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Chapter 4

Patriarchal Equilibrium

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 patriarchy has been compelling and inconclusive.¹ It has not been a fruitless search—we have learned a great deal—but it is doomed in both conception (there was almost certainly no single original site of patriarchal power) and execution (the sources are too fragmentary for firm conclusions). The second challenge is posed by the seeming ahistoricity of patriarchy. If patriarchal power is a feature of all historical societies, then what can historians have to say about it? Or worse yet, perhaps the persistence of patriarchy betrays its roots in biological imperatives that are outside the purview of history altogether. If patriarchy is everywhere, where is its history?

This chapter argues that patriarchy does have a history, one that is inherent to the feminist project of women's history. Patriarchy might be everywhere, but it is not everywhere the same, and therefore patriarchy, in all its immense variety, is something we need to understand, analyze, and explain. If we have the courage to make patriarchy—its mechanisms, its changes, its forms, its endurance—a central problem of women's history, we will write not only better history but also history that speaks more strongly to central feminist concerns. The partnership of feminism and history has withered in recent years, but the venture of historicizing patriarchy breathes new life into the relationship. As I see it, the study of patriarchy is properly as central to women's history as is the study of capitalism to labor history or the study of racism to African American history. To move patriarchy from the margins of women's history to a more central position, this chapter begins with patriarchy *per se*, then examines the need to confront the continuity at the heart of patriarchy, and ends with a case study—of

women in the English brewing industry between 1300 and 1700—that introduces the analytical concept of a “patriarchal equilibrium.”

Patriarchy

In modern English, the term “patriarchy” has three main meanings. First, it can refer to the ecclesiastical power of men recognized as Christian leaders, particularly within the Greek Orthodox tradition; hence, the archbishop of Constantinople is commonly known as the patriarch of that church. Second, “patriarchy” can denote the legal powers of a husband/father over his wife, children, and other dependents. In seventeenth-century England, this confined-to-the-household definition of patriarchy was extended into political theory in an argument, popularized by Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, that the power of kings derived from the power of fathers.² Filmer’s extension-by-analogy has been much repeated and elaborated on, and it has created an understanding, still found among some social scientists, of patriarchy as a form of government in which male heads of household rule over lesser males and all females. Despite its analogous extension to the state, this second meaning of “patriarchy” has usually remained limited to domestic, familial contexts; today, it is better expressed by such words as “patriarchalism” or “paternalism.” The third meaning of “patriarchy,” which I adopt here, broadly draws on feminist critiques of male power. As Adrienne Rich has defined it, patriarchy is “a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”³ Or as Allan Johnson has more recently defined the term, “Patriarchy is *not* simply another way of saying ‘men.’ Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such ‘patriarchy’ doesn’t refer to me or any other men or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men *and* women participate. . . . What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male dominated*, *male identified*, and *male centered*.”⁴ When feminists at rallies chant, “Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Patriarchy’s Got to Go,” we are not talking about the ecclesiastical structures of Greek Orthodoxy or about a specific form of fatherly domination within families, but instead about a general system through which women have been and are subordinated to men. As Sylvia Walby has succinctly put it, patriar-

chy is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.”⁵

This understanding of “patriarchy” is justified not only by its commonsense feminist usage but also by the fact that it is the *best* available term to denote the system variously described by Rich, Johnson, and Walby. “Male dominance” and “male supremacy” suggest not only that such systems rest in biological differences but also, through analogy with such terms as “white supremacy,” that patriarchal institutions are strictly equivalent to racist and other oppressive institutions (the most striking divergences derive, of course, from the impracticability of segregating women and men as thoroughly as has sometimes been managed for people of different races, classes, and religions). “Sexism” suggests mere prejudice. “Oppression of women” and “subordination of women” fail to convey the full complexity of systems in which many women have colluded and from which some women have benefited. “Patriarchy” also has the significant asset of being a single word with straightforward adjectival and adverbial forms. As long as we use a phrase like “male dominance,” we will slip into using roughly equivalent phrases like “male supremacy” or “male domination,” and such a multitude of terms will lead to unclear thinking and unclear writing. And, finally, “patriarchy” helps to re-orient our work toward more explicitly feminist purposes, simply because, as we saw in chapter 2, it comes with a sharp political edge. “Patriarchy” focuses the mind, and in so doing, it can recharge feminist history.

To many people, talk of “patriarchy” goes hand in hand with attacks on men, as men. I fear some readers will be thinking at this point, “Oh dear, here comes the part where she blames it all on men.” And others might have quite different hopes, anticipating, “Oh good, now she’s going to prove that it is all the fault of men.” I intend to satisfy neither group. Men are certainly implicated in patriarchy; some men have vigorously supported its tenets and institutions, and most others have benefited from its power. But not all men have gained equally from patriarchal structures, and some men—for example, homosexual men in many societies—have suffered directly from patriarchy and misogyny.⁶ In any case, women have not been innocent of collusion with patriarchy; some have supported it, some have benefited from it, and most have raised their daughters and sons to conform to it. In suggesting that we investigate patriarchy more fully, then, I am not advocating a simplistic history of misogynistic men oppressing virtuous women.

The term “patriarchy” is also sometimes associated with a femi-

nism that falsely elides differences among women by assuming that white, middle-class, heterosexual women can speak for all women. The differences that have fractured the category “women” in the past and still fracture it today (for example, those based on race, class, marital status, sexual orientation, and world region) are differences signified by vast imbalances of power, and in suggesting that we focus some attention on the problem of patriarchy, I certainly do not intend either to ignore or to replicate these inequalities. “Patriarchy” is not a concept confined to the West nor used only there; for example, some of the most forthright recent uses of the term have occurred in studies focused on South Asia.⁷ Similarly, recent studies in African American women’s history have laid open not only the oppressive racial frameworks within which African Americans have had to live but also the patriarchal concerns that could trouble racial solidarities; for example, Michele Mitchell has traced how African American activists in the post-Reconstruction era “considered it critical that women radiate inviolable modesty, that men embody controlled manliness, that couples marry and establish patriarchal households.”⁸ As explained in the specific case of “women” in Chapter 2, if we seek general observations rather than universalizing statements, I believe we can cautiously deploy such categories without obfuscating difference. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty recently put it, “[D]ifferences are never just ‘differences.’ In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining.”⁹ Like Mohanty, I seek to balance the particular and the general, to appreciate difference while seeing common ground, too.

Patriarchal constraint constitutes a central part of that common ground. It is no accident that when Ida Blom and her colleagues ambitiously set out to write a women’s history of the world in the 1990s, they could agree on only one common theoretical framework: patriarchy.¹⁰ Keeping in balance *both* the relationality inherent to differences among women *and* the relationality inherent to differences between women and men, feminist historians can work to develop new ways of considering how the history of women—*as women*—has been different from the history of men, as men. In late medieval England, for example, some women had more wealth or higher status than some men; some women wielded more political power than some men; some women enjoyed racial or sexual privileges denied to some men. But within each group of men and women—whether the group was structured by commonalties of class, race, ethnicity, or whatever—women as a group were disempowered *compared to men of*

their group. Peasant women held much less land in their villages than did peasant men; townswomen did not enjoy the same benefits of guild association as did their fathers, brothers, and husbands; and women of the landed classes did not sit on privy councils, serve as justices of the peace, or attend parliament. The disempowerment of women vis-à-vis comparable men in late medieval England had specific late medieval, English components, but it is possible to study patriarchy in that time and place without thereby obscuring differences among women and without eliding or denying other inequalities. Most theorists of patriarchy insist, in fact, that systems of sexual oppression are closely imbricated with other systems of human oppression, such as imperialism, racism, feudalism, capitalism, and heterosexism. “Dual systems theory”—which in the 1970s and early 1980s attempted to synthesize feminist critiques of patriarchy with socialist critiques of capitalism—is just one example.¹¹

Patriarchy has often been understood in simplistic terms. My students sometimes talk about “The Patriarchy,” which always evokes for me a committee of white-haired men, nastily scheming to keep women in their place. Not so, of course. The concept of patriarchy might be singular, but its manifestations certainly are not. Examining the historical workings of patriarchy entails writing the many histories of many patriarchies—of its many forms and the many systems through which it has thrived. Sylvia Walby’s work on modern England provides some critical help here. Her distinction between *forms* of patriarchy (that is, overall types of patriarchy) and its *degree* (that is, the intensity of women’s oppression) frees us to examine patriarchy without being bound by problematic quests for progress. And her articulation of six *patriarchal structures*—mode of production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, culture—provides an example of how to break the seeming monolith of patriarchal power into analyzable units. Walby traces a transition, in modern English history, from a “private patriarchy” which flourished in the mid-nineteenth century to a “public patriarchy” which has since replaced it. Her specific patriarchal forms, degrees, and structures might apply only to modern England, but her overall approach is not so limited.¹² Patricia Hill Collins’s work is also helpful in thinking about patriarchy in more complex ways. Her notion of a “matrix of oppression” critically melds different oppressive systems; although her arguments are based on the specific dynamics of race and gender relations in the modern United States, they are more broadly applicable.¹³ “Patriarchy” is not yet a fully analytical concept, in part because historians and others have insufficiently studied it. But in time, I hope that we

might be able to distinguish various sorts of historical patriarchies, particularly as they have interacted with various socioeconomic systems; we might someday be able to distinguish analytically, say, “pre-industrial patriarchies” from “capitalist patriarchies” from “socialist patriarchies.”¹⁴ I do not, however, look ahead toward any grand theory or metanarrative of patriarchy; to my mind, “patriarchy” is a concept that focuses feminist study and strategy, not a single system and not, as one historian recently phrased it, a “principle.”¹⁵ Patriarchal power might be a fact of recorded history, but this power is not solitary; our job is to understand the many varieties of patriarchy that have so successfully supported its adaptation to so many different historical circumstances.

Just as patriarchy is improperly understood as “The Patriarchy,” so, too, are women misconceptualized as passive victims of its power. Women have certainly suffered under patriarchy, facing ideological, institutional, and practical barriers to equitable association with men (and indeed, with other women). But women have also colluded in, undermined, and survived patriarchy. The history of patriarchy is not, therefore, a history of men; it is also a history of women as survivors, resisters, and agents of patriarchy.¹⁶ Women’s agency is part of the strength of patriarchy; as Margaret Ezell has argued for seventeenth-century England, the very endurance of patriarchy must be explained, in part, by the “very looseness of its structure,” which insured that “conditions were not intolerable to the point of open rebellion for the majority of women in their everyday lives.”¹⁷ And the linking of women’s agency to women’s vulnerability (as in, for a modern Western example, the “freedom” of women to walk the streets at night and their vulnerability in such environments to rape) is a crucial part of patriarchal endurance; we must examine the patriarchal ideologies and realities that have assured women that there is safety in protected subordination and danger in vulnerable freedom.¹⁸

In understanding women’s agency within patriarchal regimes, Deniz Kandiyoti’s concept of “patriarchal bargains” is key. Kandiyoti has shown how women strategize within the constraints of any patriarchal regime, creating opportunities for themselves, changing patriarchal systems, and even playing out “implicit scripts that define, limit, and inflect their market and domestic options.” The “bargain” of “patriarchal bargain” is not necessarily a “good buy,” but it both creates strategic opportunities for women and invests women in patriarchy. Thus, for example, a young woman will endure the dispossession of living as a daughter-in-law in her husband’s family because she anticipates that she will someday be a mother-in-law, possessed of

adult sons, property, and control over the labor of daughter-in-laws. In this form of what Kandiyoti calls “classic patriarchy,” an older woman is subordinate to men but exercises substantial power over younger women, giving her a strong reason to maintain the patriarchal status quo.¹⁹ Kandiyoti developed the concept of “patriarchal bargains” by contrasting sub-Saharan Africa and the Muslim Middle East, and many scholars have since put her concept to good effect in those contexts.²⁰ But those of us who work on women’s history in other world regions will find it applicable, too; “patriarchal bargains” might help us, for example, to better understand why so many women were opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment in the late twentieth-century United States.

Antifeminists have often argued that male dominance is unavoidable, locating the roots of patriarchy in biological differences or functional imperatives. Feminists know otherwise; we know that patriarchy is contingent, constructed, and subject to change. We know, as Zillah Eisenstein has put it, that “the reason patriarchy exists is because a nonpatriarchal sex-gender system could exist if allowed to.”²¹ Yet unless feminist scholars historicize patriarchy by studying its many variants, it will remain a bugbear for feminists, an ignored but ever-present specter that suggests (however falsely) that the oppression of women is natural and ineradicable. The power of patriarchy in our lives today partly rests, in other words, on our failure to understand how it has worked in past times. So long as we are afraid to name patriarchy and to study its workings historically, we will understand our current circumstances inadequately, and the lives of women and men will be twisted by the perverse strengths of patriarchal institutions. Historians of women need not “go on endlessly repeating and proving the obvious, that is to say, the grossly unjust treatment that women have received over thousands of years at the hands of males.”²² But it is the special task of historians of women to investigate *the forces behind this obvious fact*—that is, to explain how the oppression of women has endured for so long and in so many different historical settings. This problem—the problem of historicizing patriarchy—has inspired considerable disquiet among historians, but our feminist politics demand that we address it.²³

Confronting Continuity

In order to address patriarchy as feminist historians, we must first come to grips with continuity. The tension between continuity and change is perhaps the oldest and most productive of historical

themes. At the center of eighteenth-century debates about Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it remains powerful not just in studies of Rome but in most historical fields. In the twentieth century, the balance between continuity and change shifted slightly, as new historical approaches and subjects placed special emphasis on continuity. Seeking to downplay event-based history, Fernand Braudel and other historians in the *Annales* school began in the 1930s to stress the structural continuities of economy, society, and environment. By the late twentieth century, this emphasis on continuity began to seep into many fields, reshaping once-sharp breaks into more measured trends; for example, historians of religious reform in sixteenth-century Europe now emphasize gradual change and continuity with medieval practices. To the social historians, family historians, and historians of women who began to produce so many innovative sorts of history in the 1970s, this renewed emphasis on continuity also made good sense. Most readily agreed, for example, that the lives of European women were more influenced by slow-moving structural changes (such as the industrialization of the European economy) than by events (such as the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792).

Nevertheless, change exerts a powerful narrative force over women's history. Events might often seem less important than long-term structural shifts, but historians of women still frequently focus on significant moments of seeming transformation in women's status, particularly on seeming advances or declines in women's status. As a result, we sometimes highlight "transformation" when the more important story may be about "continuity." I will unpack one such example in the next chapter—the assumption among many historians that women's work was more valued in preindustrial Europe than afterward. This is an old belief, much repeated even today; our two most recent interpretations of women's work in Europe's industrial revolution tell us that "[i]ndustrialization brought about the subordination of women in many realms of production" and that changes in this period "not only subordinated women's work, but contributed to identifying women as not workers."²⁴ The approaches of Deborah Valenze and Deborah Simonton are new in many ways, but they build on a familiar story about women nurtured by traditional economies and harmed by industrial ones. This story masks important continuities. To be sure, women's work in Europe has changed in many ways since 1300; today, European women work more often for wages than did their medieval predecessors, they more often travel away from home to a separate place of employment, and they also accrue wel-

fare benefits through their work that would have been unimaginable to medieval women. But these changes have not transformed the work status of women, compared to men; today, as in 1300, “women’s work” in Europe is still relatively low-status, low-paid, and low-skilled. This judgment rests on a critical distinction between *changes* in women’s experiences on the one hand and *transformations* in women’s status on the other. To my mind, there has been much change in European women’s experiences as workers over the last millennium, but little transformation in their work status in relation to that of men.²⁵

“Transformation” is the accepted or even canonical story; “continuity” is troublesome, worrisome, and even dismissible. In 1993, the Berkshire Conference on Women’s History was entitled “Transformations: Women, Gender, Power,” a title so innocuous and unproblematic that most participants probably never thought twice about it. Would we have thought twice (and even more) if the conference had instead been headlined as “Continuities: Women, Gender, Power”? I think so, and I think we need to discuss more actively and more explicitly *why* one title is so much more palatable than the other and *how* our preference for history-as-transformation might limit our ways of seeing the past lives of women.²⁶

Historians of women have long written about the status of women falling or rising in certain times or places, but the “status of women” is a slippery concept that tends toward an overgeneralization of which feminists are justly skeptical. It is also haunted by subtle ideological practices that use “women’s status” as a sort of litmus test of civilization. In the nineteenth century, Europeans claimed cultural supremacy over colonized peoples by, among other things, imagining that European women enjoyed higher status than did women in India, Africa, the Americas, or, indeed, any place other than Europe; more recently, the Bush administration has similarly deployed the “status of women” as part justification for its aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. These are serious liabilities, but the desire to trace advances and declines in the status of women over time remains a fundamental part of our field. In the 1970s Joan Kelly added new power to what was already an old practice of judging the rising or falling status of women.²⁷ Kelly began by looking critically at the fit between women’s history and traditional history, arguing that the periodization of the former inverted the periodization of the latter. As Kelly put it, “what emerges [from women’s history] is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women precisely in those periods of so-called pro-

gressive change.” A year later, she provided a historical example in her classic essay “Did Women Have a Renaissance?”

Kelly’s negative answer to this question has been much revised and reconsidered, but her overall vision—of an often-inverted synchronization between the history of women and traditional history—has waxed strong in both research and teaching. Some fields of women’s history have adapted to Kelly’s formulation less enthusiastically than others. As Sandra Greene has pointed out, historians of women in Africa have consistently traced continuities between the precolonial and colonial periods; in the context of an Africa once misunderstood as having no substantive history before European contact, the continuity of indigenous practices is now deployed by historians “as a form of agency on the part of African societies.”²⁸ And as Valerie Traub has noted, lesbian history, often motivated by a search for “historical foremothers,” has been driven by “the logic of temporal continuity.”²⁹ In women’s history more generally, however, almost every great divide in the traditional historical narrative seems to have provoked Kelly-inspired assessments of how that divide affected women’s status for better or worse. In European women’s history, for example, we have considered how women’s status was affected by the Christianization of the ancient world, the rise of capitalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the industrial revolution, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and so on.³⁰ In most cases, the possibility that the status of women was not transformed is not even considered. We seem to assume that these turning points *must* have affected women’s status, leaving to us the straightforward task of weighing the transformation. In so doing, we strive for an overall assessment—women’s status getting better or getting worse—instead of considering the possibility that, despite change, shift, and movement, the overall force of patriarchal power might have endured. To use the terms proposed by Walby, we seldom consider how during these great divides, the *forms* of patriarchal power might have changed more than its *degree*.³¹

Karen Offen has suggested that this drumbeat of change, change, and more change is characteristically modern, because it is a simple fact of history that “historical change relentlessly accelerates . . . as we reach modern times.”³² The hoary myth of an unchanging premodern world underpins modernism, but, in fact, change pulses as strongly through premodern histories as modern ones. For example, medievalists have produced a large literature assessing how the status of women was transformed with the developments that created the so-called high or central Middle Ages. Inverting traditional historical assessments of this era, scholars have argued that many apparent

“advances” associated with the eleventh and twelfth centuries actually hurt women. Because women were more reliant than men on informal and family-based modes of influence (the argument goes), the seeming improvements of the central Middle Ages—the consolidation of feudal monarchies, the papal reform and associated monastic movements, the rise of universities, and the relative pacification of feudal society—created a more formalized and public power structure from which women were increasingly excluded.³³ Before this central medieval watershed for women, there were (according to Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple) “few restrictions on the power of women in any sphere of activity,” but afterward (according to David Herlihy) “the social position of the medieval woman seems in some ways to have deteriorated.”³⁴ In this instance as in many others, historians of women have accepted the traditional chronology but inverted it. We have synchronized transformations in women’s status with major historical turning points, even though we have found regress for women in the midst of seemingly progressive historical change.

In college classrooms where women’s history is now regularly taught, history-as-transformation also remains an effective and compelling theme. Most textbooks in women’s history provide a periodization that marches women in time to traditional history (so that even if women and men “move” in different directions, they “move” at the same time), and most teachers also emphasize the turning points that are critical to the traditional narrative.³⁵ Apart from the occasional awkward “How’s that any different from today?” most students accept this history as both sensible and convenient. We might struggle with college students to get them to give up whiggish notions of women’s steady progress toward emancipation, but we do not have to struggle to convince them that the status of European women was different before and after the French Revolution, before and after the upheavals of 1848, or before and after World War I. These sorts of transformations are even more readily assumed in our undergraduate classrooms than they are in our research.

The critical question is *why*. As students, we are trained to have skeptical and inquiring minds. And as teachers, we constantly hear questions from students that force new ideas on us. Yet at the center of our work as historians of women lies the rarely questioned assumption that the history of women is a history of transformation in women’s status—for better at some times and places, and for worse at others. I believe that we see women’s history in such transformative terms for at least four very good reasons: because of the development

of the field; because of the structure of the discipline of history; because of the particular influence of feminism in the academy; and because of our own lived experiences. Each of these factors compels us to put aside troublesome ideas about history-as-continuity and to seek out histories that emphasize transformation. Together, their power is largely silent and unacknowledged, and all the more powerful for that. In the hope of moderating their influence over our visions of the past, let us look each in the eye.

CONTINUITY AND WOMEN'S HISTORY IN THE 1970S

To begin with, the emphasis on history-as-transformation seems to spring partly from the development of the field of women's history. Our field's origins are usually traced back both to historians and intellectuals of past generations (such as Eileen Power, Simone de Beauvoir, and Mary Beard) and to feminist advocates of the recovery of women's past in the 1970s (such as Gerda Lerner, Joan Kelly, and Sheila Rowbotham). These scholars have certainly been very important in the development of women's history, but the field also grew from other sources that have critically shaped our ability (or inability) to consider continuities in women's past. Like many feminists who came of age in the 1970s, my first taste of women's history did not come from Eileen Power or Gerda Lerner or other distinguished feminist scholars; my first taste came from popular feminist formulations—from such sources as the “Lost Women” column of *Ms.* magazine, Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex*, and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*.³⁶ These popular formulations of women's history were often essentialist, finding their explanations for women's oppression in biological differences between the sexes. They often portrayed women as passive victims, overlooking not only women's agency but also women's collusion in sexual oppression. They also often took falsely universalist perspectives, assuming that the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women could speak for all women. Most importantly, they emphasized continuity, a sisterhood between the oppressed women of the past and the oppressed women of the 1970s. In these ways, some of the first women's history produced in the 1970s raised issues about long-term continuities in women's status, but raised them in very problematic ways.

As women's history began to gain an academic foothold over the course of the 1970s (particularly in the United States), these early popular formulations that emphasized continuity, oppression, victim-

ization, and a universal sisterhood were put aside in favor of a more professional scholarship that synchronized the history of women with the history of men.³⁷ Kelly's model of an inverted synchronization between women's history and traditional history provided a critical guide. Kelly explicitly challenged some of the basic assumptions of traditional history, but she did not fully reject its periodization; Kelly sought to change *evaluations* of great divides, not the idea of transformation per se. In other words, she accepted the notion that there was a turning point called "the Renaissance," she assumed that this Renaissance affected women as much as men, and she sought merely to argue that the Renaissance affected women in different ways than it affected men. Indeed, Kelly quite explicitly rejected the possibility that major historical transformations might *not* have affected the status of women in substantial ways and that therefore women's history should be periodized differently (in terms of both chronology and criteria) from mainstream history. For Kelly, a distinct periodization for women's history would have been essentialist (that is, it would have tied women's history in a biologically deterministic way to women's bodies), logically inconsistent (that is, it would have inverted what Kelly called the "causal sequence" of history), and isolating (that is, it would have separated women's history from the mainstream of historical work).³⁸

Kelly's ideas spoke, I think, to the need of feminist historians in the 1970s to create an academically acceptable and useful history of women. She certainly spoke to my needs as a graduate student then seeking legitimacy for my work on peasant women in medieval England. Thanks to Kelly, I came to understand that my project was to provide the women's angle on medieval peasant society, to fit women into the hitherto male-dominated history of rural economy and society. In the last few decades, therefore, I and most other historians of women have accepted a periodization that marches women's history in time to traditional history, emphasizing the same turning points that are critical to the traditional narrative. We have tried to answer, for our own times and places, that question Louise Tilly passed on to us from a colleague, about what difference it made that women were participants in the French Revolution.³⁹ And in whatever era we have examined—in European history, whether we have looked at ancient, medieval, early modern, or modern women—we have tended to see that era within a framework of transformation in women's status.

CONTINUITY AND HISTORICAL PRACTICE

If history-as-transformation was partly formed by a necessary reaction to some early popularizations of women's history as it took shape in the United States in the 1970s, it has also been supported by the basic practices of history itself. In graduate school, most historians are prepared for one straightforward mission: find change and explain it. To be sure, historians are not blind to continuity, and the balance between change and continuity provides one of the great seesaws of historical writing and teaching. Thus, for example, the English historian Geoffrey Elton saw the year 1485 as inaugurating a Tudor revolution in government, a dramatic break with England's medieval past.⁴⁰ But many English historians have seen 1485 as little more than a convenient moment in dynastic history, an easy place to break the gradual shift from medieval England to its Tudor-Stuart successor. And others have subjected the core assumption behind the 1485 way-post—that English culture and society were profoundly transformed between c. 1300 (“medieval”) and c. 1700 (“early modern”)—to steady assault. Lee Patterson, David Aers, and other literary critics have shown that two shibboleths of modernity—historical consciousness and individualism—so misrepresent cultural continuities that, as Aers has put it, “it is thus time to put a self-denying ordinance on claims about the new ‘construction of the subject’ in the sixteenth century.”⁴¹ Alan Macfarlane has argued that England in 1300 was already a capitalist, market economy governed by rampant individualism, an England very similar in its socioeconomic structures to England in 1700.⁴² Recognizing that change is seldom dramatic and seldom complete, historians usually look hard for the continuities that run across seemingly sharp divides.

Most often, however, we pay lip service to continuity and then side heavily with change. Macfarlane's argument, for example, precipitated considerable debate in the early 1980s and is now largely dismissed. It did, however, have one effect; instead of eliminating English history's great divide between medieval and early modern, it encouraged a generation of social and economic historians to push the date of that divide forward a bit, to c. 1525 instead of 1485.⁴³ We talk about continuity, we debate our great divides, and we even shift our dates a bit, but we cleave to the divides themselves. Why? Change, quite simply, seems to be more fun. Requiring careful tracing and analysis, its causes and effects cry out for study. In contrast, continuity can seem rather dull. As D. C. Coleman put it in his economic history

of early modern England, “Change is the greater temptress; continuity appears as the bore to be avoided.”⁴⁴ (Note the feminization of temptation; this is the sort of rhetoric that Bonnie Smith has critiqued so effectively in her studies of the gendering of the historical profession.)⁴⁵

Continuity seems to be more than boring; it also calls into question the very ways that we practice history. Consider how firmly we embrace a historical consciousness founded on discontinuity between the present and the past; whether this discontinuity was a creation of the Renaissance or not matters less than its power over our ways of seeing the past.⁴⁶ Consider, too, how modern historical writing is so often driven by the power of narrative, by the telling of stories that contain crisis, adjustment, and resolution. And consider how often historians use a concern with differences between the present and the past—transformative changes that differentiate our lives from the lives of those who preceded us by twenty years or two hundred years or two thousand years—to distinguish ourselves, rightly or wrongly, as professionals. We like to imagine that it is our ability to recognize these changes and analyze them that distinguishes us not only from the general public but also from sociologists, political scientists, philosophers, and scholars in other related fields. Without clear and considerable differences between the past and the present, it seems that historical context—and with it, the work of historians—might come to mean little indeed.

For historians of women, this practice of history has particularly strong repercussions. Within the bounds of the discipline of history, feminists have had to fight against the essentialist critique, often used to undermine the viability of women’s history as a field, that women’s place has been unchanging and constant throughout history. In other words, feminist historians have had to legitimate women as historical subjects by showing that women’s lives have history—that is, have change and transformation.⁴⁷ And for very practical reasons, historians of women have also had to try to fit the rhythms of women’s history into the traditional periodizations of the profession. How else, for example, could histories of women fit into courses in European history except with distinctive Greco-Roman, medieval, early modern, and modern chronologies? Seeking not only to uncover women’s history but also to teach women’s history within traditional curricula, we have perhaps necessarily kept the chronology, adhered to the notion of transformative change, and marched to the pace of traditional history.

CONTINUITY AND FEMINIST PRACTICES

These two forces—the developmental context of the field of women’s history, and the practice of history itself—have created a strong professional imperative to focus on history-as-transformation. This imperative has been further strengthened by the politics of modern feminism in the West, which has been more comfortable with transformation than continuity. After all, the tracing of transformations in women’s status in the past implicitly promises similar transformations in the future, and it can even offer lessons about achieving positive progress. For example, we have learned from the experiences of working women in England and the United States during the two world wars of the twentieth century that expanding war-time economies can open new possibilities for women workers and that contracting postwar economies are often hostile to women’s work (this is, of course, the story immortalized in the film *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*). And we have been able to apply this knowledge to economic change in our own time—to try to keep women from being among the last hired and first fired in skilled occupations. Working for transformation in the present, we are often encouraged and informed by histories of transformation in the past. In contrast, continuity in women’s status is a frightening prospect to many of us, for it suggests (wrongly, in my view) that women’s subordination might be rooted in insurmountable obstacles. If nothing much has changed in the past, then some worry that women’s plight is based so firmly in biological or social or material or psychological constraints that positive transformations in women’s status in the future are simply impossible.

These are pressures enough, but they have often been further strengthened by the actual practices of feminism within the academy. Many feminisms have been influential in academia, and some have dealt more readily than others with continuities in women’s past. Radical feminism—from which came some of the earliest popular formulations of women’s history in the 1970s—has readily accommodated to the notion of long-term continuities in women’s status. Black feminism has also developed the critical concept of a “matrix of domination” which effectively speaks about the varied forces that can work to maintain the status quo between oppressors and oppressed.⁴⁸ Moreover, since few feminist historians adopt specific ideological labels or interpretative lines, much feminist history tends to reflect eclectically the influence of several different feminist positions. These are important caveats, but I think it is nevertheless fair to say that two

strands of feminism have been particularly influential in the production of academic women's history in the West: liberal feminism and socialist feminism.

In their original formulations, both these feminisms posited (albeit in different ways) transformation in women's status as a fundamental feature of women's past. For liberal feminists, women's subordination was not a fundamental feature of modern society but was instead caused by many small accretions and vestigial traditions of the past. Because female subordination was seen as an incidental rather than substantial aspect of modern life, liberal feminists tended to see women's status as improving with modernity (for example, with Europe's Renaissance or industrial revolution) and as readily subjected to change. For socialist feminists, gender inequality was linked with the development of private property and capitalism. Because women's plight was seen as arising from the triumph of capital over labor, socialist feminists expected women's status to shift with changes in economic structures, and they depicted women's status as declining with modernity (for example, with Europe's commercial and industrial revolutions). Liberal feminists and socialist feminists, therefore, certainly disagreed about the direction of change in the past, but they agreed about one crucial thing: transformation in women's status had occurred. Liberal feminism and socialist feminism have moved on from their early formulations, but it is often possible to see these foundational ideas about the status of women exercising a continuing influence on feminist history. In the history of women's work, for example, the eclectic approaches of feminist historians still usually draw on either liberal or socialist traditions.⁴⁹ Both the politics of feminism in general and the specific practices of feminism in the academy have encouraged historians of women to look for past transformations in women's status.

CONTINUITY IN OUR OWN LIVES

Finally, these professional and political forces are strengthened by a fourth force: our own personal experiences. As Carolyn Steedman has reminded us, "any scholarly use of historical material takes place not only within the academy, but also in the commonplace, everyday world of which the academy is a part."⁵⁰ In that commonplace, everyday world, modern women and men have seen many things change for women in Western societies (and mostly change for the better). Consider, for example, higher education in the United States. Forty

years ago, the most elite colleges in the United States did not admit women at all; very few women were earning doctorates; and even fewer women were finding tenured employments. All this has now changed: women now graduate from colleges and universities in higher numbers than men; women go to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton; and about one-third of all doctorates and entry-level faculty positions in history are held by women. This is inspiring stuff, and it encourages us to believe that women's status can be transformed, and transformed rapidly.

Against this, however, we must place enormous continuities in the status of women in our own times, continuities that we may prefer to overlook. In the United States, women with college degrees still have the earning power of men with high school diplomas; most women in the university still work in the secretarial and clerical pink-collar ghetto; female faculty cluster in fixed-term and untenured positions; even the best careers can still be held in check by an academic "glass ceiling"; and sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of violence against women on our campuses have continued unchecked and perhaps, indeed, have increased. We must also be alert to the possibility that we ourselves are caught in a pattern often observed in women's history—a pattern of women gaining access to institutions only when those institutions are in decline. Recent attacks on higher education (especially on public funding of universities and on academic freedom) suggest that women—as both students and teachers—have been gaining access to higher education at the very time that its influence might be waning. Bill Gates, after all, is a college dropout.

We have good reasons, then, to be more comfortable with a Berkshire Conference entitled "Transformations" than with one entitled "Continuities." In part, we seek to distance ourselves from popular histories of women that once emphasized continuity along with a package of ideas—particularly essentialism, female victimization, and false universalism—from which we now wish to disassociate women's history. And in part, we see transformation in women's history because our profession expects it from us, our feminist politics seem to need it, and our own lived experiences apparently support it. These are compelling pressures indeed, but we can resist them, and if we do, we will move toward more measured ways of seeing the past. If we question apparent transformations in women's status, consider new periodizations based on women's histories, and feel comfortable thinking about long-term continuities, we can see women's history in new ways.

Brewsters

One new way of revisioning women's history is to question whether the conventional historical narrative of crisis, adjustment, and resolution is itself a gendered tale. Working with medieval saints' lives, Caroline Bynum has observed that male biographies take shape as "social dramas" involving crisis, inversion, and resolution, but that female biographies often offer "a life in which 'nothing happens' at least if we expect to find a social drama." Bynum has suggested that both social facts (that is, the limited ability of women to change their lives) and psychological differences might account for the comparative continuity of female life-stories within this medieval genre.⁵¹ Or perhaps the difference lies less in male and female lived experiences and more in the interpretation of those experiences by biographers.⁵²

In any case, there can be little doubt that a tale of transformation does not effectively explain fundamental dimensions of women's past. As Georges Duby has noted for the central Middle Ages, despite the many changes of that era, "the hierarchical distance between the sexes was not noticeably diminished."⁵³ As Olwen Hufton has observed about the common notion that early modern women enjoyed a more equal relationship with men, "So far the location of this *bon vieux temps* has proved remarkably elusive."⁵⁴ And as Susan Staves and Amanda Vickery have suggested for more recent times, there might be much less transformation in women's status since the eighteenth century—particularly in property law and family relations—than we once thought.⁵⁵ In my own work on medieval brewsters (that is, female brewers) in late medieval England, I found a similar gap between, on the one hand, my assumption of transformation and, on the other hand, continuities suggested by the archival and literary evidence. By looking hard at these unexpected continuities, I came to see a "patriarchal equilibrium" that sustained women's (low) status despite the enormous—indeed, transformative—expansion of the brewing trade.⁵⁶

In the 1980s, when I began examining the history of brewsters, I anticipated a story of radical change, a story of how women were forced out of the trade as it became profitable and prestigious. Indeed, brewing seemed to provide a classic illustration of a negative transformation in women's status accompanying a major turning point in economic history. In 1300, women controlled the trade in brewed drink; by 1600, it was controlled by men. At the same time, brewing was transformed by economic changes of the sort commonly aggregated under the rubric of "commercial revolution." Capitaliza-

tion, centralization, professionalization, monopolization, even industrialization—all these describe how English brewing changed between 1300 and 1600. As I had expected, I found that this slow commercialization favored men over women. When business opportunities expanded, women had little capital to invest in new equipment, limited authority over large workforces, and few contacts for obtaining supplies and opening new markets. When guilds began to offer brewers fresh ways to foster trade solidarity and power, wives found themselves second-rank members in fraternal organizations run by their husbands. When beer (made with hops) began to replace unhopped ale in the English diet, women suffered from poor access to the new technology of beer-brewing and from an inability to respond effectively to the commercial opportunities it offered. When the production and marketing of brewed drink came under closer governmental regulation, women's modest enterprises were deemed less reliable than the larger enterprises run by men. And whenever local authorities worried about the drunken disorder of alehouses, they tended to blame brewsters more than male brewers.

In short, I expected to find transformation, and I did. In 1300, brewing was a ubiquitous trade requiring little specialized skill or equipment, conferring minimal trade identity, and offering only small profits. As such, it was accessible to women, and compared to the other, even more limited economic options for women, it was a good trade for them. By 1600, brewing in many places had been transformed into a specialized trade requiring training and investment, conferring social prestige and guild status, and offering considerable profits. As such, it had ceased to be a trade of women and had become a trade of men. Brewing had prospered, and brewsters had faded away. Or, as Alice Clark put it in her classic study of the negative effects of industrialism and capitalism on women's status, "with the growth of capitalism and the establishment of a monopoly for 'Common Brewers' women were virtually excluded from their old trade of brewing."³⁷ Yet as I dug more deeply into the archives, I began to see my information about brewsters in new ways. I found that this story of dramatic loss only partly described what happened in English brewing between 1300 and 1600.

To begin with, this story too readily idealized the "old trade" of brewsters. In 1300, brewing was low-skilled, low-profit, low-status work—that is, work then seen as appropriate for a woman. There was, in other words, no "golden age" when prosperous brewsters enjoyed the fruits of a profitable and prestigious women's trade. There was, instead, a time when brewing was among the many petty employ-

ments available to women as they tried to patch together a living—women worked by the day for wages; they sought work as servants or prostitutes; they sold eggs, cheese, and other foods; they hawked old clothes; they cared for the sick and prepared the dead for burial; they brewed and sold ale. I am sure that many women took satisfaction in these labors, put their small profits to good use, and were even proud of their abilities. But in the broader context of their villages and towns, these were modest employments that offered relatively little prestige and profit. Brewing was among the best of these modest employments, but it, like women's other options, attracted little interest from men, who could get better work.⁵⁸

Clark's story also worked to stabilize the trade of brewing in ways that obscured its transformation between 1300 and 1600. By the seventeenth century, when women were being "virtually excluded from their old trade," their "old trade" had, in fact, virtually disappeared. Indeed, what had changed was not women's work but instead brewing itself, which had so prospered and professionalized that it was a new industry apparently no longer suitable for women. To be sure, in 1600 women still worked in the drink trade but only in lowly pursuits—they worked as unskilled servants in breweries, they carried ale on their backs from breweries to the houses of customers, they retailed ale and beer that was supplied to them by breweries. But, except in isolated areas, they rarely worked as brewsters, rarely enjoyed the high profits that male brewers took from the commercial production of ale or beer.

And, finally, Clark's tale of decline and loss tended to mingle together two discrete concepts—the *experiences* of women and women's *status*. Many things changed in the experiences of women who sought to profit from brewing between 1300 and 1600. Some women had to shift from producing ale to merely selling ale brewed by others; some became employees of brewers rather than brewsters in their own right; some had to find new sources of petty income in lace making, stocking knitting, and other new employments. These were real changes, real accommodations that women had to make as commercial brewing became a less viable option for them. Yet these changes in women's experiences did not transform women's status as workers. Brewing changed, and women's access to brewing changed, but in 1600, as had been the case in 1300, women's work was humble work. Much change in women's experiences; no transformation in women's status.

Both these histories of brewing—one emphasizing the change entailed in women ceasing to brew and the other emphasizing conti-

nities in the low status of women's work—are useful. But it is the latter story—the story of continuities—that most enriched my understanding of brewsters in late medieval and early modern England. It emphasized for me that although some of the *forms* of women's work changed between 1300 and 1600 (for example, women worked less in brewing and more in stocking knitting), its *substance* as low-status, low-skilled, and low-profit work remained the same. By examining brewsters and their trade in this way, I saw new and productive questions that had before eluded me. History-as-transformation asked me to explain decline—to explain brewsters' descent from paradise as they lost control of a trade once their own.⁵⁹ History-as-continuity asked me to explain something quite different—to explain why brewsters were unable to accomplish an ascent to paradise, unable to take advantage of the expansion of the market for brewed drink after 1350. Why did brewsters not respond as effectively as male brewers to the late medieval growth of their market? What were the pressures for continuity—for maintaining the low work status of women—that ensured that brewsters could not retain control over the trade once it began to prosper? Built not around a history of transformation but instead around a history of missed opportunity for transformation, these questions allowed me to understand English brewsters in new ways.

The answers that I have found to these questions have eased my mind about three of the problems long associated with history-as-continuity. First, for brewsters, biology was not destiny. Indeed, traditional essentialist explanations for female disadvantage in the workplace—that women either are less strong than men or are more burdened by reproductive work—had no effect on brewsters. Quite the reverse was true. As requirements for physical strength in brewing eased, women worked less in the trade; in 1300, brewsters themselves had to haul the water, fuel, and grain used to brew ale, but by 1600, many male brewers pushed paper instead of barrels, employing workers who did the hard labor. There was a similarly inverse correlation between brewing and childbirth/child rearing: the first women to leave brewing as the trade grew more profitable were those with the *fewest* reproductive responsibilities—that is, singlewomen and widows. Despite being “distracted” by pregnancies and childcare, wives more tenaciously kept their place in the brewing trade. Essentialism—or what Karen Offen has recently called “physiological concerns particular to women”—remains a powerful thread within some feminist understandings of the perdurability of patriarchy. That it is a frayed thread in the case of brewsters speaks, again, to the importance of

assuming nothing about biological constants and subjecting all such possibilities to hard study. We cannot explain women's subordination, past or present, by simple reference to childbearing and infant feeding.⁶⁰

Second, although brewsters were, in the end, unable to take full advantage of the expanding profitability of their trade, they were not passive victims. I found no evidence that brewsters protested the obstacles they faced as women, but I found abundant evidence of their creative reactions to problems. Some left off brewing and took up the selling of drink; some associated as closely as they could with the guilds that began to regulate their trade; some operated in a brewing black market beyond the control of guilds and cities; some continued to brew even when their husbands assumed all public responsibility for the trade; and some found employment in other trades altogether. Instead of passively withdrawing from brewing, in other words, women actively sought new ways in which they could support themselves and their families; they faced changing circumstances, reacted to them, and made history. Their choices were, of course, shaped and defined by the circumstances in which they found themselves. But if a woman ceased brewing and took up, say, lace making, she accommodated to changing times without either freely choosing to leave the brewing trade (agency) or suffering direct exclusion from it (victimization).

Third, differences among brewsters were critically important in understanding how and why they left the trade. Brewsters in rural villages maintained their businesses much longer than brewsters in many towns and cities, and, as just mentioned above, married brewsters retained a place in the trade long after most widows and singlewomen had to seek work elsewhere. Indeed, the experiences of brewsters illustrates well how appreciation of differences among women is essential not only for nuance and clarity but also for understanding the experiences of all women, as Elsa Barkley-Brown has argued so persuasively in U.S. history.⁶¹ The slow masculinization of the trade—a trend which eventually embraced women of different places, classes, and marital statuses—cannot be understood without reference to how, in the earliest stages, some women left off brewing earlier than others.

Thus, my work on medieval brewsters suggested to me that history-as-continuity need not necessarily lead to essentialist explanations, to a history of female passivity, or to false generalizations that obscure differences among women. This might have been true of some history-writing in the 1970s; it need not be true today. Sandra Greene

has noted much the same for the history of women among the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana and for African women's history more generally. In these instances, too, an appreciation of continuity is now enabling historians "to emphasize African women's creative reactions to problems, differences among African women, and the varied character of patriarchal power."⁶²

Instead of being compelled by biological imperatives, female victimization, or an eternal battle between two sexes unmarked by class, race, sexuality, or other factors, the brewsters of late medieval England faced changing circumstances and reacted to them in diverse ways. Their history is one of much change for brewsters but little transformation for women's work. This immobility was not of their own making, for at every turn, brewsters found themselves unable to respond as effectively as men to new opportunities. They encountered historical circumstances that discouraged them from brewing and encouraged men to take up the trade: household economies that required wives to assist husbands at their trades (rather than the other way around); laws that limited the contractual powers and economic autonomy of women; economic practices that inhibited women's access to capital and credit; local and national governments that sought to control brewsters through their husbands; and ideological presumptions that made it difficult for brewsters to establish themselves as reliable and trustworthy tradespeople. These factors affected some women differently from others, but they affected all women to some extent. These factors shaped the lives of men as well, but they constrained most women more than most men. And these factors grew from fundamental institutions of English life at the time, patriarchal institutions that were nevertheless much more than mechanisms for the subordination of women. I use "patriarchal institutions" advisedly, defining institutions as "any organized element of a society" and applying "patriarchal" to any such elements that reinforced male power, *in part*.⁶³

The lives of English brewsters were shaped, in short, by a patriarchal equilibrium. Brewsters faced a host of institutions that worked, at least in part, to subordinate women to men. As a result, changes which undermined the force of patriarchy in one sector were subtly countered by responses in other sectors. The expanding brewing trade of late medieval England posed a real threat to the patriarchal order: women controlled a trade that was suddenly becoming very profitable. Yet this possibility of female advance in the economic sphere was met by strong responses from other patriarchal institutions. Representations of brewsters in poems, plays, and other media

began to emphasize the filthiness and untrustworthiness of brewsters; civic officers started to worry about how women were a disruptive force in the trade; new regulations sought to proscribe not-married women from the brewing trade so that married men could be supported by it; and the traditional authority of husbands over their wives began to assert itself in new ways. Put more abstractly, what happened is this: an economic change that might have advantaged women was countered effectively by responses rooted in ideology, law, politics, and family.

What was—and remains—particularly confounding about this patriarchal equilibrium was that none of these institutions existed solely to keep women in their place or acted self-consciously in tandem with others to keep women in their place. Indeed, each had advantages that could appeal to women as well as men. Guilds were not formed with the explicit intention of excluding women from skilled trades; family structures were not designed solely to subordinate women to male householders; and the laws that limited the economic opportunities of women were not written just to keep women poor. For a woman, these institutions could offer good as well as bad. A guild might have solidified male privilege, but it also offered solidarity with other brewers, better bargaining with city officers, and protection for those who fell on hard times. All of these could benefit brewsters as well as male brewers, and if male privilege was part of the package, it might have seemed to some brewsters an amorphous, ancillary, or even unimportant part. In a sense, patriarchy was an effect of many institutions in late medieval England, but it was neither the sole effect nor sole intention of any one.

The circumstances of brewsters were made even more disconcerting by the different strategies that guilds and other institutions adopted to maintain male advantage and female disadvantage. *Exclusion* was a powerful weapon of patriarchy. Brewsters were excluded from the regulation of their trade, excluded from many guilds, and excluded sometimes from the trade altogether. *Segregation* also worked effectively to limit brewsters. Women belonged to the London guild in the early fifteenth century but were not full members; women brewed ale more readily than beer (ale was much less profitable than beer); women fell from brewing ale into selling ale brewed by others, but not out of the trade altogether. And the strategy of *division*—divide and conquer—might have been particularly powerful. Patriarchal adjustments to the changing profitability of brewing—regulations proscribing brewing by singlewomen, or the establishment of guilds for husbands of married brewsters, or the development of depictions

of brewsters as foul and filthy workers—might have been especially effective because they harmed some brewsters more than others and thereby impeded common identification and, possibly, common action. These varied strategies meant that brewsters faced not only many adaptable patriarchal institutions but also a variety of ways whereby they were disempowered within them.

By looking at brewsters in a new way that saw continuities in the midst of change, I was able to observe some critical aspects of patriarchal power in England during these centuries: its location in multiple sites; its production as an effect of essential social institutions; its flexibility and durability; and its powerful strategic use of exclusion, segregation, and division. The best way I have found to describe what might have happened to brewsters is with a metaphor of ballroom dancing: a dance where women and men—many different sorts of women and men—move across the room, alter their steps, movements and rhythms, even change partners or groups, but *always the men are leading*. In this patriarchal dance, there has been much change in women's lives, but little transformation in women's status in relation to men. If we are willing to see other aspects of women's past in this way, we will find more new histories to be written, histories that trace changes in women's lives without resort to narratives of transformation, histories that seek to problematize continuity, and histories that grapple with the challenge of understanding patriarchy.

Historicizing Patriarchy

As we saw in Chapter 2, historians of women have most recently dwelt on integrating women into the discourses of traditional historical fields, examining discourses of gender, and unpacking the intersection of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other differences. Just as feminism is an inherently plural noun, fueled by multiple feminist approaches, so, too, is women's history diverse, varied, and many-voiced. As we saw in Chapter 3, however, the many voices of women's history are speaking predominantly about recent historical eras, lingering with loving attention on the twentieth century and rarely venturing back before 1800. This chapter argues that that this lack of historical depth profoundly hinders our ability to trace continuities in women's history. Although I have focused here on how confronting continuity can positively reshape the specific project of historicizing patriarchy, all the main approaches within women's history—integrationist histories, gender analyses, studies of difference, and others—will yield better results if we attend to the distant past and

the continuities, as well as changes, that this longer perspective can suggest to us.

I do not believe that history-as-continuity excludes history-as-change, and indeed, my understanding of English brewsters has been informed by both perspectives. But I do believe that we need to hold these two “ways of seeing” in better balance, and to explore more fully than we have yet done the implications of long-term continuities in women’s status. A healthy skepticism about narratives of transformation does not require us to abandon all talk of change, transformation, or even progress. Quite the contrary, for this skepticism allows us to replace loose talk about change, transformation, and progress with hard talk about the same. In other words, instead of writing from a gut-level, perhaps even panicked, assumption that we *must* find and explain change, we can ground our discussions of change in firmer, more careful analyses of what is and is not new. We thereby ensure that when we say “change” or “transformation” or “progress,” we really mean it. By being more attentive to continuity, in other words, we recognize real change, too. A healthy skepticism about transformation also should not provide us with a reason, as some scholars have suggested, to retreat into studies so detailed and specific that we need not worry about continuity or change.⁶¹ History relies on empirical study, but it is fed by broad overviews and daring generalizations. This is true of all history, but especially women’s history. If women’s historians are to generate historical perspectives on critical questions of feminist scholarship and activism, we must continue to think in broad—and broadly temporal—ways about continuity and change.

I have suggested here that broad swathes of the past might have been shaped by a dynamic of “patriarchal equilibrium,” by patriarchal institutions that have adapted remarkably well to the conflicts, contradictions, and confusions they produce. I hope that more historians of women—not all, but more—will start their work from a consciousness of the need to study in such ways the workings of patriarchy and will return, in the end, to that same consciousness. If some of us make patriarchy (not its origins, but instead its mechanisms, its changes, its endurance) a central problem of women’s history, our work will address one of the greatest general problems of all history (the problem of the nature, sustenance, and endurance of power structures), it will eschew gut-level notions of times getting “better” or “worse” for women, and it will grapple with the pressing feminist problem of overall constancy in the (low) status of women. We can also liaise more effectively with feminist colleagues in other disciplines—in anthropology, which has played a central role in

exploring the origins of patriarchy; in social and political theory, where current theories of patriarchy are severely limited by lack of historical context; and in law and literature, where so much of the ideological power of patriarchy has been manifested.⁶⁵ And by analyzing the nature and causes of women's oppression in the past, we can directly contribute to feminist strategies for the present. The history of women's work, explored in the next chapter, provides one example of this feminist pay-off, for a deep-into-the-past and attentive-to-continuities view of women's work suggests to me that current strategies to achieve gender equality in the workplace—for example, the legislative enforcement of pay equity, or programs such as affirmative action and comparable worth—might prove insufficient to the task.