

BLENDING WESTERN CIVILIZATION AND WOMEN'S HISTORY

A. Daniel Frankforter
Pennsylvania State University
The Behrend College

One of the harsh realities of recent academic experience is a decline of enrollments in non-technical fields. There are doubtless as many people who are innately curious about historical questions as there have been in the past. But there are fewer who feel they can afford to risk indulging their inclinations. The problem has become one of survival for many history departments. Two strategies seem to dominate this struggle for survival. Some departments elect to go with the market--to find what students are interested in and give it to them. Others hope to engineer a return to the halcyon days of captive audiences by way of mandatory history requirements. There are problems with both strategies, but there are opportunities too, if we discover ways to blend the two approaches.

A simple return to western civilization as it was once taught could be a betrayal of advances made over the last few decades in fields like women's history. It could become an excuse for once again concentrating exclusively on the activities of the white male in the analysis of western institutions. It could, were mandated for all students, limit the opportunity for or reduce the motivation of students to enroll in special topics courses. Feminists have, with good reason, begun to wonder how women's history can be integrated into traditional western civilization courses.¹ The question of integration may, however, be the wrong one to raise. Integration, if successful, might win a small share of time devoted to women, their issues, and achievements. But something of greater significance could possibly be accomplished by a different strategy.

Women's history can legitimately be promoted as a service to at least two kinds of audiences. It is of general interest to both men and women, but there is also a sense in which it speaks primarily to females. It can be convincingly argued that women's history is not a form of ethnic history² (e.g., comparable to Black studies), but it is obvious to any observer that it can have similar functions. Like Black studies, women's history can be a vehicle for female "consciousness raising"--an inelegant but widely understood term for reaching a new level of self-awareness as a member of a group. History should be just and balanced in its presentations, but in so far as it necessarily invites judgments on the past it is permeated by reform interests. Valueless history might be as impossible to achieve as it would be useless to possess. History helps people locate themselves in time and space, and it provides them with a healthy sense of roots which equips them for change. The social concerns of recent decades have alerted historians to the responsibility of recovering histories for previously neglected segments of the American population. Black history has flourished as a vehicle for developing pride and self-respect in Black people. It has assisted them in claiming their rights as American citizens. Women may not be an ethnic or a racial group, but women's history has often been taught as if they were.³ And it has helped them formulate programs of reform and mobilize for political action.

But women's history, when taught as "women's" history, often attracts only women. It speaks to the oppressed about their self-interest. It is sometimes less successful in attracting the attention of the general population which needs to be mobilized if effective political action is to take place. Special interest courses attract special interest groups. They often do little more than preach to the converted. Blacks take Black history, and women take women's history. There is some value in this, but there are pitfalls as well.

Special interest courses may create an attitude of "us against them" which makes balanced historical judgments difficult. If such courses are the only exposure which students have to the field of history, they may leave them ill-equipped to understand and deal with the institutions of modern society. And such history may, regrettably, often be bad history. It sometimes degenerates into a mere search for the forgotten Blacks or women who equaled the achievements of white males. It can inadvertently perpetuate the old error of seeing history as the composite biographies of "great persons." It tends to polarize the assignment of credit for events, and it can aspire to the failing of "male" history--the writing of history as if the other sex did not exist or cooperate.⁴ This activity may do something to provide emotional recompense to women for past slights, but it is not the most valuable service which women's history can provide. And it has little to recommend it for inclusion in mandatory general education requirements.

The interests of women must be served by western civilization courses. Women now constitute slightly more than 50% of the student population, and that alone gives them some claim on the structure of curricula. But history is ill-served by attempting to tailor its narratives to the private interests of different members of its audience. It does little good to recognize the few Hatshepsuts, Artemisias, Isabellas, and Curies of the past. It is little more than polite to complete a unit in a course and then pause to "remember the ladies."

It may be misleading to begin to plan a western civilization course by wondering how to integrate women's history into it. This approach suggests that history is naturally an account of male deeds which can be liberalized by the occasional mention of non-male persons. There is a far more fundamental issue raised by women's history; it reveals that what women have done in the past and do in the present is not unrelated to the activities of men. Each gender completes the other.⁵ Changes in the behavior of one sex call forth complementary changes in the responsibilities of the other. Men and women share a common history, a history of a sex-role system which shapes their identities and opportunities. This common past provides a theme for a western civilization course which serves some of the legitimate interests of women's history without minimizing its effectiveness or claiming undue significance.

A western civilization course should provide students with a chronological outline of major events in Euro-American history. It should erect a reference framework for other courses and set a context for bits of information acquired through life from all kinds of sources. Bare chronology is unappetizing and minimally informative. Both the significance and sequence of events are hard to grasp and retain without some thematic scheme which helps the mind to organize them. Numerous themes or collections of themes have been used to enliven the teaching of western civilization. It has been seen as an unfolding function of an institution (e.g., city life). It has been taught as the emergence of an ideology (e.g., capitalism or Marxism). It has been traced as a natural process (e.g., a Darwinian competition). It has been presented as a progressive revelation of divine will (e.g., Augustinian Christianity). It could also be explained--at least in part--as the development of a sex-role system.

A western civilization course which raised the issue of sex roles would focus in each of its units on the concept of the ideal man and woman which informed the social realities and expectations of each epoch in western history. It would concern itself with the divisions of labor between the sexes and with the theories which justified those divisions and excused exceptions to them. Each civilization has a literature (mythological, religious, and scientific) which reveals its preconceptions about men and women. Fascinating things can

be learned by tracing the effects of these preconceptions and by studying the careers of extraordinary persons who challenged them.

This approach has the advantage of obvious and equal relevance to both males and females in the student audience. Males are not encouraged to feel that their time, which could be better spent on other subjects, is being sacrificed for lip-service to a vocal interest group. Females are not left without points for making personal connections with events. One of the difficulties with attempts to "integrate" women's history into western civilization courses is the impression the task gives of introducing something marginal into an already overly burdened program. Feminists can justly counter that women's studies are not just for the benefit of women. Anything which is done for the liberation of women is also ultimately a contribution to the true freedom of men.⁶ But the way in which women's history materials are sometimes packaged and taught obscures that truism. If attention focuses on the problem of the oppression and exploitation of women at the hands of men, an adversarial relationship is implied.⁷ The existence of a common system which burdens both the male and the female is obscured.⁸

The subject of oppression of females will inevitably make males defensive. Men should, perhaps, be forced to come to terms with this reaction, but this may not be the best place at which to begin the discussion of the problem of liberation with college freshmen. Sympathy for issues of female liberation can be gained by urging males to look at the burdens of their own inherited roles and values.⁹ Why must men work in the public sphere to justify their lives? Why do women, but not men, have the social option of being provided for by the labor of another? Why has family law tended to favor the female over the male in matters of support and child custody? New depths of awareness can be promoted in females by inviting them to examine the responsibilities of liberation. The "dominant" sex is not necessarily a gender fulfilled and benefited by its privileges. An introductory course which focuses on the features of a shared sex-role system provides a departure point for discussions of the future in terms of increased options for males and females. It minimizes the tendency to see advances for one gender as costs subtracted from the account of the other.

A western civilization course organized around the theme of sex roles could be structured in numerous ways. There is no space here to present a full proposal. But it is possible to suggest the kinds of questions and perspectives which such an approach might provide.¹⁰ First, a unit on pre-history would be essential, and it might have to be expanded beyond its usual format.¹¹ The bulk of human experience was acquired before the beginning of written records, and civilization begins with roles for males and females already firmly entrenched. It is essential that students understand the economic survival strategies of prehistoric cultures which provided the rationale for the division of labor between the sexes.¹² The neolithic "revolution" becomes even more revolutionary when its effects on earlier sex role patterns are revealed. The transition to civilization is not presented unrealistically as a simple triumph of progress, but as a development which was costly to an earlier human life-style which had offered its own advantages.¹³

The history of the early Near Eastern civilizations raises the still relevant issue of the effects of city life on the careers of men and women. The distinction between public and private spheres emerges, and the adjustment of responsibilities between the family and the state begins.¹⁴ The influence of centralization of authority and accountability systems on male-female roles can be analyzed. The complexity of class systems as they affect the ability of men and women to live out ideal social roles needs to be noted. The problem of the orderly transmission of power and property will be seen as a community

concern which sometimes overrides traditional sex-role limitations and provides special opportunities for the emergence of matriarchy or female leaders.

Greek history is often taught as the history of a man's world where women were confined in a cloistered isolation which made them historically insignificant. Yet Greek literature has something of a preoccupation with women.¹⁵ Greek science provides stunning examples of how far rational minds will go to provide confirmations for popular assumptions and prejudices.¹⁶ The Greeks provide an excellent opportunity to discuss the means societies use to keep men and women in their respective places. They can, at least tentatively, be explored as an example of a culture which sought too much, or too rigid, sex role specialization. They provide excellent examples of the strains of sex role systems.¹⁷ It is instructive to try to imagine the state of mind of an Athenian woman who was taught to pursue the goal of total social invisibility. It is worthwhile wondering how the ordinary man coped with the extraordinary demands of polis citizenship for universal competence and the ideals of Homeric heroism.¹⁸

The Roman age brings into focus the problem of the relationship between the individual human being and large corporate structures. Male roles of dominance and self-sufficiency may not have much relevance in a world state in which few people have the option of independent initiative or real power.¹⁹ The distinction between male and female may be less important than other social and economic realities. Significant numbers of women occupied positions of influence in Roman politics and society, and they raise the question of the social forces which drive women out of or admit them to public life.²⁰ The gap between realities of life and traditional ideologies does something to explain the phenomenal success of the salvation cults of the period. Christianity can be explored as a faith which opposes the "female" submissiveness of the people to the male dominance of an omnipotent God--a step toward a universalistic faith which strove to look beyond human sex differences.²¹

The Middle Ages began with the decline of the state and the revival of the family as the source of structure for society.²² The significance of the family gave women a greater public presence than they had often enjoyed in classical antiquity, and the breakdown of public order during the ages of invasions and migrations restored the importance of heroic male roles. The gradual return of public authority in the later medieval period encouraged the exclusion of women and the pacification of males. The art and literature of the age takes on an interesting significance when seen as a commentary on changing sex roles.²³

The Renaissance and Reformation raise the issues of humanism and individualism--intellectual movements which encouraged the discussion of human nature and rationales for sex roles.²⁴ The demilitarization of kingship may have assisted, with other factors, in the promotion of remarkable numbers of women to positions of real leadership. Their careers were a challenge to popular prejudices about women and to rigid scholarly definitions of the roles for the sexes established by God and nature.

The increasing prominence of women in politics, intellectual circles, and economic life which begins with the Renaissance and is assisted by the early industrial revolution may have inspired a certain anxiety about maleness during the Age of Enlightenment. Feminism begins to emerge as a self-conscious issue, and it is effectively countered by a propaganda program for domesticating women in male- and child-centered homes.²⁵ The modern period is replete with themes illustrating the polarization of the sexes, concern about masculinity, and debate over the nature of "true" femininity. The military and economic adventures of the recent past take on new meaning for students when their effects on these issues are considered. The literature of the modern age also falls handily into a framework of commentaries on sex roles.

In short, a course on western civilization organized around the theme of sex roles offers a number of advantages. It gives the instructor an opportunity to look at old material from a new perspective and to be refreshed by the discovery of new connections and meanings. It provides students with a new motive for interest in the course. By discussing the history of the roles they have inherited and now live the problem of relevance is at least partially solved. Moribund western civilization courses can be revived by the energy and resources of new research in women's history. And the reintroduction of western civilization courses to curricula from which they have been absent can be experienced, not as a return to a dated idea, but as an advance which builds upon the sensitivities and insights of recent decades. The result might be a course which has the felicitous qualities of attractiveness to students, coherent content, and integrity to the traditional goals of liberal education.

NOTES

¹This paper was prepared in response to a FIPSE sponsored conference on women's history and survey courses led by D'Ann Campbell at SUNY Fredonia, April 7, 1981.

²Martin King Whyte, The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 178.

³Vivian Gornick, ed., Women in Sexist Society, Studies in Power and and Powerlessness (New York: New American Library, 1971).

⁴Elizabeth Davis, The First Sex (New York: Putnam, 1971); Evelyn Reed, Woman's Evolution from Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975).

⁵Shirley Weitz, Sex Roles: Biological, Psychological, and Social Foundations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), provides excellent background for students embarking on the study of genders and history.

⁶Warren Farrell, The Liberated Man. Beyond Masculinity: Freeing Men and Their Relationships with Women (New York: Random House, 1974).

⁷T. Besterman, Men Against Women: A Study of Sexual Relations (New York: Methuen, 1934); Carol Tavris and Carole Offir, The Longest War (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

⁸For a look at the "burden" from an early perspective, see Samuel Noah Kramer, History Begins at Sumer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 123ff.

⁹Marc Fasteau, The Male Machine (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Joseph Pleck, The Myth of Masculinity (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1981).

¹⁰There is no shortage of resource material on women for each period likely to be treated in a western civilization course. There are large synthetic surveys like Elise Boulding, The Underside of History (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976) and Vern Bullough, The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973). Supplementary texts for students are available: Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., Becoming Visible, Women in European History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977); Susan Bell, ed., Women: From the Greeks to the French Revolution (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1973). Little attention has been given to male roles, but there are a few specialized studies

such as Ruth Kelson, The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the 16th Century (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1929/64); and Michael Cross, The Workingman in the 19th Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). There are some pioneering surveys: Peter N. Stearns, Be a Man! Males in Modern Society (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), and A.M. Kirschner, ed., Masculinity in an Historical Perspective (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1977). There are some useful bibliographies: Kathleen Grady, Robert Brannon, and Joseph H. Pleck, The Male Sex Role: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography (Rockville, Maryland: National Institute of Mental Health, 1979), and the Men's Studies Bibliography available from the Human Studies Collection of the MIT Library.

- 11 Some sociobiological theories on the rationale for sexual dimorphism might be relevant: Edward O. Wilson, Sociobiology: The New Synthesis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975); and Donald Symons, The Evolution of Human Sexuality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Short assignments for students could be found in articles like Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman, "Women in Evolution," Signs, I (Spring, 1976), 585-608.
- 12 Whyte, The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies.
- 13 Peter Farb, Humankind (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).
- 14 Frederick Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (New York: International Publishers, 1972), is useful here. Eleanor B. Leacock's "Introduction" to the listed edition is helpful. Also see Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited," in Rayna Reiter, ed., Toward an Anthropology of Women (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); and Elizabeth Fisher, Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1979).
- 15 Arnold W. Gomme, Essays on Greek History and Literature (Oxford: Blackwell, 1937).
- 16 Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "Aristotle and Woman," Journal of the History of Biology, IX (Fall, 1976), 183-213.
- 17 Philip Elliot Slater, The Glory of Hera (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
- 18 W.K. Lacey, The Family in Classical Greece (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968).
- 19 C. Bradford Welles, Alexander and the Hellenistic World (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert Ltd., 1970).
- 20 J.P.V.D. Balsdon, Roman Women: Their History and Habits (London: Bodley Head, 1962); Linda W. Rutland, "Women as Makers of Kings in Tacitus' Annals," Classical World, LXXII (September, 1978), 15-29.
- 21 Derrick Sherwin Bailey, Sexual Relations in Christian Thought (London: Longmans, 1959); George Tavard, Woman in Christian Tradition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973); William E. Phipps, The Sexuality of Jesus (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Jo Ann McNamara, "Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought," Feminist Studies, III (Spring-Summer, 1976), 145-58.
- 22 Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100," Feminist Studies, I (Winter-Spring, 1973), 126-41.

²³ Frances and Joseph Gies, Women in the Middle Ages (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1978); Susan Mosher Stuard, Women in Medieval Society (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

²⁴ Ian Maclean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Susan Groag Bell, "Christian de Pisan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problems of a Studious Woman," Feminist Studies, III (Spring-Summer, 1976), 173-84.

²⁵ Katherine B. Clinton, "Femme et Philosophe: Enlightenment Origins of Feminism," Eighteenth-Century Studies, VIII (Spring, 1975), 283-99; Melissa Butler, "Early Roots of Feminism: John Locke and the Attack on Patriarchy," American Political Science Review, LXXII (March, 1978), 135-50; Marlene Legates, "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought," Eighteenth-Century Studies, X (Fall, 1976), 21-39; Martha Vicinus, ed., Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1972).