



## Framing Essay Getting Started

### Introduction

All of these women are figures of historical importance in their own right.

- Queen Hatshepsut and Cleopatra of ancient Egypt
- Shaman-Queen Himiko, 3rd-century Japan
- Emperor Koken-Shotoku, Japan's last reigning female emperor
- Queen Nzinga, who ruled in pre-colonial West Africa
- Queen Elizabeth I of England
- Catherine the Great of Russia



The history of women in the world more often includes names like these:



- Mumtaz Jahan, the wife of 17th-century Mogol Emperor Shah Jahan
- Eva Perón, the wife of 20th-century Argentine president Juan Perón
- Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong and member of the so-called Gang of Four
- Yang Guifei, the concubine of an early Tang dynasty emperor

These women reflected the importance of men with whom they were associated: husbands, fathers, sons, or, sometimes, consorts.

These women are all exceptional, in part because there are records that tell us about their lives and in part because they appear in world history textbooks. They all played important roles in economic, diplomatic, and political history and had formal or informal access to power.

Traditionally, historical writing focused on elites and often rendered women invisible unless they were queens or empresses. With the socio-political



changes of the late 1960s, historical inquiry expanded to include a focus on race, class, and gender. This literature has begun placing women's varied experiences worldwide in historical context.



Using gender to analyze the past has resulted in asking new questions about history and in reframing traditional areas of historical inquiry—economic, diplomatic, and political history. When we begin looking for women in history, they are there. And, they have long played important roles in all parts of their societies. The most famous women of history were less unusual for what they did than for having it recorded.

Records from a time period that allow us to reconstruct the history of a person, place, or event are referred to as primary sources. Historians use many types of materials as primary sources for historical inquiry, including images, texts written for public and private use, materials and visual objects, and even music. All of these types of sources provide a window into the past, including the lives of women.

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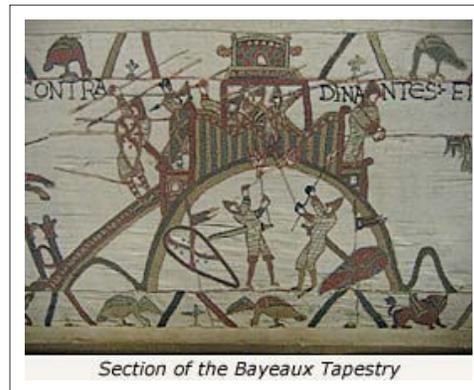
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## **Rethinking History**

When studying the lives of women throughout history, it is important to consider the questions that have not been asked. The traditional invisibility of women in history does not mean that they were absent from pivotal events or did not play important roles in their societies.

“Where are the women?” and “How would the inclusion of women’s experiences in various events enrich interpretations of them?” are important questions to ask. Why were the roles women played the subject of limited attention in, or omission from, particular historical discussions?

Consider, for example, how warfare often has been represented in history books: a narrative of battles and military prowess. The visual record of war, from the narrative on the “Royal Standard” of Ur, through those on vases, wall frescos, mosaics, and



illuminated manuscripts, to the Bayeux Tapestries in France, is overwhelmingly one of men fighting men. In many traditional histories, the dates of wars bracket the beginnings and ends of different eras. Changing the focus from battles to discussion of postwar reconstruction of families can affect the dates we associate with particular wars, as well as how we evaluate issues of historical continuity and change.

As long as historians’ focus remained on fighting, the analysis of war centered on death and heroism, together with military hierarchies and strategies. Questions often raised in connection with war addressed issues of diplomatic, military, and political history. This interpretation

of warfare is popularly reflected in the predominantly male figurative statues in memorials throughout North America and Europe. Women are only occasionally found, and those who are depicted are usually shown healing or mourning the dead.



Women were more easily omitted from analysis of the fighting front because until World War II, when significant numbers of women participated as soldiers in the Soviet Union's Red Army, they were only rarely found on or near the battlefield. Occasionally mythological figures like the Amazon warriors of Ancient Greece or Tomoe Gozen, the Japanese female samurai, or exceptional real women, such as Joan of Arc, the 15th-century French heroine of the Hundred Years' War against England became part of war legend. In rare cases, lesser-known women donned men's clothing to participate in battle as males. Beyond that, only camp followers, and later nurses, would find places in this history.

What happens, though, when we change the focus? When we consider war as having both a home front and a fighting front? Then the discussion of war expands to include not only women's varied wartime activities, but also the experiences of families, children, and non-combatant males. This approach permits examination of non-heroic accounts of the male experience of war, differing attitudes toward male and female collaboration and resistance, and postwar social continuity and change.

Standard primary sources, such as government documents and newspapers, contain a wealth of material reflecting women's wartime experiences. These include accounts of civilian rationing and food supplies as well as statistics on birth, death, marriage, and divorce rates. Less public sources, ranging from civilian letters to women's commentaries about life on the home front, in captivity, or in exile, help us understand wartime in a broader framework. Taking into account class, cultural, gender, and racial aspects of wartime society expands our understanding of the reach of war.

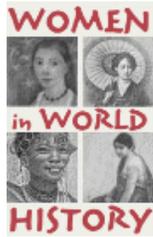
This example of how the history of war changes when we broaden our focus can be applied to any aspect of world history. When we take this broader view, women emerge from the shadows and become active and important players in our analysis of the past.

Considering the place of women in world history does not simply expand our understanding of events, but reshapes that understanding. Therefore, it is important to think about women, and gender more broadly, as more than adding voices to the historical record. By investigating women in world history we gain a new way to understand social relations at every level—the personal and the political, the local, the national, and even the international.

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### What does the source tell us about society?

Investigating women in world history through the use of primary sources requires careful attention to particular historical contexts. Women's lives have varied dramatically based on geography, religion, level of education, socioeconomic position, marital status, race, and historic time period.

Women have subscribed to many different political, social, cultural, or economic agendas and these must be taken into consideration to understand women through primary sources. It is important to consider the factors that have rendered women in particular times and places different from women who lived in other situations. How have men and women used the language of gender—defining men's roles as inherently "masculine" and women's roles as inherently "feminine"—to structure society? When we look at these roles over time and across cultures, we see that the categories can vary dramatically. For example, British, male colonial officials in Nigeria misunderstood an uprising of women in Southeastern Nigeria in 1929. The officials were interpreting the women's actions based on how they thought British women would act. **[See Analyzing Evidence: Court Records]**

Carefully considering the specific experiences of women in particular times and places and the symbolic roles women have played in history, historians begin their analysis of primary sources by asking a few basic questions, all of which help place the source in historical context.

In a sense, all of the following questions are about social relations. It is also important to step back from the specifics of individual sources to consider how they contribute to a larger understanding of a society.

How does this source fit into what we already know about a situation? Does the evidence contained in this source suggest that we need to revise our understanding about women's experience of an event or a

place or a time period? How does this source compare and contrast with the information we have about women in similar social situations? How does the information contained in this source shed light on the ways that a society imagines itself and its interaction with those outside that society? How does this new information change what we know about the hierarchies of power within and among societies?

Textile production, for example, reflects the availability of products, including cotton, linen, and wool, as well as trading patterns, and sophistication in the production of the cloth itself. Textiles also provide information about female clothing as it relates to the age and economic and

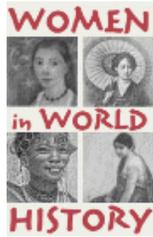


social status of the wearer, or its social function—whether or not it was used for cultural-religious ceremonies, or general use.

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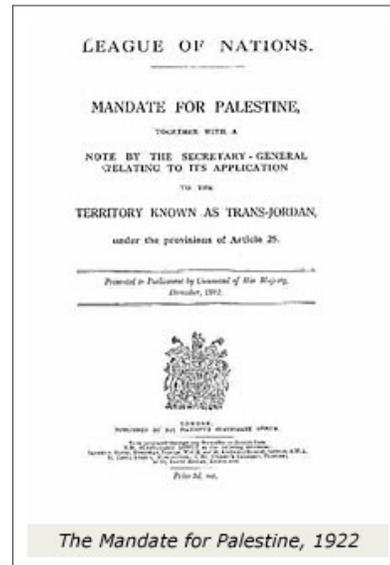
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### What kind of source is it?

Different types of sources offer various kinds of information. Official documents rarely contain information about personal and private issues, but they do provide evidence related to larger, more structural issues. For example, legal codes often reflect a society's ideal vision for itself, whereas court transcripts provide a glimpse into situations of individual behavior considered unacceptable by the society. Personal narratives, in contrast, might offer reflections on larger social issues, but they are usually focused on events as they affect the life of one individual or the lives of several known individuals, rather than a nameless collective.



Careful reading of many kinds of sources can help identify important clues such as the language used, the tone of the source, and motivation of the creator. With visual material, considering the physical form of the source is an important step in analysis.

While many visual or material culture sources do not contain words, scholars analyze them in similar ways. Is the image realistic or figurative? Does it have characteristics that mark it as the product of a particular time or place? Does it draw upon common cultural references or styles? Was it created for a museum or other public use rather than for personal enjoyment?

Similarly, objects of material culture require close reading that considers the form and function of the source. What materials are used to create the object? Was it for everyday use or was it used in religious

or social rituals? Is the object decorated? If so, what messages does that decoration convey?

When you first look at a source, you can attempt to identify it by asking some of the questions listed above. If it is a written text, read it, look for information about the author, date, and location to help ascertain the original purpose of the document. If the source is an image, attempt to answer some of the same questions by discovering its location of origin, its material, and its meaning and use at various times. This kind of information will help you decide how to analyze the document in question.

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### Who created the source and why?

Analyzing sources that pertain to women's lives and experiences often starts with questions about author or creator and why something was created. Any author, male or female, brings a set of assumptions and values that shape the document. Understanding those assumptions and values is one of the first steps in understanding the source. If an author can be identified, a next step is to learn more about his or her life.

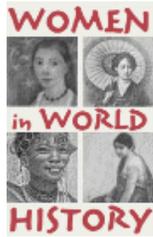
Some sources, such as official documents and newspaper advertisements, do not necessarily have an identifiable author. Nonetheless, they reflect the consensus of a group of creators, such as legislators, diplomats, newspaper owners, and marketing firms. These authors still represent identifiable perspectives that can help explain the sources.



*El Universal advertisement,  
July 1924*

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### Who is the intended audience?

In addition to identifying the author, identifying the intended audience or audiences is an important part of analyzing any source. Evidence on women in history can fruitfully be divided into “conscious” and “unconscious” sources. “Conscious” sources are material that has a deliberate subject or audience, such as letters or memoirs.

“Unconscious” sources constitute items that were made for or by women for daily, personal, or household use, such as images and objects shaped or produced by humans. All of these can be studied to learn about the varied experiences of women throughout history.

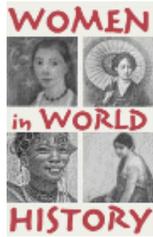
There is a large difference between public communication—documents created to be read by unknown others—and private creation. Public communication expanded rapidly with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, and later with the growth of the bureaucratic state across the globe beginning in the 19th century. Private materials are often created for the author, perhaps a journal or a painting, or for a specific other, perhaps a letter to a relative or friend.

In each instance, the creator of the material works with a particular audience in mind. The imagined reader—the self, a family member, other women, the general public—influences not only the content of the source, but also the form. Sources are created to persuade, to inspire religious devotion, to encourage “proper” conduct, to facilitate the day-to-day business of an organization, to preserve an account of a particular event or a particular life, or to provide statistical information about a group of persons or a historical phenomenon. In all of these cases, the author’s motivation shapes the content of the source, and subsequently, the evidence it provides about women in world history.

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### Quantitative Evidence

A valuable source for analyzing modern women's history is quantitative evidence. It can help locate women within the greater society at the local, regional, national, and even, international level.

National governments, with their expanding bureaucracies, have increasingly undertaken the task of compiling statistical material about their citizens/subjects. This material includes national censuses that contain a variety of information, such as language of daily use, mother tongue, race, religion, marriage and family patterns, and longevity, as well as birth, death, and infant mortality rates.

RELATION to Head of Family	CONDITION as to Marriage	AGE at birth of Male
Head	M	46
Wife	M	
Daughter	S	
Son	S	17
Daughter	S	
Son	S	6
Daughter	S	
...	S	22

1891 Census of England

Moreover, privately produced quantitative evidence (including polls, long-term medical studies, and other non-governmental research) address numerous issues connected with globalization. Among these are the trafficking of women and children, differential nutrition levels, disease, wages and wage differences based on gender, and living standards. Much of the statistical evidence, including fertility levels, literacy, marital status, rates of celibacy, marriage, and divorce, relates in one way or another to women's situations. Even when those gathering the material were not doing so with women in mind, the resulting statistics can provide a great deal of information about women.

Categories of statistical analysis are created for a purpose. Analyzing the categories themselves can provide insights into how a society views women and gender, and into society as a whole. Why, for example, is the site of the United States census the home rather than

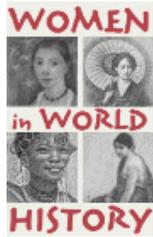
the workplace? Why is women's work in the home often not included in traditional studies of labor?

Statistical data most often contains information about groups of women, categorized by factors such as age, race, location, or economic situation. These often reveal little about individual women's experiences, but can offer rich information about women's experiences as a group. This kind of evidence enables us to make transnational comparisons about the lives of women as well as comparisons with men, and can tell us about changes in a wide variety of women's experiences over time.

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### Official Documents

Official documents of all types can help locate women in world history. They include government reports, laws, press releases, diplomatic communication, policy statements, declarations of war, treaties, constitutions, pronouncements of organizations, committee hearings, speeches, and court records.

They show how societies viewed and treated women as a group, as well as expose women's everyday lives. Often, piecing different official documents together can provide a clear picture of how different societies viewed women and women's roles, and shed light on social structure as a whole.

Reading the entire document is an important place to start. Does the document have an author? If so, who? Are women included as among the authors?

Documents that are created by many people and do not list individual authors also can illuminate women's roles and lives. Look at laws and constitutions from different societies. Do women have property rights? Are there laws about reproductive rights or childbirth? How are women treated in a country's constitution? Are they mentioned explicitly? What assumptions can be made if they are not mentioned at all? How do these documents compare to those of other societies at the same time period, or the same society in a different time period?

The Laws of Manu, for example, written in India between 200 and 400 C.E., restricted the legal independence of women, established the moral subordination of wives to husbands, socialized women in self-control, and reduced the property rights of women. When reading laws from other time periods, the Laws of Manu regarding women's social status both show a transition in Hindu values over time and shed light the way the Caste system operated.

Court records and commission hearings are also useful for locating women in world history, especially at times when women are absent from other types of available historical documents. Court records and commission hearings can provide valuable information about women's everyday lives. For example, records of testimony from the Spanish

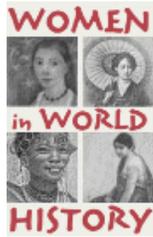


Inquisition show what women were thinking about and how they spoke in the 1500s and 1600s. **[See Analyzing Evidence: Official Documents]**

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## Newspapers

Newspapers are a rich source of information for researching women in world history during the last few centuries. Newspapers began appearing in the early 17th century in Western Europe, and by the early 20th century, they had become common throughout the world.

Newspapers, especially dailies and weeklies, contain an enormous amount of information. Reading newspapers from different times and places, historians learn about current events from local, regional, and international perspectives. They also learn what is important to publishers and readers of certain newspapers at a given time.

Historical newspapers allow scholars to analyze trends across time or compare coverage of daily events in different newspapers within a city or across the globe.

Newspapers tell us about attitudes toward race, class, and gender at particular points in time. Begin by looking at the stories that appear on the front page. Do certain stories dominate? In the 17th century, many kinds of information appeared side-by-side on a front page and the relative importance of each story may not be clear. By the 20th century, newspaper layout featured headlines in large type, and increasingly photographs, that served to highlight events and issues considered most prominent or marketable.

Then examine the organization of the paper and content of the entire newspaper. What is considered "newsworthy"? Whose stories are being told? Who is telling the story? Women very seldom were listed as authors in the news section until the late 20th century, but they may have played important roles behind the scenes.

Under what circumstances do "society" women appear in a newspaper? Working-class women? Are male and female criminals described in similar language? Male and female victims of crime? Are certain

sections of the newspaper aimed at women or men, such as style, sports or business sections?



Advertisements and classified sections are also very revealing. Advertisements for runaway slaves and indentured servants in American newspapers, for example, provide insight into slavery, labor, and gender as well as clothing, skills, and strategies for survival and escape. Employment notices reveal assumptions about gender and work.

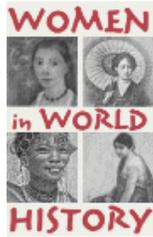
For many years, American newspapers offered "male" and "female" sections in the want ads; jobs were listed for either men or women, but not both. What jobs are categorized as male or female across cultures and time?

What products or services are advertised in various sections of the paper? Advertisements about clothing, cosmetics, and hygiene directed at women tell much about a society's standards of beauty. What is considered fashionable for women? For men? How are women's bodies represented? What strategies are used to entice readers to purchase clothing or other items? How much do products cost? Who could afford to use or wear them?

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### Religious Sources

Religious sources are excellent sites for uncovering the important beliefs and frameworks that have influenced women's experiences throughout history. Religious systems often provide a comprehensive way to think about aspects of life. Religions can provide information about how particular cultures organize their human relationships, how they make their personal and communal decisions, and how they interact with other societies.

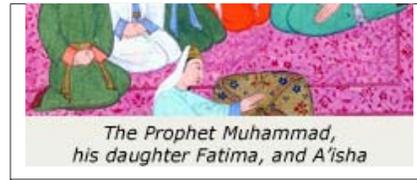
Different religious systems throughout the world have taken widely varying positions on the role of women. For example, Hinduism and Confucianism are religious systems whose teachings and stories emphasize concepts of social hierarchy. In these religions, women are often in explicitly subordinate roles, spiritually and practically. In Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, women and men are believed to have spiritual equality. Despite this spiritual equality, in Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist societies, patriarchal social norms frequently meant that women experienced practical inequality.

When one encounters a historical religious text, one should read it carefully, keeping in mind the imagery associated with women in that text. Are the female characters portrayed as strong and wise counselors? Are they portrayed as a source of distraction or temptation for men who are pursuing salvation, enlightenment, or the moral good? Does the text provide guidelines for female behavior? Does it instruct adherents on how to conduct their domestic, sexual, or political relationships?

Similarly, it is important to ask whether the text indicates that individual historical women held important places of respect or power in



that religion. For example, the Torah includes stories about figures such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, who played important roles in the history of



the Israelites. In the Christian New Testament, Jesus' mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Martha figure prominently in the story of Christ's life. In Islam, portions of the Hadith, which are reports about what the Prophet Mohammed did and said, that were conveyed by A'sha, Mohammed's second wife, provide important information about the women in Mohammed's sphere. **[See Analyzing Evidence: Religious Texts]** These women all served as key role models for subsequent generations of women in those faiths.

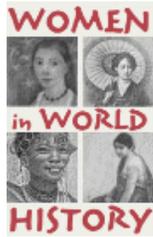
In addition to foundational religious texts, works of devotion and religious commentary also provide important information about women in world history. Again, one should consider whether the text was written by a woman. Were women the primary audience for the text? How does the text position women in relationship to the larger religious system? How does the text reflect the historical context in which was created?

In the case of religious objects, not unlike other instances of material culture, one should consider the creator of the object, the user, and the context of the devotional activity. For example in the Americas, participants of West African-diasporic religions symbolize spiritual devotion with ornate crowns, thrones, and alters that are decorated with symbols that invoke particular Orisha (deities). Thus, a crown that is yellow in color and includes water imagery most likely honors Oshun, a powerful female deity whose domain includes rivers.

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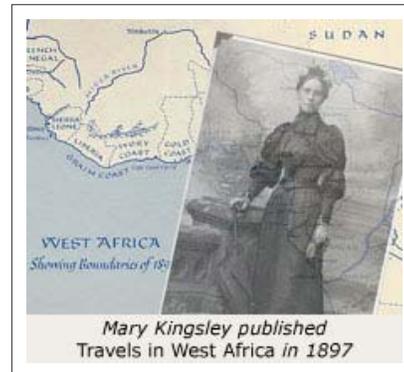
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### Personal Accounts

Personal accounts are excellent sources for women's history. These include travel accounts, diaries, memoirs, letters, and oral histories. These are more common in the last two centuries with the expansion of female literacy—throughout history most women (and men) were illiterate. While documents created for personal reasons often tell us about individual women, some of the attitudes they reflect and the experiences they discuss can be generalized.

Travel accounts tell the reader about the author as well as about his or her objects of observation. Among the well-known examples of travel accounts are those of 19th-century middle-class and upper middle-class British women. Many of these record life?



those of the indigenous people?n areas colonized by Britain, such as Africa and India, and reflect colonial assumptions about the indigenous subjects.

Diaries and memoirs, kept by women of all ages, including young girls, tell the reader much about differing stages in the female life cycle, as well as about the development of women's cultural, economic, and social life. Although some of the most famous female diarists of the Renaissance came from the upper classes and many diary keepers of the late 18th and early 19th century were also upper class, producers of diaries hailed from a wide social spectrum. Memoirs differ from diaries because memoirs have been specifically written for a public audience. Because their producers are often public figures, women have written memoirs less often than have men.

Letters that women exchanged with friends and other family members

also reveal the intricacies of female lives. When these personal documents record a historic event, they sometimes provide intensely personal interpretations of public occurrences. Wartime diaries and letters provide a home front perspective on war that may be radically different than that of the fighting front.

Finally, not all personal accounts take a written form. Oral tradition, including epics, lamentations, poems, and myths, are important sources for women's history because women often participated in the production and maintenance of these forms of preliterate history.

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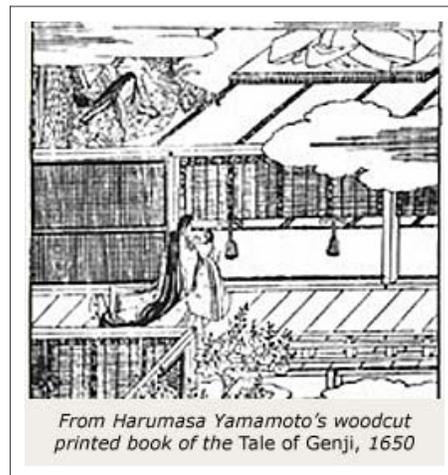
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### Fiction and Poetry

Literary sources can provide useful information about women of a particular era or place in world history. Novels, short stories, and poetry created by women express their perspectives on a range of social and cultural issues. Although these texts are works of imagination, women have used them to voice their thoughts on a whole range of issues.

In many historical contexts, women lacked a public platform to express their opinions on social, cultural, or political issues. In some cases, their literary works allowed them to reach an audience—if limited to those who were literate—through a medium that might have seemed trivial to the men who controlled access to the public sphere. For example,



Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of the Genji* is thought to be the first novel in world literature. Written by a low-ranking female aristocrat, *Tale of the Genji* provides insight on the court culture of medieval Japan.

When analyzing a literary source, it is important to gather as much information as possible about the author and the circumstances of the source's creation. Next, consider the ways in which the source depicts women. Are women primary actors or secondary actors in a narrative? Does the narrative focus on issues and concerns that are related to women's lives? If so, what is the perspective of the author on these issues? Is there consistent imagery or symbolism related to women? Does the author challenge or affirm the dominant cultural attitudes about women?

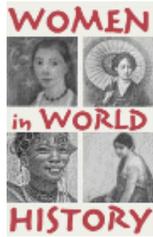
In addition to considering the content and message of a literary source, think about the audience for novels, short stories and poems. Who read this source? Did it have a major public influence? Was it read only by women, or by men and women?

Although sources created by women allow us a more direct insight into the concerns, values, and social customs, of women in different historical contexts, literary sources need not have been written by or primarily about women to reveal the prevalent attitudes of a culture toward women. Male literary figures create characters, storylines, and poems that convey information about women, even when that information seems tangential to the major theme of the work.

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## Music

Women in world history can also be found through examining the music from a given culture or time period. Music is best understood as “humanly organized sound” or “the purposeful organization of sound.” Many different types of music can be found in the historical record: music recordings, song lyrics, written music, spontaneous tunes, staged music performances, and music performances in other social settings, such as work situations and domestic life.

When approaching the music of a culture or time period, listen to or look for the rhythm, the melody and harmony, the formal structure of the piece, and the sound quality of the instruments and voices performing the music. Ask several questions: Who composed the music? Who is making the music? If there are lyrics, who composed them? What is the purpose of the music? Is the song sung for a particular purpose? Is the music intended to accompany a certain kind of event? When and where is the music performed? Is music restricted to certain people or transmitted through a master-apprentice system? Who are the “musical experts”?

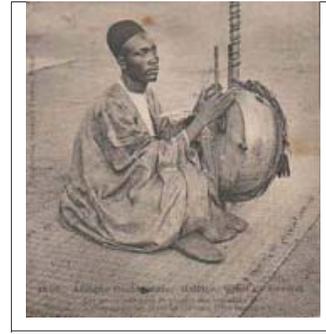
Asking a few fundamental questions about a culture’s musical system can open up a unique window into the philosophical, religious, and artistic concepts that shape people’s everyday lives. These questions also can help you determine how societies viewed women’s roles and status.

Within a given society, what types of music are women performing? Where can men provide music and where can women provide it? Do the lyrics comment on the status of women in society?

For example, among the Mande people of West Africa, the experts in speech and song who transmit historical information are called



*griots*. They are highly valued as advisors to kings and as artists. *Griot* roles are gender-differentiated. The men give genealogical information, recite historical epics, recount political events, mediate disputes, and transmit news. The women sing praises and convey moralising entreaties.



Traditionally, men have played almost all the instruments, while both men and women spoke and sang. It is also important to remember that these roles change over time.

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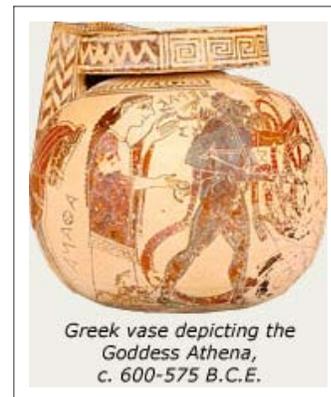
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### Visual Material

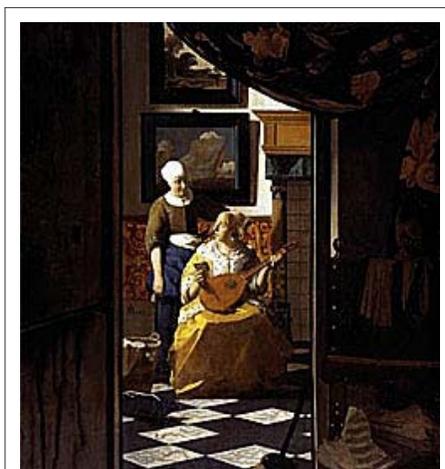
Visual sources offer important evidence about gender in a society. Paintings, murals, sculptures, and mosaics often provide information about the positions of women in a particular society through representations of women, men, sexuality, class, diet, familial relations, religion, daily activities, leisure, and work. Women are also part of the visual record as artists.

Representations of women are visible in Egyptian tomb paintings, African sculpture, and on Ancient Greek vases. Figurative paintings, especially portraiture in the Western tradition, can provide a wealth of detail about the lives of individual subjects, including women. For example, a series of paintings of women produced in the 1660s by



Greek vase depicting the Goddess Athena, c. 600-575 B.C.E.

the Flemish artist Jan Vermeer provide detail on the interior of Dutch homes as well as on female clothing and social status. They also incorporate assumptions about contemporary female literacy and musical training. The main figure in *The Love Letter* (1669) sits with a lute on her lap and an unopened letter in her hand, with her female servant looking on.



Other visual materials include women as symbols of certain values or beliefs. In statues, representations of the female body have often taken allegorical form, especially in the West. Modern states often use female figures to represent values such as liberty, freedom, justice, reason, truth,



virtue, and wisdom, concepts drawn from Ancient Greece. So, too, were representations of regions and areas, for example, Austria and Germania, often rendered female in sculptural form.

The “femaleness” of some of these concepts has been adopted elsewhere in the world. In one recent example, the statue Chinese students raised on Tiananmen Square in Beijing during pro-democracy demonstrations in the spring of 1989 was the “Goddess of Democracy.” We can also learn by asking questions about who creates art and how it is valued. Who is considered an artist in a given culture? Does art created by women have the same value as art created by men? Who has access to training and materials necessary for creating formal art?

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### **Material Culture**

Objects of material culture, such as clothing, textiles, cooking utensils, tools, simple machines, jewelry, or religious artifacts supply information on women's everyday lives. They provide evidence about women's positions in society, documenting not only their role in the household economy, which is often predominant, but also the social rites of passage in which they participated. Other items tell us about cultural and religious practices, some of which reflect attitudes toward women.

Material culture focuses on objects with physical substance, objects that were shaped by humans, such as a clay pot, or given meaning by humans, such as a tree branch believed to have medicinal or spiritual power. Each object has a story to tell, or more often, many stories to tell.



Start by asking what an object is. How might it have been used? What is it made of? What kinds of materials survive? A trace of pollen on a stone bowl can reveal important aspects of a culture's diet.

Does it appear to have been crafted quickly or slowly? How was the object valued? A coin may have represented a small amount of monetary value at one time, but collectors in the 21st century might value it highly. A coin also may have been used as currency in one society, but worn as decoration in another.

Where was an object found? How did it get there? An object displayed alone in a glass case can only tell part of a story. What objects appeared near that object when it was used? How does it compare to similar objects from the same culture.

Even written sources often can be analyzed as material culture. An illuminated manuscript displaying a 14th-century romantic story written by a woman known as Marie de France tells us a great deal. Parchment was very expensive, as were certain colors of paint, so a story written in large writing with wide margins and gold illustrations indicated wealth. **[See Analyzing Evidence: Literary Sources]** Similarly, a girl's diary written in the margins and between the lines of a book shows a determination to record one's life despite lack of access to writing materials.

Quilts, often produced in the United States by women, tell stories in their stitches. Some incorporate religious motifs, like the Rose of Sharon, or the names and dates of important events in their lives. Quilts were sometimes produced to raise money or to promote causes, such as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, or temperance.

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### Case Study: Prostitution

We can learn a great deal about women's history from studying women in a particular situation. Discussion of prostitution, a topic that has long excited widespread interest, incorporates ethnographic, historical, philosophical, medical, religious, and sociological elements and can tell us much about different societies' attitudes toward women. Popular attitudes toward prostitution also provide information on a particular society's beliefs about race, class, gender, and age, as well as eugenics and hygiene, not to mention gender difference in marriage. The variety of sources described here can be employed as a model for students interested in other women's history topics.

Courtesans, or upper-class prostitutes, are among the women often mentioned in traditional histories, from the hetaerae of Ancient Greece, through the Byzantine Empress Theodora, to Diane de Poitiers, the 16th-century mistress of Henri II, King of France. Courtesans have been the subject of Japanese woodcuts, "Pictures of the Floating World," dating from the



*Diane de Poitiers*  
(Francois Clouet, 1571)

Edo Period **[See Analyzing Evidence: Paintings and Prints]**, and of European portrait painters.

Some, like the Madame de Pompadour and Madame du Barry, the mistresses of French King Louis XV during the mid-18th century, came to wield significant power. These women, however, represent only a small percentage of prostitutes, many of whom lived—and still live—in poverty.

Both men and women have been employed as sexual laborers throughout history. When Western governments began attempting to regulate prostitution during the 19th century, however, their policies

concentrated on the sexual behaviors of women. Journalists, moral crusaders, and politicians discussed prostitution in newspapers, periodicals, parliament, and public speeches or discussions. Novels reflected contemporary female stereotypes associated with prostitution (the “weaker” morals of women or the “dirtiness” of women from certain ethnic groups, often immigrants). Physicians, sociologists, and other specialists sought to explain its causes. Reflecting the growth of prostitution as a global concern, beginning in the late 19th century, countries throughout the world began signing international treaties banning the transportation of women for illicit purposes, which was known as the “white slave trade.”

European states, as well as some cities in East Asia (but not the United States), that regulated prostitution kept a close eye on “registered” prostitutes, who constituted a small percentage of sex laborers. Most sex laborers worked clandestinely, sometimes only temporarily.

Governments passed laws meant to control the behavior of prostitutes. Officials tracked their health with compulsory medical examinations designed to detect venereal diseases. “Morals” police monitored their behavior and movements, and arrested them for a variety of violations, sometimes resulting in court cases. All of these documents (laws, court records, police records, and health exams) provide a rich source basis for the study of prostitution.



Prostitute's health book application, Habsburg Monarchy

For example, the regulation of prostitution in the last decades of the Habsburg Monarchy included a variety of assumptions, among them the widespread literacy of women and a competent bureaucracy large enough to oversee the administration of prostitution. Prostitutes were expected to fill in application forms for health books as well as to read behavioral and health rules and regulations

the police provided. The questionnaires demanded personal information, including name, date, and place of birth, residence, religion, marital status. If the applicant were married or a minor, the

permission of her husband or parents was necessary for registration.

Some health book applications might contain subjective questions, such as why the applicant had chosen to become a prostitute. The health books, which varied locally throughout the Habsburg Monarchy, usually contained the name, age, and place of birth of its holder, and from 1894, also an identifying photograph of the prostitute. These were primarily photographs of faces only, but occasionally, they included full-length, formal studio portraits. Health books tracked the government-mandated regular visits prostitutes had with police doctors to determine the state of their health. In addition to telling us about the health of individual prostitutes, as well as more general information about the age of regulated



prostitutes, their hometowns, and the towns and cities in which they chose to work, this material also provides evidence that prostitution was part of the family economy among the poor of the Monarchy.

In an era before antibiotics, venereal disease was the main cause of concern about the health of prostitutes. Because registered prostitutes might have as many as 20 clients a day, they risked great exposure to venereal disease (and other infectious diseases) and at the same time exposed many people to it. Indeed, by the time a registered prostitute was discovered to have a venereal disease, she might already have infected numerous clients, who might pass the disease along to his spouse, and perhaps, future generations.

When a registered prostitute left a city or town, she was obliged to inform the local police. If she planned to continue practicing prostitution in her new place of residence, she had to re-register with the police. They in turn contacted the police at her previous place of residence to verify her presence there as well as any criminal record or venereal infection. In addition to information on the health and possible criminal activity of prostitutes, this correspondence tells us about the mobility of prostitutes within the Monarchy.

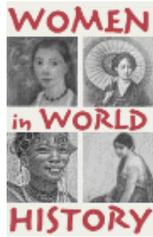
In addition to local, regional, and state governmental documentation of the behavior of individual prostitutes, there are also the numerous publications by social organizations concerned with the issue of prostitution. Although many male and female bourgeois social reformers sought to eliminate prostitution altogether, their approaches were often very different, in part because of contrasting attitudes toward venereal diseases, the spread of which was associated with prostitution. Many reforming middle-class women's groups in the United States asserted that the very regulation of prostitution discriminated against women and helped force them into a lifetime of prostitution; once labeled as prostitutes, their possibility of finding "respectable" employment was limited.

These varied materials reflect differing class, cultural, religious, and social perspectives on prostitution, especially in the modern, Western world. They tell us much about what observers thought about prostitution and how their attitudes changed over time. Until recently, there were few personal accounts by prostitutes to provide clues about their varying motivations or their attitudes toward the governments, organizations, or individuals that sought to regulate the practice or abolish prostitution. Oral histories as well as the anthropological and sociological studies that document the lives of prostitutes, many of them from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, almost all of them poor, have begun filling this gap.

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### About the Author

Nancy M. Wingfield has published widely on the cultural history of Habsburg Central Europe. Most recently, she is editor of *Creating the Other: Nationalism and Ethnic Enmity in Habsburg Central Europe* (2003) and co-editor with Maria Bucur of *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present* (2001). *Gender and World War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, also co-edited with Maria Bucur, is forthcoming in 2006.

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