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Natalie Zemon Davis Solves a Problem

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One question directed at the latest iteration of women's history from the late 1960s and down to today was/is "where is the power?" This challenge to women's history's legitimacy, posed by those who claimed that history was essentially about charting power and that women had never wielded power, sent historians of women scrambling. There is not time to go through the resulting sightings of women's power in, for example, unions, food protests, charitable activities, and the many forms of activism—abolitionism, civil rights, suffrage, socialism and communism, and reform politics. Women had been queens regnant, behind-the-scenes influencers, assassins, resisters, warriors, and on and on. Exceptional women had in fact wielded that power, the justification for women's history went.

Natalie Zemon Davis's first book, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, appears on the surface to follow that quest for acts of power in essays such as "Women on Top" or in her work on influential women printers. Fast forward twenty years to *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Lives*. Her quest seems to be different—or at least appears to be so in interviews and writings during the intervening years in which she discusses "the variety of ways of being a woman." Indeed, in scrupulous, archival detail—another announced but also obvious passion—she chronicles the lives of three very different women "on the margins" as part of her historical engagement with and portrayal of individuals.

For Davis, the margins are important spaces in history—national and world history or otherwise. People at the margins are flexible, she announces in her study, and, given their character and positioning on the margins, they take advantage of opportunities. At the margins there may be fewer constraints and social conventions that one has to follow. Although people at the margins confront problems, as the heroines of Davis's story did, they soldier on and work to find emotional and other resources that others might not. They develop skills and fortify themselves with them, even to the point of interfering in others' lives. They thus prepare themselves for whatever may threaten to upset their life course and goals. Simultaneously there are fewer rules on the margins and often fewer constraints, opening the way to creativity even as spiritual strength also fortified them. In the case of German-born Gluckl, French nun Marie de l'Incarnation, and Dutch scientific illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian, personal creativity and doggedness outside central, constrained, and elite society allowed them onto the world history stage. The queens of France could not go off to live with Native Americans in Canada, nor could they sail away to Surinam to draw plants and insects. No matter how creative they might have been, they are more constrained. In contrast, lives at the margins are in many ways full of texture, which may not be said to include the wielding power. Let's see.

Davis emphasizes border crossings, fluidity of identity, and self-fashioning in her writings on the large cast of individuals who comprise the subjects of her extensive oeuvre. There are those in women's history who might be included only by crossing borders mentally or symbolically or by self-fashioning—Chinese women, for example, who self-fashioned by borrowing the practice of footbinding from (perhaps) Persian dancers or those who wove silk for trade on the Silk Road or the River Merchant's wife who imagines the travels of her husband as well as his return. Eighteenth-century African women—both slave and free—grew crops and invented new varieties of produce from plants around the globe thus crossing borders though they might be stationary. These went to feed African slave armies fighting neighboring kingdoms. Women captured for the trade are said to have transported seed in their hair or their children's hair or otherwise on their person or seizing it from ship stores and then composing what one historian has called truly "botanical wonders" in the distant Caribbean or South America. Davis would consider these supposedly marginal activities as stemming from a positioning beyond the historical centers of power, and in the case of Chinese and African women may be considered as functioning on the margins of the margins as the most ordinary of people. How would she connect them as well to power?

In her first book Davis showed ordinary, marginal people—journeymen and others—wedded to ritual, hanging out, enforcing social rules, while also fluidly creating new identities as Protestants, for example. We can also see Chinese behavior as shaped by ritual intertwined with gender, constantly enacting and perpetuating gender order while also riddled with fluidity. Studies of Chinese women find that there was no universal word for "woman/women" in the Chinese language until late in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Instead there was sister, mother, wife, and so on, each one defined by relationships themselves constructed on following rules, rituals, and other practices associated with the term mother, wife etc. Suddenly, they are "women." The Chinese examples suggest that there is little in a female being inhabiting this social world that is determined by biology. Fluidity, as Davis would have it, always rears its head: beginning in the late seventeenth century, for example, Jesuits residing in China (and in other parts of the world) sent accounts of gendered relations and other social behaviors—definitely more refined than those of most Europeans at the time—back to the Continent, where they were widely translated and published. In them was the story of Mencius's mother and the behavior she demanded of her son and of herself. It was after these writings became popularized that Europeans fluidly reshaped motherhood as encompassing the nurturing and raising their children to be responsible—not simply well-connected—adults. (Some historians in the 1970s took this fluidity for women's eternal and static nature and an indication of their lack of historicity and power.) Motherhood in the West thus was shaped by a new set of behaviors and practices crossing borders and women, those people at the margins, refashioned themselves. We only need to study Rousseau's reading notes on the history of women worldwide to understand that in the West the rules and rituals of modern motherhood (suggested by thinkers such as Rousseau) stemmed from other cultures, as they reshaped global practices, fostering new options in self-fashioning. Played out at the margins, gender is a taken for granted way of life and a process of dwelling in this world that has transcended boundaries as part of its fluidity—but nonetheless interpreted as powerless. Still, as Davis finds her women full of distinct characteristics and a range of self-fashioned attributes she takes on another initial objection to

women's history: that united by female reproductivity women had no history beyond the body, or alternatively, the family.

Yet, some women seemed directly to wield power and were not simply marginal: they regularly carried out rule-based diplomatic negotiations among Southeast Asian states and among those of Africa to enact and compose the shared world. They also were especially capable and successful in both local and international trade, eventually in the twentieth century becoming politically forceful in decolonizing efforts albeit understood by white historians as marginal: I cite here the Nigerian Market Women's organizations that both organized the so-called Aba Women's War of 1929 and the postwar activism that helped Nigeria gain its independence from Britain—all of these by what would pass as marginal persons. It is easy to see in the above-mentioned cases the world history importance of these figures, despite the denial of their relevance in understanding the large process of what are called "world systems" and the power embodied therein. However, when discussing her "women on the margins" Natalie Davis did not call them powerful but said instead that "power flowed through them." This flow of power through individuals appears obvious in the case of the Egyptian and Hittite queens' correspondence or in the adept negotiations of Southeast Asian women diplomats. The same is true of African queen Njinga, who kept the Portuguese at bay even as she took on regional kingly rivals. Davis's protagonists, however, were hardly so highly born or recognized as internationally important at the time. She shows their power as life-force or as competence or as worldly energy in their lives or the infusions of white or other power directing their actions. Dwelling on this earth was a matter of life practices, rules, and competencies, and a broader international power creating European knowledge- and wealth-based dominance coursing through their lives. The history written by Gulbadan Begum, aunt of Akbar, reveals the power of institutional religion and dynasties surging through women of the Mughal court, as they handle women from other regions wanting a place in the court and striving to become the mother of the next emperor. Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of a British ambassador to the Ottoman court, took the knowledge of inoculation from Istanbul back to London in her letters, becoming in the process a conduit of scientific knowledge as power.

However, what about power flowing through the lives of the "gens de peu" (from Pierre Sansot's book of the same name)—that intertwined more ordinary people with one another, even those who were victims? Women's voices of victimhood and occasional triumph were heard during the Manchu takeover of China in the seventeenth century. The verse of Shang Jinglan and the verse and biographies of Wang Duanshu are still conduits of power—not just that of the author but that of the family and of the state. Thereafter Chinese women's adherence to cultural rules advanced the interests of defeated families in poetry and sustained families imperiled by political revolution. These poems passed among women and across families as a kind of rule-based performance as power crossing household boundaries moved through their poetry and formed invisible networks (as did that of Ottoman women poets writing almost simultaneously). Inhabiting the margins, women did not go out in public and read their works aloud seeking acclaim, yet the poetry indicated life-force conducting power crossing household and imperial thresholds, as women fluidly refashioned themselves, ultimately reaching a world stage in our times. The processes of footbinding and of creating the dainty shoes cemented sexual intimacy, testifying not only to powerful gendered structures but also highlighting a resistant power

resonating from the margins of the Manchu conquest and binding its women and other opponents in a common web.

In sum, the scholarship of Natalie Davis provides us with new and critical understandings of power and individuation as she merges structural exigencies with human capacities. Across her own life flows the power of intellectual fluidity, of character and generosity, of mentoring, and extraordinary scholarly verve. With gratitude, we try to emulate the richness of that power in our own lives and work.

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