Inspired by the Bechdel Test for fiction, **"The Parity Principle"** provides a simple set of criteria for historians, educators, and the public to assess whether historical works offer a complete picture of the past by including the experiences of both men and women.

Guiding Principle:
An account or portrayal of a historical period or event should feature multiple named women:

01 within the main thrust of the historical narrative

02 discussed on their own terms, rather than in their relation to others (e.g. as a spouse or a victim)

03 providing insight into their own notable achievements and/or the general life experience of women at the time

The Parity Principle

Missing Pages

ancestry

THE PARITY PRINCIPLE: A 3-STEP TEST

For an exploration of a historical event or period to pass the Parity Principle, it must meet the following three criteria:

1. **The Presence Test**
   The Rule: An account should feature named women who are central to the narrative, not just mentioned in a footnote or a sidebar.
   The Benchmark: If a module names five historical men, it must name at least two historical women

2. **The Agency Test**
   The Rule: Women should be presented as active agents in their own lives – whether that's through notable acts or the exploration of their everyday experience of a given period - not just as victims, bystanders, or wives/mothers of powerful men.
   The Benchmark: The women featured must be studied for their own actions, ideas, or impact on society, politics, science, or culture.

3. **The Structural Test (The "Beyond the Exceptional" Rule)**
   The Rule: Historical analysis should explore the collective experiences, legal status, or societal contributions of women during a given event or era.
   The Benchmark: Space should be reserved for the exploration of how the events of the period uniquely impacted women across different social classes or ethnicities.

WIDER CONTEXTUAL EXAMPLES:

Example 1: The Early Modern Period (The Tudors)
If you're working on an account of history based on the Tudor period, and specifically the events of the English Reformation, it is equally important to also include the experiences of women at the time.

For this period of history, you could consider:
Agency & Resistance: Looking beyond Henry VIII's wives as passive victims and instead exploring women who actively shaped religious thought or resisted the regime, such as the Protestant writer and martyr Anne Askew, or Elizabeth Barton (the "Holy Maid of Kent"), who led a public prophetic campaign against the King's break from Rome.
Economic Impact: Interrogating how the dissolution of the monasteries uniquely affected women, given that nunneries were often the only places where women could access education, healthcare, and financial independence outside of marriage.
The Business of the Household: Examining how everyday women ran the domestic economy, which in Tudor times was a massive enterprise involving healthcare, brewing, agriculture, and manufacturing. Wills and legal disputes from the period, reveal how widows and wives independently managed properties, directed family businesses, and held significant legal and economic influence within their communities while men were away or after they had died.

Example 2: Modern British History (The First World War)
If you're working on an account of history based on the First World War, and specifically the events of the British Home Front, it is equally important to also include the experiences of women at the time.

For this period of history, you could consider:
Diversity of Labor: Moving past the standard image of affluent women knitting socks, and instead highlighting the hazardous, vital work of the "Canaries" (the hundreds of thousands of working-class women who mixed explosives in munitions factories, leaving them with yellow skin and severe health issues).
Political Mobilisation: Exploring how the war effort intersected with the Suffrage movement, examining figures like Dr Elsie Inglis, who founded the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service after being told by the British War Office to "go home and sit still".
The Legacy of Autonomy: Interrogating the aftermath of 1918, looking at how the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act 1919 forced women out of their wartime jobs, contrasting the political win of partial suffrage with the economic reality of women being pushed back into domestic service.

SUPPORTING PROVOCATIONS:

1. **The Headcount**
   "If we removed all the men from this narrative, is there enough content left to form a coherent story, or does the narrative collapse entirely?"

2. **The Identity Check**
   "Are the women in this content referred to by their own names and specific titles, or are they primarily defined by their relationship to a man (e.g., 'Henry VIII's sister', 'the weavers' wives')?"

3. **The Power Dynamics**
   "When women do appear, are they the agents of action (protesting, organising, creating, ruling), or are they merely the recipients of action (vulnerable, rescued, victimised, or passive observers)?"

4. **The "Exceptional Woman" Trap**
   "Is the woman featured treated as an 'extraordinary anomaly' who succeeded in a man's world, or is she framed as part of a wider context of women's contemporary capabilities and resistance?"

5. **The Breadth of Experience**
   "Does this content acknowledge how factors like social class, wealth, or race created vastly different historical realities for the women of this era?"

6. **The Default Settings**
   "When 'everyday life' or 'the public' is discussed in this topic, is the default assumed to be male unless specified otherwise?"

7. **The Source Material**
   "Whose voices are providing the evidence? Does this content utilise primary sources written, created, or spoken by women from the period?"

8. **The Legacy Question**
   "Does the conclusion of this narrative reflect on how these events impacted women's lives, whether by shifting their societal status or by reinforcing the constraints they lived under?"