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**PUSHING THE ICEBERG UPHILL:
RE-VISIONING THE ROLES OF WOMEN,
THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARGARET WADE LABARGE.**

by

Heather Waldorf Macdonald, B.A., B. Ed.

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Canadian Studies**

**Carleton University
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**The undersigned recommend to the Faculty
of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of the thesis**

**“Pushing the Iceberg Uphill: Re-Visioning
the Role of Women, the Life and Work of
Margaret Wade Labarge”**

submitted by Heather Macdonald, B.A., B.Ed.

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts**

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Wade Labarge, a distinguished Canadian Medieval historian, donated her papers to the Carleton University Archives in the summer of 1998. Examining these documents and Labarge's published work reveals some aspects of the life of an exceptional woman who was able to create an expanded female role for herself because of a distinctive pattern of socialization, her material circumstances, and the way in which she responded to those circumstances. Labarge, a deeply religious woman, accepted much of the traditional Catholic framework of beliefs, but she combined her belief with an enlightened version of women's roles and their importance to society. This feminist study of Labarge's life and work demonstrates how she shaped her own role in life, and how she sought to recover and re-evaluate the roles played by women throughout history, most particularly within the Medieval period.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1998, Margaret Wade Labarge donated her papers to the Carleton University Archives. Labarge, a respected historian, had sifted through the lives of many medieval characters to produce her excellent historical studies, and she had, many times, wished for more information on the lives she investigated, especially women's lives, where research has long been hampered by a lack of documentation. By donating her papers, Labarge was undoubtedly conscious of performing an historically significant act: not only would her published work be accessible to researchers, but additional, somewhat more personal, information would be added to the historical record, and thus, one more woman's life would become available to future scholars who sought to understand women's lives and women's work.

The material donated by Labarge is by no means comprehensive. Labarge has not written any autobiographical work; there is no personal correspondence included. The Labarge Fonds contain documents that outline, for the most part, the public persona of Margaret Labarge, and it is the public representation that I have examined. I have not delved into the "personal" life of Labarge except in so far as it is revealed in her published works, the archival

documents and in the interview that she granted.¹ A more complete biography would necessarily entail years of deeper investigation into personal sources along with the public archival documents. However, the available material provides a fascinating glimpse of an exceptional woman who created a life in which a kind of intellectual androgyny co-existed with an acceptance of traditional views about the role of women.

I have based the approach for this study on three premises: that women's history has brought about essential and ongoing changes in traditional history; that biography is a justifiable and effective format for women's history, and that feminist biography has distinctive characteristics that set it apart from traditional history. These three premises are examined in the first chapter.

Margaret Wade Labarge is a respected Canadian medievalist and an Adjunct Research Professor at Carleton University. She has been a visiting scholar at universities across Canada and the United States. She is an esteemed author who has written nine books on the medieval world and its personalities, as well as chapters for medieval compilations, encyclopaedia entries, and magazine articles.

¹Margaret Labarge, interview by author, August 3, 1999, Ottawa, Canada. Tape recording and transcripts. The provenance is the Heather Macdonald collection in the Carleton Archives. The accession number for the interview is 2000-10. The cassettes are located in CAS-05 and the transcript in A 265. My sincere thanks to Dr. Labarge for graciously agreeing to an interview, the parameters of which were established by Dr. Labarge.

Throughout her career she has been the recipient of awards and honours, receiving two honorary doctorates, one from Carleton University in 1976, and one from the University of Waterloo in 1993. In addition to her work as teacher, writer and historian, she has been active in community groups and associations, and was inducted into the Order of Canada in 1982 because of her outstanding contributions. In 1988, she was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada where she was acknowledged in her citation as "One of the most widely read (and readable) historians of medieval history in the world."² In 1993 she was elected President of the Canadian Society of Medievalists.

When looking at the life of an exceptionally successful woman several questions come to mind. How did she do it? What factors allowed her to deviate from the most common path for women of her generation? What empowered her to develop independent and creative work? This study points to several distinguishing factors in her life. The circumstances of her personal life reveal common threads with many other women achievers of this era: she was supported and encouraged by her father. His expectations for her were not confined to typical female roles, and Labarge's evident intellectual talent, it will be seen, was cultivated by a privileged education at single sex schools that produced a high-level of competence and self-esteem. While her

² Naomi Griffiths, "Introduction, in Labarge, Margaret, A Medieval Miscellany (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997) 13.

father's wealth and expectations provided the foundations for Labarge's intellectual life, the other dominating factor in her life, her faith, was greatly influenced by her mother's religious beliefs and guidance. Labarge's religious training and her early schooling up to university were firmly grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, and this has remained an integral part of her life and outlook which is reflected in her public speeches to community and school groups. The, at times, paradoxical combination of Labarge's intellectual independence and religious commitment helps to explain her unique approach to life.

In the 1950s and 1960s when Labarge was involved in raising her family, teaching part-time at university, and writing the first of her nine books, investigation will show that public discourse, especially in Canada, idealized the women whose lives focused solely on home and family. An examination of Labarge's actions and the writings that outline her vision of women's roles reveal the two quite different perspectives that guided her life. Labarge was adamant that women's intellectual capacities were equal to those of men, and that a woman should strive to move beyond the home to fulfill her intellectual potential and utilize her talents for the good of society. At the same time, Labarge adhered to a traditional view of female roles within the family. An analysis of Labarge's writings and actions during this period

reflects generational patterns that link her experience with larger changes in the social order; this study identifies Labarge's role in helping to change attitudes towards women's abilities and activities as well as identifying the smaller modifications she thought desirable within the traditional domestic ideology of the nuclear family. Because this is a feminist undertaking, I also seek to understand, throughout the thesis, Labarge's resistance to, or acceptance of, feminist ideas.

Labarge's scholarship has been widely admired and praised. Her impeccable historical research based on a meticulous synthesis of primary and secondary sources, and her readable style garnered for her a secure, scholarly reputation. After her book A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century was reprinted in 1980, The Times of London judged it to be "a firmly established classic."³ Reviews of other books have praised her for her "accurate and enthralling narratives."⁴ Her last and most well-known book A Small Sound of the Trumpet elicited words of praise from that most prestigious arbiter of merit The New York Review of Books.

In analyzing Labarge's historical work on women, it becomes clear that her primary motivation in writing about women came not from a feminist impulse but from an abiding interest in social history.

³ The Times of London, 25.2.82.

⁴ The Economist, 4.10.75.

However, her interest in searching out what women had actually done throughout the ages, and, more particularly, what women had done in the Medieval period, was fostered by her association with the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. The historical summary that Labarge wrote for the Commission entitled "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women" lays out the tradition of misogyny that has dominated religious and philosophical thought since Greek and Roman times resulting in, what Labarge terms, the "cultural tradition of inferiority"⁵ inherited by Canadian women. Analyzing this essay, as well as assessing Labarge's most well-known book A Small Sound of the Trumpet,⁶ I will argue in this thesis that Margaret Labarge has made a significant contribution to women's history and to feminist history by recovering and making available the stories of women who were strong, independent, and powerful in spite of the misogynistic societies in which they lived. Comparing Labarge's published work with her unpublished community speeches, I also seek to explore the areas in which Labarge's historical observations and her beliefs about a woman's role and about feminism seem to come into conflict with one another.

⁵ Margaret Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women: The Historical Background," A Medieval Miscellany (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997) 145.

⁶ Margaret Labarge, A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life. (London: Hamish Hamilton Press, 1986).

This thesis, as a biographical work, seeks to present some facets of the life of an exceptional woman who achieved success in three distinct areas: she created a niche for herself within the academic community, teaching part-time and writing as an independent scholar; at the same time, Labarge sustained a happy and rewarding family life; as well, she devoted much time and energy to aiding the community with her work on Hospital Boards and committees.

Moreover, in addition to her interesting personal accomplishments, Labarge is a representative of a group of educated upper/middle-class women who lived during a period of rapid change for women in North America. The daughter of a wealthy family in which her mother played a purely traditional role as stay-at-home wife and mother, Labarge initiated change in her own life and advocated change for other women. When assessing change in women's lives, Judith Bennett has pointed out that scholars have looked especially to economic and political factors for causal explanations, which, she asserts, have not been as important as scholars had assumed. Bennett suggests other motors of change in women's lives and points to misogyny, rape and other forms of violence, and attitudes to female sexuality, to reproductive capabilities, controls and circumstances.⁷

While Bennett's purpose is to change the focus and search for new

⁷ Judith Bennett, "What Should Women's History Be Doing," Conference Group on Women's History Newsletter 21, 5 (1990): 18-19.

factors she is still proposing to look at the macro causes of change in women's lives, and this is a valid enterprise. What I believe to be an equally worthwhile undertaking, and what I endeavour to offer in this study of Margaret Labarge's life, is a view of the micro motors that promote change in women's lives. An examination of Labarge's life does not illuminate how revolutionary, tradition-defying thought and action has produced change, but it may help to show how the small steps toward change ultimately modify and reconfigure women's lives. It also elucidates how change comes to those groups of women who stand in apparent fundamental opposition to much of feminist thought and action. Margaret Wade Labarge was not, nor did she wish to be, a part of a feminist revolution, but she was, demonstrably, an agent of change, helping to produce a feminist evolution.

CHAPTER ONE
FEMINIST BIOGRAPHY:
LINKING THEORY AND EXPERIENCE

I have stated in the Introduction that my approach to this historical investigation is situated within the realm of women's history, and is biographical and feminist in nature. Fundamental questions, therefore, arise: why must there be a specific women's history? What are merits of using biography as a vehicle for historical research? How do feminism and biography combine to create a new vantage point from which to view the history of women?

The genre of biography, described by Barbara Tuchman as the "prism of history" through which we can see "the universal in the particular,"⁸ has changed profoundly in the past three decades. Both the concept of the biographical prism and the concept of history have undergone redefinition because of the challenges presented to them by

⁸ Tuchman quoted in Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Perry, "Introduction," The Challenge of Feminist Biography, Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Perry et al eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 6.

women's history and feminism. From a synthesis of history, feminism, and biography has emerged a new genre - feminist biography.

Before the flowering of women's history in the 1970s, it can be clearly seen that women were rarely included in the narrative of history. History equated importance with activities that were normally restricted to men. Women's activities were deemed unworthy of historical interest, and most women were legally and socially excluded from spheres of activities which interested the male gaze of history. The women who were included were mostly those who, because of circumstances, were allowed to assume male roles, or were deemed to be interesting because of their association with powerful men. Occasionally, as well, women who set themselves apart from traditional womanhood by virtue of extreme virtue or vice were commented upon, but the vast majority of women were unseen, unheard, and unrecorded.

One of the first tasks of women's history was to challenge the assumptions of both men and women that, as Simone de Beauvoir stated, women have "no past, no history, no religion of their own."⁹ Gerda Lerner, the founder in 1972 of the first women's history programme in the United States at Sarah Lawrence College, was profoundly affected by the vision of historian Mary Beard. Beard did

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir quoted in Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness (New York: Oxford university Press, 1993) vii.

not view women as marginal to history. She saw women as a different, but integral part of history, and not just as passive participants in the events that had been recorded by male historians. Beard's insight that women were "a central agency in the shaping of civilization"¹⁰ indicated to Lerner, and to other women historians such as Margaret Labarge, that there was a need for investigation to recover, not only the story of how women affected the events that are recorded within traditional history, but also, the need for a new vision of what events and activities are a proper subject of investigation for history. As Hilda Smith suggested almost three decades ago in an essay written when women's history was undergoing rapid development, "history, at its best, should be a recounting of how members of a particular society lived and not merely a designation of who (and what) was 'important' in that society. Women's history, along with other studies of the powerless groups of the past, is based on that assumption."¹¹

Thus, one of the primary and continuing impulses of women's history has been to record women's lives as integral parts of history.

¹⁰ Catherine Stimpson, "Gerda Lerner on the Future of Our Past," MS September 1981: 93.

¹¹ Hilda Smith, "Feminism and the Methodology of Women's History," Liberating Women's History, ed. Berenice Carroll, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976) 369.

The denial of women's history retarded the possibility of feminist thought and action until the nineteenth century because progress depends on the ability to absorb past knowledge, critique it, and then supersede it.¹² The reinsertion of women into the historical record since the 1970s has allowed women to see evidence of their existence as historical agents and participants. It has allowed women to use the knowledge and wisdom of their foremothers to interpret the present and envision the future. Life stories of women were, and continue to be, essential to women's development in that they can provide a narrative of female possibilities that are excluded from an individual woman's confining reality.

In the years since the 1970s, women's history has become an established and accepted historical field.¹³ While there have since been many challenges to the existence of the category "woman," I think it is most instructive to understand the original reasoning for the establishment of the category of "women's" history as a vehicle for historical research.

The history of women has been "informed by the political and theoretical perspectives of feminism.... historians of women have

¹² Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 18.

¹³ Judith Bennett, "Feminism and History," Gender and History 1/3 (Autumn 1989) 252.

made gender a historical issue, arguing that the cultural meanings accorded to biological sex, or to 'maleness' and femaleness,' are socially constructed and change over time.¹⁴ A feminist perspective on women's history requires, as Hilda Smith points out, a definition of feminism. Smith defines feminism as:

a view of women as a distinct sociological group for which there are established patterns of behavior, special legal and legislative restrictions, and customarily defined roles. This definition includes the obvious corollary that women's roles and behavior are based on neither rational criteria nor physiological dictates. It assumes a process of indoctrination from earliest childhood, both by overt and covert means, which determines the differing life styles of men and women. And, finally, it views the role of women as more restricted and less personally fulfilling than that of men.¹⁵

There is much that has changed since Smith wrote this definition in 1976. Many legal and legislative restrictions have been modified or removed, and there could undoubtedly be debate as to whether the roles of some women are more restricted and less fulfilling than the roles of some men; there are many challenges from without and within feminism as to the validity of viewing women as a sociological group. What Smith's definition can still do, I believe, is provide a compass for

¹⁴ Beverly Boutilier, Alison Prentice, "Introduction: Locating Women in the Work of History," Creating Historical Memory, eds. Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) 7.

¹⁵ Smith, 370.

investigating any woman's situation within a historical time frame.

What are the established patterns of gender expectations for behavior? What are the restrictions, societal symbols, writings, and dictates surrounding women, and how have these factors affected the experiences and the choices made by women? What forces have allowed women to escape the indoctrination of childhood that would lead to the predictable "female" behaviour and achievement?

This is not to suggest that factors other than gender are not present, or that other categories in a woman's life may not have a more profound influence on her experience. There are many categories within the broader category of 'woman,' and there will be a profound difference between, for example, an African-American woman's experience, an upper-class white women's experience, and a working-class lesbian's experience, but I would suggest that there are some common attitudes towards all of those women that prescribe certain behaviors and certain restrictions based simply upon a longstanding patriarchal definition of what "woman" is, and what she should do. The effects of that definition can be modified or superseded by powerful assumptions concerning race or class, but, in my view, a feminist perspective asserts that there is a commonality amongst women in spite of their many differences.

As social history has progressed, groups formerly excluded from

the narrative of history have insisted on having their lives and experiences included. Working class men and women, African-Americans, gay and lesbian men and women, and disabled persons have all demonstrated that the exclusion of any group from the narrative of history renders that history incomplete. Louise Newman points out that these ongoing additions to history suggest that the past is not capturable as a single narrative, but must be seen as a number of conflicting stories; stories that depend on which events, peoples, or products are viewed as significant, but also on the political and moral views of the historian writing the account.¹⁶

The fact that women's history has undertaken to re-vision history to specifically seek out and record women's lives and activities, and to determine the patterns of control and restriction that have affected women's lives does not dismiss either the original male narrative (except in its claim to exclusivity), or the possibility of the addition of further narratives. What the re-visioning signifies is that any narrative of history must be inclusive of women's history, and that historians must acknowledge that there is a constant need to review and revise the narrative of history. As well, women's history must question the inclusiveness of its own narrative. Diane Elam puts the

¹⁶ Louise Newman, "Critical Theory and the History of Women: What's At Stake in Deconstructing Women's History," Journal of Women's History 2/3 (Winter 1991) 60.

caution to women's history this way: "An injustice is committed when any one history purports to speak for all women everywhere, when it does not underline the incompleteness of its own narrative."¹⁷ The admission that feminist history is incomplete and must constantly be revised is in no way an admission of weakness. It is, in fact, a great strength: feminist historians openly acknowledge what exists for any system of knowledge even if it is unarticulated. As Susan Bordo puts it "all ideas...are condemned to be haunted by a voice from the margins...awakening us to what has been excluded, effaced, damaged."¹⁸ However, while it is imperative to include the narratives of women who have been traditionally excluded from women's stories, it is still instructive to study women who, because of their privileged positions in society, have been able to overcome the restrictions and obstacles presented to women because they stand as witnesses to the fact that when artificially constructed constraints are removed, a woman's capabilities and potential are as varied and as extensive as her male counterpart's.

Feminist history, because it specifically targets women's experience, does select and order historical evidence. It is more

¹⁷ Diane Elam, Feminism and Deconstruction (London: Routledge, 1994) 37.

¹⁸ Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism", Feminism/Postmodernism, Linda J. Nicholson ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990) 138.

interested in some parts of history than others. This does not restrict its value or its usefulness. It is not more selective than other 'versions' of history. All historical narratives are based on selection and ordering of evidence. Overt acknowledgment of that fact leads to the valuable possibility of reconstructing the past from many angles to lead in the direction of a fuller expression of the past as it existed.

The admission that history is always a selective process and influenced by the selection process denies the existence of the autonomous historian as a neutral observer of reality. Women's history has consistently pointed out that it makes a very great difference *who* is writing history. Nonetheless, while one may acknowledge that there is no unbiased version of history, there is still the possibility of creating history, or biography that is based on real, determinable facts. Louise Newman describes the dilemma this way:

Although an objective stance for the historian is no longer available, some version of objectivity still resides in the categories "past" and "experience": pasts are accessible through the vestiges of evidence of people's experiences; and histories are *assess-able* in terms of the "accuracy" in relation to evidence. Although history, the accounts of experience, may no longer be objective, the underlying experiences still are.¹⁹

Some historians, however, do not agree. Joan Scott influenced by Derridian poststructuralist theories believes that "knowledge of the

¹⁹Newman, 61.

past, of the world, of ourselves, and of sexual difference comes not from reconstructing "objective" experiences but through analyzing the systems of meaning that make possible and construct those experiences in the first place... history is the representation that constructs experiences."²⁰

As Scott sees it, "when experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured - about language (or discourse) and history - are left aside."²¹ Scott sees experience not as something that can buttress an explanation of the way things were, but as that which needs to be explained.

"Experience...becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced."²² She is arguing for a critical scrutiny of the category of experience.

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

²¹ Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," Critical Inquiry 17 (Summer 1991): 777.

²² Ibid., 778

Scott appeals for historians to recognize that experience is already a construction and something that needs to be interpreted. She wants historians to take as their project "not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself."²³ For Scott the story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them - instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of men and women as categories of identity have been constructed.²⁴

It is important to consider Scott's challenge to the use of experience as historical evidence because feminist biography rests squarely upon the selection and interpretation of women's experiences. While I do not doubt that the constructed nature of experience is a valid and fascinating area of historical enquiry, it seems clear to me that historians still have to attempt to provide meaning through the organizing and collecting of experiences. The debate suggests to me that the historical process can include deconstruction of the experience without rejecting the use of experience as evidence for historical phenomena; this conclusion is vital for the writing of

²³ Ibid., 797.

²⁴ Sonya Rose, "Gender History/Women's History: Is Feminist Scholarship Losing its Critical Edge?," Journal of Women's History 5/1 (Spring 1993): 90.

women's history and feminist biography which assume that the experiences of women can be identified, and are useful to illuminate patterns which have existed in the treatment of women throughout history. The emphasis on the constructed nature of experience holds special interest in the writing of biography because, as Deborah Gorham points out in her introduction to her Vera Brittain, a Feminist Life, "we are always in the process of constructing a self,"²⁵ and the biographer must, therefore, always be aware that the self presented by the subject is, to some degree, based on an interpretation or a construction by the subject of her or his own history.

As well as pointing out the necessity to understand that experiences are constructed, poststructuralists have, as Mariana Valverde points out, identified the prominence of binary oppositions as a basis for social structures. For example the opposition of man/woman posits that there is a set, preexisting group of opposite characteristics that define male and female. These pairs of characteristics such as strong/weak, emotional/rational then become translated into social restrictions and prescriptions for the activities of males and females. Deconstructing such fixed categories via biographical studies of women exposes the fallacy of the rigid nature

²⁵ Deborah Gorham, Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996, 5.

of the male/female characterization; this is of great help to feminists who seek to explain the socially constructed nature of the oppression of women that restricts female autonomy.²⁶ Making available the stories of women who personify achievement and success in areas where it was deemed they would be utterly incapable because of their “feminine” characteristics, efficiently helps to put the lie to such misogynistic philosophy.

Feminism sees women as a distinct sociological group that has been oppressed, and yet feminist theory, in agreeing with poststructuralist concepts of deconstruction, also insists that the category of woman has been socially constructed. Denise Riley has recognized the dichotomy and has resolved the difficulties in this way: “I’d argue that it is compatible to suggest that ‘women’ do not exist - while maintaining a politics of ‘as if they existed’, since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did....”²⁷ For the historian and the biographer, therefore, this indicates that there are two levels of evidence that must be investigated in any historical period: what is the discourse about ‘women,’ and what are women really doing. This insight is particularly valuable on two levels for this thesis. Firstly, in

²⁶ Mariana Valverde, “As If Subjects Existed: Analysing Social Discourses,” Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology 28 (May 1991): 178.

²⁷ Riley, quoted in Valverde, 178.”

examining Margaret Labarge's life it is important to determine what educators, governments, and religious leaders were saying about women's roles during her childhood and adulthood, and then to juxtapose what Labarge, and others like her, were actually doing. Secondly, it becomes very clear in Labarge's historical work that her desire to seek out the two levels of evidence was one of the motivating factors that led her to the analysis of medieval women. One of her main purposes was to distinguish between what misogynistic philosophers and religious leaders were saying about medieval 'women' and what Labarge was able to reveal that some women were actually doing.

As feminist history became increasingly interested in relations and structures, another challenge to the use of biography in women's history became apparent: in many cases, the subject of history became gender itself. The desire to focus on systems of meaning requiring the integration of both men's and women's experiences, led to a shift away from examining women's lives. This movement has been criticized by many as taking the primary focus off women and their oppression, which was, for some, the original feminist goal.²⁸ Judith Bennett sees some real advantages to gender history in that it can help us to understand the complex factors of real

²⁸ Rose, p. 89.

experiences of women while it also expands the study of women, via the construction of gender, into traditionally male areas of history, but she cautions that the study of gender should not be pursued in isolation from other feminist historical work. Gender history, on its own, ignores women as women and "the hard lives of women in the past; the material forces that shaped and constrained women's activities; the ways that women coped with challenges and obstacles - all of these things can too easily disappear from a history of gender as meaning."²⁹ Gender history can add important insights to the narrative of history, but gender historians who claim that the exclusive focus of investigation should be systems of meaning rather than the investigation of the experiences of women risk a return to the marginalization of the study of women which has been in existence for such a short period of time. This study rests on the belief that an exclusive focus on women's lives is valuable and necessary to complete the historical picture of any era.

One theme in feminist historical scholarship has been women's agency within repressive situations. There has been an ongoing historical debate as to the nature or even the existence of human agency. Mariana Valverde suggests that poststructuralist theory is

²⁹ Judith M. Bennett, "Feminism and History," Gender and History 1/3 (Autumn 1989): 258.

useful in investigating the enduring dilemma of structure vs. agency.

Valverde describes prior historical positions emanating from humanism and structuralism: humanism emphasized human agency and concluded that discourse is the result of, and not the origin of, human action; structuralism based on Althusser's theories reduced humans to creatures who were determined by discourse.³⁰ The difficulty of maintaining a balance between these two positions in the writing of feminist history and biography is exemplified in Mary Poovey's statement that, in writing Uneven Developments, a study of Victorian life, she was constantly torn between focusing on individuals as if they were agents of change, and dispensing altogether with life stories in order to create the impression that individuals are merely points at which competing cultural forces intersect.³¹ Poststructuralism, Valverde says, retains the idea that subjects are not the authors of social meaning, but neither are they fully determined.

Poststructuralism gives insight into how subjects can start to exercise some agency by using one discourse against another.

Poststructuralist theory posits also that an individual's subjectivity is never singular, but is always fragmented, and always in flux. Many

³⁰ Valverde, 183.

³¹ Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 20.

different discourses converge on a particular subject - discourses of political and social domination, feminism, socialism etc. Some of these discourses can co-exist, while others are alternatives to one another.³²

Valverde sees poststructuralist theory as providing a very important contribution in warning against oversimplifications such as were present in humanist and structuralist conceptualizations.³³

Using the insights of Valverde's interpretation of poststructuralism, a subject can be seen to be a composite of the distillation of all the competing discourses, recognized and unrecognized, that have converged upon her life. This is a very valuable insight when attempting to understand an individual life. Many courses of action may be the result of the interplay of various discourses, and attention must be paid to those discourses. Valverde sees choice being possible, even if that choice is only formed by the non-viability of acting in accordance with two or more non-complementary discourses, but I would argue that the avenue of agency for humans is much broader than the one that Valverde puts forward. Not all choices can be explained simply by the intersection of discourses - the reactions of humans to discourses are not necessarily logical or predictable. While keeping the insight from poststructuralist

³² Valverde, 182.

³³ Ibid., 183.

thought about the importance of competing discourses in a subject's life, I would assert that a psychological dimension must not be forgotten or underestimated. As Nancy Chodorow has said "meaning...is always psychologically particular to the individual."³⁴ She advises that there must always be an "attention to both the social-cultural-political and the individual creativities of consciousness."³⁵ Combining poststructuralist recognition of discourses with Chodorow's psychological insights, subjects can be viewed as partly, but not wholly, self-determining agents: their actions are, in some part, predetermined by the influences of the many discourses that impinge upon their lives; however, subjects also interpret the meaning of discourses, and consciously and unpredictably, at times, make individual choices. In studying a life, the biographer must situate subjects within the context of the surrounding historically specific discourses, including the material forces that constrain them, as well as attempting to uncover the individual traits that influence subjects' reaction to the context and material circumstances. The poststructuralist vision of co-existing and alternative discourses also helps the biographer to search out and accept the existence not only

³⁴ Nancy Chodorow, "Gender as a Personal and Cultural Construction," *Signs*, 20, 3 (Spring 1995): 517.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 518.

of competing discourses in the life of the subject, but also the influence of diametrically opposed discourses within the life of the subject creating conflicts which may not be acknowledged or resolved. For example, in this biographical study it will be seen that in Labarge's life elements of both feminism and Catholicism co-exist and are not always compatible.

One of the challenges to feminist thinking and history brought forward by postmodernist thinker François Lyotard is the rejection of grand or metanarratives. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson analyze Lyotard's position explaining that Lyotard rejects metanarratives such as the Enlightenment theory of the progress of reason and freedom and Marx's theory of the march of class conflict culminating in proletarian revolution. These metadiscourses narrate stories about the whole of human history declaring that they have discovered the Truth about social practices. For Lyotard these metadiscourses are simply one more discourse among others. Lyotard, Fraser and Nicholson point out, sees the field of the social as "heterogeneous and nontotalizable." Fraser and Nicholson see links between feminism and postmodernists, in that, feminists criticize moral and political theories as contingent, partial and historically situated instead of the necessary, universal and ahistorical truths they presume to be. Fraser and Nicholson recognize that postmodernism's gift to feminism

is to insist upon the presence of multiplicity, to demand attention to historical and cultural diversity, and to resist falsely universalizing features of the theorist's own era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and/or ethnic or racial group. However, Fraser and Nicholson are only willing to accept some of the "gifts" proffered by poststructuralist theory. Lyotard not only rejects metanarratives, he also discounts all theories that employ general categories such as gender, race and class. Fraser and Nicholson refuse to reject large historical narratives or analyses of societal macrostructures. Categories such as gender in its historical specificity are essential to feminist history.³⁶ Judith Butler concurs stating that a "feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, (i.e. gender oppression)," while at the same time using the insights of postmodernism to "remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism."³⁷ Appreciating Lyotard's insights allows feminist history to look critically at other metanarratives while also recognizing the need to investigate its own universals.

³⁶ Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," Theory, Culture & Society 5 (1988): 373-94.

³⁷ Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990) 13.

Some feminist biographers, influenced by the poststructuralists' desire to abolish metanarrative, have suggested that any linear narrative of history should be abolished. Mary Poovey suggests that "ideally, an analysis of the social construction of meanings and the texts that participate in this process would contain no... unselfconscious, linear narratives, for the conventions that make these narratives meaningful are also socially constructed."³⁸ However, it is difficult to see the value of suggesting that there should be no unifying, linear, narrative explanation when Poovey herself admits, that "such an ideal is not attainable...partly because my readers and I can only communicate through the conventions of signification we share."³⁹

Biography is a distinctive and popular genre that has adapted particularly well to the aims and goals of women's history. In a North American context, biographies are widely read and make up an important proportion of books published in the humanities,⁴⁰ and yet there has been, within scholarly circles, a certain lack of esteem directed towards historians who produce biographies. There has been a questioning as to whether biography has any important role in

³⁸ Poovey, 18.

³⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰ Eric Homberger, The Troubled Face of Biography, Eric Homberger and John Charmley (London: The MacMillan Press, 1988) ix.

shedding light on history.⁴¹ When social history became popular in the 1960s and 1970s at the same time that women's history was beginning to take root, the esteem for biography fell further as social history concentrated upon the study of groups and the interaction between groups, not individuals.⁴²

In spite of criticisms and condescension, there are many reasons why biography has proven to be very durable, and many reasons why it has become particularly important in women's history. Biography was one of the most evident of the early forms of women's history in Canadian and European history.⁴³ In her survey of doctoral dissertation work in women's history in the United States between 1980 and 1987, Gerda Lerner discovered that the most popular approach was biographical.⁴⁴ Many feminist scholars have outlined the reasons why biographies of women are necessary and important. Teresa Iles writes that we need biography "to learn about the collective/individual past of

⁴¹ Robert Skidelsky, "Only Connect: Biography and Truth," The Troubled Face of Biography, Eric Homberger and John Charmley eds. (London: MacMillan Press, 1988): 1, and Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elizabeth Perry et al eds. The Challenge of Feminist Biography, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992): 4.

⁴² Alpern, 4.

⁴³ Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Feminist Biography," Atlantis 10, 2 (Spring 1985): 2.

⁴⁴ Alpern, 5.

women.”⁴⁵ Canadian scholar Susan Mann Trofimenkoff agrees, and suggests that biographies of women are important because they show woman as actors, they reveal the category of “female” as a historical concept by showing the changing forms of “femaleness” over time.⁴⁶ Elizabeth Crawford points out that women’s biographies give strength, by putting the spotlight on strong-minded and interesting women. She feels that a general revival of interest in women’s lives would benefit all women by revealing how women have managed in harsh physical, social and economic climates⁴⁷ thus allowing us to measure our lives and assess our cultural heritage against the past. Susan Bell and Marilyn Yalom see in biographies an affirmation of individual worth. They feel that “the impersonality, fragmentation, and alienation of the postmodern world seems less overwhelming as we follow the vicissitudes of a real person... a sister creature from whom we grasp vicarious validation; it allows us into situations that we have not personally encountered, opening new vistas, offering unexpected

⁴⁵ Teresa Iles, All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1992) viii.

⁴⁶ Trofimenkoff, 4.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Crawford, “Finding the Sources: Selling Women’s Biography, ”All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography, Teresa Iles ed. (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1992) 139.

precedents, and providing a sense of continuity and connection.”⁴⁸

Feminist opinion has not been unanimously in favour of the use of biography of individual women. Some feminists object to the “spotlight” approach that highlights one woman who is often highly favoured and atypical in her advantages,⁴⁹ and, to some, feminist biographies imitate male notions of importance.⁵⁰ In spite of the acknowledged inequality that a biographical approach implies, many feminists agree with Susan Alpern that, although focusing on one person, “feminist biography not only expands our knowledge about women’s lives but alters the framework within which we interpret historical experience.”⁵¹ Boutilier and Prentice agree and see the emphasis on “women worthies” as more than a “simple emulation of men’s historical preoccupations.”⁵² This emphasis places women at the centre of history and that is a legitimate historical objective.

Liz Stanley warns against a pseudo-sophisticated rejection of the

⁴⁸ Susan Bell, Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender, Susan Bell and Marilyn Yalom eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) 1 and 11.

⁴⁹ Trofimenkoff, 2., and Liz Stanley, “Process in Feminist Biography and Feminist Epistemology,” All sides of the Subject: Women and Biography, Teresa Iles ed. (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1992) 115.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1

⁵¹ Alpern, 13.

⁵² Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice eds., Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian women and the Work of History (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) 8.

use of biography when she emphasizes the need for feminists to recognize and value the characteristics of biography that some see as negative to its importance: its popularity, the fact that people read it to look into lives different from their own, that one of its goals is to provide feminist heroes, and the fact that it is accessible and enjoyable. These reasons, Stanley says, need to be acknowledged and accepted as entirely legitimate ones in feminist terms and not treated as supposedly naive.⁵³

Joan Scott, in spite of her poststructuralist apprehensions about the nature of experience, has acknowledged the utility and effectiveness of the biographical format. She has stated that historians need "to examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organizations, and historically specific cultural representations [and that] the best efforts in this area so far have been, not surprisingly, biographies."⁵⁴

A great deal of feminist criticism of biography has centred around the choice of subjects for biographical study. Much of the

⁵³ Liz Stanley, "Process in Feminist Biography and Feminist Epistemology.," All Sides of the Subject : Women and Biography, Teresa Iles ed. (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1992) 123.

⁵⁴ Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," Feminism and History, Joan Scott ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 169.

earliest women's history was written in the form of biographies of exceptional women in an attempt to reinsert women's lives back into the historical record. Even now, biographies of women tend to be of those women whose lives stand out from those of ordinary women, and so the question can justly be put: are the women whose lives are most often the subject of biographies so 'special' that they have little to do with the history of more ordinary women? This question has been much pondered by feminist biographers, and while there is certainly a stated need to pay more attention to women who were not seen as traditionally important, there has also been a defense of the biographies of exceptional women. Rachel Gutiérrez argues that a woman who stands out "is the one who, whether in her role in history, whether determined to challenge conventions, whether feminist or not, somehow becomes an example of independence and creative work: therefore her life should be made known."⁵⁵ By rebelling against stereotypes, an exceptional woman stands out and is contrasted with those who submit to the stereotype. She also enables others to develop their possibilities against all odds.⁵⁶ Berenice Carroll sees the possibility that exceptional women are the "tip of the iceberg" and

⁵⁵ Rachel Gutiérrez, "What Is a Feminist Biography?," All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography, Teresa Iles ed. (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1992) 49.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 54.

that the lives of these women could be investigated as possibly "striking instances of a type of woman becoming more common in a given era."⁵⁷

Many of the women who are subjects of biography come from privileged circumstances as is the case for Margaret Labarge. Their privilege renders them unrepresentative of most women, and, therefore, in the views of some feminist critics, unworthy subjects for feminist biography. But several authors agree with Joyce Antler, who has written a biography of Lucy Sprague Mitchell, a wealthy and well-placed American woman. Antler defends her choice of subject by proposing that, in spite of Mitchell's class privileges, which shaped many of her choices, her exceptional life history can suggest generational patterns that offer a link between individual experience and larger changes in the social order.⁵⁸

There is the additional fact that most of the historical records available to scholars are those which document women of comfortable circumstances. Working class women and poor women often left, and still leave, no records at all. Their lives are worthy of investigation, but biographical study is often impossible. It seems absurd to suggest that because we are unable to study some women's lives, the lives of

⁵⁷ Berenice Carroll, "Herstory as History," Liberating Women's History, Berenice Carroll ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976) 426-7.

⁵⁸ Antler, 101.

women for whom we do have records should be ignored.

A case for the importance of studying the lives of women who do not see themselves as feminists is clearly made by Barbre, Farrell, Garner, Geiger, Joeres, Lyons, Maynes, Mittlefehldt, Prell and Steinhagen in their book entitled Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives. They state: "women's lives are lived within and in tension with systems of domination. Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics."⁵⁹ Elizabeth Minnich defends her choice of Hannah Arendt as a subject of biography even though Arendt was not a self-proclaimed feminist. Minnich feels that Arendt's "noninvolvement does not matter... unless we refuse to listen to people unless they claim the same labels we do."⁶⁰

There has also been discussion as to whether it is useful for feminist biography to deal with a subject who is overtly anti-feminist. Birkett and Wheelwright deal forthrightly with the problem by suggesting that the biographer should explain why the subject is anti-feminist, and to "make unpalatable facts integral rather than peripheral to our understanding of them [the subjects]" There is a

⁵⁹ Joy Barbre, Amy Farrell, Shirley Garner et al, Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 8.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Minnich, "Hannah Arendt: Thinking As We Are," Between Women, Carol Ascher, Louise De Salvo, Sara Ruddick eds (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 170.

definite need to view women subjects in all their complexity and Birkett and Wheelwright caution feminist biographers not to deny the challenge that seemingly contradictory thoughts and actions represent, and to present women who are full of contradictions, and to resist the "distillation into a monolithic whole."⁶¹ To support their position, Birkett and Wheelwright quote from an unpublished conference paper by Martha Vicinus: "Rather than raiding the past to find satisfactory models for today, we should look to the difficulties, contradictions, and triumphs of women within the larger context of their own times."⁶² As Teresa de Lauretis points out, female subjects are the site of differences - sexual, racial, economic and cultural - all of these together and often in tension with one another.⁶³

In spite of a hesitation on the part of some feminist scholars to accept the choice of exceptional women and non-feminist women as subjects of biography, the arguments in favour of studying any woman regardless of her class, race, sexual orientation or political affiliations are very strong. The inclusion of all women's lives into the historical record is an important and valuable change that has come about

⁶¹ Dea Birkett and Julie Wheelwright, "How Could She? Unpalatable Facts and Feminists' Heroines," Gender and History 2, 1 (Spring 1990): 56.

⁶² Ibid., 56.

⁶³ Lauretis quoted in Alice Werder, "Emma Goldman," Between Women, Carol Ascher, Louise De Salvo, Sara Ruddick eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 41.

because of women's history. Patricia Rooke and R. L. Schnell, biographers of Charlotte Whitton, although not very favourably regarded by some feminists, make a valid point when they state that, "women, whether exceptional or not have been relegated to historical obscurity. We know little enough about individual women, even the female worthies."⁶⁴ Adding biographies of women's lives to the narrative of history changes the portrait of civilization as it was portrayed by traditional male history. The biographies of exceptional women provide us with examples of women throughout the ages who have contributed to their societies in spite of the many obstacles in their way. All women's contributions are worthy of biographical attention. Deborah Gorham argues strongly for the necessity of acknowledging that "adding women" is essential to the enterprise of feminist scholarship; it takes effort and skill, it is exciting, and it deserves to be treated with respect.⁶⁵

The production of a feminist biography is not dependent upon the choice of subject but rather upon the content of the analysis undertaken by the biographer who can illuminate, in the life of any

⁶⁴ Patricia Rooke and R. L. Schnell, "The Making of a Feminist Biography: Reflections on a Miniature Passion," Atlantis 15, 1 (Fall 1989): 61.

⁶⁵ Deborah Gorham, "In Defense of Discipline Based Feminist Scholarship," Graduate Women's Studies: Visions and Realities, Ann Shteir ed. (North York, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 65.

woman, the issues most important to a feminist vision of women's status in society. Central to a feminist analysis must be the issue of gender, "even if the woman being studied is not particularly conscious of that centrality or even denies it."⁶⁶ A feminist perspective, as Hilda Smith has made clear in her previously quoted definition of feminism, requires seeing established patterns of behavior, legal and legislative restrictions, and customarily defined roles for women that have evolved from non-rational processes of indoctrination. Failure to consider these issues in the life of a woman distorts the accounts of women's lives.⁶⁷ The search for patterns, cultural scripts and the resistance to those scripts is a fundamental theme in feminist biographical analysis. Historical and cultural constraints imposed by male dominated societies are seen as "far more constant, and constantly the same, than those constraints are for men."⁶⁸ The feminist biographical study is looking for the patterns that underlie the cultural experience of a particular woman, and the patterns in women's responses to those cultural restraints.

The context of a woman's life, the wider political, religious and

⁶⁶ Alpern, 8.

⁶⁷ Alpern, 7.

⁶⁸ Maureen Quilligan, "Rewriting History: The Difference of Feminist Biography," The Yale Review 7, 7 (Winter 1988): 261.

economic circumstances, must always be considered.⁶⁹ Rachel Gutiérrez sees feminist biography as being under a double oath - to data and to the condition of women in history.⁷⁰ The feminist preoccupation with uncovering particular historical patterns of constraints against women roots feminist biography firmly within a specific historical period, as the constraints encountered by women must be seen in the context of the discourses that are at work producing the constraints. Kathleen Barry points out that biography can "become a study of social interactions with their economic and political intersections. In this way, political and social structures are grounded in the life story which gives lives social interpretation and theoretical depth."⁷¹ This establishes women's biography as "an important connecting link between the study of microinteractions of social history and macropolitical structures and transformations."⁷²

The particularizing nature of biographies, while pointing towards macropolitical structures can, at the same time, be useful in preventing excessive universalizing of historical patterns. For example, feminist Carolyn Steedman, in writing a memoir of her

⁶⁹ Bell, 7.

⁷⁰ Gutiérrez, 49.

⁷¹ Kathleen Barry, "Biography and the Search For Women's Subjectivity," Women's Studies International Forum 12, 6 (1989): 562.

⁷² Ibid, 561.

mother, takes issue with earlier male historians' work which generalizes about women in the British working class. Steedman says that her mother "was a woman who finds no place in the iconography of working-class motherhood that Jeremy Seabrook presents in Working Class Childhood, and who is not to be found in Richard Hoggart's landscape."⁷³ Steedman sees the auto/biographical form of her book as offering a challenge to a generalized, conventional interpretation of women's lives. Feminist biography portrays the particular which may reveal a genuine historical pattern; it can also act as a counterbalance to prevent an overly simplistic picture of a historical period.

Another significant feature of feminist biography is the desire to provide analysis of the intersection of the private and public lives of women. Both areas are considered to be important ones for investigation in order to obtain a balanced understanding of a woman's life.⁷⁴ Kathleen Barry has pointed out the danger that can arise if *too* much emphasis is placed on intimate lives of women,⁷⁵ and a biography

⁷³ Carolyn Steedman, Landscape For A Good Woman (London: Virago Press Limited, 1986) 6-7.

⁷⁴ Alpern, 5.

⁷⁵ Kathleen Barry, "'Toward a Theory of Women's Biography: From the Life of Susan B. Anthony,'" All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography, ed. Teresa Iles. (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1992) 33, 34.

should certainly not be confined to a woman's private life. There is, however, a necessity to understand the many areas of women's lives that have not been deemed important enough to study: the impact of mother-daughter relationships, of familial ties and female friendships and support networks that sustain women's public activities.⁷⁶ In 1984, Joyce Antler highlighted the fact that historians of women had mostly looked at public manifestation of women's activities, and had neglected the importance of issues, like motherhood, to a woman's life and thought. Investigating the private lives of women via biography, Antler states, can 'help us understand 'life-process' feminism, the "personal ways in which an individual struggles to achieve autonomy by confronting gender-defined issues at each stage of the life cycle."⁷⁷ Considering life-cycle experience is also another way to provide a fuller portrayal of women by shifting attention away from the traditional "marriage plot" to consideration of all stages of the life cycle, including mature adulthood and old age.⁷⁸ Nell Painter argues for the inclusion of an analysis of religious beliefs as a factor in women's lives because she feels that not to pay attention to this "inner woman" who

⁷⁶ Alpern, 5.

⁷⁷ Joyce Antler, "Was She a Good Mother? Some Thoughts On a New Issue for Feminist Biography," Women and the Structure of Society, Barbara Harris and JoAnn McNamara eds. (Durham: Duke Press Policy Studies, 1984) 53.

⁷⁸ Alpern, 9.

identified with a higher power, will cause biographers to lose much of what makes a subject herself.⁷⁹ The content of feminist biography has a duty to incorporate an analysis of the effects of gender expectations on the private and public experiences of all women in their particular context so that, within the life stories of the women they present, the multiple, complicated, contradictory nature of 'woman' is investigated in all its complexity.

It is easier to determine the impact of feminist biography on the content of biography than to see changes it has inspired in the form of biography itself. Feminist biography has remained, for the most part, traditional, and feminism has had little impact on its form.⁸⁰ The postmodernist vision of historians as active producers of knowledge has been seen as offering a new direction for feminist biographical form. Liz Stanley believes that feminist biography should textually recognize the importance of the labor process of the biographer as researcher in reaching the interpretations and conclusions she does. This she calls "intellectual autobiography" - an analytic (not just descriptive) concern with the specifics of how we come to understand what we do, so that the reader can recognize the role of the

⁷⁹ Nell I. Painter, "Writing Biographies of Women," Journal of Women's History 9, 2 (Summer 1997): 163.

⁸⁰ Liz Stanley, "Moments of Writing: Is There a Feminist Auto/Biography" , " Gender and History 2, 1 (Spring 1990): 59.

biographer in the construction of a particular version of the self it presents.⁸¹ Hazel Rowley is also intrigued with this possibility for feminist biography whereby reflections on the process of writing the biography assume a significant role in the text. The biographer explains textually the questions, doubts, problems of interpretation that are usually hidden.⁸² Attempts have been made to write feminist biography in this manner but the results are often condemned as narcissistic and intrusive.⁸³ Rowley points out a striking example of post-modernist structure in Brian Matthew's biography of Louisa Lawson. Matthews created, as a part of the text, a biographer-narrator, who comments on his doubts, and his problems of interpretation. The criticism of this approach is that the work turns out to be not so much a biography of the subject as an auto-biography of the author. Others defend this type of meta-biography as a legitimate attempt at including the process of the constructing a subject.⁸⁴ Considering the use of this process is part of an effort to find a distinctive form for feminist biography.

⁸¹ Stanley, "Process in Feminist Biography, 115 and 123.

⁸² Hazel Rowley, "How Have Biographies Been Written and How Can They Be?," Australian Feminist Studies 16 (1992): 141.

⁸³ Stanley, All Sides, 118.

⁸⁴ Rowley, 142-143.

Susan Mann Trofimenkoff has also wondered if there is a way of conveying the multifaceted activity of women's lives in the form of the biography itself. Some women's autobiographies have tried to get rid of the linear portrayal of women's lives to suggest this multiplicity but the style, Trofimenkoff says, "drives traditional literary critics crazy."⁸⁵ While I find the possibility of a distinctive feminist form of biography to be a fascinating concept, I do not find any of the current alternatives to the linear portrayal to be effective, and so I have not ventured into any experimental forms in the presentation of this biography.

While there is much debate about the possibility of including reflection on the biographical method within the text itself, there is agreement on the need for feminist biographers to acknowledge the subjective nature of their enterprise.⁸⁶ This acknowledgement has led to the realization that feminist biography must treat interpretation as speculation and offer multiple explanations when possible.⁸⁷ Feminist

⁸⁵ Trofimenkoff, p. 9, footnote 29.

⁸⁶ See for example, Liz Dearden, "Reviewing Women's Biography" All Sides of the Subject, 143, Hazel Rowley "How Have Biographies Been Written", Liz Stanley, "Process in Feminist Biography," 123, Diane Middlebrook, "Postmodernism and the Biographer," Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender, (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1990),164.

⁸⁷ Bell Gale Chevigny, "Daughters Writing: Toward a Theory of Women's Biography.," Between Women, Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, Sara Ruddick eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 369.

biography, Jacquelyn Hall writes, has “challenged the illusion of objectivity and given up the arrogance of believing that we can, once and for all, get our foremothers right. Second readings thus come with the territory of feminist biography.”⁸⁸ Feminist biographers know that they are producing the best version that they can create at a particular time, while they also realize that subsequent material may produce a revision or something different.⁸⁹

Feminist biography has been an integral part of the task of women's history in ending male domination of historical vision and knowledge. In producing a new focus on female subjects, women's history and biography have repopulated the historical record with the formerly invisible lives of women. Women's history has further insisted that not only must history look at the lives of exceptional women who functioned in traditional male areas of society, the gaze of history must be extended to include predominantly female activities formerly considered unimportant and unworthy of historical documentation. The most fundamental refinement brought to traditional history which is evident in feminist biography is the insistence that gender must play a central role in any historical

⁸⁸ Jacqueline Hall, “Second Thoughts on Jessie Daniel Ames,” The Challenge of Feminist Biography, Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Perry et al eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992) 155.

⁸⁹ Dearden, 147.

analysis: the view of a woman's life, or indeed society in general, is fundamentally flawed if the effects of gender differences are not considered in all their complexity. Women's history continues to evolve, considering and appropriating those parts of contemporary historical and philosophical theory that aid in creating a complex and inclusive vision of human society.

Before women's history, theory about women's roles and abilities was made, in most cases, without reference to women's actual roles or abilities. Feminist biography requires a constant reference to actual lives of women - how women were and are; it shows what women are capable of doing and being; it reminds the readers of the world of the possible. Feminist biography is an interpretation of historical evidence that demonstrates the link between feminist theory and women's experience. The great practical gift of feminist biography to the historical process is aptly described by Ruth Benedict. "One adventure through the life of one woman who has been profoundly stirred by a great restlessness and you will comprehend more than from a library of theorizing."⁹⁰

This chapter has attempted to provide the theoretical underpinnings of the biographical endeavour which follows: the

⁹⁰ Ruth Benedict, unpublished manuscript "Adventures in Womanhood" quoted by Joyce Antler in "Feminism as Life Process," Feminist Studies, 7, 1, (Spring 1981) 134-157.

adventure through the exceptional life of Margaret Wade Labarge.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY LIFE AND SCHOOLING:

ESTABLISHING THE CONDITIONS FOR ACHIEVEMENT

"The failure of women to fulfill their intellectual potential has been adequately documented. The explanations for this are so plentiful that one is almost tempted to ask why women achieve at all."⁹¹

Margaret Wade Labarge, like many of the medieval characters she describes, is an exceptional woman. She has made many lasting and important contributions, not the least of which is her career as an historian. Her personal experience helps to illuminate the history of a generation of women who succeeded professionally and personally in a climate which was not designed to further the advancement of women's careers. It is therefore intriguing to examine the ways in which this exceptional woman's gender identity was formed, and to discover Labarge's acceptance of, and resistance to, the prevailing societal, religious, and class based gender expectations for women of the period. Unfolding along with this unique personal history which

⁹¹ Lois W. Hoffman, "Early Childhood Experiences and Women's Achievement Motives," Women and Achievement, Mednick, Martha, Sandra Tangri and Lois Hoffman eds. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975) 129.

allowed Labarge to develop a life long devotion both to independent and creative work as well as family, one sees as well the generational patterns that link Labarge's experience with larger changes in the social order.

Margaret Labarge did not choose a life restricted to genteel "feminine" pursuits, as did many of her generation, in spite of the fact that she was born in 1916 into the mainstream upper class of the eastern United States. The only daughter of four children born to Helena Mein (1878-1966), and Alfred B. Wade (1874-1949), Labarge was raised until she was ten in New York City. Her father's family had at one stage been very comfortable, but her grandfather's unlucky speculation plunged the family into straightened financial circumstances, so that while Labarge's uncle Herbert was able to attend university and eventually teach at Columbia University, her own father, although more intellectual than his brother, was financially unable to attend university, and instead became an office boy in the firm of Parker, Wilder and Co. in New York, a firm which dealt in wholesale dry goods. Alfred Wade became a partner in the very successful firm and he was able to retire comfortably at the early age of 52. Labarge's mother was from a less prosperous background. Her father died when she was four, and her family was often faced with

financial difficulties.⁹²

In New York, Labarge's family lived in a brownstone house just two blocks away from Central Park on East 75th Street between Madison and Park Avenues. Rather like a modern townhouse, the house was multi-level with a kitchen and the maid's living room in the basement, a dining room and living room on the first floor, the master bedroom and Labarge's bedroom on the second floor, the boys' bedrooms on the third floor and the maid's bedroom on the fourth floor. The family employed a cook, a waitress, a chambermaid, a laundress, and, when the children were small, at least two governesses in succession. Labarge's memories of this period in New York before the family moved to New Canaan, Connecticut when she was ten are not extensive, but the images she does recall and recount reveal a pleasant, uncomplicated childhood; her parents, although they would travel without the children for a month or two at a time leaving the younger children in the care of a governess, were much admired and beloved. One anecdote that she recounts reveals her evident admiration for both her mother and her father as well as her own precocious nature. "My mother was very ingenious about holidays, and on one occasion, she had, for Easter, festooned the whole house with different coloured ribbons which each of us had to chase to find what

⁹² N.W.S. Griffiths, "Introduction," in Labarge, M. A Medieval Miscellany (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1977) 2.

the present was at the end. I got to the end of mine and it was a simply superb yellow rabbit with a bright green jacket, and somebody said: "What are you going to call it?" I thought [the rabbit] was the most elegant thing I had ever seen. So the only thing I could think of that was truly elegant, was... my father was drinking one of these Bulgarian concoctions, so I said I'm going to call it Acidopholus which gave me great pleasure."⁹³ It is not hard to imagine the amused approval and admiration that would be bestowed upon this clever daughter who would choose to name her bunny rabbit Acidopholus. The feeling of pleasure derived from this incident was great enough to imprint itself on Labarge's mind so that even seventy-five years later, she finds satisfaction in relating this anecdote. Her other recollections of that time are of the joys of roller skating, alone and safe, in Central Park, and of school days at the Sacred Heart Convent School on Madison Avenue at 54th Street, where her teacher, a nun, insisted upon constant recitation of the multiplication tables which she can still remember perfectly to this day.⁹⁴

Naomi Griffiths describes the home atmosphere of the Wade family as characterized by a "cultured and liberal humanism with,

⁹³ Labarge, interview by author, 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 1.

however, religious life being a matter of serious concern.”⁹⁵ The portrait which emerges from Labarge’s personal reminiscences of the New York years is that of a contented, well-cared for, and privileged child who was often the centre of attention as the only and clever daughter in the family.

While her father was quite reserved and somewhat shy, Labarge’s mother had a lively disposition, with an openness of spirit coupled with an optimistic and courageous attitude to life.⁹⁶ Labarge demonstrated the beginnings of a forceful personality even as a young child. She seems to have internalized her mother’s outgoing nature and coupled it with her father’s efficient business acumen. Labarge has laughingly stated that “I think probably I tried to push people around from the beginning.” Even when she was quite young, when there was a question of going on a picnic, or going swimming, the youngest member of the family would admonish her mother : “Now, let’s get organized.”⁹⁷

The family’s life would change considerably when Labarge was ten years old and they moved to New Canaan, Connecticut. At that time, her father had decided to retire. His decision to do so was based on

⁹⁵ Griffiths, 3.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 2, 3.

⁹⁷ Labarge, interview by author, 34.

two factors. Alfred had been dealing for most of his life with the after effects of a riding accident in Central Park when he was in his twenties. He had been thrown from a horse frightened by a carelessly thrown newspaper, and had been kicked in the head. From that time on, he suffered a continual ringing in his ears and periodic severe headaches.⁹⁸ At the age of 52, his energy had been drained by this handicap, and he was in a financial position to retire from his work. Helena, Labarge's mother, was also in poor health at that point, having just had a major thyroid operation in 1926 which, for several years, left her a semi-invalid. The change in lifestyle for Labarge was significant.

When the family moved to New Canaan, the boys were no longer a constant part of the household. The oldest boy, Munroe, was at Princeton University, and the younger two, Philip and Hugh, were sent to Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut, and so Labarge became the only child as well as the only beloved daughter in a household with older parents whose health was not ideal. As well, it was decided that Labarge would have a year without formal schooling. Labarge recalls that, because she had very poor eyesight, being both very myopic and astigmatic, and because her family felt that she had gotten rather ahead at school, the family decided that she ought to have a year off.

⁹⁸ Griffiths, 2

She remembers this year as a "lovely time."⁹⁹ It meant that her life became much more solitary. Neither she nor her parents knew many people, being new to the area, and this resulted in her becoming much more independent. Labarge remembers wandering by herself around a wooded hillside at the back of their home, reading a great deal, and making her own amusements. This change in circumstances also brought Labarge into a much closer relationship with her father. He was now retired, and she was the only child at home, the "apple of her father's eye," as she recalls. They played many games of backgammon together, and Labarge feels that she got to know her father much better than her brothers were ever able to do.¹⁰⁰

When looking back at three decades of research on achievement-oriented behaviour, Irene Frieze suggested, that, while investigation of parental child-rearing practices and various situational or environmental factors yields interesting results, other research indicated that there are also explicitly cognitive variables that aid in understanding human behaviour. "People engaging in achievement behavior have ideas and beliefs about what they are doing. One type of belief is an expectation about the likelihood of their being successful or

⁹⁹ Labarge, interview by author, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4.

not."¹⁰¹ One route by which women attain the desire to achieve and the belief that they can be successful has been discovered in studies by Almquist and Angrist in 1971; Astin, in 1968; and by Frieze, et al., in 1972. They indicated that "one of the stronger predictors for high career aspirations in college women is their having a working mother to serve as a role model. In other studies by Baruch, 1975, and Broverman, et al., 1972, women whose mothers worked or whose mothers reinforced the idea of their working tend to have higher estimates of female ability and competence in general."¹⁰² But the question remains then: for women who lived during a period when most mothers assumed traditional family roles as Margaret Labarge's mother did, never working outside the home, what are the factors that serve to foster ambition for achievement and self-confidence in daughters?

Nancy Chodorow points out that the processes of separation and individuation are made more difficult for girls than boys because mothers and women tend to identify more with daughters and do not

¹⁰¹ Irene H. Frieze, "Women's Expectations for and Causal Attributions of Success and Failure," Women and Achievement, Mednick, Martha, Sandra Tangri and Lois Hoffman eds. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975) 158.

¹⁰² Ibid., 168.

help them to differentiate themselves from their mothers,¹⁰³ and, she states, that separation from the mother, and the breaking of dependence remain difficult psychological issues for Western middle-class women.¹⁰⁴ However, Chodorow further suggests that if a father is actively involved in a relationship with his daughter and his daughter develops some identification with him, this helps her individuation.¹⁰⁵ Her father gave her, Labarge says, "the confidence that I could do whatever I wanted. He was unusual for his day. He was a conservative business man, and he had three sons, but there was no question that the daughter shouldn't get just as good an education, and, in fact, he was quite specific that if his daughter did better than his sons at college, then the daughter got the graduate work."¹⁰⁶

The close connection between fathers and daughters in achieving women is a characteristic that has also been pointed out by Carolyn Heilbrun in her book Reinventing Womanhood. She says: "If one reads the biographies of women... one discovers that the fathers are as crucial to the lives of their daughters as they were to the ceremony of

¹⁰³ Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," Women, Culture, and Society, Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974) 48.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 58

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁶ Labarge, interview by author, 7.

marriage in Shakespeare's plays. They are the pivot on which turns the life of the daughter seeking a destiny beyond her mother's or that "normally" ascribed to women."¹⁰⁷ The fathers become role models; these achieving women did not have to accept the fact that, being girls, they "necessarily took second place in the order of things."¹⁰⁸

Sandra Tangri, in a study of women who choose to go into traditionally masculine dominated areas posits that "neither parent has a monopoly on estimable attributes, and a woman who selectively "identifies" with both (introjects the better qualities of each parent) should have greater ego strength and higher aspirations."¹⁰⁹ The overall picture that Tangri discovers of the Role Innovator is a woman who "has substantial cognitive distance from both parents, warm feelings toward mother, but some perceived similarity to father."¹¹⁰

While Labarge's mother had had a few stories of her own published in a children's magazine, Labarge never saw the articles, although she did admire her mother's wonderful writing ability so

evident in the letters that were exchanged with her daughter. Helena

¹⁰⁷ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, "Afterword," Daughters and Fathers, Boose, Lynda, and Betty Flowers eds. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989)418.

¹⁰⁸ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 50.

¹⁰⁹ Sandra Tangri, "Occupational Role Innovation Among Women," Women and Achievement, Mednick, Martha, Sandra Tangri, and Lois Hoffman eds. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975) 259.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 260.

Ward was a woman whose life's work was her family. Labarge has expressed a great affection for her mother and has followed very closely in her mother's religious footsteps, but the life that she eventually created for herself was much larger than her mother's traditional world. It included her father's world as well. Labarge's admiration for, close contact with, and support from her father during the early stages of her life undoubtedly influenced her and enabled her to create a new path for herself.

The day school to which Labarge went in 1927 was, as she remembers it, a very good one. It was not a public school, but had been started by some local families. In this school, they studied Latin starting in Grade 6, and she still clearly recalls the interesting way in which Civic history was presented. There were stories of local heroes, such as the judges who had condemned King Charles of England and then been exiled to America where they hid in caves in New Haven. She remembers the story of a famous cavalry officer in the Revolution who had jumped off a cliff in Greenwich to avoid the British. Another fascinating feature of the school for the eighth grade student was a class in Greek, Roman, and Scandinavian myths and legends, which was greatly useful to her when she began the study of Shakespeare in secondary school. Clearly, her interest in history can be recognized in her reaction to this early imaginative presentation of local and distant

history. The education at New Canaan was not segregated by sex, but Margaret felt that there were enough girls so that “nobody seemed to feel much difficulty about getting their oar in. There was no question of the boys ruling the roost...” She remembers a good deal of competition between one boy and herself trying to get to the top of the class.¹¹¹

Labarge credits the excellence of her education in those early years in New Canaan for the fact that, when she did go off to boarding school at fourteen, instead of being admitted into first year as was customary, she was put ahead into second year where she was able to succeed very well.

Labarge's high school years were spent at the Sacred Heart Convent at Noroton-on-the-Sound, which was not very far from her home, but, as all students were required to board there, Labarge could not commute to the school. The Convent of the Sacred Heart at Noroton-on-the-Sound was founded in 1925. It was the Society's most exclusive and smallest boarding school, where Buckley, Kennedy, and Ford women have had their education.¹¹² The choice of a convent school was Labarge's mother's decision. The Wades' marriage had

¹¹¹ Labarge, interview by author, 6.

¹¹² V. V. Harrison, Changing Habits: A Memoir of the Society of the Sacred Heart (New York: Doubleday, 1988) illustrations.

been, in the terms of the time, a mixed marriage. Helena was Roman Catholic and Alfred was Episcopalian. The sons received a wholly secular education, but the only daughter was educated at Sacred Heart Convents both in her younger years in New York and in high school. This was at the insistence of her mother who was very concerned that her daughter be given a sound Catholic upbringing similar to her own education by the Sacred Heart Nuns. It was a decision that was to have a life long effect upon Labarge. She has remained a devout Catholic and her association with the Sacred Heart nuns continues to the present day, in her active involvement with the Alumnae Association in Ottawa.

The experience of attending a Sacred Heart Convent has been described in great detail in a book by V.V. Harrison entitled Changing Habits: A Memoir of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Harrison attended Torresdale Convent in Pennsylvania in the late 1950s and although this was a much later period than the 1930s when Margaret attended Noroton-on-the-Sound, Harrison makes it clear that little had changed in convent life since earlier days. Neither the time period nor the country in which the Convent was located had much influence on the life of the individual convent. To articulate the objectives of a convent in which every minute was calculated to engender self-control and self-discipline Harrison quotes a novel, Frost In May, written by

Antonia Wright, an Alumna of the Sacred Heart School in Roehampton, England, who had been a classmate of Vivien Leigh and Maureen O'Sullivan. "The nuns worked to turn out, not accomplished young women, nor agreeable wives, but soldiers of Christ, accustomed to hardship and ridicule and ingratitude.... In its cold, clear atmosphere everything had a sharper outline than in the comfortable, shapeless, scrambling life outside."¹³

The first Sacred Heart convent was opened in 1802; its foundress was a French nun, Marie Sophie Barat. Although there were, of course, many changes that occurred between that time and the 1930s when Labarge attended Noroton-on-the-Sound and the 1950s when Harrison attended Torresdale, nonetheless, life at the very first convents and those of later days, was built around a set of universal traditions and regulations that were to be taken seriously, and unquestioningly obeyed: holy water in the morning, Mass every day before breakfast, no lifting desk tops after study hall had started, and always the rule of silence - walking to and from classes silently in ranks, no radios in the dormitories on weekdays, and no speaking in the lavatories or in the hallways.¹⁴ Students were not allowed to visit a dormitory other than their own except on Saturday afternoons. There

¹³Ibid., 21, quoting Frost In May by Antonia Wright.

¹⁴ Harrison, 22, 23.

were assigned seats at mealtime and in study hall. There were uniforms for morning classes, gym classes, study hall and dinner time; there were special dresses for feast days and special occasions. The young ladies learned to pull chairs gently back from the tables in student refectories without scraping the floor, sit with straight backs and uncrossed legs, speak in a clear, well-modulated tone of voice, and to behave in a manner befitting their station in life. The austere and authoritarian nature of convent life was ubiquitous and unavoidable. "There was nothing arbitrary or unplanned about life at the Sacred Heart. We had no choices, engaged in no debate, and were not part of a democracy."¹¹⁵

Whatever judgment might be given concerning the restrictions placed upon the students' behaviour, there can be little doubt that the emphasis at Sacred Heart Convents on academic excellence and the breadth of the academic curriculum provided a solid and impressive foundation for any aspiring young scholar. The students were given a liberal arts education with, of course, Catholicism at its core. There were courses in philosophy and logic to cultivate an early facility in defining terms and analyzing ideas, and to provide an early exposure to conceptual and abstract thinking. Imagination and memory were stimulated by literary contests and oral examinations. Students were

¹¹⁵ Harrison, 25.

expected to achieve.¹¹⁶

The young women at the Convent were a homogeneous group. Labarge attended Noroton-on-the-Sound in Connecticut during the 1930s, and, although there were scholarship students there, the feeling that Labarge had was that the girls who were given scholarships had come from families who had belonged to the upper middle class but, because of the economic disaster of the 1930s, their families were no longer well-to-do. The school itself was in a beautiful house that had once belonged to the man whose wealth had come from setting up the traffic lights system for all of New York. The buildings on the estate along with the marble swimming pool looked out into Long Island Sound.

Labarge's transition to the boarding school was not without its anxieties. Coming from the mostly male and very quiet environment of her family, and also arriving from a small town in Connecticut, she had some difficulty learning to adjust to living closely with a large group of sophisticated young women, but she came to appreciate the Convent

for the many skills that she was able to acquire there as well as the

¹¹⁶ Harrison, 81-83, 87. Harrison remembers, for example, being continually prodded to do better by the nuns. She describes them as "lecturing, berating, instructing, seemingly never satisfied with our performance." 22. There were ribbons awarded for students who achieved special merit: blue for the upper classes (grades), green for the middle classes and pink for the lower classes. Harrison says: "To be a Ribbon was an honor sought by many but achieved by few." There were also weekly school assemblies where "primes" were handed out by the Reverend Mother - blue Très Bien cards, brown Bien cards, and gray Assez Bien cards for very good, good, and satisfactory behavior. 23, 24.

sense of belonging that she came to feel with the other students at the convent. The nuns, Labarge feels, provided a pattern of study and work which was very well instilled; as well, they insisted upon “proper” behaviour, and manners, some of which were of doubtful utility. In her interview, Labarge elaborated on one dubious talent she acquired at the convent for which she has had no further use. The students were required to curtsy to all the visitors whom they passed in the front hall. It was a very long hall, and she said she developed a remarkable capacity to curtsy about every ten feet going down the hallway at full speed.¹¹⁷

There were two legacies that Labarge recognizes from her time at the Sacred Heart Convent. There was, Labarge says, a feeling that they were a part of a special group. That a “Sacred Heart child,” as they were called, was someone with whom you could connect and whom you could understand no matter where they came from in the world. The distinct culture of the students was recognizable whether they were from Egypt, America, Japan, or Canada. It is also a recognizable feeling across time. Senior students from American Sacred Heart convents in the 1980s express the same sentiment. “I have met girls from other Sacred Heart schools and it was as if we already knew each other because of the things that we share.” Another stated: “Several

¹¹⁷ Labarge, interview by author, 7.

members of my family went here to school and they have the same feeling of specialness that I do. The school develops a certain spiritual aspect of your life and gives you a basic way of living.¹¹⁸ This “specialness” has been interpreted by some as a sort of feeling of superiority, but by others it has been thought of as knowledge that, because of their privileged position, they were uniquely required to use their talents for worthwhile purposes to give a great deal back to society.

It is interesting to speculate on the influence this strong sense of belonging to a special religious group had on Labarge's life. The young women attending Sacred Heart Convents were, in many ways, except for their wealth, at a disadvantage in the United States' mainly Protestant and religiously intolerant society. The depth and longevity of the anti-Catholic sentiment can be seen in the sometimes acrimonious debate surrounding the election campaign of the Catholic John F. Kennedy, who narrowly won the Presidential election in the 1960s amidst threatening predictions of dire consequences and papal control of the United States government. An anecdote told by Labarge also indicates her experience of the status of many Catholics in U.S. society. When spending the weekend at the homes of her wealthy, Protestant friends from Radcliffe, Labarge, wishing to ascertain the

¹¹⁸ Harrison, 167.

location of the nearest Catholic church so that she could attend Mass on the Sunday morning, found that the most direct method was, oftentimes, to inquire of the Irish maids working in the family kitchen.¹¹⁹

The minority, subordinate status of American Catholics in the United States could have produced in Labarge the feeling of being an outsider, of not quite belonging to American society. Carolyn Heilbrun identifies an outsider as someone who is excluded from the cultural patterns of bonding at the heart of society, at its centers of power, but she also points out that outsiders may gain strength in their reactions to exclusion if they bond among themselves, offering each other comradeship, encouragement, protection, and support.¹²⁰ The strong sense of belonging to a worldwide group of special individuals known as the Sacred Heart Children combined with the obvious advantages of wealth seems to have provided a good antidote for feelings of exclusion; it seems possible as well that it reduced an attraction to the feminist movement. It appears to me that one of the fundamental motors in forming a feminist consciousness is the sentiment that one is an outsider. If one looks at the lives of renowned historians such as Gerda Lerner, Natalie Zemon Davis and Jill

¹¹⁹ Conversation with Margaret Labarge, August 3, 1999.

¹²⁰ Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood, 38.

Kerr Conway, contemporaries of Margaret Labarge who forthrightly declared themselves to be feminist as Labarge did not, it becomes evident that Lerner, Davis, and Conway each felt herself to be an outsider to society. Each woman had a particular reason for this feeling: in Gerda Lerner's case it was her experience as a Jewish woman living in Nazi controlled Austria, and then as an immigrant to America; for Natalie Zemon Davis, it was her Jewish heritage in the midst of the American Christian tradition and her disdain for her parents' bourgeois life; for Jill Conway it was, in part, a dislocation in what she knew she was capable of and the limited roles that Australian and American society prescribed for women. In Jill Conway's words: "I didn't fit in, never had, and wasn't likely to. I didn't belong for many reasons."¹²¹ Obviously not all female members of minority groups become feminists, but being an outsider may mean that a space for questioning traditional norms is established, and, combined with other factors, may create the conditions for the creation of a feminist consciousness. In post-structuralist terms, perhaps the particular elements required to produce the feeling of being an outsider are a part of one of the requisite discourses that must intersect with other discourses to produce a feminist. It is clear that, for some women, the Sacred Heart tradition fostered the beginning of a life-long sense

¹²¹ Jill Ker Conway, The Road from Coorain (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1989) 236.

of belonging and inclusion that could insulate them from needing to bond with other women in the cause of feminism. Carolyn Heilbrun, in a conversation with her friend Tom Driver, a theologian, discussed the question of the formation of a feminist, and they speculated that "to be a feminist one had to have had an experience of being an outsider more extreme than merely being a woman."¹²² It seems quite possible that Labarge was insulated from an extreme sentiment of being an outsider because of her experiences at Sacred Heart Convents.

One feature of the educational pattern at the convent was particularly useful and perhaps influential in Labarge's future endeavours. History and literature were taught concurrently, so that when Labarge entered the second academic which was Grade 10, she was taught both Medieval history and Medieval literature. The same was done for English history and English literature, American history and American literature. This approach Labarge found to be extremely useful as she always felt that it provided a context to which history could be related; the literature often gave a good idea of what people were like during the period. The double lens of history and literature prevented students from making errors such as thinking that 12th century tales were written in the 15th century, because it was clear from the history that the stories simply would not fit.

¹²² Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979) 20.

The instruction at the Convent was also very rigorous in essay writing. There were four young women in Labarge's class who went on to Radcliffe from Noroton-on-the-Sound, and each one was successful in the English college board exams. Only four or five of her class of twenty did not go on to further study, even though Labarge remarks, that, as a rule, Noroton-On-The-Sound was not designed particularly for people going on to university or college. She credits her training at the convent and luck for the fact that she passed the English college board with such a high mark that she did not have to take freshman English at Radcliffe.¹²³

The education at Noroton-on-the-Sound shares many characteristics with other single-sex institutions. With her entry into the Sacred Heart convent, Labarge entered an academic world where serious women teachers were the leaders and encouragers of young women, and thus the possibility of women taking education seriously was enhanced. As Natalie Davis has pointed out concerning female academic institutions: "whatever the discourse was..., " Davis says, "it came from the lips of a woman, was heard by women's ears, and discussed in a classroom of women. Women could evidently decide

¹²³ Labarge, interview by author, 6.

what was true."¹²⁴ Labarge herself feels that single sex education is most important during the high school years when boys' and girls' physical and intellectual patterns are so different: girls of that age are seeking approval from male classmates, and boys are being buffeted by hormones and "attempting to boss everyone about." This, Labarge feels, does not make for an advantageous education for young women.¹²⁵ Another Sacred Heart graduate puts it this way: "I think not competing with boys in the classroom was useful. By the time you got into the world, you were accustomed to being a leader in your own right and you were used to responsibility."¹²⁶

What made the Sacred Heart convents different from other girls' schools which could have equally strict and rigid codes regarding behaviour, was its Catholicism. "Catholicism was the axis on which everything else turned - each class, each meal, each day began and ended with a prayer. There was no doubt where the emphasis lay...."¹²⁷ From a purely secular point of view, there were perceived drawbacks to the pervasive and unquestioned Catholic presentation. V.V.

¹²⁴ Natalie Davis, "A Life of Learning: Natalie Zemon Davis," American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 39 at Internet: <http://www.acls.org/op39.htm>., 8.

¹²⁵ Labarge, interview by author, 6.

¹²⁶ Candy Stroud quoted in Harrison, 86.

¹²⁷ Harrison, 87.

Harrison, while recognizing that the classes in philosophy provided early exposure to conceptual thinking and were supposedly designed to produce original and independent minds, saw too that there was a basic contradiction in the goal, because “the premises of Catholicism are restrictive even in the most elementary concepts....,” but she still feels the philosophy courses were a stimulus to a thought process.

Suzannah Lessard, a Sacred Heart graduate, describes the contradiction in this way: “I think that there was a very deep conflict in the nuns’ identity as propagandists, but there is no doubt that they taught us to write and to think. They could not actively encourage us to truly dig and explore things because they had to stick to the party line (Catholicism), which was a fundamental conflict because many of them had intellectual minds.”¹²⁸

Although it must be remembered that the lives of the nuns were always controlled within the hierarchical male structure of the Catholic church, and while the overt and deeply believed message from the nuns would, almost exclusively, have been a strict and unquestioning adherence to the tenets of Catholic dogma, by their actions and their very existence as a congregation of nuns, the sisters provided a living refutation of many of the culturally determined restrictions that had been placed on women inside and outside of the Catholic church. As

¹²⁸ Suzannah Lessard quoted in Harrison, 88.

Marta Danylewycz pointed out in her study of Quebec convents "From a social perspective, women's religious communities provided a viable and esteemed alternative to motherhood in a society that seemed to value lay women solely as procreative beings. Under the aegis of a vocation, women could reject marriage, pursue lifelong careers, and be part of a community that enjoyed the ability to create its own sense of rank, status, and division of labour." Women could be rewarded for the excellence of their work, the position of the mother superior being just one case in point¹²⁹ Administrative work, academic curriculum planning and delivery, sports oriented activities, all of these functions were carried out by women. Higher education for women was a well established tradition at Sacred Heart convents. More than any other religious order for women, Sacred Heart filled its ranks with the daughters of affluent, prominent, Catholic families. Most of the nuns had completed four years of college, and some like Sister Mary C. Wheeler who entered the Society in 1926 when she was eighteen, acquired four Master's degrees and a Ph.D. The nuns were mostly "well-traveled, well-heeled and gently bred."¹³⁰

The nuns did become, in many ways, role models for their young

¹²⁹ Marta Danylewycz, "In Their Own Right: Convents, and Organized Expression of Women's Aspirations," Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History, Strong-Boag, Veronica and Anita Fellman eds. (Toronto: Copp Clark, Pitman Ltd., 1986) 195.

¹³⁰ Harrison, 97.

charges. Although in the secondary schools, Harrison says, that there was an effort to discourage close relationships, many remarkable friendships developed between the nuns and the students. Many students were drawn, Harrison says, to the affectionate caring and fine example of unselfish dedication in their lives.¹³¹ So too, the students could have absorbed the silent message of satisfaction gained through intellectual achievement and work. This does not deny the accompanying thrust of the traditional role that the nuns also expected the young women to play in society, and to that end there were extracurricular activities such as letter writing, music, sewing, diction and even politeness. There was no doubt, for example, in the mind of Mother Grace C. Dammann, President of Manhattanville College in her address to the student body in 1933, a time at which Margaret was attending Noroton-on-the-Sound, that the greater majority of the graduates would become wives and mothers who, because of their training would have the understanding, intelligence and the trained strong, rightly directed will "for the life of an educated Catholic woman called upon to meet problems of the most searching nature."¹³² But, she did allow as well that these problems could also be encountered in their professional careers as well as in the more hidden world of a

¹³¹ Harrison, 186.

¹³² Louise Callan, The Society of the Sacred Heart in North America (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937) 769.

finely organized home.¹³³ Journalist Candy Stroud, who attended Newton College in Massachusetts in 1963 remembers the motto from her days at Sacred Heart as being “a man’s head with a women’s heart”. She received the message that “the nuns meant us to be every bit as good as a man intellectually, to develop as a whole person....”¹³⁴ In 1990, alumnae Betsy Ryan and Tina Tree, reminiscing in an article entitled “Why and What We Write” which appeared in Les Amies, a magazine published by the Convent of the Sacred Heart in New York stated: “Literature was an important subject taught by women who obviously loved it and who managed to convey a slightly irreverent ‘you can do it too’ message.”¹³⁵

Labarge has remarked upon the fact that she made very good friends with some of the nuns,¹³⁶ and her association and friendship with them has continued to the present day. Whatever message Labarge had absorbed regarding her spiritual life or the probability of becoming a wife and a mother, she had also received from the nuns a reinforcement of the message from her father that there was no reason for her to consider her intellectual self as inferior to her male

¹³⁴ Candy Stroud, quoted in Harrison, 86.

¹³⁵ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Ryan, Betsy and Tina Tree, Les Amies, New York: Convent of the Sacred Heart, September 1990.

¹³⁶ Labarge, interview by author, 7.

counterparts, or that there should be limits on her intellectual aspirations because of her gender.

Labarge has indicated that the choice of Radcliffe as the next step in her education in 1933 was made by her father. She feels that her mother and father probably had struck an agreement that her mother would be allowed to choose the educational institution up to the end of high school, but the choice of college would be made by her father. She is silent about her own particular desires at this point, but she obviously was quite willing to accept her father's decision. Her father recognized that she had performed very well in high school and that she ought to be sent to the best school available. The best in his view was Harvard, but this not being available to women at that stage, the next best was Radcliffe, Harvard's women's college.

Single sex post-secondary academic institutions have produced a disproportionate share of women achievers in society. In 1973, Elizabeth Tidball studied women's colleges in the United States and found that women's colleges produced achievers at 1.9 times the rate of co-ed schools.¹³⁷ Several benefits of single sex institutions were identified: they provide more opportunity for academic and campus leadership at a critical point in life; they encourage women to

¹³⁷ Mary J. Oates and Susan Williamson, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers," Reconstructing the Academy, Elizabeth Minnich, Jean O'Barr and Rachel Rosenfeld eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 195.

concentrate in more unconventional areas of study; high expectations are held for the students by large numbers of adult women faculty who themselves exemplify achievement; the students who apply to women's colleges are self-selected in that they are probably brighter and more advantaged, catering to an economic and social elite. Women in these women's colleges pick a special environment that in turn nurtures and reinforces their later success.¹³⁸

Although at Radcliffe at that time, Labarge recalls that there were no women faculty, the special environment and self selection were obvious characteristics of the student body. She has stated that, if she had ever had any vanity about doing extremely well in high school, it was soon lost at Radcliffe where everyone had been first in her class. Another reason, Labarge feels that she did not have a sense of being "different" even though she was following a path that not many women followed in those days, was because most of the other Radcliffe women were "different" also, and their parents had similar views to Labarge's parents or they most likely would not have been at Radcliffe. There was never any suggestion from her parents, Labarge says, that the only thing in life for her was to grow up and get

¹³⁸ Mary J. Oates, 195, 202, and Elizabeth Tidball, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers Revisited", *Reconstructing the Academy*, 218, and Joy K. Rice and Annette Hemmings, "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers: An Update," *Signs* 13 3 (Spring, 1988) 232.

married. At Radcliffe, as well, it seemed to her that it was never a matter of young women just putting in time before they got married, because if that was all you wanted to do you would likely not have come to Radcliffe, which was known as a difficult college. You would have gone, Labarge felt, perhaps with a bit of Radcliffe condescension, to Wellesley or to Vassar. The young women at Radcliffe expected to do things with their lives, and in most cases they did. Labarge recalls going back to the twenty-fifth reunion of her graduation from Radcliffe to find that many of her classmates had married, and had also managed to combine work, marriage, and children in rather inventive ways, as she herself had done.¹³⁹

There is no doubt also that the possibility for these Radcliffe women to consider the less usual path of combining career and home was attributable to their high social and economic status. Joseph Veroff has concluded from his studies that "social success breeds high motivation which in turn breeds social success. As applied to women, this interpretation might lead us to suspect that only women coming from an upper-class background, and then only some of them can anticipate that their own assertive achievement competence might not endanger their social or economic standing in society...." Veroff refers to a study by Domhoff in 1970 which provides some evidence

¹³⁹ Labarge, interview by author, 9.

for the notion that excellence in academic pursuits has been considered especially legitimate for upper class women."¹⁴⁰ There seems little doubt that coming from an upper middle or upper class background and therefore having less fear of one's ability to maintain a certain standard of living, or fear of losing one's standing in society, has a great influence on a person's willingness to deviate from accepted patterns.

The major influences on Labarge's scholarship during her years at Radcliffe seemed to be, according to her recollection, some of the visiting professors from Harvard who would come over to give lectures at Radcliffe because women were not allowed in to Harvard classrooms. After their first year, in many cases, the classes were very small with five or six students, and the young women at Radcliffe got the young lecturers just on their way up the academic ladder who needed the small extra stipend for giving the extra classes. In this way, she was exposed to the best in her field, such as Charles Taylor, who was the great expert in French Medieval history; there was Charles McIlwhain who taught political theory and English constitutional history; John Livingston Loews, an expert on Romantic nineteenth century poetry, and the famous Professor Kittridge who was an expert in

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Veroff, Lou McClelland, and David Ruhland, "Varieties of Achievement Motivation," Women and Achievement, Mednick, Martha, Sandra Tangri and Lois Hoffman eds. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975) 189.

Shakespeare. These are the important influences that Labarge mentions in her interview. The field that she chose to aim for, Medieval history and literature, was definitely a male preserve and the influences on her historical development during this period were exclusively male.

In spite of the fact that women were not allowed in to Harvard classrooms, and were even denied access to Widener, Harvard's library, except by special permission when they had to write their honour's paper or some other special task, Labarge seems to evince no particular ill will towards the system that produced this injustice. Her attitude was one of acceptance of an apparently immutable fact. Speaking of the restriction on Radcliffe's students using the Harvard library, she states: "Oh, [we] sort of took it for granted. Harvard was always king of the roost anyway, of course. It had much more money and our library wasn't bad and you could get in to Widener when you needed to, so that was all right."¹⁴¹ Whether intentionally or not, Labarge seems to rationalize the exclusion of women from Harvard's library in terms of Radcliffe's or of any other university's lesser status compared to Harvard, but the fact remains that the reason for exclusion was based on gender alone. It was discriminatory and unjustifiable. I suppose that, in this case, because of the privileged

¹⁴¹ Labarge, interview by author, 12

exclusivity of the two colleges, the crumbs that were falling from Harvard's table were of sufficient quality that it seemed to be of little significance to many Radcliffe women that the entire cake was out of reach.

Labarge does remember, it seems with some dismay, that there was not a single woman teacher when she attended Radcliffe. Eventually, one of the Radcliffe graduates created a Chair at Radcliffe which was occupied by the first woman professor, Helen Cam, a famous medievalist from England, and this creation was not even really a decision that Harvard made. It is interesting to ponder what differences there would have been in Labarge's scholarship, if she had had a woman professor and mentor. But this pattern of male mentorship was not at all unusual at this time. "... Few women born before the second half of the [twentieth] century have found a woman mentor, mother or not, and have been professionally mentored, where they have been mentored at all, wholly by men: fathers or father surrogates."¹⁴²

Labarge's matter of fact attitude towards the lack of female professors and the restrictions placed on women students seems to be: - well, that's the way it was, so I coped with it, and achieved what I

¹⁴² Carolyn G Heilbrun, "Afterword," Daughters and Fathers, Boose, Lynda, and Betty Flowers eds. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989) 422.

wanted to achieve in spite of it. This attitude is reminiscent of Judith Zinsser's comment in History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full that "the true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in the male-defined world on their own terms."¹⁴³ But it would seem to me that "on their own terms" seems rather too positive an interpretation of the situation. The terms were not their own. They had to accept the terms established by male fiat during the time they were functioning, and find ways around those terms in order to be able to function. I would suggest that there is some reason to believe that their life courses were possibly significantly altered by the need to dance around the prevailing male norms. Although in the Radcliffe-Harvard setting the choices that Labarge was able to make were excellent ones, it bears emphasizing that those choices were limited by her gender.

Labarge graduated in 1937 achieving the distinction of magna cum laude on her thesis, and she was keen to do graduate work, but with "typical Harvard arrogance,"¹⁴⁴ she remembers, she did not want to do graduate work at an "inferior" university in the United States (and all others were considered such after having been to Harvard.)

¹⁴³ Judith Zinsser, History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993) 37.

¹⁴⁴ Labarge, interview by author, 12.

She had the Sorbonne or Oxford in mind. Once again, her father was instrumental in her choice of university. Alfred was not keen at all about his only daughter "floating around Paris",¹⁴⁵ but, being an Anglophile, he approved heartily of the idea of Labarge's going to Oxford, and so she applied and was accepted by the Society of Oxford Home Students which is now St. Anne's College. The authorities of the college wanted her to do a B.A. because they felt she was too young to do research and that she wouldn't meet anybody if she were off on her own doing research. For them, her age and her gender were obviously infinitely more important in deciding a course of action than the fact that she was a talented Radcliffe graduate who had a keen interest in Medieval history. Labarge was quite able to stand her ground, and, as she put it, "got sort of pigheaded" and said that she wished to speak to the head of the History Department. Her advisors suggested to her that the head of History would never work with a woman but, again, Labarge describes herself as quite fortunate in the fact that the head of History, Professor Powicke had, not long since, visited Harvard for its tercentenary, and had met many of the historians there. When he learned that Labarge had studied with McIlwhain and Taylor, he was quite willing to accept her request to do research. Her interest in the relationship between England and France in the 13th century, was an

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 12

excellent opportunity for Labarge to work with Professor Powicke, as he was in the process of writing a book on the 13th century. Other members of the department expressed surprise that Powicke had agreed to work with a woman, but he obviously did not exclude Labarge because of her gender. Labarge enjoyed working with him and was undeterred by the fact that Powicke, although he was an amiable man, did not take at all kindly to sloppy work, and he would "take a strip off you" if you turned in a sloppy paper. Powicke was the Regius professor at Oxford and his reputation was very high, and as Labarge well understood, the reputation of the person under whom you study helps a great deal in establishing your own credibility as a serious scholar.¹⁴⁶ The one time that Labarge seriously seems to have resented the treatment she received as a woman was when she was doing part of her research in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. She said that: "If you were young and a woman, you were at a particular disadvantage, as the functionaries naturally considered you beneath their notice, and frequently your books never arrived at all. This attitude made life so difficult that I finally was pushed into presenting the introduction to M. le Directeur with which my kindly professor had armed me."¹⁴⁷ She was able to proceed with her work pursuant only to

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 12, 13.

¹⁴⁷ Margaret Labarge, "My Collection of Libraries", Unpublished Article, 1962, Carleton University Archives, Margaret Wade Labarge Fonds: Box A 238, 7.

the presentation of male authority in the person of Professor Powicke. Labarge had the strength of character and determination of purpose not to let male opposition stop her, but it certainly did, at times, make her path more difficult.

Scholarship was not the only matter on Labarge's mind during her time at Oxford. She thoroughly enjoyed an active social life that culminated in the meeting of her future husband. Her father's business contacts prepared the way for her acceptance into Oxford society. A cousin of her father's business associate was the Warden of All Souls college, the most impressive of the colleges, because it was all graduate students. Through this contact, Labarge was extended an invitation to tea any Sunday that she wished to go. There she met many extraordinary people and also got on to the lists of several wives of the heads of the Colleges as a convenient extra woman when they were entertaining. The English girls, Labarge felt, were much more timid than she was, and they became rather tongue tied at dinners, whereas she was always ready she says "to chatter on and give her opinion."¹⁴⁸

Labarge was living at a hostel run by the Sacred Heart nuns, with four nuns studying at university and five other girls. One of the young women invited her to a party in rooms in Wadham College. The party

¹⁴⁸ Telephone conversation with Margaret Labarge, October 29, 1998.

was not a very great success and it became apparent that she and another fellow were having to work very hard to keep the conversation going. That fellow was her future husband, Ray Labarge.

Unfortunately because Labarge was, as a concession to vanity, not wearing her glasses at the time, she failed to recognize him the next day and to his surprise, she did not give him a second glance as she passed by. After this initial mishap, the two started to see each other and gradually became more and more important to one another. Their relationship had become quite serious, and just before Ray was heading home for the summer, Labarge suggested to him that, because he had been away from his family and friends and been immersed in the Oxford atmosphere for two years, it might be a good idea for him to go back and see if there weren't some former girlfriends who were still important to him. Ray came back at the end of the summer and said "No, you're the one." This occurred at the end of the summer of 1938, and the course of their lives would be altered by the approaching war. Labarge was able to finish the next year and receive her B.Litt. degree. If she had not been forced to return to North America because of the war, she would have stayed and worked towards receiving her D.Phil. the following year, but under the circumstances that was impossible. Labarge went back to Connecticut and Ray returned to Ottawa to begin his work for the War Time Prices and

Trade Board. They had decided to marry in June of 1940 and Labarge secured a post as an English teacher at a high school in Rosemont in Philadelphia until she moved to start her married life with Ray in Ottawa. Labarge has stated that she had been quite certain that she knew that Ray was the man that she wished to marry, but that she also knew that marriage would not be the only thing that she would do. The idea that Labarge would not confine her future to being a wife and mother was something which she and Ray did not really talk about. It was something, she says, that they both took for granted. This, she feels, was one of the advantages of the courtship at Oxford, because Ray had seen her seriousness and concern with her courses at Oxford and thus had accepted her scholarship as a part of who she was.¹⁴⁹

Labarge appears to have had a very clear idea of who she was and what she wanted out of life. Carolyn Heilbrun states that women who have succeeded in typically male areas "have become able, by some psychological process, to conceive of themselves as selves."¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Ashburn in her book Motivation, Personality, and Work-Related Characteristics of Women in Male-Dominated Professions, quotes a 1965 study by Alice Rossi that found that "those women who have entered the top professional fields have had to have

¹⁴⁹ Labarge, interview by author, 20.

¹⁵⁰ Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood, 106.

extraordinary motivation, thick skins, exceptional ability, and some unusual pattern of socialization in order to reach their occupational destinations. Intelligence and education are apparently not sufficient conditions to predict professional achievement."¹⁵¹ It is intriguing to notice the manner in which Labarge corresponds to this depiction. At various times in her interview, this most gracious and cultivated lady has described her younger self as competitive, confident, arrogant, pigheaded, more outspoken than many, rather tactless, prepared to say what she thought, and willing to try to push people around.¹⁵² A combination of inborn personality traits and atypical socialization produced a very strong woman who did not correspond to a traditional image of a passive, unambitious, hyper-sensitive and self-effacing "girl." Further reinforcement of the idea of unusual socialization comes from a study by Almquist and Angrist in 1970 who, in their enrichment hypothesis, describe Labarge's circumstances almost precisely. "...the unconventional chooser is not so much a renegade as she is a product of additional enriching experiences which lead to a less stereotyped and broader conception of the female role. She does not reject the customary, time-honored duties of adult women, but sees

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Ashburn, Motivation, Personality, and Work-Related Characteristics of Women in Male-Dominated Professions (Washington: National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors, 1977) 6.

¹⁵² Labarge, interview by author.

these as augmented by work as an important feature of her adult life."¹⁵³

The portrait which emerges from the glimpses of Margaret Labarge's early life and academic endeavours is that of a highly motivated young woman of exceptional ability who, because of atypical paternal encouragement in intellectual pursuits, a first rate education in a female environment, and superior financial and social resources was able to create a self that was able to navigate successfully in the male dominated world of academia.

The next stage of Labarge's life would see her integrating two additional roles, those of wife and mother, into her already established identity as that of a proficient and talented scholar.

¹⁵³ Ashburn, 9.

CHAPTER THREE

WIFE, MOTHER, AND COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER:

COMBINING NEW PATHS WITH TRADITIONAL BELIEFS.

During the years 1940 to 1972, Margaret Labarge's life exemplified the juggling act performed by many working women who continued to follow professional goals while maintaining a busy and expanding family life. Her family responsibilities, while chosen freely and joyfully, had, nonetheless, a significant effect on her scholarly choices. Her early married life was conducted during the dislocations of the war and, thereafter, her life combining scholarship and family was undertaken during a period when domesticity was valorized, the period which Betty Friedan called the era of the Feminine Mystique; Labarge was definitely a woman who had no intention of remaining confined to the domestic sphere, and she managed to combine her family life with a rewarding career as a teacher, scholar, and community volunteer. Labarge, in forums provided to her in the community, advised other women to look beyond the confines of religious or philosophical theory that would limit them to being caretakers of their families. Labarge's attitudes and choices were

also influenced by her deeply held religious convictions.

After their marriage in June of 1940, the Labarges settled in Ottawa where Raymond worked for the War Time Prices and Trade Board until 1942 when he enlisted in the Canadian Navy. Both husband and wife went to Raymond's posting in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. During their time in Quebec, Labarge taught a night course in English to young French women who, she says, were very motivated by their desire to be able to talk to the young English soldiers at the naval signal school located in the town. This teaching assignment she considered to be great fun. An uncertain future and the many sacrifices demanded of all Canadians during the war meant that a settled existence was not possible for the young couple until the end of the war. Raymond was posted to Naval Intelligence in Ottawa in 1944 and the Labarges returned to the capital city which would become their permanent home.¹⁵⁴

When examining the lives of North American women in the post World War II period, it becomes clear that there existed a fairly distinct split between the philosophical and religious discourse on women's position in society and the changing reality of the roles that women were assuming. In the print media the message was very clear that the wife and mother who worked in the home was the "archetypal,

¹⁵⁴ Labarge, interview by author, 20, and Griffiths, "Introduction", A Medieval Miscellany, 5.

normal, and superior model for North American women.¹⁵⁵ In the United States, "...by the end of 1949, only one out of three heroines in American women's magazines was a career woman - and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife."¹⁵⁶ In 1953, Better Homes and Gardens, approvingly described the American First Lady, Mamie Eisenhower, as "no bluestocking feminist."¹⁵⁷ Adlai Stevenson's address to the Smith College graduating class "urged women not to define themselves by any profession and to participate in politics through the role of wife and mother."¹⁵⁸ Most of the women's magazines available in Canada at this time were American, and so the domestic message in the American media was passed along to the other side of the border.

The largest Canadian periodical at that time was Chatelaine with a reported circulation of over one million readers of its French and

¹⁵⁵ Joan Sangster, "Doing Two Jobs, The Wage Earning Mother, 1945-1970," A Diversity of Women, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 102.

¹⁵⁶ Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 44.

¹⁵⁷ Carabillo, Toni, Judith Meuli, and June Csida, Feminist Chronicles, 1953-1993 (Los Angeles: Women's Graphics, 1993) 39.

¹⁵⁸ Adlai Stevenson quoted in *Ibid.*, 39.

English magazines.¹⁵⁹ A study by Gardiner, Kirmayer and Vininsky which compares the fiction of Chatelaine with that of Ladies Home Journal and Good Housekeeping, reveals the average central figure in the fictional stories to be young, white, usually married and, most often, happily so. Seventy-three percent of the women depicted were housewives only. A very small number of women who had any stated goals had career goals. Women who combined home and career were depicted as leading “fragmented lives” and were often unhappy, and only one felt dissatisfaction with her housewifely role.¹⁶⁰ Canadian magazines did not differ significantly from their American counterparts. As the authors of Canadian Women. A History point out, in Maclean's magazine between 1939 and 1950, the proportion of all advertisements that directly appealed to women as homemakers rose from about 40% in the period 1939-43 to more than 70% in 1950, and the emphasis shifted. No longer did the advertisements merely offer to free the housewife from the drudgery and boredom of her work; now they promised her a life of personal fulfillment - provided she

¹⁵⁹ Kati Malloch, Women In the Canadian Media (Montreal: McGill University, 1973) 21.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 22, 23.

wisely purchased the right products.¹⁶¹ During the 1950s in particular, Maclean's articles dealing with women and the family thoroughly reflected the ideas of the Catholic church: that nature destined women to perform domestic work, and that women's paid employment outside the home was to be deplored.¹⁶² In Chatelaine in the 1950s, women who concentrated on their careers were portrayed ambiguously or with a suggestion of personal unhappiness. Articles such as "I Quit My Job To Save My Marriage" in the June 1955 Chatelaine, suggested that divorces were often caused by a wife working outside of the home.¹⁶³

The ever growing influence of television during the 1950s added to the depiction of women as being primarily domestic by nature and not naturally suited to pursuits outside of the home. The advertisements on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation portrayed women "pursuing either beauty or the cult of domesticity." CBC programming allowed women only "supplementary and decorative roles while men were the masters of argument and fact."¹⁶⁴ Joan Sangster

¹⁶¹ Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne and Gail Brandt eds., Canadian Women, A History, Prentice, Alison, Paula Bourne and Gail Brandt eds., 2nd edition (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Co. Canada, 1996) 383.

¹⁶² Prentice, 383.

¹⁶³ Sangster, 102, 104.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 103, and quoting Paul Rutherford, When Television Was Young: Primetime Canada 1952-1967, 332, 200.

has also discovered that The National Film Board of Canada created negative portrayals adding to the print and television media's depiction of career woman as abnormal. The Film Board prepared a series of fictionalized films to discuss mental health in 1951 and featured Clare 'the successful career girl' as the centrepiece for the theme of 'Hostility'. Clare, 'starved for affection in her early years', turns her energies to 'intellectual pursuits, school, and work' and to achievement."¹⁶⁵

It is difficult to judge the extent of the impact of the media message. There is little indication of how seriously women regarded the advice given in the magazines, or how significantly it influenced their behaviour, but women do remember how the messages made them feel. Joan Sangster quotes a nurse who remembers the messages she and her co-workers received from the magazines during the post-war period: "The magazines, even Chatelaine [said] if you were a working mother, your kids were going to be convicts in time to come...we were urged to come back to work [by the hospitals] but when we did, we felt shunned by our peer group...[for] neglecting our home duty."¹⁶⁶ Clearly, many women accepted the domestic message in the media and were ready to criticize the minority of women who,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 104

from necessity or desire, did not exist exclusively for their home and family.

The message in the media was reinforced by the messages from the nation's pulpits. Catholic women would have heard the pronouncements of the Pope who suggested that every woman was made to be a mother, and that the vast majority of women would find in marriage the circumstances in which they can "fulfill their mission." Women's nature, the Pope said, admirably fitted her for her function as a partner of her husband and bearer of the children that God would send them.¹⁶⁷ Protestant ministers also suggested to their congregations that being a mother was a full-time job, and the United Church Observer made a disparaging reference to "hard-boiled women [who were] compelled by competitive and status-seeking to work outside the home" rather than being guided by the ethical and nurturing values of true motherhood.¹⁶⁸

Along with the media and religious messages, sociology and medicine weighed in with their opinions on women who worked outside the home. Joan Sangster points out that Canada's social work journal Canadian Welfare quotes Benjamin Spock who spoke urging his

¹⁶⁷ William Flaherty, The Destiny of Modern Woman (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1950) 125, 127.

¹⁶⁸ Sangster, 105.

professional audience to solve the problem of women who 'resentful of their wife and mother role sought outside work.'¹⁶⁹ Dr. Marynia Farnham, an American anti-feminist psychiatrist and co-author of the 1947 book Modern Woman: The Lost Sex declared that women who attempted to compete with men or expressed discontent with their "natural" careers as mothers suffered from mental illness, bitterness and were likely to suffer from a sexual disorder¹⁷⁰ Edwin C. Lewis in Developing Women's Potential, cited many studies which 'proved' that "the girl who aims for a career is likely to be frustrated and dissatisfied with herself as a person. [She is] less well adjusted than those who are content to become housewives. Not only is [she] likely to have a poor self-concept, but she also probably lacks a close relationship with her family."¹⁷¹

Against this backdrop of what appears to be a universal, unremitting, and publicly promoted ideal of domesticity for women, it is important to seek out those ideas which did not support the predominant domestic message, and to discover if the actual lives of women conformed to the prescriptive norm. In 1963, Betty Friedan

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 104, quoting from Benjamin Spock, "What We Know About the Development of Healthy Personality in Children," Canadian Welfare April 15, 1951.

¹⁷⁰ Farnham, quoted in Friedan, Betty, The Feminine Mystique, 119, 120.

¹⁷¹ Lewis, Edwin C. quoted in Helson, Ravenna, "The Changing Image of Career Women," Women and Achievement: Social and Motivational Analysis, Mednick, Martha, Sandra Tangri, Lois Hoffman eds. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975) 422.

published her highly influential book, The Feminine Mystique which described a deep discontent in American women after World War II. In her book, Friedan did identify a restrictive and domestic ideology that was the prevailing code for American women during the post war period, but she did not identify opposing ideologies, nor did she recognize the way in which some women's lives were subverting the domestic ideal prescribed for them. Joanne Meyerowitz, in her article entitled "Beyond the Feminine Mystique" studied a sample of 489 non-fiction articles with a circulation of 22 million Americans reaching readers of all classes, races and genders in the postwar period, and she points out that domestic ideals coexisted with an ethos of individual achievement that celebrated non domestic activity, individual striving, public service, and public success. Many articles in magazines like Readers' Digest suggested that the noteworthy woman rose above and beyond domesticity. While the articles reinforced the rigid definition of appropriate female behavior and sexual expression, they tried openly to inspire women to pursue unusual goals, and they even sometimes suggested that public service brought more obvious rewards than devotion to family.¹⁷² Susan Hartmann also argues that scholars have overlooked the fact that many leading American decision

¹⁷²Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," Not June Cleaver, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 237.

makers and opinion shapers sought to adjust public opinion and public policy to accommodate women's greater participation in the public sphere. The American National Manpower Council Commission for the Education of Women commented approvingly on the development of what would later be called women's studies courses, and they recognized the need for more research on women. Hartmann agrees that scholars were correct in seeing an American obsession with family life and traditional gender roles but the actual behavior of women, she proves, increasingly deviated from that vision of domesticity.¹⁷³

Hartmann demonstrates that in spite of the celebration of domesticity during the postwar period, rates of women's employment in the United States matched the high levels attained during World War II: married women's employment rose by 42% and employment rose fastest amongst middle-class women.

There is a significant difference in Canadian and American married women's patterns of employment, and the public attitude towards such employment. Employment figures tend to indicate that, in Canada at least, women did retire to the home after World War II, and they were encouraged to do so by the makers of public policy.

Ruth Pierson in her book Canadian Women and the Second World War

¹⁷³ Susan Hartmann, "'Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,'" Not June Cleaver, Joanne Meyerowitz ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994) 86, 87, 92, 97.

states that, in Canada, "women's participation in the paid work force began to slide in 1945 and plummeted in 1946 to a quarter of the work force. The rate continued to decline with the mid-fifties. Only in 1966 did it climb back up to the 1945 level."¹⁷⁴ After the war, a larger total percentage of women worked outside the home but only one in ten married women worked outside the home.¹⁷⁵ What is also clear is that government and industry had tried to accommodate some of the domestic needs of married women for the duration of the war only, not because of any acknowledgement of a woman's right to work, but only because "such accommodation was justified by the war emergency, and would not outlast it."¹⁷⁶ After the war, both government and industry halted or cut back severely on the few programmes, such as child care, that had been designed to come to the aid of working mothers. The barriers to married women's employment went up again after the immediate wartime need for replacement workers had disappeared.¹⁷⁷ Unlike the authorities in Hartmann's assessment of the

¹⁷⁴ Ruth R. Pierson, "Canadian Women and the Second World War," Readings in Canadian History Post-Confederation, Francis, R. Douglas and Donald B. Smith eds. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1986) 506.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., Pierson, 506.

¹⁷⁶ Ruth Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in World War ," The Neglected Majority, Trofimenkoff, Susan and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977) 135.

¹⁷⁷ Pierson, "Canadian Women and the Second World War," 507.

post-war attitude in the United States, Canadian authorities, while they agreed with the principle of women's right to work, in practice, they expected and promoted the idea that married women would stay at home. In a Report on Social Security for Canada, L.C. March emphasized that women's commitment was primarily to homemaking and childbearing, and argued that most female industrial workers would "retire voluntarily from the labour market through marriage."¹⁷⁸ The largest authority figure in Canada, the government, made it amply clear by its actions of non-support for married women that it actively discouraged them from entering or remaining in the work force. In fact, the only reason the government had employed married women at all was not because of women's right to work, but because of a shortage of labour for the war effort. "There was a deliberate effort ... to limit women's employment in the public service. The prime minister went so far as to request that his cabinet ministers not employ female secretaries." Married women were barred from the federal civil service until 1955.¹⁷⁹

The picture that emerges of the Canadian woman's experience in the 1950s and 1960s contains two elements. There was a demonstrable and strong discourse which presented a "domestic

¹⁷⁸ Pierson, "Canadian Women and the Second World War," 502.

¹⁷⁹ Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, and Gail Brandt et al eds., Canadian Women: A History, 2nd. ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996) 350.

ideology of nuclear family...that extolled home and family centredness, pronatalism, and heterosexuality...that celebrated the security of traditional gender roles for men and women."¹⁸⁰ Many Ontario residents "from a range of ethnic and class backgrounds attempted to attain the ideal of a nuclear family supervised on a daily basis by a wife and mother and financially maintained by a male breadwinner."¹⁸¹ And yet, in spite of the rhetoric of unchanged social attitudes and the aspirations of many families, the reality was that, after the initial post war downturn in women's employment, where the vast majority of married women did return to the home shuffled along by governmental and industrial pressure, the number of women in the work force would continue to grow - fifty-six percent between 1951 to 1961, and seventy-three percent between 1961-1971.¹⁸² In 1951, one in ten married women worked, and in 1961, one in five worked.¹⁸³ While there continued to be a public debate over the desirability of married women's working outside the home, the debate masked, says Strong-Boag "the economic need that compelled women with families to work

¹⁸⁰ Sangster, 102.

¹⁸¹ Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Their Side of the Story': Women's Voices from Ontario Suburbs 1945-1960," A Diversity of Women: Ontario 1945-1980, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 47.

¹⁸² Parr, 6.

¹⁸³ Sangster, 99.

outside of the home, erroneously portraying Canadians as entirely middle-class."¹⁸⁴ Most married women worked to maintain their families' standard of living in an increasingly consumer oriented society.¹⁸⁵ In spite of these facts which do portray a trend that would continue to see all women take an increasing role within the work force, it must be remembered, and emphasized that, in 1961, almost eighty percent of married Canadian women did not work, and it was not until 1981 that the percentage of married women who worked reached 50.5%.¹⁸⁶ During the post war period, it was still, by far, a minority of married women who worked outside of the home. There were, however, women like Margaret Labarge, whose lives, although following much of the traditional familial model, did illustrate an alternative path for those unwilling members of the eighty percent majority at home, who did not wish to have their entire existence focus solely upon domestic pursuits.

Margaret Labarge's life pattern in the 1950s and 1960s mainly fell within the realm of the domestic ideology of nuclear family that has been previously mentioned - home and family centredness,

¹⁸⁴ Sangster, 103.

¹⁸⁵ Prentice, 352.

¹⁸⁶ Susan MacDaniel, "The Changing Canadian Family," Changing Patterns: Women in Canada, Burt, Sandra, Lorraine Code, Lindsay Dorner (Toronto: McClelland and Sullivan, 1988) 109.

pronatalism, heterosexuality, and the security of traditional gender roles for men and women. These values were outlined in a series of speeches that Labarge gave to community and religious groups on the topic of family life and the role of women in society. A reading of these speeches makes it clear that, while Labarge was a firm believer in the importance of the traditional nuclear family, she also questioned and challenged some of the socially constructed expectations placed upon women by society at large and by the Catholic church in particular.

For Margaret Labarge, the traditional family was the basic unit of society, one of the last bastions of individual life and personal worth. She was convinced that most women wanted a primary commitment to the family.¹⁸⁷ She also felt very strongly that during the period of children's total dependence, the mother must be selfless and put the needs of the children first. She further suggested that women with children of preschool age should never work full-time if they need not do so out of absolute economic necessity, but she appears to moderate her position by prefacing her opposition to full-time work with the suggestion that it is impossible to do so because good

¹⁸⁷ Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, Panel Discussion, Education and Careers for Women, St. Basil's PTA, unpublished, and unpublished speech entitled "Education of Our Daughters", Blossom Park PTA, 1966.

substitute care is rarely available.¹⁸⁸ Studies from that time period certainly do reinforce Labarge's assertion that, at that point in time, most women's primary focus was on the family. Even in studies such as one by Rossi in 1965 that included women achievers in traditionally male dominated professions, it was indicated that, the majority of women expected family relationships to be the primary source of satisfaction in their lives; the only exception was amongst the group of unmarried women college graduates whose long-range career goals were in masculine fields, forty percent of whom expected their career to be the primary source of life satisfaction; fewer than ten percent of married women whose long-range career goals were in masculine fields felt this way. Research by Poloma and Garland in 1971 on 53 professional couples came to a conclusion similar to Rossi's: "... for the majority of women doctors, lawyers, and professors in their study, the highest priority was for the wife and mother role, and ... they simply did not want the demands, commitments, and responsibilities of a full career."¹⁸⁹ While it is obviously possible to demonstrate women's primary commitment to family during this era, the question was raised

¹⁸⁸ Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, unpublished speech entitled "The Problem of Women in Our Society" - Theology Course at St. Paul University, 1965, 20.

¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth Ashburn, Motivation, Personality, and Work-Related Characteristics of Women in Male-Dominated Professions (Washington, D.C.: National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors, 1976) 18.

by scholars in the 1970s as to “whether this lesser ambition and commitment is a valid sex difference; i.e., the differences appear to occur as a consequence of differential vocational socialization processes for males and females, rather than as a consequence of any inherent differences.”¹⁹⁰ Labarge has also acknowledged that the “present view of family life [in the 1960s] and education are creatures of our own historical situations and not immutable commandments handed down from on high,”¹⁹¹ and yet she has also stressed in her speeches that Catholics must put a proper emphasis on “feminine roles”; Labarge evidently believed that there were indeed proper, definable feminine roles. She has also stated that the man must be the head of the house just as he is legally responsible for the family’s financial solvency.¹⁹² Labarge, although seeing the general possibility of historically constructed gender roles, does not explore the cultural aspects inherent in the gender roles she has laid out for Catholic men and women.

She describes the situation of a small family unit with an absolute and dominating father as inappropriate and unsatisfactory.

The wife’s function, she feels, is more important than it could ever be

¹⁹⁰ Ashburn, 19.

¹⁹¹ Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, Radio Broadcast Taped, October 5th, 1963.

¹⁹² Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, “Education of Our Daughters”, Blossom Park PTA, 1966, 3.

in that situation. Labarge describes a wife as her husband's marriage partner, his most stable and continuous friend and counselor.¹⁹³ The roles of the partners, Labarge states must be complementary, not competitive;¹⁹⁴ there is a moral obligation to put the needs of the family above one's own desires for self-fulfillment, but at the same time the whole family should encourage the widest possible development of all of its members.¹⁹⁵ Labarge insists that fathers must be seriously involved in the upbringing of children, and "the father who lets business or pleasure keep him from being intimately involved in the upbringing of the family is not giving the wife the support she deserves."¹⁹⁶ In the Christian framework, Labarge sees the family as a basic value that requires individual sacrifices from both partners. She suggests that new partnerships will have to be worked out with greater regard for the talents, aptitudes and even the desires of individual women.¹⁹⁷ To achieve this new partnership, it will be necessary, Labarge feels, to educate boys to understand and approve of wives who are mature and developed human beings, who are

¹⁹³ Labarge Fonds, Box A 238 "The Problem of Women in Our Society", Theology Course, St. Paul University 1965, 15.

¹⁹⁴ Labarge Fonds, "Education of our Daughters," 3.

¹⁹⁵ Labarge Fonds, "The Problem of Women in Our Society", 21.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 15.

¹⁹⁷ Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, Speech Newman Convention, 1967, 6.

“helpmates, in the fullest sense of that delightful and old fashioned word,” if the world wishes to use the reservoir of woman-power with intelligence and consistency.¹⁹⁸ Labarge suggests also that, if the role of women is to be redefined, men will have to reexamine and update their attitudes, their expectations of marriage, and of their wife’s function. They will have to show a “generous openness to the swiftly changing circumstances of modern life.”¹⁹⁹ It is clear that Labarge strongly supports the idea of a nuclear family with specific roles for both husband and wife, but she also supports some modification of that family structure away from a domineering male and subordinate female, to a mutually supportive arrangement where both participants, after their obligations to the maintenance of the family structure are met, are free to pursue individual fulfillment away from the domestic arena. That the obligations of the woman within the home would, in most instances, be greater than those of her husband, based on a gender division of labour, is not a situation that Labarge discusses or takes issue with.

While Labarge does not deviate from the idea that women are, and wish to be, the main caretakers of the children, she is quick to point out in her 1960 speeches that this is only a full-time occupation

¹⁹⁸ Labarge Fonds, “Education of Our Daughters,” 6.

¹⁹⁹ Labarge Fonds, Speech, Newman Convention, 1967.

while the children are of preschool age. After that point, she insists that a women's "horizons must go beyond the confines of the house."²⁰⁰ A woman, she states, must not simply be an extension of someone else, John's wife, or Betty's mother, no matter how dearly these people are loved. A woman has values and talents that she should give back to a wider group than the family unit. Labarge further states that women must be educated to realize that marrying and living happily ever after is not the end of their individual responsibility. Women have a responsibility to do their share in and for the world. Labarge decries the huge reserve of untapped woman power that could be used to help solve the many community problems in our society. Labarge observes that not every woman needs or wants a paying job, but Labarge does not allow that fact to absolve women of the duty to act outside of the home. For those women who are not obliged or inclined to work in paying jobs, there is other work that needs to be done - helping the elderly, the children and the lonely. Labarge sees those women who spend their lives solely in making the rounds of coffee, bridge and curling parties as using these outlets as filler for a spiritual vacuum.²⁰¹ Veronica Strong-Boag confirms the existence of

²⁰⁰ Labarge Fonds, "The Problem of Women in Our Society", 20.

²⁰¹ Labarge Fonds, "The Problem of Women in Our Society," 20, 21 and "Education of Our Daughters", 4.

this type of woman in the Ontario suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s: "... by sustaining happy families and cohesive neighbourhoods, most believed that they had done their share of the world's work. Such women felt little need to assume roles beyond the local school or church."²⁰² Labarge's disdain for a type of woman who views her existence as a series of social adventures echoes her historical analysis of the effect of Victorian society on the status of middle-class women. Labarge noted that it became acceptable for some Victorian women to gain social status in occupations she categorizes as "useless and time-wasting," and in the pursuit of these occupations many women lost their personal worth and dignity.²⁰³ According to Labarge, the woman whose only sphere of activity during her lifetime is reduced to the domestic area is incomplete, and she has traded, willingly or unwillingly, the possibility of a dignified and useful existence for an unworthy substitute.

Between 1945 and 1950, there were four children born to the Labarges: two girls, Claire and Suzanne, and two boys, Charles and Paul. Having four children in five years meant that full-time academic life either as a doctoral student or as a full-time university teacher

²⁰² Veronica Strong-Boag, "Their Side of the Story: Women's Voices from Ontario Suburbs 1945-1960," A Diversity of Women, Parr, Joy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 68.

²⁰³ Labarge, "Education of Our Daughters", 2.

was out of the question for Labarge, but as soon as she had arrived back in Ottawa in 1944, she looked around for possibilities that would allow her to remain involved in the academic community. Labarge found that Ottawa “was not a place that had been very active in the higher education of women. Ottawa U was certainly ‘sniffy’ about it....”²⁰⁴ An acquaintance, Mary Macdonald, who was a graduate of Notre Dame College, one of the rare colleges in Ottawa which, before the establishment of Carleton University, accepted women professors, asked Labarge to give a talk to their alumnae, and Labarge feels that it was this opportunity that led to her acceptance as a lecturer at Carleton. Ruth Pierson states that universities in Canada at this time provided only a limited field for women, with more opportunities in professional schools such as household science, library, music and the extension departments for adult education,²⁰⁵ but Labarge’s perception was that, after the war, the universities were so short of people, that if you had the proper qualifications they were willing to hire anybody.²⁰⁶ She, of course, was not seeking a tenure track position or even full-time employment which increased the likelihood of her finding a university position. Throughout the fifties and sixties, Labarge taught

²⁰⁴ Labarge, interview by author, 22.

²⁰⁵ Pierson, “Canadian Women and the Second World War,” 503.

²⁰⁶ Labarge, interview by author, 22.

one course a year, usually history, at Carleton, and then at the University of Ottawa. This was her choice, she said, as it was all she could manage as she “was having children at a rather rapid speed.”²⁰⁷ There were two reasons for her desire to teach. One was her wish to continue to be involved in the academic world; the other reason was, she says, “I felt it helped to keep me sane because it gave me something else to think about....”²⁰⁸ Although Labarge has always doted upon her children, it was evident that she required more stimulation than that which was available to her within the confines of her house. For Labarge the lure of historical research remained strong. Preparing and teaching her history courses at the universities, Labarge began to envision writing a kind of book that could accommodate the difficulties and logistics of having four small children and a busy husband. Such a book would not require her to consult manuscript sources in remote places which would have been out of the question for her at that point in her life. Another factor which facilitated her move into paid labour was the fact that the Labarges started to employ young farm women from Barry’s Bay to help out when there were three children under the age of three. These young girls would come to Ottawa about the end of September after the

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 20.

potatoes had been brought in and then go back home in May. For five years, these young women eased Labarge's domestic burden. This was an important release for her not only because of her desire to teach but also because, physically, at that point, she had more than she could handle with so many young children. The ability to hire extra help was obviously available to the Labarges because of a comfortable financial position. It is interesting to note the disparity in Labarge's living status and that of her mother, who had the services of multiple staff members, but had no outside employment whatsoever. Domestic help certainly did facilitate the possibility, but it was an external focus and a desire for independent achievement that were the motivating factors in Labarge's pursuit of scholarly activities.

William Chafe, writing in The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970, points out that in spite of the fact that there were many women who did work after the war, "what remained most significant was the impression that women went to work out of "necessity". If a woman had declared that she sought employment in order to gratify personal whim or desire, she would immediately have come into conflict with the social norm that a wife should be happy to stay in the home."²⁰⁹ This sentiment is shared

²⁰⁹ William H. Chafe, The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1950-1970 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 192.

by the editors of the book Working It Out, a collection of essays in which women describe their efforts to accomplish their chosen work. In their introduction, Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels state "In a patriarchal world, female aspirations towards autonomous creative work is all too often dismissed, even denigrated, while women's initiative and competence outside the home are perceived as threatening anomalies."²¹⁰ In the post war debate about working women, "the vast majority of women were at pains to stress the economic necessity that compelled them to go out to work."²¹¹ Joan Sangster points out that even those sympathetic to women workers "felt they had to study the question exhaustively to assure the public that women were working to survive, not for frivolous reasons."²¹² Clearly, Labarge did not conform to that societal dictum. She sought work, and was desirous of continuing her research not out of the necessity for financial reward, but because she wanted the intellectual stimulation, and also, because her vision of her life's work included more than the roles of wife and mother regardless of how much she also loved those more traditional roles.

²¹⁰ Sara Ruddick, and Pamela Daniels, "Introduction," Working It Out: 23 Women Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk About Their Lives an, Ruddick, Sara and Pamela Daniels eds. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) xxvi.

²¹¹ Sangster, 120.

²¹² Ibid., 125.

Labarge's move into the labour force may have been more insulated from criticism than was the case for some other women because of the nature of the work that she chose to do, and because she could already be identified as "successful" in the traditional roles of wife and mother. Carolyn Heilbrun suggests that "...marriage and motherhood permitted academic women at that time (spanning the postwar marriage and baby boom) to feel more comfortable with their unusual accomplishments and status in the academic world. Perhaps equally important, the flexible daily schedule of academic work more easily accommodated family life."²¹³ A study by Crandall and Battle in 1970 found that "young women who were highly motivated to achieve in the intellectual sphere also felt that they were able to meet conventional sex-role standards, but had attitudes that were discrepant from those standards in many ways."²¹⁴ Sara Ruddick, a teacher of philosophy, literature and biography at the New School for Social Research describes her ability to combine work and maternity in this way: "why should new parenthood, which subtracts enormously from the time available for work, nonetheless, make work more likely? One obvious explanation is that with conventional feminine desires

²¹³ Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood, 51.

²¹⁴ Crandall and Battle quoted in Aletha Stein and Margaret Bailey, "The Socialization of Achievement Motivation in Females," Women and Achievement, Mednick, Martha, Sandra Tangri, and Lois Hoffman eds. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975) 154.

obviously satisfied, the fear of success in “unfeminine” work is less acute.”²¹⁵ This suggests that although women might have been considered unusual and perhaps even a bit suspect if they were involved in autonomous creative work, they were at least shielded from outright societal criticism if they were also able to fulfill society’s expectations of their being good wives and mothers. Labarge could add on the somewhat suspect activity of part-time teaching and the writing of history because the rest of her life demonstrated an adherence to the home and family centredness, the pronatalism, heterosexuality and the traditional gender roles associated with the dominant domestic ideology. Labarge was firmly ensconced within a traditional lifestyle, and because of that, she was also able to pursue the enhanced pathway of not limiting her life to home and family without being ostracized from her milieu.

Labarge began work on her first book when her youngest child went off to first grade. Most of her work was done in the middle of the day when her children were at school and her husband was at work. She would write about three or four pages a day, and then pass the work over to friends and relatives for rereading. Her husband would read her second draft, and if he said he couldn’t understand what she

²¹⁵ Sara Ruddick, “A Work of One’s Own,” *Working it Out*, Ruddick, eds Sara and Pamela Daniels (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 140.

was trying to get at she would start the chapter all over again to make it more accessible.²¹⁶ Most of her research was done in Ottawa although she occasionally made use of the Pontifical Institute in Toronto. Her friendship made through the Catholic Historical Association with two Basilian priests who were historians allowed her access to the best medieval library in the country. The Reverend Michael Sheehan generously offered to read her articles and introduced her to Bertie Wilkinson, the most important medievalist at the University of Toronto at that time, who helped Labarge to find a publisher for her work. Labarge published three books from 1962 to 1968: Simon de Montfort in 1962, A Baronial Household in 1965, and Saint Louis, The Life of Louis IX of France in 1968.

Labarge's opinions on women's roles combine elements of both traditional thought and feminist positions. In her community speeches, Labarge denounces suggestions of those who advocate a reactionary type of education for young women which would educate them to be a wives and mothers only, by diverting them into areas like domestic science, or into classes which give "Cleopatra like instruction on getting and holding a man."²¹⁷ And yet, in her 1960s speeches, Labarge

²¹⁶ Labarge Fonds, Box 222, Article in scrapbook, The Ottawa Citizen, February 24, 1965.

²¹⁷ Labarge, "The Education of Our Daughters," 2.

takes issue also with the feminist approach which advocates identical courses of study and identical emphasis on jobs and careers for both boys and girls. This she feels is foolish because it overlooks the biological and psychological facts of feminine nature. She does not elaborate on which parts of feminine biology and psychology she feels would necessitate differing paths for men and women, but it seems to be most definitely related to the fact that she feels, especially as a Catholic, that girls must be brought up with an emphasis on their feminine role and its different requirements. As she views women as the primary caretakers of children and their most important religious teachers, it appears that she feels that the pattern of their lives must be different. She describes the life trajectory for a young woman in 1966 as being one in which she is educated like a boy until she is finished with school or college, then enters the work force; she then marries and leaves the labour market when she becomes a mother for the first or second time. After ten to fifteen years of absorption in her home and family, she returns to work or takes on some serious volunteer work.²¹⁸ This pattern of Canadian women's lives in the 1960s is confirmed in Alison Prentice et al's book Canadian Women: a History. They state that in the decades prior to the 1960s, "a woman's adult life had typically had two distinct phases: paid work

²¹⁸ Labarge, "The Education of Our Daughters," 2, 3.

before marriage, and then permanent withdrawal to the domestic realm. Now, for a relatively brief period lasting until the middle 1980s, a woman's life cycle had three distinct phases: paid employment until the birth of her first child, childrearing at home, and re-entry into the paid workforce once her children reached school age."²¹⁹ The fundamental biological difference that, in Labarge's view, requires different life patterns for men and women is the fact that women bear the children, and although Labarge does state that child-rearing is only a sex-linked characteristic, and that it is not necessarily, and has not always been the work of women, she does seem to accept the prevailing pattern of female child-rearing as a good thing. What is not articulated is that this pattern of withdrawal to the domestic realm was only available to those who had a choice because of their economic advantages. Having mothers at home to care for their children is both a sex-linked and a class-linked characteristic.

Unlike some feminists, Labarge did not see or experience marriage and motherhood as sites of oppression. Her views on marriage and family have distanced her from the feminist movement. Labarge puts it this way: "...I had a happy marriage, I brought up four kids whom I enjoy very much. I cannot feel that men and children are the enemy and there's been that....attitude in feminism which has

²¹⁹ Prentice, 354.

turned me off very much. I certainly think that women should be paid equally with men for work of equal value. That women, certainly are equal as individuals to men, but I'm not sure that I believe that there has been one particular great conspiracy by all men to put down all women. I haven't seen it."²²⁰ Labarge is reacting here to the fact that one of the central issues of the second wave of the women's movement was a critique of the family and the institution of motherhood. But according to S. J. Wilson in her book Women, Families and Work, the contradiction between the ideology of motherhood and the economic realities of some women's lives made the critique of the family and the institution of motherhood essential to the women's movement.²²¹ As feminists Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh have pointed out, feminism drew "attention to the violence and degradation hidden within the walls of the nuclear household, and to the broader social and economic inequalities connected with it. These arguments belong to a long tradition in feminist thought and reflect a long-standing concern with the sexual objectification of women and the exploitation of wives and mothers."²²² They further state that "many

²²⁰ Labarge, interview by author, 31.

²²¹ S.J. Wilson, Women, Families and Work, 3rd ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1991) 29, 30.

²²² Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, The Anti-Social Family (London: Verso Editions/NLB, 1982) 19.

feminists identify the family as a primary site, if not the primary site, of women's oppression and seek to abolish it....."²²³ This feminist position was clearly one that Labarge rejected. She viewed a good marriage as a collaborative effort in which each member was required to suppress her or his individual needs if this was essential for the good of the family, and yet, in an ideal situation, each member of the family would be able to seek out individual fulfillment.²²⁴ Violence, degradation, sexual objectification and exploitation had no part in Labarge's vision of what marriage ought to be; if these elements were present, it appears to me that Labarge would attribute them to individual failures, male or female, that needed to be corrected, but she would not see these elements as evidence of a systemic failure in the institutions of marriage and the family.

Labarge's vision of marriage also entailed her economic dependence on her husband but this did not seem to concern her as she was singularly fortunate, or prescient, or both, in her choice of husband. As self-evident as it may seem, it needs to be pointed out that "for married women, the pursuit of a serious career is more than

²²³ Ibid., 20.

²²⁴ Labarge Fonds, "The Problem of Women in Our Society," 15-20.

casually influenced by the husband."²²⁵ "Husbands must be confident enough in their own accomplishments so that their wives' professional commitment and achievement do not threaten them."²²⁶ Labarge was fortunate in having a husband who supported her career. Their marriage has been described as "a fortunate and happy partnership."²²⁷ As Labarge stated, "I have been lucky in my men,"²²⁸ and this luck gave her the freedom to extend her feminine role beyond that of successful wife and mother. Kathleen Gerson in her book Hard Choices has described the effects of a stable marriage upon a woman's life choices, and the analysis is very applicable to Labarge's case. Gerson says:

The building of or the failure to build a stable relationship with a male partner together with this partner's orientations toward bearing and rearing children, had a powerful impact on women's work and family choices. A stable permanent marriage promoted female domesticity in a number of ways. It fostered a belief in marriage as a safe, secure place that both permits and rewards economic dependency. Over time it tended to narrow a women's occupational options, as wives' work decisions were subordinated to those of their spouses. A stable marriage promoted a context in which childbearing came to be seen as a natural outgrowth of the relationship itself. Stable marriage made female domesticity

²²⁵ Ashburn, 10.

²²⁶ Ashburn, 10.

²²⁷ Griffiths, 4.

²²⁸ Telephone conversation with Margaret Labarge, October 29, 1998.

possible and fostered a withdrawing from the workplace to rear [the children], natural, inevitable and desirable.²²⁹

Labarge recognized that not all women were likely to be as fortunate as she was, but she wished to be, and was financially able to be, the primary caretaker of her children, and this suited her desires as a mother. This did not mean that she would regard that sphere of her life as exclusive or impossibly restrictive; nor did she identify women as being the only necessary primary caretakers. She pointed out quite clearly that the emphasis on maternal care of children was an historical construct. She chose motherhood and marriage as parts of her life plan, and expected that most other women would also choose to do this, but marriage and motherhood did not constitute the whole of her life plan.

The initial attack on marriage and motherhood has, in many instances, diminished. Some feminists, while still insisting that the bitterness and anger over gender roles in the early 1970s were warranted, now concede that there may have been an over-reaction to what were seen as the shackles of conventional femininity. Especially concerning motherhood, despite the constraints and the ambivalence, many feminists assert that the experience of motherhood is a central

²²⁹ Kathleen Gerson, Hard Choices: How Women Decide about Work, Career, and Motherhood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 193.

and positive one.²³⁰ Barrett and MacIntosh point out that some feminists "argue that feminism must recognize that the majority of women are not helplessly trapped in the family but have willingly identified marriage, children, and a family with their own happiness, and it is to this reality that feminism must be made relevant."²³¹ But in spite of this moderation by feminists, many women continue to believe that all feminists remain anti-marriage and anti-family. It continues to be an issue for many women. In an interview in Ms magazine, noted feminist historian Gerda Lerner addressed the problem with a feminism that discounts family and marriage as viable options. Lerner feels that the possibility of a good feminist marriage does exist. Speaking of marriage and love, Lerner's views in 1981 echo many of Labarge's ideas expressed in the 1960s. Lerner states:

I have had what people tell me is an unusual experience, a thirty-three year old happy marriage that ended with the death of my husband. This is not as unusual as people think, nor as unattainable as many feminists think. It's a matter of a joint enterprise that two people undertake and work on while engaged in other enterprises that connect them with the rest of the world. Long-term commitment to an intimate relationship with one person of whatever sex is an essential need that people have in order to breed the qualities out of which nurturant thought can rise. To address the question - how you get human relations of this duration and profundity- is to me as much a part of the theoretical problem of feminism

²³⁰ Wilson, 33, 34.

²³¹ Barrett and MacIntosh, 20.

as anything.²³²

Carolyn Heilbrun touches upon this debate as well when she suggests that an inclination on the part of some feminists to discount the views of those who are involved in life long relationships arises because of confused thought. Heilbrun states:

Women who cannot, or will not, survive without a man as companion or housemate must not, on that account, be seen as less independent than women who live, for example, with another woman. If dependency needs are involved, they are involved equally in both cases. The woman who lives alone may, it is true, choose that life from strength rather than fear, but she is not necessarily more independent than a woman who prefers a chosen dependency with a man. The essential point is the woman's ability to define herself apart from the man or to believe in her ultimate ability to survive without him.²³³

Lerner and Heilbrun recognized the particular strain of feminism that was skeptical of marriage, but they, unlike Labarge, chose to regard it as one of the many challenging questions within feminist theory, rather than as a reason to stay out of the feminist fold. It is not surprising that Labarge, Heilbrun, and Lerner all express an optimistic viewpoint about the possibilities of marriage as all three were able to view the institution from the vantage point of long-term, happy marriages that, in the case of Lerner and Labarge, continued

²³² Gerda Lerner, "Gerda Lerner On the Future of Our Past," Interview with Catherine Stimpson, MS, 10, 3, (September 1981) 94, 95.

²³³ Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) 117.

until the death of their spouses, and, in Heilbrun's case, continues into old age.

In Labarge's case, she was obviously quite willing to accept the restrictions imposed upon her career as a historian because of her roles as wife and mother. Labarge was cognizant that, as Carolyn Heilbrun has pointed out that, "marriage, in short, is a bargain, like buying a house or entering a profession. One chooses it knowing that, by that very decision, one is abnegating other possibilities."²³⁴ It was fortunate in Labarge's case that the career that she so earnestly desired to continue was particularly well suited to her domestic arrangements and her financial security as well. The type of research that Labarge was able to do was restricted, but she seemed well content to labour within those limits. As she was not forced by financial circumstances to seek significant and immediate remuneration, she could allow herself the freedom to research and write at her own pace. Women whose career goals were not so easily contained within the constraints of marriage and whose financial circumstances were not as fortunate as Labarge's would undoubtedly have viewed the marital bargain in a distinctly different light. For such women there could remain the troubling concern as to whether both partners were forced in similar measure to abnegate possibilities or if

²³⁴ Heilbrun, Writing A Woman's Life, 92.

gender was the determining factor as to who was required make the necessary sacrifices for the marriage to succeed.

Labarge's views on family were distinctly traditional and essentialist for the most part. She believed in a gender based division of labour and a fundamental desire on the part of almost all women to marry and have children. Where she differed from a traditional viewpoint and advocated change was in emphasizing a more extensive role for males within the family structure and insisting upon the necessity of widening the scope of action for women in intellectual or action oriented activities. Labarge's message of change to PTA groups, to Catholic community and academic groups would have gained credibility with more traditional women because of her position within the Catholic community as the wife of a well respected Deputy Minister from a well-known and active Catholic family, and because of her own reputation as a devoted wife and mother; as well, her career as an historian illustrated that it was possible, and even perhaps laudatory, for a good Catholic woman to succeed outside the family unit as an individual.

While Labarge felt herself at odds with those feminists who appeared to view marriage and family as the source of women's oppression, Labarge's views on family life and the role of men and women also differed considerably from a conservative Catholic

approach. Labarge disagreed openly with old fashioned clergy who thought woman's only excuse for being was to have another baby, and their view that this would be the norm in a proper Catholic marriage.²³⁵ Labarge commented quite sharply on the shortsightedness of regarding women only as mothers during a speech to a theology course at St. Paul University. She pointed out that the average woman will enjoy a period of thirty years after her last child leaves home. As she put it, somewhat testily, to the assembled auditors: "If this [motherhood] is her sole excuse for being then what in heaven's name do you expect her to do with herself for those last thirty years?"²³⁶

During the 1960s and the early 1970s, there was a very definite stirring of change within the Catholic church. In the early 1970s in a survey held in Edmonton, there were many comments and criticisms of priests' and the Church's view of the ideal woman. "She is maternal, stays in the background, and works hard for her family and parish. She is passive and subservient." One woman commented sardonically that Catholic women were expected by the official church to be "pallid, submissive, and prolific."²³⁷ Cecelia Wallace writing in Women in the

²³⁵ Labarge Fonds, "The Education of Our Daughters," 2 .

²³⁶ Labarge, "The Problem of Women in Our Society," 19.

²³⁷ Cecelia Wallace, "Changes in the Churches," Women in the Canadian Mosaic, Matheson, Gwen, ed. (Buffalo: Peter Martin and Associates Ltd., 1976) 95.

Canadian Mosaic, suggests that women in the Catholic church were seen as tied to children and confined to the family, headed by a patriarchal spouse, rather than as having anything to contribute to the larger world community.²³⁸ The regard in which Catholic women's opinions were held is illustrated by the fact that at the Second Vatican Council in Rome, 1962-1965, no women were invited. Representatives of all major religious denominations including Jews were invited to be present. There were overtures made to non-Christians, atheists and Communists. Cecilia Wallace reports that when the question was put to a Catholic bishop as to why women had not been invited, he "looked blank, and said 'We never thought of it.'"²³⁹

There is no question that Labarge's stated positions and life choices put her squarely within the ideological camp of those Catholic women who were not content to live with the prevailing male interpretation of "women's place." Labarge's life challenged the stereotype of a conservative, traditional, Catholic woman. While she might have been called prolific during a particular period of her marriage, there was no one who would ever have thought of Margaret Labarge as pallid or submissive! Furthermore, one of her most constant messages was the need for women to look beyond the

²³⁸ Wallace, 97.

²³⁹ Ibid., 97-98.

confines of their homes and use their brainpower to better the world. Her stated views on women, and her own love of historical research and writing reveal her fundamental disagreement with traditional Catholic women writers in the 1950s who could state that, "man leaves the imprint of his personality in the creations of his mind -works of science and art, monumental buildings and commercial enterprises. But women's masterpiece is life itself. She is not interested in abstract or technical achievements but in persons, and in bringing persons to God."²⁴⁰ This same limiting sentiment was echoed by John Fitzsimmons, a Catholic "expert" on women in his 1952 book Woman Today. He declared that: "While women do not differ quantitatively from men in matters of intelligence, they do differ both in quality and in direction in the use that they make of their minds..... Abstract considerations hold no deep attraction for them...."²⁴¹ Margaret Labarge would not accept such limitations on women's intelligence and achievements even if they came from Catholic sources.

Labarge was certainly not alone in disagreeing with Catholic ideas in this area, but her opinions put her squarely at philosophical odds with many other Catholic women who were adamantly opposed to any change in women's status within the Church or within society. One

²⁴⁰ Flaherty, 124.

²⁴¹ John Fitzsimmons, Woman Today (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952) 74, 75..

such woman, Anne Roche, in an article in Saturday Night in April of 1974, staunchly defended the orthodox traditional church doctrine. Cecelia Wallace suggests in her previously mentioned analysis that Roche's opinions were echoed by many women who were confused and resentful about any change in the Church, let alone changes that would benefit women.²⁴²

The National Coalition of American Nuns in affirming the myopic nature of the masculine Catholic view of major religious and philosophic questions quoted Pulian de la Barre's writing in the 17th century: "All that has been written about women should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit."²⁴³ In the spirit of de la Barre's suspicion, Margaret Labarge turned her historian's skeptical eye upon the writers of canon law and those Church fathers who elaborated on Christian doctrine. She states that writers on women have "mixed biological facts and theories with dubious sociological convictions to arrive at even more questionable theology."²⁴⁴ Labarge's views on the cultural tradition inherited by Canadian women were outlined in her essay "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian women: The Historical Background," written in response to a request from the Royal

²⁴² Roche quoted in Wallace, 106, 107.

²⁴³ Wallace, 108.

²⁴⁴ Labarge Fonds, "The Problem of Women in Our Society," 2.

Commission on the Status of Women in Canada established in 1967.

The purpose of the Commission was "to inquire into and report on the status of women in Canada and to recommend what steps might be taken by the Federal government to ensure for women equal opportunities with men in all aspects of Canadian society." Professor Naomi Griffiths characterizes the work of the Commission in this way: "it reported in 1970, and it is arguable that its work was the most important single event for Canadian women in the late twentieth century Canada in terms of public awareness of the prejudice that confronted women in many areas of their lives."²⁴⁵ The report was a bestseller, and shorter digests were prepared in English and French that were widely distributed through women's organizations.²⁴⁶ Such was Margaret Labarge's reputation as an historian that the task of revealing the roots of women's heritage in Western history from the Greeks onward that had brought Canadian women to their present cultural position was entrusted to her. The commission given to Labarge would appear to reveal three elements at once: Labarge's impressive credentials as an historian; an implicit acknowledgment that her interests were attuned to investigation of women's status in

²⁴⁵ N.E.S. Griffiths, "The Scholar and Her Society", *A Medieval Miscellany*, Labarge, Margaret W. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997) 116.

²⁴⁶ Prentice, 418.

history, and the acceptability of Labarge to the authorities of the ruling Liberal party.

Labarge's starting position when considering the position of a Canadian woman in the postwar period is that she is "burdened by a furtive cultural tradition of inferiority. Subconsciously she feels that she is considered a second-class citizen, a role which no longer satisfies her."²⁴⁷ The roots of this subordination Labarge traces back to the place of women in antiquity. While Labarge constantly underlines the great gap between theory and practice concerning women's roles and the fact that women had achieved many rights and practical equality, she concludes that the Greek inheritance which was codified in the Roman law resulted in a situation where "in theory and the strict terms of the law, [women's] position was still noticeably inferior."²⁴⁸ From the Jewish tradition, Labarge identifies a bifurcated tradition of legal inferiority accompanied by philosophical misogyny, and yet a practical position of social dignity.²⁴⁹ It is in Labarge's illumination of the roots of female subordination within the Christian tradition, that her willingness to depart from an unquestioning

²⁴⁷ Margaret Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women," A Medieval Miscellany (Ottawa : Carleton University Press, 1997) 145.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 123.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 124.

acceptance of Catholic tradition can be seen. Labarge's re-visioning of women's current subordination as originating in male bias and frame of reference allowed Labarge, unlike those Catholic women who defended orthodox traditional church doctrine, to point out very clearly the cultural basis of society's and the Church's misogynistic views of women. Nor was she shy in proclaiming this historical insight. That Labarge was generally quite willing to state her opinions and hold firm to her own convictions was recognized in a delightfully humorous way in a letter to her and her husband from Canon (later Bishop) G. Emmett Carter on February 3rd, 1958. Carter was informing the Labarges that during the National Conference on Education, they would be teamed up with three clergymen. He states: "If I knew you and Ray a little less well I might suggest that you need not be intimidated. However, that would be the superfluous remark of the year."²⁵⁰ Labarge's analyses were not confined to the written pages of government documents and academic treatises. The historical study was used in university history courses, as one of the few available studies on women's history.²⁵¹ In her speeches to community groups, and within the heart of Catholic academe itself, a Theology Course at St. Paul University, she traced how the male interpretation of Christian

²⁵⁰ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Letter from G. Emmett Carter, Canon, February 3, 1958.

²⁵¹ Conversation with Professor Deborah Gorham, Carleton University, April 23, 2000.

doctrine suffered from the influence of the experiences of the early church fathers, Paul, Augustine, and Jerome. Labarge underlined essential contradictions in Paul's writings influenced by the movement of asceticism. As Labarge points out Paul asserts that in Christ there is neither male nor female, but at the same time he insists on the subjection and silence of women. This dichotomy, Labarge believes, often trapped the Church fathers into an obsession with women merely as sex objects, hence, Augustine's insistence that the only legitimate use of intercourse in a marriage was for immediate procreation, anything else being a weakness or even a sin. Labarge stated that Jerome, more intemperate even than Augustine, was not above manipulating the text in his translation of the Bible to suit his prejudices.²⁵² These early Church fathers set out a path for Catholic doctrine that has "consistently taught the subordination of women to men, with particular emphasis on the wife's necessary obedience to her husband."²⁵³

As a firm believer in Christianity, Labarge makes the assumption that there is a true Christian doctrine, but that this doctrine has been distorted by the biases and prejudices of the male minds that have

²⁵² Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women," A Medieval Miscellany, 125, 126.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 144.

interpreted it. Labarge asserts that Jesus emphasized in his gospels the equal value of every human soul, rich or poor, male or female,²⁵⁴ and that "the single most important fact in the emancipation of women is the basic theological assertion of Christianity that both women and men have immortal souls and thus an equal human dignity."²⁵⁵

In taking this position, Labarge appears to differentiate herself from strict Catholic loyalists who hold that there is no doubt of the essential goodness and holiness of the religious tradition as a revelation and a gift from God.²⁵⁶ Labarge's views reflect common ground with a revisionist Catholic view as outlined by Carolyn Osiek. Writing on feminism within the Catholic church, Osiek outlines a revisionist position that utilizes an historical approach that demonstrates that "the patriarchal cast of the Judeo-Christian tradition is due more to historical and cultural causes than technological ones. Thus the androcentrism... and patriarchal pattern of dominance and submission are serious but not fatal wounds that can be healed. Christianity was born in to a world that was already formed into these patterns, and that is why, understandably, it has expressed

²⁵⁴ Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women," A Medieval Miscellany, 124.

²⁵⁵ Labarge, "The Problem of Women in Our Society," 6.

²⁵⁶ Carolyn Osiek, Beyond Anger: On Being A Feminist in the Church (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 30.

itself in the same patterns....” The revisionist views the cultural baggage as non-essential to the real message of Christianity.²⁵⁷ As Osiek points out, the revisionist position rests on a number of optimistic presuppositions - a benevolent view of institutional authority and the possibility of its changing courses once a better way is shown in spite of the advantages for those in power of keeping things the way they are, and also that the knowledge of history revealing the truth will effect change.²⁵⁸ Labarge’s continued devotion to the Catholic church indicates that, while disagreeing with some traditions of the Church, she does hold a favourable view of the institutional authority of the Church and its ability to change.

It must be remembered that, while Labarge’s reviewing of the misogynistic roots of the subordination of women within the Christian tradition was certainly a challenge to conservative Catholic views, and aligns her with some revisionist claims, her position is still very far away from more radical viewpoints such those expressed by feminists such as Mary Daly who have left their Catholic roots behind and who wonder why any woman would want equality within the Church. Daly’s sharp rejection of seeking for a way to separate cultural baggage from the hard core of Christian truth in the Church is worded this way:

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 37, 38.

²⁵⁸ Osiek, 38.

"Woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Ku Klux Klan."²⁵⁹

Labarge's approach is a middle way; it sought to inspect and renovate the foundations of conservative Catholic thought, but it did not intend or desire to dismantle the entire edifice. It is important to view Labarge within the framework of her religious convictions, and not to dismiss, as some feminists are apt to do, all religious themes as hopelessly patriarchal and unworthy of investigation as sources of strength for women. As Martha Ackelsberg has stated: "...there are many aspects of Catholic theology and practice that have functioned to limit women's full humanity; but there are are certainly also ways in which those traditions provided sources of support, identity and resistance at times of great collective and personal trial."²⁶⁰ Religious tradition and values are an integral part of many women's lives, as they were in Margaret Labarge's life, and it seems unwise to dismiss any part of a woman's experience that may give her strength because it falls outside of a particular feminist ideal. At the same time, it must be recognized that Labarge's recounting of the historical misogyny within organized religions did not extend to an extended

²⁵⁹ Mary Daly, The Church and the Second Sex (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975) 6.

²⁶⁰ Martha Ackelsberg, "Spirituality As A Resource For Activism," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 14, 2, Fall 1998. (Date): 136.

analysis or criticism of misogyny within present day religious practice, and this could place Labarge under feminist suspicion. As Mary Daly sees it: "For women, the first salvific moment comes when we realize the fact of our exploitation and oppression. But- and this is an important "but" - unless the insight gives birth to externalized action it will die. This externalized action, or praxis, authenticates insight and creates situations out of which new knowledge can grow."²⁶¹ Labarge's praxis did not make the type of feminist leap that defined Mary Daly's life, but Labarge's insight did, nonetheless, help to give birth to an expanded definition of all women's capabilities and possibilities in the intellectual domain. Change is brought about by those who leap and also by those who walk slowly and deliberately, and it is not necessarily clear which strategy is ultimately more effective: those who leap often terrify other mortals who are unable to toss aside the familiar and comforting rituals of the ages and who can only be tempted to change by small steps.

Unlike her historical enquiry into the roots of Canadian women's burden of a "cultural tradition of inferiority," Labarge's speeches in which she described her thoughts on education and women's roles in society were not published pieces, and they were not set out as an

²⁶¹ Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, "Radical Feminism, Radical Religion: Mary Daly Selections from "The Women's Movement:," Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought, Clark, Elizabeth and Herbert Richardson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977) 268-269.

organized philosophical treatise. It is interesting to note some apparent contradictions between the two theorizings. Labarge is quite definite in her assertions that there is a different and proper role for Catholic women for which a young Catholic woman must be prepared because she will want to fulfill her desires, and perhaps her duty, to be a wife and a mother. The husband is the head of the household, although, in her view, this headship is not a dominant and authoritarian role. Marriage becomes a partnership with complementary roles for the two partners, but some parts of these roles are evidently based on the biological imperative that women give birth to the children, and that, according to Labarge, almost all women will want to assume the role of wife and mother for part of their lives. Opposed to these statements are Labarge's historically based observations that child rearing is a sex linked and not a biological characteristic, and that the "present view of family life and education are creatures of our own historical situations and not immutable commandments handed down from on high."²⁶² Labarge does not investigate or elaborate on the historical construction of a contemporary woman's desire to assume the wifely and motherly roles that are mandated by Catholic tradition. Labarge, at times, seems to allow her religious convictions and traditions to be unchallenged by her historical observations.

²⁶² Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, Radio Broadcast Taped, October 5th, 1963.

Another area that could evoke some puzzlement is Labarge's personal reflection "that women, certainly are equal as individuals to men, but I'm not sure that I believe that there has been one particular great conspiracy by all men to put down all women. I haven't seen it."²⁶³ And yet, if one disregards the question of whether one can describe the actions of *all* men and *all* women, in her historical study done for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, she traces and clearly illuminates centuries of philosophical and religious misogyny based on erroneous assumptions by the most influential men about most women which has resulted in evident legal and social discrimination against most women. Labarge identifies historical discrimination but she, and many other distinguished women like her, did not feel its sting. Speaking of herself and her friend Florence Bird, the head of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, Labarge states:..."I don't think it ever occurred to either of us that you couldn't go out and do things if you wanted to. There might be more difficulties...but one attacked that.... Nobody managed to get in our way."²⁶⁴ Because of her social and economic status, her fortunate family circumstances, her great intelligence and forceful personality, and the congruence of her desire for marriage and motherhood with

²⁶³ Labarge, interview by author, 31.

²⁶⁴ Labarge, interview by author, 32.

the prevailing traditional expectations for women, Labarge was able to bypass or ignore the obstacles that became insurmountable to other women.

Margaret Labarge's life conformed in many respects to a traditional pattern for both Catholic and non-Catholic women, but she was also a living example of a woman who would not accept philosophical or traditional interpretations that limited her desired field of action. Labarge rejected the idea that a woman was any less intellectually able than her masculine counterpart. She demonstrated that being a wife and mother, while a noble and enriching experience, need not be a women's whole existence. In fact, Labarge's actions and words showed that women who retreat to the domestic sphere and never re-emerge were short changing themselves and their society. Labarge's social and economic position exemplified the fact that a woman who was not shackled by economic need, a limited education, or intolerance based on race, sexual preference, or physical handicap was much more able to fight off restrictive gender expectations and freely choose a mixture of traditional and non-traditional roles according to her personal desires that would lead to a fulfilling and joyful life.

Another crucial ingredient in Labarge's quest for a fulfilling and joyous life was her active role in community affairs. Labarge's birth family had a tradition of community activity, and when she and her

husband first moved to Ottawa, Labarge was in constant contact with the world of her husband's family. The Labarge family had a long record of community consciousness and volunteering, and they took it for granted that their children should do likewise. Labarge's husband, who had been very active in community work from the beginning of their marriage was asked, in the mid-1960s, to sit on the board of St. Vincent's hospital, but it was an invitation that he was too busy to accept. The invitation was then extended to Labarge. It seemed like an interesting new challenge to her.²⁶⁵ Labarge has said that she "worked on the theory that if you're offered something and there is any chance that you can do it, you better try,"²⁶⁶ so she accepted the invitation from St. Vincent's and began what would become an association that has lasted up to the present time. Labarge was also a volunteer member of the Nursing School Board, the District Health Council's Continuing Care and Acute Care Committees; she was on the board of the Canadian Nurses' Association and the Rehabilitation Institute, and most recently has been a member and chair of the Council on Aging, as well as being on other advisory committees on health issues.

Labarge's motivation springs from both religious and secular

²⁶⁵ Labarge, interview by author, 37, and Labarge Fonds, Box A 239, Miscellaneous Speeches Folder, 1992-993, 2.

²⁶⁶ Labarge, interview by author, 24.

visions of the world. On the one hand, Labarge exemplifies a value held by many of her generation that each individual owes a contribution to society. Professor Naomi Griffiths has commented on Labarge's dedication to charitable activities and defends her actions from those who would see volunteer activity as a sop to the conscience of the comfortable or the patronizing of the poor by the powerful. Griffiths states: "The need of truly charitable action as a necessary lubricant for a civilized society, something which will humanize state action and recall bureaucracies to the reality of the human being who suffers, is slowly being recognized as the twentieth century closes. Mrs. Labarge, in her concern for the elderly and the frail, has been one of those who have kept alive the tradition of true service to those in need."²⁶⁷

Labarge has often quoted approvingly the statement of a fellow committee member who explained that she had volunteered for the Social Planning Council "to pay her rent in the community."²⁶⁸ Labarge feels that everyone needs to pay their "rent" and working on the many committees overseeing the province's health care was her way of doing so.²⁶⁹ There can be no doubt that Labarge's volunteer work has added greatly to the social capital of her community.

²⁶⁷ Griffiths, 12.

²⁶⁸ Labarge, interview by author, 37.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 37.

It was not only a secular vision but also Labarge's "Roman Catholic vision of human dignity"²⁷⁰ that has prompted her work in the field of public health for the more vulnerable members of society - the sick and the aging. She has been vocal in attempting to safeguard community medical services, condemning any decrease in governmental funding of the health care system. She decries what she sees as the current governments' uncaring vision of the "individual patient, especially if elderly, dying or chronically ill [as] irrelevant, [who] can be totally disregarded in the interests of supposedly greater efficiency."²⁷¹ Labarge's community work and scholarship have been recognized by Honorary Doctorates from the University of Waterloo and from Carleton University. As well, by means of her Investiture into the Order of Canada on April 20th, 1983, her outstanding achievements and service to Canada, and to her fellow citizens were recognized. Her involvement in community service has remained a life-long commitment, and is a deeply held value that has not diminished with advancing age. Labarge stated in 1989: "Personally I feel there is no more fatal attitude with which to face the years of retirement than the belief that you have now done your share in the world, survived and

²⁷⁰ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Introduction to Honorary Doctorate from University of Waterloo.

²⁷¹ Ibid., Submission to the Health Services Restructuring Commission, 1997.

have retired....while you make no contribution whatsoever to the world around you, uninterested and uncaring about the needs of others.ⁿ²⁷²

An interesting study, beyond the scope of this thesis, would be to examine the motivations and the beliefs of those women who have played an integral role in providing and maintaining vital community services. Labarge's conclusion in A Small Sound of the Trumpet that, medieval women, although suffering from many restrictions, were neither invisible, inaudible, nor unimportant could be also applied to her own, and other women's, volunteer work and community activism in the twentieth century. Labarge, in arguing that medieval women's contributions were undervalued, argues also for inclusion of contemporary women's under-appreciated contributions to society.

²⁷² Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Speech to VON, Brockville, 1989.

CHAPTER FOUR:
SCHOLARSHIP: RECOVERING WOMEN'S HISTORY

Margaret Labarge's published oeuvre contains nine books on the medieval world, as well as chapters for medieval compilations, encyclopedia entries, and magazine articles. Also published was the study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada cited in Chapter Three, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women: The Historical Background." The particular areas of Labarge's work that are of significance to this thesis are those that involve her interpretation of women's lives in history. The main analysis in this chapter will focus on Labarge's scholarship on women although some reference will be made to her other works to establish her reputation within the academic community; there will also be a consideration of some of the interesting paradoxes that arise in areas where her academic work and her unpublished speeches overlap.

Apart from three notable exceptions, A Baronial Household which focuses on the contributions of the Countess of Leicester, the commissioned study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women

in Canada and her second last book, A Small Sound of the Trumpet. Labarge did not seek out women as subjects. Indeed three of her published works are biographies of male subjects: Simon de Montfort, Saint Louis, and Henry V. Nonetheless, as Labarge puts it, she was perfectly willing to highlight female contributions when they were a part of the story.²⁷³ She was looking, she has said, for the humanity of people, both male and female.²⁷⁴ Labarge's impulse was simply to seek out the human, not particularly the female. Nonetheless, in contrast to most male historians, she was open and sensitive to female concerns as being a part of human history. Because of this, her historical investigations, in fact, closely paralleled a part of feminist methodology, in that she was helping to re-vision women as historically important. Gerda Lerner has labeled the history of women worthies or compensatory history as that type of history which identifies women of achievement and what they achieved.²⁷⁵ This category of history was a part of Labarge's contribution but she went beyond this realm. Labarge also studied women's contribution to, their status in, and their oppression by a male-defined society. Lerner has described this type

²⁷³ Labarge, interview by author, 25.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 35, 36.

²⁷⁵ Gerda Lerner, The Majority Finds Its Past. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 145 - 150.

of history as contribution history.²⁷⁶ But while Labarge was writing women into the historical record, and finding out how they functioned in a male defined world, she also turned her attention to women-centred activities that had not been considered important enough for historical investigation and recording, and this is a part of feminist historical methodology: a shift from male-oriented to female-oriented consciousness.²⁷⁷ In her early work, Labarge does not specifically aim for this goal, it is more a by-product of her personal preference for a focus on the individual and her openness and sensitivity as a female to female experience.

From one of the very earliest examples of Labarge's work, it can be seen that she was undertaking a shift in the angle of vision, turning away from a consideration of prior traditional areas of historical enquiry such as constitutional and political arenas where women were not very evident. In her thesis for her Oxford degree entitled "The Quarrels of Simon de Montfort and Eleanor, His Wife, with Henry III of England," Labarge states that her purpose was to treat Simon de Montfort's personal quarrels and those of his wife with their English kin. This subject area, she states, has been mostly overlooked in the

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 146.

²⁷⁷ Berenice Carroll, "Placing Women In History: A 1975 Perspective," In Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays, Carroll, Berenice ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976) 362.

biographies of de Montfort where the historians were looking for "larger" issues. Labarge, however, felt that the quarrels of de Montfort and his wife with other members of the English aristocracy had more than a limited, personal significance because, as Labarge stated in 1939 in a wonderfully evocative phrase for women's history, "public and private were inextricably tangled in the Middle Ages." Labarge felt that the study of the private quarrels helped to understand the larger issues at stake between Simon and Henry as these personal quarrels illuminate the major political happenings and help to appreciate events more fully.²⁷⁸ In her thesis Labarge relied upon some documents that had not previously been published which were concerned with the dower lands provided for widows. Labarge was not willing to relegate de Montfort's personal life which included the influence of his wife, the Countess of Leicester, to the oblivion of history. In taking this stance Labarge, although not deliberately targeting women's activities, is intuitively demonstrating that women's influence and contributions must not be left out of the analysis or the historical picture will be incomplete. The quality of this thesis can, in part, be judged by the fact that it was still being used as a reference fifty-three years later. J. R. Maddicott, a Fellow and Lecturer in Medieval History at Exeter College in Oxford wrote to Labarge in

²⁷⁸ Labarge Fonds, Box A 222, Bachelor of Literature Thesis for Oxford University, 1939.

September of 1992 requesting permission to quote from her B. Litt thesis of 1939.²⁷⁹

Margaret Labarge's first book published in 1962 was Simon de Montfort. The subject was a logical extension of her previous work for her thesis at Oxford in 1939. Because of this work, she had a strong knowledge of the period and an acquaintance with de Montfort in particular. The de Montfort biography was also a book that did not require her to consult manuscript sources in remote places. Much of Labarge's work would rely on printed sources and secondary books. This was important as the writing of the book was undertaken during a period when Labarge was a busy wife and mother. Her goals for her first book were clear. "My aim was not primarily to break new historical ground but to provide a readable distillation of the current advances in scholarship, buttressed by a wide acquaintance with the printed word."²⁸⁰ The reviews were generally favourable, and despite some criticisms regarding a few scholarly details, the reviews agreed that the book contributed to the understanding of the period with its readable and thoroughly researched narrative. Joan Walker in the Globe and Mail of February 3, 1962, describes Labarge's research as painstaking and exhaustive, and she suggests that Labarge has taken

²⁷⁹ J.R. Maddicott to Margaret Labarge, 25 September, 1992 in Labarge Fonds, Box A 240.

²⁸⁰ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Speech to the Royal Society of Canada, June 1988.

an original stand in her view of de Montfort.²⁸¹ The Edmonton Journal states that Labarge has “drawn brilliant portraits of the chief characters in her historical drama.”²⁸² The Times Literary Supplement was less complimentary stating that “her volume adds little to scholarship, but it provides a simple narrative of events, and her comments are sometimes enlightening.”²⁸³

In two of the reviews a particular characteristic of Labarge's work is highlighted: her concentration on the person, the personality, and the career of her subject. Labarge's focus on the individual is seen by one reviewer as an effective means of presenting not only the person of de Montfort himself, but also a clear picture of life in the Middle Ages,²⁸⁴ while the Canadian Books in Review in the summer of 1962, feels that she overemphasizes, as did her mentor Sir Maurice Powicke, the role of the individual. The criticism reflects the ongoing debate surrounding the use of the biographical historical method. Labarge has a specific vision of the utility of a biographical approach to history. In agreement with many other historians, whose ideas have been discussed in Chapter One, Labarge feels that many aspects of

²⁸¹ Labarge Fonds, Box A 222, Walker, Joan, The Globe and Mail, February 3, 1962.

²⁸² Ibid., Edmonton Journal, April 14, 1962.

²⁸³ Ibid., Times Literary Supplement, March 16, 1962.

²⁸⁴ Labarge Fonds, Box A 222, South Wales Argus, April 4, 1962.

historical knowledge can be revealed more effectively by a "detailed portrayal of a single individual and his place in a specific society, than in the more bloodless description of a general intellectual pattern."

Labarge also sees biography as a means to recount the romantic incidents which constitute the "charm of History" to speak to those readers who, in regard to history, need to be "tempted to truth."²⁸⁵

Labarge's predilection for biography will eventually take her from general historical analysis of philosophical and religious theory about women, her study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, to a study of individual Medieval women's lives, A Small Sound of the Trumpet, that became a well-received and recommended resource for women's history.

With Labarge's first book she was able to reach in to an area of history that, previously, had been relatively untouched by Canadian historians. This resulted in some chauvinistic gloating in the Toronto Telegram. The reviewer John Bishop points out that, in writing about Simon de Montfort, the Canadian Labarge has invaded what had been hitherto regarded as the private preserve of British historians. He describes the book as a scholarly and fascinating account of the Middle Ages, and he delights in the fact that a Canadian has excelled in well

²⁸⁵ Labarge Fonds, Box 240, unpublished speech "History and Biography," Ottawa Historical Association, March 1972, 4.

established British territory.²⁸⁶ Bishop, in his delight at the New World invasion of Old World intellectual territory, does not stop to quibble about Labarge's American birth or American and British education.

In Labarge's next book A Baronial Household, published in 1965, she elaborated on a section of the de Montfort book that had been remarked upon most favourably by many reviewers. In this book, Labarge investigated seven months in the life of Eleanor, Countess of Leicester, wife of Simon de Montfort, in the year 1265, based on her household accounts. In this small book, which History Today declared to be a minor classic when it was reissued in 1983, Labarge begins the type of observations that will be a distinguishing feature of her writings on historical women. In a review of The Baronial Household in the Montreal Gazette, the reviewer recognizes the result of Labarge's focusing on the factual details of an actual woman's life in the 13th century. "Mrs. Labarge explodes the popular idea that the fair ladies of the medieval age were simpering, empty headed beauties. Some of them defended the castle in their husbands' absence and most shared equally in the duties of administering the land around it."²⁸⁷ Labarge's theme in this book which will become a theme in all of her writing about women is that some women at all levels of society have exercised

²⁸⁶ Ibid., Box A 222, Review by John Bishop, The Toronto Telegram, March 10, 1962.

²⁸⁷ Labarge Fonds, Box A 222, Montreal Gazette Review, no date.

power and influence as their circumstances have permitted even though their numbers were often small.²⁸⁸ She demonstrates the Countess of Leicester's outstanding talents in managing officials, and purchasing adequate supplies for a household of 250-300 people. The Countess was responsible for figuring out how to feed, clothe, transport and maintain the security of all the many men and women in her household. As Labarge has pointed out, when she was doing research for an even later book than A Baronial Household, the accepted orthodoxy was that women in the Middle Ages, except for a handful of queens and a few other exotic characters, were only important as decoration at major social events.²⁸⁹ In other words, what women did on a daily basis was not important enough to be written about. In shining the historical spotlight on the household accounts of the Countess of Leicester and showing the Countess' contributions to society to be significant and impressive, Labarge is demonstrating in this book published in 1965 a principle iterated in 1979 by Gerda Lerner when she stated that women's history demands a reevaluation of methodology of traditional history where the assumption is that man is the measure of all and therefore the

²⁸⁸ Ibid., Box A 239, "In Search of Medieval Women", unpublished speech for Canadian Federation of Women, Nepean, 1994, 4.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., Box A 240, "Research on medieval Women," Bishops University, February, 1999.

activities pursued by men are by definition significant while those pursued by women are subordinate and unimportant.²⁹⁰ Like American historians Mary Beard and Gerda Lerner, Labarge wanted to use history to show women as active participants and their roles as significant despite their unequal circumstances and subordinate status.²⁹¹ Judith Zinsser points out in her book Feminism and History: A Glass Half Full that without women's historians, such as Beard and Lerner that "...women's lives and contributions had been omitted because what they had done was devalued, made inconsequential in a world described by those seeking to narrate only the action of the politically and economically powerful male elite."²⁹² Labarge's study of the Baronial Household of the Countess of Leicester does shift the spotlight from male to female activities, but it is unlikely, given Labarge's later statements, that she would have done so because she rejected the systemic discrimination against women by male authors who excluded women from historical narrative as Zinsser implies. In spite of the fact that Labarge's later work for the Royal Committee on the Status of Women does point out women's subordinate status, and the prevailing misogyny in religious and philosophical thought, from

²⁹⁰ Gerda Lerner, The Majority Finds Its Past, 180.

²⁹¹ Judith Zinsser, History and Feminism: A Glass Half Full (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993) 35.

²⁹² Ibid., 36.

Labarge's point of view the lack of attention to female activities in history was a result of male historians having often unconsciously overlooked women's lives or having considered women's lives unimportant because they only rarely dealt with great movements or major political events."²⁹³ In Labarge's view, it seems, the overwhelmingly male nature of history was due to a misplaced focus which needed to be corrected rather than being a reflection of conscious male bias and privilege throughout the ages. In her historical outlook, Labarge travels down a path that is parallel to some feminist objectives, but she is not necessarily on the same path.

Labarge demonstrates in The Baronial Household a belief that she articulates in 1987 as the necessity of looking specifically at the nature and value of women's roles during an historical period. The need to re-vision the history of the Middle Ages, for example, is required, she states, because much of historical writing had been written by male historians who did not consciously recognize the male nature of the sources.²⁹⁴ Although Labarge does not express the need for this focus on women's history until a later date, it is clear that, in this early work, she begins doing what she will later declare to be an

²⁹³ Margaret Labarge, A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life. (London: Hamish Hamilton Press, 1986) 238.

²⁹⁴ Labarge Fonds, Box A 239, "Women in Medieval Life", unpublished speech at University of North Carolina, 1987, 1.

essential enterprise, agreeing with the statement by R. H. Hilton, which she quotes in A Small Sound of the Trumpet: "It should not be necessary to write a separate history of half the human beings in any social class. We must however, do so, whether or not we believe that all women throughout history have constituted a class oppressed by all men or whether we believe that women's class position was more important than their sex."²⁹⁵ The impetus for Labarge to follow this path of investigation into the lives of women, did not come from an association with feminist causes, but rather from an adherence to the philosophy of the influential social historian Marc Bloch. Labarge acknowledges her debt to Bloch in a 1987 lecture given at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick. She stated: "Much of my own historical work has been influenced by the approach of the great French historian, Marc Bloch, who wrote that the historian is like the giant in the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk: 'Wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.' This insistence on the central place which should be given to the human reality of historical men and women is a belief that has influenced much of my work."²⁹⁶

Labarge's essay, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women: The Historical Background" which has been discussed earlier in the

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 1

²⁹⁶ Labarge, "In Search of Medieval Women," A Medieval Miscellany, 20.

thesis as a source of information regarding Labarge's religious position, also provides a chance to understand Labarge's vision of the place of women throughout the ages. In it, Labarge's provides the background for many of the personalities about whom she writes in her later books. She also identifies the origins of the "furtive cultural tradition of inferiority"²⁹⁷ that Labarge states is the legacy that has burdened the postwar Canadian woman.

In her analysis of the status of women starting with the initial misogyny of philosophical and religious thought of the Romans and Greeks, Labarge, while never shying away from recognizing the legal and cultural limitations under which women laboured, is always keen to point out women's agency and her ability to act in ways that would appear to contradict the role laid out for her by religious and secular leaders. Labarge is pointing out in her synthesis of philosophical and religious thought that male discourse has treated women as if there were a common basic nature that could be defined for all women in the same manner. Labarge's investigation of the actual activities of women reveals that they were not confining themselves to those roles that had been prescribed for them, and that they were, in fact, demonstrating their abilities to play important and influential roles in society.

²⁹⁷ Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women: The Historical Background," 145.

In her examination of the status of women in the Middle Ages, for example, Labarge emphasizes the duality of attitudes towards women. She examines the possibilities allowed to women. In a religious context, Labarge states that, in terms of Catholic theology, there were two legitimate possibilities for women - marriage or the taking of vows to become a nun. She notes that nuns were some of the most intelligent and capable women of their time, and, being single, living within the convent, they were allowed wider fields of action than many other women. The unmarried nuns could develop their administrative abilities and business skills whereas the married women was constantly reminded that her highest calling was her duty of obedience to her husband. Male theory was much more prescriptive for the married woman than for her religious sister. Although Labarge does not specifically refer to the work of Eileen Power and Lena Eckenstein in the Study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, it is clear when perusing the bibliography of a A Small Sound of the Trumpet, that she is familiar with, has consulted, and recommends these authors and their extensive work on the role of women and nuns in the Middle Ages. Even as Labarge sets out the restrictions that were placed on women by the Catholic church, she insists that even with its inherent Catholic misogyny, canon law was slightly more sympathetic towards women because it upheld rights of a

married women that were denied in common law.

Labarge does not look back from her vantage point as a twentieth century historian and dismiss what could appear to be relatively insignificant positive variations in male behaviour in light of the ongoing historical subordination of women. It is as if she perceives actions from within the period and judges them as they stand relative to the discourse of the day so that concessions to women, which by today's standards might appear risible, can be considered in a much more positive light. Mary Clive, in a review of Labarge's 1982 book, Medieval Travelers: The Rich and the Restless for The Literary Review recognizes this characteristic of Labarge's historical viewpoint. She stated: "another agreeable surprise is that she finds her dramatis personae congenial company. Far too many historians sneer at our forbears: scolding them if they follow the customs of their own day...."²⁹⁸

Even within the Catholic dogma, as Labarge points out, there were two currents of extremism among the clergy. One was a devotion to Mary which implied a special respect for women but only as a nonsexual being. There was also, she states, a "...consistent and virulent antifeminist tendency both on the philosophical and the popular

²⁹⁸ Labarge Fonds, Box A 237, Scrapbooks of Reviews for Medieval Travelers, Mary Clive, The Literary Review, February 1983.

level."²⁹⁹ This resulted in the portrayal of women by the Church as "...unpleasant and dangerous beings, a constant source of physical temptation...."³⁰⁰ Thomas Aquinas, whom Labarge identifies as the most influential of all medieval philosophers and less extreme than many, thought that women could be an essential helpmate to man in the work of generation, although he would not admit that she could be a real help in any other way.³⁰¹ At a secular level, women were portrayed in literature as either the remote heroines of courtly love or the harridans of the fabliaux concocted to appeal to bourgeois tastes.

In "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women" Labarge differentiates between the predominant theory about women, both religious and secular at that time, which she terms "destructive and offensive,"³⁰² and women's position in actual practice which she feels contained more freedom and power than would be indicated by the writings of the male clerics in the church and the male philosophers. Labarge particularly points out that peasant and village women actually managed their own affairs no matter what the law said, and they inherited freely; in many towns women assumed roles as heads of

²⁹⁹ Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women," A Medieval Miscellany, 127.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 128

³⁰¹ Ibid., 128.

³⁰² Ibid., 129

commercial enterprises and as such were free, even if married, to make contracts and buy goods without the assent of husbands. This Labarge regards as an important legacy of the Middle Ages - the integration of single women into society giving her an often important role which had nothing to do with her sexual function. Women's activities were varied and they were very much affected by their place in the social structure, but Labarge wishes to make clear the "inadvisability of relying on a stereotype, or a series of stereotypes, to describe either sex in any historical period."³⁰³

Labarge's historical purpose was not only to discover what the theoretical religious and secular positions were concerning women. Labarge was also constantly searching for the reply to the question: "What were women actually doing?" She asserts that, often, the theory and the practice were significantly at odds one with another. As a historian, Labarge decries any history that ignores either facet of historical investigation - theory or practice. She is as critical of male historians who ignore much of those parts of history concerning women that they often called disparagingly "soft topics," and certain feminists whom Labarge described in a popular talk as women who are convinced that they are fighting an entirely new battle and who believe

³⁰³ Labarge, "Wives, Widows and Wantons: A Medieval Sampler," A Medieval Miscellany (Ottawa: Publisher, 1997) 60.

that "no woman ever did anything outside the home, or influenced public policy before the 1960s."³⁰⁴ Labarge rejected, as did Gerda Lerner, the position of radical feminists whose concept Lerner interpreted as being "that all women are oppressed and have been throughout all history."³⁰⁵ Like Mary Beard before her, Labarge "...disdained those who failed to make some effort at capturing both the unity and the diversity in the "actuality" of history...." "... Her commitment was to the integrity of past reality."³⁰⁶ Labarge's concern for a recognition of the dichotomy between theory concerning women and their actual experiences and the variability of women's experiences in the past reflects an ongoing concern for feminist scholarship. Labarge attempted to illustrate that not all women were left out of positions of influence throughout history, that it is ahistorical to regard the category of "women" as monolithic. The 1990 Berkshire Conference pondered the question: "What should Women's History be doing?" At this conference Lyndal Roper of the University of London echoes Labarge's approach and underlines the necessity to view "woman" itself as a constructed category, "not an

³⁰⁴ Labarge Fonds, Box A 239, "In Search of Medieval Women", unpublished speech for Canadian Federation of Women, Nepean, 1994, 2.

³⁰⁵ Gerda Lerner, quoted in Carroll, Berenice, "'Mary Beard's Woman As Force in History: A Critique," Liberating Women's History, Carroll, Berenice ed., (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1976) 30.

³⁰⁶ Bonnie Smith, "Seeing Mary Beard," Feminist Studies 10, 3 (Fall 1984): 403.

unproblematic resource for transhistorical identifications." Not only is female experience itself a constructed category, but women are endlessly divided.³⁰⁷

The concern for actual women's experiences is not a new concern for feminist history. Although Labarge does not cite Eileen Power directly in the Study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, Labarge had undoubtedly read and been influenced by British historian Power who had studied under the supervision of C.V. Langlois, a teacher of Marc Bloch. Labarge does cite Power often in her later book A Small Sound of the Trumpet. Power wrote about Medieval nunneries and tied the ideas of women's subordination to monasticism and the ascetic ideal. Like Labarge, "Power believed that the real contributions of bourgeois and working women had to be placed alongside the misogyny of medieval ideas."³⁰⁸ Power's optimistic outlook concerning the actual work of women in industry and trade which would not be guessed at from a study of the religious and philosophical discourse of the Medieval period closely resembled Labarge's interpretation of the period.

An interesting observation that emerges from reading Labarge's

³⁰⁷ Lyndal Roper, "What Should Women's History Be Doing?," Conference Group on Women's History Newsletter 21, 5 (1990): 25.

³⁰⁸ Maxine Berg, "Eileen Power and Women's History," Gender and History 6, 2 (August 1994): 270.

historical survey is the lack of congruence in the timing of periods of increased freedom for women and for men. During the Renaissance period, Labarge points out that there was some encouragement of women's education by the new humanism which benefited young women of high social status who had enlightened fathers, but the general level of education for women was low, and the new protestant reformers Calvin and Luther were as steeped in misogyny as their unreformed Catholic predecessors, insisting on the divinely ordained subordination of women. Labarge states that Luther interpreted the Bible as ordaining the man as the head of the wife who must honour and obey her husband. Luther also declared that "women had been created with large hips so that they should stay at home and sit on them."³⁰⁹ Calvin argued that the subjection of wife to husband was part of an inviolable order established by God the Father. Woman was given to man as "an inferior helper" and she was born to obey.³¹⁰ Protestantism, according to Labarge, raised the prestige of matrimony, which it regarded as the usual and proper Christian vocation: the average Christian women was taught that she gained salvation through the pains of childbearing, and the unmarried woman was regarded with suspicion and distrust.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women," A Medieval Miscellany, 131.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 131.

³¹¹ Ibid., 132.

What Labarge has demonstrated, but does not state outright or further analyze, is that during the Reformation when men were being freed from many of the religious restrictions and practices of an unreformed Catholic faith, the new currents of thought, especially as evidenced by the strict Calvinists, further increased women's subordination and entrenched the idea of her inferiority in the new dogma of the Protestant faith. Labarge's study illustrates that a period of increased intellectual freedom for men was not mirrored in a corresponding increase of freedom for women but, rather, it produced a regression in the status of women both married and single.

It is intriguing to note the similarities between these observations by Labarge in the study for the Royal Commission on Status of Women in Canada which was published in 1970, and those of noted American feminist historian Joan Kelly in her article "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications for Women's History" published in 1976. In this article Kelly refers to the revitalization of women's history in the area of periodization in which feminist historiography has "disabused us of the notion that the history of women is the same as the history of men, and that significant turning points in history have the same impact for one sex

as for the other."³¹² Kelly refers to conferences at which this shift of vantage point in women's history has been developed. In commenting on the development of this point of view, Kelly lists the conferences where these "dramatic new ideas" were discussed, and the earliest of these was in October, 1973.³¹³ Kelly states that in Renaissance scholarship almost all historians have been content to situate women "on a footing of perfect equality with men."³¹⁴ Kelly elaborates on this statement in a footnote, and declares that the aforementioned view of women's equality in the Renaissance, except for the very important work of Ruth Kelso, was one "shared by every work I know of on Renaissance women except for contemporary feminist historians. Even Simone de Beauvoir, and of course Mary Beard, regard the Renaissance as advancing the condition of women...."³¹⁵ To prove her point that the Renaissance was a period of a marked restriction of the scope and power of women, Kelly refers the reader to works published by the contemporary feminist historians she had earlier mentioned, or studies about to be published: these she lists as works by Susan Bell,

³¹² Joan Kelly, "The Social Relations of the Sexes," Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 3.

³¹³ Ibid., 16.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

herself, Margaret King, and Kathleen Casey, dating from 1975/1976.³¹⁶

Kelly's article "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" was based on ideas from a course she gave at Sarah Lawrence College in 1972-1973.

Obviously the concept of women not experiencing the Renaissance in the same way that men did was considered a newly discovered perspective in 1972, two years after Labarge's study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada. I can find no reference to the work of Ruth Kelso in Labarge's work, nor is there any reference in "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women" to any feminist interpretation of the Renaissance era. It can be seen from Kelly's comments that the idea of a different periodization for women and men was certainly not a common idea, and, except for Ruth Kelso, it is doubtful if it had been explored before 1972. Although Labarge did not write a detailed study of women's condition in the Renaissance, (the section in the study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada is only about two pages in length, and it certainly does not qualify as a complex investigation of periodization), it appears that, by illustrating a regression in the status of women and their increased subordination during a period of increased freedom for men during the Renaissance, Labarge has prefigured, or at least, was one of the few historians who, very early on, was influenced by concepts that

³¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

would produce the “dramatic new ideas” about periodization which would be the hot topic in women's history in the mid 1970s.

Labarge further traces the subordination of women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where, in spite of unusual women who went beyond the decreed inferior position, the legal and cultural patterns were limiting. As always, rich and powerful women could be independent and learned if they so chose, but in spite of some feminine influence in France, women were regarded as inferior beings designed to please men, and in England the law, according to Blackstone, the English jurist quoted by Labarge, “the very being or legal existence of the women is suspended during the marriage.”³¹⁷

Labarge identifies the age of the Industrial Revolution as one which substantially changed women's status. The picture Labarge paints of the new discourse surrounding women at that time foreshadows the creation of a type of modern middle class woman whose function is to produce children and be an ornamental adjunct to her husband. Before the eighteenth century, Labarge states, women had maintained a position of considerable economic value. Upper class women conferred wealth upon a husband, and at the lower end of the social scale, women contributed by their labour and foresight to the

³¹⁷Labarge, “The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women,” A Medieval Miscellany, 132-135.

comfort and solvency of their families. After the Industrial Revolution, Labarge points out that a wife, except for the very poorest classes where her labour was still essential, no longer contributed to the economic well-being of her family. Labarge identifies a new stereotype which encouraged idleness for women and reduced the activities open to women.³¹⁸ Nor was the situation any kinder to women in France where the effect of the Industrial Revolution was less profound as the Napoleonic code was written to codify the complete subjection of the married woman to her husband.³¹⁹

Labarge's analysis of the changing economic and domestic scenario for women after the Industrial Revolution agrees with feminist theory which challenges the traditional male historical interpretation in economic history showing the modern era to be developmental and progressive. The feminist challenge, as Susan Stuard points out in her article "The Chase After Theory: Considering Medieval Women" in Gender and History, needs to be reinforced by the writing of history which convinces "a contemporary audience that women's and men's historical paths do not always coincide, that eras of progress for men may mean something very different for

³¹⁸ Ibid., 136.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 135-137.

women."³²⁰ Once again, Labarge, in her 1970 study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, is revisioning the categories that had been traditionally used to describe both women's and men's history. Labarge's analysis of the increasing loss of utility and restricted activity for women during the Industrial Revolution denies an older historical axiom that the Industrial Revolution represented progress in the same measure for women and men. This approach illustrates Stuard's assertion that, the replacement of the workshop by the woman in the home "cannot be read as growth, or as an increase in rationality as economists define the term or productive of economics of scale, so it is not progress by any stretch of the imagination..."³²¹

It is interesting to observe where Labarge's historical analyses seem to have influenced her personal observations on women's status in her community speeches, and where her historical conclusions seem to be at odds with her vision of a modern woman's life. The 1950s and 1960s vision of women displaced them as independent contributors to a family unit. There was during the 1950s and 1960s a discourse which encouraged women to view themselves as individuals whose worth was predicated solely upon their roles as extensions of husbands

³²⁰ Susan Stuard, "The Chase After Theory: Considering Medieval Women," Gender and History 4, 2 (Summer 1992): 144.

³²¹ Ibid., 144.

and children. This viewpoint is one that Labarge has indicated, in her actions and in her writings, relegated woman to an existence in which her full potential could not be realized. This is one of Labarge's firmest and most often heard convictions in her community speeches. Her pointed historical observations of an increasingly subordinate status for women during the Industrial Revolution, an era of progress for many men, and a period of increased prosperity, are mirrored in her community speeches in which she calls for women in the post-war, prosperous 1950s and 1960s to resist societal pressures calling for a wife to submerge her identity into that of her husband's, and to exist solely for the benefit of her family.

This continuity of thought from historical observation to modern application is not, however, always maintained. While some of Labarge's interpretations of historical movements are compatible with her stated vision of contemporary society, as in the aforementioned example, there are other times when a historical insight seems to be left dangling; it is not analyzed as to its potential significance to the modern situation and it seems to exist in an uneasy juxtaposition to Labarge's personal vision of women's roles. Discussing the heritage of the Canadian woman in a North American context, Labarge highlights the fact that because of the hardship of early colonial life, women were required to be capable partners. This partnership gave them a

position of economic importance. Labarge identifies employment and the possession of some independent financial resources as important factors in improving Canadian women's status. If this assertion is projected forward, an obvious, logical extension of this thought is that women who are totally economically dependent upon their husbands are in a much more precarious position than the financially independent women. This is an issue which Labarge does not touch upon when she discusses the role of the modern woman in her speeches in the 1960s. She is adamant that women should not restrict themselves to their roles as wives and mothers, but she considers this from the point of view of a woman's need to fulfill her potential and to perform her duty to society rather than to consider financial independence as a prudent precaution against the dangers of subordination. In advocating that women should be full-time mothers to their children up until the youngest child is of school age if it is economically possible, Labarge is making an optimistic assumption that this economic dependence, which in her case, with her supportive and successful husband was unproblematic, will not result in negative consequences for most women. Labarge's historical observation concerning the importance of independent financial resources to a woman's status does not cross the line from theory into practice in Labarge's counsel to married women's life in the real world of 1960s.

In her conclusion to "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women," Labarge redeclares the existence of a profound misogyny which she has traced in philosophical and religious thought throughout the centuries and for which she has given ample proof within her essay. A puzzling counterpoint to this declaration is her statement that theologians have balanced this misogyny with "a recognition of woman as an individual, and [they] have attempted to insure the stability of marriage - which for the great majority of couples has proved of more benefit to the wife than the husband."³²² Although Labarge has given some proof to support her statement that "marriage was important to women because it gave them some freedom of action in fact, if not in law..."³²³ within this essay there seems to be no documentation to support the conclusion that women benefited more from marriage than men, even if it could be agreed that women were perhaps somewhat less constrained by male determined restrictions if they were married although it appears that, in many instances, during the periods under analysis, married women were more restricted than their single sisters. It is a curious statement that seems to stand unsupported.

In one instance, it appears that Labarge has made a strong case for a point of view that seems to be inimical to one of her observations

³²² Ibid., 144.

³²³ Ibid., 135.

on the existence of men's intentional subordination of women throughout the ages. Although in many ways, Labarge's opinions differed from those of her historical foremother Mary Beard, both she and Beard took great pains to show that history will not support "the dogma of women's complete historic subjection to man" or "the image of women throughout the long ages of the past as being always and everywhere subject to male man...."³²⁴ Labarge and Beard show women as active, independent, competent actors in varied endeavours and occupations. Labarge, in the study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada and in her later books on Medieval women continually shows that there was a reality apart from the legal and philosophical treatises that allowed some women more freedom and action than would be thought from a study of law and philosophy alone, but in exposing the misogyny of the legal, religious and philosophical discourse of the day, Labarge has also proved that the subjection of women has a long and identifiable history. It existed and was a part of the historical reality lived by actual women. Berenice Carroll points out the same phenomenon in her critique of Mary Beard's book Woman As Force in History. Carroll states:

By virtue of their exclusion (not total, but certainly general) from such institutions women have certainly been deprived of access at least direct access to the opportunities, rewards, privileges, honor, authority and power available to the men

³²⁴ Berenice Carroll, "Mary Beard's Woman As Force in History: A Critique," 29.

who did have entry into these institutions. Mary Beard has demonstrated that women have been active participants in a much wider range of economic and social pursuits than is usually recognized, that women won acclaim from contemporaries, and some reached even the highest positions of governing authority and material rewards. The demonstration is essential and nontrivial, and insofar as it is incomplete or inadequate, it needs to be expanded and reinforced. But it is doubtful that any amount of expansion and reinforcement will do away with the historical reality of the subjection of women in this sense, that is, the exclusion of most women from the honorific statuses and ruling positions of the societies in which they lived.³²⁵

Labarge has expanded and reinforced Beard's historical demonstration of women's agency by concentrating on individual women's lives, and showing the historical existence of powerful, independent women, but by her careful examination she has also reinforced the historical existence of women's subordination throughout the ages. And yet, as has been previously mentioned, Labarge, in reflecting upon her own life experience states that:

"... I'm not sure that I believe that there has been one particular great conspiracy by all men to put down all women. I haven't seen it."³²⁶

In Labarge's last book, she focused on the active lives of Medieval women from all walks of life. Her desire to research and write A Small Sound of the Trumpet came from a combination of two

³²⁵ Ibid., 34.

³²⁶ Labarge, interview by author, 31.

circumstances that pointed her in this particular direction. During the writing of her book Medieval Travelers: The Rich and the Restless published in 1982, Labarge was surprised to come across the traces of many women travelers, and she decided that she ought to look further into the things that had been done by Medieval women that had not been described, those elements that had been lost with time.³²⁷ The other factor in her choice of research was the study she had done for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada which had planted the seed of interest in individual Medieval women. Labarge has stated that when she wrote A Small Sound of the Trumpet she was very carefully not writing about theory, but was writing about individual women. She is very careful to disclaim an a priori feminist impulse. She says: "I don't think I've ever consciously gone out and thought I am a feminist so therefore I must do this. I thought, this needs to be done so I'm going to do it. Which is a different attitude."³²⁸ It seems to be clear that Labarge wishes to claim an identity as a social historian rather than as a feminist historian, unlike Beard, Lerner, and Davis. Her approach to her subjects seems to be incorporated within women's history that has sprung from new approaches to social history. British historian Jane Rendall has remarked upon the genesis

³²⁷ Labarge, interview by author, 35.

³²⁸ Ibid., 31.

of this approach in her article entitled "Uneven Developments: Women's History, Feminist History and Gender History." In her description, Rendall could have been writing of the impulses that led Labarge along in her writing. "Social historians have seized upon the possibilities of extending their historical range, in dealing with, for instance, demography and the history of the family, or the histories differentiated by sex, of literacy and education or of witchcraft and criminality. They have accepted the necessity of a social history which incorporates or even at times focuses upon the lives of women. So it could be said, for instance, that much of the most substantial historical work relevant to women's history in medieval and early modern Britain has been done in Britain by social historians, whose interest is not specifically in women's history and who would disclaim any political purpose...."³²⁹ Although Labarge certainly did have an interest in women's history, it was not, as she has stated, an exclusive focus. Her purpose, as she has stated it, was to demonstrate that "even at a time when the theoretical basis of society implicitly postulated the inferiority of women - as was certainly the case in the Middle Ages, many women at all levels of society nevertheless

³²⁹ Jane Rendall, "Uneven Development: Women's History, Feminist History and Gender History in Great Britain," Writing Women's History: International Perspectives, Offen, Karen, Ruth Pierson, Jane Randall eds. (London: MacMillan, 1991) 46 - 47.

exercised power and influence in the ways open to them."³³⁰ Labarge was writing this book, she has said, to encourage both conservative historians and radical feminists to put aside their prejudices and to look at some case histories.³³¹

When Labarge started A Small Sound of the Trumpet in the early eighties, she states that research into women's lives was only beginning to arouse the interest of scholars and students. The accepted orthodoxy at that time was that almost all women in the Middle Ages were only important as decoration at major social events.³³²

Labarge identified the readers she wished to attract with A Small Sound of the Trumpet. She expected her audience to be the intelligent reader who had a special interest in the period of the subject, a professor who needed an accurate synthesis of the state of scholarship in an unfamiliar field, or a student just beginning a new subject who wanted an overview of the period as a useful springboard. Labarge was also aiming to write for a larger audience than the enclosed world of Academe. She felt that "history should not become

³³⁰ Labarge Fonds, Box A 239, "Women in Medieval Life", Lecture given at University of North Carolina, 1987, 1.

³³¹ Ibid, 4.

³³² Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, "Research on Medieval Women, Lecture given at Bishops University, February, 1999.

a closed hall in which professionals talk only to each other."³³³ In this attitude she is close to the historical aims of Natalie Zemon Davis who supports Labarge's inclination to write a type of history that reaches out to a variety of readers. Davis states: "... people teach and write good history in different settings. History is for the people, not the profession. The work of historians belongs to the reader..... the most important thing is the effect history has on people."³³⁴ Labarge delighted her audience with the publication of A Small Sound of the Trumpet. The book was very well received. A review by Rosemary O'Day in British Book News in London gives the flavour of the reviews. "The book is beautifully produced and is a delight to read. Mrs. Labarge made these women come alive without sacrificing high standards of scholarship. This is a gift which few historians have and which cannot be too greatly applauded. It is to be thoroughly recommended for both the scholar and the general reader and must find a place on the reading lists of all courses in women's history."³³⁵ Penny Gold, writing in The Women's Review of Books, while pointing out

³³³ Labarge Fonds, Box A 238, "Essays on Reconstruction of Medieval History," McGill, 1974.

³³⁴ Roger Adelson, "Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis," The Historian 53, 3 (Spring 1991): 421.

³³⁵ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Review by Rosemary O'Day in British Book News, London, June 1987.

that some readers may be disappointed with Labarge's "reluctance to analyze pattern and structure in the array of experiences...." praises the range of women introduced in the book and "the depth of scholarship that underlies the treatment of each individual...." Gold points out as well that "Labarge's erudition is not the sort spent on engaging in one or another scholarly argument; it is the sort used to unearth interesting stories about many lesser-known people."³³⁶

There is a very interesting and telling difference in the way that some men and women reviewers assessed Labarge's book. In a review in the Toronto Star, Catherine MacLeod, while applauding Labarge's insight and describing her as a feminist scholar who has produced a work which has magnified a proud female legacy and handed us some powerful tools, nonetheless remains skeptical of Labarge's suggestion that the gender blindness on the part of male historians was unconscious. MacLeod points out that other feminist scholars might not be so generous in forgiving what she describes as "shoddy, sexist research done by their early male counterparts."³³⁷ On the other hand, the male reviewer, Maurice Keen, who also reviews the book favourably in The New York Review of Books, stresses that "Miss (sic) Labarge

³³⁶ Penny Gold, "A Medieval Tapestry," The Women's Review of Books IV, 6 (March, 1987): 15.

³³⁷ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Review by Catherine MacLeod, Toronto Star, November 22, 1986.

could no doubt have written a paean of complaint, presenting medieval women and womankind as victims corporately of male oppression and misunderstanding, and it would have sold well; but she is too wise and too honest to play the virago in that way."³³⁸ Basil Cottle, whose status as a reviewer in Country Life is much inferior to that of Maurice Keen's, manages nonetheless, to display a similar anti-feminist attitude. Although declaring that A Small Sound of the Trumpet is a feminist book in that it sees medieval women in terms not just set by men, Cottle, it would seem, is very grateful and amazed that "it is never strident or in chairpersonese language. The style is strong, gracious and ladylike."³³⁹ The two male reviewers in comments that, it seems to me, would elicit a collective shriek from most feminists, reveal a common criticism leveled against any feminist work that documents women's oppression. Any such factual documentation is regarded as a paean of complaint by a virago. Messrs. Cottle and Keen would doubtless find Labarge's study for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada less ladylike and gracious!

Whether or not Margaret Labarge would describe herself as a feminist scholar writing feminist history, with the publication of A Small Sound of the Trumpet, she was certainly perceived as such by

³³⁸ Ibid., Maurice Keen, The New York Review of Books, January 15, 1987.

³³⁹ Ibid., Basil Cottle, Country Life, 2.5. 1986.

much of her audience, but there are feminist historians who would not define Labarge's work as being in the grand feminist tradition. Judith Bennett, a Canadian trained feminist medieval historian makes a clear distinction between women's history and feminist history. Women's history she defines as "historical work on women" and feminist history as "historical work infused by a concern about the past and present oppression of women."³⁴⁰ Bennett remarks upon a burgeoning market for books on women in the Middle Ages which are largely descriptive. In a footnote to this comment, Bennett includes Labarge's book amongst those which have a "tendency towards non-critical description"³⁴¹

While Bennett points out that such works are making available very useful information about medieval women, she also feels they are also avoiding difficult questions about the sexual dynamics of power within medieval society. She states that "on the one hand, that oppression is taken for granted; on the other hand, it is almost disguised by being neither analyzed nor critiqued."³⁴² For Bennett the historical task in the grand feminist tradition is "to study the oppression and subordination of women in the past, not just to detail women's

³⁴⁰ Judith M. Bennett, "Feminism and History," Gender and History 1/3 (Autumn 1989): 253.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 258.

³⁴² Ibid., 254.

oppression but also to understand the means through which that oppression has been accomplished."³⁴³ For feminists such as Bennett, works like A Small Sound of the Trumpet that celebrate the agency of women in the past without also examining in detail women's oppression are unbalanced history and run the risk of losing sight of women's very real oppression.³⁴⁴ It seems likely that those who have been criticized by Bennett could point out that a history that examines in detail women's historical oppression and male dominance but does not examine examples of women's agency and male support is also an unbalanced history. It is, not unusually, the balance that is difficult to find.

Bennett acknowledges that some historians vehemently disagree with her point of view and her definitions of women's history and feminist history. She particularly points out the more inclusive views of Ellen Carol DuBois et al who state in their book Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe that "even work 'just on women' if it tells us something we did not know before, can be seen as feminist, if that term is broadly conceived."³⁴⁵

³⁴³ Ibid., 259

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 262.

³⁴⁵ Ellen Dubois, Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe, DuBois, Ellen C. et al (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 8.

Labarge's work certainly falls easily within the second definition of feminist work, but it is less clear if her work falls short of the more exacting definition of feminist work articulated by Judith Bennett. While Labarge states very clearly in her introduction to A Small Sound of the Trumpet that there was a constant intellectual and legal bias towards a woman's' inferiority and her husband's right to domination over her,³⁴⁶ and that the theories of women's innate inferiority, and often depravity, must have had a stunting effect on women's development, she does not necessarily apply this insight to the cases that she studies, nor is that her main purpose. Labarge does not offer a wholesale critique of the medieval system as it existed, she is looking for women's contributions to the growth and development of their society.³⁴⁷ For example, when Labarge points out the fact that medieval men's power and wealth was rooted in land while noble and royal women were landless, powerless and used as pawns in a family's alliances, this observation leads not to a study of the devastating effects of this fact upon women's status or psyche but to the observation that the exchange of women as pawns who became wives in foreign lands led to "a development which provided a tenuous network for the exchange of ideas, culture and patterns of

³⁴⁶ Labarge, A Small Sound of the Trumpet, xii.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 238.

government.”³⁴⁸ Labarge notes the gender power differential and follows its effect in society. She observes, neutrally, and uncritically, what is happening.

Labarge’s gathering of facts, selective as all historical gathering must be, seeks out the positive aspects of women’s accomplishments, and also the positive aspects of male mentorship. Labarge highlights the positive contribution of the male Anglo-Saxon church in producing “able and learned women”. The portraits Labarge paints of Hilda of Whitby, and the 8th century Lioba, for example emphasize the personal influence of well-connected and remarkably able women on the great men of both the church and the kingdom. Labarge also points out the encouragement of male mentors in the education and scholarship of the nuns.³⁴⁹ Labarge finds it “pleasant to know that Charlemagne had specifically ordered his stewards to make sure that the houses where the women worked had stoves and cellars, as well as being protected by surrounding hedges and a strong door.”³⁵⁰ While Labarge does not deny the “harsh and violent conditions of their lives,” she chooses to focus on the freedoms and influences that the early medieval women

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 15.

had compared to their successors.³⁵¹ In A Small Sound of the Trumpet, Labarge makes an appeal for historians not to overlook the personal at the expense of examining the political and theoretical positions. She wants to make sure that the presence of dominant wives, and the examples of real affection between husbands and wives are not disregarded as unimportant therefore insignificant in drawing the historical portrait of an age.³⁵² Labarge argues against an oversimplification of historical vision.

Even though Bennett's criticism of Labarge's work might be considered valid if one accepts her proposal that to write a feminist history the author must focus on women's oppression and male dominance, it appears to me that Labarge often does transcend what Bennett has described as a tendency towards non-critical description.

While Labarge's work is often descriptive and tends toward synthesis rather than analysis as she intended it should, and her focus is certainly trained on women's agency and positive male interactions, it is not difficult to find examples of her willingness to point out and imply disapproval of male actions that resulted in women's continued subordination or oppression. Labarge critiques the prevailing educational goals of inculcating feminine ideals of passivity and

³⁵¹ Ibid., 15, 16.

³⁵² Ibid., xii.

submissiveness, and relates that marriage meant total domination by the husband and the extinguishing of a woman's legal rights during the term of the marriage. She makes the reader aware that the law recognized the right of men of all classes to beat their wives. Labarge unflinchingly lays the blame for medieval acceptance of women's essential inferiority at the feet of such Church fathers as Jerome and the later monastic writers who praised the virgin state and depicted women as seducers and temptresses. However, Labarge contrasts the harshness of the law and philosophy with "the more human face of reality."³⁵³ She provides anecdotal evidence of kind and loving husbands. Against the almost constant and profoundly misogynistic sermons preached against women and their vices, Labarge counterposes stories of independent minded women who refused to sit through such sermons and who yelled at the preacher in the middle of the sermon "to stop slandering her sex."³⁵⁴ Labarge seems to delight in finding examples of medieval women who have "quick, sharp tongues deflating male pomposity."³⁵⁵ Labarge is seeking the subversive women who, in their daily lives, undermined the male dominated society whether by an angry outburst in church or by a religious treatise.

³⁵³ Ibid., 35.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

Occasionally Labarge's optimism does seem rather fulsome.

She seeks out the areas in which women were considered equal rather than enumerating the many areas in which they were unequal. She cites for example the fact that in some areas men and women were on equal footing: neither wife nor husband could take a vow of chastity, go on a crusade or retire to religious life without the willing agreement of the other. She does not editorialize as I do now that the term "willing consent" is a rather slippery concept when one of the parties could be legally beaten until she "willingly" consented.

On the other hand, in her examination of women on the fringes of Medieval life, she is outspoken and unequivocal when it comes to her analysis of the causes of female prostitution in the Middle Ages.

The most usual reasons for women becoming prostitutes were poverty and male violence. The poor widow with small children, the servant or chambermaid used as a concubine by her master and then discarded, the alien unable to get legitimate work; all had no money and no skills. Prostitution was almost the only way open to make a living.... Rape was frequent, particularly of the poor and ill-protected, who had neither strength nor influence. In south-east France, groups of young men often practised sexual violence - what would now be called gang rape - on lower class women between fifteen and thirty, either innocent girls or young wives whose husbands were temporarily absent. In those communities this was considered acceptable amusement for the young men who felt frustrated by their inability to marry before they were sufficiently established, and treated these women as

legitimate prey.³⁵⁶

Further, when Labarge describes the actions of a peasant widow, Matilda, who did not succeed in committing suicide, but did manage to kill her two sons and a daughter, Labarge speculates that, while no reason for the murders was given in the English gaol-delivery rolls that recorded the crime, the woman could well have been driven to this action because of the impossibility of her economic situation.³⁵⁷ It seems clear that in these instances Labarge has not always, as Judith Bennett suggested, avoided the difficult questions about the sexual dynamics of power within medieval society.

There is no doubt of the difficulty in finding the balance between a history that is morally identified with female subordination in the past and too easily writes of women as victims, acted upon and martyred,³⁵⁸ and a history that depicts “not actual independence but action despite dependence....”³⁵⁹ In A Small Sound of the Trumpet Labarge has presented both sides of the issue, and if her emphasis is greater upon independent and active women, it is an acknowledged desire to re-balance an equation that, she felt, had overlooked

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 208.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 208.

³⁵⁸ Roper, 25

³⁵⁹ Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life, 17.

women's achievements and influence in the past.

Carolyn Heilbrun has stated that "...the reinterpretation of history and myth is one of the most powerful means women have of demonstrating their historic fitness to play all the roles in the human drama."³⁶⁰ Margaret Labarge, in her constant search for women who were strong, independent, and powerful in spite of the misogynistic society in which they lived, has provided many examples of women's capacity to perform a dazzling array of roles for which they had been deemed unfit. Because much of history had not recorded these examples, women have often been unable to imagine themselves outside of the prescribed regions to which they have been assigned. Men, too, were more easily convinced of women's inferiority because there were very few records of their previous success. Labarge has contributed valuable scholarship to women's history. Before Labarge received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Waterloo, she was introduced in the following manner: "Her often quoted scholarly contributions have earned Professor Labarge a lasting place in the area of Canadian Women's Studies for they are of seminal and fundamental importance to the recovery of women's history...."³⁶¹ She

³⁶⁰ Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) 98.

³⁶¹ Labarge Fonds, Box A 240, Introduction, Honorary Doctorate From University of Waterloo.

has succeeded in reaching readers inside and outside of the University, providing contemporary women with the knowledge that women have always been capable of independent and important work, even as this capacity was constantly undermined and hindered by male dominated religious and philosophical theory. Her historical approach, while it emerged from an affinity for the discipline of social history, is often compatible with feminist methodology and demonstrates qualities that would satisfy the definition of feminist history for all but the most exacting of critics.

But, while some of Labarge's work may be interpreted as feminist in nature, there remains a great difference between her life and work and that of feminist scholars of her era. How then does one situate Margaret Labarge as a scholar of women compared to those feminist scholars? The dissimilarity of Labarge's position to that of contemporary feminist scholars emanates from the philosophical starting points of scholars such as Gerda Lerner (1920-), Natalie Zemon Davis (1928-) and Joan Kelly (1928-1982). Each of these women at some point in their careers experienced a feminist epiphany that propelled them into a conscious determination to do women's history. A necessarily brief examination of their motivations will serve to situate Labarge's historical writing on women within the context of coexisting women's history.

Lerner decided that, to understand her own history which included her early public life conducted under the shadow of the Nazi Anschluss, and her family life where she was conscious of and angry at the position of women within the Jewish religion, she needed to understand histories that had been made unavailable to her. A realization of the gender restrictions in her own life and the absence of women from historical accounts created questions for Lerner that would follow her for twenty years and form the basis of her historical research. Lerner's writing has focused on the relationship of women to history to explain the duration of their subordination and the slow development of the rise of feminist consciousness.³⁶² Lerner was also active in feminist protest, and was responsible for incorporating Women's Studies into University curricula. In 1972, Lerner established the United States' first Women's History Department at Sarah Lawrence College and then moved to the University of Wisconsin in Madison and established a doctoral programme there.

Joan Kelly, convinced by Lerner's forcefulness, intelligence and eloquence, went through a "kaleidoscopic" change, realizing that the picture that she had held of the Renaissance, an area in which she was highly qualified, was distorted because she had not looked at it from

³⁶² Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) vii.

the vantage point of women.³⁶³ Kelly's work was more than an individual quest for knowledge and understanding.³⁶⁴ Her scholarship was infused with her identification with feminism, and along with affecting how Kelly interpreted history, she was actively involved in theorizing about the historical foundations and contemporary sweep of feminist thought.³⁶⁵

Natalie Zemon Davis also found that "being a woman made a big difference and that [she] had better attend to it practically and intellectually."³⁶⁶ In the 1970s, Davis, whose approach to history had been primarily based on social history mixed with anthropology was attracted to women's history influenced by the women's movement and by Jill Ker Conway, and she "began to see what riches lay ahead in rethinking the roles of women in the historical past."³⁶⁷ This led Davis to her work in anthropology and women's history at the University of Toronto, the University of California at Berkeley, and at Princeton. She was also active in helping to establish Women's Studies

³⁶³ Kelly, "Author's Preface", Women, History and Theory, xii, xiii.

³⁶⁴ Blanche Cook, Clare Coss, Harris et al "Introduction", Women, History and Theory, xvi.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., xxiii.

³⁶⁶ "A Life of Learning: Natalie Zemon Davis," American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 39 at Internet: <http://www.acls.org/op39.htm>., 18.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 18.

Programmes. Davis writes her history, including that about women, she has said, "as if [she] were engaged in some rescue mission over and over again."³⁶⁸

It is clear to see that although Labarge, like Lerner, Davis, and Kelly has written about women, her purpose in doing so was more personal than political, and was based on an individual search for knowledge. Labarge was influenced to some degree by feminist ideas (she has stated that she "absorbed a fair amount from Florence Bird,"³⁶⁹ the head of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada), and Labarge acknowledged as well that her desire to write about Medieval women was, at least partially, inspired by her work for the Royal Commission. However, unlike Lerner, Davis, and Kelly, her exploration into women's lives was not in response to a commitment to feminism. In fact, Labarge's motivation, in part, was to repudiate what she considered to be a characteristic of some feminist thought about the past: an ahistorical approach that denied all women's agency and independence. This difference in starting points necessarily affects the manner in which historical fact will be selected and interpreted, as can be seen in the emphasis in Labarge's work on women's agency throughout the ages as opposed to Lerner's quest for an answer to

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 25.

³⁶⁹ Labarge, interview by author, 32.

explain the duration of the subordination of women and the slow development of the rise of feminist consciousness.³⁷⁰ The starting points also help to explain why Lerner's, Davis' and Kelly's historical observations are carried forward to a critique of the status of women in modern society while Labarge's insights mostly remain applied to the past. Whereas Labarge in A Small Sound of the Trumpet has stated that she deliberately avoided writing about theory, Lerner, Davis and Kelly have all contributed to the theoretical discourse in Women's History.

There is no question that Labarge has, as Douglas Wurtele stated in the "Foreword" to A Medieval Miscellany, "long since achieved, and maintained, that level of eminence which it is the hope of all dedicated scholars to reach. This means not only recognition as a renowned authority in her chosen profession, both nationally and internationally, but also personal esteem and affection from all quarters of the world of medieval studies."³⁷¹ Her contributions to Medieval scholarship have been many: publishing of her extensive research, encouragement to many other scholars, young and old, dedication to professional committees, societies, and journals. Along with the stature attributed to her in the world of Medieval scholarship, Labarge also richly

³⁷⁰ Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Feminist Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) vii.

³⁷¹ D. Wurtele, "Foreword, " a Medieval Miscellany, viii.

deserves to be recognized within the circles of women's history and feminist history for her impressive contributions which reflect a feminist influence rather than a feminist focus.

CONCLUSION

In the intensely religious, anti-intellectual circles in which I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, I knew no women like Margaret Labarge. The domestic ideology of the post-war period that has been described in Chapter Three of this thesis was accepted and lived out in the lives of the vast majority of the women of my mother's generation and social circle. Those women who ventured outside of the home to work did so out of dire economic necessity; very occasionally, the desire to escape domesticity and economic dependence was cloaked in the respectability of religious or charitable work. A woman's subordinate position was clear and unquestioned: in the church she could hold no position of authority, and in the home, which was deemed to be her natural sphere of activity, the husband remained the divinely ordained head of the household. If I had chanced to meet a woman like Margaret Labarge during my youth, she would have been as foreign and as exotic to me as a creature from another planet. Indeed, in many ways, she was from another world than the one in which I lived. It is Margaret Labarge's particular world, the world that allowed her to become a distinguished scholar and teacher, a successful wife and mother, and a community worker, that I have sought to understand and describe in

this thesis. I have endeavoured also to examine Labarge's efforts to change the perceptions of women's roles within her sphere of influence, as well as to assess her position within the field of women's history.

The life story of Margaret Wade Labarge as it can be glimpsed from her published work and the records that she has left to the Carleton Archives provides us with the opportunity to examine some aspects of the lives of exceptional women who were able to create new patterns for themselves, greatly expanding their roles from the more restricted female occupations of their mothers' generations. The patterns that Labarge and others like her created were made possible by a process of socialization that shaped their personalities differently from their more traditional sisters, by their material circumstances, and by the way in which they responded to these circumstances.

The biographical details of Labarge's early life have revealed characteristics that are found in the lives of other women achievers. As was the case for many other successful women of that era whose mothers were not role models for a life outside of the family, Labarge was greatly aided in her quest to become a scholar by the unusual support and vision of her father who treated her educational goals as respectfully as the goals of her brothers. Labarge's obvious intellectual abilities were encouraged and supported by an education at

single-sex institutions, a form of education that has produced a disproportionate number of women achievers. It is clear also that the advantages of her class position, her race, her heterosexuality, and the lack of physical handicaps allowed her to overcome many of the obstacles that were insurmountable for other women.

The investigation of Labarge's life has also shown that the religious training she received from her mother and from the nuns at Sacred Heart Convents has had a lasting and important influence on her life. Apart from spiritual fulfillment, this aspect of Labarge's life has kept her at a distance from feminist causes and close to the domestic ideology of nuclear family, home and family centredness, pronatalism, heterosexuality, and some traditional gender roles for men and women. However, what has also become clear in the study of Labarge's life and of her unpublished community speeches is that she did challenge several traditional women's roles. She asserted and exemplified women's intellectual equality with men; she modeled and emphasized the need for all women including those who happily chose to be wives and mothers to expand their horizons beyond domestic concerns. Labarge also advocated a greater, but not total, equality within the family structure. She still envisioned mothers as the primary caretakers of children and, therefore, necessarily economically dependent on their husbands for a period of time, but she

insisted that men must be active participants in the family unit, and she did suggest also that even these arrangements were culturally determined and therefore subject to change. Her advocacy of greater possibilities for women within the traditional world of the Catholic family was visible and audible. Gerda Lerner has stated that "the final brick in the wall enclosing women within the garden of domesticity was her horror and fear of deviance." Lerner further explains that the threat of female deviance pervades the culture, personified in the popular symbols of the witch, the bitch, the de-sexed female, and the castrating woman. The images that have been presented of women who deviated from the path of domesticity are those of crazy Carrie Nation with the hatchet, the bomb throwing Emma Goldman, and the 20th century equivalent of the deviant stereotype, the dyke. It was the threat of such deviance, Lerner states which kept women in line ideologically and emotionally, and fettered them psychologically.³⁷² Margaret Labarge advocated that women look outside the confines of domestic life, that they take their place beside men in the intellectual arena. This was definitely a path which deviated from traditional thought, but it was suggested by a respected Catholic woman who had retained her religious faith and had a successful and fulfilling family life. Her advocacy of change was infinitely more credible and influential

³⁷² Lerner, xxxv.

within Catholic circles than the most eloquent and reasoned plea of an ardent feminist. If change is to occur within traditional institutions, the motors that will drive it, most likely, will come from the inside even though the larger motors of change may originate from without. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein says that "trying to bring gender equality into organized religion is like trying to push an iceberg uphill. It's very large, it's very resistant to change. You have to push so incredibly hard and you never feel it move while you're pushing it."³⁷³ In analyzing Labarge's scholarly writing tracing the misogynist nature of religious thought throughout the ages, and in examining Labarge's thinking in speeches outlining the need for women to broaden their horizons and become full members of their communities, it can be clearly seen that Margaret Labarge has indeed helped to push the iceberg uphill; however, at times, it appears that Labarge is ambivalent about how far she wants the iceberg to travel when she has stopped short of applying her historical insights to contemporary life, especially, it seems, when these insights might conflict with her religious beliefs.

Labarge's most important work in women's history, has sprung from her affinity for social history, but it carries within it a feminist impulse that points out the religious and philosophical misogyny that has resulted in what Labarge identified in 1970 as Canadian women's

³⁷³ Elyse Goldstein, quoted in Bob Harvey, "In Goddess We Trust," The Ottawa Citizen July 10, 1999, : 12.

"furtive tradition of inferiority."³⁷⁴ What is striking about Labarge's main stated goal in her historical investigations, that of finding women's agency and her ability to act in ways contradicting the role laid out for her by religious and secular leaders, is how closely the phenomena she wished to investigate paralleled the circumstances of her own life. Benedetto Croce has said that all history is contemporary history.³⁷⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis has reworded that idea in posing the question "Is historical writing just a writing of the self, no matter how hard we try to respect the texts the past has bequeathed to us?"³⁷⁶ Labarge's social class, her cultivated intelligence, and her fortunate family circumstances allowed her to envisage and pursue goals within a patriarchal system that excluded other women who, by virtue of their gender combined with other factors, were either denied the opportunity to pursue their goals, or, often, were not even able to conceive of goals that extended beyond their designated lot in life. Perhaps, because Labarge herself was able to succeed, she has cast her historical net to recapture, as Naomi Griffiths has put it, "a complex picture of the extent to which elite status so often overcame

³⁷⁴ Labarge, "The Cultural Tradition of Canadian Women: The Historical Background," 145.

³⁷⁵ B. Croce, quoted in Cott, Nancy ed. *Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 45.

³⁷⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, "A Life of Learning," *American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 39* at Internet: <http://www.acls.org/op39.htm>, 25.

the handicap of being born female."³⁷⁷

Many times while reading Labarge's description of exceptional Medieval women I was reminded of Labarge herself. An excellent description of Labarge's life may be found in her description of the life of Christine de Pisan. Labarge wrote: "It is not surprising that contemporary feminist scholars have shown such a special interest in the career and works of this remarkable fifteenth-century French woman, but Christine's real importance is as a trail-blazer, not a rebel." Describing Labarge's career and work as that of a trail-blazer and not a rebel seems particularly apposite. Labarge's description of de Pisan continues: "She accepted the medieval framework, agreed that woman was naturally subject to man, and praised the Virgin Mary as the highest ideal to which a woman could aspire. However, like the forceful abbess Hildegard, three centuries before, Christine felt that such beliefs could be combined with a practical realization of the complementary nature of men and women, a recognition of the valuable part women actually played, and the respect and sympathy which they deserved."³⁷⁸ How fascinating that this statement about two Medieval women is so easily transferable to Labarge herself, who, in her lifetime, has accepted much of the traditional Catholic framework, but

³⁷⁷ Naomi Griffiths, "Recovering the Ignored," A Medieval Miscellany, 18.

³⁷⁸ Labarge, A Small Sound of the Trumpet, 237-238.

at the same time, has attempted to combine her faith with a more enlightened vision of women's roles and their importance to society.

Margaret Labarge drew upon feminist thought for her understanding of misogyny throughout the ages, but she relied upon Catholic tradition for her sense of family and for an explanation of the meaning of life. In the end, the measure of our beliefs, our hopes, and our motivation, must rest, in part, upon the legacy we bequeath. Margaret Labarge has created a legacy of fine scholarship, social caring, and successful daughters and sons, and her many and varied contributions to her society deserve to be remembered and celebrated.

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