

GOLDEN AGES AND RENAISSANCES

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As an early modernist in a sea of medievalists (and where but at Kalamazoo could one use that phrase?) I would like to focus my brief remarks today on Sue's contributions to a basic, and yet surprisingly feminist, historical task: periodization. I realize in doing this that I am undertaking a very old fashioned sort of women's history—the "contribution" school—but we are here to honor and celebrate Sue, so this is fitting.

As most of you know, Sue joined the editorial team of *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* on its second edition, in 1987. Both this edition and the first edition, which had appeared a decade earlier, included Joan Kelly's path-breaking article, "Did Women have a Renaissance?" Kelly's essay led historians of women in many fields to question the applicability of chronological categories derived from male experience.¹ We asked whether women had an Athenian Golden Age, an Age of Jacksonian Democracy, an Enlightenment, a frontier. Thirty years later, the questioning continues, augmented by doubts about whether chronological categories derived from the experience of some women can be applied to women's history as a whole, or whether change that is generally seen as only tangential to gender relations should qualify as a major turning point. Such doubts arise in part from questions about "women" as an ontological category, and the close attention paid to multiple axes of difference in women's and gender history.

These doubts have led some historians to stress continuities rather than ruptures. In their survey of European women's history, *A History of Their Own*, for example, Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser discuss peasant women from the ninth century to the twentieth in a single section. Judith Bennett has long advocated questioning the "master narrative of a great transformation in women's lives between 1300 and 1700." She has recently broadened her focus and called for an emphasis on long-term continuities, particularly what she terms the "patriarchal

equilibrium,” across all periods, not simply across “the great divide” of 1500.²

But is something lost, if in their sensitivity to differences among women (and perhaps their desire to make women’s history less depressing), feminist historians refuse to apply structures of periodization? If a primary (some would say the primary) contribution of historians to the scholarly and larger worlds is the analysis of change over time, what happens if women’s and gender historians step back from this task? Does this make women’s and gender history “motionless,” a word used by the French Annales-school historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie to describe European history over the *longue durée* stretching from the eleventh century to the nineteenth, in an article that appeared the same year that the first edition of *Becoming Visible* did?

I would (and do) argue that it does, and in this Sue’s work has been essential in shaping my ideas. In “Fashion’s Captives: Medieval Women in French Historiography,” now more than twenty years old, Sue pointed out that in some Annales school works—a historical school Natalie Davis has termed a “sodality of French brothers”—women are, in fact, the perfect example of motionless history. They are viewed primarily as part of a household, serving as a means of exchange between families. She notes: “By such formulations gender for women, if not for men, was assumed to be a historical constant, not a dynamic category that changed in Europe’s formative centuries and changed again with the transition into modern times.” This critique is similar to that voiced more recently by feminist historians of India such as Tanika Sarkar and Kamela Visweswaran, who take Subaltern Studies and much of post-colonial scholarship to task for viewing actual women largely as a type of “eternal feminine,” victimized and abject, an essentialism that denies women agency and turns gender into a historical constant, not a dynamic category. I am not sure if Sarkar and Visweswaran have read Sue’s work, but they should.³

Criticizing periodization or its absence has thus been an important part of women’s and gender history, but critique will only take us so far. Along with demolishing or disassembling the

chronological structures that have given history shape, we also need to build new structures of periodization that take gender into account from the start and not simply stir it in later. In this we have some not very good examples, including Lawrence Stone's idea about the change from "open lineage" to a "restricted patriarchal nuclear family" to a "closed domestic nuclear family," and Thomas Laqueur's notion of a change from a "one sex" to a "two sex" model of gender differentiation.⁴ Stone's idea has been rejected as overly simplistic, but Laqueur's remains influential, though more so among non-specialists than among people who actually know something about the history of science and medicine, who have rejected it as far too dichotomous and teleological.⁵ (I don't need to tell you how important medieval historians have been in this critique.)

But we also have a very good model. In her essay "The Dominion of Gender, or How Women Fared in the High Middle Ages," first published in the second edition of *Becoming Visible* and then revised for the third, Sue describes the centuries from the eleventh to the fourteenth as a time when "gender became an increasingly inflexible category for organizing thoughts about society" in which notions of polarity between woman and man were first used by theologians "to explain to themselves why the creation of man alone was not enough in God's benevolent scheme." These notions gradually became "generally accepted commonplaces," and shaped the more complex political and commercial institutions developing in Europe at this point. This group knows very well that Sue has not been alone in asserting the importance of the restructuring of the gender system in the High Middle Ages, for many others who provided support for this argument (as well as revisions, modifications, and nuancing) are here, or their spirits are hovering over the room. But Sue links this directly to issues of periodization, noting: "The loss of rights accompanying the triumph of a rigid polar construct of gender constituted an important transition for women, and it forced substantial changes in their lives. Certainly for women this era represented as great a change as the Renaissance represented for men later. Women lost ground in the increasingly complex

institutions that could enforce a rigid code of gender and in the commercial centers where authority over resources concentrated into fewer, largely male, hands.” Women’s experience bears earlier and clearer witness than does the experience of men to the West’s transformation into a complex civilization during the medieval centuries.

These few sentences pack in five primary points: 1. the history of women does have periods of significant change 2. these are different than those for men 3. these are related to those for men. 4. these are not the same for all women 5. these intersect with other transformations. I can’t think of how one could formulate the insights of feminist periodization more concisely than Sue does, though I’ve certainly seen them formulated more long-windedly.

The stress on difference and diversity among women, and the more explicit focus on gender, has made the task of periodization harder, no matter what era we study. We no longer look for a golden age for women, judging periods by whether “women’s status” rose or fell in them. (A friend of mine wonderfully calls this the Glinda-test, from the scene in the *Wizard of Oz* when Glinda asks Dorothy whether she is a good witch or a bad witch. In earlier Glinda tests, classical Athens, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment were bad witches, while the Iron Age and the Merovingians were good witches.) We don’t assume there are single points of transformation, when, for example, medieval became modern. (Or at least I don’t read arguments about whether Hildegard of Bingen or Margery Kempe or Margaret Fell Fox was the first modern woman, the way I used to read arguments about whether Dante or Luther or Oliver Cromwell was the first modern man.)

Even though periodization is now more complicated, we can still use Sue’s five-point schema to help us think about change—and continuity—over time. This task is particularly important for us as feminists interested in the premodern period. First, it might help sway the remaining troglodytes who doubt the centrality of gender as an essential category in history. More importantly, it might convince our students and colleagues—

many of them in gender and women's studies programs—that interesting things did happen in the distant past (that is, before the invention of television). We need to spread the word—and in this I agree with Judith Bennett rather than disagree with her—that differences created by time are just as dynamic, problematic, and fascinating as those created by any other axis of difference—and what better way to do this than to engage in vigorous debates about what times mattered, and why?

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END NOTES

1. Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1977), pp. 137-64.
2. Judith Bennett, "Confronting Continuities," *Journal of Women's History* 9 (1997): 73-94, with responses by Sandra E. Greene, Karen Offen and Gerda Lerner, pp. 95-118; Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2006), ch. 4.
3. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001) and "Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women in Hindu Rashtira," *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 13, 2002: 2872-2876; Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2004); Kamela Visweswaran, "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996), pp. 83-125. For more reading on gender and colonialism, see Temma Kaplan, "Revolution, Nationalism, and Anti-Imperialism," in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (London: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 170-185 and Mrinalini Sinha, "Gender and Nation" in *Women's History in Global Perspective*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (Urbana: U Illinois P, 2004), pp. 229-274.
4. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990). To these theories we could add Foucault's model of the birth of "sexuality" in the late eighteenth century, when sexual acts and desires began to be a matter of concern for various types of authorities, who wished to know, describe, and control them. Michel Foucault, *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, vol 1: *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Most scholarship since Foucault has moved the beginning of "modern" sexuality to the late nineteenth century, however. See

Roy Porter, "Is Foucault Useful for Understanding Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Sexuality?" in *Debating Gender, Debating Sexuality*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New York: New York UP, 1996) and *Sexuality*, ed. Robert A. Nye (New York: Oxford UP, 1999). Feminist critique of Foucault has also pointed out that gender, to say nothing of women, is not part of his ideas. See *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (New York: Routledge, 1993); and *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, ed. Susan Hekman (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1996).

5. Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). Ulinka Rublack also notes that Laqueur looks only at "sexual intercourse in the reproductive process, ignoring gestation and parturition as part of female reproductive labour," and finds that sexual difference was indeed an "ontological category" well before the eighteenth century. See Ulinka Rublack, "Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany," *Past and Present* 150 (1996): 84-100.