

HIDDEN HISTORIES OF WOMEN

The Blame

A Hidden History of Heresy, Genius, and the Violence of Erasure

Study & Seminar Guide

Who gets remembered as a thinker?

RECOVER • CONTEXTUALIZE • QUESTION • RESTORE



About This Volume

The Blame examines recurring mechanisms by which women's spiritual, intellectual, scientific, medical, and cultural authority has been condemned, appropriated, diminished, or forgotten. Rather than treating recovery as the addition of isolated "exceptional women," the volume asks readers to examine the systems that made erasure repeatable - and the incomplete work required to reverse it.

Questions to Carry Through the Book

- What is the difference between historical absence and historical erasure?
- How does blame convert social anxiety into a justification for exclusion or violence?
- Why do institutions often preserve women's work while detaching women's names or authority from it?
- What counts as meaningful recovery when recognition arrives generations after exploitation?

Frameworks for Study

- feminist historiography and the politics of the archive
- the Matilda Effect and attribution in science
- heresy, witchcraft, and gendered spiritual authority
- medicalization and professional gatekeeping
- institutional versus individual responsibility
- recovery, commemoration, and incomplete justice

How to Use This Guide

Use the questions for seminar discussion, independent study, museum or library programming, or as prompts for short research responses. The purpose is not to produce one approved interpretation, but to test historical narratives against evidence, context, omission, and competing forms of authority.

Seminar Questions: Erasure, Authority, Recovery

1. When the historical record is produced by institutions that excluded women, how should historians evaluate the apparent absence of women from that record?
2. How does the book distinguish blame as an emotion from blame as a social technology?
3. Across theology, medicine, science, and law, which mechanisms of exclusion recur most consistently?
4. How does professionalization change who is recognized as a legitimate knower?
5. What is lost when women's healing knowledge is reframed as superstition while comparable practices become professional medicine?
6. How should historians discuss women accused of witchcraft without romanticizing them as a single class of healers, rebels, or knowledge keepers?
7. What does the history of attribution reveal about the relationship between evidence and authority?
8. When an institution benefits from an inequitable system without a single malicious actor, where does responsibility reside?
9. Is posthumous recognition a form of justice? What can it repair, and what can it never repair?
10. Why can popular biography, film, or public history sometimes change historical memory more effectively than academic correction?
11. What ethical problems arise when recovery narratives turn erased women into symbols rather than restoring their complexity?
12. How does naming function as a historical act throughout the volume?
13. Which case most changed your understanding of how historical canons are created?
14. What contemporary institutions should be examined for mechanisms that resemble the historical patterns described here?
15. At what point does a pattern across centuries become analytically useful, and at what point does it risk flattening historical difference?

Working With the Evidence

The book repeatedly asks readers to look beyond famous names toward the processes that determine who enters the archive, whose labor is categorized as knowledge, and whose contribution remains attached to a recognized authority.

1. Choose one recovered woman in the volume. What is the strongest surviving evidence for her contribution, and who preserved it?
2. Identify a case in which the evidence survives but attribution changed. What mechanism produced the change?
3. Identify a case in which the archive is genuinely incomplete. What can be argued responsibly, and what must remain uncertain?
4. How do later scholars, activists, descendants, or popular writers participate in recovery? What new biases can recovery introduce?
5. Compare quantitative evidence with testimony, material culture, correspondence, or institutional records. Which kinds of evidence have historically been granted the greatest authority?

The Hidden Histories Method

- RECOVER - Identify the people, labor, knowledge, or experiences pushed outside the conventional frame.
- CONTEXTUALIZE - Examine the institutions, beliefs, material conditions, and power structures that produced the absence.
- QUESTION - Ask how the inherited narrative became authoritative and what evidence it privileges.
- RESTORE - Return documented lives and contributions to the larger historical account without inventing what the record cannot support.

Case Studies for Closer Examination

Choose one or more cases and return to the book's notes and bibliography. Ask not only what happened, but how the story was preserved, categorized, credited, or forgotten.

Hypatia

Examine the difference between what can be documented about Hypatia's intellectual life, what later traditions made her symbolize, and why those layers are often conflated.

Junia

Trace how a name, translation tradition, and assumptions about apostolic authority can alter the perceived gender and status of a historical figure.

Women healers and midwives

Study professionalization, licensing, medical authority, and the danger of turning a complex history into a simple story of women healers versus male physicians.

Henrietta Lacks

Consider consent, ownership, scientific benefit, institutional structures, recognition, and why recovery does not automatically equal justice.

Rosalind Franklin and the Matilda Effect

Examine how credit is distributed in collaborative science and how later recovery changes - but does not erase - the original structure of recognition.

Across the Hidden Histories Constellation

This volume can stand alone. It can also be read beside Sara Madden's related fiction, where the same historical problem is approached through speculative investigation and Rewoven fairy-tale narrative. The genres do different work and should not be treated as interchangeable forms of evidence.

HISTORY

The Blame supplies the documentary historical lens: accusation, attribution, authority, and the mechanisms by which women's knowledge can be made dangerous or detachable from their names.

CONSPIRACY

The Thirteenth Degree: A Hypatian Conspiracy converts those documented patterns into a fictional investigation. Its conspiracy mechanism is invented; the seminar value lies in asking what fiction reveals about the desire to make diffuse institutional patterns legible.

REWOVEN FAIRY TALE

The Weaver and the Wolf translates persecution, silence, memory, and collective survival into the symbolic language of a Rewoven fairy tale, where cloth itself becomes record and resistance.

Comparative Questions

1. What can The Blame claim as historical argument that The Thirteenth Degree must leave in the realm of speculation?
2. How does The Weaver and the Wolf make the experience of accusation emotionally legible without serving as historical evidence?
3. Across all three works, what survives when official institutions fail as custodians of memory?
4. Which genre most effectively exposes the mechanism of erasure - and why?

Research Pathways

Use the volume's citations and bibliography as the starting point. A strong extension project should distinguish primary evidence, secondary interpretation, and later cultural memory.

- historiography of witch trials and gender
- women, authorship, and attribution in the history of science
- history of midwifery and obstetric professionalization
- feminist archival theory and archival silence
- Junia and textual transmission
- Hypatia in history versus cultural memory
- Henrietta Lacks, bioethics, consent, and tissue ownership

Final Seminar Question

If recovery changes the record but cannot undo the harm, what does historical justice require?

The goal is not to rewrite history. It is to widen the frame.