History/Herstory: Mata Hari and "Madeleine" Noor

Nilakshi Roy
Associate Professor, Department of English
Vaze College, Mulund, Mumbai

Preeta Nilesh
Associate Professor, Department of History
Vaze College, Mulund, Mumbai

Abstract: New Historicism approaches history in a way that is more holistic than Old Historicism, but it tries to flatten out the differences in identity negotiation by its constant allusions to power politics. Feminists argue that power is not the only monolithic determinant in assessing history: gender can be studied with respect to identity, its intersection with other parameters and resistance. This paper interrogates how a historical subject is configured in history, especially if she is a woman. It takes up the points of view of feminist critics of New Historicism and investigates the history-literature interface of the lives of two women, Mata Hari and Noor Inayat Khan, perhaps spies involved in the two World Wars. In April 10, 2014 Britain released information on Mata Hari who was tried for causing the deaths of 50,000 soldiers, arrested and executed in 1917 in Paris. British official history of the Second World War informs us that Noor Inayat Khan was a wartime British secret agent code-named Madeleine, the first female operator sent to Nazi-occupied France by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), captured, tortured and executed. The paper examines the idea of embodiment; questions of identity formation of women as subjects in the masculine project of war itself are discussed, and pertinent questions of race are raised as well. It also interrogates whether historical accounts and fictional works offer different ways of understanding historical figures, like Mata Hari and Madeleine or Noor Inayat Khan.

Keywords: Spy, gender performance, war, identity, race, embodiment, New Historicism, feminism.

Introduction

New Historicism approaches history in a way that is more holistic than Old Historicism, but it tries to flatten out the differences in identity negotiation by its constant allusions to power politics. Contrary to this, the renowned feminist Judith Butler argues that power is not the only monolithic determinant in assessing history: gender can be studied with respect to identity, its intersection with other parameters and resistance. She argues that gender must be seen from the point of view of "a constituted social temporality" (141). Judith Newton illustrates how Foucauldian New Historicism constructs dominant ideologies as monoliths, and how Feminist ideology sees them "not just as complexly oppressive but as more internally unstable, as constantly in need of reconstruction and revision" so that the conditions necessary for social change and the agency of the weak may be possible" (465). Alison Conway sees the analysis of literary history and cultural history as mere theoretical exercise if they are not located within contemporary debates and political or other ideology, as against the anecdotal approach of the New Historicist. She hopes that "our abiding love of historical narratives will not prevent us from examining the large epistemological questions that theory so capably frames" (30).

This paper interrogates how a historical subject is configured in history, especially if she is a woman. Does New Historicism see, for example, women caught up in warfare, only as a part of power politics following Foucault's arguments as is its overarching tendency? Or does it take the identity of the woman caught up in war history as a source of further debate? Is her "story" less important than her place in official history? This paper takes up the points of view of feminist critics of New Historicism and investigates the history-literature interface of the lives of two women, Mata Hari and Noor Inayat Khan, perhaps spies involved in the two World Wars. The idea of embodiment, questions of identity formation of women as subjects in the masculine project of war itself are discussed, and pertinent questions of race are raised as well.

The paper is based on official documents, dossiers as well as biographical accounts. The web of fact/fiction generated in novels and newspaper articles have also been keenly examined to determine their role in the World Wars and their dramatic and sensational deaths as also what happened thereafter. It traces the tragic life and career of Mata Hari who has been immortalized in history by examining the two recent novels of Michelle Moran, *Mata Hari: Dancer, Lover, Spy,* and Paulo Coelho's *The Spy: A Novel*. While

Moran writes a romantic historical novel, Coelho writes about the last week of Mata Hari's life with reference to historical documents and past biographies. The paper has also drawn from Russel Howe's *Mata Hari: The True Story* and Pat Shipman's *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari*.

The paper also sketches the life story of Noor Inayat Khan, who was posthumously awarded the George Cross by the British Government. Official records on Noor have yet to be released but British official history of the Second World War as documented by the BBC details the role of Madeleine, another name of Noor. The novel by Shrabani Basu, *Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan* is an account of her life-story.

The sources extensively quote from historical documents: dossiers, letters, confessions and court statements taken during trials under oath. They also use personal interviews, private and undisclosed papers, letters, notebooks, diaries and creative writing. Thus, though fictional, even the most recent texts, Coelho's novel, Moran's novel and Shrabani Basu's novel are not works entirely based on the author's imagination.

I

Margaretha Gertruida "Margreet" Zelle MacLeod (7 August 1876-15 October 1917), better known by the stage name Mata Hari, was an exotic dancer and courtesan, convicted of being a spy and executed by a firing squad in France under charges of espionage for Germany during World War I.

Margaretha's life in the Netherlands before she invented herself as Mata Hari was ordinary. Eldest of her siblings, forced to live with relatives after her father remarried, she married the elderly and abusive Captain Rudolf MacLeod at the age of 18. He was an army officer, 22 years her senior, living in the Dutch East Indies (Biography). The marriage soon left both frustrated and after the birth of their children, the couple divorced (Shipman 450). To escape her marital woes, she had begun taking dancing lessons at a local dance company fascinated as she was by the Indonesian dance styles. Soon she became adept and revealed her artistic name, Mata Hari, (literally, "eye of the day"), in her correspondences home to the Netherlands. In 1903, Margaretha moved to Paris and thereby began her struggle to make a living. Within a period of two years, she won fame as an exotic dancer and made her debut as Mata Hari in a captivating, successful act at the Musée Guimet on 13 March 1905. In her dances, she openly flaunted her body and

made imaginary claims about her origin (Kent). She introduced a new style of entertainment and elevated erotic dance to a more respectable status.

She soon became the long-time mistress of the industrialist Émile Guimet, who had founded the Musée. She posed for provocative photos and had wealthy admirers. Her show toured several places and audiences in all major cities were fascinated and mesmerized by what she had to offer (Kent). However, after 1912, her career suffered since she was no longer a novelty and many others, young imitators of her dance style, grew in popularity. Her last public performance was on March 13, 1915, almost a year into the First World War by which time she had established relationships with several high-ranking military officers, politicians and influential persons (Howe 63).

When war broke out, Mata Hari was trapped in Berlin where she had gone for a performance. Her fur coats and money were seized and it was only because she managed to charm a Dutch businessman that she could manage her train fare to Amsterdam. While in Holland, Karl Kroemer, the German Consul approached her and told her that he was recruiting spies and offered her 20,000 francs and a code name, H21. Pat Shipman, her biographer, is of the view that she took the money as a compensation for her seized furs and money and had no intention of doing any serious spying for Germany (Mata).

In late 1915 she returned to her home in Paris via England and Spain. In England she was arrested and interrogated by Scotland Yard on suspicions of being a German spy. The MI5 report noted, "…although she was thoroughly searched and nothing incriminating was found, she is regarded by police and military to be not above suspicion…" (Rennel). Unaware of being trailed, Mata Hari continued her flirtatious glamorous life. Her meetings with a German intelligence officer Kalle were turned against her, twisted to claim that she was handing over French secrets to the enemy. On February 10, 1917, the French war minister signed a warrant for her arrest. Three days later, she was arrested and imprisoned at Saint-Lazarre, a prison for women (Howe 143).

She was tried in a military court in Paris on July 24 and 25, 1917 and accused of being a double agent at a very prejudiced trial. Even though the French and British intelligence could not produce definite evidence that she was spying for Germany, the investigative magistrate, Pierre Bouchardon decided to “unmask” her (Mata). She denied all the charges but her French interrogators were convinced that everything that she did and said was lethal fiction. They refused to trust her because she had spun a web of lies and

invented a fictional life for herself (Cockfield 331). Her defence attorney, veteran international lawyer Edouard Clunet, was denied permission either to cross-examine the prosecution's witnesses or to examine his own witnesses directly. Mata Hari was pronounced guilty of passing information to the Germans, which had caused the death of many French soldiers. The verdict for this was death by a firing squad. Mata Hari's executioners fired guns right through her heart on October 15, 1917, at the firing range near Paris. After she was executed her corpse lay unclaimed and was donated to a Paris teaching hospital (Polmer 358).

Mata Hari's biographers have no final answers to whether she was guilty of the charges for which she faced execution. They are uncertain whether she was a dangerous spy or double agent. Michelle Moran paints her as a sort of dreamy innocent woman, a victim of circumstances, often a shrewd woman with a phenomenal memory who was severely abused. She has also been portrayed as a naïve woman in need of money, willing to do whatever asked to. Perhaps she was not absolutely innocent. But was she a master spy who sent information that sent thousands of soldiers to their deaths, as has been claimed? (Flanner 126). Julie Wheelwright suggests in her study that Mata Hari's death was a useful tool in wartime social control: "The demonization that followed her execution in 1917 made her a convenient pillory for women's attempts at sexual, economic and marital independence" (Scutts). It seems she was a victim of circumstances created by the Great War. There was no conclusive evidence to establish her as a perfect spy /double agent who left no incriminating evidence behind. If she was only a victim, how did she become such a legend? In October 2001, documents released from the archives of MI5 were used by a Dutch group, the Mata Hari Foundation to ask the French government to exonerate Zelle as they argued that the MI5 files proved she was not guilty of the charges she was convicted of (Jeffries). Many mourned her death, and now there is a Mata Hari Collection in the Friesmuseum in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. Perhaps, until the French government declassifies the Mata Hari papers in 2017, (Kent) we are left with unanswered questions. The documents, offering a more human side to this woman, as a victim of domestic abuse and historical circumstances, may finally vanquish the historical slut-shaming of Mata Hari.

II

Noor Inayat Khan, the British spy, who was captured and killed by the German army was the great-great-great granddaughter of Tipu Sultan and the first woman radio operator who was sent into German-occupied France by the British. Noor was born in 1914 to Hazrat Inayat Khan and Pirani Ameena Begum, born Ora Ray Baker. Inayat Khan, a Sufi mystic and an expert in Indian classical music, had travelled the length and breadth of India with his musical band, The Royal Hindu Musicians. Armed with his interest in music and desire to propagate Sufi thought, Inayat left India and travelled to several countries across the world. The family moved to Paris and then, on the outbreak of WWI, to London, where Hazrat Inayat Khan founded the Sufi Order in 1915 (Sufi).

While in Russia, Noor, his eldest child, was born. The family soon moved to London and later in the autumn of 1920 to France, settling at Fazal Manzil, Paris. In 1927, while on a visit to India, Inayat Khan died. Amina Begum collapsed in grief and the burden of looking after the family now fell on Noor's tender shoulders. After obtaining a degree in child psychology in 1938 from the University of Paris, she became a writer of children's books and also contributed literary articles to newspapers. She also broadcasted on radio on the French Children's Hour (Noor).

When the Second World War broke out, Noor and her family left Paris and went back to London. When the fascist forces occupied France, Noor decided that she wanted to do something for her country. It was not an easy decision for the daughter of a Sufi pacifist to enter the battlefield but Noor was determined. British official history of the Second World War as documented by the BBC details the role of Madeleine (Dalton).

Noor had undertaken a course in nursing from the Red Cross and cherished the ambition of helping war efforts. Her ability to speak French and English with equal ease caught the interest of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) created by Winston Churchill. She joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in November 1940 as Nora Inayat Khan and was trained as a wireless operator. She was posted in February 1943 to the Directorate of Air Intelligence and was trained for espionage and sent to France in June 1943, her code name being, "Madeleine." Madeleine was trained to transmit messages, set up live and dead letter boxes, be vigilant and alert, dodge those following, handle questioning including extreme techniques if ever caught. Noor, along with some others landed at a secret airstrip in the Lori Valley behind enemy lines as a children's nurse, Jeanne Marie Renier and was the first woman radio operator to be flown into occupied

France. Under the garb of a children's nurse, she was to find a flat, demonstrate French mannerisms and transmit pertinent and important messages to London (Helm 6, 13).

Soon after she landed in France, most of her colleagues and members of her Prosper and other networks were arrested. Noor managed to dodge German intelligence and continued to transmit messages to London under very trying circumstances. "She refused to abandon what had become the most important and dangerous post in France and did work" (London).

She was captured by the Germans on a tipp-off by a jealous woman. Madeline faced interrogation at the Gestapo Headquarters in Paris but she did not crack and even managed to escape again. Despite her training, she was careless and had left her codebook around (Noor). The Gestapo continued transmitting messages to England as Madeline and the MI5 did not realise this for several months. On September 11, 1944, transferred together with three other SOE women prisoners to Dachau concentration camp, she was shot in the head on the morning of September 13, 1944 (Visram 143). Her last word was "Liberte!" Since she was working as a civilian, she was not protected by the Geneva Conventions (British).

III

It is interesting to examine how the lives and identities of Mata Hari and Madeline are negotiated through the mass of literature that continues to pour in. We need to look at these women as persons, as living and breathing human beings as well as parts of interesting and dangerous history. Interestingly, there are some aspects which are startlingly similar in the lives of these women, one who played a role in the First World War and the other in World War II.

In 1990, Judith Butler coined the phrase "gender performativity," (179) discussing how gender performance was a phenomenon that was being produced and reproduced repetitively. The films on Mata Hari (Fitzmaurice 1931, Harrington 1985, Berry 2016) evince such diverse approaches by the directors and actresses essaying these roles, just like the books written on her. Sue Harper's study shows how British film production of the Second World War was controlled by the directives of the Ministry of Information. They depicted women as vulnerable victims of war, to which feminist scholarship responded critically, much later. An interesting study by Penny Summerfield in 2009

directs the gaze of scholars to the contradictions inherent in the female presence in four films detailing the Second World War. While they were portrayed as heroic women, the aspect of female vulnerability was strong in the narratives. Summerfield concludes: "The women were national heroines but they shared an identity as victims of the war with millions who suffered persecution and displacement in Europe and across the globe." She noted in a footnote that the story of Noor Inayat Khan was excluded from a film on four women SOEs in the Second World War, because she was not blond, a Hitchcockian standard of film-making ("Public Memory" 957, 948).

The depiction of victimhood of women has been critiqued by later feminists like Lise Nelson, a geographer, who critiques Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity as repetitive enactments of gender norms. She argues for a more thoughtful and nuanced use of performativity, which would allow geographers to map how concrete subjects negotiate their identities through many trajectories across time and space. This is perhaps where we locate Mata Hari and Noor. Both the women, before and after the wars, had travelled far and wide, which gave them insights into human behaviour and culture. Coelho, Moran and Basu detail in their novels how Margarethe made friends everywhere as did Noor wherever she went. Both were extremely popular and impressed whoever met them, be it in Spain, Italy, Germany, Indonesia, France or England.

Paris mattered to both. Mata Hari always spoke of her beloved Paris, and was grieved to see its condition during the war, and it was as she says "the only true north of my life, the only city where I felt like a human being and everything that means" (Coelho 919). The fact that she was implicated in betraying France was anathema to her. Moran writes in Margarethe's voice, "France is my home!... For most of my life I have lived in Paris. Am I a courtesan? Yes. A traitoress? Never!" (3049). Love for France was very strong in Noor as well. She missed her house in Suresnes, Fazal Manzil. She "felt her natural home was France" (Basu 1250).

In her work on the bodies of European women, Kathleen Canning suggests that embodiment is a process of becoming a body in social space. In the light of this, even before the First World War, Margarethe's body had been under watchful eyes. The entire upper class European gentry, men and women, made use of her body either by sexual contact or through picture postcards, magazine and newspaper articles and other memorabilia. Noor was no less visible as a person of exotic origin who practiced Indian

dressing and sufi music. Though she gave these up later, she had attracted attention wherever she went, in Europe or in the UK, because of her gentle yet resolute behaviour as Sharbani Basu mentions in her book.

Both the women were very beautiful. Mata Hari was described, in the home Office Report of 16th November, 1916, as a "Handsome, bold, type of woman" (Coelho 1376). She was seen not only as a dancer but as a courtesan by whom married women felt threatened. Alison Conway's work on the courtesan Nell Gwyn, an eighteenth century actress and woman very similar to Mata Hari, shows how ''Courtesan narrative opens a window onto a continent of religious controversy and sexual politics that offers no safe harbours for those travelling its coastlines'' (Carnell 64). On the other hand, Noor's body was her most important asset: she looked frail and exotic and beyond reproach and disguised herself cleverly. She managed to dodge German intelligence and continued to transmit messages to London under very trying circumstances, as Shompa Lahiri discusses in her book, and as Basu details in Chapter Eight "The Fall of Prosper" (2233-2489) and Chapter Nine "Poste Madeleine" (2504-2833). The historian Juliette Pattinson has recently shown in 2011, in her book, how the strategies of masquerade, mimicry and passing were utilised by female SOE agents during the Second World War. Her quick disguises, her hair, dyed red, blond and brown, and the speed with which she could run, and even sense danger, saved Noor's life on many occasions.

The women under discussion were single women. Women in wartime Europe were not the most free nor most admired. In the words of the fictional Mata Hari in Michelle Moran's novel: "No one trusts a woman alone" (2298). The British intelligence officer in Holland added to Mata Hari's dossier that he had heard rumours about payments to her from the German Embassy (Rennell). In the voice of Mata Hari, Paulo Coelho writes about how the warring factions could not leave alone a "woman whose greatest sin was having a free mind" (1033) in a war-torn world. Captain Bouchardon, the man who testified against Margarethe and headed the tribunal which tried her, wrote "In the battle of the sexes, all men, no matter their expertise in various arts, are always easily defeated" (qtd. in Coelho 1302). Even during the Second World War, single women were suspect: "In wartime, as in peacetime, women who did act independently, were attacked on moral grounds, by other women as well as by men" (Summerfield 7).

Both women were entirely self-made and carved their destinies indelibly on a society torn by war. By virtue of their birth, by dint of their character, their own abilities and talent, they were very well connected. Margarethe could easily travel all over Europe during the war, and Captain Ladoux's statement says "I am convinced that a person who is able to travel during the time in which we live and has contact with so many officers is already proof enough" about her guilt (qtd. in Coelho 1247). Noor could hide in all her earlier friends' houses like the Jourdans and the Prénats, which were safe havens during her Paris days, as Shrabani Basu shows (2616, 2632, 2648).

Margarethe and Noor were polyglots: their abilities to speak multiple languages were their great assets and in a way, marked them out during the war. The report on Margarethe cited this: "Speaks French, English, Italian, Dutch, and probably German" (Porter 1916). Noor was hired specially because of her native French, and for her qualities and her appearance as well. Her personal file has this entry: "Has interesting linguistic qualifications which might make her of value for operational purposes." Jean Overton Fuller remembered Noor's peculiar accent: a mix of Indian, English, French and American (Basu 986, 813). However, it was not her language skills alone that was the reason for her recruitment as an SOE officer. Assuming that would be to severely undermine her qualities as a professional and a person of integrity. Shrabani Basu documents through personal interviews, books and official records; she fitted the bill of the SOE recruitment policy, as she had "character and steadfastness of approach," "Rugged honesty" and "essential guts" (Buckmaster 27). Her recruiter also found this to be true within a few seconds of their meeting. Her chief recruiting officer Selwyn Jepson says that "in spite of a great gentleness of manner" she had an understanding and "an intuitive sense of what might be in my mind" regarding the possible threat to her life if she joined the SOE (Fuller, "Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan" 110).

Interestingly, both Margarethe and Noor had exemplary artistic talent: Margarethe was a dancer and Noor a musician, story-writer and poet. Strangely, yet truly, the high order of their art is perhaps not as much discussed as their beauty or desirability. Perhaps this is the part of their gendered subjectivities that the New Historic approach ignores. They were seen as women first, victims next, and artists later. Noor continuously expressed the desire to Fuller to learn and practice music, writing and singing after the war. Margarethe knew no other life, struggled with weight issues and waning popularity in the war years, but still wanted to dance and entertain audiences in war-torn Europe.

In short, whatever they did, they accomplished with the highest standard: as a dancer and a courtesan, Margarethe was exemplary. In the argument of the prosecutor Dr Mornet was the claim that "Zelle is the kind of dangerous woman we see nowadays," and adds that her language skills, especially in French, "her numerous relations in all areas, her subtle ways of worming onto social circles, her elegance, her remarkable intelligence, her immorality, all this contributes to her being seen as a potential suspect" (Coelho 1244). This could only now, in hindsight be seen as grudging admiration, but at that time was the most morally incriminating, though technically flimsy evidence. Noor was one of the most courageous and talented Special Operations Experts. Even at the time of recruitment, Selwyn Jepson comments on how he could not forget the impact Noor had on him: "the small, still features, the dark quiet eyes, the soft voice, and the fine spirit glowing in her" (Basu1159).

Apart from the gender performance angle, the racialised bodies of these two women were also reconfigured down the ages, when they lived and after they died. The distinct aspect that these women present about their knowledge and complicity in constructing racialised identities is that they did it out of choice, as represented through the time-space axes of their lives. Both the women had tenuous links with India, which added to their exoticism. Margarethe followed her husband to the Dutch colony of Java. Colonialism itself, like war, is a sign of superb male self-aggrandisement. She trained herself to dance with the help of a famous Javanese dancer, Mahadevi, as Moran calls her, and by sheer observation, understood the male fascination for the oriental female body. She put forth stories about herself being an Indian princess born in an Indian temple, and even answered, questions about India and Hindu temples to M. Guimet. Margarethe constructed a fable of her having been born in India (Moran 151-165), and trained in the East Indies, (Coelho 349). Her insistence on sandalwood, incense, garlands of marigold during her dance at Guimet's Museum in Paris suggests how well she understood Orientalist tendencies among European men. "Her liminal body allowed exoticist men to have intercourse with an Orientalist fantasy of the divine." This aspect was what also completely isolated Margarethe from her erstwhile "friends": no one came to stand as witness for her innocence as no one wanted to be implicated in their personal, social and professional lives with a woman of her notoriety. One of the interesting overlaps of history also overlooked by many is the way that Mata Hari performed several times with Inayat Khan and his music troupe, The Royal Hindu Musicians, as they were

photographed in her garden at Nuielly. They performed in December 1912, to "illustrate a lecture on Asian temple festivals by Paul Olivier, music critic for Le Matin" (Cohen 34, 32). Thus, the spurious "indigenousness" of Mata Hari was used even by scholars and researchers to give credibility to their work, ironically with the authentic classical musicians led by Inayat Khan. Strange cultural crossroads brought these two historical figures together, and Noor Inayat Khan later.

Noor's engagement with race is also worth noting. Noor had actually travelled to India as a child (Basu 483-485). Though in some ways a princess, a descendant of Tipu Sultan, Noor never used this aspect of her identity for her career or otherwise. Noor had many lovers as is claimed: Islamic sufi, Jewish, English and French. However, Fuller said to Basu in a personal interview that there was "lot to get away from" the Sufis, (qtd. in Basu 879) and that Noor wanted to live an independent existence away from their prying control. Though everyone who knew her in the SOE knew her as Nora Inayat Khan, she put the Church of England Christianity as her religion, attended Church Service, and never revealed her Indian antecedents. She always respected India and Indian politicians, and even during an extensive interview before being appointed in the SOE, she defended them and their right to carve their own destiny. Her brother Vilayat Khan said in his reminiscences to Basu that she would have joined the Indian freedom movement had she lived after the war.

There are references to negative racial stereotyping in her records, however. Firstly, she was often believed to be dreamy and inconsistent, distracted and too honest in her dealings as she never wanted to lie. She was, later in her career, known as the daughter of the Sufi master, and that went against her as if she valued spirituality over practicality or was, in some ways, weak. What the SOE later realized was that she survived so many crises as an agent, and later so many imprisonment-related hardships only because she meditated, using her skills as a sufi believer. Secondly, she was "given the special treatment" as she was "creole-looking," (qtd. in Basu 3256) as a German officer told Lieutenant Colonel Wickey, a Canadian officer, after the war. Vera Atkins privately believed that she was probably raped, abused, stripped, kicked and beaten before being shot (Basu 3272). Perhaps her mixed race origin was the cause of her terrible fate; she suffered more than what her white peers must have.

This paper celebrates the two women: their intelligence, their agency, their cerebral approach to their work, though it makes place for the naivete and innocent charm, and shows how both gender and race intersect in their reception to their contemporaries and to later research as well. Noor Inayat Khan's life has since been recaptured in several films, and recently her champion has been the Asian origin scholar Shrabani Basu. The classified French official documents about to be released and made accessible to scholars in October this year will hopefully be able to read Mata Hari / Margarethe to a different assessment by later scholars.

The comments made by Alison Conway become significant here. She says in a footnote that though she accepts Judith Newton's suggestion that "feminist theory can provide a corrective to new historical blindspots, creating a more accurate narrative," she herself argues that "feminist theory allows us to interrogate, more broadly, what we bring to our study of the past" (30).

The tremendous capabilities and talent of the two women which have been undermined in earlier historical references have been given new resonances by feminist theory and in literary works.

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