

‘However, the majority of women are neither harlots nor courtesans; nor do they sit clasping pug dogs to dusty velvet all through the summer afternoon.’ Should we focus on studying ordinary or extraordinary women? Explain your answer with reference to an academic discipline of your choice.

The notion of ordinary and extraordinary women is in itself problematic. Whilst both ordinary and extraordinary are clearly and separately defined¹, the application of these adjectives in conjunction with women is subjective. The concepts of the usual and the unusual are entirely dependent on one’s personal circumstances in life. Thus, there is no obvious line to be drawn between what is ordinary and what is extraordinary. Whilst there has been plenty of study of the supposed ordinary and extraordinary men in history, evidenced by Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Great Man Theory’² and latterly historian Tristram Hunt’s assertion that today’s history has become the study of the ‘everyman’³, women, have been overlooked. Given the dichotomy in how ‘ordinary’ is defined in either gender through time, women must be defined by entirely separate criteria to men. However, despite the problematic existence of these terms, when taking a historical standpoint on women, it is perhaps easier to pinpoint their meaning. The structural oppression of women and societal enforcement of what is accepted as ‘normal’ for women, makes it more straightforward to determine, in patriarchal standards, what an extraordinary woman was: a woman who did not conform with the accepted values of femininity in her time.

In her extended essay ‘*A Room of One’s Own*’ Virginia Woolf questions the absence of the ordinary woman in the study of the past, whose life appears to be so traceless that she has been entirely omitted from history⁴. One could argue that the purpose of studying history is to understand the mechanisms and causes of change, as well as the elements of society that remain constant, and thereby inform the future⁵. Regarding the study of women through time, this interpretation of history favours ordinary women, who are most representative of societal norms and changes to these. However, those deemed extraordinary women have been propelled to the forefront of historical study, such as Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I and Emmeline Pankhurst, all of whom will be discussed in this essay. The study of these renowned figures disregards the social context of their lives, which Herbert Spencer regards as far more significant in the formation of any extraordinary individual than the individual themselves⁶. It is the ordinary women of the past who make up this tapestry of social context, and thus are vital to study if a historian is to ever track the development of the role of women through history and indeed its continual development in the future. Furthermore, by focusing on the women who have broken the mould, we run the risk of altogether

¹ Collins, *Collins POCKET English Dictionary*, Ninth Edition (1992; repr., Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 196, 387.

² Bert Alan Spector, “Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory More Fully Considered,” *Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2015): 250–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015571392>.

³ Tristram Hunt, “History Used to Be the Study of Great Men. Now It’s of Everyman | Tristram Hunt,” *the Guardian*, November 21, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/nov/21/tristram-hunt-praises-serious-biographies>.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929; repr., : Penguin Books, 2020), 36.

⁵ Peter Stearns, “Why Study History? (1998) | American History Association,” *Historians.org*, 1998, [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998)).

⁶ Bert Alan Spector, “Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory More Fully Considered,” *Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2015): 250–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015571392>.

forgetting what the mould really was, and thus producing a historical narrative unrepresentative of the oppression women faced for centuries, and latterly the lifting of this oppression. That is not to say that the triumphs of women who admirably subverted societal norms should be entirely disregarded, but that we should now turn to ordinary women, who reflect contemporary social attitudes, to understand the trajectory of women through time and inform their route in the future. As Woolf's own attempts uncovered, this methodology of historical study has been often unpursued, with a tendency to focus on the extraordinary exceptions, rather than the general trends.

Joan of Arc is one of the most studied women of the medieval era and is regarded as an extraordinary warrior and martyr, renowned by women across the world who view her as an emblem of women's suffrage and a proto feminist⁷. In the English language alone, there are over 12,000 published works about her.⁸ Joan of Arc is studied in history as a Saint, a woman of mysticism, a staunch guardian of her monarchy and nation, and a corruptor of social order. Her actions are indeed remarkable, the trajectory of her life is otherwise unheard of in the medieval world. From a mere farm girl, who claimed to be divinely inspired, to the saviour of France. Joan's arrival at Orléans on Friday 29 April 1429 corresponded with a shift in direction of the battle between the French and the English, and the English siege of Orléans swiftly ended. From then on Joan of Arc's role in the Hundred Years War was solidified and her execution on at Rouen on 30 May 1431 sealed her fate of martyrdom and heroism⁹. Joan of Arc's story and actions are undoubtedly remarkable, but history has long acknowledged this and whilst the intense study of this revered figure has upheld her legacy and promoted debate surrounding faith, it has done little for the study of women more widely. It is unrepresentative of the generally constrained life of women in the medieval era.

The study of women who have gained the title 'extraordinary' has in fact hindered the wider historical study of women. A black hole has emerged with regards to ordinary women, making the tracking of social change and the development of women through history extremely challenging, Woolf despairs at this lack of initiative. She is aware, as are historians, that "all these facts lie somewhere"¹⁰. However, as historians have not sought them, they often continue to lie dormant. If historians were to divert their attention to the ordinary woman of the 15th century, more would be discovered about the role of women and the circumstances which made Joan of Arc's actions so far out of the ordinary. As is the case today, it would be inherently wrong to generalise the experience of the medieval woman however, it was largely unlike the life of Joan of Arc. Peasant women had many domestic duties and often aided their husbands' work¹¹. Women's status in society was dictated by men, drawing from the Bible which asserted male dominance over women. However, women were known to gain status as widows and were able to inherit. These quotidian experiences of the ordinary woman are overlooked when focusing on extraordinary figures, such as Joan of Arc.

⁷ Helen Castor, "Joan of Arc – Feminist Icon?," *the Guardian* (The Guardian, February 22, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/17/joan-arc-feminist-icon-uncomfortable-fit.

⁸ Una O'Higgins O'Malley, "St Joan of Arc," *The Furrow* 38, no. 4 (1987): 226–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27678460>.

⁹ Taylor, Craig. "Introduction". In *Joan of Arc*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2013) accessed Mar 7, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526112798.00009>

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; repr., : Penguin Books, 2020), 36.

¹¹ Alixe Bovey, "Women in Medieval Society," *The British Library*, April 30, 2015,

Consequently, history may fail to meet its aim of understanding changes and constants in society, by focusing on anomalies and consequences, rather than the wider under currents of change.

Admittedly, written sources detailing ordinary women of the past are not plentiful. Woolf herself encounters this problem positing that upon attempting to unearth the Elizabethan woman “one is held up by the scarcity of facts”¹². However, whilst there may be a scarcity of *written* facts, this excuse is devalued by the presence of archaeological artefacts which are in equal abundance across the gender spectrum, perhaps even overrepresented among women and are hugely revelatory in divulging the lives of, who Max Adams describes as, the ‘unquiet women of history’¹³. But if there is no scarcity of sources, why is the voice of ordinary women so muffled in the study of history? Historian Karen Dempsey provides an answer to this, by critiquing archaeology’s long-standing complicity in upholding patriarchal structures through its unwillingness to modernise and opt for intersectional equality in its study. Instead, for as long as white male voices dominate the archaeological field, as is demonstrated through their overrepresentation in the authorship of medieval archaeology journals and the Oxford handbooks of archaeology¹⁴, the stories they reveal will continue to reflect their own prejudices and interests, which ultimately leads to a disregard of the ordinary women of history.

As we move through history a familiar pattern begins to unearth itself: the study of extraordinary women overshadows the experiences of the ordinary, giving way to a glazing over of the past that does little to acknowledge societal constants and changes for women. Mary Astell, often referred to as “the first English feminist”¹⁵ has aired her discontent towards such a narrow study of history: she bewails the male ability to ignore the actions of “good women” and when they finally come to acknowledge them it is only to say “That such women acted above their sex. (...) That they were not Women who did those Great Actions, but that they were Men in Petticoats!”¹⁶ This remark illustrates the absence of study of ordinary women in history, and the discipline’s complicity in perpetuating the idea that women only become of value or interest when they are acting as men, which is both damaging and inaccurate.

The study of Elizabeth I is the embodiment of this narrow-minded approach to history. Whilst her reign was undoubtedly important, her significance as a woman is less so. Elizabeth was indeed unusual for her times, as a powerful female monarch who led England to defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588. Her reign is often deemed to be England’s own “Golden Age”, characterised by a prolonged

¹² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929; repr., : Penguin Books, 2020), 35.

¹³ Max Adams, “Not so Silent: The Unquiet Women of History,” *HistoryExtra*, February 8, 2018, https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/women-history-untold-stories-feminism-archaeology-invisible-hidden-histories-queens-ordinary-lives/.

¹⁴ Karen Dempsey, “Gender and Medieval Archaeology: Storming the Castle,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 369 (June 2019): 772–88, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.13>.

¹⁵ Jenny Batchelor, “Mary Astell,” www.litencyc.com, March 21, 2002, https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=168.

¹⁶ Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820* (2000; repr., Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 18–19, https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=UhrygiO5bbQC&oi=fnd&pg=PP15&dq=British+Women+Writers+and+the+Writing+of+History,+1670-1820&ots=R0Smx2sGb7&sig=tY3816Xg_uZ6sdITSM5KwWZ3Qs&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=British%20Women%20Writers%20and%20the%20Writing%20of%20History%2C%201670-1820&f=false.

period of peace, economic stability and flourishing of the arts and intellectual curiosity.¹⁷ However historians' focus on the study of this extraordinary figure overlooks ordinary Elizabethan women, and their positions in society, which would provide a better overview of women's progression through time. The umbrella term "The Golden Age" does little to encompass the experiences of the average 16th century woman. The focus on Elizabeth's female identity, gives historians the false reassurance that they have addressed the issue of Elizabethan women. This is a damaging angle of study, which in its practice disregards the reality for Elizabethan women. The reign of Elizabeth I upheld a patriarchal system, in which women, other than the monarch, were deemed to be weak and of little value. However, contrary to modern assumptions, a surprising number of girls in the late 16th century were in education¹⁸, signifying a slightly more progressive society than would be apparent if a historian were to focus solely on Elizabeth I, and stereotype all other Elizabethan women. Thus, the study of extraordinary women is flawed on two ends of a spectrum; it runs the risk of ignorance of both oppression and progression. To overlook these aspects of women's lives would be to overlook mechanisms of change and constancy and hence reduce the efficacy of historical study.

As we move into the more recent period of modern history, the phenomenon of extraordinary women is again widely studied. One who dominates the early 20th century is Emmeline Pankhurst, accredited with leading the Suffragette Movement, ultimately resulting in the vote for women being granted in the UK. Whilst the study of Emmeline Pankhurst does bring with it a type of justice for the struggles of ordinary women, it still fails to acknowledge the variation of opinions and roles among her contemporaries, thus creating an inaccurate façade of simplicity regarding the early 20th century woman. Furthermore, through studying Emmeline Pankhurst and disregarding the ordinary women who provided the foundations of the women's suffrage movement, we risk crediting her with a victory that is not hers to claim. If the historian were to instead focus on the ordinary woman, they would unearth diversified opinions among women concerning their suffrage. Often forgotten are the tens of thousands of working-class women who provided a mass-movement in support of women's suffrage; 30,000 women working in the cotton mills of Lancashire signed a women's suffrage petition which was presented to Parliament in 1901¹⁹. This is just one example among many of the support the Suffragette Movement gleaned from working-class women. However, they were often met with sneering condescension from suffragettes of the upper classes who deemed them to be 'the weakest portion of the sex'.²⁰ Furthermore, whilst ultimately the suffragette movement prevailed, the anti-suffrage movement also held traction in the early 20th century and consisted of many ordinary women who felt a 'division of functions' was 'the keystone to civilisation'²¹. If a historian only studied the extraordinary Emmeline Pankhurst, the lack of intersectionality within the Suffragette Movement would escape them, as would the resistance of many women to receive

¹⁷ William H Sherman, "'Gold Is the Strength, the Sinnewes of the World': Thomas Dekker's 'Old Fortunatus' and England's Golden Age," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 6 (1993): 85–102, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24321954>.

¹⁸ Barbara Bogaev and Elizabeth Norton, "Elizabeth Norton: The Hidden Lives of Tudor Women," Folger Shakespeare Library (, July 9, 2018), https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/elizabeth-norton-hidden-lives-tudor-women.

¹⁹ Sarah Jackson, "'Women Quite Unknown': Working-Class Women in the Suffrage Movement," *The British Library*, 2018, <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/women-quite-unknown-working-class-women-in-the-suffrage-movement>.

²⁰ " "

²¹ Julia Bush, "The Anti-Suffrage Movement," *The British Library*, March 5, 2018, <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/the-anti-suffrage-movement>.

suffrage. Consequently, they may wrongly proclaim that her actions brought justice for *all* women or deceive themselves into thinking that women were able to emerge from years of oppression without any self-doubt. Thus, they would miss the mechanisms, causes and constants of change.

In conclusion, whilst epochal women of the extraordinary certainly do exist, focusing historical study on them, without looking at the wider context of ordinary women, leads to a gap in historical knowledge of women's social progression through time. Studying ordinary women allows the historian to track the underpinnings of social change, the setbacks to social progression and ultimately the course of gender equality through time, in a way that the study of extraordinary women overlooks. To understand the position of women today, one must first understand her history, and the only way to do this is to examine the ordinary lives which have been the foundations of extraordinary change.

Word Count: 2492

Bibliography

- Adams, Max. "Not so Silent: The Unquiet Women of History." *HistoryExtra*, February 8, 2018. Accessed 06/03/2021. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/women-history-untold-stories-feminism-archaeology-invisible-hidden-histories-queens-ordinary-lives/>.
- Batchelor, Jenny. "Mary Astell." *www.litencyc.com*, March 21, 2002. Accessed 07/03/2021. <https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=168>.
- Bogaev, Barbara, and Elizabeth Norton. "Elizabeth Norton: The Hidden Lives of Tudor Women." *Folger Shakespeare Library*. , July 9, 2018. Accessed 07/03/2021. <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/elizabeth-norton-hidden-lives-tudor-women>.
- Bovey, Alixe. "Women in Medieval Society." *The British Library*, April 30, 2015. Accessed 07/03/2021. <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/the-middle-ages/articles/women-in-medieval-society>.
- Bush, Julia. "The Anti-Suffrage Movement." *The British Library*, March 5, 2018. Accessed 07/03/2021. <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/votes-for-women/articles/the-anti-suffrage-movement>.
- Castor, Helen. "Joan of Arc – Feminist Icon?" *the Guardian*. *The Guardian*, February 22, 2018. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/17/joan-arc-feminist-icon-uncomfortable-fit>.
- Collins. *Collins POCKET English Dictionary*. Ninth Edition. 1992. Reprint, Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.
- Dempsey, Karen. "Gender and Medieval Archaeology: Storming the Castle." *Antiquity* 93, no. 369 (June 2019): 772–88. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.13>.
- Fry, Stephen. "The Future's in the Past." *The Guardian*. *The Guardian*, July 8, 2006. Accessed 09/03/21 <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2006/jul/09/featuresreview.review>.
- Gubergritz, Natalia. "GRIN - English Women through the Ages. A Comparative Study of the Feminine during the Elizabethan and Victorian Eras." *www.grin.com*, 2009. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://www.grin.com/document/412994>.
- Hunt, Tristram. "History Used to Be the Study of Great Men. Now It's of Everyman | Tristram Hunt." *the Guardian*, November 21, 2010. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/nov/21/tristram-hunt-praises-serious-biographies>.
- Jackson, Sarah. "'Women Quite Unknown': Working-Class Women in the Suffrage Movement." *The British Library*, 2018. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/votes-for->

- women/articles/women-quite-unknown-working-class-women-in-the-suffrage-movement.
- Laurence, Anne. "Feminist History and Women's History." OpenLearn, September 1, 2005. Accessed 06/03/2021 <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/feminist-history-and-womens-history>.
- Looser, Devoney. *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820*. 2000. Reprint, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. Accessed 06/03/2021 https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=UhygiO5bbQC&oi=fnd&pg=PP15&dq=British+Women+Writers+and+the+Writing+of+History,+1670-1820&ots=R0Smx2sGb7&sig=tY3816Xg_uZ6sdlTSM5KwWZ3Qs&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=British%20Women%20Writers%20and%20the%20Writing%20of%20History%2C%201670-1820&f=false.
- Nico, Magda. "Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Times? The Terrible Opportunity for Sociological Inquietude | European Sociologist." *www.europeansociologist.org*, June 2, 2020. Accessed 06/03/2021. <https://www.europeansociologist.org/issue-45-pandemic-impossibilities-vol-1/ordinary-lives-extraordinary-times-terrible-opportunity>.
- O'Higgins O'Malley, Una. "St Joan of Arc." *The Furrow* 38, no. 4 (1987): 226–31. Accessed 07/03/2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27678460>.
- Sherman, William H. "'Gold Is the Strength, the Sinnewes of the World': Thomas Dekker's 'Old Fortunatus' and England's Golden Age." *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 6 (1993): 85–102. Accessed 07/03/2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24321954>.
- Spector, Bert Alan. "Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory More Fully Considered." *Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2015): 250–60. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015571392>.
- Stearns, Peter. "Why Study History? (1998) | American History Association." *Historians.org*, 1998. Accessed 09/03/2021. [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998)).
- Taylor, Craig. "Introduction". In *Joan of Arc*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2013) accessed Mar 7, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526112798.00009>
- The British Library. "Women in Anglo-Saxon England | the British Library." *The British Library*, 2019. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/women-in-anglo-saxon-england>.
- Wilkinson, Kate. "Young, Female and Powerful: Was Elizabeth I a Feminist?" *www.rmg.co.uk*. Royal Museums Greenwich, November 16, 2017. Accessed 07/03/2021 <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/blog/young-female-powerful-was-elizabeth-i-feminist>.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. Reprint, : Penguin Books, 2020.