
Premodern History: An Endangered Feminist Species?

Ulrike Strasser

“[I]n the first four years of the twenty-first century, the three major English-language journals in women’s history—*Gender and History*, the *Journal of Women’s History*, and the *Women’s History Review*—have published 295 articles of which 7—yes, 7—deal with women’s history before 1500” (32). This is but one of many striking observations on the state of feminist history writing in Judith Bennett’s provocative new book *History Matters*. Bennett has given us an insightful and highly stimulating account of the last three decades of women’s and gender history, as well as a very timely intervention in a host of debates.¹ As an early modern Europeanist, I am especially pleased to see Bennett take on one of the most pressing intellectual issues in academic life, the increasing presentism that haunts feminist scholarship within the field of history and beyond.

Although I do not know how many articles were published on the period from 1500 to 1750 in the journals during the years that Bennett examined to get her statistics, I venture to guess that the numbers for early modern Europe are only marginally better than for medieval history and certainly not adequate for a sustained feminist engagement with my temporal field either. My hunch is based on personal impressions and anecdotal evidence obtained in conversations with other early modernists, both U.S.–American and European; they all report similar tales of declining interest in their epoch. The premodern European past, it seems, threatens to become altogether passé, and not only among our students, where it has never been that popular but, more alarmingly, among many of our feminist colleagues as well.

History Matters provides hard evidence for this trend and perceptive analysis of its main causes. More important still, Bennett speaks eloquently to the intellectual and political cost of dismissing things premodern. She makes a compelling case that feminist history and theory must reclaim the distant past as a site of analysis to maintain their interpretive force and long-term relevance to feminist politics. To illustrate this larger point, Bennett elaborates several examples of how knowledge of earlier periods lends indispensable depth to current feminist issues.

Her main case in point is the wage gap. A look at the *longue durée* reveals that the gap between men’s and women’s wages has remained remarkably stable from the Late Middle Ages all the way into the twenty-first century, with women earning between one-half and three-quarters of what

men earn. This centuries-old pattern, Bennett points out, raises serious questions about the validity of labor histories that posit radical transformations—be it for better or worse—of women's work with the advent of capitalism. Likewise, it makes plain the limitations of feminist political strategies that are formulated around short-term gains in women's wages and do not address the bigger picture of resilience.

Bennett's main antidote is systematic attention to what she refers to as "the patriarchal equilibrium," or the fact that women's disadvantaged status vis-à-vis men has persisted across time and space even as its specific forms have been changing. She believes that the study of women's oppression ought to be "a third pole supporting the broad tent of feminist historiography" alongside the study of gender *à la* Scott and the study of difference in women's history (28).

History Matters is written with refreshing clarity and passion. Bennett's attempt to revitalize the 1970s concept of patriarchy should spark interesting discussion among feminist historians of all periods. Her insistence on the importance of the premodern will resonate especially strongly with early modernists. To travel to a distant time rather than a distant place in order to gather one's feminist insights is a familiar intellectual move for this group. So is the experience of periodically having to persuade modern scholars, with whom one otherwise shares a primary political commitment to feminism, that temporal diversity is no less vital to rigorous intellectual inquiry and effective political strategizing than other forms of diversity. A rich resource of arguments and analysis, *History Matters* aids in explaining the importance of what it is that premodernists do to a broader feminist audience, and it provides tools for understanding the gradual disappearance of premodern scholarship from our modernist colleagues' radars, as well as provocative suggestions for reversing the trend.

To add a couple of things to an otherwise comprehensive discussion, it seems worth pointing out that the eclipse of premodern history is part of a broader phenomenon of growing contemporaneity in the humanities today. Feminist historians ultimately will have to counter presentism on a number of institutional fronts beyond history departments or women's and gender studies programs. For one, they might want to consider alliances with premodernist scholars from other disciplines, a route that has been taken at the University of California at Irvine, my home institution, where a Group for the Study of Early Cultures was formed in 2006. Comprising over thirty faculty members from ten departments in the School of Humanities and the School of the Arts, this multidisciplinary formation constituted itself around the twin goals of developing "complex narratives about cultures" and calling "attention to the fundamental challenges that the past can pose to ways of thinking that risk becoming all too familiar and congealed."² It

provides a powerful platform for feminist premodernists, who otherwise work in varying degrees of isolation, to articulate their position in campus-wide discussion about the future of humanistic inquiry.

Second, the dearth of premodern articles in the main women's history journals notwithstanding, publications on early modern women's and gender history have been appearing elsewhere at an impressive rate. The position of the premodern may be precarious in women's and gender history at large, as Bennett contends, but the sub-field of early modern feminist history is alive and well. Readers from other fields can easily verify this by turning not only to the new *Early Modern Women* journal, but also by perusing a mainstream—yes, mainstream!—journal in the field. The *Sixteenth Century Journal* has published a considerable number of feminist articles in the last ten years. Of the approximately twenty-five articles that appear every year, between three and eight articles in each volume have dealt with women and gender. In fact, in 2000 the journal had so many excellent submissions on women that the editors decided to publish a special issue on women, followed by a special issue on marriage in 2003.³

The journal has been under feminist co-editorship since 1996, but these articles were not solicited specially. What does this tell us about the status of early modern women's and gender history? Early modern feminist scholars, it seems, are busily infusing the mainstream with their perspective. Once they determine that a journal in their sub-field, be it a traditional or recently established venue, is interested in publishing their work, they are happy to keep supplying the editors with manuscripts. Why does not more of their work get published in the main women's history journals? Have early modernists gotten the message that the distant past is not where feminist historians and theorists see themselves going? With *History Matters*, Judith Bennett has given us a clearer sense of the powerful obstacles that have come to stand in the way of recognizing the significance of temporal depth to the future of feminist scholarship, as well as the considerable costs of such oversight. She has also given us a new vision of a feminist historiography that takes the premodern seriously. Not everyone will agree with all aspects of Bennett's program for reinvigorating the field. But *History Matters* should inspire premodern feminists to send their work to the major feminist history journals and the editors of these journals to receive premodern scholarship with renewed appreciation and enthusiasm.

NOTES

³See also Ulrike Strasser, "Judith Bennett, *History Matters*. Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism," *L'HOMME. Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*, Geschlechtergeschichte, 18, no. 2 (2007): 149–51.

²Cited from the group's manifesto; the latter as well as more information can be found at the early cultures project at UCI, <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/earlycultures>.

³I would like to thank Merry Wiesner-Hanks, coeditor of the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, for making this information available to me.
