WOMEN IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

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À partir de l'examination d'une sélection de livres récemment publiés, l'auteur de cet article trace le rôle des femmes dans la société européenne, de la Grèce antique à la Revolution française. Grâce aux efforts d'historiennes féministes qui tentent d'intégrer la femme aux écrits historiques, la dimension sexuelle fait maintenant partie de certains manuels scolaires universitaires.

This essay discusses the role of women in European society from Ancient Greece to the French Revolution through an examination of a number of recently published books to appear on the subject. It considers the three major aspects of women's history: (1) men's images of women in the past; (2) the victimization of women; (3) the positive accomplishments of women in a male-dominated society. It especially underscores the significance of *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz.[1] The authors of the volume wanted to write women back into the historical record. Their efforts and the work of other scholars has resulted in some textbooks at the college level now achieving a gender dimension in their narratives.

In 1977, an important milestone was reached in women's history with the publication of *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*. It was the first successful attempt to analyze systematically the whole experience of women in European society from neolithic to modern times and has never been surpassed. The volume contains twenty general essays by leading scholars whose contributions are organized along conventional lines into chapters dealing with the role of women, for example, in classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the French Revolution.[2] Consequently, *Becoming Visible* is a very useful text for classes on European history or Western Civilization. The authors intend to restore women to the mainstream of history, to explore the meaning of women's unique historical experience, to depart from male-centered models and to destroy simplistic notions about women's passivity. They portray women as reformers, revolutionaries and feminists who were a force in politics, as wives and mothers whose activities as helpmates and conspicuous consumers were significant in changing family structures, as peasant wives, artisans, cottage and factory workers, and domestic servants who were important as producers in the European economy and as nuns, witches and pious wives whose influence in religion was surely felt.

The positive images offered in *Becoming Visible* stand out in stark contrast to the negative perception of women presented in Amaury de Riencourt's *Sex and Power in History* (1974; reissued in 1983 as *Women and Power in History)*. If we examine Western culture from early Germanic times to the present, there is no question in the mind of de Riencourt that women have always remained on the periphery of culture. There have been no creative women geniuses. In early modern Europe, for example, when women produced such capable rulers as Elizabeth I of England, Christina of Sweden, Maria Theresa of Austria and Catherine the Great of Russia, they failed to provide any noteworthy philosophers, painters, sculptors, architects, scientists or composers. How can this development be explained? Quite simply in de Riencourt's view. Women have had every opportunity to become creative geniuses, but have not done so because they do not possess creative mentality. They lack the necessary brain power to become creative geniuses or, as de Riencourt puts it: "It is as if nature had purposefully equilibrated the sexes by giving the male the power of mental creativity, reserving physiological creation for the female." He liberally quotes a number of "great" western thinkers such as Aquinas, Nietzsche and Freud to support his thesis that the lifegiving intuitive woman has been consistently undervalued in European society. Indeed, his book takes on the appearance of a history of men's ideas about women. This is a legitimate aspect of women's history, but should be sought from writers who display respect for the subject: de Riencourt does not.

Two works, on the other hand, which assess men's ideas about women more accurately are Martha Lee Osborne (ed.), *Women in Western Thought (1979)* and Susan Moller Okin's, *Women in Western Political Thought* (1979). Osborne's book is especially useful for teachers since it grew out of her course on the philosophy of women which she had been offering for several years at the University of Tennessee. She presents selections from leading western philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Rousseau and several others, along with commentaries on their ideas by modern scholars. To evaluate a philosopher's theory of woman properly, Osborne believes that we must take into account three distinguishable, but related matters: their personal experiences, the time and place in which they lived and other theories they embraced. Philosophers frequently turned to science or theology for premises upon which to construct arguments about the nature of woman. Theology, for example, provided Augustine and Aquinas with the foundation for their views on women. Aristotle, by contrast, relied upon biology for principles from which to construct his philosophy of woman. These included: (1) females are normally smaller and weaker than males, (2) human beings are rational creatures, and (3) psychological development is directly proportional to physical development. Aristotle concluded that "women were not only smaller and weaker than men, but rationally inferior to them as well." This judgement obviously affected his ethics and philosophy of politics.

Susan Moller Okin, in her pioneering study on the place of women in the tradition of Western political thought, con-

siders not only the works of Aristotle, but also those of Plato, Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. She clearly reveals how a scholar such as de Riencourt could arrive at the interpretation of women which he has put forth. The four philosophers she examines treat men as cultural products and women as creatures of nature forever constrained by their biology. They are creatures of nature and of the family, but outside the social order. They give life to the family and nurture it. Nevertheless, in Okin's view, they are given a subordinate status in society by the four philosophers, a status which is based on the crucial argument that within the family, the husband should possess the authority, while the wife should raise the children and keep house. Women will not reliably fulfill their domestic duties if they are their husbands' equals. Women who have the same prestige, wealth or power as men may not be willing to make a home, let alone obey their spouses. On only rare occasions do women emerge as the social equals of men in the writings of the theorists. They enjoy, for example, social equality in the *Republic* because Plato abolishes the family and therefore the question of women's domestic place does not arise. He proposes a utopian society with a guardian class of men and women who share the same education and the same responsibilities. Unfortunately, Plato rejected this scheme as unrealistic and prescribed instead an attainable regime in the *Laws* which placed women in their traditional domestic roles. Aristotle subsequently was so convinced of the necessity of women being subordinate in the family that he made inferiority part of their very nature and endorsed the Athenian practice of keeping them strictly under the supervision of men, both at home and in the state.

The social condition of women at Athens has been the subject of much debate. Sarah Pomeroy in her work, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (1975), presents the traditional picture of upper-class respectable Athenian women living secluded lives in which the only men they saw were relatives. They spent their entire lives physically confined to a separate part of the house reserved for them. Except for the funerals of close relatives and a handful of religious festivals they seldom left the premises. They had to be protected from other men so as to preserve the

purity of the citizen body. Only their children could be citizens and society wanted to be assured that they were offspring of legitimate Athenian husbands.

The isolation of upper-class women may have had dramatic effects upon the Athenian family if we consider the challenging and controversial view of the relations of mothers and sons in Greece, based upon modern psychoanalysis, suggested by Philip Slater in *The Glory of Hera* (1968). He argues that the Athenian father lived his life outdoors in the marketplace where political activity took place; the son, by contrast, spent his early formative years under the exclusive supervision of his mother who dominated the household and nursed a repressed hostility against her husband for having isolated her from family, friends and religion. Thus Slater writes: "Her need for self-expression and vindication requires her both to exalt and belittle her son, to feed on and to destroy him." The result of the mother's behavior was an Athenian male child who grew up with a deep-seated fear or terror of all women which took a peculiar form in adult males. They especially feared mature maternal women who resembled their mothers and therefore married girls half their age who had just reached puberty. "The Greek male's contempt for women,"Slater concludes, "was not only compatible with, but also indissolubly bound to, an intense fear of them and to an underlying suspicion of male inferiority."

Sarah Pomeroy in her book, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves,* disagrees with Slater's thesis. Her criticisms must be given careful attention since her study is considered by many authorities to be the most scholarly treatment of women in classical antiquity to date. Although men and women lived separate lives, Pomeroy asserts that there is no conclusive documentation of fathers neglecting their children. Indeed, there may have been a certain closeness between fathers and children if evidence from Greek comedy is accepted. Moreover, there is no proof that Athenian women harbored repressed feelings of rage as a result of their rigidly restricted position within a Greek patriarchal society. They may have found happiness as homemakers because their traditional expectations were being fulfilled. Despite her reservations about *The Glory of Hera,* Pomeroy recommends that the monograph should be read by anyone interested in the history of Greek women because it contains some fascinating and original ideas which should not be overlooked. She gives this sound advice in her "Selected Bibliography on Women in Classical Antiquity," *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers* (1984) which is the most thorough, comprehensive annotated bibliography on the subject.

There is no comparable bibliographical tool available for the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, in recent years a spate of new volumes have been published on women in the medieval world which will alert the inquiring reader to the latest research directions and trends in the field. Among these, those worthy of special mention are: Heath Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest: Women in Castilian Town Society 1100-1300* (1984); Angela M. Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage and Letters* (1983); Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (1983); Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (1983); Suzanne F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900* (1981). The latter two studies interpret the Early Middle Ages as a period of great opportunity for women. Wemple, for example, is deeply impressed with the energy and resourcefulness of Merovingian women who "made the most of the opportunities that marriage or concubinage offered them, not only to improve their own status, but also to contribute to the social and economic advancement of their families." Stafford is able to show how this process worked out in practice among the

royal wives of early western European dynasties. Their power depended upon their ability to influence their husbands, who they influenced most effectively when they produced male heirs who were numerous and healthy enough to overcome the risks of early death. Wives providing such offspring wielded considerable political power and could not be easily displaced. When their husbands died prematurely, they governed their countries as regents for their minor sons. Given a chance to play a part in the dynastic politics of their day, Frankish queens often asserted their rights with extraordinary forcefulness, even brutality.

Across the Channel in England, Lucas describes the marriage customs and laws of Anglo-Saxon society and how the relative freedom of women in the Early Middle Ages came to be curtailed by the introduction of feudalism in the latter half of the eleventh century after the Normans conquered the land. She concentrates on English women in the upper and upper-middle classes during the entire medieval period, whereas Shahar explores the condition, ranks and rights of women in Western Europe from the twelfth to the mid-fifteenth century in a unique manner. She insists that medieval thinkers in their writings divided society into worshippers, warriors and workers and found no place in this analysis for women who, instead, were treated separately as a distinct class or fourth estate. Persons within the fourth estate were placed then into various sub-groups according to their socio-economic or personal . . . that is, marital standing. Accordingly, Shahar follows these subdivisions set forth by medieval writers in her description of the role of women in religion and in marriage and among the nobility, peasantry and townspeople.

Especially significant was female participation in the new urban societies of medieval Europe. The long persistence of a frontier society among the the Castilian towns of the Reconquest era (1100-1300), for example, offered "even ordinary women challenging opportunities to better their lot in life and to stake claims to substantial wealth and privileges." Dillard, in his study of Spanish women during the High Middle Ages, contends that they were vitally important in the shaping of Hispanic society during the medieval expansion of Christian Spain. They joined men in moving southward from the mountainous regions in the northern part of the country to transform uninhabited places, fortresses and formerly held Muslim sites into highly-privileged and largely self-governing communities. Because of the relative scarcity of women in these towns, they were highly prized and given a respected position in municipal society. They were valued for their biological function of transmitting to their offspring the blood of their brave ancestors. On a more practical level, Christian women held considerable legal and property rights within their communities. Daughters inherited most types of wealth on an equal basis with their brothers, whereas wives were entitled to half of everything a couple earned or acquired during their marriage. Many townswomen became substantial owners of both urban and rural property and managed their households effectively as well. Others worked in family trades and crafts, acted as innkeepers, shopkeepers and vendors of merchandise, took in washing or became domestic servants. However they lived their lives in these pioneering communities, Dillard maintains that we must question the old stereotypes of female passivity and irrelevance, rampant misogyny and other commonplace negative generalities about medieval women.

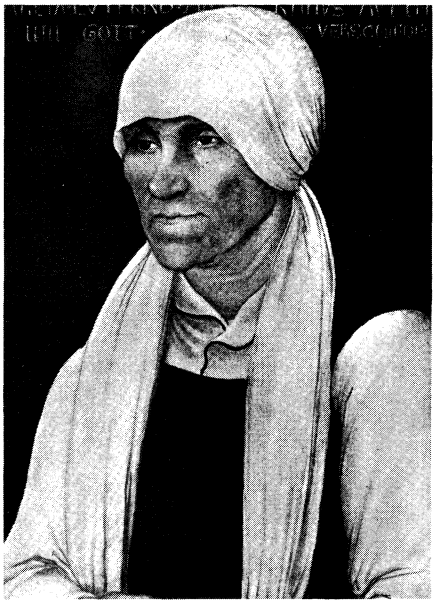
Olwen Hufton, who is in the midst of writing a volume on *Women in European Society 1500-1800,* takes issue with this point of view, especially in terms of the question of rampant misogyny.[3] As a leading European authority on women's history, her interpretation deserves thoughtful consideration. She argues that Western European women

coming out of the Middle Ages bore a heavy, common ideological heritage (based primarily on the Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman traditions) which characterized them as defective creatures who were irrational, lustful, habitually talkative and obsessed with luxurious clothing and their own fair bodies. Such an individual's only hope for a happy, contented Christian life was to be strictly governed by her husband. In his controversial study of family life during the Reformation, Steven Ozment tells us that fathers and husbands were expected to rule, but were not free to dominate their households as they pleased.[4] A variety of socioeconomic and interpersonal relationships prevented them from acting tyrannically. "Despite male rule," Ozment concludes, "an ordered equality existed between husbands and wives." On another related matter, he discounts the opinions of present-day scholars who assert that Renaissance humanists and Reformation theologians generally only modified slightly the negative image of women held by their medieval predecessors.

Ozment apparently is not impressed with the widely-acclaimed study of Natalie Zemon Davis, "City Women and Religious Change in Sixteenth-Century France" in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1973). Despite some gains for women, Davis shows how Calvin reaffirmed that, in marriage, females had been created subject to men. "Let the woman be satisfied with her state of subjection," he declares, "and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex." Being inferior meant, as Davis reveals, that women were to be barred from decision-making within the church and excluded from the profession of ministers. In the early stages of the Reformation in France, some Protestant wives were not content with merely reading the Bible at home to their children; while waiting for a preacher to arrive at their churches, they had gone up to the pulpits and read from the Bible. Others wanted to preach. Calvin and his colleagues in the Venerable Company of Pastors at Geneva opposed these developments and quoted Paul's command from I Corinthians that "women keep silence in the churches" to Protestant women who wanted to preach publicly or have some special vocation in the church.

The underlying thesis in Davis' study is that women gain most during periods of social turmoil. During the early stages of revolutionary movements, they are welcomed, but as normal conditions return and a new order is established, they are excluded again and relegated to former inferior roles. This theme can be found repeatedly in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* as the authors analyze women in crisis situations. Ruth Graham, for example, in her article in the volume on the French Revolution, argues that although some political activity of revolutionary women was traditional, much of it was new. For the first time, women were forming political clubs, writing their own newspapers, presenting petitions directly to the government and demanding the right to participate. They made important gains in revolutionary civil law. Military defeats and internal divisions, however, caused the government to suppress independent female political activity and stress family unity instead. On 23 May 1795, the Convention, the ruling body of France, proclaimed that "women were disturbers of the peace and they must remain in their homes: gatherings of more than five women would be dispersed by force." With the coming of Napoleon, Graham concludes, "women lost whatever rights they had gained in the Revolution, for now they had to obey their husbands unconditionally."

Although French women lost whatever gains they had made during the Revolution, their valiant efforts to seek greater political participation in society are now being written into the historical record by such scholars as Ruth Graham. A central purpose for her and the other contributors to *Becoming Visible* was to put women back into history. The editors of the volume observed that, in their day, one widely-used textbook limited its consideration of the female gender to four women – three deities and Alice in Wonderland! They complained that women in the past had remained virtually invisible to generations of male historians who preferred masculine-oriented activities such as war, diplomacy and politics. How different their assessment would be today, nearly a decade later. Because of their studies and those of many other scholars, the appetite for women's history is widespread and the goal of at least some textbooks on Western Civilization and European History is to give their narratives a gender



dimension. Let me conclude by citing two such textbooks which teachers should examine. They are: John McKay, Bennett Hill and John Buckler, *A History of Western Society* (2nd ed., 1983) and F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization* (4th ed., 1985).[5]

[1]Two essays presenting a wide-ranging critical assessment of work published before the appearance of *Becoming Visible* are Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women's History in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, Nos. 3-4 (1976), pp. 83-103, and Carolyn C. Lougee, "Modern European History," *Signs*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1977), pp. 628-650.

[2]Because of the limitations of space, this essay will be confined primarily to a discussion of women from classical antiquity to the French Revolution. For the definitive bibliography on this period, see the recent publication of *Women in Western European History: A Select Chronological, Geographical and Topical Bibliography from Antiquity to the French Revolution*, ed. L. Frey, M. Frey and J. Schneider (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982). It lists 6,894 works.

[3]Olwen Hufton, "What is Women's History?" *History Today*, Vol. 35 (June 1985), p.39. Hufton also has written an informative bibliographical essay dealing with the subject of her forthcoming book entitled "Women in History: Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present*, Vol. 101 (Nov. 1983), pp. 125-141.

[4]Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). For three excellent bibliographical studies on the family in Ancient Greece, The Middle Ages and Europe since 1500, see the articles of Sarah B. Pomeroy, Suzanne F. Wemple and Louise A. Tilly in *Trends in History*, Vol. 3, Nos. 3-4 (1985).

[5]For those readers interested in European women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Richard J. Evans, "The History of European Women: A Critical Survey of Recent Research," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 52 (December, 1980), pp. 656-675; Patricia Hilden, "Women's History: The Second Wave," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1982), pp. 501-512; and Joan Walloch Scott, "Women in History: The Modern Period," *Past and Present*, Vol. 101 (Nov. 1983), pp. 141-157.

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