

# History Matters

Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism



Judith M. Bennett

History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism, Judith M. Bennett, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, 0812200551, 9780812200553, 224 pages. Written for everyone interested in women's and gender history, History Matters reaffirms the importance to feminist theory and activism of long-term historical perspectives. Judith M. Bennett, who has been commenting on developments in women's and gender history since the 1980s, argues that the achievement of a more feminist future relies on a rich, plausible, and well-informed knowledge of the past, and she asks her readers to consider what sorts of feminist history can best advance the struggles of the twenty-first century. Bennett takes as her central problem the growing chasm between feminism and history. Closely allied in the 1970s, each has now moved away from the other. Seeking to narrow this gap, Bennett proposes that feminist historians turn their attention to the intellectual challenges posed by the persistence of patriarchy. She posits a "patriarchal equilibrium" whereby, despite many changes in women's experiences over past centuries, women's status vis-à-vis that of men has remained remarkably unchanged. Although, for example, women today find employment in occupations unimaginable to medieval women, medieval and modern women have both encountered the same wage gap, earning on average only three-fourths of the wages earned by men. Bennett argues that the theoretical challenge posed by this patriarchal equilibrium will be best met by long-term historical perspectives that reach back well before the modern era. In chapters focused on women's work and lesbian sexuality, Bennett demonstrates the contemporary relevance of the distant past to feminist theory and politics. She concludes with a chapter that adds a new twist—the challenges of textbooks and classrooms—to viewing women's history from a distance and with feminist intent. A new manifesto, History Matters engages forthrightly with the challenges faced by feminist historians today. It argues for the radical potential of a history that is focused on feminist issues, aware of the distant past, attentive to continuities over time, and alert to the workings of patriarchal power..

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"Judith Bennett offers a striking analysis of the current state of feminist history. In a series of lucid chapters, she demonstrates the political and intellectual consequences of forgetting the past. This book should be required reading for every feminist who cares about the future."—Martha Vicinus, University of Michigan

"Bennett argues convincingly that our understanding of modern women's condition and contemporary feminist dilemmas must be rooted in the longue durée. From that perspective, we can develop a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the 'patriarchal equilibrium' that has so long constrained women's lives and efforts to transform them."—Nancy A. Hewitt, Rutgers University

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Judith M. Bennett is Professor of History at the University of Southern California. She is the author of numerous books, including *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* and *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague*. She is coeditor, with Amy M. Froide, of *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Judith Bennett appears to have spent the last thirty years of her life trying to bring together the politics of her lesbian activism with the discipline of her work as a medievalist. She has done this by using women's history as a battlefield against patriarchy. She continues this battle in *History Matters*, suggesting that "it is time for historians of women and gender to regain our feminist indignation and to reorient our history around the straightforward feminist conviction that women should share human opportunities equally with men." Therein lies the rub. The history of women is diverse but it is not an example of how the human race has taken its opportunities in historical terms. Indeed, much of women's history, particularly, though not exclusively, over the last two centuries is one of not having equal opportunities.

Bennett expresses concern about the eroding relationship between feminism and history but fails to understand that women's history is not the same as feminist history which remains a political vehicle for feminist theory. Those who regard feminist history as of minor significance are right to do so because such history marginalises women's experiences by seeking to place them in a mainstream of which they were not a part. If feminist historians no longer speak "easily and readily about patriarchy" as they did in the 1970's it's because patriarchy as a theoretical imperative has proved to be nonsense. As long as Bennett regards talk of patriarchy as "essential to the future of feminism, essential to historical research on women and gender and essential to our teaching" she will continue to be as disappointed as those who viewed the Soviet Union as a new civilisation.

In truth Bennett is caught between a desire to redress the past (which is impossible, no matter how many times it is rewritten) and the desire to change future society so that equality in those matters which many feminists consider to be politically and socially important are brought about. The "sexual iniquities at the heart of the feminist critique" to which she refers are not the stuff of history, still less of social theory. She appears not to understand that while "awareness of women's illegitimate subordination to men rests at feminism's core" the very concept itself is an indictment of feminism rather than a description of reality. Feminist history is a useless weapon for advancing the rights of women in the twenty-first century and little use in understanding the past.

The fundamental reason why feminist history, as opposed to the study of women's history, will fail to provoke change is because in fighting patriarchy it is fighting a mythical enemy created by its own imagination and equally erroneous social analyses such as Marxism. She understands the problem - she is in a privileged position in a privileged environment - but never confronts the inherent contradiction this involves. Warren Buffett understood the problem when he was asked why ordinary people were unable to make the money he was making. His answer? "They are too busy earning a living". Attacking "patriarchy" from the comfort zones of academia is far easier and economically safer than engaging in the political process. Rosa Parks didn't need a political theory for her actions, she was just tired of giving in to discrimination and prejudice. Bennett has too much time on her hands.

It is inevitable, given Bennett's background, that she devotes a chapter to lesbianism complaining

that "women's history has a lesbian problem". Furthermore, she opines, "I knew from the beginning that my desire for a social history of lesbians, especially medieval ones, was perverse", in the sense that original evidence would be hard to find. Therefore, she sought to identify "lesbian like" relationships as a way of expanding her studies. Such studies are not perverse, they are dishonest, for they seek to impose Bennett's own perspective on the past. In seeking to discover a past which may or may not have existed Bennett appears to be rationalising her own lesbian identity.

Bennett's argument is so unconvincing that I can only give History Matters three stars, despite the very copious references to each chapter. In addition, the book could have done with a good bibliography. No doubt those academics who share her views would rate it higher but there's nothing in this book to recommend it to those living and working outside the universities. As Bennett's argument is that patriarchy rules in academia too one wonders whether it will be read by anyone who isn't persuaded by Bennett's own frame of reference. In truth, History Matters is more likely to reinforce existing caricatures of feminist history which is the opposite of what Bennett intended. Read more &rsaquo;

I thoroughly enjoyed this thoughtful critique of the current state of women's history and its feminist implications. "History Matters" by Judith M. Bennett presents an unapologetic feminist vision that is cognizant and respectful of all three "waves" of feminist thought/action at the same time that it chides some feminists for their historical blinders. Bennett challenges the historical profession on many fronts but is also committed to establishing high standards and producing sound research that will enlighten our understanding of the past and have practical application today.

I found most interesting (and a bit aggravating!) her survey of how women's history has morphed into the broader arena of "gender studies" over the past few decades and how the once seemingly clear concept of "patriarchy" has been replaced by less polarizing but rather tepid terms like "gender differences," often obscuring power dynamics and deleting critical agent(s). Her critique of "presentism" is compelling. She warns that the increasing focus by historians - including feminist historians - on 19th and 20th century history ignores the longer view and prevents us from identifying the continuities as well as the transformations which have occurred over millennia. Perhaps most illuminating is her promotion of the concept of "lesbian-like" to get a better handle on the lives and experiences of woman-identified women in the past. The narrow definition of sexual contact and the impossibility of proving it centuries later limits inquiry about women who may have been lesbians. Bennett urges a broadening of our criteria and analysis for identifying women who lived "like" lesbians that makes a lot of sense.

Over all, I especially appreciated the clarity of Professor Bennett's writing. Her analysis is logical and presented in precise, unambiguous prose. So much academic writing today is marred by arcane language and labyrinthine theorizing, much of it intelligible to only a small number of eggheads. That's not a problem in this book. It is easy to follow Bennett's arguments, and her recommendations for research and teaching are constructive and concrete.

I first came to feminist history in the 1970s as a way of reconciling my two full but contrary identities at the time. In one, I was a lesbian feminist, absorbed by activism at home and in the streets. In the other, I was a studious medievalist, training under the guidance of male professors, most of them priests, at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaera1 Studies ...

In women's history, the distant past tells a story of enduring patriarchy, a story that poses two challenges to our field. The first challenge is the long-standing and baffling job of locating the historical origins of patriarchy. From J. J. Bachofen and Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century to Gerda Lerner in 1986, the search for the origins of ...

Women who work in England today share an experience with female wage earners seven centuries ago: they take home only about three-quarters the wages earned by men. In the 1360s, women earned 71 percent of male wages; today, they earn about 75 percent. Of course, no parallel across six centuries can be ...

OK, I admit it. I am one of those twentieth century feminist historians Judith Bennett is speaking to in History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), historians who have given little thought to the practice of premodern history. No &#8212; wait just a gol&#8217; durn minute. I have. Here goes.

My third and more ornery response tackles Bennett&#8217;s assertion that, pushed by liberal and socialist feminisms and structured by conferences (especially my own beloved Berkshire Conference), feminist history&#8217;s fascination with the present is fueled by the assumption that change is necessarily transformative (62). The present is, well, more cheerful than the past, Bennett argues: we can start with the fruits of progress, and devote our research time to recording the hard-won victories that get &#8220;us&#8221; here. What we are missing, Bennett argues persuasively through examples drawn from her own research on medieval English women, are the continuities that are just as important to understanding women&#8217;s lives over time &#8212; if not more important. Bennett argues this point well in Chapters 3,4,5 and 7. However, in Chapter 6, on lesbian history, she stumbles, missing a place where she might suggest how to address the modern as a transformative moment but not be blinded by it.

What Bennett has caused me to think about differently is the point that I work hard to hammer home for my students as I introduce them to historical thought: our relationship to our subjects as historians. On the one hand, I tell my students, the people we will study are human: this makes our own human intuition a tool for our research, part of what J.H. Hexter called our &#8220;second record.&#8221; On the other hand, there is a point &#8212; usually early in the semester when some member of my class has offered up a stinging, presentist judgement on a conquistador or a plantation mistress in place of analysis &#8212; that brings discussion to a screaming halt. I then scowl at them and say, &#8220;Please remember that the people in this book are strange to you. They live in a foreign country called the past.&#8221; If a student can learn to perform these two, more or less contradictory, tasks at the same time, said student will have learned to think historically by the end of the semester.