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Women of Influence: Gender and Power in European History

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Introduction

This book asks a deceptively simple question: how did women shape European history? To answer it, we move beyond cameo appearances of “exceptional” figures and instead trace the many ways women—elite and poor, urban and rural, devout and skeptical—exercised agency within and against the structures that constrained them. Agency here is not a synonym for unfettered freedom; it is the capacity to act, influence, negotiate, and imagine otherwise amid shifting regimes of law, labor, culture, and belief. By centering gender as a key category of analysis, we illuminate patterns that conventional, male-centered narratives obscure: the political intelligence of queenship and regency, the intellectual labor of nuns and humanists, the economic strategies of guildswomen and peasant producers, the mobilization of activists from salons to factory floors.

The approach is both chronological and thematic. We begin in the medieval world, where spiritual authority, household management, and dynastic politics opened paths to influence even as canon law and custom defined women’s subordination. We follow transformations through the Renaissance courts and the Republic of Letters, into the upheavals of the Reformations and the policing of gender in witchcraft prosecutions. We explore the Enlightenment’s promises and exclusions, the revolutionary redefinition of citizenship, and the industrial reordering of work and family life. Finally, we trace transnational feminisms, suffrage campaigns, and twentieth-century struggles for rights, bodily autonomy, and political voice, paying special attention to conflict, dictatorship, and the resilient creativity of everyday resistance.

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Our evidence is deliberately eclectic. Letters, household accounts, guild statutes, court depositions, medical treatises, convent chronicles, petitions, newspapers, posters, and photographs all speak—sometimes obliquely—about women’s actions and the meanings attached to them. Material culture and spaces matter too: markets and monasteries, workshops and salons, kitchens and barracks, printshops and parliaments. Reading “against the grain,” we attend to silences and distortions in archives built by states, churches, and families that often sought to discipline or domesticate women’s activities. Throughout, we pair close studies of individuals with collective histories of movements, institutions, and communities to show how singular lives were embedded in broader structures.

Constraints are a constant presence in these pages. Law and custom circumscribed property rights and political participation; marriage and household governance organized dependency; ecclesiastical and civic authorities policed sexuality and labor; imperial and colonial projects racialized and stratified gendered experiences. Yet within these limits, women developed strategies that altered outcomes: forging

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marriage alliances and regencies, cultivating patronage networks, petitioning and litigating, building cooperative economies, disguising or redefining labor, organizing clandestine assemblies, and mobilizing the moral language of piety, motherhood, or respectability to press radical claims. Agency thus appears as repertoire rather than essence—a set of practices honed in particular times and places.

Because Europe was never a singular cultural entity, comparison is essential. The lives of a Castilian regent and a Danish merchant, an Italian printer and a Polish peasant, a French salonnière and a Russian factory organizer unfolded within distinct legal codes, confessional landscapes, and economic ecologies. Regional variation did not preclude circulation: books, people, commodities, and ideas moved across borders, knitting together solidarities and sparking conflicts. Empire further complicated the story, as women participated in and resisted imperial projects, reworking gendered identities at home and abroad. Attending to difference—of class, confession, ethnicity, and region—prevents the flattening of women's history into a single narrative and reveals the plural grammars of power they navigated.

Finally, this is a feminist history in method as well as subject. It treats women not as supplements to an already-written script but as protagonists whose actions refashioned politics, economies, and cultures. It reads "private" life as political terrain; insists on labor, care, and embodiment as engines of historical change; and tests inherited periodizations against the rhythms of women's work, mobilization, and memory. By the end of the book, the familiar contours of European history look different: revolutions begin earlier and end later; the map of influence extends from council chambers to kitchens; and progress is no longer a simple march of rights but a braided path of gains, losses, and reinventions.

The chapters that follow provide a scaffold for this reorientation. Each pairs analytical framing with vivid case studies, asking not only what women did but how they understood their actions and how contemporaries made sense of them. Together they chart a long history of constraint and creativity, revealing that European modernity was built as much by the labor of market stalls and textile rooms, by the discipline of convents and classrooms, and by the courage of petitioners and picketers as by the decrees of kings and parliaments. To tell that story is to restore complexity to the past—and to recognize in women's strategies a durable legacy for imagining power differently.

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CHAPTER ONE: Rethinking Power: Approaches to Women's History

Pick up almost any history of Europe written before the 1970s and you will notice something peculiar about the index. Queens occasionally appear, usually beside their husbands' names and often identified not by their own titles but by their marital status: "Mary, wife of Philip II." Women saints may surface in chapters on the Reformation. A handful of writers, performers, or revolutionaries might earn a paragraph. But the overwhelming majority of the female population—women who labored, prayed, traded, governed households, bore and raised children, schemed, suffered, and occasionally set the course of events—simply do not figure in the narrative. They are present in every scene and named in none of them.

This absence was not accidental. It reflected a set of decisions about what counted as history, whose actions mattered, and what kinds of evidence deserved attention. The discipline of history, as it professionalized in European universities during the nineteenth century, was built on assumptions that quietly but effectively excluded half the population. Political history reigned supreme. Wars, treaties, parliamentary debates, and the deeds of monarchs and ministers formed the backbone of the story. Women, who were formally shut out of most political offices and military commands, were by definition peripheral to this version of events. Even social history, which broadened the lens to include workers, peasants, and everyday life, tended to treat "the people" as though they were exclusively male—or to mention women only in passing, as wives, mothers, or victims of circumstance.

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The problem was not merely one of omission. It was a problem of framing. When women did appear in older histories, they were almost always cast in relation to men: as daughters, wives, mistresses, or mothers of historically significant figures. Their own ambitions, strategies, and contributions were treated as secondary, derivative, or simply unremarkable. The implicit logic was that power flowed downward from thrones and parliaments, and anyone who did not hold formal office could not be said to exercise power at all. This definition of power was narrow, but it was so deeply embedded in the profession that most historians did not even notice it. It was as invisible as the air the excluded women had once breathed.

The first systematic challenge to this framework came from scholars who asked a question that now seems obvious but was genuinely radical at the time: where are the women? In 1970, the American feminist activist and writer Robin Morgan posed this question at a conference, and it quickly became a rallying cry for a new kind of historical inquiry. A small but determined group of researchers began combing

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through the same archives that had produced conventional political histories, only they were looking for different things. They examined parish registers for clues about women's work and family lives. They read court records for cases involving inheritance disputes, domestic violence, or defamation. They studied convent chronicles, personal letters, and the ledgers of charitable institutions. What they found was not silence but a vast, scattered, and often fragmented record of women's activities—one that had been there all along, waiting to be noticed.

Gerda Lerner, an Austrian-born historian who became one of the founding figures of women's history in the United States, argued that the exclusion of women from the historical record was not a mere oversight but a process. Women had been, in her influential phrase, "the majority unrecorded by history." Their contributions had been absorbed into the households and communities that male historians overlooked, or they had been deliberately suppressed by institutions—legal, religious, and educational—that depended on women's subordination for their own legitimacy. Lerner's insight was that the absence of women in histories was itself a historical fact, one that revealed the priorities and blind spots of the societies that produced those histories.

Early women's history often took what scholars have since called an "add women and stir" approach. Researchers identified notable women—rulers, writers, saints, rebels—and inserted them into the existing narrative. This was valuable and even thrilling work. Suddenly, figures like the twelfth-century Byzantine princess and historian Anna Komnene, or the fifteenth-century French military commander Joan of Arc, or the seventeenth-century English pamphleteer Mary Astell could claim their places in the story. Biographies multiplied. Anthologies appeared. Syllabuses expanded, if slowly and often reluctantly.

But the limitations of this approach soon became apparent. Adding individual women to a framework that had not otherwise changed could give the misleading impression that women's exclusion had been an accident of talent rather than a structural feature of historical systems. A queen who governed effectively might be celebrated as an exception, while the political culture that made her an exception in the first place went unexamined. Worse, the "great women" approach could inadvertently reinforce the very standards of achievement that had marginalized ordinary women, implying that only those who mimicked male forms of power—military command, political office, public authorship—were worthy of historical attention.

By the 1980s and 1990s, a decisive shift occurred. Historians began to move from women's history to gender history, a transition that was more than semantic. Women's history had asked: what did women do? Gender history asked something broader and more unsettling: how have societies organized themselves around ideas of sexual difference, and how have those ideas shaped politics, economics, culture, and daily life for everyone, men included? The shift meant that masculinity, too, became a

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subject of historical inquiry. It meant that the categories historians had long taken for granted—public and private, production and reproduction, reason and emotion—could be seen not as natural or inevitable but as historically constructed arrangements that served particular interests and were constantly being negotiated and challenged.

One of the most provocative early interventions in this new mode came from Joan Kelly, an Italian Renaissance scholar who in 1977 posed a question that has echoed through four decades of scholarship: "Did women have a Renaissance?" Kelly's answer was, in essence, no—or at least not in the same way men did. Where Renaissance humanism opened new intellectual horizons for elite men, it simultaneously narrowed the social space available to women, tightening ideals of female domesticity and sexual propriety even as it celebrated individual achievement for men. Kelly's essay was a landmark because it demonstrated that a period conventionally celebrated as a liberation of the human spirit could, from a gendered perspective, look like a contraction of women's possibilities. The Renaissance did not just fail to include women; it actively produced new forms of exclusion.

The implications were far-reaching. If something as celebrated as the Renaissance could look different when viewed through a gendered lens, then perhaps all of European history needed to be reexamined. The Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, industrialization—each of these grand narratives carried assumptions about progress, freedom, and citizenship that were quietly masculine in their definitions. The Enlightenment's championing of reason and individual rights, for example, was accompanied by thinkers who argued that women's supposedly inferior rational capacities justified their exclusion from public life. The French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, as the playwright Olympe de Gouges famously pointed out in 1791, managed to be universal in name while excluding half the population in practice.

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None of this means that the achievements of the Enlightenment or the Revolution were simply fraudulent. Historians have generally resisted the temptation to reduce complex events to a single narrative of betrayal or liberation. What gender analysis offered instead was a more complete picture—one in which the same events could produce both emancipatory possibilities and new forms of constraint, often operating simultaneously and unevenly across class, region, and confession. A bourgeois woman in Paris in 1793 experienced the Revolution differently from a peasant woman in the Vendée, just as a factory girl in Manchester in 1840 experienced industrialization differently from the wife of a factory owner. The point was not to replace one grand narrative with another but to show how power operates through multiple channels and at multiple levels, and how attention to gender can reveal dynamics that other approaches miss.

Central to this rethinking has been the concept of patriarchy. Historians have used the term in various ways, but at its core it refers to systems of male authority that are

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embedded in law, custom, economic structures, and cultural norms. Patriarchy is not a single institution but a constellation of practices and beliefs that position men as dominant and women as subordinate, while allowing for variation across time and place. In medieval Europe, patriarchal authority was expressed through laws that barred women from holding office, owning property independently, or testifying in court without male sponsorship. It was reinforced by theological teachings that associated women with sin and temptation, and by social customs that confined women's public activities to specific, carefully policed domains. But patriarchy was never total or uncontested. Women found ways to exercise influence within, alongside, and sometimes against patriarchal structures, and the specific forms of patriarchal power varied enormously from one region, class, and period to another.

Understanding this variation has been one of the great achievements of recent scholarship. Early feminist scholarship sometimes treated patriarchy as a universal and unchanging system, a kind of transhistorical oppression that operated the same way in ancient Athens, medieval Paris, and industrial London. But closer study revealed that the content and enforcement of gender norms differed dramatically depending on legal traditions, economic arrangements, religious beliefs, and political structures. A woman in medieval Scandinavia, where Norse legal traditions gave women certain property rights and the right to initiate divorce, occupied a different structural position than a woman in Counter-Reformation Spain, where the Inquisition and a rigidly Catholic social order enforced intense surveillance of female behavior. Neither situation was simply "better" or "worse" in absolute terms—though the comparative exercise makes clear that gender relations are made, not given, and that they can be remade.

The recognition that gender intersects with other axes of identity and power—class, religion, ethnicity, legal status, region—has been another crucial development. Early women's history tended to focus on relatively elite women, whose literacy and social prominence made them more visible in the archives. But scholars increasingly asked what happened when gender crossed with other forms of hierarchy. A noblewoman's experience of widowhood, with its potential for independent property management and even political influence, bore little resemblance to a peasant widow's struggle to keep her family's plot of land from reverting to the lord. An urban artisan's daughter who could apprentice in her father's workshop occupied a different world from an enslaved woman in a Mediterranean port household. The category "women" turned out to be far less coherent as an analytical unit than early approaches had assumed, and the insistence on attending to difference within the category has made the field richer and more honest.

This insistence on specificity has also reshaped how historians think about sources. The archive, as generations of scholars have ruefully observed, was not built with women in mind. Official records—tax rolls, land registries, parliamentary proceedings, diplomatic correspondence—tended to record men's activities and to record women

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only when they intersected with male-dominated institutions: as widows claiming dower rights, as wives accused of adultery, or as dependents in household listings. Personal letters, diaries, and memoirs survive in far smaller quantities for women than for men, and mostly for elite women. For the vast majority of women who lived and worked and died without leaving a single written trace, the historian must piece together a life from fragments: a mention in a neighbor's court testimony, an entry in a guild register, a line in an inquisitor's dossier, the physical evidence of a grave or a domestic space.

Rather than simply lament these gaps, many historians have developed creative strategies for reading existing sources against the grain. A court case about a marital dispute, on its face a record of legal procedure, can reveal a great deal about how women understood their rights, managed household economies, and mobilized community support. A convent chronicle, seemingly a devotional exercise, can be mined for evidence about women's intellectual ambitions, institutional politics, and relationships with the outside world. Material culture—a spinning wheel, a set of devotional objects, the layout of a kitchen—can speak volumes about the rhythms and organization of women's daily labor. Oral history, though available mainly for more recent periods, has opened windows onto experiences that would otherwise go unrecorded. Each of these approaches requires different skills and interpretive care, but all share the conviction that women's lives left traces if one knew where—and how—to look.

One of the most productive methodological innovations has been the study of the body as a site of historical power. For centuries, women's bodies were defined and regulated by male authorities: by medical treatises that described female anatomy as an imperfect version of the male norm, by laws that controlled women's sexuality and reproductive capacity, by religious doctrines that associated menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation with sin or spiritual danger. The history of the body asks how these discourses functioned in practice: how women experienced menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause; how they managed fertility through herbs, abstinence, or abortion; how they understood illness and healing; and how bodily experiences shaped their sense of self and their relationships with others. It is a field that demands comfort with discomfort—topics that previous generations of historians preferred to euphemize or ignore—and it has produced some of the most vivid and important scholarship of the past several decades.

Equally important has been the recovery of women's collective activities. Women were not only individuals struggling within or against patriarchal systems; they were also members of communities, networks, and movements. Guilds sometimes admitted women members, particularly widows who inherited their husbands' workshops. Convents offered women spaces for intellectual life, artistic production, and institutional authority that were unavailable in the secular world. Neighborhood networks in cities organized mutual aid, childcare, and even forms of collective

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protest. In rural areas, women participated in communal rituals, market exchanges, and resistance to seigneurial demands. These collective forms of agency remind us that women's history is not only a story of exceptional individuals overcoming obstacles but also a story of ordinary women cooperating, competing, and building lives within structures they did not choose but helped to shape.

The study of women's labor has been another vital thread. Economic history, for much of the twentieth century, focused on waged work in factories, mines, and offices—spheres from which women were often formally excluded, at least until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But if we widen the lens to include unwaged and partially waged work, women's economic significance becomes impossible to ignore. Spinning, weaving, brewing, dairying, market gardening, midwifery, nursing, teaching, laundering, and the management of household production were all labor, and in many periods and places they constituted the majority of productive activity. Ignoring this work does not make it disappear; it simply distorts our understanding of how economies functioned and how families survived. Recent scholarship has shown that women's labor was not a static relic of a pre-industrial past but a dynamic and contested terrain, shaped by market demands, technological change, legal frameworks, and the persistent efforts of women themselves to claim recognition and fair compensation for their work.

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Political history, too, has been transformed by attention to women. The conventional definition of politics—as the business of states, parliaments, and armies—excluded women by definition. But if we define politics more broadly, as the processes by which communities make decisions, allocate resources, and exercise power, then women's political activities come sharply into focus. A queen negotiating a dynastic marriage was practicing diplomacy. A mother petitioning a local magistrate for poor relief was engaging in governance. A group of market women refusing to pay an unjust toll was participating in collective political action. A regent ruling in the name of a minor son was exercising sovereignty. These acts may not fit the traditional definition of politics, but they shaped outcomes for thousands or millions of people, and any account of political life that ignores them is telling only part of the story.

The field has also grappled with the problem of presentism—the danger of reading contemporary values and assumptions back into the past. Feminist historians have had to navigate between two pitfalls: on one hand, dismissing women's historical experiences as irrelevant because they did not conform to modern ideals of feminism or autonomy; on the other, projecting a seamless narrative of sisterhood and shared oppression across centuries of vastly different conditions. The most productive approach has been to take women's own terms seriously—to ask not "was this woman a feminist?" but "what did this woman want, what resources did she have, and what constraints did she face?" This does not mean abandoning judgment or refusing to note injustice. It means recognizing that the past is a foreign country, and that understanding it requires patience, evidence, and a willingness to be surprised.

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What emerges from several decades of this work is not a single story of women's progress but a complex, contested, and often contradictory set of histories. Women have exercised power and been denied it. They have collaborated with patriarchal systems and subverted them. They have been celebrated as saints and condemned as witches, praised as mothers and feared as political actors, honored as muses and exploited as laborers. Their history does not lend itself to a simple arc of progress or decline. It demands attention to context, contingency, and the specific ways in which gender intersected with other structures of power and identity.

This book attempts to do exactly that. It takes the methods and insights of women's and gender history and applies them across the full span of European experience, from the medieval period to the twentieth century. It does not claim to be comprehensive—no single volume could encompass the diversity of women's lives across a continent and a millennium—but it aims to be representative, illuminating the strategies women used, the constraints they faced, and the difference their agency made to the world around them. The chapters that follow move through time and theme, drawing on the rich body of scholarship that now exists and, where the sources allow, letting the women themselves speak. Not every woman in these pages is famous. Many are known to us only through a single record, a fragment, a name scratched in a margin. But taken together, their stories reshape the narrative of European history, revealing a world in which power was never the exclusive property of men and in which women, despite everything, were always making history.

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