

## Introduction

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Both man and woman of three parts consist, Which Paul doth bodie,  
soule, and spirit call . . .

Rachel Speght, *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed*  
(London, by Edward Griffin for Jacob Bloome, 1621), 11. 127–28

Nothing more resembles a tomcat on a windowsill than a female cat.

Marie le Jars de Gournay, *L'Égalité des hommes et des femmes*  
(A la Reyne, 1622)

Since the 1970s, there has been an explosion of studies in women's history. Historians have searched for new sources that reveal the historical experience of women and have used traditional sources in innovative ways. They analyze the distinctive experiences of individuals and groups and relate these histories to political, ideological, and economic developments.

Interest in women's history has resulted from several academic and political movements. Beginning in the 1930s, some historians turned their attention from the traditional subjects of historical inquiry such as public political developments, diplomatic changes, military events, and major intellectual movements to investigating the lives of more ordinary people – what is usually termed “social history.” Social history attracted more people in the 1960s, as historians and activists used historical investigation of past incidents of racial, class, or religious oppression in support of demands for change in present institutions and power structures.

The political movements of the 1960s also reinvigorated the feminist movement, as women involved in civil rights and antiwar causes discovered that even their most revolutionary male colleagues did not treat them as equals or consider their ideas or contributions as valuable as those of men. The feminist movement that began in the 1960s – often termed the “second wave” to set it apart from the “first wave” of feminism that began in the nineteenth century – included a wide range of political beliefs, with various groups working for a broad spectrum of goals, one of which was to understand more about the lives of women in the past. This paralleled a similar rise of interest in women's history that accompanied the first wave of feminism.

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Students in history programs in North America and western Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s, most (although not all) of them women, began to focus on women, asserting that any investigation of past power relationships had to include discussion of patriarchy, that predominant social system in which men have more power and access to resources than women of the same group, and in which some men are privileged over other men and some women over other women. Initially, these studies were often met with derision or skepticism, not only by more traditional historians who regarded women's history as a fad but also by some social historians, who were unwilling to see gender along with race and class as a key determinant of human experience. This criticism did not quell interest in women's history and may in fact have stimulated it; many women who were active in radical or reformist political movements were angered by claims that their own history was trivial, marginal, or "too political." By the late 1970s, hundreds of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada offered courses in women's history, and many had separate programs in women's history or women's studies. Universities in Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries added courses and programs a bit more slowly, and other developed countries were slower still. Universities and researchers in developing countries have far fewer resources, which hampers all historical research and limits opportunities for any new direction, but by the 1990s courses in women's history were introduced in India, China, Korea, and elsewhere, especially at women's universities. Women in some countries in the early twenty-first century still report that investigating the history of women can get them pegged as less than serious and be detrimental to their future careers as historians, however. Thus, an inordinate amount of the work in women's history, including that which focuses on the continent of Europe and many other parts of the world, has been done by English-speaking historians, although this is changing.

Women's history therefore began in some ways as a subfield of social history, but it has widened to include investigations of intellectual, political, economic, and even military and diplomatic history. Historians of women have demonstrated that there is really no historical change that does not affect the lives of women in some way, although often differently from how it affects the lives of men of the same class or social group. Women's historians often began by fitting women into familiar historical categories – nations, historical periods, social classes, religious allegiance – and then realized that this approach, sarcastically labeled "add women and stir," was unsatisfying. Focusing on women often disrupted the familiar categories and forced a rethinking of the way that history was organized and structured. The European Renaissance and

Enlightenment lost some of their luster once women were included, as did the democracy of ancient Athens or Jacksonian America.

### Gender History

This disruption of well-known categories and paradigms ultimately included the topic that had long been considered the proper focus of all history – man. Viewing the male experience as universal had not only hidden women’s history, it had also prevented analyzing men’s experiences as those of men. The very words used to describe individuals – “artist” and “woman artist,” for example, or “scientist” and “woman scientist” – encouraged one to think about how being female affected Georgia O’Keefe or Marie Curie while overlooking the ways that being male shaped the experiences of Michelangelo or Picasso or Isaac Newton. Historians familiar with studying women increasingly began to discuss the ways in which systems of sexual differentiation affected both women and men and, by the early 1980s, to use the word “gender” to describe these systems. At that point, they differentiated primarily between “sex,” by which they meant physical, morphological, and anatomical differences (what are often called “biological differences”), and “gender,” by which they meant a culturally constructed and historically changing system of differences. Most of the studies with “gender” in the title still focused on women – and women’s history continued as its own field – but some looked equally at both sexes or concentrated on the male experience, calling their work “men’s history” or “men’s studies.”

Historians interested in this new perspective asserted that gender was an appropriate category of analysis when looking at *all* historical developments, not simply those involving women or the family. *Every* political, intellectual, religious, economic, social, and even military change had an impact on the actions and roles of men and women, and, conversely, a culture’s gender structures influenced every other structure or development. People’s notions of gender shaped not only the way they thought about men and women but also about their society in general. As the historian Joan Scott put it in an extremely influential 1986 article: “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, hierarchies in other realms of life were often expressed in terms of gender, with dominant individuals or groups described in masculine terms and dependent ones in feminine.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91/5 (1986), 1053–75; citation p. 1067.

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These ideas in turn affected the way people acted, although explicit and symbolic ideas of gender could also conflict with the way men and women chose or were forced to operate in the world.

Historians were not the only ones to begin using the concept and word “gender.” It spread in other academic fields and then into ordinary speech, becoming the accepted replacement for “sex” in many common phrases – “gender roles,” “gender distinctions,” and so on. Women’s history and women’s studies programs sometimes renamed themselves “women’s and gender studies” or simply “gender studies.” Because women’s history was clearly rooted in the women’s rights movement of the 1970s, it also appeared more political than gender analysis, and programs and research projects sometimes opted to use “gender” to downplay this connection.

Along with a focus on the gendered nature of both women’s and men’s experiences, some historians turned their attention more fully in the 1980s to the history of sexuality. Just as interest in women’s history has been part of feminist political movements, interest in the history of sexuality has been part of the gay liberation movement that began in the 1970s. The gay liberation movement encouraged the study of homosexuality in the past and present and the development of gay and lesbian studies programs, and it also made both public and academic discussions of sexual matters more acceptable. Historians have attempted to trace the history of men’s and women’s sexual experiences in the past and, as in women’s history, to find new sources that will allow fuller understanding. For example, they realized that the idea that everyone has a “sexual orientation” as a part of their identity developed historically and was culturally constructed. The history of sexuality has contributed to a new interest in the history of the body, with historians investigating how cultural understandings of the body shaped people’s experiences of their own bodies and also studying the ways in which religious, medical, and political authorities exerted control over those bodies.

Just at the point that historians and their students were gradually beginning to see the distinction between sex and gender (and an increasing number accepting the importance of gender as a category of analysis), that distinction became contested. Not only were there great debates about where the line should be drawn – were women “biologically” more peaceful and men “biologically” more skillful at math, or were such tendencies the result solely of their upbringing? – but some scholars wondered whether social gender and biological sex are so interrelated that any distinction between the two is meaningless. For example, although most people are categorized “male” or “female” at birth when someone looks at their external genitalia, some have more ambiguous sex organs.

The gender polarity man/woman has been so strong, however, that such intersex persons were usually simply assigned to the sex they most closely resembled. Since the nineteenth century, this assignment has been reinforced by surgical procedures modifying or removing the body parts that did not fit, generally shortly after birth. Thus, cultural norms about gender (that everyone *should* be a man or a woman) determine sex in such cases, rather than the other way around.

The arbitrary nature of gender has also been challenged by trans individuals. In the 1950s, sex-change operations became available for people whose external genitalia and even chromosomal and hormonal patterns marked them as male or female but who mentally understood themselves to be the other. Transsexual surgery could make the body fit more closely with the mind, but it also led to challenging questions: At what point in this process does a “man” become a “woman,” or vice versa? With the loss or acquisition of a penis? Breasts? From the beginning? In the 1980s, such questions began to be made even more complex by individuals who understood and described themselves as “transgendered” or simply “trans,” that is, as neither male nor female or both male and female or in some other way outside a dichotomous gender system. Anthropologists pointed out that many of the world’s cultures have a third or even a fourth and fifth gender, often with specialized religious or ceremonial roles, so a non-dichotomous system was not something new or unusual. The border between “biological” sex and “cultural” gender carefully created by gender scholarship in the 1980s had by 2000 become increasingly permeable, unstable, murky, and perhaps even illusory.

Scholars who studied sexuality also increasingly called into question the notion that sexual orientation was a dichotomized schema of heterosexual and homosexual, and added more categories. These were often mixed together with gender categories into an ever-lengthening list of categories of identity and analysis: LGBTTTQI2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersexed, two-spirit) for example. At the same time, some scholars argued that all categories should be blurred and blended instead of set apart. In this they were influenced by queer theory, a field developed in the 1990s – a period of intense HIV-AIDS activism – by scholars in several different fields who combined elements of gay and lesbian studies with other concepts originating in literary and feminist analysis. Queer theorists argued that, like gender, sexuality was central to all aspects of culture, and called for greater attention to sexuality that was at odds with whatever was defined as “normal.” No sexual attitudes and practices were “natural,” but all were culturally constructed. Some asserted that the whole notion of

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“identity” – or what in literary and cultural studies is often termed “subjectivity” – is both false and oppressive, and instead favored a continuum of both gender and sexuality.

Historians of women were key voices in debates about the distinction between gender and sex and about categories of identity. They put increasing emphasis on differences among women, noting that women’s experiences differed because of class, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other factors, and they varied over time. Because of these differences, some wondered, did it make sense to talk about “women” at all? If, for example, women were thought to be delicate guardians of the home, as was true in the nineteenth-century United States, then were black women, who worked in fields alongside men, really “women”? If women were thought to be inferior and irrational (as was true in sixteenth-century Europe, as we will see in Chapter 1), then was Queen Elizabeth I of England a “woman”? Was “woman” a valid category, the meaning of which is self-evident and unchanging over time, or is arguing for a biological base for gender difference naïve “essentialism”? These historians noted that not only in the present is gender “performative,” that is, a role that can be taken on or changed at will, but it was so at many points in the past, as individuals “did gender” and conformed to or challenged gender roles. Thus it is misguided to think that we are studying women (or men, for that matter) as a sex, they argued, for the only thing that is in the historical record is gender, a category that was best understood as non-binary and that was complicated by many other types of difference that interwove with one another. Patriarchy largely disappeared as an analytical framework as well, as it, too, seemed essentialist and falsely universalizing.

Recognizing difference was not enough, asserted some scholars, who stressed that these categories were not simply matters of identity, but also oppression. They noted that feminist scholarship had sometimes taken the experiences of heterosexual white women as normative, and argued that the experiences of women of color must be recognized as distinctive. The nature of oppression is multiplicative rather than additive, and no one identity – race, class, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and so on – should be considered apart from other identities, but is always materialized in terms of and by means of them. This idea originated with the black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective, which in its 1977 Combahee River statement, mostly written by Barbara Smith, stated: “we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates

the conditions of our lives.”<sup>2</sup> In 1989, the critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw gave this idea the name that has stuck: intersectionality.

Intersectional analysis became an important part of critical race feminism in the United States and feminist scholarship in other parts of the world that interrogated the consequences of European imperialism, what is usually called postcolonial history and theory. Both critical race theory and postcolonial theory point out that racial, ethnic, linguistic, and other hierarchies are deeply rooted social and cultural principles, not simply aberrations that can be remedied by legal or political change. They note that along with disenfranchising certain groups, such hierarchies privilege certain groups, a phenomenon that began to be analyzed under the rubric of critical white studies. Just as gender had earlier, intersectionality moved from academia and feminist activism into ordinary speech. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, it had itself become a category of identity, with people using “intersectional feminist” to describe themselves on their blogs, Facebook pages, protest signs, T-shirts, and Twitter or Tumblr posts. (“Patriarchy” has returned on some of those signs as well: On Wednesdays We Smash the Patriarchy; Destroy the Patriarchy, Not the Planet.)

Debates within women’s, gender, and sexuality history in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were both a reflection and cause of broader debates about the methods and function of history itself. Historians have long recognized that documents and other types of evidence are produced by individuals or groups with particular interests that consciously and unconsciously shape the content of such sources. During the 1980s, some historians began to assert that because historical sources always present a biased and partial picture, we can never fully determine what happened or why; to try to do so is foolish or misguided. What historians should do instead is to analyze the written and visual materials of the past – what is often termed “discourse” – to determine the way various things are “represented” in them and their possible meanings. This heightened interest in discourse among historians, usually labeled the “linguistic/cultural turn,” drew on the ideas of literary and linguistic theory – often loosely termed “deconstruction” or “poststructuralism” – about the power of language. Language is so powerful, argued some theorists, that it determines, rather than simply describes, our understanding of the world; knowledge is passed down through language, and knowledge is power.

<sup>2</sup> In Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1983), 264–74; citation p. 264.

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This emphasis on the relationship of knowledge to power, and on the power of language, made poststructuralism attractive to feminist scholars in many disciplines, who themselves already emphasized the ways language and other structures of knowledge excluded women. The French philosopher Michel Foucault's insight that power comes from everywhere fitted with feminist recognition that misogyny and other forces that limited women's lives could be found in many places: in fashion magazines, fairy tales, and jokes told at work, as well as overt job discrimination and domestic violence. Historians of gender were thus prominent exponents of the linguistic turn, and many analyzed representations of women, men, the body, sexual actions, and related topics within different types of discourses.

The linguistic/cultural turn – which happened in other fields along with history – elicited harsh responses from other historians, however, including many who focused on women and gender. They asserted that it denied women the ability to shape their world – what is usually termed “agency” – in both past and present by positing unchangeable linguistic structures. Wasn't it ironic, they noted, that just as women were learning they *had* a history and asserting they were *part* of history, “history” became just a text? They wondered whether the ideas that gender – and perhaps even “women” – were simply historical constructs denied the very real oppression that many women in the past (and present) experienced. Such doubts were extended to other groups as well. If gender, sexuality, race, and other categories are all simply unstable and changing historical or social constructs, how do we understand intersectional oppression, and use this knowledge as a basis for engaged scholarship or activism? Advocates of the linguistic turn argued that their work *was* politically engaged because it critically examined the dynamics and cultural practices of power. Disagreements were sharp and sometimes personal, but by the 2010s, that debate seemed to have run its course. As Lynn Hunt – a powerful force in the cultural turn – has recently commented, “most historians have simply moved on, incorporating insights from postmodern positions but not feeling obliged to take a stand on its epistemological claims.”<sup>3</sup>

The linguistic/cultural turn was only one of many “turns” that have shaped historical scholarship on women and gender and history as a whole over the last several decades. For example, the “spatial turn” has led scholars to more closely examine borders and their permeability, connections and interactions, frontiers, actual and imagined spatial crossings, migration and displacement, and the natural and built environment.

<sup>3</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York, Norton, 2015), p. 39.



They have argued that space is both a geo-political formation and a way of perceiving, producing, and organizing knowledge, and as such is deeply gendered. The “emotional turn” has led historians to seek to understand the changing meanings and consequences of emotional concepts, expression, and regulation. They have studied norms and standards that societies and groups maintained toward emotions, investigated anger, sadness, jealousy, desire, and other specific emotions, and looked at the interplay between emotions and other aspects of society. The “material turn” has brought a greater emphasis on material culture along with written texts as sources of historical knowledge. Material culture studies, an interdisciplinary field with roots in art history, archaeology, anthropology, and history, is both a method by which one can evaluate and analyze objects, and a theory able to assess the role of objects and the relationships between things and people in the creation and transformation of society and culture. It was originally mainly androcentric, and either oblivious or hostile to using gender as a category of analysis, but the critiques and research of feminist art historians, archaeologists, and historians have begun to change this.

The same is true in a fourth important turn, the global, in which historians increasingly focus on large geographic areas, along with connections, exchanges, entanglements, interactions, and movements across borders, and the cultural and social mixing and blending that result. When it focuses on the modern period of nation-states, such scholarship is often termed “transnational” and viewed as an outgrowth of contemporary globalization, but world or global history (the two are largely the same in my opinion, though some historians distinguish between them) is also an increasingly common perspective for earlier periods. World and global history have traditionally tended to focus on political and economic processes carried out by governments and commercial elites, thus primarily on men but without recognizing their gendered nature. This is beginning to change, and many historians are investigating the family, sexuality, the body, work, slavery, identity, cultural representation, and many other topics from a gendered global perspective, a trend that will no doubt continue in the ever-more-connected twenty-first-century world.

### *Early Modern European History*

The first half of this book’s title, “women and gender,” is thus the result of developments in the past (one meaning of “history”) and in history as a field (another meaning of “history”), and so is the second half of the title, “early modern Europe.” The term “early modern” was developed by historians seeking to refine an intellectual model

first devised during this very period, which saw European history as divided into three parts: ancient (to the end of the Roman Empire in the West in the fifth century), medieval (from the fifth century to the fifteenth), and modern (from the fifteenth century to their own time). In this model, the break between the Middle Ages and the Modern Era was marked by the first voyage of Columbus (1492) and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (1517), although some scholars, especially those who focused on Italy, set the break somewhat earlier with the Italian Renaissance. As the modern era grew longer and longer, historians began to divide it into “early modern” – from the Renaissance or Columbus to the French Revolution in 1789 – and what we might call “truly modern” – from the French Revolution to whenever they happened to be writing.

As with any intellectual model, the longer this tripartite division was used, the more problematic it seemed. The voyages of Columbus may have marked the beginning of European exploration and colonization, but there was plenty of earlier contact between Europeans and other cultures, and Columbus himself was motivated more by religious zeal – generally regarded as “medieval” – than by a “modern” desire to explore the unknown. The Protestant Reformation did bring a major break in Western Christianity, but Martin Luther was seeking to reform the church, not split it, just like medieval reformers, of which there were many. Other developments traditionally regarded as marks of modernity, such as the expansion of capitalism, the growth of the nation-state, or increasing interest in science and technology, were also brought into question as scholars found both earlier precedents and evidence that these changes were slow in coming. Thus, in many aspects of life, continuities outweighed change. More philosophical issues also emerged: What exactly do we mean by “modernity”? Will it ever end? Has it ended? What comes afterward? The thinkers who first thought of themselves as “modern” saw modernity as positive – and “medieval” as negative – but is modernity necessarily a good thing?

If “early modern” is not self-evident, what about the other part of the title, “Europe”? What is “Europe”? The answer most of us learned in school – one of the world’s seven continents – can easily be rejected simply by looking at a globe. If a continent is a “large land mass surrounded by water” (which we also learned in school), then surely the correct designation for what is conventionally called “Europe” is the small western part of the continent of Eurasia. If we look very closely at the globe, in fact, Europe is a tiny northwestern part of the huge continent of Afroeurasia, a term increasingly used by geographers and world historians for what is the world’s largest land mass.