The Gender of History

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Men, Women, and Historical Practice

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For Natalie Zemon Davis and Donald R. Kelley

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Introduction

Gender and the Mirror of History

> I am not partisan . . . Why? Because in history I see nothing but history.
>
> —Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire*

This book inserts the term "gender" into an account of historiography in the Western world.[1] It proposes that the development of modern scientific methodology, epistemology, professional practice, and writing has been closely tied to evolving definitions of masculinity and femininity. In so doing, it seems to go against the grain of professionalism itself: for more than a century and a half historians have prided themselves on the way in which their training allows them to overcome contingencies of religious creed, national origin, class, race, ethnicity, and gender through scrupulous adherence to the scientific method. When people's biases do appear, historians point these out and correct them in order to come as close as they can to "value-free" science. Although their personal lives may be very much influenced by issues of gender, their methodology helps them arrive as close as humanly possible to an ungendered historical truth. Only bad history would work to promote a religious, racialized, or class-based version of the past that flew in the face of accepted evidence.

Changes in the profession since the early 1970s have been based on these beliefs. Trained in scientific methods, historians of both women and people of color have assumed that their scholarship would eventually fit into the field of history as a whole. Their findings fill out the picture, making the scholarship of the past finally truthful because more complete and up-to-date. Of course, many have also believed that ingredients such as periodization would change as matters important to women displaced men's events, and that the cast of historical characters and many traditional interpretations would alter too. But the profession's rationality and fairness, it was thought, would ultimately allow the findings of women's history and the

accomplishments of women historians their full influence and dignity in the academy. Meanwhile, some male historians welcomed the arrival and development of women's history and, later, gender history as a corrective.[2] When, in the mid-1980s, one prominent social historian announced that historical research about women had gone far enough and should stop, it was in the belief that history's claims to lack of bias could be vitiated by an excess of such information. The history of women and blacks, it was said, would politicize the field. Or these subdisciplines—being "sexy, fashionable, and hot"—could undermine the truth value of real history by exposing it to influences (such as ideology and rampant market forces) that operated outside professional standards for what was important.[3]

We hold such beliefs because we trust in the mirror of history—a metaphor that has long been indicative of how scholars in the West envision historical truth. Held up to the past, the mirror supposedly reflects bygone events more accurately than any other instrument or tool, showing nothing fanciful or imaginary. While faithfully reflecting the past, the mirror can also show fleeting images and provide a sense of change and movement. The mirror is also a theme relevant to the modern rational subject, whose self-scrutiny is the first step toward understanding and toward the construction of an unbiased scientific mindset. As a consequence of knowing himself and his biases and faults, the historian is better equipped to analyze the historical objects that appear in the mirror.[4] This theme has other aspects, especially in the Hegelian idea that reaching a higher truth comes only with the deliberate transcendence of the relationship between the knowing subject and the object of scrutiny. The result, as Lucien Febvre suggests when he claims to see nothing in history but history, is that the figure of the individual historian becomes spiritualized and invisible. His self, which includes prejudices and preferences, disappears from the mirror along with the flawed minutiae of the reflected object, to be replaced by a "true" vision of historical reality recounted by an invisible, omniscient narrator.

In Western iconography the knowing subject—along with the historically important objects the mirror serves up for scrutiny—is usually male, adding complexity to what seems a simple image. When we envision a great historian, we instinctively imagine him as male; we accept as natural such titles as *The History Men* (as a recent book of historiography was

called) because professionalization and historical science developed at a time of separate spheres, when middle-class women mostly stayed at home.[5] Thus, for historically explicable reasons, it is said, the profession was virtually all male. Only men had the time to engage in the activities (archival research, teaching in universities) on which the founding of professional history depended. Historical common sense should also explain why the most well-regarded histories were about men: focusing on political history, professional history would naturally choose great men to study. Moreover, the nation-state, which inspired and financed so much of the new historical science, allowed men alone the full rights of citizenship during this time. Evidently, then, they would be most likely to champion its history. History, as Jack Hexter maintained some fifty years ago, "has mostly been stag affairs," gendered male by tradition, accident, and circumstance.[6] According to these views, there is little to be gained from looking at gender in historiography and historical practice.

But let us consider another image in the mirror of history. When the person before a mirror has been a woman, her self-regarding has appeared repetitive, even obsessive, and indicative of vanity or love of luxury—connoting the sensual rather than the rational. The iconographic mirror in women's case has occluded reflexive depth and yielded only superficiality—a dramatic change in the mirror's signifying work. So fixated on the surface, women have been seen as incapable of reaching the requisite profundities of either history or self-knowledge. They occupy a lower rung on the ladder of cognitive being—poor practitioners indeed, as the many women amateur historians are often said to have been, even by women professionals themselves. On the one hand, the mirror can produce universally true, important, and objective reflections of reality; but on the other, it has traditionally worked best if the observer is male. We might argue that these often-invoked images of the mirror are merely metaphorical; but historicizing the metaphor shows that, for centuries, it in fact has had not just decorative but explanatory force. The adjectives "sexy," "fashionable," and "hot," which are used to designate bad history (or the history of people of color and women), are likewise rich with gendered efficacy and form part of a long tradition of imaging the historian's work in gendered ways. Thus, because the mirror of history resists some efforts to reach gender neutrality, its multiple images of gender's relationship to

professional practices and historical science are intriguing enough to merit further exploration, if only to clear the air.

Embedded in these preliminary images of superficiality and depth, gendered versus universal truth, the metaphorical and the real are some historical knots that we have devoted little attention to because we automatically favor "depth" in our scholarship and hope to provide "real" accounts and "universal truth." We concomitantly reject as goals the superficial, gendered, and metaphorical. Many disciplines share history's claims to attain universal truth or beauty, either of which can be verified by a set of rigorous standards that are beyond such contingencies as race, gender, religion, and ethnic background. Although musical, scientific, and philosophical geniuses, for instance, are nearly always men, their genius soars beyond such contingent or ultimately insignificant matters as gender to reach the heights of philosophical insight or the musical sublime. Great artists and philosophers are geniuses above all, and men only accidentally.

Scholars in other disciplines, however, are probing these foundational claims to understand how their fields are gendered. Feminist scholars in music and philosophy have been among the first to explore the functioning of such claims, showing how gender operates inexorably in even the most abstract, nonrepresentational work and in the standards applied to judge it. Susan McClary has compared the formal elements in music that critics discuss as "masculine" and therefore of high quality with those that are considered "feminine" and therefore inferior. The "masculine" in the sonata and several other forms is seen as a series of ascending phrases of notes competing to reach ever higher until their competition is utterly exhausted. The "feminine" is often taken to be any "large-scale dissonance" needing to be resolved in a piece.[7] Londa Schiebinger has pointed to the ways in which modern science has often claimed to be value-free even as it has been inhospitable to women scientists. Further, she has described the male fantasies at work in the naming of animal species and in portrayals of plant functioning.[8] Both authors show how claims of universality were accompanied by the elevation of men and the concomitant devaluation of women—were enabled, that is, by gender hierarchy.

The philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff has discerned two roads to the masculinization of philosophical study—roads that might also be suggestive for historians.[9] The first involves the metaphors by which philoso-

phers have described their perfect societies and through which they have been able to come up with new answers to epistemological, ontological, aesthetic, and ethical dilemmas. These metaphors are often highly gendered, meaning that the road to universal truth—what it is that allows male genius-philosophers to think—is sex and gender. Le Doeuff does not present gender at work in every theoretical advance. But Andrea Nye finds that metaphors of femininity and sexuality have been essential to the breakthroughs of great logicians from Parmenides to Frege. Logic is not a kind of mathematical abstraction devoid of social content; rather, Nye demonstrates, logic has historically been constituted out of gendered thinking—a gendered thinking based on a hierarchy that privileges men as intellects and sexualizes women.[10]

Le Doeuff further elaborates how gender hierarchy makes philosophy work both intellectually and sociologically. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness,* the central example in Le Doeuff's book, took the female body as an image for all that is inauthentic, for the filth of nature that humans must transcend in their quest for philosophical truth. "There is a possibility that the In-itself might absorb the For-itself . . . Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet feminine revenge . . . [It] draws me, it sucks at me . . . It is a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking . . . In one sense it is like the supreme docility of the possessed, the fidelity of a dog that *gives* itself."[11] As this example begins to show and as Merleau-Ponty pointed out in detail, Sartre could explain the main point of phenomenology only as the work of a male subject needing to annihilate female subjectivity. He described the entire process of self-creation in terms of disgust at sexual engagement with a woman.[12]

According to Le Doeuff, these philosophically enabling sketches of overcoming the "disgusting" other accompanied the exploitation of Sartre's partner, Simone de Beauvoir—an exploitation verified in many accounts of their relationship. As university students, Sartre and de Beauvoir were virtually identical in their accomplishments. Sartre ranked first and she second on the *agrégation,* but evidence shows he had flunked so many times previously that the examiners felt sorry for this man who had convincingly advertised himself as a genius. De Beauvoir, by contrast, finished the same arduous course of study in two years instead of three, and was acquiring her lifelong name of "Beaver" for the hard work she put into

philosophy. Throughout their lives together, Sartre insisted to de Beauvoir and others that hers was a far lesser but hardworking mind, all the while employing her to spend most of the day writing his projects.[13]

But how can such sordid stories advance our understanding of scientific history and its professionalization, especially when the profession ultimately allowed women entry into the field? While this book explores the development of historical science as a complex endeavor undertaken by young scholar-adventurers in the nineteenth century, it is also centrally preoccupied with all those terms like "superficiality," "metaphor," and "women" that supposedly became irrelevant to received historical techniques and to the scientific communities that practiced the new history. It thus looks at female personalities and gender issues that historiography generally shuns.

For example, despite the thrust of most historiographic accounts, history for the past two centuries has *not* been mostly written by men or even been concerned mostly with men. Women in the West have had a lively, productive, and growing interest in the genre since at least the end of the eighteenth century. Their careers and rewards have been different, however. For one thing, although by the end of the nineteenth century some English and American women had satisfying careers in higher education, thousands of women historians pursued their calling as amateurs, without the institutional affiliations of male professionals.[14] For another, women often chose different historical subjects: the history of women, of social life, and of high and low culture. Prestigious professional history based on deep reflection and weighty political topics was for men, while "amateurish" women pursued a more "superficial" kind of writing about the past.

This book looks precisely at naive tales of queens and famous ladies in order to chart the superficial, literary, trivial, and "feminine" side of amateurism. It does so not to deny such characterizations but rather to explore this type of historical production as it existed in the early nineteenth century, before university-based, scientific practice surpassed it. Departing from the rich historiographic tradition of seeing canonical male writers at the center of the story is risky, but it seems important to address from the outset women's superficial, trivial, yet ardent relationship to history. I analyze women's amateur status not only because their work became synonymous with the "amateurish," but also because the connec-

tion between the woman amateur and professionalization has been far from clear, even unexplored, although the historical subject matter—"the past"—is similar for both male and female writers.[15] For instance, given that amateur writing of history antedated professionalism, is women's practice the more authentic and natural one, preceding the creation of scientific history, with its copious rules and procedures? Constantly excoriated by university men, amateur writing in the nineteenth century might additionally be seen as a kind of impurity that the professional eliminated—a thicket of falsehoods he cleared away in order to find an authentic past and objective truth. Or, again, was the concept of the amateur only a result of professionalization, a weak and less worthy ("amateurish") imitation of the scientific practitioner embodied by those not up to being professional historians? If any of these notions is true, then how did the "impure" or "false" historical productions function? We think we know what superficial, amateurish history is. But do we really?

Two senses of the "trivial" and "low" inform this discussion. Amateur writing came to be seen as in some way fit for women—women who made their living by writing for the marketplace, outside the more exclusive professional institutions of history. This kind of market-driven work was interpreted by later professionals as base, catering to low reading tastes, and distinct from the high-quality work of well-off men outside the academy. Women were the quintessential amateurs, who dealt with the market; men, the appropriate professionals, who served more lofty ends.[16] The distinction between these juxtaposed terms was crucial to the ability of professionals to fashion themselves as part of the elite power structure, discrete from the untutored views of ordinary people. But how exactly did this happen, on what terms, with what moves and countermoves? Women's amateur history has served as a gendered ground for professionalization, though one thus far lacking historical specificity, just as the historiography of professionalization has lacked much sense of this interaction. Women's connections with the market permitted a more transcendent, professionalized, male realm of history writing to arise.

Professional writing rose to importance in times of economic and political modernization, beginning very slowly in the mid-eighteenth century and accelerating in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Women's amateurism, however, had taken off several decades earlier. From the French and

American Revolutions on, women amateurs like Mercy Otis Warren, Louise Keralio, Germaine de Staël, Johanna Schopenhauer, Caroline Pichler, and Anna Jameson lived in a climate of violent bloodshed, drastic social turmoil, and increasing discrimination against women. Their intellectual vision traveled through a contemporary landscape of horrendous wounds and massive losses on its way to the past. Although many amateurs studied manuscripts and other archival sources, the vast numbers who wrote did so in a period before history was tamed into a kind of professional knowledge and in an age of new mass armies and interminable violence, when life itself precluded dispassionate objectivity on issues of social life or politics. Constructed amid the modernity spreading across ever larger sections of the West, amateur history by women often throbbed with vivid description and heightened feeling—the heart of what has come to be called the "low" and "superficial."

What was first called women's "amateurism" is symptomatic of a relationship to the past similarly filtered through trauma. Revolutionary times brought unbearable pain, and the resulting modernity led to disorientation. The political climate promoted equality and universal rights, but at the same time there was increasing denigration and legal despoliation of women.[17] Written largely by women, who often had no right to keep their earnings, amateur history was a complex expression of this world. Like many men of the time, women writers—notably Germaine de Staël—saw the past as a point of mournful remembrance and loss for them as women, and often for society as a whole. Legitimate heightened feeling connected with memory work is most often associated with men's experience of such events as World War I and the Holocaust.[18] We are accustomed to the trauma motivating the drug-sated Romantic genius of the early nineteenth century, as well as to the sufferings of writers such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé in response to the trials of modernity. In the case of women, drugs also helped someone like de Staël work through to the past, yielding what I will investigate here as "narcohistory." Other women writers, similarly positioned in the field of trauma, devised different but no less important strategies that yielded well-read histories of queenship and notable women, of culture, travel, and social life, as part of a major, uncharted, and gendered tradition.

Leading historians have suggested that good, even analytic history in-

spires emotion and that in so doing it may serve important psychological functions. Because the past serves up accounts of violent events that are over, Hayden White claims, readers (including scholars) can let their violent fantasies roam freely when doing history.[19] In a somewhat different set of observations, Dominick LaCapra maintains that cognitively dealing with traumatic events can help "work through" the disabling emotions associated with them.[20] Just as these scholars have recently come to problematize our relationship to the history of war and the Holocaust, so we might look at the work of women amateurs in the context of new ideas about the relationship among cognition, emotion, and the psyche. Incessant writers often to the point of graphomania, indefatigable gatherers of information during perilous times, overworked and exploited contributors to flagging household economies, deprived of political and property rights, women historians produced a stream of cultural and social histories and accounts of queenship and notable women. This repetitive historical focus on superficial subjects needs investigation in epistemological and psychological terms.

What has prevented us from considering the work of women amateurs and their relationship to the development of intellectual and political womanhood is a historiography that eradicates amateurism to tell a singular story of professionalism's high accomplishments. In contrast, interlacing men's and women's historical work shows how professionals constructed their standards of excellence by differentiating themselves from a low, unworthy, and trivial "other."[21] Several generations of young classicists, expert in Latin and Greek and brutally trained to appreciate the nuances of words, laid the foundations for reform of the field. Beaten in school for mistakes with words in the recondite classics, professionalizers came to fetishize the written document, devaluing everyday objects and artifacts, and emphasizing their shared, lofty male identity as experts who were beyond ordinary life, just as their work was beyond the comprehension of the ordinary intellect and beyond domestic, feminine matters. Historical "scientists" set up polarities between professionalism and amateurism, between political history and cultural trivia, between the spirit and the body—polarities in which the latter term was always inferior to the former.[22] It was in dialogue with the more popular amateur vision—that is, with femininity, everyday life, and their attendant superficiality—that

historical science took shape as a matter of national importance, as genderless universal truth, and simultaneously as a discipline mostly for men.

Until recently, the idea of a universal truth reflected by the mirror of history has been compelling in Anglophone circles. Historians of science, however, provide evidence that the sciences do not just reflect in some neutral way but that practices and tools (such as looking in a mirror, and the very mirror itself) help shape the discipline, its ideas of truth, its practitioners, and its readers.[23] Procedures, professional behavior, and scholarly practices have been definitional, and never more so than in the creation of professionals in the field of history. Women wrote endlessly, managed childbirths, families, and political catastrophe while doing so, and haggled with publishers for terms; they acted out history in *tableaux vivants,* canvassed an odd assortment of documents, repositories, and informants for material, and tried to make this material vibrant in travel books and historical novels. Professionals, in contrast, focused on seminar training and imaged themselves as archival researchers interacting with authentic, if dusty, documents. These male adepts also practiced history more privately at home, enlisting mothers, wives, children, sisters-in-law, cousins, and other female relatives to do the work of researching, filing, editing, and even writing. All credit went to the male author. These works by the singular male professional as the most credible narrator of the past, and the attendant erasure of contributions by their women relatives and women amateurs, are another part of the gendering of historical science. A historian is often seen as unproblematic: a well-trained expert. In this book I will look at the professional historian's connections to suppressed work and "inferior" accounts. In the process, I will explore the hypothesis that professionalism is a relationship dependent on discredited voices and devalued narratives.

Insights borrowed from anthropology, literary criticism, and philosophy have guided contemporary inquiries into the linguistic and methodological development of the new science and profession of history. Since Wittgenstein, we have known that language and understanding are fragmented into linguistic communities, and more recently the philosopher Mary Hesse has shown in great detail how metaphorical thinking has helped scientists to make their breakthroughs and advance their careers. These metaphors nourish the formulation of new ideas, providing a lan-

guage in which scientists can reconceptualize problems or settle issues.[24] The mirror has been a helpful metaphor for explaining how history operates, and gender was necessarily involved as part of defining professionals against the low and amateurish. Images of femininity and sex served, surprisingly, to advance historical work, untangle historical knots, and incite fantasies about the past. Thus, I will look particularly at the way in which both the language of the body and sexuality became crucial to establishing the coherence-conditions for breakthroughs in the field. Even such important but simple terms as "facts," "detail," and "reality" were explicitly interwoven with sex and gender.

Since the profession has evolved on such a gendered basis, questions arise about the first women professionals who received university training in Britain and the United States, from the 1870s on. Would they perform as professionals and thus as "men"? Could they somehow makes themselves disembodied, despite women's collective persona in the Victorian period as "the sex"? Could they avoid the taint of amateurism, especially since amateurism was flourishing by the end of the century? Most of these women stayed single, disassociated themselves from the personal and financial dependency that marriage automatically brought, and consequently had to carry on their work without the vast household support that helped produce the male professional. Simultaneously during the second half of the century, amateur history written by women flourished, and not only expanded its range of travel literature, social history, and cultural accounts but also adopted new fields such as the cultural study of the Renaissance. Many of these developments have been interpreted as part of various national traditions stemming from ethnic anxiety, cultural malaise, and the like. I read them differently: as continuing the traumatic figurations of earlier work, while molding them into a distinct genre. More dramatically, suffragists and other feminists, social investigators, and reformers began probing the past to produce accounts of women's lesser economic and political experience and to chart the rise of movements for change.

This is the story of women professionals' intriguing and still-uncharted relationship both to amateurism and to historical science's bodily tropes, sexual metaphors, and gendered values—correlates of the archival research they undertook and the objectivity they valued. Did professional women

historians and those with university training have a deep or superficial regard in the mirror of history? Was their work inflected by the status of the private sphere and its attendant demands for propriety and virtue? The account of women's performance as historians in the late nineteenth century, amid the development of professionalization and feminism, will start to blur the story.

Assuming a malleable, plastic identity, women historians played as great a part in historical modernism as gender did in the construction of modernism in general. Professionalism had involved control of the mirror of history by university men, whose founding practices depended on discrediting the historical vision of outsiders as feminine and thus "low." What would happen when different practitioners—including those from the "inferior" sex and the "inferior" races, backed by considerable professional expertise—came to engage history in a noticeable way? For much of the nineteenth century, at a time of minimal electoral participation, historical subject matter had concentrated on elites and on the functioning of government at the highest levels. But in the years prior to World War I, the white male electorate in the West rapidly expanded, while growing consumerism and advances in communications media furthered the development of mass society. A mass suffrage movement, the attendant repeal of laws that had awarded women's wages and property to men, and a rapidly falling birthrate were all challenges to traditional ways of producing gender. Commitment to certain hallowed aspects of professional male identity unraveled as a result of these changes. Redefining themselves, such disparate male historians as Benedetto Croce, Karl Lamprecht, Johan Huizinga, Henry Adams, and Henri Berr expanded their range to include the history of culture, economic life, and a commitment to "synthesis" and "aesthetics" instead of facts and details. Their work became modernist, but no less sexed and gendered than that written in previous eras, even though they questioned the centrality of facts, archival research, and elite political history. They helped construct the modern historian's persona, making it far more visible in the mirror of history.

Women historians performed no differently, becoming modernist in their turn. Literary critics have seen in modernist metaphors and concerns both gender definition and a gender blurring that offered the possibility for more equitable literary, social, and professional practices.[25] Women, ac-

cording to such scholars, are emblematic in a way that is more liberating than that offered by Victorian concepts of separate spheres. Technology, primitivism, parody, and other aspects of modernism provided openings that women scholars took, with varying degrees of success. Lucy Maynard Salmon, Eileen Power, Jane Ellen Harrison, and Mary Beard were unique historians, but each produced history and historical personae that constitute a hitherto neglected element of our profession's modernism.

Although studies of history as a profession often follow fantasies of male historiographic parthenogenesis, of an exclusively male subject of historical truth, and of the importance of male-defined procedures and topics, this book explores multiple practices, impulses, cognitions, and subject matter that men and women have interactively devised out of a socially built and cognitively expressed alterity.[26] It examines how, between 1800 and 1940, they struggled over definitions of historical significance; how they variously imagined historical topics and meaning; and how they produced scholarly selves out of historical practices and the iteration of historical rules. There was no "one" without the "other." Nonetheless, despite the contentious centrality of gender, the "singular" tale of historiography, historical reality, and professional advance endures and remains a staple for most of us. It is time for a version of historiography that acknowledges gender—a version that will allow us to refurbish our mirror on the past.