemon Davis's study usefully reveals the material obstacles that historical work posed for its female practitioners, other gender-explicit complications arose from history's reformatting, complications that ask us as critics of history to investigate not just the discipline's methodological bias but also its motivational content, not just the material exclusions that kept certain writers outside historical discourse but also the incentives that compelled any writers, female or male, to recover the past in the first place. Because women operated at some remove from traditional historical discussions even before history's entry into disciplinary circles and because the written record documenting that past did not address their lives or their dreams, their need to look to other forms and different historical experiences was both highly fraught and highly sought.

In this book I want to suggest that written history – formalized history – lost much of its moral compass in a move towards method and proof, a loss that has in turn precipitated more recent historical forgettings. Unable or unwilling to accept a documented past that locates its truth in a desire for a better tomorrow, we as modern practitioners of history forget as well the scores of early modern women writers who were history's keepers, who saw their work as deeply involved with the past, and who often announced those connections both explicitly and with confidence. This book seeks to recover such historical encounters and to recover as well the instructional charge that might have impelled them.

Acknowledging that there are real dangers in asking contemporary scholars to re-engage with those aspects of the written past that render it most vulnerable to criticism (its subjectivity and bias) and to consider in practical terms what history, any history, ought to mean to its myriad futures, I hope to illustrate the extent to which such gestures are necessary and to investigate as well how both form and gender direct, shape and complicate the matter of history's troubled truths.

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GENDER AND GENRE AS ETHICAL CATEGORIES

This project is principally an argument about the relationship between gender and affect – between different kinds of voices, the matter that they are able to discuss, and the ends to which separate versions of the past can be put. It is also an argument about genre as it looks at the way that different incarnations of history depend on and elicit the forms in which they are written. All of the women discussed in this study recognize their work as historical and self-define accordingly: Clifford repeatedly returns to her favourite text from Isaiah to imagine her role as historian: ‘And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places’, she promises, ‘[T]hou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations, and thou shalt be called the repairer or the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell therein.’²¹ Dowriche, in turn, acknowledges that she has ‘diligentlie collected the great plagues and just judgements of God shewed against the persecutors in every severall History, & have set them downe so in order, and amplified them by the like judgements against sinners out of the word and other histories, that everie proud persecutor may plainly see what punishment remaineth due unto their wicked tyrannie.’²² Grymeston calls her legacy a ‘*veni mecum*’,²³ treating it as heritable property, a historical movable that can be legally passed from mother to son. Finally, Carleton promises that ‘as to matter[s] of Fact I will have due regard’ and that while ‘Ambition never tempted me to write a History of my Life ... Necessity hath constrained me to give you a History of part of my Life.’²⁴ In calling on an authentic past, Clifford, Dowriche, Grymeston and Carleton fix the events, experiences, places and practices that they recount in real time and rely on the authority that derives from that claim to the past.

Let me begin with two caveats – one about genre, one about gender. While women’s erasure from the historic record appears both systematic and malicious, their disappearance cannot easily be explained. For one thing, form and function are not in and of themselves gender-specific. Like the women I describe in this study, early modern men wrote ‘extra-historical’ accounts in the form of diaries and closet dramas, defences and legacies. They also, on many occasions, wrote from the margins and sought redress for perceived wrongs. By the same token, women, particularly those whose writings have survived, often spoke from positions of tremendous authority. Clifford, in her last years, was one of the most powerful women in the kingdom. The desire, then, to use history to good end and to position it within a given formal structure is of necessity gender neutral. Most, if not all, early modern practitioners of history feel drawn

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to their subject by virtue of its efficacy as a learning tool, by a shared hope for a different future. Men as well as women recognize in history writing the opportunity to set the record straight, to offer up an example to posterity, to understand themselves and their world better.²⁵

This is not then an argument about generic or genetic absolutes; the correlations that I draw are materially manifest rather than essential. Early modern women spoke to and responded against very real social constraints in their writing. The way women were positioned vis-à-vis specific laws about inheritance, the lack of access they had to public forums of redress, the centrality for them of a domestic experience of spirituality, and the circumscribed opportunities they faced in their attempts to effect change within traditional institutional channels, all played a role in generating certain kinds of historical work and in shaping the forms that such work would take. Accordingly, I will in this book illustrate the way that early modern women writers employ specific notions of the past and particular models of expression to navigate peculiarly female concerns about the future, but I will do so without fixing or finalizing a claim to separate spheres or formal purity.

As I noted above, gender concerns make up the matter of this book. Embracing a pragmatic and materially explicit understanding of identity that takes into consideration the changing circumstances of Tudor and Stuart England, *Women Writing History* both insists on a notion of real women and recognizes the complications that render such understandings suspect. Within this formulation, gender stands in for the socially configured and frequently less flexible roles that early modern women inhabited over the long haul, and gendered history, the extent to which those sometimes restrictive subject positions enabled, disabled and transformed an ethically driven account of the past. Real, embodied women reside at the heart of this study, women who wrote for themselves, women who made difficult choices between often untenable outcomes, and women who understood and positioned their work in temporally specific and historically aware ways. All of the chapters in this study situate women's writings front and centre, presuming this work to be foundational to the historical enterprise writ large.

In moving my sights across the period I privilege female-authored texts in order to illustrate how gender bumps up against questions of form to create and determine its own ethical trajectories. While my chapters do offer close readings of five specific women historians, I am not emphasizing here an account of particular histories or individual practitioners so much as foregrounding a notion of how women write 'History' across time.

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Looking at early modern women's writings not simply as historical artefacts in their own right (by virtue of their distance from our moment) but more particularly as didactic ventures in the writing of the past highlights for me an even more significant link in the chain. Gender is/can be *the* constitutive element in the formulation of a specific sense of duty or obligation. Following philosopher Avishai Margalit's lead, I want to draw a distinction here between ethical and moral responsibility.²⁶ For the purposes of this discussion, ethics, the matter I see residing at the heart of the following histories, can be defined as a sense of duty or obligation to a select and familiar group of others based on mutually shared ideas of right and wrong and an awareness of what is owed to that group via those already established relationships.²⁷ Morality, in contrast, is far less selective and far more capacious. According to Margalit, ethics, what he calls 'thick relations', is

grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, [or] fellow-countryman ... [it is also] anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory. Thin relations on the other hand [the matter of morality] are backed [only] by the attribute of being human ... Thick relations are in general our relations to the near and dear. Thin relations are in general our relations to the stranger and remote.²⁸

Thanks to Margalit's division, we can begin to distinguish between the general *respect* that is owed to people at large from a *moral* vantage point and the more narrowed *caring* and *loyalty* that might be demanded from an *ethical* perspective.²⁹ Within this rubric a socially responsible history will more often than not depend on the particular relationship that inheres between and among familiars. Historical obligation in this case will be ethical rather than moral in makeup simply by virtue of what it asks us to do – to call to mind something we already know, to remember. 'Memory', Margalit writes, 'is the cement that holds thick relations together, and communities of memory are the obvious habitat for thick relations and thus for ethics'.³⁰ Margalit's distinction underscores the relational ethics that I find evoked in historical accounting – especially in the female-authored narratives addressed here. Paying careful attention to the local, the quotidian and the particular – to the close proximity of fathers, ministers and magistrates – the early modern women writers in this book understand obligation as inherently amenable to recollection, to a notion of the historical past. As I see it, what these women value as sound or sinful, as just or unjust, reflects not only the idiosyncrasies of upbringing, background, education and individual predisposition, but also, and in some cases perhaps more tellingly, the very fact of their gendered relationship to a host of familiar others, their sense of the obligations they

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owe across acknowledged communities as both forward thinking and past derived.³¹

Women Writing History offers us an opportunity as scholars to better theorize our sense of social obligation as it relates to history: an understanding of duty that responds to different needs in different temporal contexts, *at least some of which are gender particular*. Is it possible then to imagine the material seeds of a specifically feminized historical ethics – a privileging of certain value systems over certain others? It would be foolish and counterproductive to claim discrete and complete divisions between voices and choices or to assume constants even within the most narrowed of local communities and shared allegiances. However, it is precisely within the realm of historical investigation (ours and theirs), with its dependence on ‘authentic’ experience, attention to detail, and its caring attention to a remembered other, where we might begin to imagine the possibility of a ‘gender inflected’ ethical field – a code of conduct that anticipates particular kinds of futures by virtue of its grounding in the practical experience of being a woman or of not being a man. This book plays with that possibility.

One last caveat here: while I have intentionally chosen to define this book’s overall framing in terms of a local ethics rather than a universal morality, I will substitute the broader term when and if it applies. Indeed, given the historical privileging in renaissance Christian contexts of the Latin *moralitas* over the Greek *tà ethická*, morality *in situ* is perhaps the more appropriate choice. Moral responsibility pertains when notions of obligation are (1) religiously freighted, (2) specific to early modern contexts and (3) directed towards humanity at large (or, at the very least, towards a wide network of social connections). In general, all three conditions must be met for this usage to occur.

Historical method offers us a way of passing on what we know. That it might simultaneously and variously have been shaped by what it means to be a woman, and what role that identity might play in the future, seems a question very much worth interrogating. To the extent that we continue to anticipate what is yet to come by looking backward at the past, we would do well to examine that making, both formally, in the patterns we choose, and in the way that gender concerns may influence and direct such imaginings.

Like gender, genre carries ethical weight in this study. It shapes our thoughts and moulds the histories that we carry with us. Those narratives in turn determine the kinds of ethical choices we can make. As I see it, the modes of address that we select deliver to us a particular portrait of the