



## The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy (Women and History 2)

By Gerda Lerner

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### **The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy (Women and History 2)** By Gerda Lerner

A pioneer in women's studies and long-term activist for women's issues, and a past president of the Organization of American Historians, Gerda Lerner is one of the founders and foremost scholars of Women's History. *The Creation of Patriarchy*, the first book in her two-volume magnum opus *Women and History* (1986) received wide review attention and much acclaim, winning the prestigious Joan Kelly Prize of the American Historical Association for the best work on Women's History that year. *Ms* hailed the book for providing "a grand historical framework that was impossible even to imagine before the enlightenment about women's place in the world provided by her earlier work and that of other feminist scholars." *New Directions for Women* said it "may well be the most important work in feminist theory to appear in our generation."

*Patriarchy* traced the development of the ideas, symbols, and metaphors by which men institutionalized their domination of women. Now, in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, the eagerly awaited concluding volume of *Women and History*, Lerner documents the twelve-hundred-year struggle of women to free their minds from patriarchal thought, to create Women's History, and to achieve a feminist consciousness. In a richly documented narrative filled with inspiring portraits of women, Lerner ranges from the Middle Ages to the late 19th century, tracing several important ways by which women strove for autonomy and equality. One of the most remarkable sections examines over twelve hundred years of feminist Bible criticism. Since objections to women's thinking, teaching, and speaking in public were based on biblical authority--most notably, passages from Genesis and the writings of St. Paul--women returned again and again to these texts, in an attempt to subvert patriarchal dominance and establish their equality with men. This survey of biblical criticism allows Lerner to illustrate her most important insight--the discontinuity of women's history. She describes how women's history was not passed on from generation to generation, forcing women in effect to reinvent the wheel over and over again. In a series of fascinating portraits of individual women who resisted patriarchal indoctrination, Lerner discusses women mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich and later Protestant mystics, and brings to life the many women of great literary talent, from Christine de Pisan to Louise Labe to Emily Dickinson, who simply

bypassed patriarchal thought and created alternate worlds for themselves. Documenting the 1,200 year struggle of women to free their minds from patriarchal thought, create a women's history, and achieve a feminist consciousness, this brilliant work charts new ground for feminist theory, the history of ideas, and the development of women's place in our intellectual tradition.

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Documenting the 1,200 year struggle of women to free their minds from patriarchal thought, create a women's history, and achieve a feminist consciousness, this brilliant work charts new ground for feminist theory, the history of ideas, and the development of women's place in our intellectual tradition.

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**Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

This volume is a densely researched, accessible and engrossing conclusion to Lerner's two-volume study *Women in History*. In *The Creation of the Patriarchy* (1986), she traced the slippery progress of women in ancient Near Eastern societies into a subordinate position but the Sisyphean journey back is no less painful. Analyzing European, American and African American history, Lerner begins with the ways in which women sought "self-authorization": as mystics, speaking with the voice of God; as mothers, educators and nurturers of future generations, or as creators. Lerner then moves on to show how self-authorization combined with education and female networks helped foster feminist consciousness. This is no linear tale, however. As Lerner notes, men's contributions became the common heritage while "women's creations sank soundlessly into the sea, leaving barely a ripple, and succeeding generations of women were left to cover the same ground others had already covered before them." Lerner, Robinson-Edwards professor of history emerita at the University of Wisconsin, helped pioneer the study of women and history and remains preeminent in the field.

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From Library Journal

With this book, Lerner (history, Univ. of Wisconsin) completes her study *Women in History*. In the initial volume (*The Creation of Patriarchy*, LJ 7/86), Lerner examined the development of female subordination as a historical phenomenon; in this work, she analyzes the conditions necessary to contest the idea of patriarchy. She places educational disadvantage at the center of continuing female subjugation, describing women's devotion to mysticism and motherhood and offering illustrations of those few extraordinary women who transcended constraints. But feminist consciousness, Lerner argues, depended upon both economic independence and the development of a written history; these conditions finally emerged in the 19th century. Based on wide-ranging research and written with a scholarly audience in mind, Lerner's lively and provocative essay will nevertheless attract a broad readership. Suitable for large public libraries and all academic and research collections.

- *Cynthia Harrison, Federal Judicial Ctr., Washington, D.C.*

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From Kirkus Reviews

In an excellent follow-up to *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986)--a study of how men institutionalized their domination of women--NOW cofounder Lerner (History/Univ. of Wisconsin at Madison) follows women's struggle to create a history of their own--from the first written record in the seventh century to the start of the feminist movement. Lerner's sweeping and erudite chronicle primarily traces women who were aware of belonging to a socially defined, unnaturally subordinate and deprived group, and who expressed their consciousness and their opposition mostly in their writing. After a brief history of women's educational "disadvantaging," the author describes women's various attempts to "authorize" themselves through mysticism, heretical religious practices, alternative modes of thought, and motherhood. She laments the talent lost by the repression of women, illustrated by the wasteful and repetitive nature of women's Biblical criticism--which, deprived of a written tradition, each generation had to start anew. It was through creativity, Lerner says, that some women by-passed the patriarchal institutions--a thesis illustrated with copious examples, including that of Emily Dickinson, whose reputed homosexuality the author discusses in detail. Lerner finds in the German Romantic movement the conditions for an emerging women's consciousness and the subsequent struggle for their own history. Detailing the victimization of women--their lack of support,

education, leisure, and power, and their displacement by the Church from equal formal participation in the divine--Lerner nonetheless makes a strong case for their success based on tenacity, survival skills, and strong empirical sense--which she herself displays. The thesis is debatable, but the evidence here is fascinating and perhaps unique. Moreover, Lerner doesn't simply lament the silence endured by women--from the obscure wives of medieval French troubadours to Mexican peasants, German nuns, and English mystics--but gives these nearly forgotten souls a voice. -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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