



Why Writing Women Back Into History Matters

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The Problem

This is an historic evening. Not only does London explode with the sound of fireworks, lit to commemorate the failure of an attempted regime change. But tomorrow we will hear news of whether there has been a successful transfer of power in the US. The timing of my lecture could not be more pertinent, since through the night votes will be counted to determine whether, for the first time a woman will be declared President of the United States of America.

To date more than a third of countries in the world have had a female ruler, and currently twelve, including Mexico, Italy and Thailand, are ruled by women. But the position of US President has always been held by a man. Will the glass ceiling ever be shattered, and can we learn how to move forward by looking backwards?

Why Women?

My work centres women in history because, as over 50% of the global population, they are the most obvious group that has been deliberately excluded from many historical narratives. However, this lecture is not about binaries - dividing men from women - but rather about asking why so many silenced voices are excluded from traditional history. Issues of race, disability, class, background and sexuality are being foregrounded in all areas of academia now. As the largest excluded lens, I use women to challenge what has gone before, and explore how we can build a fairer, more equal, future.

Some Statistics:

- **10% of the world's Heads of State today are women.**
- **Today women enjoy less than two-thirds of the legal rights available to men.**
- **The gender pay gap is at 20% worldwide.**
- **One in three women globally have already suffered physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both.**
- **Every 11 minutes, a woman or girl is killed by a member of her own family.**
- **40% of women worldwide live in countries where abortion laws are restrictive .**
- **270 million women worldwide have no access to modern contraception.**



Women have always made up roughly half the population, so why then do they not feature more prominently in studying the past? I will argue that there are very clear and deliberate moments over the past few centuries that have led to the truism of women as the second sex, and that we need to go back earlier - to the medieval period - to begin to challenge this assumption.

It's All About the Suffragettes

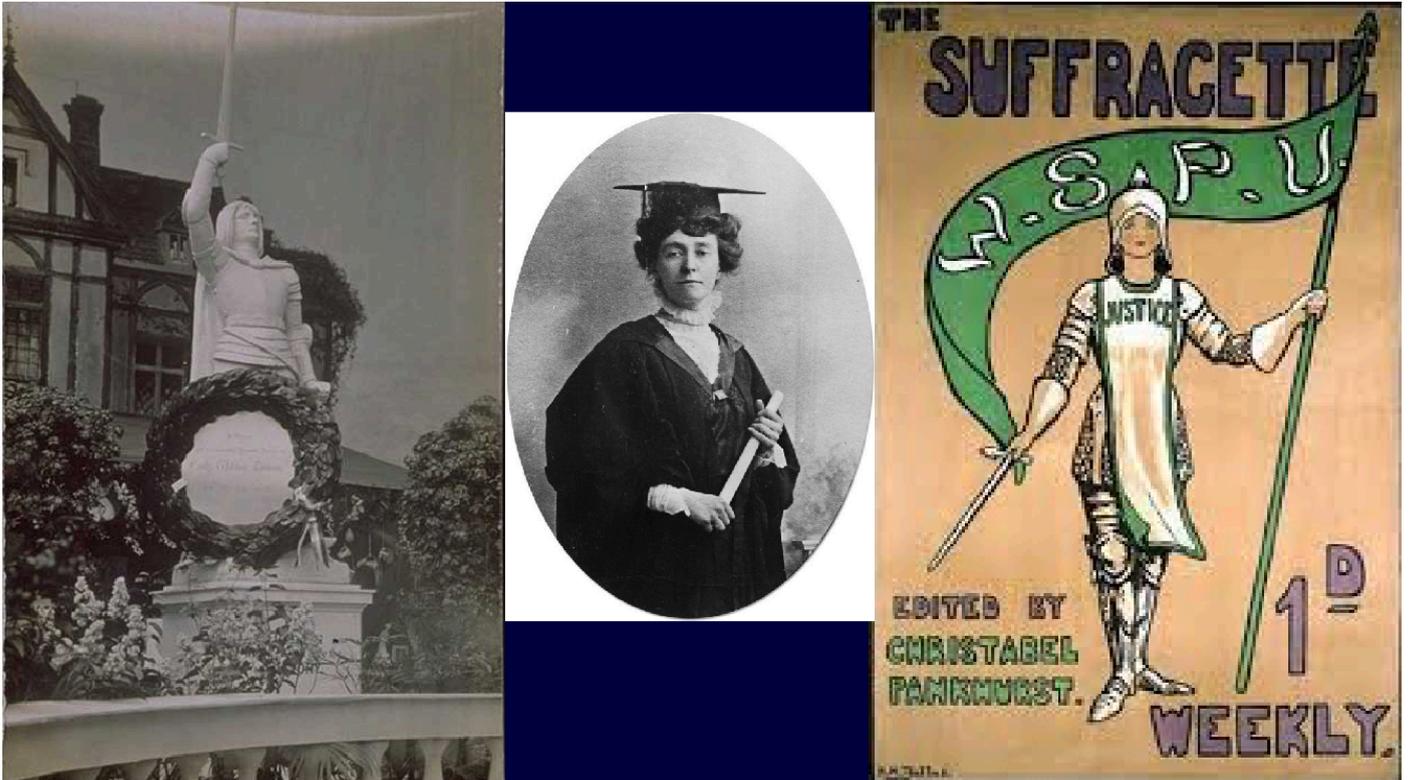
Today in our school we are taught that women's rights are barely a century old. We owe it all to the suffragettes, who dragged us from the position of the 'second sex,' to where we are today. That's the traditional narrative. But is this the full picture?

It's the Epsom Derby 1913 and as the horses round Tattenham Corner a figure has slipped under the railings, moving directly into the path of the King's Horse. Everything happens in seconds. The figure reaches up, the horse tries to jump, the rider is thrown off and two bodies fall to the ground.

Who was this mysterious figure struck by the King's Horse? It was the suffragette Emily Wilding Davison. She died from her injuries and became the first martyr of the Suffragette Movement. Over 50,000 people lined the route of her funeral procession. Her death was galvanizing and just five years later women gained the vote.

But there's something very few people know about Emily Wilding Davison. She was a medievalist. She had gone to Oxford University and completed her finals in medieval literature. However, as women were not allowed to graduate at that time, she could not receive a full degree. Nevertheless, she continued to write hundreds of letters and articles on medieval topics, even calling herself 'Fair Emylye' after Chaucer's famous character.

Why does this matter? Well, I am also a medievalist, so I started to dive into some of Emily's writings. Here I found something very interesting. As a suffragette - and one of the most active and militant - she did not think she was breaking new ground by fighting for women's rights. Instead, she was arguing that women HAD rights in the past and these were taken away from them relatively recently.



Many of the Suffragettes were fascinated by the medieval period, and even had Joan of Arc held up as their figure head. Their motto, Deeds not Words, was supported with Joan's famous slogan 'Fight On and God Will Give Thee Victory'. They found inspiration from women of the past and looked to them for a time when they could have agency and feel empowered once again. They were not simply carving out a new path, but trying to return to one which had gone before; one which we have now lost sight of.

History is Changing

How should we look at History differently and why now? It is an incredibly exciting time to be studying the past:

- The Pandemic made archives and records more available than ever before.
- Developments in science and technology are pushing the boundaries of what we can discover, with DNA testing bringing those people excluded from historical texts into the foreground.
- The areas sidelined by traditional history course - social history, local history, women's history - are taking up more space and we are starting to look for the many rather than the few.
- Texts are not the only source of information.
- We are more aware that history is written to serve agendas. Mine is clear - to put women back into the past to ensure we move forward with a sense that we are all part of the conversation.

"You cannot be what you cannot see."

Trying Something Different

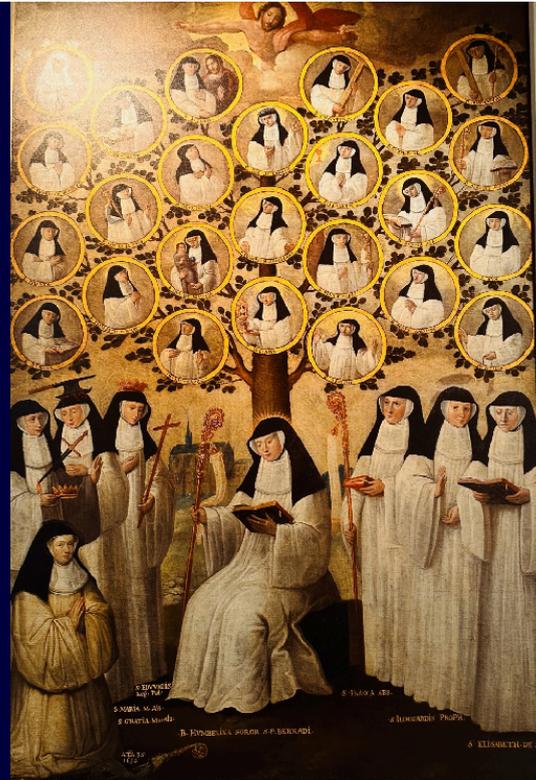
A recent best-selling book on the Early Medieval period claimed that the women of the period were 'unrecoverable'. It is time to challenge this. There are reasons that women do not fare well in historical records. Texts can be edited, lost, destroyed and over-written. Women do not emerge as easily in textual evidence, but combining this with archaeology, art history, literature, theology and more can bring new insights into individuals from the past.

There are some individuals who do survive the passage of time, but they have often been manipulated by each generation to serve new and ever-changing needs. Joan of Arc has been highjacked by the far right, and Christine de Pizan has been declared a Feminist, centuries before Feminism developed.

It is clear that women were involved in all areas of life following the Black Death. They are in guilds, involved in trading, politics, religion - Catherine of Siena even negotiates with two popes and multiple international courts to break the Great Schism! And yet women's roles in society transform increasingly with the move towards to modern world. Where does it begin?

“A woman’s place is in the home.”
John Calvin (1509-64)

“The wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and concern the state.”
Martin Luther (1483-1546)



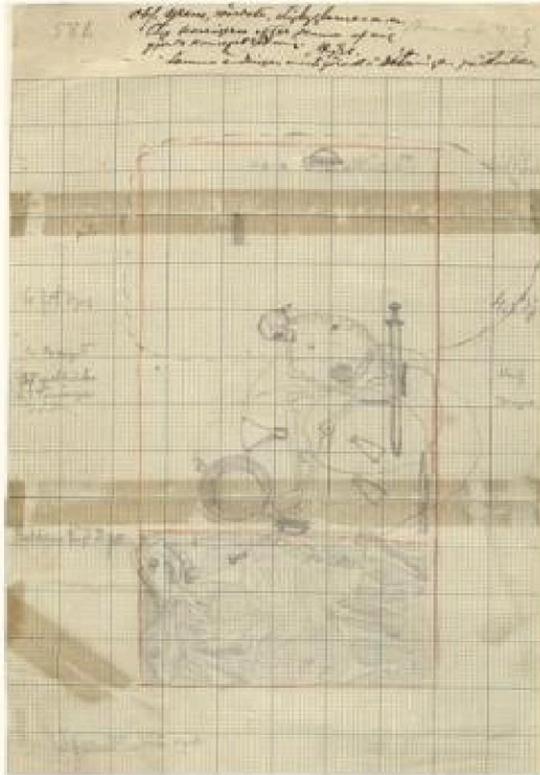
I want to try something different going forward, challenging traditional narratives, and beginning new conversations about gender and identity.

Case Studies

I will consider three case studies:

- The Birka Warrior Woman
- Hildegard of Bingen
- King Jadwiga of Poland

The first involves using techniques developed recent in DNA analysis to bring the role of women as warriors within early medieval society to light alongside textual and art historical evidence. Challenging age-old assumptions of Vikings, the new evidence shows that female leaders were not unheard of, even in terms of military leadership.



The second shows how one woman could reach the heights of fame and respect in the high medieval world, but that she is not the exception. Hildegard's life shines a light on a society where men supported and raised up certain women, and many were working in advanced areas.



She described existing in 'the shadow of the living light', but when she entered a vision she felt it physically, 'like a trembling flame, or a cloud stirred by the clear air'.

'I was compelled by a great pressure of pains to make known what I had seen and heard ... But then my veins and marrow became filled with powers I had lacked in my childhood and youth.'

Life of Hildegard, Book 2

"You, you evil deceivers, who labour to subvert the Catholic faith. You are wavering and soft, and thus cannot avoid the poisonous arrows of human corruption ... And after you pour out your lust in the poisonous seed of fornication, you pretend to pray and falsely assume an air of sanctity, which is more unworthy in my eyes than the stinky mire."

Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, II. 7.

She gives very clear instructions that the woman should take a bath in freshly heated river water and fill it with tansy (a well-known abortifacient), chrysanthemum, mullein and feverfew.

The water should cover all the belly. Then she must:

'take rifebere and one-third as much yarrow, aristologia, and about one-ninth as much yue, and crush this mixture in a mortar. Put it in a little bag and then cook it in wine; add clove and white pepper ... and honey. Drink this daily both fasting and with meals ... for five days or fifteen or until the matter is resolved.'

'When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man's seed. And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it, and soon the woman's sexual organs contract, and all the parts that are ready to open up during the time of menstruation now close, in the same way as a strong man can hold something enclosed in his fist.'

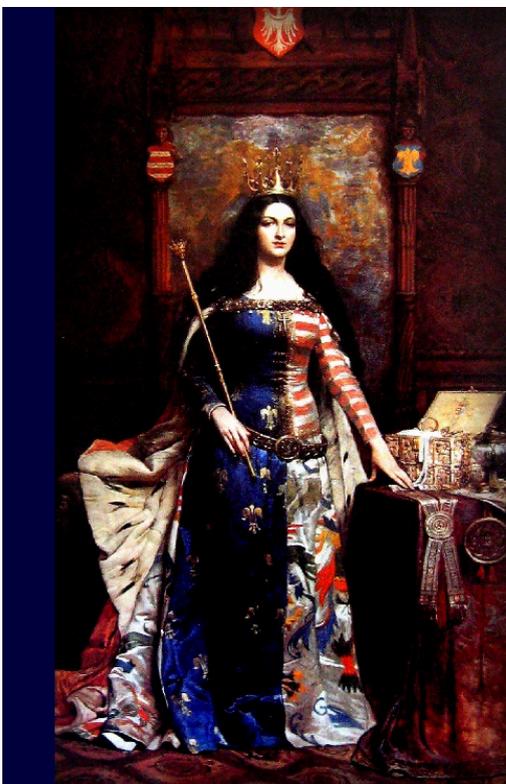
Hildegard of Bingen, *Causae et Curae*



‘On feast days, your nuns stand in church chanting psalms with unbound hair and for decorative purposes wear long white silk veils which reach down to the ground. On their heads they wear crowns of woven gold ... and they adorn their fingers with golden rings. And they do this although the first shepherd of the church (St Paul) forbade such things.’

‘Letter from Tengsrich to Hildegard’

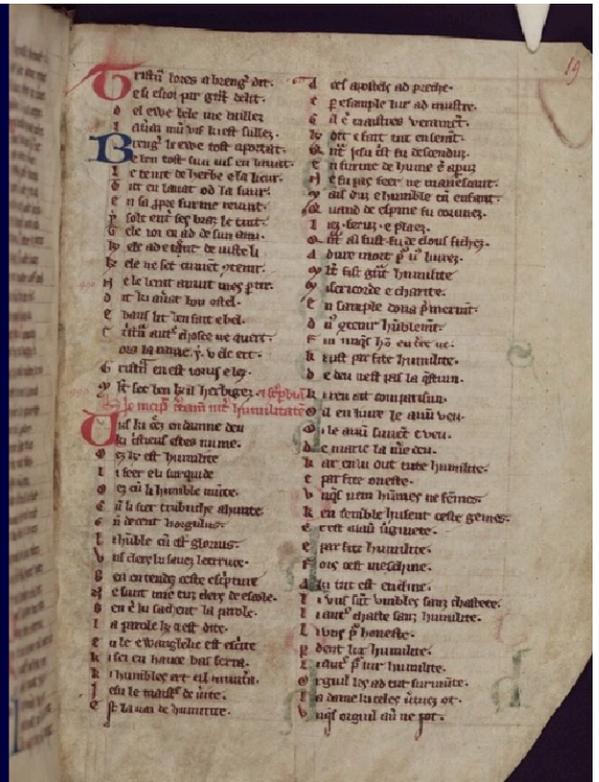
The third case study flags up how our Eurocentric view of history needs to be increasingly turned east. By highlighting the sophistication and complexity of Poland's court in the late Middle Ages, a different view emerges. As King, not Queen, Jadwiga's life has been condensed to serve nationalistic ends. But examined as a real living woman, she fascinates in her complexity.



1997 – Patron Saint of a United Europe.

‘ They shouted as if at a wolf.
 "Look at the madman! Grrr! Grrr!"
 The boys and squires began pelting
 him with sticks, thronging after him
 through the court as if mad themselves.
 He turned to them a number of times
 to see one or another attacking him...
 the king saw him right away’.
 Lines 250-261.

Folie d'Oxford, Oxford, Bodleian Library,
 MS. Douce D 6, c. 19 r.



Bishop Piotr Wysz
 Radoliński:
 ‘A gem of the Kingdom of
 Poland, an anchor of state’s
 order, an extraordinary
 jewel, comfort of widows,
 solace of paupers, help to
 the oppressed, respect
 for church officials, escape
 of priests, strength of peace,
 and anchor to Lord’s laws.



What Can We Learn?

We don't need to simply accept the versions of history that we have inherited. Instead, we need to scrutinize them and ask why we have been told stories from the past in the ways we have. Who does history serve and what can be achieved if we look with fresh eyes at the evidence? What I have found is, that by looking beyond the Great Men narratives, complex and diverse perspectives emerge. And I have found this empowering.

When I know that remarkable women like the Birka Warrior Woman, Hildegard of Bingen and King Jadwiga went before me, I feel like I have foundations upon which to build my own agency. You cannot be what you cannot see. They also open up the possibility of rediscovering a whole host of ignored individuals from the past with whom we can identify and find inspiration. 'Can looking for women in the past help us build a better future?' If we can find people like ourselves in the past and acknowledge people like us have always been there, then we can see ourselves contributing to a more equal present and future.

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