

THE STENTON LECTURE 2000



Past Imperfect

Reflections on giving women a past

by

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*I should like to dedicate this very short study to Sir James Holt,
founder of the Stenton lecture and a man not only of great learning
but of fairness and generosity of spirit. I owe him much.*

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I WAS A LECTURER in this university in the late sixties when the concern emerged to construct a past for women, the largest missing presence as it then seemed in the canon. It was a good time to be at Reading. Expansion was the order of the day and no one talked about economic crises. There was a marvelous clutch of medieval and early modern European historians and the wider political framework was one of optimism that change was on the agenda. Jim Holt, now Sir James Holt, was a creative and energetic head of department. Academics did not live in the straitjackets of QAAs and RAEs: and personality and diversity rather than uniformity seemed the desiderata. Debts were modest at both the institutional and the student level. Reading was populated by many amiable ghosts and resonated with stories of how a fledgling university was developed. There was more than a soupçon of eccentricity.¹

The Stenton lecture was founded to keep alive both a medieval tradition and preserve the memory of a man (and his wife) who distinguished medieval British History for several decades and were critical in the shaping of the History department at Reading. Indeed, an instruction given to the annual Stenton lecturer is that a reference must be made to the name of Stenton.

Of the lectures I attended during my twenty year spell at Reading, all chose Sir Frank Stenton for such mention. My point of departure, however, will be his wife Doris, Lady Stenton, usually described by the adjective, formidable, who died in 1971 having retired from the department in 1959, and whose memory was still alive and well when I arrived.

The Stentons, it must be understood, were a couple, a pair, a team in quite a modern sense. When University College, London wanted to elect Sir Frank Stenton to the Astor chair they realised that inducement must also include a post for his wife. That he or they refused in favour of the life they had here in Reading may have surprised those who saw academe as hierarchied and the Astor chair high up the ladder of glory. But on close examination the decision is not so surprising. While Stenton was Vice Chancellor (the one who clinched the deal on Whiteknights Park and hence demonstrated he knew a thing or two about the value of land), Lady Stenton ran the History department. They were in a very real sense *installés* in their fiefdom. London could hold few attractions.²

¹ I should from the outset confess that the University of Reading is not for me a neutral commodity. I regard the two decades I worked there and my close association with my fellow European historians Malcolm Barber, Angus MacKay and Patricia McNulty as something very special. The work we did to create a documents-based course on the structure of European society 1500–1800 provided me with the context for much of my later work on poverty and women.

² J. C. Holt, *The University of Reading: the first fifty years* (Reading University Press, 1977) 3 and idem 'Doris Mary Stenton' *American Historical Review* lxxix (1974) 265–6 for a

She is to be counted among a number of women medievalists who distinguished the British academic scene (such as Dorothy Whitelock, Eileen Power, May McKisack Margaret Deansley), in the early – middle decades of the twentieth century. They were strong, career focussed individuals. A couple of them went for marriage but not maternity—there was no expectation that one could have it all. They all had a hard ride to get where they did and the story of their success belongs very properly in both the history of education and the history of women.

Whilst Sir Frank Stenton was an Anglo-Saxon scholar his wife was a specialist in the Normans. Their scholarship was rigorous, resting on a disciplined familiarity with documents – Plea Rolls, Pipe Rolls and Charters. By the standards of our times it does not make easy reading. A blip in Lady Stenton's document based career however emerged at the end of her career in the form of a study entitled *The English Woman in History* (1957). The breadth of this work—it extends into at least the late nineteenth century – as well as its very structure, were quite at odds with anything Lady Stenton had written before. Her former student and my colleague in the History department, Barbara Dodwell, said she did not regard this as a 'serious' work and she herself wrote a kind of apologia for her book in the introduction. She described it as a 'holiday' endeavour that she and her husband and friends shared by combing secondhand bookshops and indulging her interest in Christmas and birthday presents.³

Yet the collection of books which now form part of the Stenton Library at Reading can hardly be dismissed as trivia. The reading informing her work was very extensive and the end product could not be described as light. Indeed, in the late seventies when I put together an optional subject on the history of women in the early modern period which in the fullness of time developed into *The Prospect before Her* (1995) the Stenton collection was an invaluable resource. So why might Lady Stenton have adopted a version of the practice of the eighteenth and nineteenth century woman novelist in suggesting that what she offered was not quite up to the sterner stuff of real history?

My guess, substantiated I would argue by the very form of the work, is that she was very conscious that her own agenda in putting this work together differed considerably from her approach to her other scholastic endeavours. I would suggest that she, at the end of her career, experienced a longing akin to that which surfaced amongst a younger group of women historians in the late sixties. This was very simply to find women in the record, to give them a past of their own, a recognisable identity suggesting that they or at least their predecessors 'were there'. The consciousness of a missing presence was obviously not peculiar to her. Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf had lamented the omission of women from the record. And had she but known it, Simone de

scholarly and personal appreciation. Another fine commemorative piece is C. F. Slade, 'Doris Mary Stenton, 1894-1971' 'Liber memorialis Doris Mary Stenton' *Pipe Roll Society*, new series, xli, (1976) 1-32.

³ D. M Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London, 1957). This was very close to her retirement. The Introduction vi-viii contains this virtual apology.

Beauvoir at the very moment she was writing, was pronouncing on the absence of a women's past and the degree to which this impacted upon a woman's development of a sense of self.⁴ Historians contemporary to Lady Stenton such as Eileen Power and Margaret Deansley had found space in their work for abbesses and religious women. Moreover, Sir Frank Stenton himself, had written an essay on Anglo-Saxon women in place names, a piece of scholarship pivotal to Lady Stenton's argument in the early chapters of her book.⁵ But she wanted to go beyond the specificities of rock-face scholarship to the broad interpretative mode, one which began with the Anglo-Saxons and terminated with the breaching of Oxbridge by clever girls. Lady Stenton, it would seem apparent, was intent on creating a narrative account which allegedly offered a past to all Englishwomen. Taking some broad aspects of experiences taking place in England over a thousand years she concocted an evolving personage or set of personages with shared attributes able to deem themselves English. In so doing she perhaps wrote a book which could, with greater accuracy, have been subtitled the rise of Doris Stenton.

To convey her excitement one needs to quote her directly:

Until I applied myself seriously to the task of writing and extended my researches well beyond the period for which I had been trained I had no idea how clear a pattern would emerge. It is satisfactory to a historian who boldly undertakes a survey of a broad sweep of history if he finds that his subject falls into shape, so that a clear line of development can be discerned. I began with a lively interest in the Middle Ages, but as I progressed down the centuries my interest and my excitement grew.⁶

Her point of departure was the choice of a chronology. Such an exercise has been one of the besetting problems of women's history for reasons which will presently be discussed and the decisions she made are far from absent in recent writing. The birth of the English woman occurred for Lady Stenton in Anglo-Saxon England because enshrined in ecclesiastical and administrative records as well as place names is the evidence of discernible women in possession of names and in some instances characters. Amongst others she reels off Cynethryth wife of Offa, King of the Mercians (759–96) who had coins struck in her name and whose daughter Eadburg was wife to Beorhtric, King of Wessex. Goodwood means a piece of land belonging to a woman called Godgifu. Audley and Balterley in Staffordshire, Aveley in Essex, Kimberley in Norfolk and Halberley in Shropshire were originally clearings belonging to women called Ealdgyth, Bealdthryth, Aelfgyth, Cyneburg, Heathuburg and Wilthryth.⁷ Such women were the legatees of the Germanic strong women of Tacitus who fought alongside their men and defended family interests. Here again the text tells the story:

⁴ O. Hufton *The Prospect before her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500–1800* (London, 1995) Introduction.

⁵ F. M. Stenton, 'The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4 series, 25 (1943) 1–13.

⁶ D. M. Stenton, *The Englishwoman ...* vii.

⁷ *Ibid* 2–6.

The Germans felt that in their women was something holy which made them able to look into the future and they scorned neither to consult them nor to follow their advice. The peoples of whom Tacitus wrote lived some four hundred years before the Angles and the Saxons made any settlements in Britain, but they were the stock from which the first Englishwomen sprang.⁸

Lady Stenton was not the only writer who drew on the descriptions of Tacitus. Indeed, long before her Engels saw these Germanic women as exploiters of the land and equal to their menfolk until capitalism in the form of ownership of property made them a historical anachronism by destroying *Muttersrecht*. Lady Stenton went further, however. She urged that such women were not afraid or unable to plead their case in court. They did not need men to speak for them. She describes them as 'masterful'.⁹ They were not excluded from the law where their honour was to a degree protected. From this high-point they were doomed to setback with the arrival of the Normans who brought with them Roman and worse, feudal, law designed to structure a military state of fighting men. In this legal structure women were disadvantaged in the inheritance of property because the land was accorded by the monarchy against military service. Heiresses must be married to those who could perform such services and families to protect themselves used marriage to cement kin-group alliances. A married woman's legal status was subsumed in that of her husband and hence she could not hence speak in court in her own defense. For Lady Stenton, change in this gloomy situation was gradual receiving impetus from the presence of Queen Elizabeth I and the spread of literacy. Literacy and knowledge were the way forward. Education was the key to change.

Much of the work concerns the rise of the learned lady although the countrywoman who was farm manager is duly acknowledged. Lady Stenton admires the women writers of the eighteenth century but is not entirely comfortable with Mary Wollstonecraft whose ideas are lauded but way of going about things is condemned. Indeed, she has a certain impatience with a rights' discourse. Perhaps Harriet Martineau is the woman who commands most of her respect.¹⁰ The expansion of the availability of education in the nineteenth century is critical to her theme because such an initiative makes possible the realisation of the self. Education for women is more significant than the suffrage and indeed Lady Stenton discontinues her narrative before votes for women are achieved on the grounds that far too many books have already been written on this theme already.¹¹

Some have endorsed, some have criticised her chronology and some have shown a similar dismissal of political rights for women. Virginia Woolf, for example, thought the suffrage of much less importance than a room of one's own or a small personal income. Clearly a lot depended upon who one was. The Anglo-Saxons, after all, practised slavery whilst the Normans did not and

⁸ *Ibid* 1.

⁹ *Ibid* Introduction 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 318-319 and 340-1.

¹¹ The twentieth century is subsumed in a terse epilogue.

those whose ancestors' arrival in Britain was via the Irish boat in the nineteenth century or those whose ambitions could only have meaning after the Education Act of 1944 might feel their historical roots had been passed over.¹² When the black feminist Belle Hooks asked who was washing Betty Friedan's floor when she was writing her critical work of feminist criticism, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she tersely summarised the destruction that considerations of class and race can reek upon generalisations about a category as vast as that of women. Chronology is not the same for everyone even if they live on the same territory and at the same time.

Yet the search for chronological pegs, if often a subjective exercise, is nonetheless an instructive one in the process of defining and ordering the record. Amongst the most influential of chronological interpretations of English history has been the work of Alice Clark, daughter of the famous manufacturer who studied with one of the first female professional historians at the London School of Economics, Lilian Knowles. Clark's *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919) opted for a different chronological distribution of change. For her the high watermark of women's lives in Britain was the seventeenth century when the majority of the population was rural and for married women both of town and country the home and the workplace were the same. Married women engaged in productive labour, some of which might be remunerated and certainly brought money into the family and the family rather than the individual was what mattered. Clark saw this as a harmonious and fulfilling life in which children were not neglected by mothers forced to leave for the factory and she emphasized particular women's skills such as brewing and baking which were an integral part of the family economy. These skills were valorised and essential. Married women of the middle and upper classes did not live out their lives in idleness.

Just, then, as Lady Stenton wrote herself into the script so did Alice Clark, an unmarried daughter living with her parents in what she saw as enforced and meaningless social routines. She was also the product of a generation which had been scarred by war. Her politics were of the left: she was conscious of urban squalour and poverty, and the nineteen twenties seemed the essence of social misery. Her chronology of good times/bad times was very different from that of Lady Stenton. Whereas for the latter, after the loss of Anglo Saxon status things got better, after 1600 for Alice Clark they got worse. The resultant graph of wellbeing for women created by Alice Clark's work starts from a pre-industrial high water mark and plummets with the onset of industrialisation and the factory probably reaching rock bottom somewhere about 1870 which is one of Lady Stenton's high points. Nevertheless, and whatever one thinks about the elusive search for Golden Ages, Alice Clark's construction of a chronology, if flawed by an over concentration on the yeoman, sturdy farmer group and some eclectic evidence, asked some very good questions of an economic nature. *Did industrialisation lead to deterioration in women's*

¹² I would not count as English except by association, for example, if I had to depend on Lady Stenton's pedigree.

*lives? What were the implications for women of industrial change?*¹³ Lady Stenton too had a clear problematic. *How does the law, the legal and cultural framework, impinge upon women's lives?*

These two examples, of women who long predate the concerns of the sixties with women's history, also illustrate the degree to which historians, products of their times, had, in spite of the absence of women from the university curricula, the desire to secure for themselves a past. Anyone old enough to remember the history syllabuses of the sixties is only too cognisant of the remorseless masculinity of the record. From Stubbs' Charters to World War II a medieval abbess (Hilda of Whitby), Elizabeth and Mary Tudor, Catherine de Medici. Marie Antoinette *en passant*, and Queen Victoria might alone represent the female of the species. When the Civil Rights movement of the sixties burst in America and inequalities based on gender and race became the focus of protest, history was summoned to embellish the record of exclusion. Women had been denied a past. The moment had come to give them one. History was, after all fundamental to identity. But what was the labour force? And how might this labour force view its task?

Only a very small fraction of it at the beginning was of actual academics in post. But female research students were gripped by the possibilities implicit in a new dimension to history, one full of resonances for themselves. Many outside academe or in tangential disciplines wished to partake. But where did they start from? What did they want? For some it may have been a desire to have women in the record – we were there. Some may have been tempted to explain the inequalities of the present by reference to the past. Feminism was an angry movement and with good cause but there are perhaps dangers in reducing history to a history of our oppression and there is doubtless more to history than the revelation of inequality. History was seen by some as about power relationships. This could provoke the question were there women in the past who were powerful? It could also be followed by another interrogation, if so, who stripped them of their power? There were more questions. Once one had got a past what would one do with it? Perhaps for some, though I do not think these were professional historians, there was a simple answer *Divest and move on*. The past was the locus of oppression. For others, it was critical as a constituent of identity formation. Others wanted an element of greater balance in the record.¹⁴

The prospect in short, offered different things to different people. This in itself was new and exhilarating. The spirit of the sixties was very communitarian and very open and there were neither rules of procedure or indeed a real sense of the most productive ways of proceeding let alone at that stage the

¹³ Alice Clark *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth century* (London 1919) went into new editions in 1982 (ed Jane Lewis and M. Chaytor) and 1992 (ed L. A. Erickson). The introductions to both these editions by authors deeply involved in women's history make first rate contributions to understanding historiographical development.

¹⁴ Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (London, 2000) for me encapsulated the range of attitudes when her Anglo-Caribbean heroine seeks to construct for herself a genealogy on an English model and becomes conscious it can't be done and who decides that multi ethnic pasts can be complex and a liability so that divestment becomes rational choice.

vaunting of a single method over another. There was, after all, no available archival source labelled 'Women in ...'

For the professional historian in academe one had to start by reviewing terrain which was to a degree familiar and thinking about where women, variously defined might intrude upon the record. Probably the first bibliography for an actual teaching course in women's history was drawn up in 1972 by Natalie Davis and Jill Conway at the University of Toronto. A bibliography is not a neutral commodity. One had to start with works in print (amongst them Stenton and Alice Clark). Clark's work provided an early thesis for development and indeed some of her theses seemed set in stone. Two interpretations of early modern history however dominated the sixties and shaped to some degree the discussions. The first was inspired by the socio-economic questions about property and capital relationships posed by Marx and had to be somewhat reformulated to recognise that the working class was not necessarily monolithic in its experiences and that women could be doubly disadvantaged in the workplace. Some, like Edward Thompson were remarkably open to the idea. Others were averse to the suggestion that early socialism, in particular, demonstrated its own form of sex discrimination. The structures of union meetings and goals of a family wage for the working man rather than a concern to address the earning differential as between men and women or open up more skilled jobs to female labour showed socialism as a contributor to sexual inequalities. Nevertheless, in Britain, history from below, a concern with survival strategies in which women were deeply concerned, was perhaps the earliest 'home' for a study of women in the past. In France the dominant reading of history was that of the *Annales* school who were remarkably slow in accepting that women might need separating out of their overarching structures implicit in their *science de l'homme*. Theoretically this branch of learning aimed to quantify all available data pertaining to the human record. What the *Annalistes* did do in their preoccupation with *histoire serielle* was to pioneer the study of parish records so as to construct the demographic profile of early modern Europe and in so doing set an international precedent for a statistical understanding of family patterns in traditional societies. The preoccupation was taken up, for example by what was to be called the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population which was heavily concerned with family history. Within a decade, demography had become a heavy industry and those questions which Virginia Woolf had said could not be answered became answerable.

What one wants, I thought – and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it? – is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it. It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own it is a little queer as it is, unreal, lopsided; but why should they not offer a supplement to history? Calling

it of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety?¹⁵

There was however, more than one approach to family history. In the 1970s Lawrence Stone produced a highly influential work aimed at uncovering the affective relationships of the English family from the middle ages to the nineteenth century.¹⁶ This ambitious project was based on an examination and analysis of extant letters, journals and autobiographical writing and even more upon predicative literature which poured from the printing presses of Europe over this period. Stone came up with a chronology which cut the early modern period into segments. His English lineage family, characterised by the subservience of the individual to family interests was a sixteenth and early seventeenth century phenomenon. It was a gloomy experience. Parents arranged the marriages of their children with no respect for affection let alone anything we would recognise as love. The baby and very young child were, given heavy infantile mortality rates, something that parents were wary of making any emotional investment in. Put out to nurse, swaddled to restrict its movements, harshly disciplined as the repository of sin as it grew older, and dressed in the uncomfortable replicas of adult garments, the infant was taught to understand duty but not encouraged to indulge in what we would think of as childish pleasures. Stone saw a softening of attitudes once civil war had receded and urged that the real changes came in the eighteenth century 'the century of the child' and for him, Britain led the changes.¹⁷ Secularisation toned down the gloom of predicative pronouncement: enlightenment discourse undermined the gloominess of clerical exhortation, peace allowed families to relax more and sustained prosperity and a burst in consumerism led to house building and spending. The child was recognised as someone whose mind and body demanded special care. His mind should be developed by an education which allowed him to question and experiment. Toys and books should capture his imagination. Naturally his affective relationships changed. Men and women fell in love! Dynasticism was a less overarching consideration.

This interpretation did not go uncriticised and for good reasons. Stone was accused of mistaking predication for real life. His use of journals and letters was shown to be eclectic. Linda Pollock detailed the references to child beating in all known British and American ego documents and found it to be never used in respect of girls and almost never in the case of boys.¹⁸ Alan Macfarlane discerned affectionate middle class families in the sixteenth century but stuck

¹⁵ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1945) 46–7.

¹⁶ L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (Abridged version, London, 1977).

¹⁷ The thesis of course owed a great deal to Phillippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life* (New York, 1979).

¹⁸ L. Pollock, *Forgotten Children. Parent Child relationships from 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1983) 1–67. Others had previously warned of the dangers of taking predicative literature as a statement of what actually occurred. For example, J. E. Mechling, 'Advice to Historians on advice to Mothers' *Journal of Social History* 9 (1975) is a voice of sound sense.

to the notion of English precocity in pioneering the caring family.¹⁹ Others like Simon Schama challenged the notion of the eighteenth century English aristocratic family as the locus of change and pointed to the heavy visual and textual evidence in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic attesting to considerable concern for the well being of and delight in the young child.²⁰ Is the child loaded with toys a more valorised child than the one who is not?

Historians were somewhat slower to reflect upon the implications of Stone's writings for the historical interpretation of the mother herself. Moreover, he was not alone in relegating early modern mothers to zombie status. For Edward Shorter whose work *The Making of the Modern Family* (1976) was discussed against that of Stone, Stone had got the chronology of affective relationships wrong and also the class of those who pioneered change. For Shorter love, as between men and women, began in the nineteenth century and was located in the working classes. Young people left the conservative village for the town and began to experiment with relationships. The rising figures of illegitimacy in nineteenth century Europe Shorter attributed to this process of emancipation. But he had no problem with a negative view of early modern motherhood. One need look no further than the high levels of infant mortality:

The high death rate was generated because of circumstances over which parents had considerable influence: infant diet, age at weaning, cleanliness of bed linen and the general hygienic circumstances surrounding the child – to say nothing of less tangible factors in mothering, such as picking up the infant, talking and singing to it, giving it the feeling of being loved in a secure little universe. Now by the eighteenth century, parents knew, at least in an abstract kind of way that letting newborn children stew in their own excrement or feeding them pap from the second month onwards, were harmful practices. For the network of medical personnel had by this time extended sufficiently to put interested mothers within the earshot of sensible advice. *The point is that these mothers did not care and that is why their children vanished in the ghastly slaughter of the innocents.*²¹

Shorter was challenged at several levels. Joan Scott and Louise Tilly launched their careers as historians of women with a study of women's work and the problems of early industrialisation which directly denied the validity of the life- begins-in-1800-for-the-working-classes theme.²² They argued that the rise in illegitimacy was a reflection of the vulnerability and exploitation of young women distanced from their native villages. They sought to demonstrate traditional patterns of women's work such as maid service continued to be the dominant model in Europe until the eve of World War II and that such

¹⁹ A. MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England. Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford, 1986). Works on the English family are discussed in R. Houlbrouke, *The English Family 1450-1700* (London, 1984).

²⁰ S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London, 1987) 496-516.

²¹ E. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976) 203-4.

²² L. A. Tilly and J. W. Scott, *Women, work and family* (New York, 1978).

ill remunerated work in other people's homes had always produced single mothers and would continue to do so. But they left largely untouched Shorter's observations on the quality of early modern motherhood. Indeed several feminist authors (sociologists and philosophers rather than historians) used his bleak generalisations to further a thesis that mothering was a cultural production and in no way 'natural' to the female of the species. Instead it was an attribute which was imparted during the socialisation of the young girl through nineteenth century educational programs and the filter down effect of bourgeois norms. The developing and intrusive state interested in cannon fodder and an abundant force of young people to populate the colonies fostered notions of improved maternity through education and example.²³ Two widely influential texts, Elizabeth Badinter *The Myth of Motherhood* (1981) and Nancy Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) proved very acceptable in the short term. Badinter, a philosopher, claimed the evidence for maternal indifference in the early modern period can be deduced from the practise of wet nursing and the high levels of babies abandoned as foundlings in the first days of life. Capitalism with its demands for child labour then altered the value of the child within the family. Mothers had a new interest in seeing their infants lived. The state which promoted capitalist development promoted mothering which was not an innate instinct in women. Furthermore the promotion of consumer goods directed at children helped to define caring motherhood. Chodorow, a sociologist, argued that nineteenth century motherhood was reproduced in the home itself. Parents and particularly mothers shaped their girl children so that they did not react against imposed limitations on job expectations and wages and accepted as 'natural' the view that they were destined for motherhood. Mothers in short reproduced their own disadvantaged lives for their daughters.

A more positive view of historic motherhood was slow to shape itself. Indeed, one could speak of a consensus of silence. When it was treated, it was somewhat patchily. Or, it was approached through legislation designed to protect mother and child.²⁴ Demographers discovered that most abandoned children came from the very poor who saw in the foundling hospital a way of preserving other children threatened by the presence of another mouth to feed. Or, the mother herself was poor and unmarried and unable to fend for herself in a labour market where women had few opportunities, if she had a child on her hands. A major study on nineteenth century Milan demonstrated that the child most likely to be abandoned was the *third* child of textile workers who used the foundling hospitals intending to turn up in easier times to reclaim the child.²⁵ Could the mother who found herself in such a situation be accused of not loving her child? Putting out to nurse was demonstrated to be the practise of

²³ A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood' *History Workshop Journal* 5 (1978).

²⁴ Such legislation was the subject of some pioneer work by J. Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England, 1900-1939* (London, 1980).

²⁵ V. Hunecke, *I trovatelli di Milano, bambini espositi e famiglie espositrici dal XVII al XIX secolo* (Bologna, 1988). Tear jerking accompaniments to some of the abandoned children are given in F. Doriguzzi, 'I messaggi dell'abbandono: bambini espositi a Torino nel '700' *Quaderni Storici* xvliii (1983).

either the wealthy or the commercial classes. The first used wetnurses for cultural reasons. Country women were considered to be better milk producers than the aristocracy and the country was considered healthier than the town. Families where the habitation was also a site of commercial production (the best studied case is that of the silk workers of Lyons) were also ill-equipped to have a baby on the premises. They used a wet nurse for economic reasons.²⁶ The mother could not relinquish her role in the family economy. In short, indifferent motherhood was difficult to argue from such sources. More positively, the visual imagery of the past has left considerable testimony to mothercare. Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, a study of a part of Europe which does not seem to have made much use of wetnurses, used the works of Dou, ter Borch and Steen etc as well as literature such as the work of Jacob Katz – and midwives' accounts to construct a very different rendering of the caring mother. But we have had to wait for more balanced accounts of motherhood as a fulfilling role, one which entailed a lot of commitment and which could be rendered harsh or impossible by external circumstances. Indeed, in this process, Italian historiography has demonstrated considerable precocity. Motherhood has been seen as a positive transmission agent of culture (language, sentiments).²⁷ In Britain Anna Davin's recent *Growing Up Poor* (1996) represents a positive breach with the spirit of much of the historiography of the seventies in its profoundly sensitive treatment of maternity in the context of poverty.

In the late seventies and eighties history began in fits and starts to undergo a reshaping of focus. Whereas the Annales school and a Marxist historiographical tradition had been dominated by the socio-economic and by structures, cultural history involving both literary (language) and anthropological influences (rituals and orderings) became increasingly important. In this process and an influential force were the developments which marked the transition of women's to gender history. Briefly this development reflected the cultural impulse.²⁸ Women and men are made or constructed in the sense that a given society allots them certain roles and seeks to perpetuate them in those roles. It does so in certain given ways: through family structures, that is to say in the home: through religious beliefs in which rules for procedure are laid down: through the political orderings of communities which accord a voice to one sex rather than another. Peer group pressure, schooling, the workings of the labour market, legal structures which do not allow one sex to speak in its own defense or define how property is allocated to the advantage of one sex rather than another contrive to create norms and define aberrance within a culture. A given society could thus be read through scriptural precept vis-a-vis the god-ordained division of attributes as among the sexes. Woman in the

²⁶ O. Hufton, *The Prospect ...* 193.

²⁷ For example, ed G. Fiume, *Madri. Storia di un ruolo sociale* (Venice, 1995).

²⁸ L. Hunt ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989) Introduction. Defines the development thus: 'Culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes to life.'

Christo-Judaic tradition was the sinful sex whose disobedience and persuasive tongue led to the expulsion of man from the garden of Eden. She must hence sit in silence and be subject to the governance of man. Or she can be read through legal codes, serious and profane literature, medical treatises which since the Greeks had posited woman as a botched male, or from comic print or from differential salaries in the labour market. Her virtue is chastity: his honour is bravery and so on.²⁹ Women and men are cultural constructions because they interiorise social roles in which they are conditioned from birth. Such roles may vary according to the society or culture time and place but they are an important key to reading and understanding that society and what is possible for them within the constraints laid down. Lady Stenton would have had little problem with that in principle since she herself had looked at the corset imposed by Norman law-codes. Such views also accorded well with the anthropological drift of history writing in the seventies. Did all cultures behave the same or in what essentials did they differ? In default of explanatory text was it possible to decode the attitudes of a society through its ceremonies and rituals?

This kind of approach opened up considerable possibilities furthering an understanding of many branches of history. Why were women excluded for so long from political participation? Why was the actress by definition regarded as disreputable with noteworthy exceptions before the nineteenth century? Why were 80 per cent of prosecuted witches women?

One immediate preoccupation amongst historians of women was the search for 'strong women' who apparently flouted the rules laid down in the master cultural schema. Midwives, witches, kings' mistresses and prostitutes, women who apparently stood outside the conventional cultural prescripts were highlighted. But the exercise proved on the whole unsatisfactory.³⁰ The majority of witches were old and poor: the king's mistress could all too soon lose her power to a younger woman: the prostitute as revealed in the magisterial theses of Bénabou and van der Pol, unless she could contrive a permanent relationship as quasi wife or kept mistress, usually lived a pretty marginal existence.³¹

Another direction of interest explored modes of empowerment within a system one was doomed to lose. Anorexics, mystics false or genuine, those who claimed visions and showed stigmata designed to convert them into saints and prophetesses who performed before riveted audiences in the late middle ages secured much attention.³² These women certainly paid a price for the

²⁹ This point is more fully developed in Hufton, *The Prospect ...* Chapter 1 Constructing Woman, and the supporting bibliography.

³⁰ Amongst the many works dedicated to whether or not the witch was a 'strong woman' C. Garret, 'Women and Witches' *Signs* III (1977) and C. Honnigar, 'Comment on Garret's Women and Witches' *Signs*, 4 (1979).

³¹ E. M. Bénabou, *La prostitution et la police des mœurs au XVIII^e* (Paris, 1987) and L. van der Pol, *Het Amsterlams Hoerdom. Prostitute in zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1996).

³² R. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago, 1995); C. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, 1987). G. Zarri, *Le sante vive: profezie e devozione femminile tra '400 e '500* (Turin, 1990).

interest they raised in the form of physical deprivation. Nevertheless the pre-occupation with women's spirituality at all levels was an important constituent of developing gender history. There was a mystery involved. Religious doctrine seemed to lie at the root of women's subordinate social role and yet religion was embraced by women and their religiosity in historical terms was perpetuated long after men pursued the path of secularisation.

The cultural reading of gender and its use as an analytical tool was coincident with many developments in historiography which altered the discipline beyond recognition. Sometime in the late eighties history experienced 'the linguistic turn'. This meant differing things to different people but essentially the key idea was the 'parity of the text' and that language embodies cultural assumptions. The novel, the poem, the play, the song have the same historical value as the law code or economic treatise and can be deconstructed/reconstructed to demonstrate fundamental underpinning attitudes and principles revelatory of the mentalities of the day. How an entire society viewed women and men, race and class, sexual behaviour such as homosexuality, or what was deviant or appropriate, could to a greater or lesser degree be 'read' from text(s).³³ The linguistic turn was not responsible for 'micro-history', (what Peter Burke once described as 'history in a raindrop') which predated the notion but it did help to elevate micro-history into a significant mode of historical enquiry. Micro-history is the study of an individual or group of individuals and an event read carefully to expose the thought patterns of those involved. Two early examples were Le Roy Ladurie's *Le Carnaval de Romans* (1979) and Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980). In the second the world view of a stubborn miller encounters the Inquisition. The individual speaks but as he or she does so their responses and those generated by those about them reveal attitudes and the limits of tolerance of behaviour designated aberrant.

The law suit surfaced as the favoured if not the unique source for a micro-historical study because it captured both a moment and a past record. It permitted the individual to speak if through responses to questions put to him or her and this question and answer format lends itself readily to interpretation. Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) was a landmark work. It caught through a long trial of an imposter husband who had replaced the real incumbent after years of absence the predicament of the wife. Why had she lived out this deception? What were the social imperatives, the cultural determinants that shaped her decision? Another ground breaking micro-study was Lyndal Roper's remarkable essay about a young girl who said she was a witch when being questioned on an alleged poisoning offence. *Oedipus and the Devil* conveyed the predicament of this motherless girl who tended to her father's wants and ran a lodgings house on his account and who was a general drudge living a life without warmth or affection. She became infatuated with a young lodger who, knowing her feelings, taunted her by flouting his

³³ This is not the place to comment more fully on this view point. Personally, as a historian, rather than a literary scholar, I believe that historians engage somewhat differently with texts and prefer a range of documents rather than in depth treatment of a single one.

girlfriend whom Regina (the accused) allegedly sought to poison. But the questioning prompted Regina to construct for herself the profile of a witch by confessing deeds which astonished the neighbours and for which there was no evidence. What made her do so? What kind of imagery did her imagination draw upon to describe the devil—a young man in silken hose, with whom she said she sat in a tavern and who feasted with her on sausages? Why did she when the neighbours said they knew nothing of such events admit to riding on the backs of cattle by night? By unpacking the text of the trial and using gender and psycho-analytic analysis, Lyndal Roper produced an utterly convincing and very moving picture.³⁴ Clearly Regina, who was a good forty years or so younger than the average European witch, could not speak for all witches but her case study, located in a cultural context, could make graphically apparent the circumstances which could trap an uneducated and abused woman into the *huit clos* of a false confession.

The study of the interaction between an individual and cultural constraints specific to time and place was not restricted to the study of women. The idea prompted a study of masculinities, of homosexuality, of racial attitudes and concepts of alterity within a dominant culture. Women's history opened a Pandora's box of 'other' histories and contributed to the fragmentation of the historical discipline. A new 'right' of the individual was to a history of his or her own with personal resonance. The sociologist Frank Furedi spoke of the demise of history with a capital 'H' and the development of 'competing histories'.³⁵

The notion of competition, however, is a little strong. The desire for 'a bit of the me' in the historical narrative has merely extended down the social scale. We live longer and in multicultural societies where identity is precious.³⁶ This does not mean that an interest in a wider frame has vanished. Simon Schama's *History of Britain* pulled in four million viewers. There is a public for readable wide ranging history which keeps history alive and well outside academe. I would replace the word 'competing' with that of 'constituent'. History has become more than a master narrative but needs to become more overtly the sum of the parts rather than operating on parallel lines. I confess to a taste for the broader approach and would seek to pull together information which contributes to a such a vision. I would like to illustrate what I mean by asking the question what has a sensitivity to the history of women and gender, to cultural concerns such as ritual and text done for a broader picture and since I was asked to address the early modern period, I will chose as my temporal and spatial context the European court.³⁷

³⁴ L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil. Witchcraft, Sexuality and religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994).

³⁵ F. Furedi, *Mythical Past: Elusive Future. History and Society in an Anxious Age* (London, 1992).

³⁶ I accept dangers in the use of history as a way of perpetuating the conflicts and unfairness of the past.

³⁷ In my view, the concern with 'competing' histories has not carried history down market. Aristocrats, consumption, art patronage, and books reflect the tastes of the comfortably off in the past and are growth industries in historical studies at the present time.

Of recent years, the history of the court has been a growth industry in European historiography perhaps because it has offered such richness of evidence and a diversity of approaches. Politics, dynastic struggles, have been joined by ritual and ceremony as a means of reading through the visual signs how relationships of power and degree were acted out. Historical anthropology has asked us to think about the body of the king and that of the queen. Autobiography, letters and journals have been used to convey experiences of the individual within the wider court culture. The significance of the gift economy within the court as a key to patronage and rewards and favours: the structures of patronage and access to it: the study of networks emanating from families and kingroups are all preoccupations which have burgeoned in recent years. Indeed, the study of court culture is almost a microcosm of much of the historical focus of our times.

It is worth considering the many uses to which the memoirs of the Duc de Saint Simon of the court of Louis XIV have been put over the last half century. Having been the source behind Norbert Elias's *The Civilising Process* (English trans. 1978), a work which was concerned with the means by which a court culture has a filter down effect on manners and comportment, the work has served gender historians well in permitting an analysis of the careers of differing types of women within the court.³⁸ Peter Burke drew upon the work to examine the relationships between ritual and power and most recently Le Roy Ladurie and Filou sought to use the work to explore *le système de la cour* to include networks and hierarchies of power, art as propaganda and even age structures and mortality rates of male and female courtiers – amongst other issues.³⁹

A great deal of innovative work on the early modern court has come out of Italy perhaps because of the precocious flowering of court culture in that context. Some of the best works on the functioning of the gendered court have come from Maria Antonietta Visceglia and Renata Ago using the papal court, one of the most developed courts of Europe, one employing and attracting the largest number of ambassadors and where rewards and pickings existed on a truly international scale. Ago's works pursue the dynamics of negotiating favours drawing on the evidence of family papers which permit the construction of an entire process of sollicitation to gain posts which would enhance the career of family members first to secure the cardinalate and then to acquire ambassadorial posts and offices which would build up revenues.⁴⁰ Marriage negotiations were carried out in not dissimilar ways resulting in the exchange of a large percentage of family wealth to buy the right marriage for a daughter, right defined by the standing of the prospective husband's family. An important aspect of Ago's work, and she is not alone, is to pursue the respective roles of the women and men of the family in the process of negotiation.

³⁸ A. Muhlstein, *Les femmes et le pouvoir: une relecture de Saint Simon* (Paris, 1976).

³⁹ E. L. Ladurie & J. F. Filou, *Saint Simon ou le système de la cour* (Paris, 1997).

⁴⁰ R. Ago *Carriere e clientele nella Roma barocca* (Rome, 1995). The exchanges of gifts and favours between intermediary groups of people to gain a certain end form part of a 'baroque economy,' *Ibid.*, *L'Economia barocca* (Rome, 1998).

A court existed for a number of purposes. For the ruler two considerations dominated. It was the focal point of internal power relations (designed to ensure the presence and the loyalty of great magnates). Secondly, the court was intended to impress ambassadorial outsiders so that their reports back home would stress the grandeur and magnificence of the experience and the perceived strength of the king or duke himself. For the dignitaries who gathered around the ruler, posts, pensions and sinecures, the rewards at the disposal of the king, dominated their interests. The ruler had both to impress and reward those about him. He chose ministers and advisors who formed political interest groups and promoted both internal and external policy decisions. Most rulers were men and the queen or duchess was a consort. For any ruler, the choice of spouse was a major political decision, perhaps the decision of a lifetime. The marriage was a marker of international status, of political alliances, of dynastic claims to inheritance. The marriage was intended to provide a range of opportunities for the countries of the two contracting parties but the party who had to cross frontiers and visibly adopt the allegiances of her husband was the bride. This consideration has been the informing principle behind many studies which have focussed on the body of the queen. Whatever the ceremonies, the stripping of her clothes at frontiers and her reclothing of the princess/bride in the garments of her new nation and status, this woman could not be a neutral commodity for the country of reception. For her native land she had the status of special ambassador: at court she had the support of the group that had promoted the match. She remained a foreigner. When a difference in religion separated the spouses a serious question arose as to the contagious influence such a woman could exercise over her husband and children. English history in the seventeenth century was clearly marked by suspicions surrounding Henrietta Maria, Catherine of Braganza and Mary of Modena whose Catholic origins threatened the religious purity of the heir to the throne as well as the king.⁴¹ England was hardly alone in experiencing such neuroses. There are plenty of continental examples. For example, when Ercole d'Este married Renée de France, ecclesiastical society throughout the peninsula was riveted by the fear that her Calvinism would allow the establishment of Protestantism in North Italy. Calvin showered her with letters in the hope of maintaining her for the cause. The Jesuits, new boys and hardly established in the city, gained access to her to convince her she was wrong. She eventually conceded to the latter but, confined as she was to her quarters to prevent the seepage of her ideas, she kept Catholicism waiting and Ercole and a major part of the Ferrarese aristocracy wringing their hands.⁴²

Nor was religion the only cause for concern. Political difference between the two allies that had cemented the match, the fall from favour of the group which had promoted the alliance in the first place could see the queen-consort

⁴¹ An excellent analysis of the meddling of Henrietta Maria's household in the politics of Charles I's court is found in, C. Hibbard, 'Henrietta Maria and the transition from princess to queen' *The Court Historian* 5 (2000) 15-28.

⁴² C. J. Blaisdell, 'Calvin's letters to women: the courting of ladies in high places' *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 13 (1982) & *Ibid.*, 'Renée de France between Reform and Counter Reform' *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 63 (1972).

increasingly isolated at court. A prime example of such isolation and hostility was of course Marie Antoinette who has received considerable academic attention in recent years.⁴³ Marie Antoinette *l'Autrichienne* (the last syllables spelling out the word bitch) was the embodiment of an unsatisfactory, indeed politically disastrous, alliance between Austria and France which soon turned sour. From the moment of her arrival in France she was bombarded with letters from her mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, commenting both on her conduct and comportment and the political significance of the Franco-Austrian alliance. Regina Schulte recently pointed out the Austrian Empress's obsession with receiving portraits of the Queen in her regalia as Queen of France. The exhibiting of such works at the Habsburg court reminded ambassadors of the connections of Austria (whose devise bore the words *tu felice Austria nube*). The correspondence however between this royal mother and daughter clearly placed great stress upon Marie Antoinette who could not live up to the expectations of her mother or her minister, Kaunitz, and she adopted the strategy of lying to them about the true state of affairs..

France was of course an eighteenth century super-power and no one could have predicted the disastrous turn of events for the queen. Nevertheless many princesses from lesser German states in particular found themselves while in the role of consort caught up in the maelstrom of politics of their new country's political configuration. Where the king was weak their situation was particularly interesting. Hence Catherine of Anhalt Zerbst wife of Peter III of Russia, was at least a part of the noble faction that murdered the hapless monarch and converted her into Empress of Russia. Caroline of Hanover, sister of George III, wife to Christian VII of Denmark, who was murdered by her lover the court doctor Struensee. He paid with his life she with exile and probable murder. Wilhelmina of Prussia married Frederick William Stadholder of the United Provinces and was regarded as far too intrusive in political life prompting political rebellion. A more smooth running partnership of a kind existed between Frederick the Great of Prussia and the wife to whom he was totally indifferent, Elizabeth Christina of Braunschweig Wollfenbüttel-Bevern. They found a compromise. She ran the court in Berlin: he ran the army and the bureaucracy from Potsdam, returning to the court for the occasional overnight stay when important ambassadors or foreign dignitaries were present. She was not allowed to Potsdam or Sans Souci.⁴⁴

The queen's importance was not just as the bearer of heirs. Since she occupied (if sometimes intermittently) the royal bed, she had the ear of the king. She sometimes shared that access with the royal mistress. Whereas the queen reflected the external relations of the court, the mistress often reflected the internal manoeuvrings of political factions within the court. In short, she represented the domestic policies of the court rather than the external affairs. Most royal mistresses were ephemeral but there are occasional success stories.

⁴³ For example L. Hunt, *The family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992); S. Maza *Private Lives and Public Affairs: the causes célèbres of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1993).

⁴⁴ J. Kremer, 'Two Queens and a Princess' *The Court Historian* 5 (2000) 64-5.

Thus Madame de la Vallière was summarily despatched to a Carmelite convent when Louis XIV's eyes turned elsewhere to Madame de Montespan whose days were also limited. But amongst the king's mistresses whose reign was more protracted were first the Princesse de Soubise, whose consenting husband profited much from his wife's favoured status and Madame de Maintenon who turned her position into that of private wife (she was secretly married to the king but never wore the crown). Maintenon's success was due less to her sexuality than her loyalty and trustworthiness, attributes which an aging king with increasing infirmity rather than rampant virility found precious.

Interestingly, both the Princesse de Soubise and Maintenon earned the respect and friendship of the king whilst acting as royal governesses. To date this is a somewhat underestimated role in court studies. Royal children frequently lost their mother or she was absent or engaged on royal business. Under such circumstances the governess who supervised the physical care of the royal children and taught them etiquette, gave them their early religious formation and determined their contacts, could build up considerable influence over her royal charges. A conspicuous example outside France is Isabel de Mascareñas, governess both to the children of Charles V and also for some time to the children of Philip II. Mascareñas's charges were initially the future Philip II and his sisters Maria who subsequently married Archduke Maximilian and later became Empress and Juana who became Queen of Portugal but was soon widowed. In later life the sisters joined Mascareñas in Madrid where they were conspicuously influential in promoting Jesuit activity in Spain. Indeed they put up the money for the foundation of the college, later known as the Colegio Imperiale, since Maria, who donated the most money and had the most prestigious title, was made official founder. Juana herself became a covert Jesuit. It was, however, the close friendship between Loyola and the royal governess which set the process in train.

The hierarchies of royals and office holders who enjoyed a specific role in ceremonial were only a small proportion of the court population. Whereas the first were on permanent display – whether they liked this or not – there was a more shifting population of great families who came to court with a specific aim in view, the promotion of dynastic interests. Renate Ago argued that four sets of people (the two families which had produced the husband and the two that produced the wife) could identify a given reward – a benefice, a pension, an office in the donation of the ruler – and each contribute something to the furtherance of the goal. This 'team game'⁴⁵ accords different rules to men and women. Most of those for whom favours are sought are men and most of those who can accord favours are men. However, the role of women is to beat a path for the men of the family, to open up channels of communication, sow ideas, write letters to find out who else can help, before the men of the family put family honour on the line and actually make the request to the elevated being in a position to deliver the goods. Refusal would mean loss of face.

⁴⁵ The rules are best laid out in: R. Ago, 'Giochi di squadra: uomini e donne nelle famiglie nobili del XVIII' in M. A. Visceglia ed., *Signori, patrizi, cavalieri in età moderna* (Rome/Bari, 1992).

The supplicant wants some guarantee of a favourable response. Women can set matters *en marche* because, themselves lacking formal legal status, . . . , they can only act at the informal level and hence test the likely reception of a proposal. The very informality of their conversations at the dinner table, in the powder room, in the corridors behind a fan or sitting in an assembly, permits them to drop an idea, let it mature to discover whether it is going to get very far, before the men, for whom negotiation is honour, move in. Women specialise in networking and letter writing. They arrange dinner parties and can place the invitees. If their town houses offer an advantageous viewing spot for a procession they can invite selected people and foster contacts. They operate a gift economy quite different from that of men in which food, livestock, cheese and wine, needlework, particularly gloves, puppies of a fashionable breed raised on their estates, figure conspicuously. They can be offered, where appropriate, to either men or women who can help their cause. Barbara Harris' study of the Henrician court offers an exact parallel to the gift economy operated by women in the papal court.⁴⁶ The goal can be short or long term such as a position in a high noble household which itself could lead to important contacts for an advantageous marriage; or a more immediate ambassadorial post opening up because of the turn of international events. The goal in sight, however, the formal negotiations are left to the menfolk.

Widows, however, conscious that the services performed by their late husbands should not be forgotten and their children passed over in the distribution of honours, could make a periodic pilgrimage to court. Saint Simon, for example, gives his unstinting approval to the widow of Louvois who came annually to Versailles with such an end in view. Some came as well to promote the interests of their sons or daughters in the marriage market. The business of circulating information about the size of a dowry (always exaggerated) and the potential input of the husband's family was frequently left to women so that by the time a head of house proposed negotiations he knew roughly the scale of the enterprise with which he was dealing. A court wedding was a very expensive undertaking but it served to establish the family of origin of both contracting parties on a scale of social status.

When a country was ruled by a queen the dynamic of favours fell still more conspicuously into the hands of women since the ear of the queen could be reached through her ladies in waiting who hence had direct access to the top.

Though the position of lady in waiting at the courts of Elizabeth I or Queen Anne was not in itself well remunerated, gains were to be had through the gifts of those who wished to solicit favours of the queen. Elizabeth I in particular would enquire of her women what monetary gifts they been given for their approach to her and only if she considered the gifts in proportion to the favour asked would she concede it.⁴⁷

This brief commentary upon trends in court studies has omitted a great deal such as the study of letters and autobiographies or the roles of women

⁴⁶ B. Harris, 'Women and Politics in early Tudor England' *Historical Journal* 35 (1990).

⁴⁷ C. Mertens in conversation with the author, Cambridge, 1994.

and men in ritual and ceremony. It has, however, been intended to demonstrate how an eye for gendered roles has enriched our understanding of the dynamic of the court and how it has helped to construct an appreciation of the whole through the interaction of specific roles. I would certainly not claim that other kinds of historical endeavour will not carry our understanding of the court still further. Indeed, as I write this double negative I am reminded of the frequency with which ex students of this university from the late sixties allude when they meet me and we succumb to the pleasures of memory, to a lecture given by Angus Mackay. Angus, a tri-lingual scholar of great wit and learning specialised in a lecture delivery which usually did not involve notes and certainly, because I don't think they had been invented, transparencies with bullet points, was concerned to expand on the Valois court and on the political vagaries of the disastrous reign of Henri III. He speculated that a significant figure in the court of this bi-sexual monarch was probably the barber who picked up in the course of his business information casually revealed by his clients the 'mignons' (pretty boys) which the barber might trade to others. How much evidence he offered for this I do not know but several students commented that it helped them to understand how politics in a very different structure might operate and how 'the barber's story' might indeed inform the whole history of this particular court.

History has traveled along some unexpected roads since the Stentons chiselled their careers in medieval English history. Time will tell what will grip the interest of generations to come. But diversity, after all, is what the writing of history is about and those who in the future track historiographical development will, I have no doubt, be obliged to recognise that the pursuit of women in the past, in which Lady Stenton was precociously involved, led history into a brave new world of enquiry.

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