

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- What is the value of **biography**?
  - Why should one person's life be seen as more important or informative than another's?
  - Are certain individuals somehow more representative of their times and thus more deserving of our attention as historians?
  - And even if there are "Great Men," do they produce their times more than their times produce them?

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- the “**Great Man Theory**” of history is often downplayed today
  - most modern historians prefer to focus on the larger political and social forces that have shaped human history
  - but this is an unnecessarily harsh indictment of a rich and ancient tradition: the study of biography

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- e.g. the autobiography of **Sargon of Akkad** (ca. 2300 BCE)

[Text of Sargon's Autobiography](#)



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- the truth is, biography is and always has been popular
  - if not because it encompasses historical truth fully, then because it expresses the commonly held belief that individuals matter
  - and whether *that* is true or not, it embraces an abiding and undeniable principle of history:  
Great Men produce Great Men
    - that is, the idea of “Great Men” creates role models for Great Men which, in turn, produces *actual* Great Men

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- in other words, Great Men *as* history have produced Great Men *in* history
  - the reality of history is that Great Men like Napoleon, Charlemagne and other driven narcissists *have* shaped history
  - and that is in large part because they modeled their careers off the stories, invented or not, they heard about the Great Men who came before them



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- So, how do we deal with this complex intersection of the individual and society?
  - how do we add up culture, history and DNA and find an answer that makes sense of what-really-happened-in-the-past?
  - ANSWER: We can't! The situation is just too complex!
  - it's not possible to get a good enough core sample of Pericles to see how his DNA and the Athens of his day collaborated to create the Classical Age and build the Parthenon

# *Women and Historical Biography*

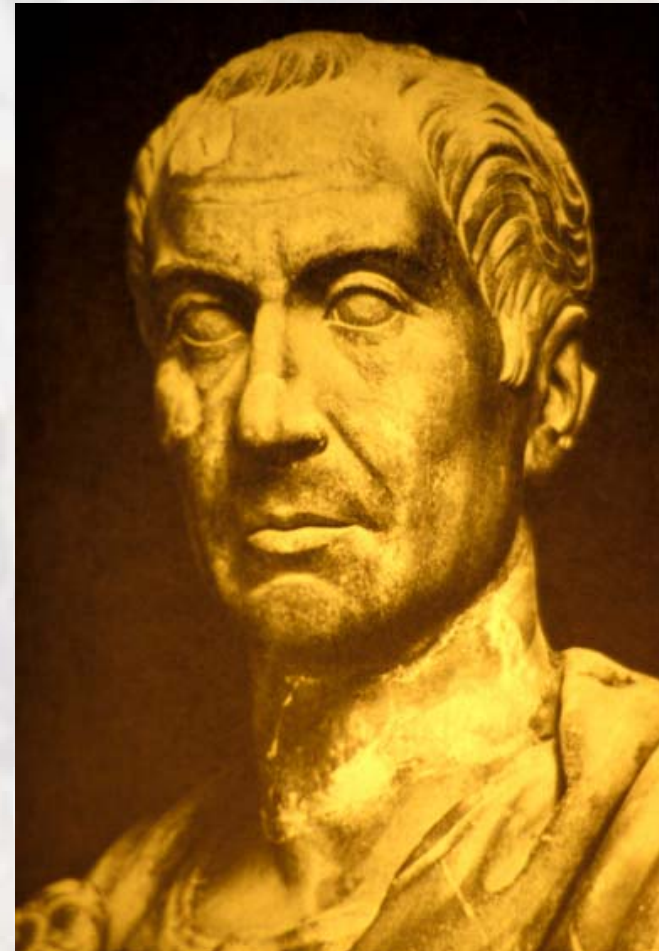
## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- but it is possible to see some enduring principles in the lives of Great Men, e.g.
  - they all faced seemingly impenetrable barriers
    - they were under-funded or disregarded or spurned for some reason . . . or all these things!
  - but they all rose above those challenges and asserted themselves
  - and they all pursued their own dreams with fevered self-interest and at some point had to step over bodies on their way to the top

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- e.g. **Julius Caesar**
  - born into the aristocratic Julian *gens* which had fallen onto hardship recently
  - his ties to Marius got him in trouble and he had to flee Rome and make it on his own in the East
  - he returned to Rome in the 60's BCE and scored big on the party circuit

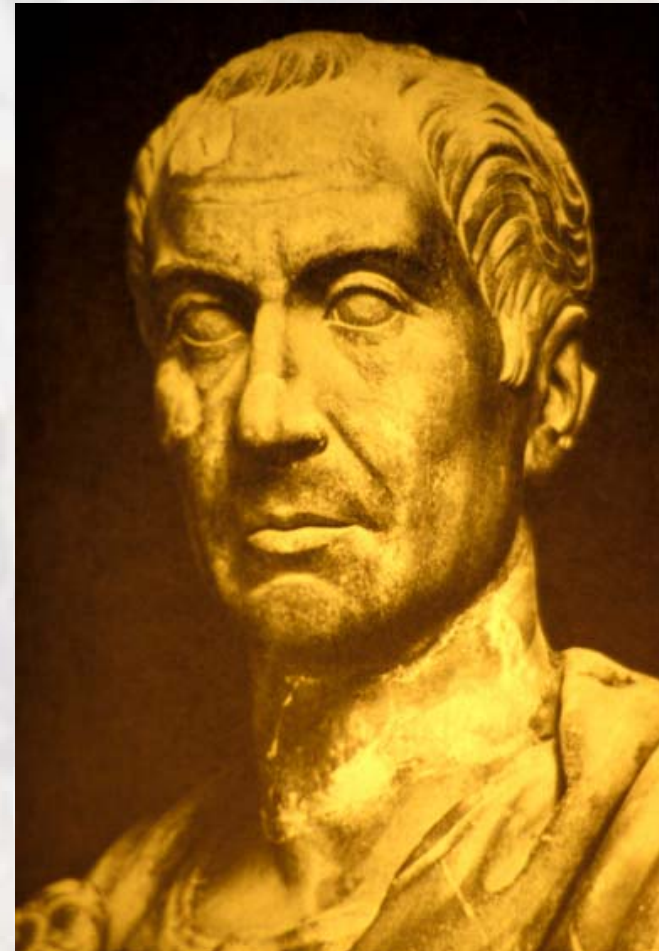




# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- e.g. **Julius Caesar**
  - he worked his way up to the consulship by spending others' money wisely
  - then he became the proconsul of Gaul (France)
    - the Romans controlled only a small part of Gaul in 58 BCE
  - by 52 BCE he had conquered all Gaul, bringing untold wealth into Rome





BRITANNIA

GERMANIA

GERMANIA  
INFERIOR  
17 C.E.

BELGICA  
57-51 B.C.E.

LUGDUNENSIS  
58-51 B.C.E.

GAUL

GERMANIA  
SUPERIOR  
17 C.E.

AQUITANIA  
56-51 B.C.E.

Lugdunum

CISALPINE  
GAUL VENETIA

NARBONENSIS  
c. 120 B.C.E.

LIGURIA

IBERIA

Massilia

MEDITERRANEAN  
SEA

ITALY



# *Women and Historical Biography*

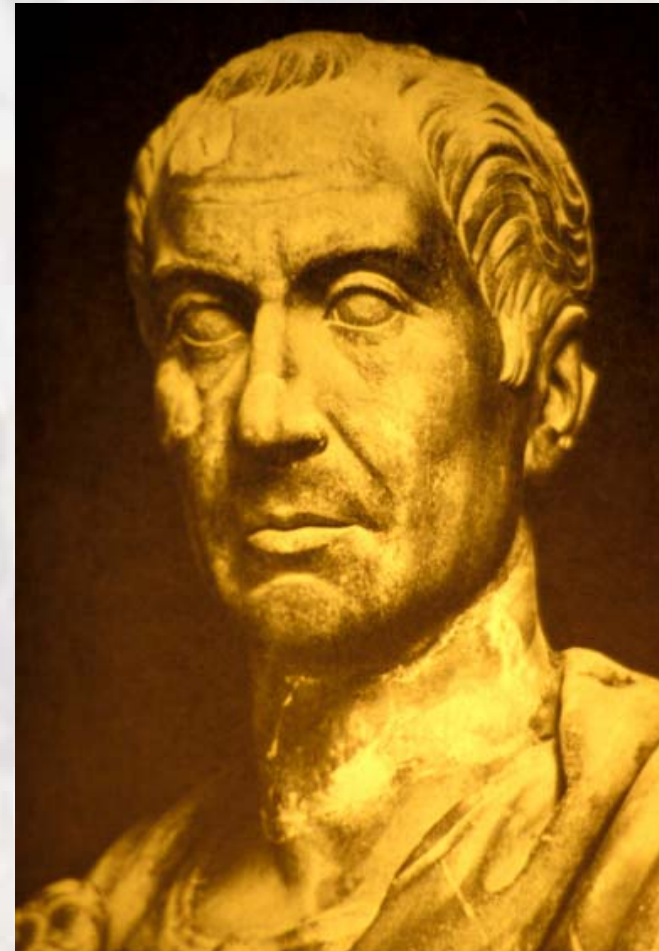
## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- e.g. **Julius Caesar**

- but his campaigns probably killed as many as a million Gauls in less than a decade:

Requisitions of food and punitive devastations completed human, economic and ecological disaster probably unequalled until the conquest of the Americas.

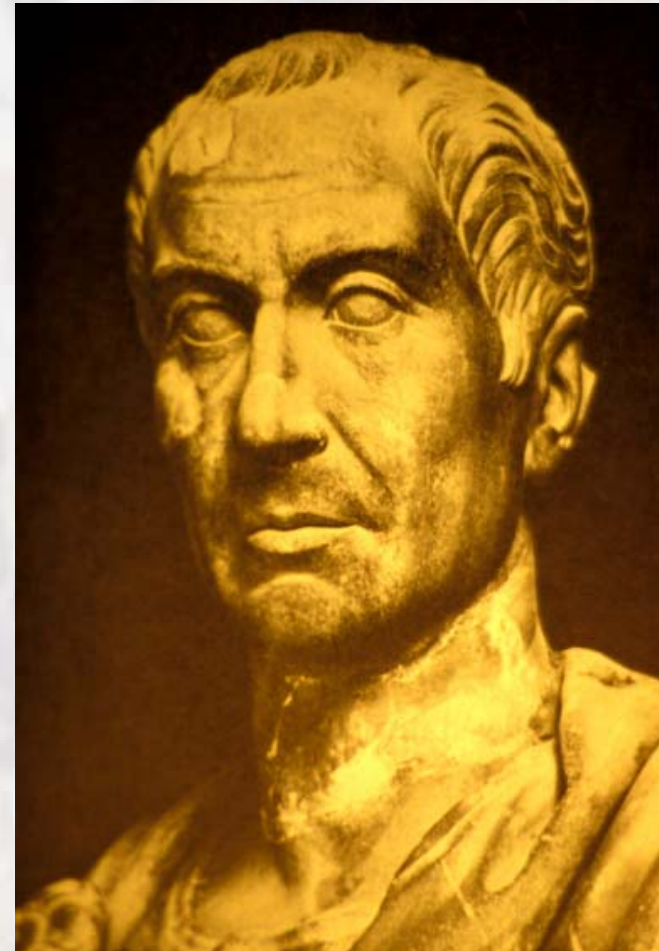
E. Badian, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- e.g. **Julius Caesar**
  - worse yet, this spectacular rise made his colleagues in Rome jealous
    - which led to a civil war in which many Romans died
    - and ultimately Caesar's own assassination
    - along with the end of democratic government in Rome
  - *tantum pro gloriâ Caesaris!*





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- and these principles are clearest when one looks at the oppressed
- the rise to power of those who are for some reason repressed is even more difficult
  - that makes the value of studying them as individuals all the greater
- thus, **women's history** makes a superb case for the study of historical biography

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- women in history have almost universally faced bias and scorn
  - for their gender alone, if nothing else
  - even queens and rich women have had to force their way into the corridors where power is brokered
  - even when they've owned armies and mints, they've had to assert their influence



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- thus, the history of (in)famous women opens an important door to the past
  - studying women in history allows us to embrace a wider-than-usual range of life within past societies





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

- thus, the history of (in)famous women opens an important door to the past
  - when we see how minorities like women have seized power, we understand better the “greatness” of the Great People who’ve shaped our world





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Introduction: The Great Man Theory*

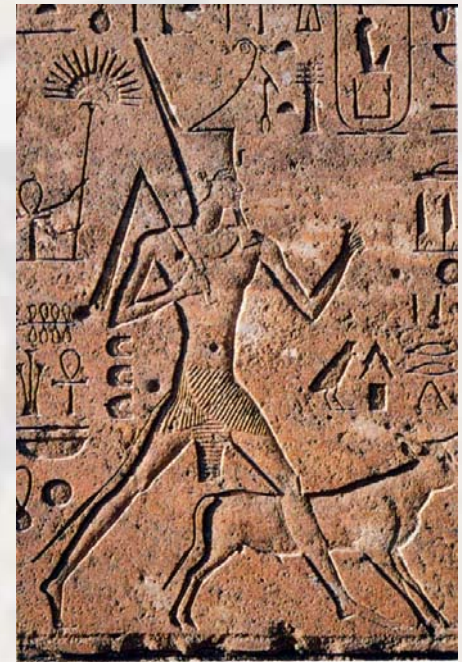
- thus, the history of (in)famous women opens an important door to the past
  - so let's look at three powerful women in history, all of whom followed unique paths to power and prominence
    - Hatshepsut, the **Pharaoh** of Egypt (ca. 1490 BCE)
    - Theodora, the Empress of Byzantium (540's CE)
    - Joan of Arc, the liberator of France (1420's CE)



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- **Hatshepsut** was born just after Egypt had been freed from foreign domination
  - the **Hyksos** (“foreign kings”) had controlled Egypt from 1785-1552 BCE
  - they were evicted by **Ahmose**
  - Ahmose’s dynasty would go on to rule Egypt for over two centuries
    - the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty: 1552-1320 BCE
    - ended with Akhenaten’s successors (see Section 10)

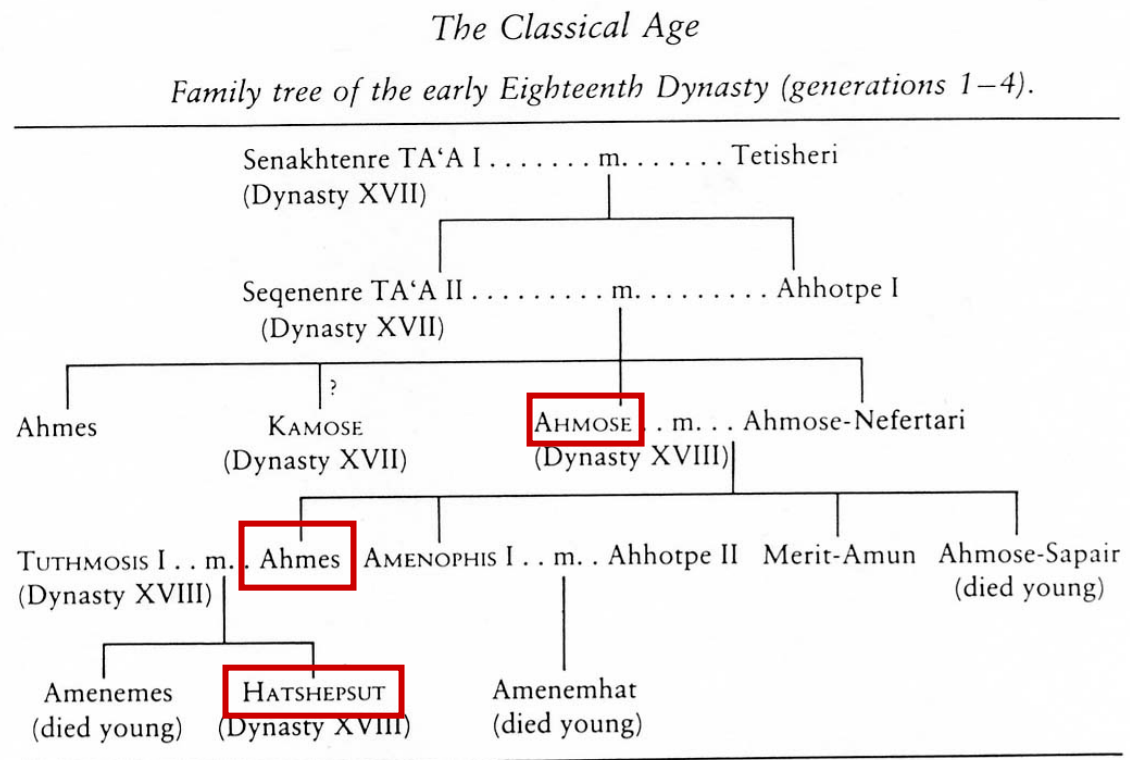


Relief block from the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut at Karnak, showing the queen performing a religious ceremony associated with the kingship. 18th Dynasty, c. 1470 BC, quartzite. (GRAHAM HARRISON)

# Women and Historical Biography

## Hatshepsut

- Hatshepsut was Ahmose's granddaughter
  - but through his daughter Ahmes
    - Ahmes was married to **Tuthmosis I** (not related to Ahmose)
  - thus, by the time she was grown, Hatshepsut was the only living descendant of Ahmose

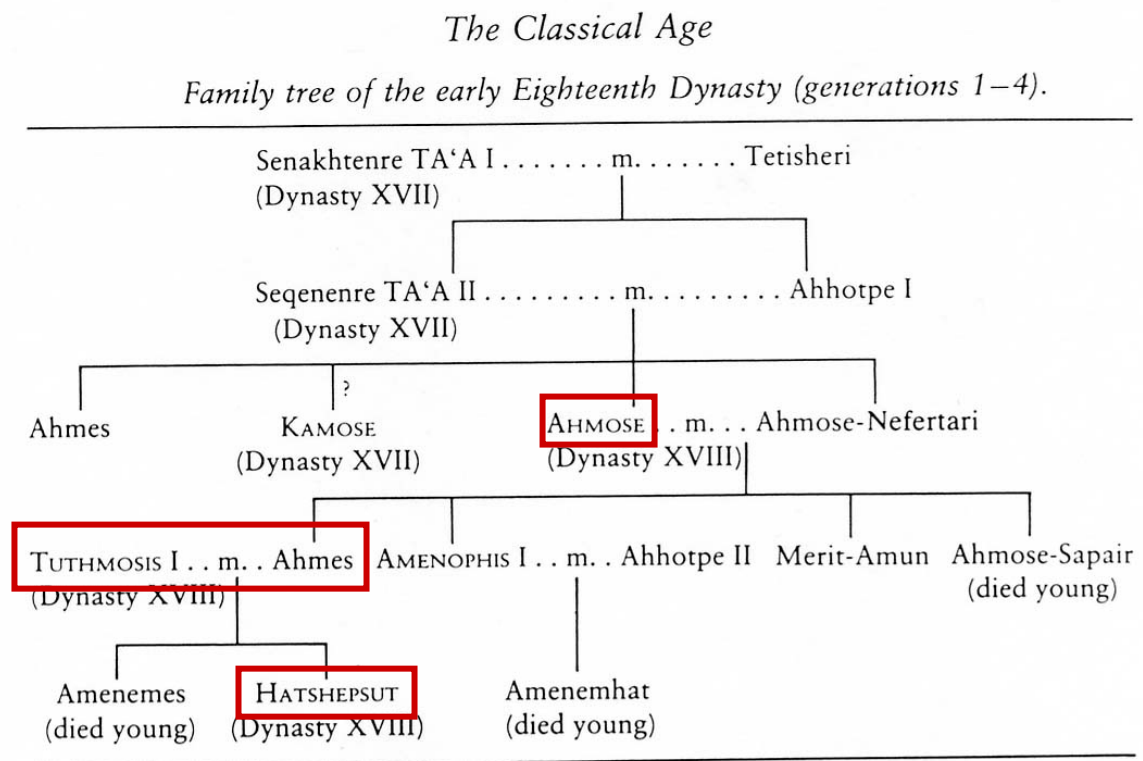




# Women and Historical Biography

## Hatshepsut

- Hatshepsut was Ahmoses' granddaughter
  - but she was female and women could not rule on their own, even in Egypt
  - she needed a man to serve as a front for her regency if she wanted to be "king"

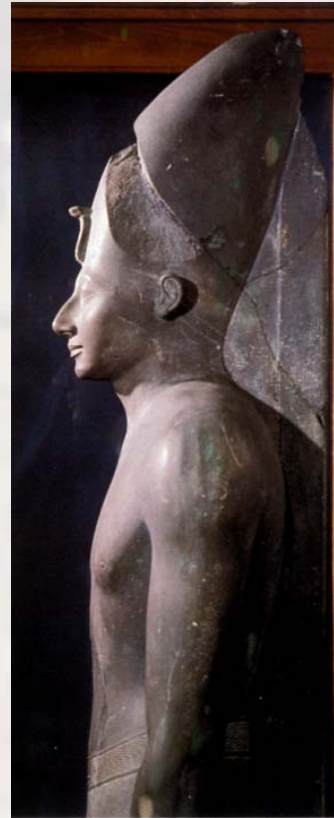




# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

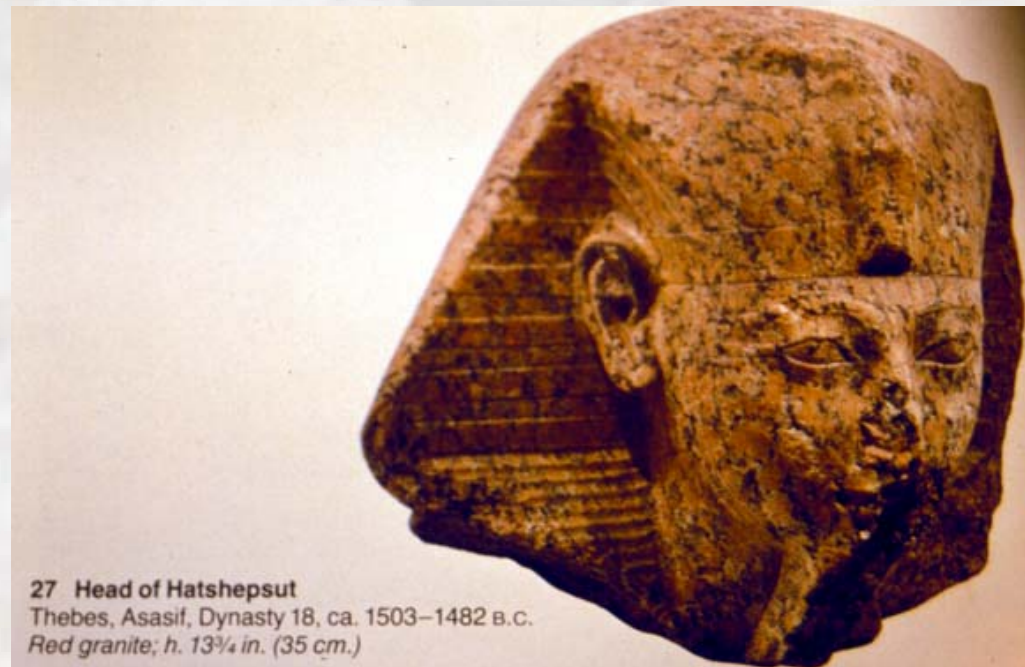
- thus, to secure her claim to the throne, she married **Tuthmosis II**
  - a “secondary son” of her father
  - from this marriage was born only one surviving daughter **Neferure**
  - but Tuthmosis II and a secondary wife had a son, **Tuthmosis III**
    - Tuthmosis III would eventually become one of the most aggressive and dynamic pharaohs in Egyptian history
    - but not for a while!



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- when Hatshepsut's husband Tuthmosis II died young, she took the reins of power
  - there were no other surviving adult males in her family
    - Tuthmosis III was still a boy
  - but as a woman Hatshepsut could not be "king"



27 Head of Hatshepsut  
Thebes, Asasif, Dynasty 18, ca. 1503–1482 B.C.  
Red granite; h. 13¾ in. (35 cm.)

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- there were many honorific titles for women in ancient Egyptian
  - e.g. “god’s wife,” “king’s mother,” “king’s daughter,” “king’s sister”
- but there was no word for “female ruler”
- to hold power, Egyptian women had to be connected to men





# *Women and Historical Biography*

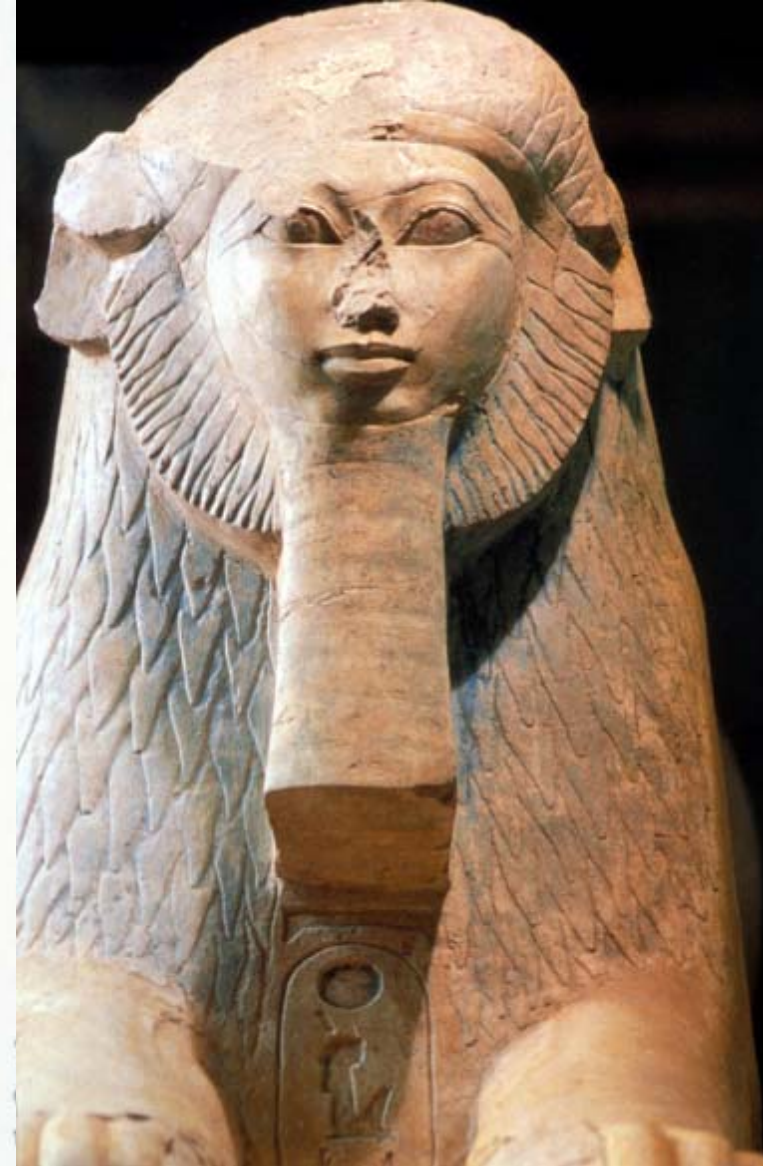
## *Hatshepsut*

- Hatshepsut needed some sort of “male cover”
  - but all she had was Tuthmosis III and he was still a child
  - given infant mortality rates in ancient Egypt – even among the upper classes – it would have been unwise for her to ally with him
- her solution was ingenious!
  - instead of trying to create the concept of “female ruler,” she redefined *herself* as “king”

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- she portrayed herself as male, e.g. false beard
  - with masculine titles, e.g. “Bull of Horus”
- but she also depicted herself realistically
  - as a heavy-set woman
  - why? did she not want to push the gender-bending too far?



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- she did not denounce Tuthmosis III, but instead claimed to be his guardian
  - she said she was keeping the throne safe for him to have one day
  - and so she did — for over twenty years!
- thus, she was not a usurping woman, but a caring mother-figure





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- finally, she tied herself to her dead father Tuthmosis I

[The King] went up to Heaven and was united with the gods. His son took his place as King of the Two Lands and he was the sovereign on the throne of his father. His sister, the God's Wife Hatshepsut, dealt with the affairs of state: the Two Lands were under her government and taxes were paid to her.

*(Urk. IV 59, 13-60, 3)*



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

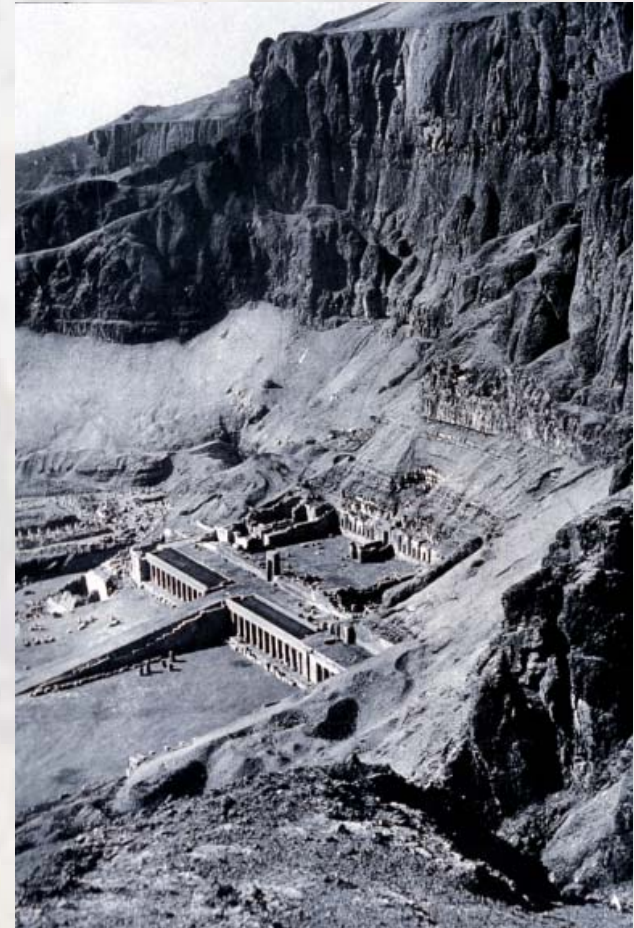
- but an impeccable pedigree “won’t help you at the automat”
- Hatshepsut needed a “non-dead” male beside her, too
- Enter **Senenmut!**
  - a non-royal whom Hatshepsut elevated into the court as her companion and steward
    - gossip says her lover, too
  - Senenmut was made the tutor of Neferure



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- Senenmut oversaw the building of Hatshepsut's funerary monument at **Deir-el-Bahri**





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- all in all, Senenmut helped Hatshepsut look like she was “just one of the boys”
- and that’s how she got to the top and stayed there: by playing “the old boys’ network”
  - having grown up in the court, she knew how to give and collect favors
  - cf. army reliefs at Deir-el-Bahri





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Hatshepsut*

- Lesson of Hatshepsut's Biography:  
women can rule, if they act like "kings"
  - "Don't stress your gender too much, but don't deny it either!"
  - "And don't let anyone use it against you!"

"...he who shall do her homage shall live, he who shall speak evil in blasphemy of her Majesty shall die!"

(Inscription on the walls of Deir-el-Bahri)



# Women and Historical Biography

## Theodora

- fast-forward ahead two millennia to **Theodora**, during the **Byzantine Empire**  
– she lived in **Constantinople**





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- the best – the only! – historical source for Theodora is **Procopius** (see Section 1)
  - Procopius hated Theodora, even more than her husband **Justinian**, the Emperor of **Byzantium**
  - in *The Anecdota*, Procopius portrays her a back-stabbing, power-hungry social climber
  - and a harlot!





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- the biography of Theodora, according to Procopius

When these children came of age, their own mother put them on the stage there as soon as possible, in that they were comely in appearance, but not all at the same time, rather as each seemed to be ripe for this task. The first, Comito, had already become distinguished among the prostitutes of her day.



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- the biography of Theodora, according to Procopius

Theodora, walking behind her and wrapped in a little tunic with sleeves, the sort meant for a girl-slave, attended on her in other ways and followed, always carrying on her shoulders the stool her sister was accustomed to sit on in assemblies . . .





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- the biography of Theodora, according to Procopius
  - the salacious details Procopius provides are probably “invented history,” at least to some extent
    - a puritanical courtier’s spiteful and prurient musings





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- the biography of Theodora, according to Procopius
  - but as with all invented history, there is also, no doubt, some degree of truth
    - Theodora was bold and savvy, ruthless and self-centered
    - whether or not she actually did, she was the type of person who *would* have been a stripper
    - and who would know this better than her underlings?



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- the biography of Theodora, according to Procopius
  - she worked her way up the Byzantine social ladder, serving as a courtesan to a series of important officials
  - ultimately, she met the emperor himself, Justinian
    - Justinian was smitten instantly
    - but Theodora refused to be with him until they married



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- after a short courtship, they married and Theodora became the Empress
  - and also the dominant personality of her day
- she was in many ways Justinian's co-ruler
  - as can be seen in the **Ravenna mosaic**
- she saved Justinian during the Nika riots
- and after her death (548 CE), Justinian's effectiveness as a ruler decreased dramatically



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Theodora*

- Lesson of Theodora's Biography: A woman can also use sexuality to climb to the highest ranks of power
  - but that's not the only way a woman can use her sex to surpass the obstacles blocking her rise to glory
  - a woman can also withhold her sexuality and climb to the top of the heap



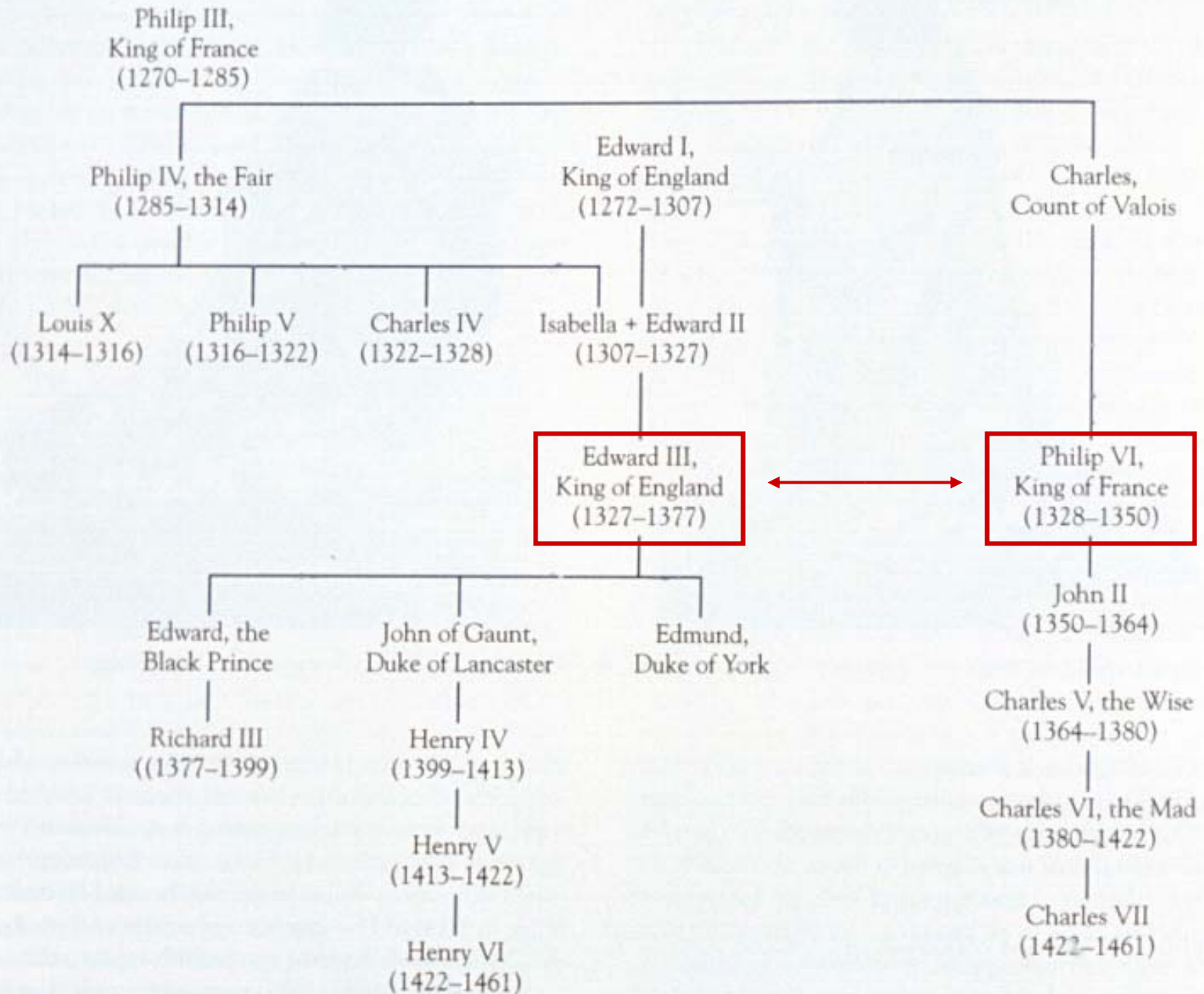
# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Joan of Arc*

- fast-forward again another millennium, to France in the fourteenth century
- **The Hundred Years' War** (1337-1453)
  - between the French and the English over which of them owned France
  - the English kings came from French nobility and were as “French” as the French kings
  - the war unfolded very slowly at first because of the Black Death (see Section 6)
  - in the end, the French king **Charles VII** chased the English out of France (1453 CE)



THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH SUCCESSIONS, C. 1270-1461



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## Chronology of Late-Medieval England and France

---

### England

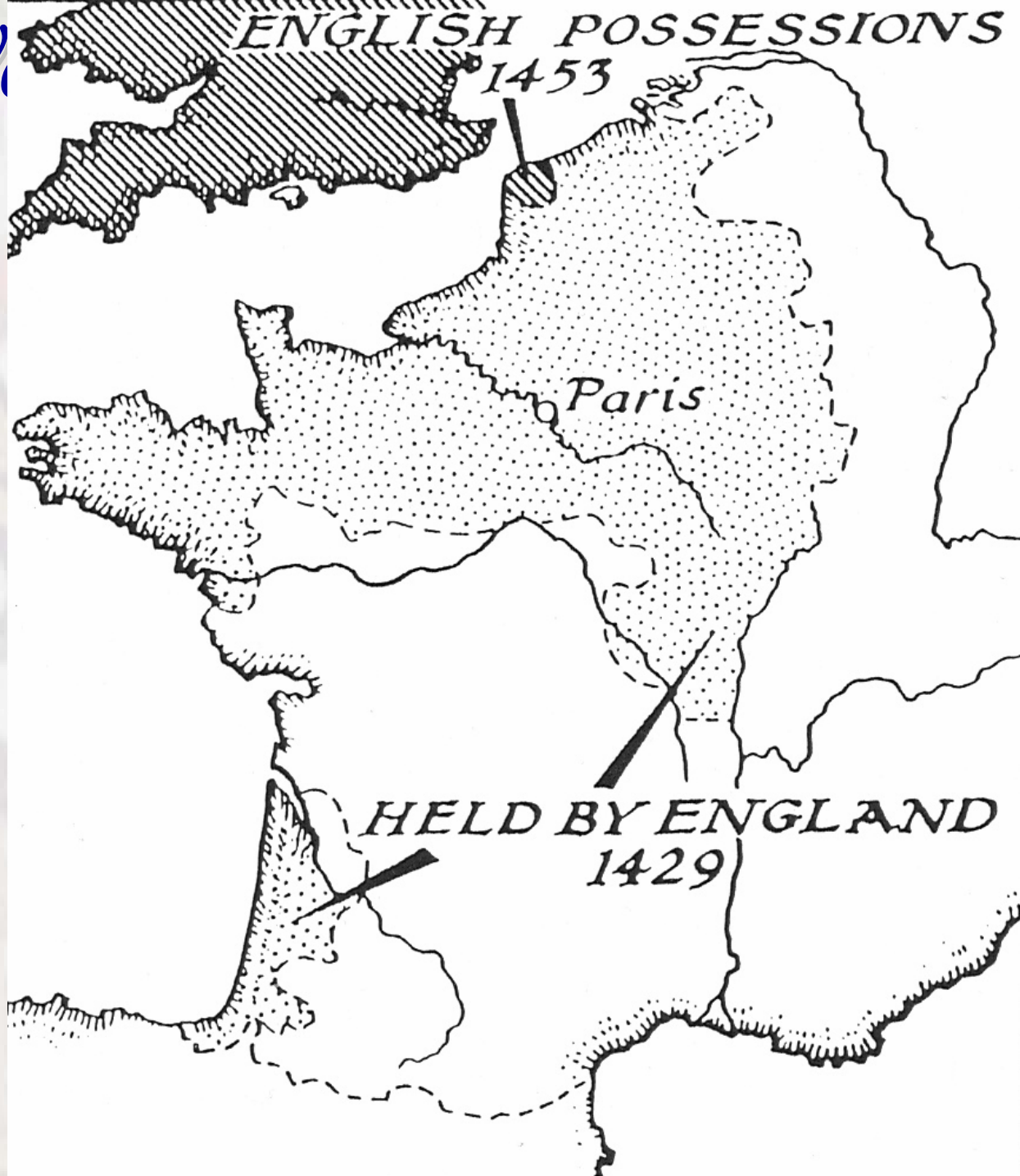
1307–1327: Reign of Edward II  
1327–1377: Reign of Edward III  
**1337–1453: Hundred Years' War**  
    1346: Battle of Crécy  
**1348–1349: Black Death**  
  
    1356: Battle of Poitiers  
  
1377–1399: Reign of Richard II  
    1381: Peasants' Revolt  
**1413–1422: Reign of Henry V**  
    **1415: Battle of Aginçourt**  
1455–1485: Wars of the Roses  
1461–1483: Reign of Edward IV  
1485–1509: Reign of Henry VII; beginning of  
    Tudor Dynasty

### France

1328–1589: Valois Dynasty  
1328–1350: Reign of Philip VI  
**1337–1453: Hundred Years' War**  
    1346: Battle of Crécy  
**1348–1349: Black Death**  
1350–1364: Reign of John, "the Good"  
    1356: Battle of Poitiers  
    1357: The Great Ordinance  
    1358: Jacquerie Rebellion  
1364–1380: Reign of Charles V  
  
**1380–1422: Reign of Charles VI, "the Mad"**  
    **1415: Battle of Aginçourt**  
1422–1461: Reign of Charles VII  
**1429–1431: Career of Joan of Arc**  
1461–1483: Reign of Louis XI

---

W



phy



# *Women and Historical Biography*

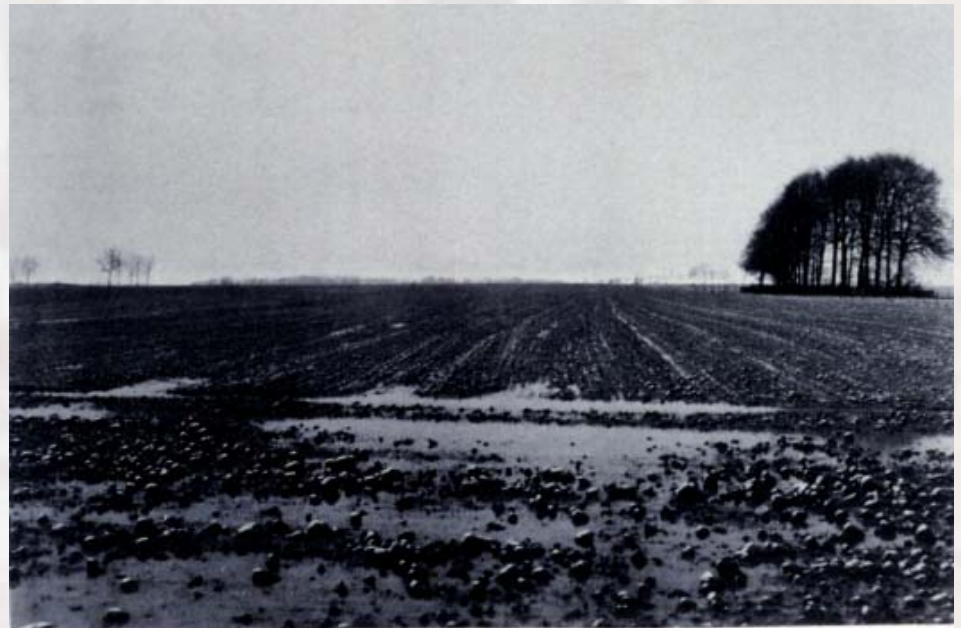
## *Joan of Arc*

- but in the early 1400's it looked as if the French would lose the Hundred Years' War — and they almost did!
  - after a series of weak rulers, the English had finally found a competent king, **Henry V**
  - but the French were still burdened with their worst king ever, **Charles VI** (aka “The Mad”)
    - Charles VI was at war with his own son, the **dauphin** (later Charles VII), “crown prince”
  - Charles VI wanted to hand France over to the **Burgundians** (English supporters)

# *Women and Historical Biography*

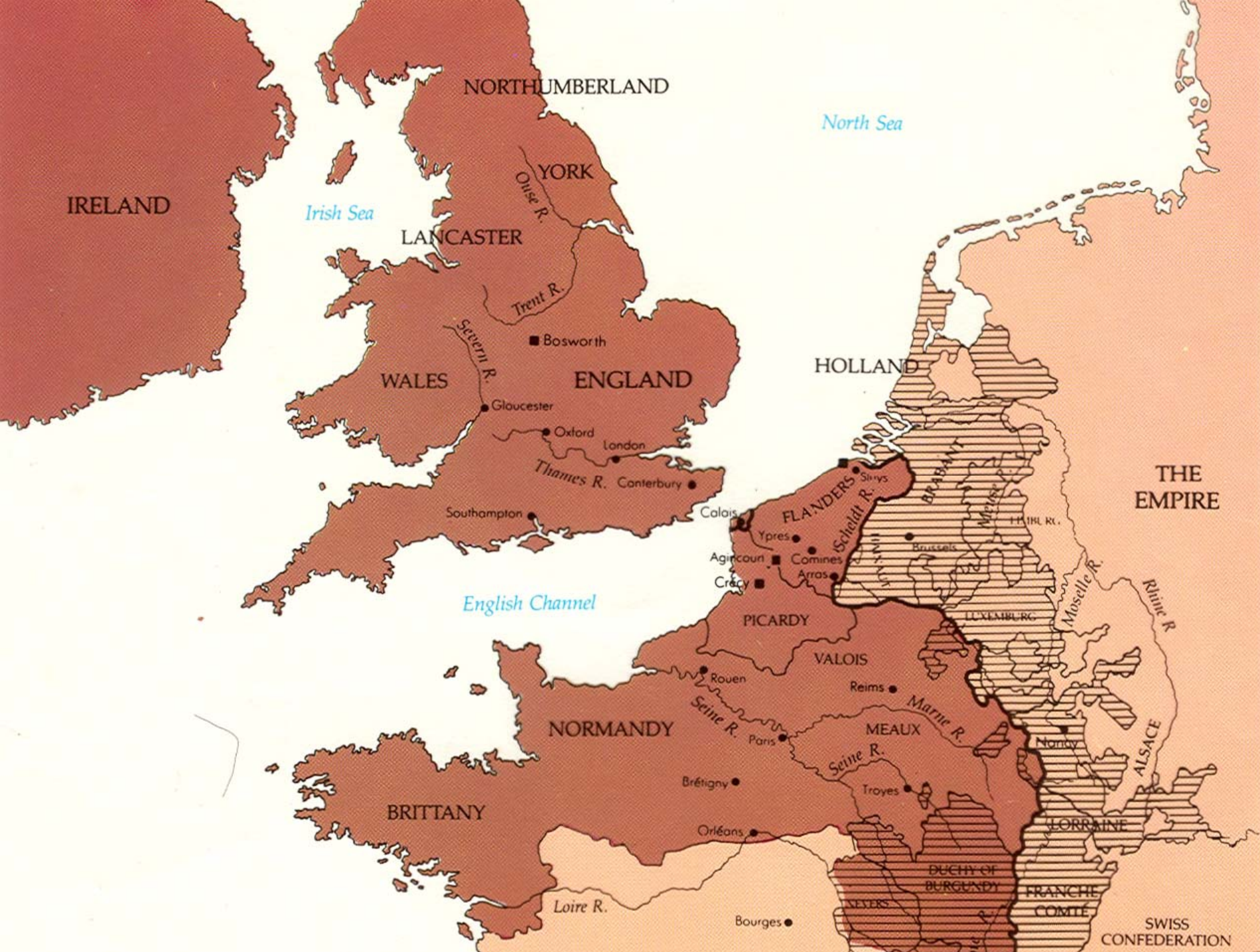
## *Joan of Arc*

- seeing this weakness among the French, Henry V of England attacked northern France
  - 1415 CE: the **Battle of Agincourt**
  - English archers mowed down French knights mired in the mud after a heavy storm



12 The battlefield of Agincourt from the English second position. Grave pits are marked by trees to the right.







# *Women and Historical Biography*

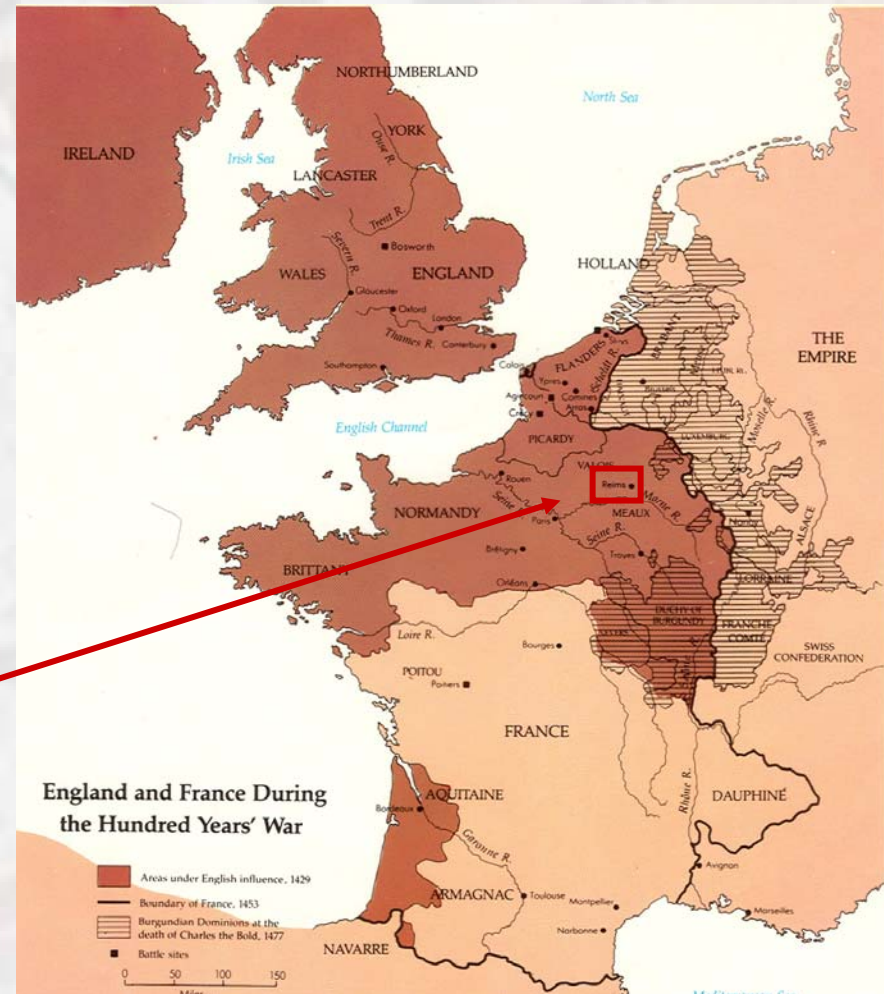
## *Joan of Arc*

- Charles VI disinherited his own son (Charles VII) and made Henry V his heir
  - it was the end of France proper — on paper!
- 1422 CE: Charles VI and Henry V died
  - Charles VI's death was a much-needed relief for the French
  - but Henry V's death was an unexpected shock for the English!
    - his son **Henry VI** who was still a child became the King of England

# Women and Historical Biography

## Joan of Arc

- Charles VII controlled very little of France
  - mainly in the south
  - the Burgundians ruled the north
  - Charles VII could not even be formally crowned because he did not control the area around **Reims**



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Joan of Arc*

- at this low moment in French history appeared **Joan of Arc** (1412-1431 CE)
- from a peasant family
- had religious visions that God wanted her to save France
- allowed herself to be proclaimed the “**Maid of Lorraine**” and went to war like a man



Joan of Arc as she may have looked, shown here holding a banner with the fleur-de-lis, the royal emblem of France.



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Joan of Arc*

- she led the French assault on **Orléans** and broke the British siege
  - thereafter, victory followed upon victory
- ultimately, she saw Charles VII crowned in the cathedral at Reims



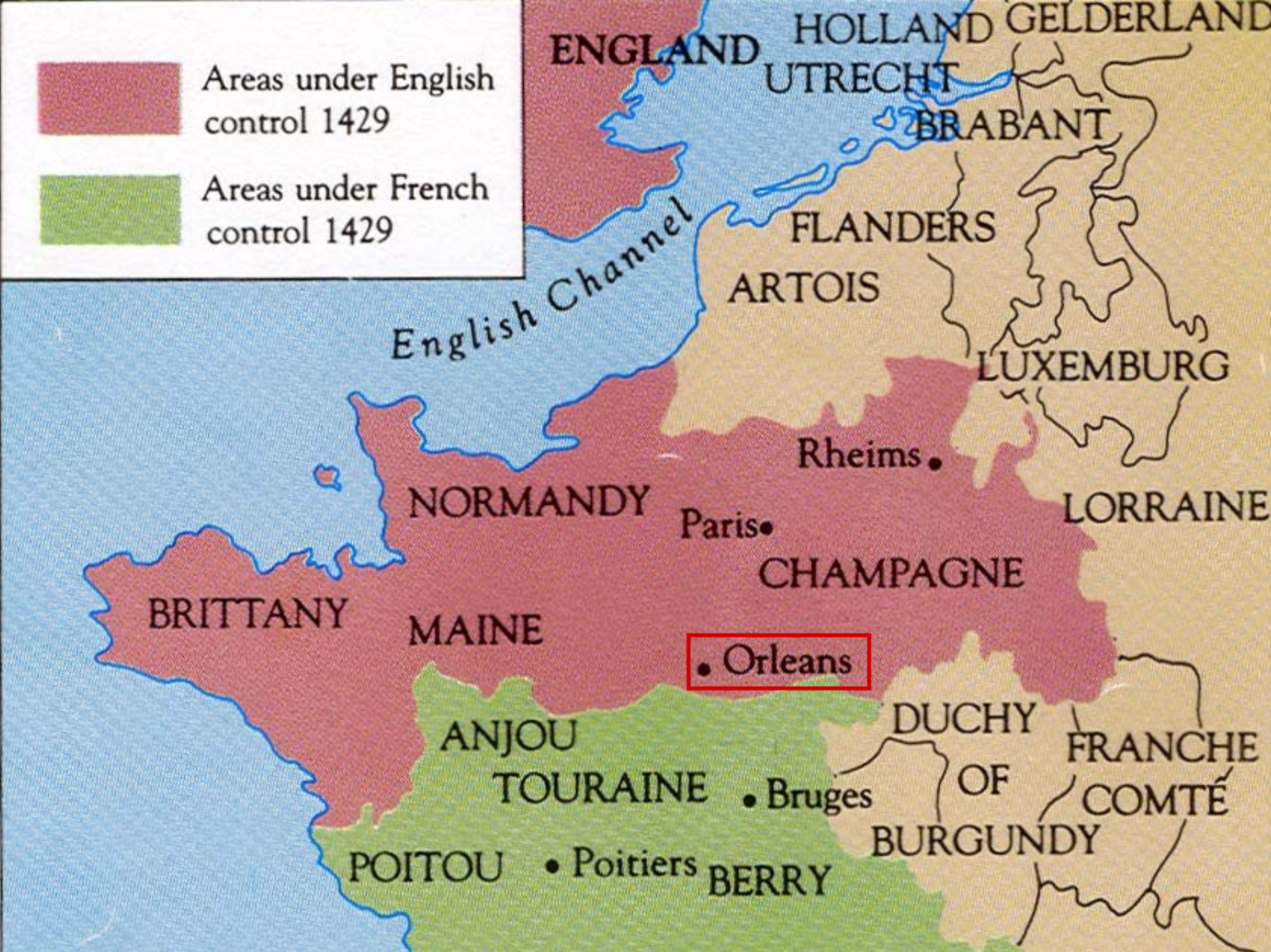




Areas under English control 1429



Areas under French control 1429





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Joan of Arc*

- but her success engendered jealousy and eventually British sympathizers in France handed her over to the English forces
  - she was tried for witchcraft
    - part of post-Black Death hysteria (see Section 6)
  - she was burnt at the stake





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Joan of Arc*

- in 1920, the Pope finally canonized “Saint Joan”
- Lesson of Joan of Arc’s biography: The denial of gender can be as powerful as the use of sexuality
  - like Theodora, Joan was born poor
  - but unlike Theodora, Joan used abstinence — not sex — to fuel her rocket to fame



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- Hatshepsut, Theodora and Joan of Arc show how individuals in history have risen above the obstacles facing them
  - but none of these historical women embraces as much of the truth about the importance of individuals in history as a fictional character like **Clytemnestra** does
  - the myth of Clytemnestra demonstrates well the complex nexus of biases and fears which have confronted the “Great Women” of the past

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- in Greek myth, Clytemnestra is the daughter of Zeus and a mortal woman
  - thus, of both low and high birth
  - also the “ugly sister” of Helen
- as a princess, she is forced to marry **Agamemnon**, the King of **Argos (Mycenae)**, without her consent

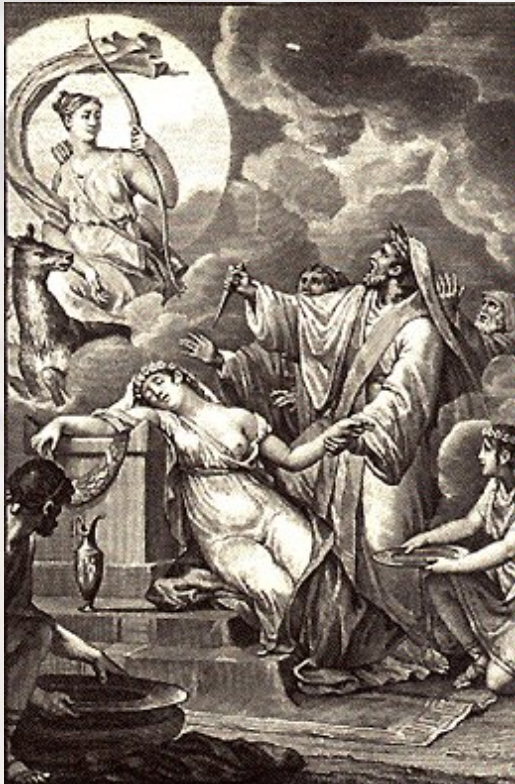




# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have three children: **Iphigenia**, Electra and **Orestes**
  - Agamemnon tricks her, sacrifices Iphigenia



# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- for ten years while Agamemnon is away at Troy, Clytemnestra runs Argos and plots revenge for her daughter's murder – and takes up with his cousin Aegisthus
- she then slaughters Agamemnon in his bath upon his “triumphant” return from Troy





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- some years later, Orestes returns from the safe house where his mother had placed him as a baby and murders her for killing his father
  - but her Furies haunt and drive him mad
  - until the goddess Athena saves him
    - a mother is not a true parent but only the father's "field"





# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- Clytemnestra as a prototype of “Great Women” in history:
  - like Hatshepsut, she waits for her chance to seize power and plays power politics as well as any man
  - like Theodora, she uses her sexuality to maneuver herself onto the throne
  - like Joan of Arc, she appeals to heaven for a violent and righteous retribution
  - and like them all, she is filled with ambition and a healthy disregard for others’ opinions!

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- none of the “Great Women” of the past let their femininity obstruct their ambitions
  - in fact, they used it when it was convenient
  - especially as it gave them entry into the beds, baths and beyond where the powerful lived
- all in all, women’s history adds an important dimension to our understanding of the what-really-happened-in-the-past
  - it foregrounds what is all too often scenery

# *Women and Historical Biography*

## *Conclusion: Clytemnestra*

- if the study of the past looks to some like a long litany of **DWEM**'s (Dead White European Males), studying women's history can go some way toward correcting that misimpression
  - women — and all minorities! — own history as much as anyone
- when we muzzle any minority, we impoverish and weaken ourselves
  - it enriches us to listen more to more of them!