

History Matters

Patriarchy and the Challenge of
Feminism

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Feminism and History

I first came to feminist history in the 1970s as a way of reconciling my two full but contrary identities at the time. In one, I was a lesbian feminist, absorbed by activism at home and in the streets. In the other, I was a studious medievalist, training under the guidance of male professors, most of them priests, at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. Radical feminist by night, medievalist by day; feminist history brought my two selves together. As I recall, the reconciliation was less than perfect. Among some feminists I felt awkward about the elitism of my education, the snottiness of my diction, and the maleness of my chosen profession. And at both the Pontifical Institute and the University of Toronto I encountered a steady stream of students and professors who dismissed feminist history, not to mention abortion rights, lesbian self-determination, and the other struggles that nourished my political soul. But there was one aspect of the reconciliation that was always a perfect fit: I never doubted that my work as a historian was important work for feminism. In the 1970s it seemed crystal clear that one of the battlefronts of feminism was women's history, where feminists—both in the academy and outside it—were reclaiming a lost past in their research, empowering students in their teaching, and using historical insight to inform feminist strategy.

This book seeks to recover some of the clarity of that 1970s ideal of a seamless union of history and feminism—and to add depth to it. In the thirty years since I first pulled a history book off the shelves of the Toronto Women's Bookstore, the history of women and gender has developed into a recognized academic field, institutionalized in departments, conferences, journals, and presses, and mature enough to participate in the creation of such newer fields as lesbian history and the history of masculinity.¹ Feminism, even though it has waxed and waned in popularity, has also grown immensely, its theories becoming more sophisticated and inclusive and some of its tenets now realized in the legal codes, educational curricula, and everyday

Chapter 6
The L-Word in Women's History

In the early 1990s when I first began talking about the L-word in women's history, some people expected me to be speaking about "the eral." With the 2004 debut in the United States of the lesbian soap opera *The L Word*, what was once obscure is now likely much clearer. By "L-word," I mean to evoke the lesbians and lesbianisms that are so often effaced in the writing of women's history. This effacement is a long-standing part of Western culture, which, in the words of Judith Brown, has adopted an "almost active willfulness to *diabolize*" in female same-sex love.¹ It is also, alas, a part of feminist scholarship and feminist history. In an article first published in 1977 and much reprinted since, Adrienne Rich urged feminist scholars to cease reading, writing, and teaching from what she later called "a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity."² Yet more than a quarter century later, women's history still skips lightly over the presence of lesbians and the possibilities of lesbian experience. The problem is not lesbian history; it is doing just fine, thank you, with conference sessions, articles, and books galore exploring aspects of same-sex love among women in the past. The problem is women's history, within which lesbianism remains a tricky subject and sometimes an unspeakable one. Simply put, women's history has a lesbian problem.

In making this charge, I do not mean to efface the advances of the last few decades. The recent renaissance of lesbian history is an outgrowth, in part, of the safe haven women's history has provided by opening its journals and conferences to work on women's same-sex relations in past times. In 2001–4, the three main English-language women's history journals published a dozen or so articles on lesbians or lesbian-related topics, and at the 2005 meeting of the Berkshire Conference more than two dozen papers did the same; whether this is "enough" or not, I do not know, but it is certainly something.³ Lesbians *as lesbians*—separated out, segregated, different—have become an accepted and integral part of women's history, readily included, especially when they were in-your-face, well-documented, self-naming

lesbians. But—and this is the crux of the problem addressed in this chapter—women's historians regularly overlook lesbian possibilities that are more subtle, obscure, or awkward. Most of us still see the past in heteronormative terms, closing our thinking by failing to consider that the dead women we study might have been other than heterosexuals, other than wives, mothers, and lovers of men.

This problem—I could, in a spirit of playfulness, call it a lack of "gaydar"—permeates all fields of women's history, including my own. One feminist historian has characterized the lives of medieval nuns as "distorted and unhappy," because she saw them as forced to choose between the joys of heterosexual intercourse and motherhood, on the one hand, and a life of learning and contemplation, on the other. For Gerda Lerner, nuns were to be pitied for giving up the self-evident joys of heterosexual sex and motherhood.⁴ Another feminist historian has produced an impassioned history of female monasticism, a history that elides the evidence—as discussed by Ann Matter and others—of intense emotional and homoerotic relations between medieval nuns. For Jo Ann McNamara, the celibacy of medieval nuns seems to have been threatened only by men.⁵ And a third feminist historian has written about peasant women in the Middle Ages as if they were all heterosexual maidens, wives, or widows. For myself, when I studied peasant women, the marriage-defined roles of noteyetwed daughter, married wife, and bereaved widow loomed deceptively large.⁶

These are examples enough, for I wish in this chapter to explore not the problem but instead a solution to it: the concept of "lesbian-like."⁷ I came to this solution in a circuitous way, while contemplating the curious fact that gay and lesbian studies, particularly of periods before 1800, abound with insightful analyses of texts produced by the powerful and privileged, but are relatively poor in scholarship about the ordinary lives of average people. Gratified by the rich insights yielded by intellectual, cultural, and literary studies of same-sex love, I aspired to complement these with more complete understandings of the same-sex relations of people who were more real than imagined and more ordinary than extraordinary.⁸ For example, I was delighted to read about how medieval theologians conceptualized (or failed to conceptualize) same-sex relations between women; about how medieval nuns might have expressed same-sex desire in their kissing of images of Christ's wound; about how a lesbian character might have lurked in a thirteenth-century romance with a cross-dressed heroine; and about how a fourteenth-century Parisian play explored the meanings of accidental marriage between two women.⁹ But I wanted more. I wanted to know about the actual practices and

lives of ordinary women—the more than 90 percent of medieval women—who never met a theologian, contemplated Christ's wound, heard a romance, or saw a Parisian play.

I knew from the beginning that my desire for a social history of lesbians, especially medieval ones, was perverse. Before the twentieth century, sexual minorities are hard to find, and they can be traced most often in records of legal or religious persecution, records whose terse, sad entries compete poorly with the rich and illuminating writings of philosophers, monks, diarists, and novelists. Lesbian histories are, of course, even more challenging to construct than the histories of male homosexuals, for even fewer documents tell of past lesbians among either privileged or ordinary folk. Women wrote less; their writings survived less well (Sappho's works are the classic example); and they were less likely than men to come to the attention of civic or religious authorities. For more recent times, it is certainly easier to locate lesbians of ordinary circumstances—think, for example, of the love shared by Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus in late nineteenth-century Hartford (Connecticut) or the culture of lesbian bars in the mid-twentieth-century U.S. cities of Buffalo and San Francisco.¹⁰ But even recent lesbian history abounds with women who were wealthier, better educated, more powerful, and more articulate than most: Anne Lister, Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, M. Carey Thomas, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rita Mae Brown.

As to medieval lesbians, they are almost impossible to find. We have information about lesbian practices in the writings of theologians and canonists, in some suggestive literary texts, and even in a few artistic representations, but if we want to write about actual women whom extant sources explicitly associate with same-sex genital contact, we have fifteen women for the entire medieval millennium: all but one from the fifteenth century, and all of them either imprisoned, banished, or executed for their activities.¹¹ This is material for only a very modest social history.

I sought to solve this problem by broadening my perspective to include women whose experiences were what I have chosen to call “lesbian-like”: women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women (to paraphrase Blanche Wiesen Cook's famous formulation),¹² I first coined the term “lesbian-like” in a paper presented in 1990; Martha Vicinus adopted it to good effect in an article published in 1994, and it is now being used by such other historians as Alison

Oram and Laura Gowing.¹³ Thus far, however, the term has been deployed mostly within lesbian history, and I believe its greatest potential lies within women's history, where it can purge our historical vision of heteronormativity and challenge us to acknowledge some past behaviors that are related to modern lesbianism. Today, many historians of women pause at the L-word threshold. We agonize: “Was she or wasn't she?” We fret about applying our contemporary term “lesbian” to women long dead. We pause over the difference between sexual identities and sexual acts. “Lesbian-like” can get us over the threshold, out of the master's house, and into possible worlds that we have heretofore seldom been able to see.

Searching for Lesbians

It is no accident that “lesbian-like” has emerged from a quest for *medieval* lesbians, a quest that epitomizes the queer turn in gay and lesbian studies.¹⁴ Responding to the sparse evidence for actual lesbian practices, medievalists have mostly adopted intellectual or cultural approaches, not social history. The intellectual approach has focused on why lesbianism was so underplayed—compared to male homosexuality—in the literatures of the Middle Ages. Most medieval physicians discussed male homosexuality much more fully than lesbianism; most authors of penitentials (handbooks designed to guide priests in assigning penance during confession) either ignored lesbianism or rated it a lesser sin than male homosexuality; and most theologians similarly either overlooked or trivialized same-sex relations between women. To John Boswell, lesbian practice was so relatively untroubling because it left bloodlines undisturbed, since same-sex intimacy between women neither produced bastards nor introduced false heirs into lineages. It was relatively unproblematic.¹⁵ To Jacqueline Murray, the phallocentric sexuality of the Middle Ages best explains its obfuscation of lesbian activity; as long as women-loving women did not use dildoes or other devices that seemingly mimicked penises, their same-sex relations were not seen by many medieval writers as being fully sexual.¹⁶ To Harry Kuster and Raymond Cormier, sperm loom larger than phalluses; Kuster and Cormier suggest that in the “spermiatic economy” of medieval understandings of sex, little harm was done in same-sex relations between women, since no sperm was spilled.¹⁷ To Joan Cadden, lesbian invisibility is part of the subordinate place of all women in the Middle Ages; seen as lesser, more passive, and secondary players in reproduction, women were easily overlooked by most physicians and natural philosophers.¹⁸

These explanations are plausible, intriguing, and not mutually exclusive. But they too often construe a small number of writers as representing broad medieval realities, reconstructing medieval attitudes about same-sex love between women mostly from the ideas of clerics—that is, the most male and most sexually anxious segment of medieval society. The observations and speculations of this clerical minority are certainly impressive, but their worldview too often becomes, in modern interpretations, *the* medieval worldview.¹⁹ I am delighted to know what medieval theologians, canonists, and physicians thought about lesbianism, but their thoughts represent their sex, their education, their class privilege, and their professional contexts, as well as their time. In this sense, I am sympathetic with Catherine Mackinnon's comment that in most histories of sexuality "the silence of the silenced is filled by the speech of those who have it and the fact of the silence is forgotten."²⁰

Still, in comparing how medieval theologians, physicians, canonists, and other authors treated male homosexuality and lesbianism, this intellectual approach has usefully delineated differences between elite perceptions of male same-sex relations, on the one hand, and female same-sex relations, on the other. To these medieval writers, same-sex love between women seemed less sexual than male homosexuality; it more often prompted explanations based on purported physical deformities; it was doubly perverse for positing love not only of the *same* sex but also of the *lesser* sex; and if it resulted in marriage resistance, it could be profoundly disruptive.²¹ Among these authors, same-sex relations between women and between men in the Middle Ages were not entirely unrelated, but they were certainly distinct. These elite understandings usefully remind us that when a medieval woman had sex with another woman she did so within physical, social, familial, sexual, and gendered contexts quite different from those of a medieval man who had sex with another man.²²

Literary and cultural scholars have also responded in creative ways to the virtual absence of actual women from the sources of medieval lesbianisms.²³ In their provocative readings of medieval texts, these critics have found homoerotic possibilities not only in the medieval media mentioned earlier but also in the music of the twelfth-century polymath Hildegard of Bingen; in the piety of the mystic Hadewich of Brabant; in the admonitions of the anonymous author of *Holy Maidenhead*, a treatise for the guidance of holy virgins; in the ravings of the would-be mystic Margery Kempe; and even in the cross-dressing of Joan of Arc.²⁴ Although these analyses offer insightful commentaries on how we might better imagine the sexual mentalities

of the Middle Ages, even the best of them can give me pause. As literary criticism, these readings reach plausible conclusions, but as guides to social history, they are considerably less convincing.

To begin with, many of these readings draw on mystical texts, texts that were profoundly obscure at the time of their composition and are profoundly hard to interpret today. As Ulrike Wiethaus has suggested, the obscurity of these texts *might* have allowed female mystics to express and still mask same-sex desires.²⁵ But the obscurity of these texts *might* also encourage modern scholars to read desires into them that would have been foreign to their authors: fascinating readings, in other words, rather than historically plausible ones. Caroline Bynum, whose opinions have considerable authority in studies of mysticism, female spirituality, and conceptions of the body, has resisted lesbian readings of such texts, arguing that we too readily sexualize medieval somatic experiences and expressions. Others, such as Karma Lochrie, vehemently disagree, arguing that Bynum resolutely sees maternity where same-sex affections might, in fact, have been at play.²⁶ The debate on this issue has only just begun, but in the meantime, those who are, like myself, interested in actual people and plausible behaviors might best respond with caution to literary readings of same-sex expressions in mystical texts.

In other cases, I have been more impressed by the cleverness of modern critics than I am by the historicity of their arguments. It is great fun, for example, to read Lochrie's impressive exploration of the artistic, literary, and linguistic ties between Christ's wound and female genitalia, and to speculate, therefore, that the kissing of images of Christ's wound by medieval nuns somehow paralleled lesbian oral sex. Even Lochrie, however, does not claim that any medieval nun who contemplated Christ's wound ever, in fact, was really thinking about the last night's tumble in bed with a sister nun.²⁷ Within the traditions of literary scholarship, readings such as Lochrie's can stand on their own, properly appreciated for their careful and insightful explication of interpretive possibilities. These readings also have a power of their own, helping us to explode medieval taxonomies that might have obscured or overlooked relationships between women.²⁸ Yet they speak less directly about the historical issues that concern me—about the possibilities of same-sex love between actual women in the Middle Ages.

"Lesbian-like" seeks to move beyond elite understandings of lesbian relations and intriguing but not fully historicized readings that interrupt, redirect, or even queer canonical texts. In complementing these intellectual and cultural approaches with social historical study,

it also replaces paucity—the brief notices of the fifteen women who found themselves in legal trouble for same-sex relations in the Middle Ages—with plentitude. What lesbian-like does for medieval women's history, it can do for women's history more broadly, too. There might always be only a few women in past eras for whom we can be reasonably confident about same-sex genital contact, but these need not be the only women whose stories are relevant to lesbian history, and relevant, as well, to a women's history that is more open to lesbian possibilities.

Lesbian-Like

It may seem crazy to create yet another piece of jargon and to link to it a troubled term like "lesbian." After all, no one today is really sure what "lesbian" means. Are lesbians born or made? Do lesbians delight in sex with women only or can the term encompass those who enjoy sex with men as well as women? What defines lesbian sex—genital contact, "bosom sex," or an even more amorphous "erotic in female terms"?²⁸ And, indeed, might sexual practice be less determinative of lesbianism than *desire* for women, *primary love* for women (as in "woman-identified woman"), or even *political* commitment to women (especially as manifested in resistance to "compulsory heterosexuality")? Lesbian theorists offer us debate on these questions, not firm agreement, and this definitional fluidity has been a source of both anxiety and flexibility.

Nevertheless, the ever-changing contemporary meanings of "lesbian" have often been belied by a persistent assumption of a core lesbian identity, especially when used in such expressions as "she came out as a lesbian." This invocation of identity is both affirming and embarrassing. To me, it still speaks powerfully about the revelation of self I felt when I first had sex with another woman in 1973, but it also now seems unduly naïve, simple, and maybe even silly. Still worse, it can work to obfuscate critical differences. Do various sorts of women who love women—femmes and butches, lesbian feminists and lipstick lesbians, vanilla lesbians and sexual radicals, American lesbians and Jamaican lesbians, rich lesbians and poor ones, fifteen-year-old lesbians and fifty-five-year-old lesbians, African American lesbians and Asian American lesbians, and perhaps most challenging of all, transgender lesbians—really share enough to fit comfortably under the rubric "lesbian"?

These are troubles enough, but, for historians, "lesbian" is also troubled by its apparent contemporaneity. To many scholars, the use

of "lesbian" to describe women before the late nineteenth century reeks of ahistoricism, and especially of the naïve search for past heroines plucked out of historical context and reclaimed for contemporary uses. For some (mostly premodernists), it is important to preserve the past from present concerns. For others (mostly modernists), it is important to preserve the distinctiveness of modernity, especially as represented by a pseudo-Rococo paradigm that resurrects sexual identities and, indeed, sexuality itself to the modern era.²⁹ Strange bedfellows—traditional premodernists and lesbian/gay/queer theorists—and their coalition is powerful enough to encourage many scholars to abandon "lesbian" in favor of terms less laden with contemporary identities, such as "homerotic" or "same-sex relations." Indeed, the refusal to apply the term "lesbian" to historical subjects often serves to affirm an author's historical professionalism, offering a strategic seal-of-approval that is especially important for scholars working on marginalized topics.³⁰ This concession is both unnecessary and counterproductive.

To begin with, "lesbian" has considerable antiquity, and its use by historians accords well with long-accepted professional practices. More than a thousand years ago, the Byzantine commentator Arethas associated "lesbian" with same-sex relations between women. By equating *Lesbia* with *tribades* and *hetaeristria*, Arethas indicated that, to at least one person in the tenth century, the term "lesbian" roughly signified what it roughly signifies today.³¹ It might have meant much the same to the poet Louise Labé who, in mid-sixteenth-century France, wrote about "l'amour Lesbienne."³² In English, the first uses of "lesbian" to denote same-sex relations between women date as early as the 1730s.³³ Unlike "gay" or "queer," then, "lesbian" has deep historical roots. Yet even without these roots, "lesbian" can, with due care, apply just as well to the past as do many other terms that have recent origins or meanings. In historical writing, it is common practice to use modern words to investigate past times; for example, "feudalism" and "courtly love," both inventions of the nineteenth century, are firmly enshrined within the discourses of medieval studies.³⁴ And it is not uncommon to find that Jakob Fugger was a "capitalist" (long before Adam Smith and Karl Marx), that Thomas Aquinas was "Catholic" (although he lived several centuries before Catholicism took on its post-Reformation meaning), or that the Black Prince prepared for his "kingship" (even though it was kingship of a different sort from that anticipated today by Charles Windsor). Historians well know that part of our task is to assess the changing meanings of words over time and to weigh differences as well as similarities in their uses.

We should try to allow the same historical range, with the same comparative cautions, for "lesbian."

Indeed, to do otherwise does more harm than good. First, the refusal to use "lesbian" defers to homophobia and thereby promotes heteronormative misconceptions of the past. To some people, "lesbian" is a more upsetting word than "capitalist," "Catholic," or "king," and it can seem rude or slanderous to suggest that women such as Margery Kempe or Hildegard of Bingen had feelings or experiences that we might associate with modern lesbians. This homophobic anxiety works on many levels, some articulated and others unacknowledged. Its main effect is bad history, history driven by heteronormative imperatives. For example, our modern sexual regime of dividing women according to sex of lovers—and thereby labeling them as lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, or whatever—does not seem to work well for the European Middle Ages. Penitentials suggest that medieval theologians thought in terms of a wide range of sexual activities, among which choosing a lover of the same sex was only one of many possible sexual sins. Romanes suggests that aristocratic husbands worried most that their wives might produce illegitimate heirs and less that their wives might love others or, indeed, might sexually play with lovers in nonreproductive ways. And a wide variety of sources indicate that medieval people identified themselves less by any sexual practice and more by other criteria—willful or repentant sinner; householder or dependent; serf, free, or well-born; Christian or Jew. Insofar as there *were* sexual identities in the Middle Ages, the best articulated might have been those of the celibate and the virgin.³⁶ These are important and profound differences that separate the world of medieval Europe from our world today, but they disappear in history-writing that eschews lesbian possibilities and seeks out heterosexuality as pervasive, natural, and ideal.³⁷

Second, a refusal to apply "lesbian" to the distant past stabilizes things that are better kept in a state of productive instability.³⁸ Is there such a stable entity as a modern lesbian? Clearly not. Was there such a stable meaning to "lesbian" in any past time? Probably not. We should play with these instabilities and learn from them, not rely on them in order to deny relationship with the other. For example, medieval sexual regimes look very different from our own, but our information is, as yet, preliminary and even contradictory. Some scholars are finding that medieval people operated on a one-sex system;³⁹ others that medieval people embraced a two-sex binary that rigidly separated male and female;⁴⁰ and still others that medieval people played readily with ideas about intermediate genders or third sexes.⁴¹ The

meaning of this variety—whether an artifact of sources or historians, or an accurate reflection of medieval ideologies—is not yet clear. We need more reading, more research, and more speculation before we can sort out even the most basic aspects of medieval sexual practices. In these circumstances, it would be counterproductive to create a tidy discrimination between the abundance of modern lesbians and what we still have to learn about medieval sexualities.

In short, one of our first steps toward understanding the antecedents of modern sexual identities must be to examine how well and how poorly our modern ideas of "lesbians" and "heterosexual women" and "bisexuals" and "queers" work for the past. If we avoid these terms altogether, we will only create a pure, inviolable, and irrelevant past: a fetish instead of a history. In her recent study of early modern lesbianism, Valerie Traub opted to italicize "lesbian" and "lesbianism" for almost five hundred pages in order to remind her readers of "their epistemological inadequacy, psychological coarseness, and historical contingency."⁴² I appreciate her hesitations, but ultimately any noun is similarly inadequate, coarse, and contingent. "Housewife" is, like "lesbian," a modern identity whose meanings cannot be readily transposed from the twenty-first century to the fifteenth. But we trust historians of housewifery and domesticity to manage the differences. Since no word has transparent meaning, now or in the past, surely we need not single out "lesbian" as a word that must be proscribed or even merely italicized.

In any case, I am suggesting not the use of "lesbian," but instead the use of "lesbian-like," a hyphenated construction that both names "lesbian" and destabilizes it.⁴³ The "lesbian" in "lesbian-like" articulates the often-unnamed, forcing historians who might prefer otherwise to deal with their own heteronormative assumptions and with the possibilities of lesbian expressions in the past. Yet at the same time as the term forthrightly names the unnamed, the "like" in "lesbian-like" decenters "lesbian," introducing into historical research a productive uncertainty born of likeness and resemblance, not identity. It allows us to expand lesbian possibilities beyond a narrow and quite unworkable focus on women who engaged in certifiable same-sex genital contact (a certification hard to achieve even for many contemporary women), and to incorporate women who, regardless of their sexual pleasures, lived in ways that offer affinities with modern lesbians—such as sexual rebels, gender rebels, marriage-resisters, cross-dressers, singlewomen, and women who found special sustenance in female worlds of love and ritual.⁴⁴

"Lesbian-like" allows a social historian like myself to explore affini-

ities that are broadly sociological—affinities related to social conduct, marital status, living arrangements, and other behaviors that might be traced in the archives of past societies. I would therefore like to play with the implications of naming as lesbian-like a range of practices that impinge on our own modern—and very variable—ideas about lesbianism. If women had genital sex with other women, regardless of their marital or religious status, let us consider that their behavior was lesbian-like. If women's primary emotions were directed toward other women, regardless of their own sexual practices, perhaps their affection was lesbian-like. If women lived in single-sex communities, their life circumstances might be usefully conceptualized as lesbian-like. If women resisted marriage or, indeed, just did not marry, whatever the reason, their singleness can be seen as lesbian-like. If women dressed as men, whether in response to saintly voices, in order to study, in pursuit of certain careers, or to travel with male lovers, their cross-dressing was arguably lesbian-like. And if women worked as prostitutes or otherwise flouted norms of sexual propriety, we might see their deviance as lesbian-like.

Unlike Adrienne Rich, I do not want to label all woman-identified experience—from maternal nurturance and lesbian sadomasochism to the esprit de corps of an abortion rights march—on a lesbian continuum. The essence of Rich's continuum is "primary intensity between and among women," an intensity that involves both "sharing of a rich inner life" and "bonding against male tyranny."⁴⁵ Some behaviors that I would identify as lesbian-like—such as singleness—were not necessarily based in the female bonding at the center of Rich's analysis. To my mind, a singlewoman in a sixteenth-century European town, regardless of her emotional life, lived in ways relevant to lesbian history: she tended to be poor, in part because her household was not supported by the better earning power of men; she was viewed by her neighbors with some suspicion and concern; she could expect to be tolerated, *if* she was well-behaved in other respects. This singlewoman might have shared neither an emotional life nor any political commitment with other women, but her life circumstances were, in some respects, lesbian-like.

Yet I also do not want to privilege sexual behaviors in defining lesbians past or present; I agree with Martha Vicinus that much lesbian history—and women's history, too—is "excessively concerned with knowing-for-sure" about *sexual* contact between women.⁴⁶ Many lesbian-like behaviors—such as the deep attachments formed between some medieval nuns—were not necessarily sexual in expression. I do not want to wash sexuality out of lesbian-like, but same-sex relations

are not a sine qua non of lesbianism (as the debates of lesbian theorists make clear), and if we treat lesbianism as rooted in sexuality, we risk very limited social histories, as I have rehearsed above for the Middle Ages. In thinking about both "lesbian" and "lesbian-like," sexual behavior is certainly important, but it need not be defining.

I am hesitant to restrict the purview of "lesbian-like," for, as Greta Christina has argued so well, patrolling the borders of any loaded term is a divisive and elitist business.⁴⁷ But I am also cognizant of the risk of "lesbian-like" and I hope we might use "lesbian-like" playfully and wisely. Obviously, "lesbian-like" can be extended to ridiculous dimensions, by arguing, for example, that since some modern lesbians wear sandals, all sandal-wearers in past times were lesbian-like.⁴⁸ Let us stick to essentials that will allow us, first, to construct histories that have meaning for sexual minorities today, and second, to avoid heteronormativity in our writing of women's history. I will not define those essentials, for to do so would be as pointless as trying to secure the meaning of "lesbian" or "sexual minorities" or even, indeed, "history with meaning." We stand on shifting sands, but we need not lose our balance. Obviously, "lesbian-like" also will overlook some lesbians in past times, particularly those who conformed to social norms. And obviously, "lesbian-like" speaks more about circumstance than choice; some singlewomen in early Europe willfully determined to avoid marriage, but most found themselves unmarried thanks to poor luck, family circumstances, religious imperatives, or plain poverty. Let us appreciate the sociological uses of "lesbian-like" without endowing it with motivational meanings.

To my mind, "lesbian-like" offers not an endless set of possibilities but a set that is multidimensional, allowing any one of several criteria to call forth "lesbian-like" as an analytical tool. In playing with the possibilities of "lesbian-like," I am more comfortable applying it to *practices* than to *persons*, for most women whom I might label "lesbian-like" seem to have engaged in some lesbian-like behaviors (such as living in single-sex communities) but not others (such as indulging in sexual relations with other women). But perhaps we will eventually come to decide that we *can* call some of these women "lesbian-like"—maybe, for example, those whose behaviors evoked several criteria at once. Certainly, I would think that a woman who never married and shared an emotionally rich life with another woman might safely be considered "lesbian-like" *as a person*. But, then again, if I consider the case of Sarah and Elizabeth Delany—two never-married African American sisters well known in the United States not only for a memoir of their life together but also for the play and movie produced

from it—they strike me as lesbian-like in their *behavior*, not their *persons*.⁴⁹ Again, the sands shift; again, wise play is necessary.

Possibilities

In the earliest years of the fifteenth century, a young woman—we do not know her name—disguised herself as a man and studied at the University of Krakow. Although her story has many literary antecedents, Michael Shank has argued effectively for its plausible historicity. This student maintained her male identity for two years, and when discovered, she was more marveled at than punished. Like most other discovered female cross-dressers in the Middle Ages, she was admitted and rewarded for improving herself through a male persona: she became the abbess of a nearby monastery.⁵⁰ We have only two words reputedly spoken by this young cross-dresser, and they explain her decision to take on a male persona in clear and nonsexual terms. When asked why she had deceived everyone, she replied, “*amore Studii*” (“for love of learning”).⁵¹

This young woman never, as far as we know, had sex with another woman, but her lesbian-like cross-dressing deserves consideration in women’s history.⁵² After all, she lived as a man for two years in one of the least private of all-male environments. The account of her deception notes that she did not frequent the baths (where male students would have gone in search of prostitutes as well as cleanliness), but it tells us that she lived in a student hostel, that she attended lectures regularly, and that she got on well with her fellow students. In other words, she likely shared beds with men, disrobed in the presence of men, urinated in their company, and somehow managed, through all this, to conceal her breasts, her menstrual blood, her genitalia. To be sure, the Krakow student had some important assistance in her deception: she moved to Krakow from northwest Poland, thereby ensuring that she was unknown to anyone in the city; her parents had died, thereby freeing her from familial supervision; and she had a small inheritance, thereby giving her some financial independence. Still, if she could pass as a man in what was one of the most male and most sociable of medieval surroundings, other medieval women—motivated by love of women rather than love of learning—might have managed to do the same. The medieval world was much less private than our own, but there were many more private surroundings than a student hostel. The story of the Krakow student can, in other words, help historians of medieval women think outside the heteronormative box. After all, her story describes a society that tolerated female

cross-dressers who “improved” themselves by becoming men; it reminds us that some medieval women found themselves—through migration to cities, parental death, or both—relatively free of familial control; and it even encourages us to consider the possibility that medieval households could readily accommodate—in their much more private circumstances than those provided by student hostels—married couples in which the one partner was a cross-dressed woman.

About the same time that this unnamed Krakow student was first donning men’s clothing, Laurence, the sixteen-year-old wife of Colin Poitevin, sought from her prison cell a pardon from the French crown. She told a story of how, some two years earlier in her small town of Bleury (near Chartres), she had been seduced by Jehanne, wife of Perrin Goula. The two had walked out to the fields together one August morning, and Jehanne had promised to Laurence that “if you will be my sweetheart, I will do you much good.” As Laurence tells it, she suspected nothing evil, acquiesced, and suddenly found herself thrown onto a haystack and mounted “as a man does a woman.” Orgasm followed, certainly for Jehanne, but perhaps also for Laurence, who enjoyed herself enough to desire further encounters. In subsequent days and weeks, Laurence and Jehanne had sex together in Laurence’s home, in the vineyards outside their village, and even near the communal fountain. But eventually, the affair ended—and violently so, when Laurence’s efforts to terminate the relationship caused Jehanne to attack her. (Perhaps this attack, not the sexual relationship per se, first brought the matter before the authorities; many women prosecuted for same-sex relations were guilty of other antisocial offenses, suggesting that we would not know of their *sexual* behaviors but for their *social* misconduct.)⁵³ Jehanne’s fate is unknown; Laurence ended up in prison from whence came the document that tells her version of their encounters.⁵⁴ To us today, the behavior of both women is readily labeled lesbian-like, for this explicit story of sexual relations can make them seem much more resolutely “lesbian” than, for example, the cross-dressing of the semi-ones—and seemingly celibate—student of Krakow. Yet even such clear-cut cases of same-sex relations are not transparent. Laurence cast her plea for clemency in terms as familiar as they were successful; she was a good woman, regretful of her sin, and a victim of an unnatural aggressor. Allowed to return home, reputation secured, after six months in prison, Laurence had indulged in a behavior with affinities to modern lesbianisms, but it would be crude to identify her as a “lesbian” or even as a lesbian-like *person*; she had clearly, however, engaged in lesbian-like *behaviors*.

A few decades before Laurence and Jehanne first daltied in the fields outside Bleury, the city of Montpeller merged its two convents of ex-prostitutes, probably because, in the wake of the bubonic plague of 1347–49, both houses had fewer inmates than before. The regulations of one of these communities suggest that it served, as Leah Otis has put it, “a social more than a religious purpose.”⁵⁴ The sisters were not cloistered; they performed modest religious duties, and they could, for all practical purposes, leave whenever they wished. Their house was directed by city officers who sought to encourage orderly behavior among some of the more disorderly inhabitants of Montpeller, but it also served the purposes of the women themselves, charitably sustaining some prostitutes in old age, sheltering others who were truly repentant, and providing a transition for still others as they moved from work as prostitutes to work as wives.⁵⁵ The prostitutes and ex-prostitutes of Montpeller were lesbian-like not only in their transgressive sexual practices but also in their joint living, whether in a city-sponsored brothel or a city-sponsored convent. The “historical sisterhood” between prostitution and lesbianism has been explored for modern times, particularly in a wide-ranging essay by Joan Nestle, but it seems to have escaped the recognition of historians of premodern Europe.⁵⁶ Bernadette Brooten has let pass with little comment the semantic association of *hetaira* (Greek for “courtesan”) with *hetairistria* (a word used by Plato and others for same-sex female love).⁵⁷ John Boswell has dismissed as a “convenient derogation” a twelfth-century monk’s description of same-sex female relations as an *innanalem prostitutionem*.⁵⁸ And in their excellent books on medieval prostitution, neither Leah Otis nor Ruth Karras has been able to explore the relationship between female sex work and female same-sex relations.⁵⁹

At the same time that the ex-prostitutes of Montpeller were settling into their newly merged houses, a widow in Ferrara amalgamated her dowry funds with contributions from other women and purchased a substantial property. Bernadina Sedazzari’s intention, she claimed, was to establish a female monastery that would fall, as required by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, under the supervision of a male order. But in fact, it is likely that Sedazzari never intended to submit her community to ecclesiastical control. As Mary McLoughlin has put it, Sedazzari preferred “autonomy to authority,” cagily preserving the independence of her foundation for nearly two decades and governing about a dozen companions in a regular regime of religious devotions, good works, and common living. When Sedazzari died, she named one of those companions, Lucia Mascheroni, as her “universal heir,” having extracted from her a sworn promise to maintain the community as it

then existed. For more than two decades, Mascheroni observed this promise with “obsessive fidelity.”⁶⁰ Sedazzari was a strong-willed woman, a pious woman, a woman experienced in both monastic life and marriage, and a woman who in middle made a lesbian-like decision to avoid the governance of men—either that of the ecclesiastical hierarchy or that of a second husband. Sedazzari expressed her hopes for her community in pious terms, and we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of her words. But in an age that celebrated female chastity, piety might also have been the medium through which resistance to marriage could be most acceptably—and most effectively—expressed. The distinction between piety-as-motivation and piety-as-explanation might have often blurred in the minds of women who avoided marriage, but as Sedazzari’s story suggests, it merits further study, not least because so many women—10 percent and more in some areas—opted for religious life. For Sedazzari and many others, piety provided not only a way to avoid remarriage but also a method of sidestepping ecclesiastical control (that is, male control) of her holy household.

The Europe of Krakow’s crossed-dressed student, Laurence and Jehanne, the prostitutes of Montpeller, and Bernadina Sedazzari also accommodated many adult laywomen—several millions of them—who never married men. Unlike nuns and other women religious, these laywomen lived in the secular world, seeking work, shelter, and companionship as “singlewomen,” the English term by which they were known from the fourteenth century. In England in 1377, almost one-third of all adult laywomen were single; in Florence fifty years later, singlewomen accounted for about one-fifth of women; and in Zurich fifty years after that, nearly half of all women had never taken a husband.⁶¹ Many of these women eventually married, for especially in northern and western parts of Europe, traditions of late marriage left many women single well into their twenties. Some singlewomen, however, never married, and in late medieval England and perhaps elsewhere, these lifelong singlewomen accounted for about 10 percent of the adult female population. Whatever their sexual or affective practices, these singlewomen—both those who never married and those who eventually did; both those who chose to avoid marriage and those who sought it without success—were lesbian-like in their never-married state.⁶² Singlewomen lived without the social approbation attached to wifehood; most lived without the support offered by the greater earning power of a male; and some lived independently,

an anomalous state among people who sometimes thought, "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil."⁶³

The Past and the Present

As these five examples show, "lesbian-like" replaces a mere handling of women prosecuted for same-sex contact with a plenitude of new possibilities for medieval women's history. It offers this same plenitude to women's history more generally. I read modern women's history because it helps me to think in new ways about medieval women's history, and as I argued in Chapter 3, I think that modern historians can similarly profit by reading more widely about ancient, medieval, and early modern women. "Lesbian-like" is an example; the idea arose from the peculiar challenges of medieval scholarship, but it has much wider uses.

"Lesbian-like" is not a perfect term; it adds new jargon to our field; it is as impossible as "lesbian" to define precisely; it highlights deviance more than conformity; it stresses circumstances over motivations; and if overused, it might even create a lesbian history that lacks lesbians (however defined). Yet "lesbian-like" offers two critical advantages. First, it adds nuance to behaviors that we might too readily identify as lesbian, for the experiences of women like Laurence and Jehanne are surely more lesbian-like than lesbian. Second, it adds many sorts of behaviors to the historical study of lesbianism: cross-dressing; pious autonomy from male control; singleness; monastic same-sex community; prostitution; un-remarried widowhood. Each of these practices shares affinities with contemporary lesbianisms, and insofar as lesbian history, like all history, plays with the interplay between past and present, these lesbian-like behaviors are arguably as important as sexual practices. The sexual pleasures and legal difficulties of Laurence and Jehanne are notable parts of lesbian history, but so, too, might be the appropriation of male prerogatives by the Krakow student; so, too, the sexual disorder of Montpelier's prostitutes; so, too, Bernardina Sedazzari's resistance to male authority in either marriage or monasticism; so, too, the social and economic marginality of medieval singlewomen. These possibilities matter in both lesbian history and women's history.

If we strategically appropriate all these sorts of behaviors under the rubric of "lesbian-like," lesbian history looks very different. Again, the Middle Ages are a good example. The approaches of intellectual historians and cultural critics have suggested that the Middle Ages were either indifferent toward lesbian practice or hostile to it. A social

history that includes not only Laurence and Jehanne but also the Krakow student, the Montpelier prostitutes, the community founded by Bernardina Sedazzari, and the never-married women of medieval Europe draws a different picture. Social approval of manly women; tolerated regulation of prostitutes; religious practices that accommodated considerable female autonomy and female community; a world that abounded with singlewomen, young as well as old. All these suggest that, although medieval elites were coldly dismissive of lesbian practices, medieval society might have been, in fact, filled with possibilities for lesbian expression.

More importantly, whether we end up with histories of lesbianism that stress hostility or possibility, "lesbian-like" facilitates the development of histories that modern lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and queers rightly seek from the past. This search has parallels in the social histories of other minorities; it is rooted deeply within the feminism at the heart of women's history; and it reflects the emancipatory possibilities of all history. "Lesbian-like" speaks to this modern need for a usable past, for what Margaret Hunt has called the "cautious kinship" that can link our many lives with the histories of those long dead.⁶⁴ This cautious kinship is most emphatically not identity, for even the most lesbian-like women in the past are unlike most modern lesbians. Consider, for example, how Valerie Traub has differentiated early modern tribades—assumed to be highly sexed and possessed of large, capable-of-penetration clitorises—from modern lesbians:

How is the tribade *not* like a contemporary *lesbian*? . . . *Lesbians* today are not assumed to be marked by anatomical deviation. (Such markings, rather, is reserved for a discourse of intersexuality.) Their erotic practices are not assumed primarily to take the form of vaginal penetration. (Quite the contrary: oral sex is widely assumed to be "what *lesbians* do.") Nor are *lesbians* believed to be more lustful than heterosexual women. (Even within the *lesbian* community, jokes about "lesbian bed death" abound.) Most importantly, according to the logic of modern homophobia, *lesbians* hate (or fear) men; in contrast, according to the Renaissance psychomorphology of the clitors, the tribade enacted that sincerest form of flattery: emulation.⁶⁵

Rather than seeking identity, lesbian-like allows us to imagine in plausible ways the opportunities for same-sex love that actual women once encountered, and to do so without asserting a crude correlation between our varied experiences today and the varied lives of those long dead. It moves beyond what Traub has called the "melancholy of lesbian identification"⁶⁶ with the past, allowing recognition without identification, difference without obfuscation, and mourning without melancholy.⁶⁶ In the process, of course, we become able to under-

stand ourselves better, for it is through exploring likeness, resemblance, and difference with past times that we can better understand the fraught interplay of identity and nonidentity in lesbian, queer, and even, indeed, heteronormative communities today.

For women's history, the stakes are different. History is not just, of course, about understanding the present through the past; it is also about understanding those who lived before us—and understanding them in respectful ways that take full account of past historical circumstances. Do we understand the Krakow cross-dresser (who loved learning, not women), or medieval prostitutes (whose sexual disorder might have often sprung from poverty, not desire), or medieval nuns (often celibate and solitary), or never-married servingwomen (most of whom might have eagerly sought marriage) if we think of some of their behaviors as lesbian-like? Certainly, many of these women would not have recognized themselves as lesbian-like in any way.⁶⁷ Certainly, their lives included intellectual, religious, social, and economic concerns that cannot be reduced to a matter of sexual object choice.⁶⁸ And just as certainly, women's history can benefit from pondering the lesbian-like possibilities of their histories.

Consider, for just one example, the singlewomen whose never-married state has prompted me to incorporate them under the rubric of lesbian-like. No doubt, many singlewomen never had sex with other women, but "lesbian-like" can nevertheless help us understand their lives more fully. Singlewomen have usually been seen through a heteronormative lens—and therefore seen as pathetic, sexless, and lonely failures in a game of heterosexual courtship and marriage. If we use lesbian-like to put aside this distorting lens, we can discover that, although singlewomen might have often been economically deprived, their lives were not devoid of either sexual possibility or emotional richness. Many singlewomen were sexually active, and since procreative sex was problematic for the not-married, singlewomen might have particularly engaged in forms of sexual pleasure that easily accommodated partners of either sex. Similarly, although singlewomen lived without husbands and (often) children, their emotional lives could be quite full—and woman-identified. Some lived together in what demographers have dubbed "spinster clusters"; many others congregated in neighborhoods in which not-married women predominated; most worked in occupations—as servants, spinners, lace-makers, laborers, or hucksters—that brought them into daily contact with more women than men; and many had close female relatives and friends with whom they shared life's sorrows and joys.⁶⁹ If we do not use "lesbian-like" to see singlewomen in new ways—if

we do not do thereby startle ourselves out of our own heterosexist assumptions—we might continue to interpret their lives as "distorted and unhappy."⁷⁰ In this sense, "lesbian-like" is shock therapy for practices in women's history—modern as well as medieval—that not only have long overlooked lesbian possibilities but also have resolutely, albeit often subtly, defined "women" as "heterosexual women."⁷¹

"Lesbian-like" will not yield real-life lesbians in past times; it will not help us identify every past instance of same-sex relations; it will not address motivation as much as situation; it will not resolve the definitional dilemmas that both plague and enrich the term "lesbian"; and if used as a blunt instrument, it will produce blunt results. But if used in playful, wise, and careful ways, "lesbian-like" can address difficult problems that now confront lesbian historians, on the one hand, and women's historians, on the other. In helping us imagine possibilities and plausibilities that have hitherto been closed off from lesbian history, "lesbian-like" can expand the purview and evidence of lesbian history. And in encouraging us to see past societies in more complex ways, "lesbian-like" can promote the writing of feminist histories that are less hindered by heteronormative blinders, sexist ideologies, or modernist assumptions. As a new way of thinking about the past, "lesbian-like" can both enrich lesbian history and reform women's history.

ize "women" as a serial collective, as formed by shared circumstance rather than common attribute or identity.⁶ Feminist historians are a sort of serial collective, too. We work in many national and institutional settings; we work on many subjects and centuries; we are both teachers and students; and we work with tape recorders as well as trowels, in archives as well as streets. Feminist history is different everywhere—it has been, for example, especially influenced by socialism in Britain, shaped by Marxism in China, interested in women's culture in the United States, allied with sociology in Brazil, and fractured by "women" versus "gender" in Japan.⁷ These sorts of differences are a rich strength of women's history, and they need not divide us. In writing this book for feminist historians, in other words, I have seen myself as part of a diverse collectivity of feminist women and men who share a common interest in studying the past.

The argument of this book builds steadily from problem to solution to elaboration. The next two chapters lay the foundation by outlining the challenges that women's history—a term which I will use as a shorthand for "women's and gender history"—faces in the twenty-first century, specifically a waning of feminist connection in history (Chapter 2) and a waning of historical depth in feminism (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 suggests a way of approaching these problems—that is, by attending more to the history of a "patriarchal equilibrium" whereby, despite many changes in women's experiences over the centuries, women's low status vis-à-vis men has remained remarkably unchanged. The fact of this patriarchal equilibrium presents, in my view, a critical feminist problem that only historians—and, indeed, only *feminist* historians who take a *long view* of women's past—can unpack. The next two chapters offer in-depth illustrations of how deep historical study can enrich feminist understandings of women's work (Chapter 5) and lesbian sexualities (Chapter 6). The book is wrapped up with a chapter that adds a new twist—the challenges of textbooks and classrooms—to viewing women's history from a distance and with feminist intent. And a brief conclusion offers some final and (I hope) stirring thoughts.

Feminism has come a long way since the 1970s. As I look back now, I am amazed by some of the "truths" I then held dear, embarrassed by the differences among women I then overlooked, and ashamed by some of the ways in which my certainties then oppressed other women.⁸ But I remain as confident now as I was then that history is critical to the feminist project, that history provides feminist activists and theorists with long-term perspectives essential to building a better long-term future. I hope this book will help us think more explic-

itly about what *sorts* of feminist history can best aid feminist struggles in the twenty-first century. In the 1970s, feminists often turned to history for inspiring stories about great women who had triumphed over adversity and accomplished marvelous deeds. Today, feminists still mostly see history, when they turn to it at all, as an ever-expanding list of positive and encouraging role models: such women as Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt, Simone de Beauvoir, Susan B. Anthony, and, for those who take a longer view, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Olympe de Gouges, Mary Wollstonecraft, and perhaps even Christine de Pizan.

These women are certainly important parts of the feminist past and their inspiration does important work in the feminist present, but I seek in this book to encourage a more substantive integration of history and feminism, one that turns to history for *strategy* as well as inspiration. To my mind, the strategic lessons of women's history are more sobering than encouraging. Stirring tales of strong women who accomplished marvelous deeds against great odds may build self-esteem and confidence, but women's history, especially when viewed across many centuries, can also stimulate feminist outrage and revolutionary fervor. To whet your appetite for the long view, here is one example taken from the pages that follow: in fourteenth-century England a female wage-worker earned, on the average, 71 percent of male wages; in Great Britain today women earn roughly the same—75 percent of the annual wages earned by men.⁹ There are many ways to qualify this bald comparison and I will do just that in Chapter 5, but surely this "sticky" wage gap offers good information for feminists to think through. The feminist potential of this particular sort of women's history—focused on feminist issues, aware of the distant past, attentive to continuities, and alert to the workings of patriarchal power—is the subject of this book.

Chapter 3 Who's Afraid of the Distant Past?

In 1979, Judy Chicago premiered *The Dinner Party*, an exhibition of a grand banquetting hall that celebrated women of the past. Visitors to the first showing in San Francisco walked on a floor of porcelain tiles inscribed with the names of 999 great women from history; in the center of the floor, they found a triangular table with place settings for 39 diners; and at each place-setting, they could examine a celebration in ceramic and cloth of a woman from the past, starting with Primal Goddess, these place settings took visitors, in a steadily ascending incline, through Hypatia, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Sojourner Truth to Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe. As Christine de Pizan had done in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Chicago's exhibition celebrated great women of the past, this time in porcelain, cloth, ceramic, and paint. And like Christine de Pizan, Judy Chicago's historical vision was a long one: the 13 settings on the first side of the table moved visitors from prehistory through the classical era; the second side began with Marcela, an influential early Christian who died c. 410, and ended with the learned Anna van Schurman (d. 1678); and the last 13 settings covered the three most recent centuries, ending with the then still-living O'Keeffe. The project, which began in 1974 and involved more than two hundred artists, subsequently toured on three continents. It was, for its time, a hugely influential and well-publicized feminist cultural event that sought, in Judy Chicago's words, to "tell women's history through women's crafts."¹

Today, women's history reaches many more people in the United States than ever before, particularly through the well-organized efforts of the National Women's History Project (NWHHP), which promotes attention to women's history, especially in secondary schools and especially during March, officially designated by the U.S. Congress as Women's History Month. Each year, the NWHHP produces a poster that, like the works of Christine de Pizan and Judy Chicago, offers up specific women worthies for admiration. The women celebrated in recent renditions of these NWHHP posters are a remarkably

contemporary bunch. Of the 11 women featured in 2003, the most "historical" died in 1964 (Rachel Carson) and most of the rest were still living. In 2004, 8 women, all living, were singled out for attention. And in 2005, the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary, the NWHHP produced a poster detailing 143 former honorees, of whom 126 had lived in the twentieth century and 46 were still alive. Only 17 had died before 1900, and not a single honoree had died before 1800. Even by the standards of the relatively truncated history of the United States, the women's history of these posters is remarkably foreshortened.

The contrast between the deep historical vision of *The Dinner Table* and the shallow vision of the NWHHP posters is the subject of this chapter. It is a contrast that reflects my own lived experience, watching women's history swing toward the present during the last thirty years. But the contrast can also be demonstrated by hard facts and figures. In the 1970s, when I was a young feminist, the distant past was integral to the ways in which we critiqued the present day and envisioned a better future. When I walked into the Toronto Women's Bookstore, conveniently located midway between the university where I studied and the feminist cooperative where I lived, I found on its shelves a feminist scholarship in which long-past eras—the Middle Ages, the ancient Mediterranean, even prehistoric hunting and gathering societies—were critical parts of the enterprise. Think, for example, of *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, published in 1973, a history of women healers by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English that began in fourteenth-century Europe, segued easily to the American medical profession, and concluded with seven points for feminist revision of the contemporary health system. Or think of Joan Kelly's electrifying 1977 essay that posed the question "Was there a Renaissance for women?" that has been subsequently repeated for many other eras of history.² When I began to read the new journals for feminist scholarship that first appeared in the University of Toronto library in the 1970s, I found there, too, that the distant past was downright central. In the first four years of *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1975 through 1978), I read four articles on premodern topics (that is, anything before 1500 CE), four articles on the early modern era (that is, 1500–1800), and seven articles that stretched across multiple eras. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not neglected—they merited twenty-three articles—but modern history was well balanced by early modern, premodern, and transhistorical perspectives.³ I also took pleasure in the "Archives" section of *Signs*, a treasure trove of primary sources that stretched as far back, in those first years, as Hippocrates. And when I started going to the Berkshire Conferences

TABLE 1. CHRONOLOGICAL COVERAGE IN WOMEN'S HISTORY JOURNALS, 2001–2004

Topics by era	Journal of Women's History			Totals	Percentage
	Gender and History	Women's History	Review		
Modern (c. 1800–present)	74	81	96	251	87
Early modern (c. 1500–1800)	14	8	8	30	11
Premodern (before 1500)	4	2	1	7	2
Total	92	91	105	288	100

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

on the History of Women, I found that they too had more papers than I could possibly hear about ancient and medieval women.⁴

No more. Today, *Signs* is a fatter journal than in the 1970s but one with many fewer pages for history and virtually none for history before the modern era. In 2004, not a single historical article was included in the four issues of *Signs*; in 2003, three historical articles made the cut; two on suffrage and one on Quakers in the eighteenth century; and in 2001 and 2002, six historical articles were published, all on the twentieth century. The “Archives” section itself is long gone; after sporadic appearances in the 1990s, it disappeared after 1998. The Berkshire Conferences have gotten bigger, too, but the proportional space they offer to papers on the distant past has fallen dramatically in the last two decades. Moreover, although since 1989 we have had English-language journals devoted entirely to research on women’s history (as opposed to the women’s studies journals that began in the 1970s), these women’s history journals publish shockingly little history of a past more distant than two hundred years. As Table 1 shows, in the first four years of the twenty-first century, the three major English-language journals in women’s history—*Gender and History*, *Journal of Women’s History*, and *Women’s History Review*—have published 295 articles of which 7—yes, 7—deal with women’s history before 1500. The situation is actually even more acute than these data show, for the modern history represented in the first row is mostly *contemporary* history: the twentieth century alone accounts for well over half of all articles.

This march toward the present in women’s history has not been created by a lack of research or teaching about the world before 1500—indeed, quite the contrary. In the early 1970s, there were just a dozen or so scholars in North America publishing on premodern women; today, there are hundreds of professional historians in the United States and Canada who work on women in premodern times and places—especially the ancient Mediterranean and the medieval West, but also premodern China, Japan, and India, the early Americas, and Africa before European contact. For example, the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship today boasts more than a thousand members worldwide, produces a twice-yearly journal (*Medieval Feminist Forum*), and nurtures a variety of online bibliographic resources, including the spectacular *Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index* (<http://www.haverford.edu/library/reference/mschaus/mf/index.mf.html>). The study of women in early eras of human history is flourishing, but not within women’s history generally, where it is now outside the mainstream of what matters. In the 1970s, there was not a great deal of premodern women’s history being written, but that little bit was very much part of the broad and inclusive new field of women’s history. Today, premodern women’s history is a flourishing field, but little known to modernists. In many venues, “women’s history” has effectively come to mean “nineteenth- and twentieth-century women’s history.”⁵

In this chapter, I explore how we have reached this troubling circumstance and why we need to move beyond it. As a medievalist, I would of course be delighted if more feminists read more medieval history, but my point is not merely ego driven. I believe that modern history is impoverished by inattention to the premodern past and that feminism is impoverished by an inattention to history. By broadening our temporal horizons, we can produce both better feminist history and better feminist theory.

Don’t Know Much about History

I was introduced to history by teachers who believed that their work ended at the point when living memory begins. But since World War II, many historians have felt differently, and now the twentieth century—most of it well within living memory—has become the major field of historical research, both in women’s history specifically and in history more generally. The historians’ past, for better or for worse, is now as recent as yesterday. This shift toward the present has not yet occasioned much self-reflection among historians, and its causes are

doubtless more complex that I can cover here. But in the interest of opening a discussion among feminist historians, I will offer some figures and suggest some causes.

"Old Europe." In a quintessentially U.S. statement, Donald Runnsfeld thus characterized France and Germany in the midst of the international debate in 2003 that preceded the Bush administration's aggression against Iraq. To Runnsfeld and many others in the United States, "old" is inherently bad and "new" is inherently good. In part, the presentation of U.S. culture stems from the simple fact that most U.S. history is, after all, modern history. In part, however, it also grows from a resentful sense that most history before 1776 harkens back to a tradition-bound, elitist, European past, a past that has been properly replaced by the dynamism of U.S. democracy and multiculturalism. In this worldview, any history before 1800 seems largely irrelevant, as epitomized in Henry Ford's famous statement, "History is more or less bunk . . . the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today."⁶

This presentist view might be quintessentially U.S., but it is not uniquely so. In the same year that Runnsfeld coined "Old Europe," Charles Clarke, then British education secretary, reportedly opined, "I don't mind there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them."⁷ Yet Clarke's comment circulated in a different cultural milieu from that of Runnsfeld. Few in the United States were bothered by the "old" of Old Europe, whereas Clarke's slur generated a furor in the British press, prompting a not quite believable denial and eventually a strong statement of support for medieval studies. British and other national cultures might be edging toward presentism, but the move is especially strong in the United States. Since it is within the United States that feminist scholarship has particularly flourished in the past thirty years, I therefore posit as the first likely culprit in the tilt toward the present of women's history the ahistoricism of my own national culture.

A second suspect is rather more surprising: the historical profession itself, not just within the United States but also internationally. For members of a profession devoted to the study of the past, historians are now remarkably uninterested in most of it. When historians worldwide congregate every five years at the meeting of the Comité International des Sciences Historiques/International Committee of Historical Sciences (CISH), we mostly discuss the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We do the same in the United States at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association (AHA). As

TABLE 2. CHRONOLOGICAL COVERAGE AT RECENT HISTORY CONFERENCES^a

Topics by era	CISH Conference (2005)		AHA Conference (2005)	
	%	(n)	%	(n)
Modern (c. 1800+)	75%	(216)	75%	(445)
Early modern (c. 1500–1800)	10%	(31)	18.5%	(109)
Premodern (before 1500)	13%	(40)	6.5%	(38)
Total		287		592

Note: The CISH data are taken from the online program, (<http://www.cishswhey2005.org/>) as posted in February 2005; I counted papers in the three categories of round tables, major themes, and specialized themes. The AHA data, taken from the printed program, include sessions of affiliated societies but exclude nonresearch sessions devoted to such matters as pedagogy and professional development. I counted only papers whose titles (or session context) indicated their chronological coverage, and if a paper equally spanned two eras, I placed it in the earlier one.

Table 2 shows, when we gather in these venues to talk about history, we mostly talk about the history of the past two hundred years.⁸

History's own lack of historical depth is relatively new. As Lynn Hunt has noted, "history" in the United States and Europe little more than a century ago was mainly *ancient* history.⁹ It is only in the last few decades that twentieth-century history, once "consigned to the province of journalism," has entered the historical mainstream and taken it by storm. In Hunt's view, the new hegemony of what she calls "short-term history" is especially linked to identity politics. Perhaps so, although I suspect that the information explosion (and hence, the explosion in primary sources), the decline of secondary training in classical languages, and the challenges of writing global, rather than national, histories have also contributed to the trend. Even as individuals, many historians tend to creep toward the present, perhaps because ever-better sources beckon us to move forward in time; my own research started out firmly rooted in the early fourteenth century but has now ranged as far forward as the late sixteenth century. In any case, it seems likely that a second cause of the relentless modernity of women's history might be, quite simply, the relentless modernity of the practice of history in general.

I hesitate to blame the victim, but ancient and medieval historians might constitute a third collective culprit, for those of us who work in these earlier eras have somewhat detached ourselves from the historical discourses that now largely exclude us. Ancient historians long ago withdrew into the discrete, interdisciplinary world of classics, a withdrawal so complete that it is now rare to find historians of Greece and Rome in history departments (at least, in the United States, Canada, and Britain); they reside instead in departments of classics. In

the United States, the major annual meeting of classicists—the conference of the American Philological Association—has long clashed with the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, thereby ensuring that ancient historians must annually decide whether they are classicists or historians. Enclave-building in medieval history lags just a bit behind. Medieval historians are still usually housed in history departments, but their intellectual energies often lie in cross-appointments to medieval studies programs and in the many conferences and journals that allow medievalists to speak to no one but themselves. I think it is fair to say, for example, that most medievalists in the United States think more about publishing in *Speculum* than in the *American Historical Review*.¹¹ This interdisciplinary bent explains how ancient and medieval women's history can be flourishing but nevertheless eclipsed within women's history generally: studies of women before 1500 are mostly shared in conferences, journals, and books whose intended audiences are classicists or medievalists, not historians.

Make no mistake: there are considerable benefits to the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work of classicists and medieval studies. Their graduate programs provide vital technical training, often not otherwise available, in such matters as philology, languages, and codicology; and their journals are willing to publish extended technical discussions that would not find an audience in history-only periodicals. It immeasurably enriches ancient and medieval history that its practitioners talk so much with scholars of ancient and medieval literature, art, philosophy, and archaeology. But it is regrettable when ancient and medieval historians therefore communicate less with historians of more modern centuries, neither submitting articles to history journals nor offering papers at broadly conceived "history" conferences. It is also worrisome that these premodern enclaves seem to have created a segregation that is dangerously comfortable to both sides. Many classicists and medievalists, eager to be freed from the supposed taint of modern concerns, are content to withdraw into their interdisciplinary encampments. Many modernists, tired of a distant past that seems more "a site of pedantry and antiquarianism" than one of stimulating inquiry, are content to be freed from sustained contact with colleagues they regard as elitist, effete, and out-of-touch.¹²

If I am right that these three factors—a presentist culture, especially in the United States; history's tilt toward modernity; and the partial segregation of ancient and medieval historians—are encouraging a more contemporary approach to history, they still cannot

TABLE 3. CHRONOLOGICAL COVERAGE AT RECENT HISTORY AND WOMEN'S HISTORY CONFERENCES¹³

Topics by era	CISH Conference (2005)	AHA Conference (2005)	IFRWH Conference (2003)	Berkshire Conference (2005)
	Modern (c. 1800–present)	75%	75%	80% (183)
Early modern (c. 1500–1800)	10%	18.5%	11% (26)	9% (31)
Premodern (before 1500)	13%	6.5%	9% (21)	3% (16)
Total	287	592	230	588

Note: For full CISH and AHA data, see Table 2. The counts for the IFRWH and Berkshire conferences exclude nonresearch papers and papers whose chronological content could not be determined by title or session. If a paper equally spanned two eras I placed it in the earlier one.

explain why this approach is particularly pronounced within women's history. Table 3 compares chronological coverage at the CISH and AHA historical conferences with coverage at the most recent meetings of the two major triennial conferences of women's history, the 2003 meeting of the International Federation for Research in Women's History and the 2005 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women.

As this table shows, most historians study the last two hundred years (about 75 percent of the time, to judge by CISH and AHA programs), but if we are historians of women, we are even more firmly oriented toward recent times (as much as 88 percent of presenters at the Berkshire Conference). Why should women's history be particularly afflicted by this tilt toward the present? I suggest that at least three factors *specific* to women's history might be inclining our field toward its current state: the loss of a premodern golden age; the present-mindedness of feminist scholarship outside the discipline of history; and the challenges of broadening women's history beyond a mere history of women in the West.

In the 1970s, premodern women had an established place within the narrative of women's history, a place whose foundations had been set in the nineteenth century by two very different books: Jakob Bachofen's *Mother-Right* (1861) and Friedrich Engels's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884). Both argued that early matriarchal societies were much better for women than later ones. For Bachofen, matriarchal societies had prevailed until the "male principle" was asserted in classical times. For Engels, the sexual equality of early soci-

ettes waned once the rise of private property inspired men to control women's sexuality and limit women's work. When feminists began to advocate for women's history in the 1970s, these narratives of a past golden age provided both intellectual support (Engels was a particularly credible authority) and political inspiration (if women were once equal, they could be equal again). They also placed early women at center stage, for prehistoric, ancient, medieval, and early modern women *had* to be integral parts of a feminist historical narrative that traced how the primordial equality of women and men was slowly undermined by modernity and particularly by the advent of capitalism. This was a story told in a host of popular books in the 1970s, and it was a story that shaped professional history as well: Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* remains its most authoritative articulation.¹⁴

This narrative renders the distant past highly relevant to feminists and intensely inspiring. Even today, feminists can read popular books, attend public lectures, go on packaged tours, and buy statuary and jewelry that evoke the memory of this once glorious matriarchal (or, at least, sexually egalitarian) past. Yet academic women's history has abandoned this understanding of the past, and rightly so. In the 1990s, grand narratives lost their appeal within history, especially under the weight of postmodernist critique, and this particular grand narrative also crumbled under the weight of empirical research in women's history. Many cultures have myths of ancient days when women ruled, but these myths are just that—myths. With lessons that are misogynistic rather than feminist, these tales warn of the horrors of female power (and its just overthrow) rather than tell of an authentic past. Cynthia Eller has cogently revealed the ahistoricity of matriarchal myths, and ancient and medieval historians have steadily chipped away at the notion that these premodern (and precapitalist) eras were somehow relatively golden for women.¹⁵ As we will see in the specific case of women's work in Chapter 5, the golden age theme still crops up in professional women's history, but more as a vestigial remnant than as confident narrative. Bachofen and Engels no longer rule, at least in the academic side of women's history, and with them has declined the place of early women within the field. We now have a distant past that is more historically plausible but less inspiring and less self-referential: a distant past that is more distant and, therefore, more easily ignored.

At the same time as we have been abandoning the golden-age myths that once gave such prominence to the distant past in women's history, some of our feminist colleagues, in other disciplines have been abandoning women's history altogether. In the developing years

of feminist scholarship, women's history was in the forefront of the field—defining issues for research, contributing to feminist theory, and convening some of the first university-level courses on women. History now seems to have lost that leadership role, yielding partly to present-focused social sciences and partly to the new frameworks of feminist literary criticism. Feminist scholarship is exceedingly diverse, and some feminist scholars continue to draw on historical insights, but among younger scholars, as Jennifer Mannion has put it, “it is no secret that cutting edge feminist scholarship is more likely found in literature and American studies than history.”¹⁶ Jane Newman has similarly reported that history has almost no purchase at all among some feminist academics. This is not just a matter of young postfeminists proclaiming that they live in the present, look to the future, and do not care to remember the past. It is also a matter of feminist teaching and scholarship. In women's studies programs in the United States, most feminist teachers and students now assume that “the most recent is also the best.” They are replacing the old grand narrative with its inversion; instead of a lost golden age that feminists can work to recover, the past is now caricatured as a wretched abyss from which today's feminists have luckily escaped. In women's studies classrooms, history has little place (why bother with an abyss?), and the relevant past begins no earlier than 1945. Worse yet, this tiny slice of the past is flattened so as to create a passive reflection of today's feminism. Hence, to use one of Newman's primary examples, Simone de Beauvoir now functions in many women's studies courses as the first feminist, flawed in many ways but nevertheless taking the brave baby steps that have led to the supposed triumph of feminism in women's studies classrooms today. Aside from the ways in which this approach ignores Christine de Pizan, Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor Mill, and many others in the Western tradition who publicly criticized the gender rules of their own times, this treatment of Beauvoir also misrepresents both her intellectual context and her book *The Second Sex*, which has, as Newman notes, “the dubious distinction of being one of the most often invoked, yet recently most seldom read, of the ‘founding texts’ of Western feminism.”¹⁷

When the 1940s are the distant past and the relevant past begins in the 1960s or 1970s, the study of anything earlier becomes politically suspicious. As Newman puts it, there now resides within women's studies an “implicit claim that reaching back before these years [that is, before the 1960s] can represent nothing other than antiquarian—and potentially politically incorrect—knowledge projects.”¹⁸ Women

en's history, once the queen of feminist scholarship, is now its whipping girl. This hostile-to-history environment might explain the eclipse of historical studies in such feminist journals as *Signs*. It also might encourage our women's history journals to devote so much space to the recent past; the contemporary world is, quite simply, the only past that has credibility with many of our feminist colleagues. If a colleague in women's studies picks up the November 2004 issue of *Gender and History*, she can pass painlessly over an article on violent masculinity in medieval Normandy, quickly over articles on the early twentieth century, and then feast on articles that address our contemporary world—women and violence in El Salvador since 1992, legislative efforts to control domestic violence in India in 2002, and the artistic vision of the very-much-alive South African artist Clive van den Berg. By making our history more contemporary, we might be accommodating to the contemporaneity of feminism today. Or, as Kate Hanuman has phrased it, the practices of women's history today suggest that the recent past is "not of greater scholarly worth, but seemingly of greater political import."¹⁹

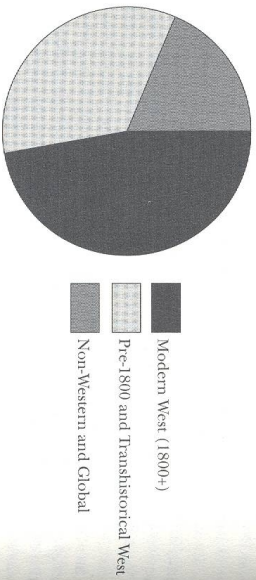
I am least confident about my last factor, but I want also to raise the possibility of a symbiotic connection between our expanding awareness, since the 1980s, of non-Western histories and our waning attention to the West's distant past. In the 1970s, "sisterhood" tripped easily off our tongues, and virtually all women's history concerned Europe or North America. I think it is possible that the historical tunnel vision of that time made it easier for us to look farther down the tunnel—only European and North American history, to be sure, but more of it. Today, the histories of women in Europe and the United States still dominate women's history, but our field extends to many more world regions than it once did. Between 2001 and 2004, 20 percent of articles published in the three major English-language women's history journals dealt with non-Western history, particularly the histories of South Asia, Africa, and Latin America.²⁰ I am not sure what ideal proportions would be, but this is certainly progress, albeit not parity. Much the same can be said for attention to difference, especially difference inflected by race and ethnicity (16 percent of articles) and class (24 percent).²¹ All of us have stories of how reading more widely in women's history has enriched our specific research. For my own ongoing work on never-married women in medieval England, I have learned, among others, from Joanne Meyerowitz's studies of young, unmarried women in early twentieth-century Chicago, Jean Allman's analysis of spinsters in colonial Asante, Janice Stockard's work on "sworn spinsters" in the twentieth-century Can-

ton Delta, and Laurel Cornell's exploration of why there are no spinsters in Japan.²²

By raising the possibility that this expansion in spatial breadth might be tied to a contraction in temporal reach, I do not want to revive the "class versus gender" debates of earlier decades in a new "non-West versus early West" rendition. This is not an either/or situation; we need *both* more non-Western history *and* more early history and sometimes, of course, we get both at once). If the former has expanded at the expense of the latter, neither is to blame; instead, the elephant in the room looks to be the history of the modern West whose dominance over both seems to have yielded little ground, if any. For history generally, I will offer only an anecdote, but it is one that many colleagues in ancient, medieval, or early modern history will confirm: in the United States today, many departments are expanding their few positions in non-Western history, contracting their few positions in pre-1800 Western history, and leaving unscathed the bulk of their appointments in the history of the modern United States and modern Europe.²³ For women's history specifically, the trend since the 1970s can best be discerned in *Signs*, which not only has *less history* than it once did but also *different sorts of history*: proportionately less pre-1800 Western history, less history that crosses over several eras, and more non-Western and global history.²⁴ Only the predominance of the modern West has stayed constant and, indeed, expanded a bit. The raw numbers are small (thirty-eight history essays in 1975–78 and only nine in 2001–4), so my findings are suggestive, not probative. The proportions shown in Figures 1 and 2 tell the story most clearly.

Among the history articles still published in *Signs*, the modern West thrives, and the space once occupied by the West before 1800 is now taken by non-Western and global histories. Women's history might best be served, I submit, by rather less modern West and rather more room for both the non-West and the premodern world (non-West as well as West).

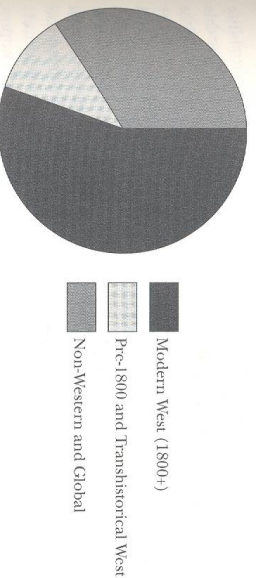
I wonder if this juggling happens within our brains, too. Attending to difference, as essential and incomplete as it is, is also *challenging*. For a historian of working-class women in nineteenth-century London it must often seem much more important to know about nineteenth-century histories of imperialism, colonialism, class, and race than to know about working women in, say, seventeenth-century London. Historical knowledge is not a zero-sum game, but there are limits to the materials any one of us can juggle, and when hard choices have had to be made, juggling the difference of the distant past might

Figure 1. History coverage in *Signs*, 1975-1978

often be giving way to juggling differences that have more contemporary resonances. Such a subtle shift is easier to suggest than to demonstrate, for it happens within our heads—the subjects we choose to study and the ways we choose to study them—rather than in any public venue. But I suggest that each of us ask ourselves whether we might be, as our intellectual imaginations range more widely across the world and deal more deftly with differences among women, slacking in our attention to the past that precedes the era we study. As our vision grows more panoramic, are we failing to look down the tunnel?

Women's History from a Distance

Clearly, history has a "distant past" problem. All historians should better attend to the past before modernity and defend its relevance in the present day. Otherwise, as Lynn Hunt has noted, the central irony of our creep toward the present might become that it "put[s] us out of business as historians."²⁵ As teachers and scholars of history, we are challenged by the study of the past, informed, amused, personally fulfilled, professionally rewarded, and, in a move that distinguishes historians from antiquarians, we seek better to understand our present circumstances by reference to the past. In our willing obsequance to the hermeneutic powers of the past, we seldom—as best I know—set temporal limits on that power. If studying the 1950s illuminates our contemporary world, then so, too, does studying the 1850s, the 1750s, the 1650s, and so forth. If anyone understands the importance of the past as an ever-receding horizon, we historians do.²⁶ For feminist historians, the imperative to turn more deeply toward the past is particularly compelling, for, if we examine feminist

Figure 2. History coverage in *Signs*, 2001-2004

issues from a distance, we can produce not only better women's history but also better feminist theory.

Modern women's history is persistently marred by an extensive series of myths about women in the world before 1500. There was no childhood or adolescence in the European Middle Ages, right? Wrong.²⁷ Little affection between wives and husbands? Wrong.²⁸ No effective birth control before 1500? Wrong.²⁹ No sexual identities? Wrong.³⁰ No advocates for women? Wrong again.³¹ In all these cases (and there are many others), the distant past is understood by modern historians as the antithesis of whatever it means to be "modern." If companionate marriage is a quintessentially modern trait, then medieval marriages *must* have lacked love; if the presence of sexual minorities is quintessentially modern, then there *must* have been no sexual identities in premodern times. Ancient and medieval historians have built cottage industries around revealing the foolishness of these myths in well-researched books and articles. But the rebuttals are remarkably ineffective: among modernists, these myths still prosper, even decades after they have been demolished by credible scholarly research.

Silly stereotypes like these have no place in women's history or history generally. The women and men who lived long before us were not profoundly "other" in awful or admirable ways; they were like us in some ways and different from us in others. Our history will be better if we attend to these past lives with the same attentiveness we bring to such factors as class, race, religion, sexuality, and world region in the present. Yes, one of the great pleasures of the historian's craft is to see the era we study (whatever era it might be) as ipso facto a time of unique and earth-shattering change. Yet this is a dangerous plea-

sure, one that falsely reifies the distant past and also limits our ability to understand more recent history. I offer substantive support for this point in the chapters that follow: Chapter 4 investigates long-standing continuities in the history of women that were not broken, as so many feminist historians think, by the advent of modernity; Chapters 5 and 6 explore how we can enhance feminist scholarship by looking across the great divide of modernity, using the examples of women's work and female sexuality, respectively. Chapter 7 examines the pedagogical usefulness of the distant past. Let me here briefly illustrate the benefits of a temporally expanded women's history from the entirely different angle of "women and the state," a subject of such importance that all three English-language women's history journals have recently devoted special issues to it.

State-building is one of the basic markers of modernity, distinguishing, in the traditional telling of Western history, medieval realms and fiefdoms from modern nation-states. This makes "women and the state" a hard case for incorporating the distant past. The *Women's History Review* chose a focus that precluded pre-1800 contributions altogether: women's suffrage in Britain.³² The topics of the *Journal of Women's History* ("Women and the State") and *Gender and History* ("Gender, Citizenship, and Subjectivities") were more inclusive, and the introductions to these issues promised articles that stretched "across the world and time" and encompassed "different time periods and locations."³³ Yet more was promised than delivered: all three journals presented "women and the state" as a topic firmly bounded by the temporal confines of modernity. This is unfortunate, for both the special issues themselves and their individual contributors could have better understood critical aspects of "women and the state" if they had looked earlier than 1800. I offer three specific examples: women and citizenship, the private political power of some women, and the development of feminist thought in the West.

Before Europe had nation-states, it had cities, citizens, and customs of citizenship that are highly relevant to feminist understandings of the history of women and the state. In northern Europe during the later Middle Ages, for just one example, men admitted to the "freedom" of a town or city acquired a host of privileges and duties: immunity from local feudal authorities; access to the town's military protection and social services; economic privileges in urban markets; and the obligation to obey, support, and participate in town government. Known as *Bürger* (German), *Powters* (Dutch), *bourgeois* (French), or burghesses, these men usually acquired citizenship by birth (a son could follow his father), by trade (membership in cer-

tain guilds could automatically confer the town's freedom), or by redemption (paying a fee). Women, too, could acquire the freedom of a town, usually by birth, redemption, or marriage (a wife of a citizen was often *ipso facto* a citizen), but women were "passive citizens" whose rights were more economic than political: although female burghesses shared the protections and rights of other citizens, they did not participate in city elections or serve in city offices.³⁴ Yet female burghesses (sometimes styled "freewomen") enjoyed privileges that were often denied others, male as well as female, because many towns extended their freedom only to the wealthiest men and women.

This premodern history is directly relevant to a problem with which several contributors to these special issues grappled—that is, the relation of women to citizenship in modern states. In the *Journal of Women's History*, Kif Augustine-Adams studied how Argentinian women in the late nineteenth century were "dependent citizens" whose marriages to foreigners de facto expatriated them, in *Gender and History*. Brigitte Studer examined a similar practice that created "contingent national belonging" for women in twentieth-century Switzerland.³⁵ This so-called marriage rule has a complex modern history that has played out differently in a variety of national contexts, but it is not, as Studer suggests, "an invention of the administrative state in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century."³⁶ As Martha Howell has shown, medieval cities also worried about marriages of female citizens with male noncitizens and similarly sought to subsume the wife's status into that of her husband: the foreign-born wife of a freeman acceded to his freedom, but the foreign-born husband of a freeman did not automatically do the same.³⁷ In medieval towns, the issue was tied up with civic rights, residence, and household governance; in modern states, the issue has been more inflected by racism and nationalism; but in both, the reigning assumption was that a wife's citizenship followed that of her husband. There need not be a direct, linear link between citizenship in fifteenth-century Lille or Cologne and citizenship in Argentina in 1871 and Switzerland in 1941 for this enduring assumption to be interesting, relevant, and worthy of incorporating into modern histories of women's citizenship.

The public sphere seems as much a part of modernity as the nation-state, so much so that women's public participation in the state—through suffrage, salons, and women's organizations—is mostly treated in these special issues as equivalent to political voice.³⁸ But women's history before 1800 can remind us that a great deal of polit-

cal life happens on informal, personal, and private levels from which women of the powerful classes have been rarely proscribed. The early Tudor court was once studied in public terms that replicate, in an early sixteenth-century context, the publicity that seems so basic to modern politics: monarchs, parliaments, and bureaucracies studied through the proclamations, statutes, and orders they generated. But Barbara Harris's analyses of aristocratic women in Tudor England have given us a new take on "political" that emphasizes its informal, personal sides—the politics of marriage, the politics of seemingly casual socializing, the politics of gift giving and token-exchange, the politics of patronage and kinship, the politics of influence.⁴⁶ The "Tudor court" will never look the same again, but neither should our understandings of politics, writ large. Given the long-standing private influence of women in European monarchies, it is unlikely to be the case, as one article claimed, that in nineteenth-century France "elite women gained unprecedented access to political life."⁴⁶ Catherine de Medici would have smiled at this notion. And it is a mistake to be so mesmerized by the modern public sphere that we fail to recognize the continuing power of women's private influence in modern states, even democratic ones. We need only think of the private powers of such women as Eleanor Roosevelt and Lynne Cheney or the accession to public office of such well-born or well-wed women as Indira Gandhi, Eva Peron, Hillary Clinton, and Benazir Bhutto to realize that private empowerment is still an important aspect of "women and the state" that the essays in these special issues obscure.

The history of feminist thought is littered with forgotten premodern advocates for women. Gerda Lerner has argued that the critiques of Christine de Pizan and others like her were so effectively silenced that, until the eighteenth century, each subsequent generation had painstakingly to recreate feminism, with no awareness of the insightful labors of those who came before.⁴⁷ If so, surely we should not replicate these gaps in our own histories of feminist thought—that is, surely we can trace the often-broken trail of feminist thought without adding new breaks of our own. One article in these special issues argues that two men—John Stuart Mill and Giuseppe Mazzini—profoundly shaped suffragist thought in late nineteenth-century Britain. This is fair enough, but it is not fair to claim, as the author does, that it is from Mill—and hence, only after 1869—that feminists learned "the fundamental insight that the source of tyranny was in the home."⁴⁸ Feminist writers before Mill had pointed this out, and perhaps even more to the point, as Sarah Hanley has shown, women's public protests against what she calls the "family-state compact" in

support of male right had created a long-standing, sophisticated, public, and popular discourse against domestic tyranny on which Olympia de Gouges and others drew almost a century before Mill published his treatise.⁴⁹ From a short view, John Stuart Mill can appear central to suffragists' understandings of domestic tyranny, but from a distance, Mill and other late nineteenth-century feminists appear as part of a long tradition of objection by women—in action as well as in thought—to the twinned domestic and political tyrannies of men. Perhaps there was a break in this tradition—that is, perhaps Mill had to reinvent this particular feminist idea—but if so, it is the historian's task to acknowledge the broader context, to see what Mill and the suffragists who read him could perhaps not see, and to seek explanations for their foreshortened vision.

These three special issues looked at women and the state in geographical contexts that ranged from Latin America and North America to India, Australia, and (predominantly) Europe. This rich world feast delighted and informed my reading of the volumes, but the meager consideration of the distant past left me unsated, with less food for thought about women and the state than a longer temporal view would have provided. I hope this example, which could be multiplied ad nauseum, can gently remind us of the value of looking more deeply into the past. I am not suggesting that feminist historians abandon the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to plunge into the pleasures of studying the world before 1800, but I am suggesting that, no matter what era we might study, we can better attend to that era's own past. Our common commitment to the peoples and societies that have gone before us is, after all, what makes us feminist historians, as opposed to, say, feminist sociologists or feminist political scientists. Given our professional commitment to the importance of the past in the present, I hope we can agree that women's history will be improved if we do not assume that the "usable" past really starts about 1900, or, generously, 1800, or indeed, whenever "our" period starts.

Let me put this another way. The people who lived in the past are not us, and their difference from us compels our attention as much as those differences that we daily encounter such as class, race, religion, sexuality, and world region. As a student of women during the European later Middle Ages, I must attend to the differences that factured the meanings of "woman" and the experiences of women in fourteenth-century and fifteenth-century Europe—especially social status, marital status, sexual status, legal status, religion, and region. But I must also attend to the past contexts of these women—the thir-

teenth and twelfth centuries, to be sure, but also their more distant pasts, such as Latin antiquity and early Christianity—in order to understand what was new and not-new in the world in which they lived. I cannot start afresh in 1300, for if I did, I would misunderstand their lives and their histories. We will produce better, richer, wiser women's history, if we attend, at least a bit, to the past histories of the past times that we study.

Feminist Theory from a Distance

Feminist historians have a second good reason to attend to the distant past—that is, the critical role of history in the creation of feminist theory. "Feminist theory" casts a wide net, from activists whose "theory" is also "strategy," to postcolonial and psychoanalytic theorists, to feminist theories that are so epistemologically based that they almost become, as Mary Maynard has put it, "theory about theory."⁴⁴ Whether strategic, middle-range, or highly intellectualized, good theory grows from temporal depth, as illustrated most immediately by Bachofen and Engels, both of whom viewed their chosen problems from the distance provided by thousands of years of human history. Their theories relied mostly on history-as-legacy, on history as a story that links us with past peoples and societies from which we are supposedly descended. This sort of history has less purchase now than it did in the nineteenth century, and it is especially hard to sustain in feminist scholarship, where attention to difference has rendered absurd the notion that the situation of women today somehow descends from any single past.

We once readily assumed this to be the case. For example, in 1893, Frances Buckstaff, who would later serve on the board of regents at the University of Wisconsin, published what might be the first piece of feminist medieval history in the academic tradition, an article arguing that the legal rights of married women in England declined with the Norman conquest of 1066. Toward the end of her essay, Buckstaff briefly reviewed the later English history of these disabilities, then traced their legislative survivals in many parts of the United States, and finally concluded with this observation for her U.S. audience: "It is not the purpose of this monograph to discuss the present state of married women's property. But I have called attention to it in order to remark the curious fact that the Norman dower of one-third the real estate, which superseded the community of property of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers, is still the rule eight centuries later in a large number of the laws of a race which has no prouder name for

itself than Anglo-Saxon."⁴⁵ Buckstaff's easy equation of "United States" with "Anglo-Saxon" was common in her day, but it did not accurately describe her world. Wisconsin, home to Native Americans as well as Europeans, was then predominantly populated by people of German, Irish, and Norwegian descent. Buckstaff's perspective might be a little more justified by the legal context of her work (there remains even today a thick web of English antecedent in U.S. law), but even there notions of lineal descent are hard to defend. History-as-legacy is especially easy to illustrate in U.S.-based studies of European histories, but it haunts all history, especially nationalist history, even today.

For feminist theory, a different sort of history is optimal, history-as-temporal-comparison. Joan Scott has judged that "simply comparing data about women did not get us very far."⁴⁶ I disagree. It has taken us far, and it will take us further still, especially if we seek to build feminist theory that, in the words of Charlotte Bunch, "grows out of and guides activism in a continuous spiraling process."⁴⁷ Seeking to demystify theory and root it in feminist practice, Bunch has described theory as a four-stage process: (1) *description* of what exists, (2) *analysis* of why it exists, (3) *vision* of what should exist, and (4) *strategy* of how to achieve that vision.⁴⁷ Feminist historians have a great deal to contribute to processes such as these, especially in terms of description and analysis. Surely, for example, feminist efforts to crack equal pay barriers can be advanced by recognizing that women's wages in comparison to men's have been remarkably stable over many centuries. As I will show in Chapter 5, the wage gap in England seems to have emerged with the advent of wage labor, and it has fluctuated for centuries within a limited range, with women paid—on medieval manors, in early modern towns, on eighteenth-century farms, in nineteenth-century factories, and in twentieth-century offices—about one-half to three-quarters the wages of men. We do not need comparative history in the scientific mode to render an observation like this useful to feminist strategists and theorists.⁴⁸ But we do need longer temporal vision. The major U.S.-based advocacy group on the wage gap, the National Committee on Pay Equity, begins its history of the issue in 1932 and hopes to solve the problem through legislation requiring that wages be based on job not job-holder.⁴⁹ Claudia Goldin, the U.S. economist who has commented most substantively on the wage gap, confines her analyses to the modern economy and pins her hope for eventual wage parity on the "economic progress" of technological change, education, white-collar occupations, and the like.⁵⁰ The long history of the English wage gap suggests to me that legislation and

economic progress are likely to be short-term solutions, at best, and that the elimination of wage differentials will require more fundamental human change. As this instance shows, history-as-temporal-comparison can have an effect on feminist theory that is both sobering and radicalizing.

It is, of course, important for feminist theorists to undertake cross-cultural comparisons as well as temporal ones, to look beyond privileged world regions and people, to see, for example, how women's work has been remunerated beyond the West or among the poor or among sexual minorities. But in the creation of feminist theory, our vision best takes in *both* the contemporary world in all its variety *and* past worlds, too. For some insights, we perhaps do not need to go much further back than the last century. The gender politics of Western nations after the two world wars of the twentieth century might suffice, for example, to caution us about conservative reactions following times of extraordinary opportunity for women. Other insights, however, require a longer view. The wage gap is one example, for it presents one sort of challenge if viewed from the confines of the modern economy, and it looks entirely different if viewed across centuries and across, therefore, a variety of economic formations. Women and citizenship is another example. The seemingly modern challenges of female citizenship take on different meanings when we recognize that citizenship was also an incomplete status for women in the Athenian polis, the Roman republic, the cities of medieval Europe, and the Italian city-states. In both these instances—and there are many others—the striking conundrum is the persistence of a practice of sexual inequality, mutatis mutandis in many different places and times. If feminist history can unpack these historical persistences, feminist theory will benefit.

In this contribution of history-as-temporal-comparison to feminist theory, history before 1800 has a challenging but critical role to play. The challenge springs from the simple fact that the distant past is most often a privileged past, a past whose study is especially liable to be understood by feminists, as Newman has noted, as “antiquarian” and “politically incorrect”—endeavors.⁵¹ It is no accident that the wage gap can be tracked back to the 1300s in *English* records, or that we know so much about women and citizenship in the great polities of the *Western* tradition, or that, if I were more skilled, I would draw further examples from the Tang and Song dynasties of *China*. It is also no accident that we know a lot more about aristocratic women eight hundred years ago than we do about women among the peasantry, and more about peasant women than about the handless poor.

To the winners belong the archives, and to the archives flock the historians. Feminist historians of premodern societies are finding remarkable materials in these archives, materials that tell us much more about the lives of humble people—peasants, poor, and prostitutes—than we once expected. We are also using old sources in new ways, uncovering new sources, and turning to methodologies, such as archaeology, that allow us to rely less on the survival of the written word. But the feminist turn to the distant past will always and already entail histories that privilege some world regions over others, the wealthy over the poor, and the powerful over the disempowered. Although we can work against this, we cannot escape it, and we have no choice but to make use of the distant past wherever we can find it. Whatever we think of ancient Rome or the Song dynasty or medieval England, their archives are among the relative few that allow us to undertake the sorts of temporal comparisons feminism needs.

This archival challenge is worth meeting for two simple reasons: the theoretical insights generated by early history and the theoretical benefit of the sheer distance of the distant past. Historians of women in the Middle Ages, for example, have developed certain specialties about which they speak with particular authority to *all* feminist scholars. Are you interested in female sexuality? If so, you will learn a lot from Karma Lochrie's exploration of medieval sexualities unshaped by modern heteronormativity.⁵² Are you researching women within Christian traditions? If so, you will benefit, no matter the time or place of your research, by reading Caroline Bynum and other medieval historians who have opened up new ways of understanding one very distinctive expression of female spirituality.⁵³ Are you worried about how to teach male-authored texts in feminist ways? If so, I suggest you learn about Jane Burns's subversive readings of “bodytalk” in the predominantly male canon of medieval literatures.⁵⁴ Are you studying prostitution? If so, you should have your brain twisted a bit by Ruth Karras's argument that medieval prostitution was more about promiscuity than sex-for-money.⁵⁵ Are you interested—as were the authors in the recent special issues—in gender and political power? If so, you need to read not only Martha Howell's work on citizens in medieval towns but a variety of other scholars whose studies of medieval queens and queenship have provided some of our best analyses yet of how class can—and cannot—trump gender.⁵⁶

As these examples suggest, all of us can benefit from reading more deeply into the past. Each and every one of us need not abandon the twentieth century and embrace the Middle Ages, and, indeed, if we did, the historical vision of women's history would become truncated

in another worrisome way. But all of us can think more wisely about women's history by reading across temporal divides. It helps to search out the specific earlier histories of the specific subjects we study, and thus, to pick up on my earlier example, historians of working-class women in nineteenth-century London can certainly benefit from delving into histories of working women in London's earlier centuries, as well as from attending to nineteenth-century histories of imperialism, colonialism, class, and race. It helps perhaps even more to read eclectically, familiarizing ourselves with the best, most illuminating, and even most provocative histories that each era has to offer. This is why I think it is so important for journals and conferences in women's history to take in a broader temporal range than is now the case. These venues encourage all of us to dip into histories outside our specialties, and I hope that, in the future, they will do more to facilitate the access of historians of modern women to the latest developments in women's history before 1800.

Finally, as all historians know, the passage of time provides new perspectives, clearer understandings, and more measured analyses—this is why we pride ourselves that history is more dispassionate than journalism. In a subject as personally fraught and politically freighted as women's history, the distance of the distant past is especially useful. This is true in the classroom where students can more frankly discuss abortion, wage inequities, and homosexuality in the fourteenth century than in the twenty-first century; it is also true in the making of theory. What we cannot yet see in, say, the twentieth century, we can sometimes see more clearly in, say, the fifteenth century. After all, it was Martha Howell working on medieval cities—not any of the authors or editors of the three recent special issues on “women and the state”—who reached the general conclusion that female access to citizenship might be linked to the extent to which citizenship was “equivalent to access to rule.”⁵⁷ When citizenship in Howell's cities conferred little political access, women were citizens; when citizenship was equivalent to political power, women were excluded. This is a hugely important insight, one that is painful to acknowledge in our own time but easier to see in past times. As a U.S. citizen, I have had ample opportunity to ponder Howell's observation in the past few years: the shredding of the electoral process in Florida in December 2000; the inauguration in January 2001 of a president not elected by popular vote; and the commitment in 2003 of U.S. soldiers to a war then opposed by the majority of U.S. citizens. Perhaps citizenship—such a prized achievement for U.S. women some eighty years ago—now has much less political meaning. This is a possibility historians of

the twentieth century will have to answer, but it was raised by contemplating the distant past. For the insights that our own distance from a subject can bring, if for no other reason, the distant past has much to offer feminist theory.

Judy Chicago's vision of women's history in *The Dinner Party* was temporally deep but flawed. In a feminist twist on history-as-legacy, she turned to past times for foremothers with whom she could readily identify. She searched for these foremothers mostly within Western culture, and as suggested by the slowly ascending height of the banquet table, she understood their collective story as one of gentle progress for women. Worst of all, Chicago eschewed the advice of professional historians. She sought out skilled embroiderers, ceramicists, and other artists, but when she needed information on the women to be honored in the exhibition, she asked a painter to head a research team that “with no research skills and little scholarly background” rekked off to the library to look for books on women.⁵⁸ We do not want to return to this sort of feminist exploration of the distant past.

But we do need to return to the distant past. The master narrative of Western history tells of great chasms that separate one era from another—Rome and medieval Europe divided c. 500 CE; medieval and early modern c. 1500; ancient regime and modern c. 1800. These chasms partly reflect genuine historical transitions, but they have been deepened far beyond their natural contours by the repetitions of a master narrative. That we pause at these chasms and seldom traverse them into the more distant past is a problem for all history, but it is a particular threat to feminist history, which, when confined to the modern, is sapped of interpretative power. As we'll see in the next chapter, the chasms of the master narrative particularly obscure what any master would not want us to see—continuities of patriarchal power that feminists need to explore and understand. Feminist history requires more than the short view and so, too, does the achievement of a more feminist future.

Chapter 4 Patriarchal Equilibrium

In women's history, the distant past tells a story of enduring patriarchy, a story that poses two challenges to our field. The first challenge is the longstanding and baffling job of locating the historical origins of patriarchy. From J. J. Bachofen and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century to Gerda Lerner in 1986, the search for the origins of patriarchy has been compelling and inconclusive.¹ It has not been a fruitless search—we have learned a great deal—but it is doomed in both conception (there was almost certainly no single original site of patriarchal power) and execution (the sources are too fragmentary for firm conclusions). The second challenge is posed by the seeming ahistoricity of patriarchy: If patriarchal power is a feature of all historical societies, then what can historians have to say about it? Or worse yet, perhaps the persistence of patriarchy betrays its roots in biological imperatives that are outside the purview of history altogether. If patriarchy is everywhere, where is its history?

This chapter argues that patriarchy does have a history, one that is inherent to the feminist project of women's history. Patriarchy might be everywhere, but it is not everywhere the same, and therefore patriarchy, in all its immense variety, is something we need to understand, analyze, and explain. If we have the courage to make patriarchy—its mechanisms, its changes, its forms, its endurance—a central problem of women's history, we will write not only better history but also history that speaks more strongly to central feminist concerns. The partnership of feminism and history has withered in recent years, but the venture of historicizing patriarchy breathes new life into the relationship. As I see it, the study of patriarchy is properly as central to women's history as is the study of capitalism to labor history or the study of racism to African American history. To move patriarchy from the margins of women's history to a more central position, this chapter begins with patriarchy *per se*, then examines the need to confront the continuity at the heart of patriarchy, and ends with a case study—of

women in the English brewing industry between 1300 and 1700—that introduces the analytical concept of a "patriarchal equilibrium."

Patriarchy

In modern English, the term "patriarchy" has three main meanings. First, it can refer to the ecclesiastical power of men recognized as Christian leaders, particularly within the Greek Orthodox tradition; hence, the archbishop of Constantinople is commonly known as the patriarch of that church. Second, "patriarchy" can denote the legal powers of a husband/father over his wife, children, and other dependents. In seventeenth-century England, this confined-to-the-household definition of patriarchy was extended into political theory in an argument, popularized by Robert Filmer's *Patristia*, that the power of kings derived from the power of fathers.² Filmer's extension-by-analogy has been much repeated and elaborated on, and it has created an understanding, still found among some social scientists, of patriarchy as a form of government in which male heads of household rule over lesser males and all females. Despite its analogous extension to the state, this second meaning of "patriarchy" has usually remained limited to domestic, familial contexts; today, it is better expressed by such words as "patriarchalism" or "paternalism."³ The third meaning of "patriarchy," which I adopt here, broadly draws on feminist critiques of male power. As Adrienne Rich has defined it, patriarchy is "a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male."⁴ Or as Allan Johnson has more recently defined the term, "Patriarchy is *not* simply another way of saying 'men.' Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such 'patriarchy' doesn't refer to me or any other men or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men *and* women participate. . . . What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male dominated*, *male identified*, and *male centered*."⁵ When feminists at rallies chant, "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Patriarchy's Got to Go," we are not talking about the ecclesiastical structures of Greek Orthodoxy or about a specific form of fatherly domination within families, but instead about a general system through which women have been and are subordinated to men. As Sylvia Walby has succinctly put it, patriar-

chy is "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women."⁵

This understanding of "patriarchy" is justified not only by its commonsense feminist usage but also by the fact that it is the *best* available term to denote the system variously described by Rich, Johnson, and Walby. "Male dominance" and "male supremacy" suggest not only that such systems rest in biological differences but also, through analogy with such terms as "white supremacy," that patriarchal institutions are strictly equivalent to racist and other oppressive institutions (the most striking divergences derive, of course, from the impracticability of segregating women and men as thoroughly as has sometimes been managed for people of different races, classes, and religions). "Sexism" suggests mere prejudice; "Oppression of women" and "subordination of women" fail to convey the full complexity of systems in which many women have colluded and from which some women have benefited. "Patriarchy" also has the significant asset of being a single word with straightforward affective and adverbial forms. As long as we use a phrase like "male dominance," we will slip into using roughly equivalent phrases like "male supremacy" or "male domination," and such a multitude of terms will lead to unclear thinking and unclear writing. And, finally, "patriarchy" helps to re-orient our work toward more explicitly feminist purposes, simply because, as we saw in chapter 2, it comes with a sharp political edge. "Patriarchy" focuses the mind, and in so doing, it can recharge feminist history.

To many people, talk of "patriarchy" goes hand in hand with attacks on men, as men. I fear some readers will be thinking at this point, "Oh dear, here comes the part where she blames it all on men." And others might have quite different hopes, anticipating, "Oh good, now she's going to prove that it is all the fault of men." I intend to satisfy neither group. Men are certainly implicated in patriarchy; some men have vigorously supported its tenets and institutions, and most others have benefited from its power. But not all men have gained equally from patriarchal structures, and some men—for example, homosexual men in many societies—have suffered directly from patriarchy and misogyny.⁶ In any case, women have not been innocent of collusion with patriarchy; some have supported it, some have benefited from it, and most have raised their daughters and sons to conform to it. In suggesting that we investigate patriarchy more fully, then, I am not advocating a simplistic history of misogynistic men oppressing virtuous women.

The term "patriarchy" is also sometimes associated with a femi-

nism that falsely elides differences among women by assuming that white, middle-class, heterosexual women can speak for all women. The differences that have fractured the category "women" in the past and still fracture it today (for example, those based on race, class, marital status, sexual orientation, and world region) are differences signified by vast imbalances of power, and in suggesting that we focus some attention on the problem of patriarchy, I certainly do not intend either to ignore or to replicate these inequalities. "Patriarchy" is not a concept confined to the West nor used only there; for example, some of the most forthright recent uses of the term have occurred in studies focused on South Asia.⁷ Similarly, recent studies in African American women's history have laid open not only the oppressive racial frameworks within which African Americans have had to live but also the patriarchal concerns that could trouble racial solidarities; for example, Michele Mitchell has traced how African American activists in the post-Reconstruction era "considered it critical that women radiate inviolable modesty, that men embody controlled manliness, that couples marry and establish patriarchal households."⁸ As explained in the specific case of "women" in Chapter 2, if we seek general observations rather than universalizing statements, I believe we can cautiously deploy such categories without obscuring difference. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty recently put it, "[D]ifferences are never just 'differences.' In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining."⁹ Like Mohanty, I seek to balance the particular and the general, to appreciate difference while seeing common ground, too.

Patriarchal constraint constitutes a central part of that common ground. It is no accident that when Ida Blom and her colleagues ambitiously set out to write a women's history of the world in the 1990s, they could agree on only one common theoretical framework: patriarchy.¹⁰ Keeping in balance *both* the relationally inherent to differences among women *and* the relationality inherent to differences between women and men, feminist historians can work to develop new ways of considering how the history of women—as *women*—has been different from the history of men, as men. In late medieval England, for example, some women had more wealth or higher status than some men; some women wielded more political power than some men; some women enjoyed racial or sexual privileges denied to some men. But within each group of men and women—whether the group was structured by commonalities of class, race, ethnicity, or whatever—women as a group were disempowered *compared to men* of

their group. Peasant women held much less land in their villages than did peasant men; townswomen did not enjoy the same benefits of guild association as did their fathers, brothers, and husbands; and women of the landed classes did not sit on privy councils, serve as justices of the peace, or attend parliament. The displacement of women *vis-à-vis* comparable men in late medieval England had specific late medieval, English components, but it is possible to study patriarchy in that time and place without thereby obscuring differences among women and without eliding or denying other inequalities. Most theorists of patriarchy insist, in fact, that systems of sexual oppression are closely imbricated with other systems of human oppression, such as imperialism, racism, feudalism, capitalism, and heterosexism. "Dual systems theory"—which in the 1970s and early 1980s attempted to synthesize feminist critiques of patriarchy with socialist critiques of capitalism—is just one example.¹¹

Patriarchy has often been understood in simplistic terms. My students sometimes talk about "The Patriarchy," which always evokes for me a committee of white-haired men, nastily scheming to keep women in their place. Not so, of course. The concept of patriarchy might be singular, but its manifestations certainly are not. Examining the historical workings of patriarchy entails writing the many histories of many patriarchies—of its many forms and the many systems through which it has thrived. Sylvia Walby's work on modern England provides some critical help here. Her distinction between *forms* of patriarchy (that is, overall types of patriarchy) and its *degree* (that is, the intensity of women's oppression) frees us to examine patriarchy without being bound by problematical quests for progress. And her articulation of six *patriarchal structures*—mode of production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, culture—provides an example of how to break the seeming monolith of patriarchal power into analyzable units. Walby traces a transition, in modern English history, from a "private patriarchy" which flourished in the mid-nineteenth century to a "public patriarchy" which has since replaced it. Her specific patriarchal forms, degrees, and structures might apply only to modern England, but her overall approach is not so limited.¹² Patricia Hill Collins's work is also helpful in thinking about patriarchy in more complex ways. Her notion of a "matrix of oppression" critically melds different oppressive systems, although her arguments are based on the specific dynamics of race and gender relations in the modern United States, they are more broadly applicable.¹³ "Patriarchy" is not yet a fully analytical concept, in part because historians and others have insufficiently studied it. But in time, I hope that we

might be able to distinguish various sorts of historical patriarchies, particularly as they have interacted with various socioeconomic systems; we might someday be able to distinguish analytically, say, "pre-industrial patriarchies" from "capitalist patriarchies" from "socialist patriarchies."¹⁴ I do not, however, look ahead toward any grand theory or metanarrative of patriarchy; to my mind, "patriarchy" is a concept that focuses feminist study and strategy, not a single system and not, as one historian recently phrased it, a "principle."¹⁵ Patriarchal power might be a fact of recorded history, but this power is not solitary; our job is to understand the many varieties of patriarchy that have so successfully supported its adaptation to so many different historical circumstances.

Just as patriarchy is improperly understood as "The Patriarchy," so, too, are women misconceptualized as passive victims of its power. Women have certainly suffered under patriarchy, facing ideological, institutional, and practical barriers to equitable association with men (and indeed, with other women). But women have also colluded in, undermined, and survived patriarchy. The history of patriarchy is not, therefore, a history of men; it is also a history of women as survivors, resisters, and agents of patriarchy.¹⁶ Women's agency is part of the strength of patriarchy; as Margaret Ezell has argued for seventeenth-century England, the very endurance of patriarchy must be explained, in part, by the "very looseness of its structure," which insured that "conditions were not intolerable to the point of open rebellion for the majority of women in their everyday lives."¹⁷ And the linking of women's agency to women's vulnerability (as in, for a modern Western example, the "freedom" of women to walk the streets at night and their vulnerability in such environments to rape) is a crucial part of patriarchal endurance; we must examine the patriarchal ideologies and realities that have assured women that there is safety in protected subordination and danger in vulnerable freedom.¹⁸

In understanding women's agency within patriarchal regimes, Deniz Kandiyot's concept of "patriarchal bargain" is key. Kandiyot has shown how women strategize within the constraints of any patriarchal regime, creating opportunities for themselves, changing patriarchal systems, and even playing out "implicit scripts that define, limit, and inflict their market and domestic options." The "bargain" of "patriarchal bargain" is not necessarily a "good buy," but it both creates strategic opportunities for women and invests women in patriarchy. Thus, for example, a young woman will endure the dispossession of living as a daughter-in-law in her husband's family because she anticipates that she will someday be a mother-in-law, possessed of

adult sons, property, and control over the labor of daughter-in-laws. In this form of what Kandiyoti calls "classic patriarchy," an older woman is subordinate to men but exercises substantial power over younger women, giving her a strong reason to maintain the patriarchal status quo.¹⁹ Kandiyoti developed the concept of "patriarchal bargains" by contrasting sub-Saharan Africa and the Muslim Middle East, and many scholars have since put her concept to good effect in those contexts.²⁰ But those of us who work on women's history in other world regions will find it applicable, too; "patriarchal bargains" might help us, for example, to better understand why so many women were opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment in the late twentieth-century United States.

Antifeminists have often argued that male dominance is unavoidable, locating the roots of patriarchy in biological differences or functional imperatives. Feminists know otherwise; we know that patriarchy is contingent, constructed, and subject to change. We know, as Zillah Eisenstein has put it, that "the reason patriarchy exists is because a nonpatriarchal sex-gender system could exist if allowed to."²¹ Yet unless feminist scholars historicize patriarchy by studying its many variants, it will remain a bugbear for feminists, an ignored but ever-present specter that suggests (however falsely) that the oppression of women is natural and ineradicable. The power of patriarchy in our lives today partly resists, in other words, on our failure to understand how it has worked in past times. So long as we are afraid to name patriarchy and to study its workings historically, we will understand our current circumstances inadequately, and the lives of women and men will be twisted by the perverse strengths of patriarchal institutions. Historians of women need not "go on endlessly repeating and proving the obvious, that is to say, the grossly unjust treatment that women have received over thousands of years at the hands of males."²² But it is the special task of historians of women to investigate *the forces behind this obvious fact*—that is, to explain how the oppression of women has endured for so long and in so many different historical settings. This problem—the problem of historicizing patriarchy—has inspired considerable disquiet among historians, but our feminist politics demand that we address it.²³

Confronting Continuity

In order to address patriarchy as feminist historians, we must first come to grips with continuity. The tension between continuity and change is perhaps the oldest and most productive of historical

themes. At the center of eighteenth-century debates about Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it remains powerful not just in studies of Rome but in most historical fields. In the twentieth century, the balance between continuity and change shifted slightly, as new historical approaches and subjects placed special emphasis on continuity. Seeking to downplay event-based history, Fernand Braudel and other historians in the *Annales* school began in the 1930s to stress the structural continuities of economy, society, and environment. By the late twentieth century, this emphasis on continuity began to seep into many fields, reshaping once-sharp breaks into more measured trends; for example, historians of religious reform in sixteenth-century Europe now emphasize gradual change and continuity with medieval practices. To the social historians, family historians, and historians of women who began to produce so many innovative sorts of history in the 1970s, this renewed emphasis on continuity also made good sense. Most readily agreed, for example, that the lives of European women were more influenced by slow-moving structural changes (such as the industrialization of the European economy) than by events (such as the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792).

Nevertheless, change exerts a powerful narrative force over women's history. Events might often seem less important than long-term structural shifts, but historians of women still frequently focus on significant moments of seeming transformation in women's status, particularly on seeming advances or declines in women's status; as a result, we sometimes highlight "transformation" when the more important story may be about "continuity." I will unpack one such example in the next chapter—the assumption among many historians that women's work was more valued in preindustrial Europe than afterward. This is an old belief, much repeated even today; our two most recent interpretations of women's work in Europe's industrial revolution tell us that "[i]ndustrialization brought about the subordination of women in many realms of production" and that changes in this period "not only subordinated women's work, but contributed to identifying women as not workers."²⁴ The approaches of Deborah Valenze and Deborah Simonton are new in many ways, but they build on a familiar story about women nurtured by traditional economies and harmed by industrial ones. This story masks important continuities. To be sure, women's work in Europe has changed in many ways since 1300; today, European women work more often for wages than did their medieval predecessors, they more often travel away from home to a separate place of employment, and they also accrue wel-

fare benefits through their work that would have been unimaginable to medieval women. But these changes have not transformed the work status of women, compared to men; today, as in 1300, "women's work" in Europe is still relatively low-status, low-paid, and low-skilled. This judgment rests on a critical distinction between *changes* in women's experiences on the one hand and *transformations* in women's status on the other. To my mind, there has been much change in European women's experiences as workers over the last millennium, but little transformation in their work status in relation to that of men.²⁵

"Transformation" is the accepted or even canonical story; "continuity" is troublesome, worrisome, and even dismissible. In 1993, the Berkshire Conference on Women's History was entitled "Transformations: Women, Gender, Power," a title so innocuous and unproblematic that most participants probably never thought twice about it. Would we have thought twice (and even more) if the conference had instead been headlined as "Continuities: Women, Gender, Power"? I think so, and I think we need to discuss more actively and more explicitly *why* one title is so much more palatable than the other and *how* our preference for history-as-transformation might limit our ways of seeing the past lives of women.²⁶

Historians of women have long written about the status of women falling or rising in certain times or places, but the "status of women" is a slippery concept that tends toward an overgeneralization of which feminists are justly skeptical. It is also haunted by subtle ideological practices that use "women's status" as a sort of litmus test of civilization. In the nineteenth century, Europeans claimed cultural superiority over colonized peoples by, among other things, imagining that European women enjoyed higher status than did women in India, Africa, the Americas, or, indeed, any place other than Europe; more recently, the Bush administration has similarly deployed the "status of women" as part justification for its aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. These are serious liabilities, but the desire to trace advances and declines in the status of women over time remains a fundamental part of our field. In the 1970s Joan Kelly added new power to what was already an old practice of judging the rising or falling status of women.²⁷ Kelly began by looking critically at the fit between women's history and traditional history, arguing that the periodization of the former inverted the periodization of the latter. As Kelly put it, "what emerges [from women's history] is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women precisely in those periods of so-called pro-

gressive change." A year later, she provided a historical example in her classic essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance?"

Kelly's negative answer to this question has been much revised and reconsidered, but her overall vision—of an often-inverted synchronization between the history of women and traditional history—has waxed strong in both research and teaching. Some fields of women's history have adapted to Kelly's formulation less enthusiastically than others. As Sandra Greene has pointed out, historians of women in Africa have consistently traced continuities between the precolonial and colonial periods, in the context of an Africa once misunderstood as having no substantive history before European contact, the continuity of indigenous practices is now deployed by historians "as a form of agency on the part of African societies."²⁸ And as Valerie Traub has noted, lesbian history, often motivated by a search for "historical foremothers," has been driven by "the logic of temporal continuity."²⁹ In women's history more generally, however, almost every great divide in the traditional historical narrative seems to have provoked Kelly-inspired assessments of how that divide affected women's status for better or worse. In European women's history, for example, we have considered how women's status was affected by the Christianization of the ancient world, the rise of capitalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the industrial revolution, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and so on.³⁰ In most cases, the possibility that the status of women was not transformed is not even considered. We seem to assume that these turning points *must* have affected women's status, leaving to us the straightforward task of weighing the transformation. In so doing, we strive for an overall assessment—women's status getting better or getting worse—instead of considering the possibility that, despite change, shift, and movement, the overall force of patriarchal power might have endured. To use the terms proposed by Wally, we seldom consider how during these great divides, the *joints* of patriarchal power might have changed more than its *degree*.³¹

Karen Offen has suggested that this drumbeat of change, change, and more change is characteristically modern, because it is a simple fact of history that "historical change relentlessly accelerates . . . as we reach modern times."³² The hoary myth of an unchanging pre-modern world underpins modernism, but, in fact, change pulses as strongly through premodern histories as modern ones. For example, medievalists have produced a large literature assessing how the status of women was transformed with the developments that created the so-called high or central Middle Ages. Inverting traditional historical assessments of this era, scholars have argued that many apparent

“advances” associated with the eleventh and twelfth centuries actually hurt women. Because women were more reliant than men on informal and family-based modes of influence (the argument goes), the seeming improvements of the central Middle Ages—the consolidation of feudal monarchies, the papal reform and associated monastic movements, the rise of universities, and the relative pacification of feudal society—created a more formalized and public power structure from which women were increasingly excluded.³⁵ Before this central medieval watershed for women, there were (according to Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple) “few restrictions on the power of women in any sphere of activity,” but afterward (according to David Herlihy) “the social position of the medieval woman seems in some ways to have deteriorated.”³⁶ In this instance as in many others, historians of women have accepted the traditional chronology but inverted it. We have synchronized transformations in women’s status with major historical turning points, even though we have found regress for women in the midst of seemingly progressive historical change.

In college classrooms where women’s history is now regularly taught, history-as-transformation also remains an effective and compelling theme. Most textbooks in women’s history provide a periodization that marches women in time to traditional history (so that even if women and men “move” in different directions, they “move” at the same time), and most teachers also emphasize the turning points that are critical to the traditional narrative.³⁵ Apart from the occasional awkward “How’s that any different from today?” most students accept this history as both sensible and convenient. We might struggle with college students to get them to give up whiggish notions of women’s steady progress toward emancipation, but we do not have to struggle to convince them that the status of European women was different before and after the French Revolution, before and after the upheavals of 1848, or before and after World War I. These sorts of transformations are even more readily assumed in our undergraduate classrooms than they are in our research.

The critical question is *why*. As students, we are trained to have skeptical and inquiring minds. And as teachers, we constantly hear questions from students that force new ideas on us. Yet at the center of our work as historians of women lies the rarely questioned assumption that the history of women is a history of transformation in women’s status—for better at some times and places, and for worse at others. I believe that we see women’s history in such transformative terms for at least four very good reasons: because of the development

of the field; because of the structure of the discipline of history; because of the particular influence of feminism in the academy; and because of our own lived experiences. Each of these factors compels us to put aside troublesome ideas about history-as-continuity and to seek out histories that emphasize transformation. Together, their power is largely silent and unacknowledged, and all the more powerful for that. In the hope of moderating their influence over our visions of the past, let us look each in the eye.

CONTINUITY AND WOMEN’S HISTORY IN THE 1970S

To begin with, the emphasis on history-as-transformation seems to spring partly from the development of the field of women’s history. Our field’s origins are usually traced back both to historians and intellectuals of past generations (such as Eileen Power, Simone de Beauvoir, and Mary Beard) and to feminist advocates of the recovery of women’s past in the 1970s (such as Gerda Lerner, Joan Kelly, and Sheila Rowbotham). These scholars have certainly been very important in the development of women’s history, but the field also grew from other sources that have critically shaped our ability (or inability) to consider continuities in women’s past. Like many feminists who came of age in the 1970s, my first taste of women’s history did not come from Eileen Power or Gerda Lerner or other distinguished feminist scholars; my first taste came from popular feminist formulations—from such sources as the “Lost Women” column of *Ms.* magazine, Elizabeth Gould Davis’s *The First Sex*, and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*.³⁶ These popular formulations of women’s history were often essentialist, finding their explanations for women’s oppression in biological differences between the sexes. They often portrayed women as passive victims, overlooking not only women’s agency but also women’s collusion in sexual oppression. They also often took falsely universalist perspectives, assuming that the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women could speak for all women. Most importantly, they emphasized continuity, a sisterhood between the oppressed women of the past and the oppressed women of the 1970s. In these ways, some of the first women’s history produced in the 1970s raised issues about long-term continuities in women’s status, but raised them in very problematic ways.

As women’s history began to gain an academic foothold over the course of the 1970s (particularly in the United States), these early popular formulations that emphasized continuity, oppression, victim-

ization, and a universal sisterhood were put aside in favor of a more professional scholarship that synchronized the history of women with the history of men.³⁷ Kelly's model of an inverted synchronization between women's history and traditional history provided a critical guide. Kelly explicitly challenged some of the basic assumptions of traditional history, but she did not fully reject its periodization; Kelly sought to change *evaluations* of great divides, not the idea of transformation per se. In other words, she accepted the notion that there was a turning point called "the Renaissance," she assumed that this Renaissance affected women as much as men, and she sought merely to argue that the Renaissance affected women in different ways than it affected men. Indeed, Kelly quite explicitly rejected the possibility that major historical transformations might *not* have affected the status of women in substantial ways and that therefore women's history should be periodized differently (in terms of both chronology and criteria) from mainstream history. For Kelly, a distinct periodization for women's history would have been essentialist (that is, it would have tied women's history in a biologically deterministic way to women's bodies), logically inconsistent (that is, it would have inverted what Kelly called the "causal sequence" of history), and isolating (that is, it would have separated women's history from the mainstream of historical work).³⁸

Kelly's ideas spoke, I think, to the need of feminist historians in the 1970s to create an academically acceptable and useful history of women. She certainly spoke to my needs as a graduate student then seeking legitimacy for my work on peasant women in medieval England. Thanks to Kelly, I came to understand that my project was to provide the women's angle on medieval peasant society, to fit women into the hitherto male-dominated history of rural economy and society. In the last few decades, therefore, I and most other historians of women have accepted a periodization that marches women's history in time to traditional history, emphasizing the same turning points that are critical to the traditional narrative. We have tried to answer, for our own times and places, that question Louise Tilly passed on to us from a colleague, about what difference it made that women were participants in the French Revolution.³⁹ And in whatever era we have examined—in European history, whether we have looked at ancient, medieval, early modern, or modern women—we have tended to see that era within a framework of transformation in women's status.

CONTINUITY AND HISTORICAL PRACTICE

If history-as-transformation was partly formed by a necessary reaction to some early popularizations of women's history as it took shape in the United States in the 1970s, it has also been supported by the basic practices of history itself. In graduate school, most historians are prepared for one straightforward mission: find change and explain it. To be sure, historians are not blind to continuity, and the balance between change and continuity provides one of the great seesaws of historical writing and teaching. Thus, for example, the English historian Geoffrey Elton saw the year 1485 as inaugurating a Tudor revolution in government, a dramatic break with England's medieval past.⁴⁰ But many English historians have seen 1485 as little more than a convenient moment in dynastic history, an easy place to break the gradual shift from medieval England to its Tudor-Stuart successor. And others have subjected the core assumption behind the 1485 way-post—that English culture and society were profoundly transformed between c. 1300 ("medieval") and c. 1700 ("early modern")—to steady assault. Lee Patterson, David Aers, and other literary critics have shown that two shibboleths of modernity—historical consciousness and individualism—so misrepresent cultural continuities that, as Aers has put it, "it is thus time to put a self-denying ordinance on claims about the new 'construction of the subject' in the sixteenth century."⁴¹ Alan Macfarlane has argued that England in 1300 was already a capitalist, market economy governed by rampant individualism, an England very similar in its socioeconomic structures to England in 1700.⁴² Recognizing that change is seldom dramatic and seldom complete, historians usually look hard for the continuities that run across seemingly sharp divides.

Most often, however, we pay lip service to continuity and then slide heavily with change. Macfarlane's argument, for example, precipitated considerable debate in the early 1980s and is now largely dismissed. It did, however, have one effect: instead of eliminating English history's great divide between medieval and early modern, it encouraged a generation of social and economic historians to push the date of that divide forward a bit, to c. 1525 instead of 1485.⁴³ We talk about continuity, we debate our great divides, and we even shift our dates a bit, but we cleave to the divides themselves. Why? Change, quite simply, seems to be more fun. Requiring careful tracing and analysis, its causes and effects cry out for study. In contrast, continuity can seem rather dull. As D. C. Coleman put it in his economic history

of early modern England, "Change is the greater temptress; continuity appears as the bore to be avoided."⁴⁴ (Note the feminization of temptation; this is the sort of rhetoric that Bonnie Smith has critiqued so effectively in her studies of the gendering of the historical profession.)⁴⁵

Continuity seems to be more than boring; it also calls into question the very ways that we practice history. Consider how firmly we embrace a historical consciousness founded on discontinuity between the present and the past; whether this discontinuity was a creation of the Renaissance or not matters less than its power over our ways of seeing the past.⁴⁶ Consider, too, how modern historical writing is so often driven by the power of narrative, by the telling of stories that contain crisis, adjustment, and resolution. And consider how often historians use a concern with differences between the present and the past—transformative changes that differentiate our lives from the lives of those who preceded us by twenty years or two hundred years or two thousand years—to distinguish ourselves, rightly or wrongly, as professionals. We like to imagine that it is our ability to recognize these changes and analyze them that distinguishes us not only from the general public but also from sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, and scholars in other related fields. Without clear and considerable differences between the past and the present, it seems that historical context—and with it, the work of historians—might come to mean little indeed.

For historians of women, this practice of history has particularly strong repercussions. Within the bounds of the discipline of history, feminists have had to fight against the essentialist critique, often used to undermine the viability of women's history as a field, that women's place has been unchanging and constant throughout history. In other words, feminist historians have had to legitimate women as historical subjects by showing that women's lives have history—that is, have change and transformation.⁴⁷ And for very practical reasons, historians of women have also had to try to fit the rhythms of women's history into the traditional periodizations of the profession. How else, for example, could histories of women fit into courses in European history except with distinctive Greco-Roman, medieval, early modern, and modern chronologies? Seeking not only to uncover women's history but also to teach women's history within traditional curricula, we have perhaps necessarily kept the chronology, adhered to the notion of transformative change, and marched to the pace of traditional history.

CONTINUITY AND FEMINIST PRACTICES

These two forces—the developmental context of the field of women's history, and the practice of history itself—have created a strong professional imperative to focus on history-as-transformation. This imperative has been further strengthened by the politics of modern feminism in the West, which has been more comfortable with transformation than continuity. After all, the tracing of transformations in women's status in the past implicitly promises similar transformations in the future, and it can even offer lessons about achieving positive progress. For example, we have learned from the experiences of working women in England and the United States during the two world wars of the twentieth century that expanding war-time economies can open new possibilities for women workers and that contracting postwar economies are often hostile to women's work (this is, of course, the story immortalized in the film *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*). And we have been able to apply this knowledge to economic change in our own time—to try to keep women from being among the last hired and first fired in skilled occupations. Working for transformation in the present, we are often encouraged and informed by histories of transformation in the past. In contrast, continuity in women's status is a frightening prospect to many of us, for it suggests (wrongly, in my view) that women's subordination might be rooted in insurmountable obstacles. If nothing much has changed in the past, then some worry that women's plight is based so firmly in biological or social or material or psychological constraints that positive transformations in women's status in the future are simply impossible.

These are pressures enough, but they have often been further strengthened by the actual practices of feminism within the academy. Many feminisms have been influential in academia, and some have dealt more readily than others with continuities in women's past. Radical feminism—from which came some of the earliest popular formulations of women's history in the 1970s—has readily accommodated to the notion of long-term continuities in women's status. Black feminism has also developed the critical concept of a "matrix of domination" which effectively speaks about the varied forces that can work to maintain the status quo between oppressors and oppressed.⁴⁸ Moreover, since few feminist historians adopt specific ideological labels or interpretive lines, much feminist history tends to reflect eclectically the influence of several different feminist positions. These are important caveats, but I think it is nevertheless fair to say that two

strands of feminism have been particularly influential in the production of academic women's history in the West: liberal feminism and socialist feminism.

In their original formulations, both these feminisms posited (albeit in different ways) transformation in women's status as a fundamental feature of women's past. For liberal feminists, women's subordination was not a fundamental feature of modern society but was instead caused by many small accretions and vestigial traditions of the past. Because female subordination was seen as an incidental rather than substantial aspect of modern life, liberal feminists tended to see women's status as improving with modernity (for example, with Europe's Renaissance or industrial revolution) and as readily subjected to change. For socialist feminists, gender inequality was linked with the development of private property and capitalism. Because women's plight was seen as arising from the triumph of capital over labor, socialist feminists expected women's status to shift with changes in economic structures, and they depicted women's status as declining with modernity (for example, with Europe's commercial and industrial revolutions). Liberal feminists and socialist feminists, therefore, certainly disagreed about the direction of change in the past, but they agreed about one crucial thing: transformation in women's status had occurred. Liberal feminism and socialist feminism have moved on from their early formulations, but it is often possible to see these foundational ideas about the status of women exercising a continuing influence on feminist history. In the history of women's work, for example, the eclectic approaches of feminist historians still usually draw on either liberal or socialist traditions.⁴⁹ Both the politics of feminism in general and the specific practices of feminism in the academy have encouraged historians of women to look for past transformations in women's status.

CONTINUITY IN OUR OWN LIVES

Finally, these professional and political forces are strengthened by a fourth force: our own personal experiences. As Carolyn Steedman has reminded us, "any scholarly use of historical material takes place not only within the academy, but also in the commonplace, everyday world of which the academy is a part."⁵⁰ In that commonplace, everyday world, modern women and men have seen many things change for women in Western societies (and mostly change for the better). Consider, for example, higher education in the United States. Forty

years ago, the most elite colleges in the United States did not admit women at all; very few women were earning doctorates; and even fewer women were finding tenured employments. All this has now changed: women now graduate from colleges and universities in higher numbers than men; women go to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton; and about one-third of all doctorates and entry-level faculty positions in history are held by women. This is inspiring stuff, and it encourages us to believe that women's status can be transformed, and transformed rapidly.

Against this, however, we must place enormous continuities in the status of women in our own times, continuities that we may prefer to overlook. In the United States, women with college degrees still have the earning power of men with high school diplomas; most women in the university still work in the secretarial and clerical pink-collar ghetto; female faculty cluster in fixed-term and untenured positions; even the best careers can still be held in check by an academic "glass ceiling"; and sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of violence against women on our campuses have continued unchecked and perhaps, indeed, have increased. We must also be alert to the possibility that we ourselves are caught in a pattern often observed in women's history—a pattern of women gaining access to institutions only when those institutions are in decline. Recent attacks on higher education (especially on public funding of universities and on academic freedom) suggest that women—as both students and teachers—have been gaining access to higher education at the very time that its influence might be waning. Bill Gates, after all, is a college dropout.

We have good reasons, then, to be more comfortable with a Berkshire Conference entitled "Transformations" than with one entitled "Continuities." In part, we seek to distance ourselves from popular histories of women that once emphasized continuity along with a package of ideas—particularly essentialism, female victimization, and false universalism—from which we now wish to disassociate women's history. And in part, we see transformation in women's history because our profession expects it from us, our feminist politics seem to need it, and our own lived experiences apparently support it. These are compelling pressures indeed, but we can resist them, and if we do, we will move toward more measured ways of seeing the past. If we question apparent transformations in women's status, consider new periodizations based on women's histories, and feel comfortable thinking about long-term continuities, we can see women's history in new ways.

Brewsters

One new way of revisiting women's history is to question whether the conventional historical narrative of crisis, adjustment, and resolution is itself a gendered tale. Working with medieval saints' lives, Caroline Bynum has observed that male biographies take shape as "social dramas" involving crisis, inversion, and resolution, but that female biographies often offer "a life in which 'nothing happens' at least if we expect to find a social drama." Bynum has suggested that both social facts (that is, the limited ability of women to change their lives) and psychological differences might account for the comparative continuity of female life-stories within this medieval genre.⁵¹ Or perhaps the difference lies less in male and female lived experiences and more in the interpretation of those experiences by biographers.⁵²

In any case, there can be little doubt that a tale of transformation does not effectively explain fundamental dimensions of women's past. As Georges Duby has noted for the central Middle Ages, despite the many changes of that era, "the hierarchical distance between the sexes was not noticeably diminished."⁵³ As Owen Hutton has observed about the common notion that early modern women enjoyed a more equal relationship with men, "So far the location of this *bon vieux temps* has proved remarkably elusive."⁵⁴ And as Susan Staves and Amanda Vickery have suggested for more recent times, there might be much less transformation in women's status since the eighteenth century—particularly in property law and family relations—than we once thought.⁵⁵ In my own work on medieval brewsters (that is, female brewers) in late medieval England, I found a similar gap between, on the one hand, my assumption of transformation and, on the other hand, continuities suggested by the archival and literary evidence. By looking hard at these unexpected continuities, I came to see a "patriarchal equilibrium" that sustained women's (low) status despite the enormous—indeed, transformative—expansion of the brewing trade.⁵⁶

In the 1980s, when I began examining the history of brewsters, I anticipated a story of radical change, a story of how women were forced out of the trade as it became profitable and prestigious. Indeed, brewing seemed to provide a classic illustration of a negative transformation in women's status accompanying a major turning point in economic history. In 1300, women controlled the trade in brewed drink; by 1600, it was controlled by men. At the same time, brewing was transformed by economic changes of the sort commonly aggregated under the rubric of "commercial revolution." Capitaliza-

tion, centralization, professionalization, monopolization, even industrialization—all these describe how English brewing changed between 1300 and 1600. As I had expected, I found that this slow commercialization favored men over women. When business opportunities expanded, women had little capital to invest in new equipment, limited authority over large workforces, and few contacts for obtaining supplies and opening new markets. When guilds began to offer brewers fresh ways to foster trade solidarity and power, wives found themselves second-rank members in fraternal organizations run by their husbands. When beer (made with hops) began to replace unhopped ale in the English diet, women suffered from poor access to the new technology of beer-brewing and from an inability to respond effectively to the commercial opportunities it offered. When the production and marketing of brewed drink came under closer governmental regulation, women's modest enterprises were deemed less reliable than the larger enterprises run by men. And whenever local authorities worried about the drunken disorder of alehouses, they tended to blame brewsters more than male brewers.

In short, I expected to find transformation, and I did. In 1300, brewing was a ubiquitous trade requiring little specialized skill or equipment, conferring minimal trade identity, and offering only small profits. As such, it was accessible to women, and compared to the other, even more limited economic options for women, it was a good trade for them. By 1600, brewing in many places had been transformed into a specialized trade requiring training and investment, conferring social prestige and guild status, and offering considerable profits. As such, it had ceased to be a trade of women and had become a trade of men. Brewing had prospered, and brewsters had faded away. Or, as Alice Clark put it in her classic study of the negative effects of industrialism and capitalism on women's status, "with the growth of capitalism and the establishment of a monopoly for 'Common Brewers' women were virtually excluded from their old trade of brewing."⁵⁷ Yet as I dug more deeply into the archives, I began to see my information about brewsters in new ways. I found that this story of dramatic loss only partly described what happened in English brewing between 1300 and 1600.

To begin with, this story too readily idealized the "old trade" of brewsters. In 1300, brewing was low-skilled, low-profit, low-status work—that is, work then seen as appropriate for a woman. There was, in other words, no "golden age" when prosperous brewsters enjoyed the fruits of a profitable and prestigious women's trade. There was, instead, a time when brewing was among the many petty employ-

ments available to women as they tried to patch together a living—women worked by the day for wages; they sought work as servants or prostitutes; they sold eggs, cheese, and other foods; they hawked old clothes; they cared for the sick and prepared the dead for burial; they brewed and sold ale. I am sure that many women took satisfaction in these labors, put their small profits to good use, and were even proud of their abilities. But in the broader context of their villages and towns, these were modest employments that offered relatively little prestige and profit. Brewing was among the best of these modest employments, but it, like women's other options, attracted little interest from men, who could get better work.⁵⁸

Clark's story also worked to stabilize the trade of brewing in ways that obscured its transformation between 1300 and 1600. By the seventeenth century, when women were being "virtually excluded from their old trade," their "old trade" had, in fact, virtually disappeared. Indeed, what had changed was not women's work but instead brewing itself, which had so prospered and professionalized that it was a new industry apparently no longer suitable for women. To be sure, in 1600 women still worked in the drink trade but only in lowly pursuits—they worked as unskilled servants in brewerries, they carried ale on their backs from brewerries to the houses of customers, they retailed ale and beer that was supplied to them by brewerries. But, except in isolated areas, they rarely worked as brewers. But, enjoyed the high profits that male brewers took from the commercial production of ale or beer.

And, finally, Clark's tale of decline and loss tended to mingle together two discrete concepts—the *experiences* of women and women's *status*. Many things changed in the experiences of women who sought to profit from brewing between 1300 and 1600. Some women had to shift from producing ale to merely selling ale brewed by others; some became employees of brewers rather than brewers in their own right; some had to find new sources of petty income in lace making, stocking knitting, and other new employments. These were real changes, real accommodations that women had to make as commercial brewing became a less viable option for them. Yet these changes in women's experiences did not transform women's status as workers. Brewing changed, and women's access to brewing changed, but in 1600, as had been the case in 1300, women's work was humble work. Much change in women's experiences; no transformation in women's status.

Both these histories of brewing—one emphasizing the change entailed in women ceasing to brew and the other emphasizing con-

tinuities in the low status of women's work—are useful. But it is the latter story—the story of continuities—that most enriched my understanding of brewers in late medieval and early modern England. It emphasized for me that although some of the *forms* of women's work changed between 1300 and 1600 (for example, women worked less in brewing and more in stocking knitting), its *substance* as low-status, low-skilled, and low-profit work remained the same. By examining brewers and their trade in this way, I saw new and productive questions that had before eluded me. History-as-transformation asked me to explain decline—to explain brewers' descent from paradise as they lost control of a trade once their own.⁵⁹ History-as-continuity asked me to explain something quite different—to explain why brewers were unable to accomplish an ascent to paradise, unable to take advantage of the expansion of the market for brewed drink after 1350. Why did brewers not respond as effectively as male brewers to the late medieval growth of their market? What were the pressures for continuity—for maintaining the low work status of women—that ensured that brewers could not retain control over the trade once it began to prosper? Built not around a history of transformation but instead around a history of missed opportunity for transformation, these questions allowed me to understand English brewers in new ways.

The answers that I have found to these questions have eased my mind about three of the problems long associated with history-as-continuity. First, for brewers, biology was not destiny. Indeed, traditional essentialist explanations for female disadvantage in the workplace—that women either are less strong than men or are more burdened by reproductive work—had no effect on brewers. Quite the reverse was true. As requirements for physical strength in brewing eased, women worked less in the trade; in 1300, brewers themselves had to haul the water, fuel, and grain used to brew ale, but by 1600, many male brewers pushed paper instead of barrels, employing workers who did the hard labor. There was a similarly inverse correlation between brewing and childbirth/child rearing: the first women to leave brewing as the trade grew more profitable were those with the *fewest* reproductive responsibilities—that is, singlewomen and widows. Despite being "distracted" by pregnancies and childcare, wives more tenaciously kept their place in the brewing trade. Essentialism—or what Karen Offen has recently called "physiological concerns particular to women"—remains a powerful thread within some feminist understandings of the perdurability of patriarchy. That it is a frayed thread in the case of brewers speaks, again, to the importance of

assuming nothing about biological constants and subjecting all such possibilities to hard study. We cannot explain women's subordination, past or present, by simple reference to childbearing and infant feeding.⁶⁰

Second, although brewers were, in the end, unable to take full advantage of the expanding profitability of their trade, they were not passive victims. I found no evidence that brewers protested the obstacles they faced as women, but I found abundant evidence of their creative reactions to problems. Some left off brewing and took up the selling of drink; some associated as closely as they could with the guilds that began to regulate their trade; some operated in a brewing black market beyond the control of guilds and cities; some continued to brew even when their husbands assumed all public responsibility for the trade; and some found employment in other trades altogether. Instead of passively withdrawing from brewing, in other words, women actively sought new ways in which they could support themselves and their families; they faced changing circumstances, reacted to them, and made history. Their choices were, of course, shaped and defined by the circumstances in which they found themselves. But if a woman ceased brewing and took up, say, lace making, she accommodated to changing times without either freely choosing to leave the brewing trade (agency) or suffering direct exclusion from it (victimization).

Third, differences among brewers were critically important in understanding how and why they left the trade. Brewers in rural villages maintained their businesses much longer than brewers in many towns and cities, and, as just mentioned above, married brewers retained a place in the trade long after most widows and single women had to seek work elsewhere. Indeed, the experiences of brewers illustrates well how appreciation of differences among women is essential not only for nuance and clarity but also for understanding the experiences of all women, as Elsa Barkley-Brown has argued so persuasively in U.S. history.⁶¹ The slow masculinization of the trade—a trend which eventually embraced women of different places, classes, and marital statuses—cannot be understood without reference to how, in the earliest stages, some women left off brewing earlier than others.

Thus, my work on medieval brewers suggested to me that history-as-continuity need not necessarily lead to essentialist explanations, to a history of female passivity, or to false generalizations that obscure differences among women. This might have been true of some history-writing in the 1970s; it need not be true today. Sandra Greene

has noted much the same for the history of women among the Anglo-Ewe of Ghana and for African women's history more generally. In these instances, too, an appreciation of continuity is now enabling historians "to emphasize African women's creative reactions to problems, differences among African women, and the varied character of patriarchal power."⁶²

Instead of being compelled by biological imperatives, female victimization, or an eternal battle between two sexes unmarked by class, race, sexuality, or other factors, the brewers of late medieval England faced changing circumstances and reacted to them in diverse ways. Their history is one of much change for brewers but little transformation for women's work. This immobility was not of their own making; for at every turn, brewers found themselves unable to respond as effectively as men to new opportunities. They encountered historical circumstances that discouraged them from brewing and encouraged men to take up the trade: household economies that required wives to assist husbands at their trades (rather than the other way around); laws that limited the contractual powers and economic autonomy of women; economic practices that inhibited women's access to capital and credit; local and national governments that sought to control brewers through their husbands; and ideological presumptions that made it difficult for brewers to establish themselves as reliable and trustworthy tradespeople. These factors affected some women differently from others, but they affected all women to some extent. These factors shaped the lives of men as well, but they constrained most women more than most men. And these factors grew from fundamental institutions of English life at the time, patriarchal institutions that were nevertheless much more than mechanisms for the subordination of women. I use "patriarchal institutions" advisedly; defining institutions as "any organized element of a society" and applying "patriarchal" to any such elements that reinforced male power, *in part*.⁶³

The lives of English brewers were shaped, in short, by a patriarchal equilibrium. Brewers faced a host of institutions that worked, at least in part, to subordinate women to men. As a result, changes which undermined the force of patriarchy in one sector were subtly countered by responses in other sectors. The expanding brewing trade of late medieval England posed a real threat to the patriarchal order: women controlled a trade that was suddenly becoming very profitable. Yet this possibility of female advance in the economic sphere was met by strong responses from other patriarchal institutions. Representations of brewers in poems, plays, and other media

began to emphasize the filthiness and untrustworthiness of brewers; civic officers started to worry about how women were a disruptive force in the trade; new regulations sought to proscribe non-married women from the brewing trade so that married men could be supported by it and the traditional authority of husbands over their wives began to assert itself in new ways. Put more abstractly, what happened is this: an economic change that might have advantaged women was countered effectively by responses rooted in ideology, law, politics, and family.

What was—and remains—particularly confounding about this patriarchal equilibrium was that none of these institutions existed solely to keep women in their place or acted self-consciously in tandem with others to keep women in their place. Indeed, each had advantages that could appeal to women as well as men. Guilds were not formed with the explicit intention of excluding women from skilled trades; family structures were not designed solely to subordinate women to male householders; and the laws that limited the economic opportunities of women were not written just to keep women poor. For a woman, these institutions could offer good as well as bad. A guild might have solidified male privilege, but it also offered solidarity with other brewers, better bargaining with city officers, and protection for those who fell on hard times. All of these could benefit brewers as well as male brewers, and if male privilege was part of the package, it might have seemed to some brewers an amorphous, ancillary, or even unimportant part. In a sense, patriarchy was an effect of many institutions in late medieval England, but it was neither the sole effect nor sole intention of any one.

The circumstances of brewers were made even more disconcerting by the different strategies that guilds and other institutions adopted to maintain male advantage and female disadvantage. *Exclusion* was a powerful weapon of patriarchy. Brewers were excluded from the regulation of their trade, excluded from many guilds, and excluded sometimes from the trade altogether. *Segregation* also worked effectively to limit brewers. Women belonged to the London guild in the early fifteenth century but were not full members; women brewed ale more readily than beer (ale was much less profitable than beer); women fell from brewing ale into selling ale brewed by others but not out of the trade altogether. And the strategy of *division*—divide and conquer—might have been particularly powerful. Patriarchal adjustments to the changing profitability of brewing—regulations proscribing brewing by singlewomen, or the establishment of guilds for husbands of married brewers, or the development of depictions

of brewers as foul and filthy workers—might have been especially effective because they harmed some brewers more than others and thereby impeded common identification and, possibly, common action. These varied strategies meant that brewers faced not only many adaptable patriarchal institutions but also a variety of ways whereby they were disempowered within them.

By looking at brewers in a new way that saw continuities in the midst of change, I was able to observe some critical aspects of patriarchal power in England during these centuries: its location in multiple sites; its production as an effect of essential social institutions; its flexibility and endurance; and its powerful strategic use of exclusion, segregation, and division. The best way I have found to describe what might have happened to brewers is with a metaphor of ballroom dancing: a dance where women and men—many different sorts of women and men—move across the room, alter their steps, movements and rhythms, even change partners or groups, but *always the men are leading*. In this patriarchal dance, there has been much change in women's lives, but little transformation in women's status in relation to men. If we are willing to see other aspects of women's past in this way, we will find more new histories to be written, histories that trace changes in women's lives without resort to narratives of transformation, histories that seek to problematize continuity, and histories that grapple with the challenge of understanding patriarchy.

Historicizing Patriarchy

As we saw in Chapter 2, historians of women have most recently dwelt on integrating women into the discourses of traditional historical fields, examining discourses of gender, and unpacking the intersection of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other differences. Just as feminism is an inherently plural noun, fueled by multiple feminist approaches, so, too, is women's history diverse, varied, and many-voiced. As we saw in Chapter 3, however, the many voices of women's history are speaking predominantly about recent historical eras, lingering with loving attention on the twentieth century and rarely venturing back before 1800. This chapter argues that that this lack of historical depth profoundly hinders our ability to trace continuities in women's history. Although I have focused here on how confronting continuity can positively reshape the specific project of historicizing patriarchy, all the main approaches within women's history—integrationist histories, gender analyses, studies of difference, and others—will yield better results if we attend to the distant past and

the continuities, as well as changes, that this longer perspective can suggest to us.

I do not believe that history-as-continuity excludes history-as-change, and indeed, my understanding of English brewers has been informed by both perspectives. But I do believe that we need to hold these two “ways of seeing” in better balance, and to explore more fully than we have yet done the implications of long-term continuities in women’s status. A healthy skepticism about narratives of transformation does not require us to abandon all talk of change; transformation, or even progress. Quite the contrary, for this skepticism allows us to replace loose talk about change, transformation, and progress with hard talk about the same. In other words, instead of writing from a gut-level, perhaps even panicked, assumption that we *must* find and explain change, we can ground our discussions of change in firmer, more careful analyses of what is and is not new. We thereby ensure that when we say “change” or “transformation” or “progress,” we really mean it. By being more attentive to continuity, in other words, we recognize real change, too. A healthy skepticism about transformation also should not provide us with a reason, as some scholars have suggested, to retreat into studies so detailed and specific that we need not worry about continuity or change.⁶⁴ History relies on empirical study, but it is fed by broad overviews and daring generalizations. This is true of all history, but especially women’s history. If women’s historians are to generate historical perspectives on critical questions of feminist scholarship and activism, we must continue to think in broad—and broadly temporal—ways about continuity and change.

I have suggested here that broad swathes of the past might have been shaped by a dynamic of “patriarchal equilibrium,” by patriarchal institutions that have adapted remarkably well to the conflicts, contradictions, and confusions they produce. I hope that more historians of women—not all, but more—will start their work from a consciousness of the need to study in such ways the workings of patriarchy and will return, in the end, to that same consciousness. If some of us make patriarchy (not its origins, but instead its mechanisms, its changes, its endurance) a central problem of women’s history, our work will address one of the greatest general problems of all history (the problem of the nature, sustenance, and endurance of power structures), it will eschew gut-level notions of times getting “better” or “worse” for women, and it will grapple with the pressing feminist problem of overall consistency in the (low) status of women. We can also liaise more effectively with feminist colleagues in other disciplines—in anthropology, which has played a central role in

exploring the origins of patriarchy; in social and political theory, where current theories of patriarchy are severely limited by lack of historical context; and in law and literature, where so much of the ideological power of patriarchy has been manifested.⁶⁵ And by analyzing the nature and causes of women’s oppression in the past, we can directly contribute to feminist strategies for the present. The history of women’s work, explored in the next chapter, provides one example of this feminist pay-off, for a deep-into-the-past and attentive-to-continuities view of women’s work suggests to me that current strategies to achieve gender equality in the workplace—for example, the legislative enforcement of pay equity, or programs such as affirmative action and comparable worth—might prove insufficient to the task.