

## WOMEN VERSUS GENDER: A FASHION STATEMENT?

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I attended my first Berkshire conference on the history of women when I was still a graduate student. It was nothing short of a visionary experience: there in front of me was the configuration of Sue Stuard, Jo Ann McNamara, and Barbara Hanawalt, as if the three matronae stepped out of Celtic mythology. (And, if I remember correctly there was even a fountain.) This occurred some ten years after Sue edited that groundbreaking volume, *Women in Medieval Society*, in which these three female worthies had been featured. And the fact that Sue was the prime mover for this volume is symbolic of her achievement on behalf of women's history on multiple levels.

First it represents Sue's mastery of what was going on in her field: her awareness of which women were doing the important and interesting work, and which men could be included as surrogate women. The fact that this volume is still in print today is a monument to Sue's historical acumen. But this volume also betokens a different kind of awareness: the ability of someone in the field to stand outside the field to assess its needs. Sue recognized the pressing need for a volume like *Women in Medieval Society* as a beginning point for scholars working in the field to become aware of one another; this instinct was corroborated by her 1987 volume *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, and again in her crucial role in the institution of *Feminae*—the bibliography of medieval women—a generous and permanent bequest. Call it a dowry for burgeoning scholars to be passed down to their daughters from generation to generation. Sue's prescience is also demonstrated by her unflinching resolve to bring medieval women into the undergraduate classroom (as evidenced by the groundbreaking *Becoming Visible* and her subsequent western civilization book, *Restoring Women to History*.) She was further invested with the kind of objective awareness that permitted her to identify and grapple with the

masculinist tradition of the *Annales* school: to recognize its roots in structuralism; that through a bizarre twist its investment in binaries accommodated only half of that crucial binary of male and female.

I have yet to mention Sue's own scholarship, which testifies to her feminist awareness that politics begin at home. Sue's book *A State of Deference* demonstrated that Ragusa's remarkable history as a peaceful polity was dependent on the aristocracy's disciplined endogamy; that the unrestrained sumptuousness of its women operated as a statement to insiders of the husband's affluence and as an advertisement to outsiders of Ragusa's remarkable metallurgy. Finally, her book *Gilding the Market: Luxury and Fashion in Fourteenth Century Italy* took some of the bite out of moralists' antifeminist slurs by demonstrating that husbands were even more ardent fashionistas than their wives, though female expenditure was, not surprisingly, the central magnet for criticism. Meanwhile, even without independent resources, wives succeeded in quickening the pace of fashion by devising a veritable cottage industry of idiosyncratic embroideries. Moreover, Sue's work has particular authority for those of us who have had the advantage of seeing her as well as reading her: for who could doubt her unerring fashion sense? I should add that I was the personal beneficiary of this fashion sense. Sue was the external examiner for my dissertation on spiritual marriage. And she was fascinated by the section in which I talked about how holy wives used clothing to signal their piety and defy their husbands. Now, Father Sheehan, the director of my dissertation, had not been particularly interested in this section (in fact he asked me earlier what on earth it was doing there). Sue's interest encouraged me to focus on this section which, in turn, became my first article.

Since the appearance of that visionary volume *Women in Medieval Society*, women's studies has paraded a number of different fashions. Perhaps the most enduring fashion statement is the shift from women's studies to gender studies. I am not labeling this a "fashion statement" in a dismissive, cliché sense. For those of us schooled in Sue's elegant analysis recognize

that fashion is serious business: it is not simply a reflection of superficial and whimsical trends, but rather it is a comprehensive reflection of a society's material and symbolic investment. So on both a material and a symbolic level, the shift to gender supported feminist historians' central claims: that the study of women was necessarily relational, and by definition entailed the study of men (something that was already amply demonstrated in the collection *Women in Medieval Society*.) But gender afforded a still greater inclusiveness to the extent that the "gaze" could be turned on men. One of the earliest volumes to register this new orientation was *Medieval Masculinities*, edited by Clare Lees. Sue was naturally one of the contributors to this influential volume, assessing the impact of the reintroduction of Roman law in the gendering of the male, and how this legal fashion pilloried his identity to the role of husband.

Yet the turn from women's studies to gender studies is not without its attendant dangers. As Joan Scott's groundbreaking article on gender makes clear, the concept's greater inclusivity is premised at least in part on its potential for dividing the symbolic from the material realm. In other words, gender analysis permits female imagery to be analyzed in default of the presence of historical women. I don't mean to disparage this potential—especially since much of my own work falls into this category. Even so, it bears mentioning that some of the more abstruse applications of gender are at odds with the origins of women's history. For as Sue's historiographical work emphasizes, and her own research demonstrates, women's history was the brainchild of social history; and as innovative as her work and interests may be, she is a carefully trained archival historian who concerns herself with the doings of "real" women and men. Sue's work testifies to the fact that gender analysis doesn't undermine, but enhances the study of women and men. Good social history is a question of balance.

How do subsequent scholars measure up? Have we been able to maintain this balance? Or is our own understanding and application of gender occasionally putting the social, the lived experience of real women, at risk? The urgency of this question

was especially brought home at a panel on “Women and the Economy” at this past Medieval Academy meeting in Vancouver. (In fact, I was included among the panelists of real economic historians as a kind of plant; it was like “To Tell the Truth.”) Now as if my inclusion on this panel wasn’t bad enough, the panelists who were real economic historians, namely Judith Bennett, Connie Berman, and Maryanne Kowaleski, had a truly disturbing story to tell. Apparently graduate students no longer wanted to do economic and social history. They weren’t interested in archival sources; they wanted to analyze gender in sermons, treatises on virginity, or saints’ lives. (Since this is the kind of stuff that I like to read, my cup of shame runneth over.) Was the disaffection from social history a possible side effect from the emphasis on gender and if so, why did this occur? Was it market driven or personal choice? Was the manipulation of gender in quasi-literary sources flashier, more fulfilling? Did quasi-literary sources provide a “faster fix,” not requiring months in the archives? Maybe there was a physical explanation: for instance, the deleterious effects of paleography or the debilitating allergies associated with aging parchment?

I don’t know the answer. But I would like to conclude by extolling the work of Sue and her generation: their ability to engage with many of the nuances of gender while keeping “real” women in the mix. May this kind of balanced work never go out of fashion!

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