

---

## Revisiting Patriarchy

Leila J. Rupp

I must begin with a confession: I am one of those scholars who has stopped using the term “patriarchy” in my writing and teaching. I admit this because in *History Matters*, Judith Bennett makes three strong, provocative, and linked arguments: we need to bring the language of “patriarchy” and the “oppression of women” back into our scholarship; we ignore pre-1800 history at our peril; and we should balance our obsessive focus on change with attention to continuities in the past. Although Bennett has laid the groundwork for the arguments she develops here in previously published articles, this is far more than a reprinting in book form. Bennett has skillfully woven together what originally appeared as discrete pieces into a provocative and impassioned book that calls for a rethinking by women’s historians and women’s studies scholars.

Let me begin with the brief for “patriarchy,” since that one really forced me to think about my own intellectual trajectory. Bennett focuses on what she identifies as a move away from the language of the 1970s to the concepts of “gender hierarchy” and “gender inequality” and “gender imbalance” (21). She deplors this as a sign of the depoliticization of women’s and gender history. Worse, she thinks feminism has lost its centrality in women’s history, and that history no longer plays much of a role in feminist scholarship in other disciplines.

The former development she links to institutionalization and success: “As women’s history has gained institutional sanction in the United States, some of us have succumbed to pressures to produce studies that are palatable to our nonfeminist colleagues—studies that avoid hard feminist questions and that appear more mainstream” (20). She blames this phenomenon on excessive deference to male authorities (particularly male theorists, and especially of the poststructuralist variety), an abundance of biographies, the cultural turn, an obsession with differences among women at the expense of interest in inequalities between women and men, and the new masculinity studies. Bennett is careful to recognize what poststructuralism and an analysis of gender constructions and representations can offer women’s history, but she laments what has been lost.

I am not convinced that women’s history has lost its political edge. Bennett offers as evidence almost entirely the question of language. I do not doubt that “patriarchy” has more or less disappeared, and her vigorous defense made me ponder why I suggest alternatives when students use “patriarchy” or “patriarchal society” in their papers. It is not, as Bennett

posits, because the mainstream historical profession disdains such language, or out of a postfeminist rejection of the very notion of systematic sexual inequality. Rather, I find that the term conjures up the kind of simplistic thinking that sometimes characterized early work in women's studies and also has the potential to suggest a transhistorical sameness that undermines the very idea of history. Bennett herself admits that when her students talk about "The Patriarchy," it "evokes for me a committee of white-haired men, nastily scheming to keep women in their place" (58). It is not that I no longer believe that in a variety of ways in different places and across time women are systematically disadvantaged compared to men of the same social group, but because the term can substitute for analysis. Oppressed by what or whom? Why? Bennett argues persuasively that analysis is the point, that what we should be studying and teaching is the history of patriarchy as a complex institution. In her words, "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" (54). I do not disagree that we need to grapple with the multitude of ways that power differentials between women and men, intersecting with class and race and sexuality and other categories of difference, have shaped the past. But I think that even if we have stopped talking about patriarchy and the oppression of women in those terms, women's history has maintained its feminism and political commitment.

With Bennett's second argument, that women's history has become overly focused on the last two centuries to the detriment of our understanding of historical processes, I agree entirely. She lays blame at the door of the U.S. historical profession at large, which shares this bias, but she also notes the fondness within the field of women's history for the myth of a golden age, the ahistorical nature of women's studies, and the move to pay more attention to women's history beyond the Euroamerican world (although she hastens to add that her preference would be to expand coverage of both premodern and non-Western history). As a former editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, I can testify that submissions on ancient, medieval, and early modern history—European or elsewhere—were few and far between and greeted with delight when they arrived in the office. Why, when there is a vigorous scholarship out there? Bennett mentions the establishment of interdisciplinary medieval studies programs, journals, and conferences, and that is part of the answer. But it is also a question of the dominance of modern U.S. women's history. Scholars working in all other fields are far more familiar with that scholarship than are U.S. historians with the rest of time and the rest of the world, just as minority cultures are far more savvy about dominant practices than vice versa. Those of us who work in modern fields have a lot to learn from the earlier past, and women's studies and feminist scholarship in other disciplines would benefit as well from

knowledge of previous centuries. The very week I was reading Bennett's wonderfully named chapter, "Who's Afraid of the Distant Past?" I was lecturing in my women's studies class about love and marriage and the varied relationships between them, paying attention to marriage as an economic and reproductive institution in medieval Europe (but reminding students that this did not mean marriages were loveless—just that love was not the starting point), as well as such unusual forms of marriage as fraternal polyandry among the Nyinba in Nepal, arranged and assisted marriage among contemporary immigrant groups, contemporary polyamory, and the struggle over same-sex marriage.

And that brings me to Bennett's final point, which ties together the previous two. The field of women's history, she argues, has focused on change over time to the near exclusion of continuity. And what is continuous—although not unchanging—is patriarchy, or what Bennett calls the "patriarchal equilibrium." She calls on women's historians to make patriarchy central to our investigations, to explain "how the oppression of women has endured for so long and in so many different historical settings," without implying that it is based on biology and thus unchangeable (60). Key to historicizing patriarchy, for Bennett, is paying attention to continuity. Rather than focusing on transformations in women's status, we should seek out overlooked continuities. As Bennett puts it, "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" (63). She does not mean this in any simplistic way, as in that women have some universal sisterhood of oppression across time and place.

She illustrates her notion of continuity with her own research on brewsters in medieval England. As she did in an article in these pages, she lays out the story of women's loss of control of the brewing trade between 1300 and 1600. But instead of seeing this as a story of women losing out as the trade expanded and transformed, she emphasizes what did not change. In 1300, brewsters eked out a marginal living in a low-skilled and low-status trade. As brewing developed and professionalized, women found themselves pushed out of their customary roles, reduced to selling ale made by others or doing unskilled work in breweries or moving into other lowly trades open to them. The trade changed dramatically, but the patriarchal equilibrium remained, reinforced by negative representations of brewsters, new regulations keeping women out of the work, and an increase in husbands' authority over their wives: "The best way I have found to describe what might have happened to brewsters 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*" (79).

Bennett is quick to point out that this story does not reinforce the notion that biology was at the root of the change. In fact, women were in control when the work required the most physical strength, and the first women to leave the trade in the process of change were single women and widows, those with the fewest reproductive responsibilities. Nor does the story suggest that women were passive victims. They may not have organized, but they reacted creatively to change. And an eye on continuity does not paper over differences among women, for those are critical to understanding what happened in this case (and, as Bennett argues in the last chapter, open our eyes to a wider range of categories that distinguish women from each other than does more modern history). In other words, a focus on continuity does not mean that women's history is a tale of essentialism, victimization, and universalism.

The patriarchal equilibrium can also be found, Bennett argues, in the story of women's wages. As she tells us in the introduction and elaborates in a later chapter, Englishwomen in 1363 earned 71 percent of men's wages, in 2002, 75 percent. There was, she insists, no golden age for women in the medieval period, and industrialization did not spell doom. Rather, there was "exceptional continuity" between 1350 and 1700, marked by inequalities in the household economy, a remarkable persistence of the kinds of work considered acceptable for women, guild resistance to incorporating women, as well as the persistent wage gap (86). And she argues that understanding such continuity is important not just for history, but for political work today, for if we view women's wages in the long run, we no longer see progress, but rather fluctuation within a historical range. This suggests that legal strategies—equal pay for equal work, even equal pay for work of comparable value—are not enough. The heart of the problem is ideological and structural: the persistence of patriarchy.

The patriarchal equilibrium is only faintly in evidence in Bennett's chapter on lesbian history, which in an earlier published form introduced the term "lesbian-like" to describe "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" (110). The connection to continuity is obvious—if we broaden our gaze in this way, we can better populate our women's history with women who, although very different than contemporary lesbians, share some characteristics. Bennett's mastery of the literature on medieval European women's history shines in this chapter, as elsewhere, and I agree that we have a lot to learn from thinking broadly about women who resisted what we would now call heteronormativity. I introduce a class I teach called "Sapphistries"—a global and from-the-beginning-of-time investigation of women who loved and desired other women—with Bennett's article, among others, and I find

my students embrace the term “lesbian-like.” Yet what is striking, in terms of the other chapters of *History Matters*, is the lack of continuity, despite the term “lesbian-like” linking women of the past and present, for Bennett says that “even the most lesbian-like women in the past are unlike most modern lesbians” (125). So while I appreciate the sensitivity of Bennett’s analysis of medieval European women’s lives and her insistence that women’s history has a “lesbian problem” (108), I would still assert that whatever term we choose, there is a difference between women who desired, loved, or had sex with other women, and those who in some other way resisted the patriarchal (there, I’ve said it) norm.

So, in short, I find Bennett’s arguments challenging, the kind of switch of angle of vision that inspires a rethinking of fundamentals. She insists that this is not a case of a glass half full or half empty, that we need to do more than add a bit of continuity to the story. She is calling, really, for a paradigm shift. As impressed as I am with the power of her work, I am not sure that replacing change with continuity will do the trick, for a women’s history organized around the patriarchal equilibrium cries out for an explanation of why. And that leads us back either to essentialism (despite what the example of the brewsters might tell us) or to unrelenting male power—the nasty white-haired men who make up The Patriarchy. In the end, I am convinced that we need to pay far more attention to the distant past of women’s history, that we should not privilege change over continuity, and that we need to understand how and why inequality between women and men has persisted, despite change over time and from place to place. I still may not use the term “patriarchy” to carry out those goals, yet I am grateful to Bennett’s passionate and nuanced arguments for making me rethink what and how I teach and for inspiring me to reach beyond my own expertise in writing about the past.