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Alice Alvarado

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Left Out: Women's Role in Historiography and the Contribution of Mary Ritter Beard

Alice Alvarado

It is time for a version of historiography that acknowledges gender—a version that will allow us to refurbish our mirror on the past.

—Bonnie G. Smith

Women have been a “force in history” since the dawn of civilization.¹ Their achievements in writing history have been intellectually comparable to men, but have not received the glory from their male peers due these accomplished and important authors. This poses some questions. Why have women been virtually left out of history? Who was Mary Ritter Beard and why was her work so influential yet forgotten? Which female authors triumphed in the field of history and what can be done to update the methodology for future generations of historians? There is much truth to the argument that women's history has come a long way since the first bricks of historiography were laid; however, there is still much work to be done in order for the discipline to arrive at “a more inclusive telling of history.”²

The goal of this essay is to examine a very small portion of women's contributions not only to history, but historiography as well. It would easily take volumes to cover women's vast contributions to history, so a select portion will be surveyed. It will offer a background on the achievements of Mary R. Beard, her thoughts on women not only in her time, but in “long history,” and attempt to explain why many contemporary historians continue to write in the tradition of Beard.³ It will also offer suggestions by both male and female historians on the methods that can be employed to improve the writing, teaching, and way of thinking about the sub-discipline of women's history.

When attempting to understand women's position in history, it is important to



Figure 1 Mary Ritter Beard. Image from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

realize that throughout the myriad of years, history has not always been written solely by and about men.⁴ Plutarch and Boccaccio wrote short histories of females they deemed “women worthies” and felt that education was important for women.⁵ Nuns and courtiers wrote popular biographies of individuals such as queens and religious figures.⁶ In the eighteenth century, women worked as amateur historians, but many considered most of their histories “superficial” due to the fact they wrote about social issues while men were writing about politics, economics and war.⁷ Women’s writing was so popular at one time, that many of these authors relied on their wage for writing as their only source of income. Some could not keep the money they earned, and publishers took advantage of many and then profited from their work. It was said that someone sold a popular Anna Jameson work for a guitar.⁸

Bonnie G. Smith questions if the amateur writings of women were actually the more “authentic and natural” since they pre-dated professionalization and scientific history writing.⁹ Some considered women’s histories un-scientific and sub-standard which was the impetus for the likes of von Ranke and Monod to professionalize the discipline.¹⁰ They considered women “emotional” writers, (especially those such as Germaine de Staël during the French Revolution) but it was a sign of the times and a consequence of their environment, which should not only be labeled to women, since many men and women suffered traumatic experiences and wrote from emotion during times of persecution.¹¹

“Emotional” and “superficial” works were not the only reasons that women were left out of history. According to Joan Wallach Scott, historians had categorized all people under the “idea of man” which meant that all human beings were lumped together in one history; in the meantime, they denied women and people of different ethnic backgrounds the opportunity to share history in their own voices and from their own experiences.¹²

Of the vast array of women’s contributions in writing in the United States, there are four major categories of works: histories of organizations, biographies, histories of social ideas, and social histories.¹³ The first category, histories of organizations, includes the history of the suffrage campaign from the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention up to the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. These histories dedicated much time and effort to why women wanted equality and their goal of achieving “the vote.” The second category’s most popular writing consists of biographies of

individual females. Only the more extraordinary women left behind letters, journals, and genealogical records to assist with the writing of their histories. This was a testament to their education and circumstance.¹⁴ Some of the more popular subjects were the Grimké sisters, Anne Hutchinson, and Margaret Sanger.¹⁵ Etiquette books, cookbooks, child-rearing books, manuals, how-to guides, and books on marriage served the histories of social institutions. This gave a glimpse into the lives and social issues of women of their day.¹⁶ The fourth category are social histories, which historians considered important because they bestowed hope for the future of women's history. They also demonstrated issues that affected the lives of everyday women and how they evolved and conformed to issues such as motherhood, birth control, and social classes.¹⁷

As the discipline of history began to be professionalized, the amateur writing of women was out and the new scientific based writing of elite, university going, white males was in. According to Bonnie G. Smith, "gender influenced what men would include in their histories. If, because of gender, men left women out of history, they would certainly omit them from historiography."¹⁸ Mary Beard also noticed that historians had paid so much attention to the suffrage struggle, that it seemed women did absolutely nothing until the nineteenth century feminist movement.¹⁹ Why would male historians purposely erase women from history? After all, most men married, had children, and lived the same domestic life as the rest of the world. They understood the social issues of the day, and those issues were fine to write about, but the "meat and potatoes" of history (i.e., war, politics, leaders) was more exciting.²⁰ They did not perceive their domestic lives as central to their work, therefore they were able to step back and write from a differing viewpoint—their lives were separated from history. Aside from that, gender and domestic issues have made an important contribution to historiography because it distinguished the "important from the unimportant, the brilliant and the derivative."²¹

Mary Ritter Beard

Any person with an elementary education is familiar with important women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Mary Ritter Beard ranks in importance with these women, yet is a virtual unknown. How could a woman who made such an impact on history be erased from it? Historians considered Mary Beard a progressive, modern writer of "New History" who was devoted to writing history, living history, and re-incorporating women into the

history in which they were wrongly abandoned. In order to understand Mary Beard's moral and intellectual convictions, one must reflect on her background and what paths led her to become the remarkable woman for which she must be remembered.

Mary Ritter was born August 5, 1876, in Indianapolis. She was born to a Republican, Methodist, middle class family who were not well off, but possessed the necessary essentials.²² Her father fought in the Civil War, and eventually went to college and graduated with a degree in law. Her mother assisted her father in studying for and passing the bar, after which he practiced law and was a reformer for the Temperance movement. Mary's siblings were successful in college and she eventually joined them at DePauw University in 1893.²³ While at DePauw, certain "discussion clubs" banned women, and they retaliated by forming clubs of their own. This had an effect on Mary and she would write about her early personal experiences later on in her life. At DePauw, she met her future husband Charles Beard, the man who would become one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century.²⁴ Mary received her undergraduate degree in 1897, and remained in the college community for another year to wait for Charles to graduate in 1898. He went off to England that year while she taught at a local school, and he returned to marry her in 1900. Charles and Mary enrolled in graduate school at Columbia University, but by 1902, Mary was rearing their one year old child, Miriam, so she decided to drop out of school.²⁵ Charles went on to earn advanced degrees and taught at renowned universities while Mary participated as his collaborator, but received no public credit up to that point. Knowing that she was his intellectual equal, yet did not possess the credentials necessary for the recognition, Mary became self-critical which would be evidenced throughout her later work.²⁶

Although Mary was a force in her own right, one cannot discuss her without including her lifelong collaborator, her husband, with whom she was married for nearly fifty years.²⁷ The Beard's family was expanding as she gave birth to a son, William, and their family life was far from typical. The Beards kept homes in Connecticut, Washington D.C., Manhattan, and North Carolina where they associated with people from all walks of life from university faculty members, to lawyers and political activists.²⁸ Some of the Beards' friends did not always get along. The sewer engineers and lawyers sometimes clashed with historians, but it would not be the first time the Beards would be in the midst of conflict—they

simply worked around it in order to keep a constant flow of new ideas in their presence.²⁹

Charles and Mary Beard traveled the world together, visiting various countries such as England, China, and Japan. It was during these visits that Mary's own views of the world had begun to change and influence her life.³⁰ When the Beards lived in England, Mary received her first glimpse of the lifestyle and conditions of the working class poor in the industrial centers. It was something to which she was not accustomed, and the experience pained her, yet interested her in analyzing the history of labor. She and Charles "continued to share in optimistic belief that the study and writing of history could change the path of history."³¹

Mary Beard was a forward thinking, original woman who others considered a radical feminist of her day. What was so remarkable was that she did not fit the stereotypical mold of the radical, militant feminist. For her time, she was atypical, avant-garde, and in a class by herself. Although she would advocate for women's causes, she was quick to offer the opinion that women were not victims of subjection. This line of thinking caused her to become celebrated in some circles, and a pariah in others. Mary possessed an unpopular opinion about women's education that would be a source of irritation to her throughout her life. Mary felt institutions of higher education would restrict women's minds and that women should free themselves from following a curriculum originally designed for men.³² Mary Smith Crocco wrote that Beard "regularly denounced the idea that a good education for women ought to be merely a facsimile of what was offered by men's colleges, a view with widespread currency in the women's colleges."³³ Needless to say, the faculty and students of women's colleges did not receive her book *On Understanding Women* well.³⁴

Mary Beard did not begin her singular literary career until her children were grown. Mary Beard succeeded in supporting her husband's endeavors the way her own mother assisted her father in becoming an attorney. It was now her time to shine all alone. Although she collaborated on several books in a partnership with her husband, she was thirty-nine years old when she published her first book *Women's Work in Municipalities*.³⁵ Margaret Smith Crocco summed up Beard's efforts in this context:

While raising a family and supporting her husband's work, Mary Beard viewed her intellectual and familiar partnership as more radical than that of the feminist career woman of her day. This perspective hints at the central paradox of her life: advocacy for women's place in history and

women's rights yet rejection of feminism, its emphasis on professionalism, and preference for middle class women's needs.³⁶

In Mary Beard's personal masterpiece, *Woman As Force In History* published in 1946, she took a stand and encapsulated into one work the ideas which defined her life's work. She described "man-women relationships" during WWII when men were going off to war and women were going off to work. Men needed women's assistance in order to make their endeavors in the war successful, therefore, a partnership.³⁷ Beard was obstinate and unswerving in her vision of altering the way of thinking about women and women's history. She was unpopular with the women of the militant feminist background because although she craved rights for women, she felt that women were not strictly being oppressed by men, but were oppressing themselves by letting thoughts of oppression take hold of their minds—if they were oppressing themselves, they had the power to free themselves.³⁸ Another central theme of Beard's work was the idea that men and women "launched civilization" together. In order to understand civilization, she felt it meant going back into history to study women's roles in everything from war to politics to economics. It also piqued her interest in anthropology because anthropologists were the ones to declare that women had a part in launching civilization. If anthropologists had the knowledge, then so should the rest of the world.³⁹

Beard felt men purposely left women out of history in order to focus on the areas in which they controlled, such as politics. This gave Mary Beard a backseat to her husband, her collaborator, and those who critiqued their work gave him sole credit for effort that was made between the two. She worked her entire life devoting herself to reconstruct history to include women, and merely received credit for being Charles Beard's wife.⁴⁰ Not only was Mary frustrated by the lack of appreciation among her peers, Charles viewed it as a slap in the face to him as well. On more than one occasion, he would write letters instructing "Macmillan Publishers to avoid quoting reviewers who did not acknowledge the shared authorship of these works."⁴¹ In John Higham's *History*, his bibliography cited a collaborative work between the Beards, yet only gave Charles credit for the work. The book only noted one woman, Mary Beard, and only in the footnotes.⁴² Charles admitted that it was Mary who "widened the frames" of the scope of history which made him successful in including issues other than politics.⁴³ Just like the "man-woman relationships" Mary compared in her book, her husband's success was based on the inclusion of

her skills.

Charles and Mary Beard led an extremely private personal life. Their professional lives were very public, yet they kept a very intensely guarded private side that only their closest friends and family had any idea about. The Beards destroyed any and all correspondence for fear of private letters being published. They also made their friends promise never to publish any personal letters written to them. Charles had been scrutinized in the press for being outspoken against President Roosevelt, and in an ironic twist, perhaps that fear led the Beards to decide to destroy their own history.⁴⁴

Little is known about the Beards' professional relationship. They kept no notes and rarely gave interviews to the press. They had no radio or telephone in their homes and spoke of their working relationship only in general terms. "Some files of correspondence exist in small depositories, but generally they succeeded, as trained historians could, in erasing their personal histories."⁴⁵

Mary Beard lived an extraordinary life as a political activist, feminist and scholar who spent countless hours collecting, archiving and preserving women's histories. Unfortunately, her own biography will never be all inclusive. Thankfully, posterity is able to cherish her work and catch of glimpse of her mind through her words. Her main goal for history was not merely to fill in the blanks, but to incorporate women into an inclusive history.

Incorporating Women into History

It is no secret that historians had disregarded women's history in the past, possibly even more so than any other group mentioned in history.⁴⁶ The number of women mentioned in textbooks is a rather small number, but in the twentieth century, strides had been made to construct a methodology to incorporate women into history and into the curriculum in the classroom.

The first group to attempt to re-incorporate women was not historians, but rather, feminists in the 1960s. Their goal was to fix "the problem of women's role in American life and history."⁴⁷ The feminists, however, were not without their partiality to certain women in their histories. They considered some women too radical, some, not enough. Another problem the feminist writers had, according to Gerda Lerner, was their tunnel vision view that writing women into history was only important to prove that women were an "oppressed group" battling the grips of

their tormentors.⁴⁸ That point of view automatically turned certain women into heroines and left behind the masses. Lerner's view is very reminiscent of Beard's, and her impact is evident in Lerner's work.

Initially, historians wrote "compensatory" histories (works written in order to compensate for the lack of women in history) in order to appease those who called for a woman's history.⁴⁹ For many, writing a few histories of notable women was not enough.⁵⁰ Women are the majority of the population in the world, so why is it so difficult to infuse them into history? The answer to the question would seem obvious to merely "integrate" them back into the telling of history, but Joan R. Gundersen points out that the idea was easier said than done. "While scholars have called for a new synthesis, what we have produced resembles a cookbook of possible questions, approaches or themes rather than a unifying philosophy."⁵¹

There are several challenges historians run into when trying to integrate women into history. The first challenge is attempting to fit women into an active conceptual framework. When this is done, they place women into general categories without thought to their particular needs or specific circumstance.⁵² The second challenge historians face is the new "feminist theory" that demands the inclusion of not only women but addresses "the wrongs of racial, class, and sexual bias."⁵³ This can be a difficult decision for an instructor of history who attempts to include as much as she or he possibly can into a semester, but has to pick and choose what is important enough to fit into a small amount of class time. The third challenge is focusing on a balanced history. This challenge may be the most difficult because trying to represent all women's history in a specified amount of time can be nearly impossible. Taking into consideration that women come from all different social classes, ethnic groups and economic statuses can pose a challenge for the historian compiling a history or a professor completing a syllabus for a term.⁵⁴

The feminist author Gerda Lerner has completed extensive research on gender and women's issues and suggests that history writing is in need of a completely new framework from which to build. There is a need to scrutinize the change in women's roles in their lifetimes in all generations.⁵⁵ It is also important to look beyond the women's rights movements which have had much attention paid to them, but observe the periods before and after. It "is an important aspect of women's history, but it cannot and should not be its central concern."⁵⁶ The history of the mass of women is just as important as individual stand-outs because "women of different classes have different historical experiences."⁵⁷ Historians should not place women into a category of an "oppressed group" since they held power in the

nineteenth century, and notable women such as Queen Elizabeth I and Cleopatra, to name two, held considerable power at one point in their lifetimes. It should be remembered that the roles of men and women are different and should be treated as equal in importance, even while roles are evolving.⁵⁸ Lerner's advice to women is that they should play a central role in historiography and compiling their own histories, always keeping the conceptual framework wide.⁵⁹

Other authors have offered suggestions on how to approach the subject of integrating women into history. Joan Kelly-Gadol states that women should be defined as women since they are the social opposite of the sex of men. Adding sex to the categories of class and race are, she feels, central to analyzing women's history. A major concern is that "periodization" must change when analyzing male and female contribution to history. Female history cannot be compared to, for example, political history.⁶⁰

What field work have contemporary historians accomplished to integrate women into history? In the 1970s, during the height of popularity for women's history, Peter Filene proposed suggestions for a women's history course at the University of North Carolina. He admitted that in the beginning, he was approaching the subject as compensatory history and comparing women's contributions to "a male past."⁶¹ As he furthered his research, he realized that women's contributions to home life and raising children were just as important as men's to the economy and must be duly noted. In his first course on women's history, he suggested an outline that included socio-economic situations of women (including outside employment and housework, marriage, sex), politics, social movements, and family history (photographs, genealogies). He included biographies of notables such as Jane Addams, and works by female authors such as Kate Chopin and Nancy Milford.⁶² His course was an early, yet important, step in integrating women back into history. The early pioneers of women's history courses can be proud that today on nearly every campus of higher education, students can find at least one course in women's studies.

This essay has attempted to serve as a short introduction to the reasons why women have been virtually left out of history and historiography. It has provided a short biography on the life and work of the extraordinary Mary Ritter Beard, who although popular in her time, has been nearly eclipsed by the work of her famous husband. Her work has influenced feminists both positively and negatively, and nearly every feminist work during the second wave of feminism have quoted her

words.⁶³ Each feminist author mentioned in this work either continues to write in the tradition of the Beardian philosophy, or is in some way influenced by it. Whether one agrees or disagrees with her point of view, she had a voice and it was loud and clear.

Contemporary historians have made suggestions concerning how to incorporate women into history. Although there is no set methodology or general philosophy in place as of yet, progress is being made every day in order to give women's studies its very own unique conceptual framework. It should be noted that a new generation of young, ethnic women are entering the discipline of history who are writing from a fresh, new perspective.⁶⁴ In time, all women who came before, and those who come after, will receive the respect they so rightfully deserve.

Notes

1. Mary Ritter Beard, *Woman As Force In History* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1946), vi.

2. Joan R. Gundersen, "Re-Visioning the Past: Toward a More Inclusive Telling of History," *The History Teacher* 20, no. 1 (Nov 1986): 51.

3. "Long History" is a signature term that is used by Mary R. Beard throughout her work *Woman As Force In History* meaning throughout history. The term is also used by contemporary historians when writing about Beard.

4. Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Boston: Harvard University Press), 6.

5. Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' In Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976): 83.

6. Ibid.

7. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, 7.

8. Ibid., 43.

9. Ibid., 7.

10. Ibid., 37.

11. Ibid., 8.

12. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 183.

13. Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy Schrom Dye, "The Problem of Women's History," as found in Berenice A. Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 76-81.

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 80.
16. Ibid., 81.
17. Ibid., 82.
18. Bonnie G. Smith, "Seeing Mary Beard," *Feminist Studies* 10, no.3 (Autumn 1984): 408.
19. Beard, *Woman As Force In History*, 59.
20. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, 71.
21. Ibid.
22. Ann J. Lane, ed., *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000), 13.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 18.
25. Ibid., 22.
26. Nancy F. Cott, ed., *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 18.
27. Lane, *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard*, 3.
28. Ibid., 4-5.
29. Ibid.
30. Cott, *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*, 31.
31. Ibid., 8.
32. Ibid., 38.
33. Margaret Smith Crocco, "Forceful Yet Forgotten: Mary Ritter Beard and the Writing of History," *The History Teacher* 31, no. 1 (Nov 1997): 19.
34. Cott, *Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*, 38.
35. Lane, *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard*, 8.
36. Crocco, "Forceful Yet Forgotten: Mary Ritter Beard and the Writing of History," 11.
37. Beard, *Woman As Force In History*, 16.
38. Lane, *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard*, 1.
39. Cott, *Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*, 32.

40. Lane, *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard*, 2.
41. Crocco, "Forceful Yet Forgotten: Mary Ritter Beard and the Writing of History," 10.
42. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 189.
43. Crocco, "Forceful Yet Forgotten: Mary Ritter Beard and the Writing of History," 15.
44. Cott, *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*, ix-xi.
45. Lane, *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard*, 6.
46. Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women In History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.
47. Ibid., 4.
48. Ibid.
49. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 367.
50. Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History" *Signs* 1, no.4 (Summer 1976): 809.
51. Gundersen, "Re-visioning the Past: Toward a More Inclusive Telling of History," 51.
52. Ibid., 52.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 53.
55. Lerner, "The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History," 10.
56. Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women In History: Definitions and Challenges," *Feminist Studies*, 2, no. ½ (Autumn 1975): 6.
57. Ibid., 5.
58. Lerner, "The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History," 10-14.
59. Ibid.
60. Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," 810.
61. Peter G. Filene, "Integrating Women's History and Regular History," *The History Teacher* 13, no.4 (Aug 1980): 485.
62. Ibid., 486-487.
63. Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women In History*, 14.

64. Crystal Feimster, "A New Generation of Women Historians" as found in Eileen Boris and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Voices of Women Historians: The Personal, The Political, The Professional* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 281.

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