Possibilities of Agency:  
The Impact of the Work of  
Natalie Zemon Davis

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Possibilities of Agency: The Impact of the Work of Natalie Zemon Davis

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Abstract

This study analyses the impact of Natalie Zemon Davis' cultural history on women's and gender history. It explains how she addressed questions of both cultural and self identity and expression. It shows how she avoided many interpretive problems of women's history and argues for the significance of her work to current debates between gender historians and post-structuralists.

Davis' 1970's women's history stands apart from the majority of studies in that field during the same period. Her research into the uses of symbols and ritual forms allowed Davis to write about women as individuals who manipulated cultural forms and norms and who participated in defining the experience and identity of their communities, their cultures, their families and themselves.

As women's history developed into gender history in the early 1980's, historians began to acknowledge the value of Davis' interpretive contributions to women's history for their pertinence to gender history. However, in the 1990's some gender historians have expressed concern over the threat posed to individual agency by the post-structuralist emphasis on constructed experience. Davis has not entered these debates and citations to her by gender historians are minimal. Yet, Davis' cultural and gender history exemplify how the possibilities for individual agency are increased by the idea that there is no experience without representation. The conception of experience as 'fashioned' has been interwoven throughout Davis' work for fifteen years. In her hands, it does not threaten the agency of historical subjects. In fact, it makes individual agency more
complex and challenging by pointing out that individuals create their own systems of meaning while mediating cultural discourse.
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Introduction

In 1965 Natalie Zemon Davis argued that the battle lines of class were not simply mimicked in conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century printing industry. Although Davis did not want to discard class conflict as an interpretive frame, she did want to "redefine it" in the search for "a stronger theory for pulling society together". This was a departure for Davis who, after coming across the Lyon grain riot of 1529 in Henri Hauser's writings on workers and printers, had decided to study the Reformation from a Marxist point of view. Her doctoral dissertation of 1959, "Protestantism and the Printing Workers of Lyon: A Study in the Problem of Religion and Social Class in the Reformation", was the outcome of that decision. However, the findings of that thesis prompted Davis to rethink the significance of social class and of class conflict in religious change.

She came to perceive culture as a driving force of historical change, thus allying herself with scholars such as E. P. Thompson, Charles Tilly, George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm. These scholars can all be distinguished by their early association with Marxism or the Frankfurt School and the dialectical materialism inspired by those traditions. They are also known for differing degrees of

departure from materialist interpretations to considerations of cultural components of experience. Rudé and Tilly did pioneering work in the early 1960's on collective violence and the social composition of crowds. Their innovation was to break away from a tradition of perceiving crowd violence as unstable, unlimited and chaotic. Instead they focussed on the 'social forces' that characterized disturbances. Eric Hobsbawm's book *Primitive Rebels* validated social banditry and millenarianism.\(^3\) He argued that the participants in social and civic disturbances acted according to what E.P. Thompson would later call a "moral economy" peculiar to the values of their community.

The phrase "moral economy" comes from Thompson's "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century."\(^4\) Thompson turned to cultural history in the early 1960's, building on the work of symbolic anthropologists. His early work had been primarily social and economic history of eighteenth century Britain. Thompson thus characterized himself as an "imposter" in that area of history which borrowed from social and symbolic anthropology.\(^5\) Nevertheless, he came to be almost as well known for his 'cultural history' as he was for his classic book, *The Making of the English Working Class*.\(^6\) Thompson himself linked his work with that of Davis, noting that they have in common their earlier Marxist

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methodology and their reactions against "positivistic or utilitarian categories of explanation". In The New Cultural History, Suzanne Desan regards Thompson and Davis as "seminal figures in the development of the cultural approach".

Davis has been an influential contributor to those fields which have emerged in the last thirty years under the rubric of the cultural approach: micro-history, ethno-history, crowd history, and symbolic history. Her eclectic use of the tools of other disciplines such as art history, literary history, the study of folklore and symbolic anthropology have earned her a reputation as a pioneer in the interdisciplinary approach to history. She expanded on the interdisciplinary historical tradition of the French Annales school which focused on long term historical shifts and structures. Using techniques borrowed from demography, economic theory, sociology, climatology and geography, Annales historians rediscovered the mentalités of the common people over the longue durée.

Historians influenced by the Annales school have recognized Davis' work as a model for careful historical use of other interpretive tools. They have also acknowledged Davis' offering of an 'inside view' of an otherwise little known world. They have lauded her insistence on the historical significance of the menu

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people, not as a trivial or uncouth mass of inarticulates, but as a cohesive, structured culture.\textsuperscript{10} Suzanne Desan has written the most comprehensive review of Davis' work on crowds, community and ritual. She noted the "subtle analysis of group dynamics" and the depiction of a lower class who played an active and integral role in the making of their own history. She asserted that Davis "has been particularly effective" at documenting seemingly powerless groups who forge authority within the crevices of social structures.\textsuperscript{11}

Women's historians have acknowledged Davis' influence on women's and gender history, often citing her suggestion that analyses focus on the significance of the sexes. In 1976, Mary Lynn McDougall remarked on the importance to women's history of Davis' interpretive innovation in the study of the so-called inarticulate.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, many gender studies benefitted from Davis' symbolic analyses.

Apart from Desan's and McDougall's comments, however, Davis' reviewers have done little to link her cultural history with her approach to women's and gender history. Cultural historians, struck by the interdisciplinary approach and the 'bringing to life' of the peasant masses, rarely analyse critically her approach to the history of the sexes. Likewise, gender and women's historians have not linked Davis' attribution of agency to female historical subjects with

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\textsuperscript{11} Desan, p. 63.
\end{flushright}
her equally strong stress on the active role of peasants in the making of their cultural identity.

This study pin-points those aspects of Davis' cultural history that led to her unique approach to the history of women. Chapter one identifies pivotal analytical elements of Davis' work: her use of symbolic anthropology and extension of earlier class-based interpretations and the cultural history of the late 1960's. It demonstrates how she used the cultural approach to look at the complex relationship between culture and individual experience. Following the development of Davis' cultural history from 1971 to 1988, it focuses on her treatment of the varied uses and meanings of cultural forms and their role in the creation of identity and experience, because of their pertinence to women's and gender history.

Chapter two examines four common features of women's history in the 1970's and argues that they limited historical analyses by conceptualizing women's past in separate terms and by universalizing those terms. This chapter also introduces Davis' alternatives for writing women's history which, informed by her cultural history, side-stepped interpretive limitations encountered by more widely used approaches.

To measure the impact of Davis' theoretical and practical contributions to the study of women in the past, the thesis analyzes citations to and use of Davis' work in women's histories of the 1970's and in historical studies that employed gender theory in the 1980's. A systematic search of nearly four hundred citations to Davis listed in the Social Science Citation Index between 1972 and
1992 generated analysis of approximately one hundred works. To supplement this analysis and to survey the field of women's history generally, I consulted bibliographical sources and review essays for mention of Davis and treatment of topics related to her work. This secondary search produced over fifty more citations to Davis and further analysis of fifty studies in women's and gender history.

Davis' contributions to women's history in the 1970's enjoyed new popularity and a re-evaluation as gender history emerged in the 1980's. Chapter three therefore argues that Davis' approach to gender, although influenced by the emerging theoretical contributions of gender theorists like Joan Wallach Scott, had its roots in her studies of the relationship between individually and culturally determined aspects of experience and identity.

Chapter three concludes by arguing for the significance of Davis' work to current debates between those gender historians who condone the use of post-structuralism and those who are wary of its contention that there is no experience without representation. Davis bridges the gap that divides both sides of this current debate in gender history. In her most recent work, as well as in her work of

13. Social Science Citation Index. DIALOG File No. 7. Palo Alto, Ca.: DIALOG, 1985-September 11, 1992; Social Science Citation Index. Philadelphia: I.S.I., 1972-1984.
the last twenty years, Davis has tackled the questions of representation, experience and identity that many gender historians are currently struggling with.
Reflecting on the tension between the field of history and the historian's own "brief embodiment of its claims" in her presidential address to the American Historical Association, Natalie Zemon Davis offered a personal exposition of what she has tried to do as an historian. The image of history Davis described in "History's Two Bodies" sums up the ethic at the heart of all her work.

My image of history would have at least two bodies in it, at least two persons talking, arguing, always listening to the other as they gestured at their books; and it would be a film, not a still picture....

Davis' vision emphasizes movement, dialogue, and commitment to an historiographical tradition. One can imagine Davis herself as one of the gesturing scholars, defending the agency of individuals in bringing about historical change. Perhaps she is arguing with another historian or a Renaissance Humanist. In any case, she would be breaking down strict categories of opposition such as individual and community, rich and poor, even Protestant and Catholic.

Davis' ability to link apparent contradictions is perhaps her most notable quality. Where other historians of the 1970's associated Protestantism with printers and Catholicism with journeymen, Natalie Davis sought to dismantle these divisions. Connecting oppositions, however, did not deny the differences that

divided people. Davis kept a dimension of tension in her work by pursuing the varied motivations behind people's choices and circumstances, making room for inconsistencies. The key component to this stance is agency. Natalie Davis found ways to speak of peasants as individuals who made choices in a complicated world rather than as determined by class or religion. She consistently portrayed historical subjects who were themselves responsible for change, and as much as she could, allowed them to speak for themselves.

Davis used the cultural approach to understand the ways ordinary people created and articulated their own and their society’s identities. Using methods that could draw expressions of individual and community identity from the sources themselves, Davis has been careful to distinguish the voices of her subjects from that of herself. To do this she sought out theories from other disciplines. She turned to the interpretive anthropology of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, as well as to the literary structuralism of Mikhail Bakhtin.\textsuperscript{17}

The most visible theoretical influences are ritual theory or symbolic action, social drama, and a text analysis associated with semiotics in its most general sense - the study of patterned communication systems. Resisting functionalism, Davis was always careful to test investigative and interpretive methods of other fields against an historical framework.

Despite its strong theoretical influence, Davis' cultural approach stands out in its fidelity to the voices of the past. Such a

blending of theory and archival integrity is arguably a difficult one to maintain, given the tendency of theory to functionalism. However, Davis, by her own admission, resisted functionalism by borrowing whatever theory gave her the most leverage in analysing a particular historical problem. "This means I don't have to worry about stuffing my people into a single scheme".

Using a variety of interpretive tools, Davis would read rituals and events as 'texts' replete with symbols and collective cultural understandings. With the emphasis on a culture's 'consciousness', its discourse, symbols, and ways of creating meaning in the world, Davis sought to understand how individuals, families, and communities created and used strategies for coping with daily life as well as times of change. She investigated how men and women knew and expressed through metaphor, symbols, formal and popular ritual, what they knew about their world. Through Davis' work we can see how themes such as space, time and community, as well as religious, vocational, sexual and family identity were expressed in action, ritual, riot, and writing.

Ritual theory recognizes the affinities of theatre and belief systems. Life is a stage upon which actors dramatize their ideologies and values or those of the state or religion to which they belong. Victor Turner argues that ritual, arising most commonly out of crises or times of change, has a long term effect of "emphasizing all the more trenchantly the social definitions of the group".20

An event...that falls outside the orthodox classifications of society [read: crisis or change] is, paradoxically, made the ritual occasion for an exhibition of values that relate to the community as a whole, as a homogenous, unstructured entity transcends its differentiations and contradictions.21

Turner also acknowledges that during ritual, withdrawal from normal modes of socialization (role or status reversals) can be potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values of the culture.22 However, he is hesitant to state conclusively that as a general rule such scrutinization does anything other than re-affirm and legitimize the prevailing structure of the community.

As described by Clifford Geertz, religious and other public rituals share the aspect of repetitive performance - the re-enactment and thus re-experiencing of known form. The power of theatre is, as Charles Morgan puts it, "the incompleteness of a known completion".23 Geertz explains that ritual theory brings out the temporal and collective dimensions of public action with particular sharpness and brings out its power to transmute, not just opinions but the people who hold them. However, by arguing for the unity of

23. Quoted in Geertz, p. 28.
purpose of social dramas and portraying public action in a systematic fashion, ritual theory runs the risk of "formally homogenizing disparate events".24

The symbolic action approach, on the other hand, deals with the more individuating details of actions. Symbolic action theorists, notably, Kenneth Burke and Ernst Cassirer, allow us to conceive of language as symbolic of action. The key here is the concept of inscription - the fixation of meaning. The textual/symbolic action approach trains its attention on how meaning is inscribed, on what its vehicles are and how they work, and on the relationship between meaning and the interpretation of events.25 Further, as in semiotics, conceiving of behaviours as words allows for a flexibility in which meanings can vary according to the situation in which they occur.

Clifford Geertz defines the interpretive study of culture as an attempt to come to terms with the diversity of ways human beings construct their lives as they live them.26 He examines the ways the world is talked about rather than the ways it intrinsically is and stresses that cultural phenomena should be treated as "significative systems posing expositive questions".27 Both Davis and E.P. Thompson acknowledge a debt to 'Geertzian' interpretive anthropology for helping them to see old problems in new ways.28 Specifically, Davis remarks that the impact of anthropology on her

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24. Geertz, p. 28.
25. Geertz, p. 31.
26. Geertz, Introduction to Local Knowledge, p. 16.
own work has been to reinforce her sense not of the changeless past, but of the varieties of human experience.  

The first half of the 1970's saw Davis turn her attention to misrule. In "Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth Century France", she analyzed festive and ritual misrule in villages and towns. She focused on carnival, the notion of the world-turned-upside-down, and community rituals such as charivari. She linked these forms to crowd behaviour in religious and civic disturbances. During carnival, the privileged moment for such behaviours, youth groups and lay confraternities were responsible for spreading carnival festivities throughout the village or town. Abbots, Princes, Barons, Bishops, Admirals, Counts, and Princesses reigned over Kingdoms of Misrule and Abbeys of Fools. Lords of Misprint issued mock declarations and Judges heard cases at the Bench of Bad Advice. Infantries were led by Mere Folle, often a man dressed in women's clothing. In Rouen, the Abbott of Conards had serving him the Prince of Improvidence, the Cardinal of Bad Measure, Bishop Flatpurse, Duke Kickass and the Grand Patriarch of Syphilitics.

Davis' sources for the reasons of misrule were the Renaissance humanists, modern historians of literature who had

treated festive organisations and customs as sources for Renaissance theatre, and theoreticians of play and recreation. Davis found that from the Renaissance to our own day two modes of explanation dominated the study of festive forms, one historical, the other functional.32

The historical theories Davis cited contend that participants in misrule were either acting out ancient and magical customs whose meaning had long since been forgotten, or else were imitating their social superiors for imitation's sake. Functional theories see misrule as a pre-political safety valve or else as a manifestation of order in primitive societies lacking in contractual relationships.33

Alternatively, Victor Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin see topsy-turvy play or rite as present in all societies. For Turner, as Davis explains, the ritual of status reversal loosens the rigors of structured society and infuses through the system, at least temporarily, the values of an egalitarian society.34 Again, Turner reservedly argues that these rituals underlie the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behaviour between the various estates of society.35

For Bakhtin, carnival is always a source of liberation, destruction and renewal. Carnival does not reinforce the serious institutions and rhythms of society - it helps change them. Carnival provided people with an actual experience of life without hierarchy as against the fixed categories of official medieval culture. Mikhail Bakhtin believed that sixteenth century people existed in a context

34. Davis, "Reasons", p. 103.
that can only be described as a two-world condition. The two-world condition signifies the dual nature of sixteenth century culture. Peasants and city-folk, argued Bakhtin, vacillated between official and non-official ways of being. Using language and enacting values in ways that both undermined and re-inforced the traditional values of the community was a natural response of peasant culture to the fixed categories of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal life.36

Davis, taking her cue from Bakhtin, argued that carnival festivities were a treatment of reality that was no less valid than reality itself. In these ways, otherwise inarticulate masses of peasants criticized what they perceived to be misrule among the upper orders as well as among themselves, as was the case in charivaris meant to regulate village standards regarding marriage and sexual relations. Davis argued that festive folly had no single functional explanation. Misrule and the carnival world of topsy-turvy was an important part of every day life and often spilled over into non-festive, official time. The theatrics and role-playing that carnival entailed were not isolated elements of sixteenth century town experience. Rebellions often borrowed from carnival with cross-dressing rebels utilizing the critical powers of someone like Mere Folle. Furthermore, the public humiliation of a wrong-doer in the community, the ritual called charivari, often consisted of an innocent participant acting-out the role of the accused party and suffering the humiliation. While charivari was a direct example of a carnival treatment of a real situation such as adultery, so too, carnival itself was a treatment of reality.

Furthermore, Davis cites numerous examples where carnival crossed the line between festive time and official time. Raucous gangs of youth known as the Abbeys of misrule had prescribed roles to play at weddings and were responsible for carrying out certain traditions like ringing the bells for the dead on All Souls' Day. Moreover, the relation between 'real' politics and the political nature of misrule are evident in examples where carnival misrule turned into rebellion.

According to Natalie Davis, festive misrule was a way that a peasant community defended its identity against the outside world. It was an important channel for criticism and exemplifies the way in which the so-called inarticulate seize upon older social forms and change them to fit their needs. She stresses the rule and the rationale in popular festivals and the extent to which they remain in close touch with the realities of community and marriage.38

In "Rites of Violence", where Davis repeatedly used words that describe the theatrical element in culture, she moved further into the realm of symbolic action. She talks of a repertory of actions used in dramatic demonstration. She describes the acting out of roles during riot that would not have been unfamiliar to the peasant who had participated in carnival role-playing. For Davis, violent behaviour had some structure to it, here dramatic and ritual. The

everyday actions of peasants, from the violent to the sacred, were social drama.40

"Rites of Violence" continued the work on crowds started by George Rudé and Charles Tilly. Rudé treated riot and social disturbances as reflective of the social patterns of a pre-industrial age. In other words, he linked the social forces inherent in any public disturbance to the dominant hierarchies prevailing in that age and locality.41 Charles Tilly took Rudé's analysis one step further by questioning whether there is always a close correspondance between class consciousness and forms of political action.42

In the tradition of Rudé and Tilly then, Davis explains that now "we may see crowds as prompted by political and moral traditions that legitimize and even prescribe their violence". We see rioters as men and women who have some stake in their community. We may see their violence, however cruel, as "aimed at defined targets and selected from a repertory of traditional punishments and forms of destruction".43 However, Davis contends that popular religious violence is not always characterized by economics and class conflict, as Rudé might have argued.44 Instead, Davis agrees with Thompson's contention in the "Moral Economy of the English Crowd", that religious riots were dramatic demonstrations often

43. Davis, "Rites", p. 154.
44. Janine Estebe argued a similar point to Rudé's in her comment on "The Rites of Violence", see Natalie Davis and Janine Estebe, "Debate. The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth Century France", Past and Present, 67: 127-130.
meant to take the place of a government seen to have failed. The sources for religious violence could be found in the religious and social experience of the local community and often provided the space and time at which riots occurred.

Davis noted the similarities between charivari and religious violence and finds that riot is commonly timed to religious or community ritual. From the places, such as churches, at which riots erupted, to the times, such as feast days, when they took place, riots often seemed an uncanny continuation of rite. Riots might become farcical (and, in fact, murder came to be called farce in Macon) while funerals could turn into massacres. Furthermore, popular festive forms made their way into riot as Catholic priests were paraded on donkeys (a charivari) sometimes even after they were killed.

Symbols taken from liturgy or the Bible might just as easily appear in Reformation riot as in worship. Common symbols of purification (fire, water) pop up variously in religious ritual, religious riot, charivari and political mockery. When Protestants paraded a Catholic object of worship backward on an ass and then burned it and threw it in the river, they were combining the associative powers of rituals and symbols known to mean something to the community. The line between the sacred and the profane is blurred in these episodes while "the crowds seem to be moving back and forth between the rites of violence and the realm of comedy".

In the mid 1970's, Davis' forays into expressions of sixteenth century cultural experience deepened. Moving from the notion that meaning can be fixed through symbols and can change as fluidly as that of words according to the context in which they are used, she continued to read the activities of her subjects as languages. The last two articles in *Society and Culture* deal directly with the relationship between the printed sources that are traditionally analysed by historians and the oral and symbolic ones Davis was now studying.

In "Printing and the People", she tried to detect the influence and effects of printing and codification. She asked if printing could have mattered that much to the people in a period when literacy was still low. After pointing out some methodological drawbacks of trying to understand people through popular books, Davis suggested two ways to understand the connections between people and printing. First, supplement thematic analysis of texts with evidence about audiences that can provide a context for meanings and uses of books. Secondly, consider the printed book not merely a source for ideas and images, but as a carrier of relationships. In contrast to the argument that perceived printing in the sixteenth century as an ossifying control factor, Davis saw social structure and values as channeling the uses of literacy and printing. For her, the role of culture was paramount. While printing did carry that threat of control, and did, over centuries, change our relationship to the spoken word, it did not in the sixteenth century silence oral culture or replace learning by doing. Oral culture was an independent

47. Davis, "Printing and the People" in *Society and Culture*. pp. 189-226.
discourse which was not directly changed or replaced by standardization from above.  

In "Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors", Davis examined the particularity of proverbs according to region and the context in which they were used. She also solidified her position that while the printed word can nullify the meanings created by an oral tradition, it does not necessarily make them stagnant for the peasants who use them daily.

In "Proverbial Wisdom" Davis explains that the growth of printing was accompanied by a movement among learned men to capture the national character of France. Coupled with a romanticization of 'peasant ways', this drive to nationalize the culture consisted of collecting the proverbial wisdom of the 'simple folk' and demonstrating some notion of cross-country sensibility. Ironically, a single national character, a 'Frenchness', was the very thing that violated the plurality that in reality characterized the regional areas called France. As Davis demonstrated, while the *menu peuple* allowed flexible and diverse meanings for a single proverb, the learned collectors more often than not offered several examples of a single meaning. She concluded "Proverbial Wisdom" with a caution that historians be aware that studying oral or partially literate cultures (those familiar to anthropologists) implies using sources whose rules we do not understand. Like the learned humanists of the sixteenth century, twentieth century

historians may give the local context to a proverb or a custom, but we still "disembed" it from its culture, not always thinking about how it was used or what it meant locally.

Davis' admonition to historians hinted at a theme that would weave throughout all her work in the next fifteen years. Her writing existed on at least two levels. On one level, she described the various ways by which people created meaning and told the stories of their lives through action. On another level, she was also keenly aware of her own modes of story telling and creation of meaning. Historian Stephen Greenblatt's term "self-fashioning" is instructive here. Davis extended the Renaissance concept of the forming or "fashioning" of the self to a wider range of situations and social groups. A Humanist's life story used the same story-telling techniques and served similar aims as a peasant's story of his life, as a village or culture's expressions of itself, a family's formulation of who it was, as well as the historian's fashioning of past events.

Of course, Davis' awareness that the narrative she found in her sources were made up as much as she herself made up her narratives led her directly to the boundaries of truth and doubt where she engaged in her own carnival of free-play with the sacred. Her first foray into this shifty ground appeared in 1977 in the article "Ghosts, Kin and Progeny". Rather than read family wills and records to understand what families were like, Davis read them to

understand what families thought they were like; to glean how a wealthy printer's widow, for example, wanted the family to be perceived by her children's children.

Of course there were other factors that help explain the early-modern family's sense of ordering and strategy. As Davis explains, the powers of the feudal lords and of distant kin had been sufficiently eroded by the mid-sixteenth century to give better-off families a freer hand. Furthermore, with the expansion of the urban economy, with some increase in geographical mobility, and with the multiplication of crafts, careers and offices, more choices opened up before families - and the response to more choices can be new plans and new forms of control.56

The most significant change in family strategy was the new sense of the family in time - what Davis called the arrow of family fortunes in historical time.57 This involved a new sense of the relations between the living and the dead; a re-evaluation or re-affirmation of the ordering of the immediate family relations; and the organization and sometimes prescription of the childrens' futures, including dowries and planned marriages for the girls and occupations for the boys.

Davis argued that there were many ways to give cultural expression to this new sense of the family in time. Relations between the living and the dead could be given expression through funerals and mourning customs, through memories, and through emblems, treasured objects and beliefs about blood and family stock. However,

57. Davis, "Ghosts", p. 92.
as Davis pointed out, the most important cultural source for a whole-hearted sense of family identity and aspiration was memory - the family history.

The family history is significant because it involves manipulation of identity - fashioning. As Davis succinctly put it, "unlike tombs, fingernails, and hair, it could move beyond mere conservation to change", 58 especially since in many households it was passed on orally. 59

The formation and articulation of community identity, was the focus of "The Sacred and the Body Social." 60 Continuing the symbolic analyses begun eight years earlier in "Rites of Violence", Davis described the ways in which religion formed and gave expression to urban values and mentality. She commented that historians may have examined doctrine and social and ethical teachings of churches more than liturgy and other forms of worship, supplication and sacrifice. Rather than just read what Catholic and Protestant spokespersons had to say about the body social, Davis also looked at the meanings of metaphors used in religious material or implied by ecclesiastical organization.

Davis approached Catholicism and Protestantism as two languages which describe, mark and interpret three aspects of urban life - space, time, and community. 61 In addition to the religious

59. However, even at the middle levels of sixteenth and seventeenth century French society, the family history was becoming a written genre, therefore allowing historians to examine how identity was fashioned and articulated.
symbolism about the body used in Religious processions and rituals, Davis found that each "language" was "in part inflected and coloured by the distinctive experience of the people who used it." In "The Sacred and the Body Social" Davis combined a symbolic analysis informed by anthropology with elements of ritual theory. As she pointed out, religious processions were dramatized statements about the community's identity and physical boundaries. The ritualized Protestant and Catholic 'statements' of the boundaries of the body social were given the freedom, in Davis' analysis, to share common cultural experiences while saying very different things. This is because, for Davis, the formation of identity - community or individual - had to be seen in relation to the various groups to which people belonged.

Identity, like that of the peasant Mennochio in Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, includes religious and cultural experience, intellectual movements and currents of the day (no matter how far removed from the village locale), family experience, and the individual's own particular spin on all of these. Individualism is not universal in Davis' conception of the sixteenth century. It is not non-existent either. As Davis explains in "Boundaries and the Sense of Self", Lockean individualism is not exclusive to Locke's day, as is evidenced by a sixteenth century woman's assertion that "Paris est au Roy et mon corps est a moy".

64. "Paris is the King's and my body is mine." Davis, "Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth Century France" in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David E. Wellbery, eds., *Reconstructing
However, a sense of individual autonomy is mediated and prompted by a sense of oneself tied to others.

The family histories discussed in "Ghosts, Kin and Progeny" passed on to descendants a sense of identity with the arrow of family fortune. The 'Lives' of the Renaissance thinkers such as Modena, Montaigne, Girolamo Cardano, and Teresa of Avila suggest to Davis that "certain forms of embeddedness - most especially in the family - could assist in consciousness of self".65 Kinfolk were often imagined or stated as the intended audience and Davis contends that playing oneself off against these relatives was a major part of self-revelation.66 Virtue among children of both sexes reflected on the family at large as the virtue of the stock influenced the children. Finally, while our twentieth century perception of the Renaissance patriarchal family accords women almost no individual autonomy, Davis explains how women's individuality can be detected in relation to family and community responsibility. Restrictions on property ownership did not stop some women from articulating identity in their wills where they itemized (on a scale of best to worst) offerings of petticoats and fur caps to close friends and relations. Additionally, loans listed and/or forgiven in women's wills and the mention of god-children can indicate, not only a woman's standing in relation to the community and the extended family, but also the intersection of community, family and individual factors in determining her identity. The notion of the private world and its

constraints on women's identity is then made problematic when seen in a context of important, semi-public family relations and ties.67

Both Leon Modena and Michel de Montaigne deal with the relation between their private and public, or inner and outer, selves. For Modena, there is a strong contrast between the two, each constituting different representations of the same person, each equally true.68 For Montaigne, the relation is a knotty one. He describes his *essais* as presenting himself to others "not as a grammarian or a poet or a jurist" but "by his universal being".69 He also sees himself as part of his father's design. In either case, the dividing line between where an individual ends and the surrounding kin or community begin is slippery and blurred.

This slippery line between individual and community identity lends force to Davis' earlier argument about the ability of carnival role-playing to truly criticize and possibly create change. If the carnival mask is seen in the light of self-fashioning then the village that wears one incarnates a new identity. Moreover, if the private and the public selves are representations of the same person, then the carnival identity of the community is as valid and real to the inhabitants as the more 'ordinary' state-sanctioned version.

It is within this framework of masking and false identity that Davis re-constructed the story of Martin Guerre, the Artigat peasant who disappeared from his marriage and his village only to come back years later and find another man literally in his place.70 For

68. Davis, "Fame and Secrecy", p. 115.
69. Davis, "Fame and Secrecy", pp. 105 and 115.
Davis, the Martin Guerre imposture is not an isolated incident or a disconnected monstrosity. It is "an extreme and disturbing case on a sixteenth century spectrum of personal change" for the purposes of play or advantage. Arnaud du Tilh, the trickster, crossed the line from play-with-identity to transgression, taking the mask of carnival from the un-official realm to the official.

Davis' analysis of Martin Guerre rests on a conception of the sixteenth century where external attributes, social roles and contractual places play a strong role in determining identity. She is not deterministic about these factors, however. She takes the Martin Guerre story as an indication that identity is never fixed and sure, even with the help of such external attributes. She places Arnaud du Tilh (and the invented marriage created with his colluding new wife, Bertrande Guerre) squarely in a sixteenth century context, one where the "individual is a work of art" and where Montaigne stated that "men form and fashion themselves..., for dissimulation is among the most notable qualities of this century".

With Montaigne, The Return of Martin Guerre argues for the presence of invention everywhere in speech and culture, and yet affirms, "we are human beings, and hold together only by our word." In 1988 Davis was 'taken to task' by fellow historian Robert Finlay for conjecture in The Return of Martin Guerre. In her response, Davis argued that her whole book was an exploration of

74. Davis, "On the Lame", p. 599.
truth and doubt. She wanted to recreate the complexity in historical experience as well as recapture the interplay between the socially determined and the chosen. What Finlay saw as conjecture, Davis saw as implications of literary construction for historical representation.76

These implications had been the focus of Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France, written in 1987, a year before Finlay's attack on Davis and her reply.77 In Fiction, Davis analysed modes of story telling to ascertain common cultural understandings of time, symbolism and narrative as ways of making sense of the world. Understanding the relationship between how a culture makes meaning and how it tells stories was a logical outcome of the combination in Davis' work of cultural meaning and expression and the broadened sense of self-fashioning seen in works like "Ghosts, Kin and Progeny" and "The Sacred and the Body Social". The connections between an individual's version of a happening and the general idiom from which he or she must draw to give meaning to the story is reminiscent of the dynamic between individual identity and common cultural links discussed earlier. In Fiction in the Archives, Davis made the centre of the analysis the crafting of a narrative - the forming, shaping, moulding elements. She asked how peasants told stories as well as what they thought a good story was. She wondered how, through narrative, they made sense of the unexpected and built

coherence into their immediate experience. She explored the
different story-telling techniques and the varying rules for plot
required by men and women to make their respective stories
plausible and pardonable. How did the rules for plot interact with
wider contemporary habits of explanation, description and
evaluation?\textsuperscript{78}

Clearly, Davis was also addressing the questions surrounding
the fashioning of historical events by historians. How much do
contemporary forms of emplotment and habits of explanation mould
our tellings of stories past? Although Davis did not make such
questions an explicit theme of \textit{Fiction}, her re-telling of the story of
Martin Guerre and "On the Lame" made truth and doubt in historical
construction a primary theme.

The play with the range between truth and doubt opens the
doors to multiple ways of perceiving and ordering the world - a range
of possible truths. Calling into question the border which separates
that which is true from that which is not true reveals that the 'truth'
as a universal norm is a myth which suppresses other possibilities.
This same principle can be applied to the overlap of official and non-
official ways of being, seen in "The Reasons of Misrule."
Moreover, it would provide Davis with a unique way of perceiving
the opposition man/woman. The manifestations of the dichotomy
universal/other in other categorical oppositions became, in the
1980's, an instructive tool for the use of gender as an analytical
category.

\textsuperscript{78} Davis, \textit{Fiction}, p. 4.
Natalie Davis observed dichotomies everywhere, but they were not necessarily always the most obvious, such as Protestant or Catholic. Furthermore, almost all of her work is distinguished by her linking of the paradoxes that separate oppositions. In "The Rites of Violence" we saw the movement from rite to violence and from ritual to comedy. Davis explained the complicated relationship between the sacred and the profane in "Rites" and showed its metaphorical articulations by the two languages of Protestantism and Catholicism in "The Sacred and the Body Social." She explored the degrees of influence of community and individual identity, questioning the unrelatedness of the private and the public. In "Printing and the People" Davis explained that books can be seen as carriers of relationships, suggesting the intersection of broad and differing determinants of experience and identity.

The dismantling of the barriers that divide oppositional dichotomies was a trademark of Davis' cultural and symbolic history that made her contributions to women's and gender history unique. Her empirical studies of women consistently linked the paradoxical symbols of the sexes and examined the meanings of metaphors used to define women and men in their historical contexts. She regularly emphasized the varieties of human experience, the range of possible responses to and expressions of experience, as well as the ways that experience is mediated and fashioned by discourses and by the imagination. Davis transferred these qualities to her women's and gender history and to all her later work, showing, not just the possibilities of cultural history, but possibilities in history.
Until the early 1970's the project of restoring women to the historical record was limited to isolated examples of great women in history written by historians who were anomalies in their field. Historians of the last twenty years have moved away from descriptions of 'women worthies', toward analyses of the way notions of the sexes operate in social organisation. Although Natalie Zemon Davis has been part of that generation of women historians, she stands out because her women's history was informed by cultural history and anthropology. The strength of Davis' women's history has been her consistent portrayal of women as having agency, not simply living out patriarchal prescriptions.

The first section of this chapter outlines some of the interpretive problems historians faced in the first decade of making women in history visible. A 1972 series on women in the Reformation provides a jumping-off point for discussion of interpretive problems. This discussion examines the ways historians have addressed women's seeming inactivity in historical events. It then explores the separation of women from men in historical analyses, specifically in the separate spheres approach. It identifies problems like the tendency to universalize about women's oppression or to privilege ideas of women's 'culture' or women's 'values'. Finally, it looks at the use of universalized dichotomous pairings such as 'woman is to man as nature is to culture'.

The second section will demonstrate how, with tools from cultural history, Davis dismantled barriers and insisted on the agency
of women and on the *significance* of the sexes. She avoided universalizations about women by underscoring varieties of experiences. She explored paradox and binary oppositions in cultural phenomena, but not always those universalized by many women's historians. She allowed her sources to supply the oppositional categories and acknowledged contradictions to them. Her contributions to the field of women's history and the history of the sexes would resonate for historians of women twenty years after her first forays into the subject.

The primary task of 'herstory' in the 1970's was to make visible women whose pasts had been eclipsed by what many termed 'malestream' history. Historians included women in already received categories of historical analysis. Many historians attempted to add women to established theoretical frameworks, such as Marxism. Some studied prescriptive literature and dominant attitudes toward women and used these to account for women's roles. These practices, however, illustrated that re-writing history to include women would take more than just the addition of women to traditional historical analyses.79 The four papers from a 1972 series on women in the Reformation illustrate the way some historians

attempted to include women and the roots of some of the interpretive problems with 1970's women's history. Reformation historian Roland Bainton introduced the three papers of this series: Miriam Chrisman's "Women in the Reformation in Strasbourg 1490 - 1530", Nancy L. Roelker's "The Role of Noblewomen in the French Reformation" and Charmarie Jenkins Blaisdell's "Renée de France Between Reform and Counter-Reform."

Blaisdell's article belongs to a category of history Natalie Davis termed "women worthies". Although important, exceptional women in history were, after all, exceptions, and did not represent the majority of Europe's female population in the sixteenth century. The focus on 'exceptional' women who are noted for participating in what is commonly regarded as a male-dominated realm in fact supports the idea that women did not make history. A similar comment can be made about Roelker's description of fortunate and often well-educated French noblewomen in the Reformation.

"Women in the Reformation in Strasbourg 1490 - 1530" argues that women played no role in bringing about the Reformation in Strasbourg. Miriam Chrisman contends that women lived in a

82. It should be noted here that Davis herself has made use of studies on Europe's learned women of the past, such as Marguerite de Navarre and Louise Labé. See Society and Culture, especially pp. 73-86; and Fiction, pp. 105 and 107-109.
private world in the home, and did not usually participate in the public realm. Because of the domestic, enclosed nature of women's lives, the Reformation was not an issue upon which they could make a great impact. Clerical celibacy, however, affected women's lives, even if indirectly. According to Chrisman, the status of women was opened for discussion by this hotly debated question because of the centrality of marriage and wifehood in debates over the sexual practices of the clergy. Chrisman's conclusion is that the Protestant position on marriage of the clergy exalted both marriage, as a partnership before God, and couples, as co-workers in the struggle to achieve salvation.

Roland Bainton's introduction, a less focused argument than the other essays, simply doubts that women participated in the Reformation in any serious way and then blames them for this inaction.

Why did these women not write theologies? Were they not interested in theology or did they accept the silence imposed on them by the Pauline injunction? They did write devotional tracts and poetry. Have women taken the view that a religious belief should not be subjected to vivisection but simply believed to the death?

Most, if not all, of the analytical weaknesses with which women's history was concerned in the mid-1970's are demonstrated or foreshadowed in Chrisman's and Bainton's articles. First and foremost is the early phenomenon of applying women to already established, traditional categories of analysis, ones which subsequently proved inaccurate for the study of women. For example, the opening sentence to Chrisman's paper stated that

83. Bainton, p. 142.
"women were not directly involved in bringing about the Reformation in Strasbourg". Chrisman did not consider redefining the meaning of 'involvement' and evaluating women's activities on their own terms. In the same way that women's seeming non-involvement in the economy would later be reversed by analyses of the household economy or shadow work, 'involvement' in bringing about social change could be conceptualized in broader terms. Roland Bainton's questions suffer from the same oversight.

These authors apply women to categories of historical analysis that were conceived of when men's actions were the focus of historical study. These categories do not constitute the only sites for analysis of human activity and so should not be presented as a universal standard to which women are compared. The establishment of a universal standard necessitates that deviations from it be seen as particularities, peculiarities, exceptions. Such conceptual closure excludes difference. As historians realized that categories applicable to interpretation of men in history were not always applicable to women, they began to conceive of a separate women's realm and analytical category. Inextricable from this concept, however, was the tendency toward universalizing about "women's experience".

84. Chrisman, p. 143.
85. Joan Kelly's article "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" exemplifies the significance of this conceptual shift. She forcefully argues that the developments for which the Renaissance is known "affected women adversely, so much so that there was no renaissance for women - at least, not during the Renaissance." Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). p. 19.
A functional analysis of the separate spheres, as Louise Tilly pointed out in 1989, has been a major orienting principle for women's history.\textsuperscript{86} The separate spheres analysis conceives of men's sphere in the public realm associated with money, business and work while the women reside in the private realm associated with children, love, and domesticity. Chrisman's statement that women had no part in the public life of Strasbourg and that their function "was a private one; within the family and the household"\textsuperscript{87} betrays a reliance on the separate spheres approach. Although she acknowledged the widow as the exception, she contended that the widow's primary role as wife and mother was not changed by her economic activity - the latter was simply an extension of her familial responsibilities, the role of preserving the stability, the property, and succession of the family.\textsuperscript{88}

Chrisman's evaluation of the widow's economic activity as secondary to her primary role as wife and mother is an interpretive judgement characteristic of many women's histories in the 1970's. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observed that historians of women have tended to emphasize the distinctive attributes that differentiate the lives of all women from those of all men. "They have stressed the gap that separates most female lives from public events".\textsuperscript{89} Fox-Genovese recognized that it would be unfair to say that such a theory exclusively emphasizes the private character of female experience. She noted that "it also points to the \textit{extension} of women's private

\textsuperscript{87} Chrisman, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{88} Chrisman, p. 143-44.
\textsuperscript{89} Fox-Genovese, p. 12.
experience into the public realm...". \(^{90}\) [my emphasis]. Note that according to this approach what women did do in the public sphere was still moored to a functional analysis of separate spheres. These activities are awarded only secondary importance as extensions of private life.

Louise Tilly has argued that the problem of focusing on certain arenas of human activity is one that should be all too familiar to women's historians as it is exactly that which they have sought to correct. \(^{91}\) Women's absence from the history books is precisely due to a singular, short-sighted focus on men's activities. Ironically, the privileging of certain problems and specific areas of activity is a factor in the separate spheres analysis. Even when women are recognized for work in the public sphere, such work is accorded private status as it is often the same work women once did in the home. Such a hierarchy of activities prevents historians from acknowledging what may have been significant and revealing aspects of women's lives. Therefore, it demonstrates the limits put on analysis by the perception of women as constricted and oppressed.

The impetus to prove women's oppression in history was closely linked to the debate over 'feminist history'. The question that best characterized this discussion was whether or not the central orienting principle behind histories of women should be 'feminist' in outlook. Feminist history, in such an approach, would be history that asked as its most basic question, why and how has the

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\(^{90}\) Fox-Genovese, p. 12.

\(^{91}\) Tilly, p. 447.
subjugation of women endured for so long?92 In these cases, women's subjugation was rarely defined, and ultimately relied on more emotive than cognitive power. Furthermore, structuring histories around the notion of women's eternal suffering under sexism passes verdict on the meaning of women's experiences before study has begun and despite women's own valuation of their lives. This tendency is described by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese as "the frying pan of ubiquitous sexual conspiracy" from which we must avoid jumping "into the fire of complacent functionalism".93 Lumping the wide range of women's experiences under the oppression of womanhood94 encourages stereotypes of women's 'separate past'. In such formulations, all women's positive activities are assessed as resistance to an otherwise constricted existence.

Interwoven through the separate spheres approach was the tendency to write of women as a single, monolithic entity and "women's culture" and "women's values" as if such things were identifiable. As Fox-Genovese conceded, it is inviting to seek female powers, female spaces, even discrete female cultures or worldviews within the life of any community. However, she continued to argue that the focus on women's domestic culture ignores the varieties of domestic life.95 Nancy Cott's Bonds of Womanhood96 is an example of such a singular focus, one which

93. Fox-Genovese, p. 15.
94. Fox-Genovese, p. 29.
95. Fox-Genovese, p. 7.
Fox-Genovese maintained accepts the dominant male view of woman as "the Other" and merely tries to turn it to advantage.97

A 1980 series of essays entitled "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium" points us to the possibility that "women's culture" was a forceful and widely used notion in women's history in the 1970's.98 The authors expressed fears that studies of "women's culture" were close to replacing those of women's politics in histories of women's collective lives.99 Not one of the five historians participating in the symposium challenged the notion of a woman's culture itself.

Another telling example is Martha Vicinus' 1985 book Independent Women: Work and Community for Women, 1850 - 1920.100 In Independent Women, Martha Vicinus brings together different women's communities and occupations in the nineteenth century and argues for their unity of purpose. Vicinus argues for a quintessential community of women. She attempts to show how, for example, "...nursing did not lead to the creation of real communities of women, as with the other occupations discussed here,...".101 It is not made clear how other communities lived up to her paradigm of a real community of women, nor is it ever explained what a real community of women is. Vicinus' argument depends on the nineteenth century independent women's construction of society that

101. Vicinus, p. 87.
places women and "women's values" in "real" communities which exist in opposition to "a world that seemed materialistic, godless and male".¹⁰²

Nowhere is the notion of a distinctive women's culture more at home than when it is wed with the use of universal polarities. The use of universal polarities entails matching binary oppositions such as 'domestic versus public' or 'nature versus culture' with the dichotomy woman/man. Binary oppositions are then taken as directly corresponding explanations for the opposition of the sexes. An influential advocate of this approach was Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, the American anthropologist and feminist.¹⁰³ Although Rosaldo herself cautioned against the dangers of strict categories such as private and public, she had earlier argued for their utility in cross-cultural understandings of women's place in society.¹⁰⁴ Many historians of women built on this notion which integrated well with the separate spheres analysis and which snow-balled into a larger analytical approach. This kind of analysis, however, assumes that oppositions such as 'nature versus culture' existed in all societies without variation. Furthermore, it too easily legitimizes an essential separation of women from men, such as in the separate spheres approach, and the search for uniformity in women's experiences.

¹⁰². Vicinus, p. 83.
¹⁰⁴. Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology".
Natalie Davis remarked that the search for universals, for sameness, in women's experience made women always resisters or victims. Rather than focus on restrictions put on women, Davis explored possibilities and resources available to early modern women. Her contributions to the field of women's history were both empirical and theoretical. "City Women and Religious Change", her first scholarly publication to focus on women, appeared in 1973.

This article was followed by "Women on Top" (1975), "Gender and Genre", and "Women in the Crafts" (both 1980). In these four research essays, and in her other works that focused less exclusively on women, Davis demonstrated her approaches practically. In 1975, Davis wrote her first review essay of the field of women's history. "Women's History' in Transition: The European Case" was a comprehensive evaluation of women's historiography in which Davis explained the theoretical and interpretive bases upon which she undertook research on women. Exploring these pieces reveals how

105. Davis, "What is Women's History?" History Today 35 (June 1985): 41.
Davis avoided the problems characteristic of women's history in the 1970's.

Because women's oppression was never a guiding principle for Davis' research, women in her studies exhibit a marked difference from those in Bainton's and Chrisman's pieces. In "City Women and Religious Change" Davis assumes that women participated in bringing about Reformation change. Secondly, she does not limit her search for women's action to traditional contributions such as those listed by Bainton. Yet, the alternative to Bainton's approach is not to see women as passively responding to social change. Davis considers every aspect of a city woman's activity, from her economic role in the household, as assistant to her tradesman husband, as participant in and organizer of religious processions and as defender of her values through acts of violence. Davis imaginatively portrays a range of options and choices for women who felt passionately enough about religious change to act on it. She explains how "on a Catholic feast day" a Protestant woman could

...defy her Catholic neighbors by sitting ostentatiously spinning in her window....If she were a printer's wife or widow, she could help get out a Protestant edition to spread the word about tyrannical priests. She could use her house for an illegal Protestant conventicle or assembly. She could put aside her dissolute hoop skirts and full gowns and start to wear black. She could harangue priests in the streets. She could march singing songs in defiance of royal edicts. She could smash statues, break baptismal fonts, and destroy holy images.\[^{108}\]

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Davis also noted action that was particular to Catholic city women during the sixteenth century. Catholic women hid priests in their quarters or organized group action among women:

this was expressed in such attempts to create new forms of common life and work among females as the Ursulines and the Sisters of Charity and the Christian Institutes of Mary Ward. On the lowest level, this was reflected in the violent activity of all-female Catholic crowds - throwing stones at Protestant women, throwing mire at pastors, and, in the case of a group of female butchers in Aix-en-Provence, beating and hanging the wife of a Protestant bookseller.109

Davis' city women exhibit strategy and agency beyond any notion of separate and constrictive spheres and realms. She presents possibilities for a variety of action available to women. By avoiding the connection of women's actions to women's oppression, Davis also avoids the depiction of women as merely resisters. In her analysis, if the choices women made for action were partly determined by societal restrictions, their use of resources and their discovery of cracks in the system were entirely their own. The implication is that if a woman's contribution to her husband's print shop allowed her to make a statement about religious reform, then it was not secondary to her role as wife and mother. Davis resisted the strict opposition of women's and men's lives that necessitated a separate woman's realm and instead acknowledged the primacy of women's activities to the family and the community.

We should be asking to what extent, even in societies which seem to assign all prestige to male occupations, certain attributes of the females in a family (literacy, occupations, standing among

women and the like) may be affecting the family's economic and social position.\textsuperscript{110}

Davis noted that women's community status was marked in small ways; the feminization of a last name, the frequent role as a godmother, or loans listed and forgiven in wills.\textsuperscript{111} Leaving treasured items in wills, as I discussed in chapter one, was one way that sixteenth century women marked their significance.

Davis also offered an important reservation about the polarities upon which the separate spheres approach and universalizations about women depend. Formulations such as 'woman is to man as nature is to culture' are based on categories which are themselves historically bound, she argued. 'Culture' is not a clear concept until the nineteenth century. Moreover, "'nature' has very different boundaries in European thought over two thousand years and its relation to 'culture' is perplexed".\textsuperscript{112}

For peasants and philosophers both, Davis contended, 'domestic' and 'public' slip and slide, and furthermore, do not exhaust the terms in which European societies would divide realms of activity. "For Aristotle, the economy was a domestic art; for Adam Smith it was not".\textsuperscript{113} Davis suggested in 1975 that it would be better to use these polarities only when our historical evidence supplies and supports them and not assume that they always represent the fundamental meanings that society sees in the sexes. She raised, as an example of the historical peculiarity of oppositions, some strains in the chivalric tradition and even more in nineteenth

\textsuperscript{110} Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition", p. 91.
\textsuperscript{111} Davis, "Women in the Crafts", p. 66.
\textsuperscript{112} Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition", p. 92.
\textsuperscript{113} Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition", p. 92.
century thought that conceived of male sexuality as close to nature and female sentiment as civilizing.\textsuperscript{114} As further testament to her preference for variety, Davis provided more examples:

If Ceres is the Goddess of agriculture, the Muses are all female. The Old Testament has many images of sacred marriage between the bride of Israel and Yahweh, so that the analogy female to male becomes social to supernatural.\textsuperscript{115}

In "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth Century Lyon" Davis provided a practical demonstration of taking binary oppositions as the texts supply them. In this paper, Davis considered not only calculations of profit and loss that determined women's role in the \textit{arts mecaniques}, but also cultural norms and taboos. Discussing the occupational identity of women in the crafts, she noted that it was thinner than that of the men in their milieu. Women's energies were made available for shifting into other work channels if the situation demanded it (due to marriage, widowhood, etc.). As Davis explained, this flexible relationship between women and their work was consistent with some notions of physiology at the time.

By the widely held humoral theory of sexual temperament men were hot and dry and therefore firm and stable, while women were cold and wet, and therefore changeable and slippery.\textsuperscript{116}

The wife's ability to help her husband was not only gauged by sexual temperament, however. The character of the work also played a role. The crafts of the weaponmaker, the smith and the caster were known as the "fire arts" and therefore were hot and dry. Davis implied that this may explain the view of a contemporary

\textsuperscript{114} Davis, "Women's History' in Transition", p. 92.
\textsuperscript{115} Davis, "Women's History' in Transition", p. 92. See also Interview in Visions of History.
\textsuperscript{116} Davis, "Women in the Crafts", p. 49.
metallurgical manual that these arts were not for those with a "gentle spirit." Furthermore, accounting for the tightening of guild restrictions on the involvement of women in the trades, she referred to the suspicious perception of independent female artisans as a "slippery opening (cold and wet?) for interlopers". [parentheses are hers]. In 1980 Davis reiterated her position on universal categories. She stated that they are not eternal and that we can think of situations such as the American frontier where the female was thought to be closer to civilization and the male closer to nature. "What we're after is gender systems in all their variety".

As I explained in chapter one, Davis' cultural history also offered specific oppositions that came out of her research into the sixteenth century menu peuple, such as the spheres of action and speech in Protestant and Catholic worship. Society and Culture in Early Modern France made use of other implicit and historically specific categories: festive time and time of the state, and the sacred and the profane, while all of her work explored the elasticity of the opposition community/individual.

Natalie Davis' unique use of oppositions was an off-shoot of her work in the area of symbols and rituals. While many women's historians' use of polarities can be associated with the separate spheres analysis, Davis avoided this through her experience trying to decipher the relationship between the world of symbols and the physical world. This experience led her to believe that somehow the

117. Davis, "Women in the Crafts", p. 68.
biological differences between men and women were given contextually specific meanings to organize the social and economic order.

Since the contrast female/male is universal in our species, sexual symbols and symbolic behaviour based on sex are always easily available for making statements about nature and human experience.¹²⁰

To think that symbols literally reflect and prescribe the position and the behaviour of the sexes is too simple. As Davis notes, anthropologists have found that societies with many female goddesses may have women contributing to agriculture or have matri-lineal descent systems, but they do not have all-female or matriarchal rule.¹²¹ As well, in her research on early modern France Davis has found that despite being supplied with many symbols of female passivity, sixteenth century society was also well-endowed with symbols of female activity and violence. "Thus the connection between sexual symbols and the actual behaviour of females and males, though surely real, is complex".¹²²

A striking example of Davis' early emphasis on variety in sexual symbology is her 1975 essay "Women on Top" in which she elaborated on the notion of "topsy-turvy", the world turned upside down. In this paper, Davis established types of symbolic reversal of sex roles in early modern Europe and their connections with orderliness in thought and behaviour. She collected a range of images of "the woman out of her place" from popular and learned literature, popular festivities and proverbs. The unruly woman, it

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¹²⁰ Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition", p. 91.
¹²¹ Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition", p. 91.
¹²² Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition", p. 91.
turns out, came in many forms and served many purposes. She could be considered irrational; ruled by her reproductive organs and so not always accountable for her actions. She also had a moral right as mother to stand up and tell the truth. Dame Folly was part of her tradition - telling the truth while playing the fool - as was Phyllis riding Aristotle. In all her incarnations, the unruly woman had sexual power, energy and license, long assumed at carnival and games, which could be used to promote fertility, to defend the community's interests and standards, and to tell the truth about unjust rule. When the festive traditions and carnival right to criticism and mockery were drawn upon to make a statement in the community, the unruly woman proved a valuable tool, for men and women alike.

Early modern men were very familiar with the varied uses of sexual symbols and integrated the unruly woman into their festive societies as well as their political activities. As Davis pointed out, in Europe's male festive societies there was a double irony to truth telling. "The young villager who became an Abbott or the artisan who became a Prince directly adopted for their misrule a symbol of licit power." However, the man who became Mere Folle or Princess of Misrule invoked a power "that was already in defiance of natural order - a dangerous and vital power, which his disguise made safe for him to assume".¹²³

In 1630, therefore, in Dijon, Mere Folle and her Infanterie were part of an uprising of men in masquerade against royal tax officers. In Beaujolais, in the 1770's male peasants blackened their

¹²³ Davis, "Women on Top", p. 140.
faces and, dressed as women, attacked surveyors measuring their lands for a new landlord.124

While freeing men from full responsibility for their deeds and actions, reasoned Davis, political cross-dressing tapped into constructions of sex that were inseparable from the social and economic order. These constructions assumed a sexual and reproductive power, both vital and dangerous, in the lustier sex. According to Davis the woman-on-top was a resource for private and public power only so long as two things were the case: first, so long as sexual symbolism had a close connection with questions of order and subordination, with the lower female sex conceived as the disorderly lustful one; second, so long as the stimulus to inversion play was a double one - traditional hierarchical structures and disputed changes in the distribution of power in family and political life.125

The complexity and power of the symbolic unruly woman is evidenced by the fact that her power to upset order in riot, protest, or festivity, was precisely that power used to set things right. It is for this reason that Davis contradicted what had been the assumption of many historians. She argued that the holiday rule of the woman-on-top was no mere safety valve. It was not simply a matter of allowing women to "let off steam" and enjoy a short, limited period of power lest they demand too much privilege during the rest of the year. She argued that "the holiday rule of the woman-on-top not only confirmed subjection throughout society, but also promoted

124. Davis, "Women on Top", p. 147.
125. Davis, "Women on Top", p. 150.
resistance to it".\textsuperscript{126} It would seem, from the quantity of evidence describing the unruly woman's symbolic presence at protests and in criticizing unjust rule, that her influence went beyond mere resistance to effective power.

Davis' insights into the relationship between sexual symbols and the real world of women and men resulted in an understanding of the sexes that was different from most historians' in the 1970's. From the range of symbols and the range of uses to which sexual symbols could be put, Davis ascertained that "man" and "woman" were themselves historically and culturally peculiar and malleable constructions. It is for exactly this reason that in "Women's History' in Transition" Davis insisted that we should be interested in the history of both women and men.

Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change. Our goal is to explain why sex roles were sometimes tightly prescribed and sometimes fluid, sometimes markedly asymmetrical and sometimes more even.\textsuperscript{127}

As early as 1973, Davis was attempting to practice such an approach. Her research experience with sixteenth century cultural forms and symbolism elicited a unique perspective on the sexes. "City Women and Religious Change" emphasized women's expression of their own experience. It illustrated complexity and difference in women's lives and underlined the historical simplification that can too easily result from functionalism. "City

\textsuperscript{126} Davis, "Women on Top", p. 151.
\textsuperscript{127} Davis, "Women's History' in Transition", p. 90.
Women" also focused on women's resourcefulness in challenging what appeared to be reigning conceptions of sexuality. Women who displayed their contempt for either the Church or the Reformed cause simultaneously divulged their understanding of sex, its significance and its changeability.

"Women on Top" demonstrated how even in the same era sexual symbols did not always follow a pattern and were used in various ways by ordinary people. The manipulation of symbols and the uses to which cultural forms could be put were paramount in Davis' analysis. The dividing lines between oppositions, especially those commonly associated with the sexes, were blurred, leaving room for women and men to act outside the confines of historical theory.

Davis' women's history, while it did much to restore women to the past, also held promise of resolving some of the major issues of interpretive practice. Her studies of women drew on her research on sixteenth century cultural expression and identity. As a result, Davis never studied one group of people as a uniform body and never isolated groups from their 'field of relations'. She stressed differences within groupings, and similarities among apparently different groups. She made an effort to avoid functionalism by recognizing that one society or village could be organized around many different systems and groupings simultaneously. Male and female were yet another kind of grouping to consider. Furthermore, Davis recognized that it was not only important what group or class her historical subjects fell into, and whether the links to others were close or distant, but how people knew and recognized their links.
When women's historians began to experiment with the sexes as a category of analysis, Davis wrote: "What is happening to 'women's history' is that it is being extended to men". What happened to women's history was not so much that it was extended to men, as that it was extended beyond the sexes altogether. By 1980, women's historians had siezed upon the difference between gender and sex. Many began analysing discourse - systems of meaning - that used the sexes as analogical referents. In other words, by looking at how the dichotomy male/female was used to represent other concepts, historians could make sense of how others made sense of the sexes.

Natalie Davis' contention that historians should look at the significance of the sexes was not that different from the aims of the most prominent gender theorists of the 1980's. While gender theory argued that social organisation and knowledge are in part constituted by meanings attached to the sexes, Davis acknowledged

a range...in sexual systems, sexual economies, and sexual symbols, in certain periods the lines between the sexes drawn quite sharply and in others quite fluid, with associated consequences for the division of labour and the distribution of power.

However, Davis kept a theoretical distance from gender theory. She never espoused it wholeheartedly and continued to stress, as she did in "'Women's History' in Transition", that universals should be used

128. Davis, "What is Women's History?", p. 42.
129. Davis, "What is Women's History?", p. 41-42.
as the original sources supplied them, and then, only as those texts defined them.

Throughout the 1970's and early 1980's women's historians usually cited Davis' work for one of two reasons. Firstly, Davis' work provided practical information and details on many aspects of sixteenth century French history. Secondly, many historians recognized the value of Davis' methodological statements. Very few historians linked Davis' theoretical assertions with her practical work, showing how she applied her suggestions in particularized studies. Furthermore, few who quoted Davis on theory showed in their own work that these ideas were easily put into practice. Carolyn Lougee's review essay of women's history and Berenice Carroll's Liberating Women's History, are two good examples of methodological overviews that testified to Davis' assessments of the field while verifying the need for new empirical studies to test her proposals.

However, a change of perspective occurred in the middle of the 1980's. At that time, the same works that Davis wrote in the 1970's began reappearing in the references of women's historians as excellent examples of the use of gendered concepts in history. Simultaneously, Davis began to use the language of gender theory more openly. It is important to remember that in all of her work, Davis' use of theory was eclectic. She borrowed theories from other modern European women's history in which she acknowledged that Davis' investigation of sex roles is "best exemplified by her own work". p. 630.
disciplines if she found them useful, and never depended upon any
one theory to make her case. It is not my contention that Davis had
been writing 'gender history' ten years before its time, only that her
approach to the sexes, as informed by her cultural history, lent itself
to a theory of gender. In addition, Davis' analyses of the sexes and
the operation of gender benefitted from the work of historians such
as Joan Scott. I will establish this by reference to her dialogue with
Joan Scott, to citations of Davis' work by other historians beginning
to experiment with gender, and to Davis' own work. Despite a
decrease in references to Davis in the 1990's, her work during this
period also sends an important message to gender historians debating
over the uses of post-structuralism for gender history.

Gender theory grew out of the separate spheres analysis and
the widespread use of polarities described in chapter two. However,
its most significant use in history came in the early 1980's.
Historians focussing on the dichotomy male/female and its relation to
other seemingly universal dichotomies realized further interpretive
possibilities of this theoretical stance. As Joan Scott defines it,
gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on
perceived differences between the sexes. Gender is knowledge about
sexual difference and since knowledge is a way of ordering the
world, gender is the social organisation of sexual difference.132 It is
not limited only to the social organisation of the sexes according to

132. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, p. 2. See also
chapter two, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis."
pp. 28-50; Originally published in American Historical Review 91, 5
(December 1986).
sexual difference. What distinguishes gender theory from sex role analyses is its recognition that all social organisation and ways of ordering the world are constituted by (among other things) the meanings attached to sexual difference and that the evidence of difference (visible physical differentiation, skin colour, reproductive functions) does not explain difference.

Gender theorists found the key to their new analytical tool in post-structuralism. Applying Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, historians began to examine the fixation of meaning through binary oppositions. Deconstruction suggested ways to analyse, in context, how oppositions operate by reversing their hierarchical constructions. Combined with the conclusions of Michel Foucault that sexuality is produced in historical contexts and that meaning is multidimensional, post-structuralism linked the relativization of knowledge with Foucault's critique of power. It conceived of language or discourse as ways of creating, rather than only signifying, meaning. Inherent in text and cultural discourse are systems which may also be thought of as ideologies. Ideology in this sense can be located in all that language takes for granted, the pre-conditions held to be so certain that they need not be stated. These concepts opened up the possibility of conceiving all cultural discourse - art and politics, ritual and popular culture, institutions - as texts in which a struggle for ideological control, especially regarding the meanings of the sexes, is played out.

The most noteworthy example of a North American attempt to outline a post-structuralist framework within which the concept of gender could be useful is the work of Joan Wallach Scott. At an
early stage in Scott's research, Natalie Davis had asked her "where the female voices were". "That was the question that made all the difference", Scott later wrote.\textsuperscript{133} In 1975 Scott published an article with Louise Tilly on "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth Century Europe" and from then on continued to merge her two interests: work and protest in labour history, and sex and work in women's history.\textsuperscript{134} Between 1980 and 1983, Scott came upon post-structuralist literary theory through colleagues Elizabeth Weed and Denise Riley. At this time she re-wrote and re-conceived much of her earlier work on women and labour to reflect her new vantage point.

When Scott was distinguishing herself in gender theory and when Davis still refrained from embracing it, their scholarly exchange resumed and their pursuits began to converge. In 1983, Scott cited Davis' 1975 statement that the aim of women's history is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups, of the range in sex roles and their role in shaping the social order.\textsuperscript{135} Although many other women's historians had cited this passage, Scott's citation in the context of gender theory gave Davis' suggestion new impact.

Scott also responded to Davis' consistent emphasis on variety and on historical specificity. In 1985 Davis had emphasized the need to read symbols and concepts as they were mediated by individuals and their cultural surroundings.

Sexual identity is an historical construction for both sexes, and it is surely formed differently when a society allows citizens to be simultaneously lovers of boys, husbands and fathers from when a society offers free men only the choice between celibate priests and married warriors. ¹³⁶

In a paper entitled "Women's History as Women's Education" in which Scott addressed the uses of gender theory, she underscored a methodological point she learned "as an admiring student of the work of Natalie Zemon Davis".

...gender symbolism (as any symbolism) is complicated because it has not one but a range of meanings and uses. Attention to the language of sex and gender can reveal great insight, but not always about what is literally represented or said. Images, stereotypes, symbols have a complicated but not a direct relationship with reality. We must read them as messages whose meanings are not self-evident, but are there to be analysed, interpreted, decoded in terms of the historical context in which they occur. [my emphasis]. ¹³⁷

Here we can see how two of Davis' pivotal interpretive points were finding their way into gender analysis via Scott. The importance of historical context and the complicated and various ways that symbols intersect with reality were hallmarks of Davis' combination of cultural and womens' history.

¹³⁶. Davis, "What is Women's History?", p. 42.
As Scott seemed to respond to Davis' misgivings about gender theory and the use of gendered oppositions, Davis' discussions of gender responded directly to Scott. In a paper also entitled "Women's History as Women's Education", Davis stated that "we are involved in the history of the construction of gender and gender systems". Until this time, Davis had not been so direct in referring to gender theory in her own work. She stressed that the best current practice in women's history insists that difference is important - "not necessarily between the sexes, which in some settings may be minimal, but difference between what we might call sexual systems, sexual cultures, sexual economies".

Joan Scott exemplified that practice in 1988 by making a plea for theory that will let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than of unities and universals. She crystallized Davis' earlier ideas about difference, stating that "our goal is to see not only difference between the sexes, but also the way these work to repress differences within gender groups". Here, a third point bearing Davis' stamp was acknowledged and elaborated by Scott.

The work of Davis and Scott clearly intersect in 1988, when Scott, explaining gender construction, cited "'Women's History' in Transition" alongside "Women on Top". This is significant

138. Davis, "Women's History as Women's Education" in Davis and Scott, eds., Women's History as Women's Education, p. 15.
139. Davis, "Women's History as Women's Education", p. 16.
because the former is a methodological review essay while the latter is an empirical study. Joan Scott saw that while Davis was arguing for particularized studies that look at both sexes and emphasize the importance of difference and variety, she was writing them as well. This article is also significant because it acknowledged that, depending on the historical context, the binary terms in which cultural notions of gender are expressed can often be contradictory: "Woman is to man as wet is to dry, passion is to reason, ...evil is to good, good is to evil...". [my emphasis].142

Joan Scott's "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story" is an especially telling example of how well Scott's post-structuralism blended with the interpretive methods that Davis employed in *Fiction in the Archives* and *The Return of Martin Guerre*. In Scott's discussion of dominant ideologies of history writing, she made a smooth transition from a post-structuralist analysis of current political conflicts among historians over practice, to a defense of history as a plurality of stories, as interpretive practice. She adapted her understanding of the Other, perfected in gender theory, to the body of history, contending that normative statements by defenders of "history-as-it-has-always-been-written" "conceal the range and variety of philosophies contained in most substantive history writing".143 Scott explained that the rhetoric of conservatives who fear inclusive history constructs an opposition of new versus old. Such an opposition relies, she argued, on the negation of history's tradition of debates over interpretive practice in

order to claim that the current conflict represents the first challenge to the reigning historical paradigm. Scott then cited Davis' "eloquent discussion of history as interpretive practice" in "On the Lame" where Davis explained that the procedures of verification and documentation to which historians commit themselves are not invariant but are subject to shifts and changes.144

During this period of exchange between Scott and Davis, Davis wrote *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *Fiction in the Archives*. From 1983, when *The Return of Martin Guerre* was written, to 1987, when *Fiction* was written, Davis' analysis of gender became more direct and, arguably, more sophisticated. However, it is interesting that in neither book does Davis definitively state that she is applying gender theory. Her secondary sources on women's history are mostly works that have examined women's voices in literature and the history of women and crime. In fact, the most frequently cited historian of women in *Fiction* is Davis herself. She drew on "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth Century Lyon" for women's "self-definition", and recommended "Ghosts, Kin and Progeny" and "Gender and Genre" for further discussion of the family history. She referred to "Women on Top" regarding women's legal defense and her study of Bertrande de Rols (Martin Guerre's wife) when discussing the story-telling skill of women supplicants.

The limited but subtle use of gender in *The Return of Martin Guerre* centers around Bertrande. Davis examines the choices

144. Scott, "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story", p. 690.
Bertrande made, situating them in their historical context as well as along a spectrum of options available to a woman in Bertrande's position. Bertrande is a mysterious figure. Jean de Coras, the judge who presided over the case of the Martin Guerre imposture, was confounded by this peasant woman's role. Was she a dupe? Or did she, as Davis suggests, conspire with her new and improved husband in order to hold on to a man she loved and a marriage that conformed to her ideals of male/female partnership? Davis contended that Bertrande's refusal to annul her marriage to an impotent husband exhibited a calculated weighing of her options against the protection of her honour and independence. As Davis describes it, Bertrande preferred the honour and good reputation of being married combined with the independence she gained by deferring her "wifely duties". She could live independently without the pressure from other suitors, her parents, and her village to remarry. The gamut of possible depictions of Bertrande illustrates a spectrum of choices for a woman in a given structure of society - a structure that relied to some extent on the organisation of the sexes for its cohesion.

The debate between Robert Finlay and Natalie Davis over the representation of Bertrande is really a debate over constructions of gender. Finlay finds Davis' combination of an honourable Bertrande who is at the same time guilty of adultery and deception inadmissible. He does not accept Davis' evidence of manoeuvring and independent sixteenth century French peasant women as applicable to Bertrande or appropriate in general. He

145. Finlay, p. 562.
argued that Davis imposed her notion of peasant women on Bertrande.¹⁴⁶ Finlay, as Davis retorted, wants absolute truth.¹⁴⁷ He would not accept the fact that in the absence of sure evidence for Bertrande's motivations, the historian must draw from the historical context a picture of peasant women in which Bertrande can be located. Throughout the book Davis emphasized the range of possible versions of the Martin Guerre story. She acknowledged that hers was one among many versions and she concluded the book by invoking the spirit of the trickster, playfully suggesting that she herself may have been duped.¹⁴⁸

The aspect of gender that Finlay did not address was the close connection in sixteenth century France between constructions of gender, family and property cohesion, and social structure. For Davis, Bertrande's actions represented the interplay between the socially determined and the chosen.¹⁴⁹ In this case, the socially determined organisation of the sexes shared an interdependence with the contractual relations which played such an important role in the ordering of family and society. When Arnaud du Tilh arrived in Artigat the villagers accepted him because, in part, "the heir and householder Martin Guerre was back in his place".¹⁵⁰ Moreover, the guiding principle in the legal decision favouring Arnaud (foiled by the real Martin Guerre's arrival) was the support of family and children. When the real husband returned, this same principle (family cohesion) informed the court's decision not to punish either

¹⁴⁶ Finlay, pp. 556-557.
¹⁴⁷ Davis, "On the Lame", p. 574.
¹⁵⁰ Davis, The Return of Martin Guerre, p. 43.
Bertrande (for adultery) or her husband (for abandonment). Likewise, Bertrande's father escaped prosecution for wrongful representation of himself as her agent, and finally, Bertrande's daughter with Arnaud was awarded legitimacy.\footnote{Davis, The Return of Martin Guerre, pp. 81 and 89-91; and "On the Lame", p. 595.} Throughout the entire analysis of the Martin Guerre imposture Davis implied that the story's import to contemporaries was partially due to its veiled commentary on the contractual relations which organise the sexes, families and village society.

By 1987, the integration of gender and the state in Davis' analyses had evolved. Two of three chapters of Fiction in the Archives deal explicitly with the sexes, noting the variations in remission tales according to sex. The pardon letter provided Davis with fertile ground on which to examine the relationship between the governing structures of society and the construction of gender. This is due to the fact that all pardon tales were composed with the help of a King's notary who counseled the supplicant on omissions and inclusions that would add to the persuasive power of the text. For instance, drawing on the cross-class understanding of festive time, Thomas Manny claimed to have killed his wife on Mary Magdelene's day, screaming "Must I die for a whore?" as he did it. In this case, the mention of Mary Magedelene's day might have enhanced the supplicant's justification for murdering his adulterous wife in a way that the King would also understand.\footnote{Davis, Fiction, p. 2.}

In Fiction in the Archives Davis found that the festive time of carnival and ritual was often used by men in accounting for a sudden
murder but that women had to draw on other explanations. Where men had honour and obedience at stake, women had sexual honour and wifelyness. A man might emphasize an affront to his occupation or estate occurring in a festive context (the knocking off of his hat by a fellow reveler, for example). A woman, to establish her wifliness, situated her story in as much of a 'daily life' setting as possible. Murders of husbands seemed to occur during meal-making, or in the kitchen.

An important element of Davis' analysis is the relationship she established between the 'requirements' of a woman's supplication and the political structure. Success of remission letters, she argued, "goes beyond the strength of the story, as the supplicant was integrated into the larger drama of the build-up of monarchical power".

From the Ordinance of Blois of 1499 through the Republic of Jean Bodin, pardon was celebrated as one of the 'fairest marks of sovereignty.' 'Kings have always glorified themselves through their clemency,' said the Dauphiné lawyer Claude Expilly. 

This connection between supplication and sovereignty helped Davis account for the small number of pardons sought by women. The major crimes associated with women - witchcraft and infanticide - were not pardonable in the sixteenth century.

The tightening sexual values characteristic of both religious reform and family strategy in France surely played their role. Contemporary pronouncements on infanticide had more to say

153. On the use of festive time in story-telling, see Chapter One of Fiction, "The Time of Story-telling."
154. Davis, Fiction, pp. 89 and 92.
155. Davis, Fiction, pp. 52-53.
about sexual appetite than about the soul of an innocent child.  

Therefore, in cases regarding infanticide, "family morality and royal majesty were better served by giving [the guilty woman] the justice she deserved".  

The Scott/Davis relationship is a microcosm of a more general re-orientation in the early to mid-1980's among many women's historians. Only three of over 200 citations to Davis appearing in journals between 1972 and 1980, discerned or utilized the interpretive potential of her recommendations on sex and symbols. In a 1977 article on "Women and Witches", Clarke Garrett asserted the need to re-examine the hypothesis that symbols polarize. Calling attention to the need to put symbols in their historical context, he cited Natalie Davis, E.P. Thompson and Richard Trexler as those few historians who were utilizing symbol analysis for studying early modern European society and culture. Carolyn Lougee also detected the interpretive value of Davis' methodological evaluations, especially those in "Women's History' in Transition" that stressed the "seldom unilinear relationship between cultural images of women and the status of women within a given

156. Davis, Fiction, p. 86.
157. Davis, Fiction, p. 87.
Similarly, Sheila Ryan Johansson called attention to the multiplicity of notions regarding the sexes. Johansson postulated that Davis' observation of "important and little understood changes in the relations between the sexes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" could be applied to almost any century.161

Even into the early 1980's, review essays continued to comment on interpretive problems in women's history similar to those Lougee identified in 1977. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's 1982 article, "Placing Women's History in History" discussed the drawbacks of merely "adding women to the received account" and of emphasizing women's special place. She called Davis a "sensitive scholar" who has "taught us to trace implicit gender relations, their affirmations and reversals".162 Fox-Genovese observed that there was still controversy in women's history between models of women's lives that find sufficient asymmetry between the sexes to justify interpreting systematic oppression of women, and those which "claim to find symmetry, albeit with difference, in the contributions of men and women".163 Among the latter, according to Fox-Genovese, were Joan Scott and Natalie Davis.

After 1985 - the year that Scott and Davis wrote *Women's History as Women's Education* - citations to Davis on the significance of the sexes and on the varieties within gender groups, appeared on a more regular basis. Review essays demonstrate that Davis' earlier emphasis on the significance of the sexes was re-

160. Lougee, p. 630.
162. Fox-Genovese, p. 8.
163. Fox-Genovese, p. 18.
interpreted and given new meaning in the light of gender theory. In 1988 Mary C. Wilson cited Scott and Davis as leaders of the movement beyond history that focussed on women but took them out of their historical context. Louise Tilly, in 1989, cited Davis as one of the few historians who called "very early on" for the use of gender as a concept.

By this time, the distinction between sex and gender was sharper. As Joan Scott explained in 1988, "'gender' includes, but does not name women, and so seems to pose no critical threat". Historians who used the word gender to signify the inclusion of both sexes became characterized as gender historians, despite the fact that for many of them their original interest had been women. For these historians it had now become impossible to study women without men and so the old usage of the term gender, meaning simply something more than non-biological sex roles, was obsolete. These historians were the first to seize upon Davis' early work as exemplary of what they were now, in their own empirical studies, trying to portray. However, even many of these historians did not utilize the full potential of a gender analysis as exemplified by Scott and Davis.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's 1986 article, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South" was one of the first empirical studies to combine gender history with citations to Natalie Davis. This piece looked at women's distinctive forms of

165. Tilly, p. 448.
166. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, p. 31.
collective action, "using language and gesture as points of entry to a culture".¹⁶⁷ Dowd Hall argued that beneath the surface of a conflict that pitted workers and farmers against the middle class, lay "an inner world of fantasy, gender ideology and sexual style". She demonstrated, through analysis of their play with sexual stereotypes, that the striking women were aware of the prevailing gender ideology, using it to their advantage and defying it in their daily lives. Dowd Hall made excellent use of "Women on Top" which appears to have influenced the premise of "Disorderly Women": "The activists of Elizabethton belonged to a venerable tradition of 'disorderly women'...who, in times of political upheaval, embody tensions that are half-conscious or only dimly understood".¹⁶⁸ Another echo of Davis is Dowd Hall's assertion that implicit in one labor conflict were two different sexual systems: one system upon which the union officials and the local middle class depended and another rooted in a rural past and adapted to working-class life.¹⁶⁹

Dowd Hall did not prove the existence of a tradition of 'disorderly women' in the historical period about which she wrote, which violated the historical relativity that Scott and Davis were emphasizing by 1985. Secondly, "Disorderly Women" did not extend the analysis beyond sex roles to the broader social and political manifestations of gender.

Julie Wheelwright's "'Amazons and Military Maids'" exhibits the same two weaknesses. However, Wheelwright made a slightly 

¹⁶⁹. Dowd Hall, p. 376.
more sophisticated use of gender, one that noted the use of anthropology. "'Amazons and Military Maids'" traces changing conceptions of gender in the stories of Britain's female soldiers between 1740 and 1893. In her introduction she cited Davis on anthropologists and historians who have found that sexual inversion often serves to disrupt and ultimately to clarify sometimes fluid or evolving concepts of gender. From the changing images of the female soldier, Wheelwright concluded that the eighteenth century audiences were prepared to believe that gender was a variable, externally determined entity that could be easily and tolerably transgressed. By the nineteenth century, she argued, "concepts of gender and class had become more firmly entrenched". Her conclusion about the nineteenth century misses an important point of gender theory: that in any century concepts of gender are entrenched and that in the nineteenth century, specifically, certain concepts of gender became entrenched which ruled out the acceptability of the 'woman on top'.

Dennis Romano took the extra step in demonstrating how notions of gender related to other aspects of social organisation. "Gender and the Urban Geography of Renaissance Venice" added to the body of symbolic analyses of Renaissance civic space by looking for gender connotations in urban space. Citing Davis' "Women on Top" on perceptions of women's sexuality, and "The Sacred and the

171. Wheelwright, p. 501.
Body Social" on dichotomies such as sacred and profane, Morano argued that Venice's cityscape had specific gender associations that complemented and reinforced other such dichotomies. Influenced by Joan Scott's article on gender as a useful category of analysis, Romano concluded that not only did the gender terms upon which urban space was defined reinforce established sex roles, they also helped patrician men further their monopoly over all forms of public power in Venice. 173

Perhaps the most notable use of gender theory to extend the analysis into social and political organisation, is Sarah Hanley's 1989 article "Engendering the State: Family Formation and Nation Building in Early Modern France". 174 Hanley's complex and brilliant article begins with her conception of the historical process as a cultural conversation

...wherein history is culturally ordered by existing concepts or schemes of meaning...and culture is historically ordered when schemes of meaning are revalued and revised as persons act and reenact them over time. 175

Hanley identifies a "Family-State Compact" forged between legislators and kings which legalized gender distinctions and widened the gap in social entitlement by empowering male heads and placing females at risk. Through a comprehensive set of laws governing marriage, parental authority, birth, midwifery and inheritance, the "Family-State Compact" served monarchical statebuilding and the

175. Hanley, p. 5.
upward mobility of an emerging class of male professionals. Hanley investigates the ways women "counterfeited" this culture to fashion themselves and their spheres of action. She then discusses how the interaction between the "Family-State Compact" and the women within its purview provoked discourse on social entitlement. She concludes by explaining that the compact, which purveyed a family model of socio-economic authority based on gender distinctions, influenced the state model of political authority in the making.

Hanley's article fuses the use of gender as an analytical tool with cultural history as exemplified (according to Hanley's footnotes) by Natalie Davis, Carolyn Lougee and Bonnie Smith. On gender history, Hanley states that

the analytical power of the concept of gender is demonstrated by Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis"...and applied in an exemplary manner to early modern France by Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *Fiction in the Archives*....176

Citations to Davis began to drop off in 1990, when historians of gender and post-structuralists began to debate about the concepts 'woman', 'experience' and 'identity'. In "The Evidence of Experience" Joan Scott stressed the need to account for the construction of experience, instead of just describing its varieties.177 She argued that there is no experience without representation. Arguing that women had different experiences and then exposing those differences, claims Scott, assumes difference to be natural

176. Hanley, p. 5.
rather than an historical construction. For example, appealing to the
different wage rates of black and white women as evidence for their
different historical experience reproduces as fact that difference,
rather than analysing the systems of meaning that constructed it.
Categories such as 'black' and 'white', 'woman' and 'man' are then
taken as self-evident and applicable cross-historically rather than as
the products of historically specific systems of meaning.\textsuperscript{178}
Subsequently, identity (be it individual or collective) is taken to be
determined by experience, when in fact identity is produced and re-
cast as the terms by which experience is represented change.

Because experience is produced by systems of meaning (discourse), history is "the representation that constructs experiences".\textsuperscript{179} It is the explanation and historicizing, not of experience, but of the systems of meaning that make experience. This notion of history has many opponents. Labour historians such as Bryan Palmer have vehemently argued for the immediacy of experience and its role in shaping identity.\textsuperscript{180} Women's and gender historians, too, have complained that by making the subject of history those systems of meaning that construct experience, women are reduced to objects of, rather than actors in historical events. Kathleen Canning and other historians of gender who appreciate, but are wary of, the post-structuralist approach attempt to hear the voices of their subjects in the ways that they "talked back" to

\textsuperscript{178} Scott, "Evidence of Experience", pp. 777 & 782.
\textsuperscript{179} Louise M. Newman, "Critical Theory and the History of
Women: What's at Stake in Deconstructing Women's History", 
\textsuperscript{180} Bryan D. Palmer, "Response to Joan Scott", International
cultural discourse, by defying it or moulding it to suit themselves.181 But this strategy makes subjects resisters of a supposed all-encompassing cultural discourse. Their actions are merely reactive.

In the "Evidence of Experience" Scott accuses "those most open to interpretive innovation" of being among "the most ardent defenders of the need to attend to 'experience'". Feminist historians critical of biases in 'malestream' histories and seeking to install women as viable subjects, social historians insisting on the materialist basis of the discipline on the one hand and on the 'agency' of individuals and groups on the other, and cultural historians who have brought symbolic analysis to the study of behaviour, have joined political historians whose stories privilege the purposive actions of rational actors and intellectual historians who maintain that thought originates in the minds of individuals. All seem to have converged on the argument that 'experience' is an irreducible ground for history.182

The consensus in defence of experience may not be as unified as Scott suggests. Ideas of constructed experience and of relatively constituted identity are not exclusive to post-structuralists. Natalie Davis has stressed for at least ten years the interplay between the socially determined and the chosen. She emphasized the manipulation of identity and that certain forms of embeddedness assist in consciousness of self. She acknowledged that identity is never fixed and sure, and she explored the connections between an individual's version (of a happening, of a life) and the general idiom from which he or she must draw to give meaning to a story. All of

these features of Davis' work demonstrate that her cultural history enabled her to tackle questions of constituted experience without embracing post-structuralism and without threatening the agency of individuals.

Davis did not get involved in the debates over the use of post-structuralism for women's history/gender history. I contend that Davis would argue that post-structuralism is not the only path to peeling off layers of meaning in discourse. Four of her articles published between 1990 and 1993, which appear to have nothing to do with gender history, explore issues that are inseparable from the debates over constructed experience, identity and agency currently being debated by gender historians. These issues are the primacy of addressing the multivalence and changing nature of language; the construction of meanings; tension and paradox in meanings and uses; and the infinite possibilities created when meaning and discourse are filtered through individual subjects. All of these considerations are brought to bear on questions about the production of knowledge and experience in Davis' work. The recent work of Natalie Davis and other cultural historians demonstrates the utility of Scott's convictions independent of post-structuralism.

The suggestion of some gender historians to search for the ways that subjects "talked back" to discourse is similar to Davis'

concern for the knotty relationship between a culture and the individual's filter of meaning. But this concern is not in opposition to Scott's post-structuralist critique of experience. In fact, Scott never implies that individuals do not construct their own meanings, only that those meanings are related to cultural discourse. Both Davis and Scott would be unlikely to refer to this tension as "talk back"; rather it is a given characteristic of being and acting in the world. It is ultimately a mystery and so challenges the historian to deal, not only with the unknown, but with the unknowable. Carlo Ginzburg's miller, Mennochio, is now famous (or notorious, for some empiricists) amidst historian's circles for his individual mixture of the cultural currents running through his world. As Robert Darnton puts it, "ordinary people in everyday life have to find their way through a forest of symbols" many of which "drift free from their sensory moorings and...float up against each other, converging in configurations that embody many ideas at once".\textsuperscript{184} Symbols do not float and converge by themselves. People give them meanings, meanings that are not fixed, but which are only contextually comprehensible. In "Printing and the People" Davis explained that
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when a peasant read or was read to, it was not the stamping of a literal message on a blank sheet; it was the varied motion of 'a strange top' (to use Jean-Paul Sartre's metaphor for the literary object), set to turning only by the combined effort of author and reader.\textsuperscript{185}
As Davis explains in her study of historian Lucien Febvre, "the historian could never be sure of the debates of conscience within a Rabelais or a Marguerite de Navarre, never sure of the

\textsuperscript{184} Darnton, "The Symbolic Element in History", p. 222.
\textsuperscript{185} Davis, "Printing and the People", p. 192.
true thought...". For Febvre the challenge was "the person in the secrecy of his conscience, in the intimacy of his beliefs and opinions". She applied Febvre's own words to an exploration of his debates of conscience while he wrote about Rabelais during the Nazi occupation of Paris. As Davis explains, not only was The Problem of Unbelief "published at a time of secrecy and veiled meanings: it is about secrecy and veiled meanings....about whether they exist, where they exist, and what the historian's task is in regard to them". This connection led Davis to explore some questions about the meanings and uses of words and silence, as the individual made his way through the 'constructed forest'.

For Febvre, writing in the 1930's and 40's, words could change their meaning over time. What he did not consider, Davis argues, was layers of meaning, the possibility of slippery meanings. In Rabelais' time, as in Febvre's, even silence had its multiple meanings and uses. Even if Febvre did not take into account the breadth of language and meaning, the occupation Annales, as Davis states, "remained a monument to the complex possibilities of language and speech and to the tension between the wish for uncalculated transparency and the need for compromise in communication". The compromise - of individuals, of discourses, and of meanings - is the secret. Cultural history reminds us of how all accounts - verbalized, gestured or otherwise signed - are shaped into stories. For Davis, it reminds us "how all the sources we

186. Davis, "Rabelais Among the Censors", p. 8.
188. Davis, "Rabelais Among the Censors", p. 4.
use...construct their own categories rather than just reflecting givens in the environment or natural orderings".\textsuperscript{191}

According to Judith Newton:

The focus on gender, on representation, on discourse...seems to have been part of feminist historiography when post-structuralist discourse was being consolidated in the U.S. I am thinking of the early work of Judith Walkowitz and Natalie Davis. I am thinking of terms such as symbol and ideological system....\textsuperscript{192}

I would add the term culture and the idea of fashioning. The issues of experience, discourse and representation that are currently a focal point of debate for gender historians, have been a focus of analysis for many cultural historians. Natalie Davis addressed these very issues in some of her earliest writings on the articulation of cultural identity and in her broadened application of the notion of self-fashioning. However, acknowledgement of this contribution to the history of women came only when historians began to experiment with the concept of gender. Davis' approach to the history of women, informed as it was by symbolic anthropology and cultural history, tackled issues that were later forced to the surface by the challenge of a conception of gender.

Coming from different angles - from the deconstruction of Derrida and the critiques of knowledge and power in Foucault, and from cultural history - Joan Scott and Natalie Zemon Davis seemed to converge on gender. At the same time, citations to Davis by

\textsuperscript{191} Davis, "Stories and the Hunger to Know", p. 12.
gender historians were often accompanied by citations or allusions to Scott.

The centrality of fashioning (representation) and discourse (culture) to historical tales has remained a commonality that Davis and Scott share. Davis has tipped the balance in favour of agency, in the form of ultimately secret interpretations of meaning. Scott has over-emphasized the determining power of dominant discourses. This over-emphasis has been at the expense of clarifying her position on the possibilities of intersecting meanings and the analytical potential of 'heresy' as meaning more than "talk back". Yet, the similarities beg the question of post-structuralism's possession of the notion of constructed experience and therefore anticipate a change: a turn away from controversy over the dangers of post-structuralism to agency and a move toward the challenge posed to history by the possibilities of agency.
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