CONSULTANTS, CONFIDANTES AND CONSORTS: advice-giving in the premodern offering a ‘feminine’ discourse of management consulting

‘…historical understanding, stemming not from an interest in the past, but from a deep commitment to understanding the present. … concerned with genealogy … locating traces of the present in the past, not with the reconstruction of the past.’ (Burrell 1998:18)

Introduction
This paper focuses on discourses of consulting in the premodern, following Foucault’s concept of ‘genealogy’ (in Rabinow 1984, Rose 1996). I want to identify enduring discourses or important shifts in discourse which may illuminate current consulting interactions and the construction of consultant identities in the present. I review historical material about/by those we can construe as consultants or advisers to organisations, principally but not exclusively individuals who advised the rulers and leaders of their time, employing ‘the counsel of manners’ii, but who were not their employees. This provides the nearest equivalent to management consulting interaction in the public sector (my own research focus). I am exploring the idea that consulting has existed for a lot longer than usually thought, stimulated by the rather ahistorical approach of much contemporary writing on consulting - and by my sense that at least public sector consulting has much older roots than the beginning of scientific management in the private sector, which is typically seen as the starting point of management consulting (Kubr 2002).

Contemporary writing on consulting implicitly or explicitly takes the view that consulting ‘began’ in late nineteenth to early twentieth century and developed alongside/in response to corporate growth, importantly post World War Two, and especially strongly from the 1980s to the present day (see for example Tisdall, 1982; McKenna, 2001). I question this very limited historical perspective and here explore people of the premodern who pre-figure consultants in how they offered advice to the leaders of the most complex organisations of their day. White comments, for example, that Machiavelli worked with ‘men who in their day were the Renaissance equivalent of Bill Gates or the Sultan of Brunei.’ (2004:5)

Recently the notion that organisation studies should pay more attention to history has gained ground (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Kieser, 1994; Mutch, 2005), suggesting ‘more interpretive and inductive analyses’ (Clark and Rowlinson 2004:332) going beyond the usual assumptions. Kieser stresses the importance of examining ‘past
choice opportunities’ to avoid a historical determinism (1994:611). This encouraged me to review the discursive history of consulting taking a much broader view of what might constitute its genealogy than others have done in order to unearth the discursive forebears which may illuminate contemporary thinking and my own work.

*Consulting as advice-giving*

The simplest and commonest definitions of consulting regard it as the giving of advice:

- ‘Almost by definition, a consultant is someone who offers advice’ (Griffin 2001).
- ‘someone – mostly a specialist – who is asked to give expert advice or information’ (Bohm 2003:21 his emphasis)
- ‘the provision of independent advice and assistance to clients with managerial responsibilities’ (Institute of Management Consultancy 2002).

Sturdy considers training (in which most consultancies engage) within a definition of consultancy, since this ‘advise[s] managers and other employees on how to think, feel and act’ (2002:131). Clark and Fincham (2002), as editors, comment that the ‘constantly changing nature of the consultancy industry’ makes definitions difficult (2002:2). However in the subtitle to their critical collection they too espouse advice as the core concept: *New Perspectives on the Management Advice Industry*.

There was a burgeoning premodern literature of advice to ‘princes’ from Aristotle through to Seneca and Cicero, as well as throughout the medieval period and from contemporaries of Machiavelli. The latter read and reiterated some of this classical advice. All the advice proffered from ancient times, whatever its differences, had two aims: how to help the prince to stay in power and how to be a virtuous leader.

In drawing on this work today we must ask how far keeping power is the goal of modern managers, and how far virtue or an ethical stance is important. For many survival is a key issue, whether in terms of surviving turbulent change and re-structuring, where keeping a job may turn on chance or favour (similar to Machiavelli’s notion of ‘fortuna’), or in terms of keeping a sane balance for life and work. Equally questions of ethics and where your personal ‘bottom line’ lies in terms of your approach to work and what being a (critical) manager or leader requires you to do in the modern organisation has produced a growing literature on business ethics, including for consultants (van Es 2002), which to some extent mirrors longstanding values of the public sector, such as service to communities, social justice.

This paper emerged from my research into consulting interaction and so focuses on emerging relations between actors in advice-giving, the related co-construction of knowing and power, the construction of subjectivities in interaction; and links these to broader socio-political processes. It primarily uses situated material, the actual words of advisers where possible, to explore these processes. I first set out the Foucauldian concept of ‘genealogy’ and consider who to study; I then present selected relevant material, chronologically to the 18th century. I then turn to considering women in advising or consulting roles. Finally conclusions are drawn through exploring advice gendered ‘feminine’ as a productive lens with which to consider consulting in the present.
Developing a ‘genealogical’ review

Carabine comments that Foucault’s genealogy examined:

‘the history [of the topic] for the purposes of writing ‘a history of the present’ … he asks what it was in earlier periods and what it has become today.’ (Carabine 2001:277)

Foucault makes clear this is not simply tracing a given topic through time, assuming it exists throughout and simply evolves, but is about understanding history such that ‘[we] arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework.’ (in Rabinow 1984:59) Here I explore the premodern in order to understand better how ‘consultant’ as an identity is constituted and how consulting discourses may have emerged and become what they are today. In addition genealogy:

‘[aim[s] to disturb the ‘normalising’ role of dominant discourses … that carry public authority, shape identities and regulate bodies, desires, selves and populations…’

(Foucault quoted in Seidman 1998:235)

This links to a key dimension of critical management studies and to challenging accepted literature on and discourses of consulting. Rose sees genealogy similarly:

‘… to try to trace, in very concrete and material forms, the actual history of those forms of rationality that comprise our present, … we can question our present certainties…by confronting them with their histories’ (Rose 1999:xi)

He suggests: ‘problematisation’ or uncovering the criteria by which things or people, in this case consultants, come to be seen as problematic; examining how things are explained, designated, evidenced; considering techniques, apparatuses and means of doing; identifying who has authority or expertise, how they get it and keep it; exploring the selves involved, how they see the world, how they are known, what they seek to be or to achieve, what techniques of self they use and their strategies. Such work presents a genealogy which aims to provide a ‘de-stabilisation or de-fatalisation of our present’ (1999:xii):

‘… opening the possibility that things have been different, could have been different, … If the history of our present is more accidental than we may like to believe, the future of our present is also more open than it sometimes appears.’ (1999:xii)

All this echoes Foucault’s distinction between how in the past certain acts were criminalised e.g. sodomy, rather than the modern construction and condemnation of identities e.g. homosexual (Sullivan 2003). My distinction is that between acts of advice-giving in the past and the shift to the modern notion of ‘consultant’; to understand more about how the past has inscribed our present construct.

Who can I study?

My genealogical search has been contained by focusing predominantly on ‘live’ material i.e. the words of people carrying out advice-giving to those leading or managing the complex organisations of their day. This helps steer a course close to my discursive view of consulting and explores directly how notions of advice-giving and consulting may have been constituted. This focus is in the case of women especially limiting.

Overwhelmingly in the premodern, the ‘organisations’ in question are states, cities and large private, landed estates. The first two immediately reflect my public sector interest. The latter for centuries represented the nearest to the private sector organisation seeking profits for its owner, but of course also enacted public services,
such as the administration of justice and was the focus (as with today’s corporates) of much political activity.

In looking for those who advised the leaders of these organisations, I also sought genuinely external advisers, rather than those directly beholden to or employed by the leader. Of course these descriptions are informed by modern concepts of these terms and the ‘employee’ is not a premodern concept, certainly not in (pre-)feudal times. However I distinguish between those in paid posts, such as Elizabeth I of England’s long-serving adviser Cecil (although his advice was often trenchantly independent nonetheless) and those remaining autonomous as advisers, often working for several people, but who nonetheless received payment for their services, such as Plato who advised Dion of Sicily. This is not a simple line to draw and some people worked in both capacities at different times, notably Machiavelli.

I have worked with material in relation to key figures; but also to key roles I have identified such as confidantes and queens consort. For convenience here, I work chronologically in reviewing key figures/roles in the ancient world, in the early centuries in Europe, in the Renaissance period and in the 17th and 18th centuries. I am necessarily highly selective so that what follows represents a first sketch of a genealogy of advice-giving to organisations.

The ancient world

In ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and China, numerous figures stand out but few have left their words behind, and those in many layered translation. After a brief overview, the words of one key Greek figure, Plato, are presented, indicating the scope of others who operated as advice-givers. The resonances from this time to our own are striking.

Rawson (1989) describes the scope of ancient advice-giving, such as the treatise Aristotle wrote for Alexander the Great and how the Greeks tried to persuade Roman rulers to use (Greek) philosophic advisers in their ‘attempts to secure patronage and status.’ (Rawson 1989:235) She lists Areus of Alexandria advising Augustus, Dio Chrysostom advising Trajan and notes a tradition of the philosopher’s letter of advice to a ruler, for example Cicero, ‘himself powerless in politics, … returned to the role of philosophic adviser …’. (1989:240). The interplay of issues of power and knowledge with values is visible here, along with how the provenance of ideas matters to their recipients: Rawson’s observations regarding Greece and Rome mirror debates on the credibility of management consulting/knowledge from the USA, Europe or Asia.

In ancient Egypt the chief adviser to Pharaoh was frequently a multi-talented individual who combined architect, soldier, patron of arts and religion and administrative roles with the ease of what we might term ‘renaissance man’ who combines art and science. A prime example of this apparent polymathy is Senenmut, adviser to Pharaoh Hatshepsut, who as a female Pharaoh was herself highly unusual. The relics of her reign suggest his influence was resented and contemporaries assumed Senenmut had a further role as her unofficial consort and lover as well as being chief of public works and tutor to her daughter (Tyldesley 1998a). Similar advisers attached to male pharaohs, such as Imhotep with King Djoser, were not criticised but were often deified after death; some were powerful enough to establish their own dynasty when the pharaoh’s failed e.g. Horemheb after Tutankhamen. Others were scribes (for example Amenhotep, with pharaoh Amenhotep III), the key profession of ancient Egypt which led to influence and position at court or in the
priesthood, institutions with huge landed estates and building projects. Egyptian advisers were well known to the royal family, often through a family tradition of such roles and/or their children being raised alongside royal children (Tyldesley 1998b). The importance of drawing on long-established trust networks is clear.

One exemplar from the ancient world: Plato

Plato (1976) in his ‘Republic’ wrote directly of his views regarding government and in his letters set out advice. In introducing Republic, Bambrough (ibid:xiii) comments on Plato’s ‘conception of the unity of ethics, politics and education’. He highlights Plato’s rejection of the ‘unexamined life’ of his times – what we term a lack of reflexivity. Plato’s theory of forms assumes objectivity is crucial, but he blends personal issues and values with work for the public good. In The Republic his words about the government of cities are relevant to the management of organisations today. Cities were the prime form of complex social organisation with which leaders had to grapple and there were alternative models in existence. In a valid sense there were competing approaches such as Athenian democracy, Spartan totalitarianism, theocracy, tyranny etc. Similarly today, organisations are the prime form of complex social structure, which we theorise on, and recently the discourse of ‘globalisation’ emphasises these over and above nations, a competing form. We also see differing approaches to management espoused and acted out to varying degrees, within competing discourses. So in what follows, for ‘cities’ read ‘organisations’.

I present excerpts from Plato’s dialogues in the Republic which express, so far as I can tell, his views about the process of advice-giving to rulers.

‘Can anything be done as it is spoken, or is it nature that action should lay less bold of truth than speech, though not everyone thinks so?’ (1976:165)

This echoes for me both the criticism of the consultant that their words cut no ice in the real world, but also that to expect such direct connection between words and action is a chimera. This is also an early assertion of the primacy of words over action – the reverse of our culture today (Grant et al 1998). He continues:

‘…do not compel me to show that what we have decided in our argument could in all respects be reproduced in experience. If we manage to discover how to organise in any close correspondence to our description, then you must allow that we have discovered that your commands could be realised. Will you not be content with that? I certainly should be.’ (1976:165)

He seems here to be arguing that the ideal (the description referred to) is unlikely ever to be wholly reproduced in reality and that if you can get even close then that is a decent result worth having. He is firm and direct in stating his view to the person in ‘command’.

Plato’s dialogue turns to an interesting view of change:

‘Then, next, apparently we must try to discover and demonstrate what evil practice in the cities of today prevents them from being organised in this [ideal] way, and what is the smallest change by which a city might arrive at this manner of [organising]. We shall hope to confine ourselves to a single change, or, if that is impossible, to two, or if that will not suffice, to changes as few in number, and small in their effect, as is possible.’

This suggests that Plato both recognised issues of change (not simply achieving stability), and saw the complexity of change very clearly, advising action on levers for change, however small. In a sense this prefigures contemporary thinking about
working with complex adaptive systems (see for example Shaw 1997). He is also
approaching the problem of creating good management from a perspective of
removing barriers rather than driving forward the vision, a facilitative rather than
heroic approach.

Talking of the difficulty of communicating knowledge to others Plato says:

‘Then what shall we do if this person is angry with us because we say that he believes but
does not know and if he disputes the truth of our statement? Shall we be able to appease
him and gently persuade him, without letting him know that he is barely sane?’

(1976:170)

Plato’s confidence in his rightness alongside the contrasting intent to be ‘gentle’ with
the person receiving advice is striking. He expresses clearly the strong emotions
involved in the exchange, where he feels they are ‘barely sane’ but he still must
‘appease’. He then discusses how he must acknowledge that the person ‘knows
something’. What he does not reconcile is how we (advisers) come to have such a
solid view that what we know (and indeed he knows as he writes here) is ‘truth’ and
what others know is for us a matter of their belief, which Platonically speaking is a
lesser power than that of knowledge.

While espousing ideas of change Plato always returns to the idea of universal truths.
This assumes that some learning or ideas are transferable, some kinds of ultimate truth
which we can offer in relation to government. His idea of the ‘philosopher’ is the
adviser or consultant figure. However Plato’s dialogue has Adeimantus comment
about such people:

‘.. most are very queer creatures if not rascally knaves, and the best of them seem … to
have achieved the result that they are useless to their country.’ (1976:179)

This is trenchant criticism that absolutely reflects much common parlance about
management consultants! Plato explores how such people are almost never accepted
as leaders, like the ship’s navigator called ‘star-gazer’ and ‘useless talker in the air’ by
sailors. This perhaps reflects something of the tension of knowledge and action, but
also a tension between being the professional and the gaining of trust, given that one
is always viewed as outside the organisation.

Plato comments on how the organisation sucks the person in, ending in corrupting
their thinking. For the person trying to work with the public or ‘the multitude’ as he
calls it: ‘the fatal necessity is laid upon him of doing whatever they approve’

(1976:183). Here he acknowledges not only the pull of the ‘client’ but also the
difficulty of holding your own views of what is right.

Levy (1956) sees Plato and Dion of Sicily ‘hitting it off’ right from their first meeting,
triggering their shared, creative and prolific output of ideas about rulers and
philosophy. However, this could not prevail under Dion’s uncle, the actual ruler, and
his realpolitik. When he imprisoned Dion, Plato wrote a series of letters to Dion’s
relatives and friends. He was imprisoned himself and once he escaped Sicily was
unwilling to return, trying instead to influence from afar.

He writes in the 7th letter:
'if, while the government is being carried on methodically and in a right course, it asks advice about any details of policy, it is the part of a wise man to advise such people ... if [a person] seems likely to listen to advice about the things on which he consults me, I advise him with readiness, and do not content myself with giving him a merely perfunctory answer.' (Plato 2006)

This is both careful writing to protect himself, but also expresses his belief in his right to judge those commissioning him: in the first place to decide if they are ‘methodical’ and ‘in a right course’; and second to prejudge how far the person will act as a result. He discounts their right to decide not to act on advice. He presumes his power to expect their action. He also implies working only in a situation already favourable to his ideas, in order to have impact, where people are ‘likely to listen’. He is not framing advice as combating lack in others, but more in supporting positive work. Notably he links this to his own motivation: when he feels he will be listened to, he will offer a deeper, more developed response.

**Early centuries in Europe**

Advisers in the early centuries in Europe are dominated by monks or priests. These include: Alcuin, the confidant of Charlemagne; Asser, adviser to King Alfred; William of Pagula with Edward III (Nederman 2001); John of Salisbury who advised Henry II and Thomas Becket. Women also appear, for example Abbess Hildegard of Bingen.

Crossley-Holland’s medieval anthology (1984) offers letters extant from pre-conquest England written by such advisers. Alcuin, ‘the leading scholar of his day’ went to be a ‘consultant’ (Crossley-Holland’s term) to King Charlemagne from 782. He became Charlemagne's personal friend and taught his sons. This is the introduction of a long letter to the king of Northumbria, when the Vikings raided Lindisfarne in 793, arguing that the decline of standards in Northumbria led to the wrath of God via the Vikings:

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…Alcuin the humble deacon sends greeting.

Mindful of your most sweet love, …I do not cease to warn you very often … either with words, when present, if God should grant it, or by letters when absent, by the inspiration of the divine spirit, and by the frequent iteration to pour forth in your ears, as we are citizens of the same country, the things known to belong to the welfare of an earthly kingdom and to the beatitude of an eternal kingdom; that the things often heard may be implanted in your mind for your good. For what is love in a friend, if it is silent on matters profitable to the friend? To what does a man owe fidelity, if not to his fatherland? To whom does he owe prosperity, if not to its citizens? We are fellow citizens … Thus let not your kindness shrink from accepting benignly what my devotion is eager to offer for the welfare of our country. Do not think that I impute faults to you; but understand that I wish to avert penalties…’ (Crossley-Holland 1984:185-186)
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Interestingly Alcuin refers to connections between friends, to issues of trust and the broader public good as a rationale for intervening. He is keen to speak plainly but not to cause offence, and like Plato does not assume a lack in the king. He positions himself as equal to the king as ‘fellow citizen’. Here a dual approach of conventional humility yet sense of his own rightness is visible. He makes common cause with the king trying to build on the positive dimensions of their shared experience and values. While this may reflect the contemporary niceties of writing to a monarch and the moral certainties of a Christian, his words reflect mutual affection and close
connection over time with the king. Alcuin was viewed as a leading adviser in Europe due to the Charlemagne connection: the king would likely take his views seriously.

Another key early source is Asser’s *Life of Alfred*. This excerpt shows the adviser in action as reported by himself. So we may assume he presents himself in what he thinks is the best light for an adviser to a king. It therefore illustrates how the process of advice-giving was construed at that time, albeit from churchman to monarch:

> ‘On a certain day we were both of us sitting in the king’s chamber, talking on all kinds of subjects as usual, and it happened I read to him a quotation out of a certain book. While he was listening to it attentively with both ears and pondering it deeply with his inmost mind, he suddenly showed me a little book which he carried in his bosom …, and thereupon bade me write the quotation in that book. … Since I could find no blank space in that book wherein to write, it being all full of various matters, I delayed a little, chiefly that I might stir up the understanding of the king … Upon his urging me to make haste and write it quickly, I said to him, ‘are you willing that I should write [it] on some separate leaf? Perhaps we shall find one or more other such which will please you; and if that should happen, we shall be glad we have kept this by itself.’ ‘Your plan is good’, said he. … that same day I wrote in it, at his request, and as I had predicted, no less than three other quotations which pleased him. From that time we talked daily together …’
> (Crossley-Holland 1984:216)

The adviser encourages the habit of reflection and recording learning (cf. the reflective diary of today’s continuing professional development). The deliberateness of the adviser’s actions and the carefully set scene of intimacy are noticeable. While Asser privileges the king – only action at his request is taken and explicitly sought - he is also clear that he has more understanding or knowledge of the process in hand – and predicts the king’s reactions. He is consciously aware of doing this; this awareness was not shared with the king. Again the certainty of the adviser is coupled with deference to the advisee.

**The Renaissance**

This period was one of turbulent changes in Europe previously unimaginable, both socially and politically e.g. the advent of the printing press, ‘discovering’ the Americas, the rise of Protestantism. The end of the Hundred Years War in Europe and the rise of the Italian city republics with their patronage of arts and sciences liberated creativity, as well as triggering revived interest in classical times and achievements. Educated people looked to learn from the ancients but also to experience their world from new perspectives. However, we must view the 15th century in relation to the horrors of the 14th – the ‘black death’, long wars in Europe. In this context anyone suggesting change, outside of a monastery, was regarded with suspicion. This is a shadow perhaps still cast today on people like consultants, seen as harbingers of change.

Old Roman virtues, Greek philosophy and republican ideas all re-surfaced. Advice-giving to leaders reflected this classical tradition until Machiavelli, who broke the mould of such advice. Following an exploration of his impact and approach, I turn to a more prosaic figure: the all-purpose helper of the courtier and his family in 16th century England, here exemplified by John Husee, ‘Lord Lisle’s man’ (St Clare Byrne 1985).
Machiavelli (2001) discusses the role of advice and advisers, focusing on those commissioning advice. Previously writers advised their prince to be transparent and ask for the truth at all times, be approachable and affable to encourage this. For Machiavelli this is a route to contempt: if everyone can say what they like to the prince, their respect turns to contempt. So from observing actual princes in action he advises contempt is provoked by those who seem ‘changeable, pusillanimous and irresolute’.

‘A ruler, then, should never lack advice, but should have it when he wants it, not when others want to give it; rather he should discourage anyone from giving advice unwarranted. Nevertheless, he should be very ready to seek information and opinions and listen patiently to candid views about matters that he raises. Indeed, if he learns that anyone is reticent for any reason, he should be angry.’ (2001:82)

He clearly acknowledges strong feelings such as trust and anger in the process of advice-giving. He is clear that getting good advice and good advisers is a function of the shrewdness of the ruler; it is a key necessity (2001:80). But Machiavelli may promote his own interests (Anglo 1971) in saying this, for he writes in the margin of his letter to his client Soderini in 1506:

‘Do not advise anyone, or take advice from anyone, except in very general terms; everyone should act as his spirit moves him and audaciously.’ (2001:97)

He seems to conclude that whatever policy you follow, follow it wholeheartedly and fully. He asserts that being seen to achieve results is the most important because that is all most people can access – your image and impression rather than what or who you actually are. He also places much importance on reading the times and acting in tune with them. These are current issues for managers and people who commission public sector consulting: being seen to deliver is critical to the Blair administration’s performance management and media management strategies in the UK.

His views on the role of adviser in relation to his own experience of advice-giving, emerge in a letter to Francesco Vettori 1513, where he talks about securing work with the new Medici rulers of Florence following their overthrow of his previous patron, Soderini. He agonises about The Prince, whether to present it in person or send it, and how presenting it may help him secure some money, given his pressing needs:
He is espousing the ‘foot in the door’ approach, as well as a sense of the importance of perception in setting a price on his services, redolent of modern marketing. But also interestingly he is assuming his power in making the relationship face-to-face will seal the contract, regardless of the purposes of the ruler himself. Machiavelli was seen as convincing and persuasive in person by his contemporaries: after meeting him, Pope Clement VII, previously linked to his opponents, thenceforth used Machiavelli as adviser (White 2004). He also sees his prior service as primarily ‘study’. What would Soderini have called it?

Machiavelli was commissioned in 1521 by a Florentine council, following his years as unemployed writer, to resolve a dispute with the Franciscan monks of Carpi. The monks’ leader felt Machiavelli was too low level to deal with this issue and prevaricated. Machiavelli meanwhile arranged for his powerful friend, Guicciardini, to send despatch riders up to three times per day, which impressed the monks greatly: Machiavelli asked Guicciardini to send one letter by a crossbowman in full livery on a lathered horse in the middle of a session with the monks. Machiavelli told them these were important letters regarding the Holy Roman Emperor and King of France. This impression management seems to have worked and is a striking early example of image manipulation.

Machiavelli’s writing of the history of Florence in 1520 is interesting for the complexity of its commissioning. The Studio Fiorentino and the university initiated this but the Medici (via Pope Leo X) were the funders. Machiavelli was asked to draft the contract for his work himself. He wrote that the contractor would do the history:

‘from whatever time may seem to him most appropriate, and in whatsoever language — either Latin or Tuscan - may seem best to him.' Letter to Francesco Nero 1520 (White 2004:233)

In writing the history he grapples with pleasing all involved yet being ‘true’:

‘I shall continue to seek advice from myself, and I shall try to do my best to arrange it so that — telling the truth — no one will have anything to complain about.’ (White 2004:236 quoting letter to Guicciardini 1524)

The confidence of the consultant in both setting the boundaries of the contract and in ‘seeking advice’ from himself are notable here. The result being no one can complain of him and he will tell the truth, but as he sees it. This reflects again the theme of certainty in their own views of the premodern advisers – and hence perhaps the space Machiavelli took to determine a complex piece of work.

The position of Machiavelli in relation to those commissioning him perhaps challenges the tradition of humility that went before. For example in his dedication of the Prince he writes:
‘Nor I hope will it be considered presumptuous for a man of low and humble status to dare discuss and lay down the law about how princes should rule; … to comprehend fully the nature of the people, one must be a prince, and to comprehend fully the nature of princes one must be an ordinary citizen.’ (White 2004:202)

John Husee: ‘I do write your ladyship my mind…’

‘My Lord Lisle’s man’, John Husee worked for the Lisle family during the reign of Henry VIII in England. The Lisle Letters (see St Clare Byrne 1985) are a key primary source regarding Henry’s court and its politics. Lord Lisle needed advice as a minor remaining relative of the preceding Yorkist/Plantagenet dynasty and Husee was his faithful ‘man’ over considerable years, corresponding regularly with all members of the family on a wide range of issues. His role as a self-employed agent or lifestyle adviser involved everything from lobbying government to organising the purchase of children’s clothes. He organises the constant sending of gifts to people across the Lisle’s extensive network of relatives and broader social obligation. Husee seems to have also worked for the king and others of the king’s retinue. He refused a position as the Lisle’s full-time steward. He was based in London, in the centre of things, working out of the Red Lion Inn at Southwark - an early ‘serviced office’ space. These excerpts show a glimpse of his role and how he carried it out.

First in writing to Lady Lisle he acts as human resource agency, gift adviser and refuses a permanent post:

‘Pleaseth your ladyship to be advertised I have received your sundry letters. Answering first touching your gentlewoman, I am sorry she [pleaseth] your ladyship no better. Randall and I will do our best in procuring of such a one as your ladyship desireth, which will be hard to come by…

And as touching your monkey, of a truth madam, the Queen [Anne Boleyn] loveth no such beasts nor can scant abide the sight of them …

Madam, I do humbly thank your ladyship for the offer of your stewardship, but surely it is no room for me, for I have no such knowledge or experience in that office… It is a room for some wise man being exercised and learned of continuance in the same, having great experiences … And xx or xl marks were well bestowed on such one, being expert, for his year's wages. I do write your ladyship my mind in this behalf.’

Letter to Lady Lisle 21 July 1535 (St Clare Byrne 1985:109)

Here Husee shows a fascinating mix of blunt statements and modesty touching on the obsequious. He gives clear advice in strong terms and signals problems ahead for her ladyship – and possibly the escalating cost of securing a suitable maid. He also self deprecatingly refuses the post offered, interestingly using the metaphor of a ‘room’ as though he sees this as somehow joining the household in a way he feels he cannot or doesn’t wish to do. He nonetheless immediately offers his advice on the pay for such a person and clearly signals it as reflecting a matter of knowledge and experience which he feels he does not have.

In a letter to Lord Lisle, he advises how to get the king actually to read the request. He comments exactly as though briefing someone to influence a modern chief executive:
‘But meanwhile I have drawn a letter to the king, which I do send your lordship herewith, so that if the contents thereof do like you may please your lordship to cause the same to be new written and fair penned, and written in as little space and as few lines as it conveniently may be, being legible, to the end that his Grace may read the same himself; and then your lordship to make up the same and send it to me with all speed. … and in case your lordship do alter the said letter … then to send me the copy thereof, to the end that if his Grace would reason anything therein, I might be prompt and prevented [i.e. forewarned] to make him a direct answer. And now that I have written your lordship my poor mind, it lieth in you to follow what best liketh you …’

Letter to Lord Lisle June 1536 (1985:353-4)

This letter again emphasises the directness of his advice while keeping Lord Lisle as the one who decides - at least in the rhetoric of what is written. He is careful to give reasons for what he is suggesting, painting a clear picture of the busy monarch and the need to consider him as reader. He also makes clear his own expert knowledge of and role in this process.

Husee writes to Lady Lisle in 1536, frustrated at not being able to progress matters at court:

‘… I have there followed and spent all time in vain, for I can there speed of nothing nor have any comfort …; one thing assuring your ladyship, unless my lord procure new friends he shall do little good at their hands that he now taketh to be his friends, for here is nothing but everyone for himself. Madame, I am at my wits' end for payment of this money, for unless God help I see no remedy … But in the meantime I will do the best I can. I assure your ladyship this matter grieveth me as much as anything that ever I had in hand …’

Letter to Lady Lisle 18 September 1536 (1985:354)

Here we gain a sense of the dangers Husee is fronting for the Lisles and the emotions this entails for him. He again writes directly of what is needed and is attempting to influence the lady so that she will in turn advise her husband to act and develop friends at court.

Towards the modern: 17th and 18th centuries

Examples of the adviser we have seen so far, trusted and intimate with a range of experience and skills, continue into 17th and 18th centuries. One example in the 17th century, is Père Joseph, confidant and highly appreciated adviser to Cardinal Richelieu. Due to Père Joseph’s extensive experience in diplomatic missions to many European courts, Richelieu when prime minister, invited him to come to the court as his consultant, saying:

‘God designated you as his principal agent to guide me through all the high positions I had the honor to occupy, I beg you to come immediately and share with me the management of our current affairs. There are pressing issues, which I would neither assign to anyone else nor resolve without you.’ (quoted in Kitzopoulos 2003)

Here Richelieu shifts the ground from advice to ‘sharing’ the work and conveys his substantial admiration of Joseph. It is clear that this commission is including implementation as well as advice; they are to work together.

However the 17th and 18th centuries saw the rise of professions and the formation of key aspects of how we view the term ‘profession’ today. These developments are
important for this genealogy given current debate on management and consulting as professions. The influence of humanist ideas in the development of the professions was important: the professional acts ‘for the good of society as well as … his and his family’s interests’ (O’Day 2000:28). Equally as professions developed, the tension between theory and practice was noted:

‘be sure not to study much bookes of learning for they divert busnes take up the memory too much, and keepe one from more usefull things.’ (Sir William Drake’s journal 1631-42 quoted O’Day 2000:29)

O’Day comments that anti-professional feeling grew as professions were established. They were seen as a monopoly exploiting need. Knowledge was made a ‘mystery’, as the trades of medieval times were termed ‘the mysteries’. There were assaults on professionals writing in Latin through ‘vitiolic attacks’ (O’Day 2000:15): the resentment of professions with distinctive terminologies is not new. She goes on: ‘They possessed the skill to offer advice in given areas of life, not to do anything..’ (2000:25), here highlighting a distinction between talk and action. Their status derived from activity that was not manual and so not viewed as ‘work’ but as skill. Thus the professions were seen as offering ‘skilled service … in ways more highly esteemed socially than … trades and crafts’ (Holmes 1982:3) Increasingly such early professionals were ‘keeping the wheel turning full circle…[and] patronised… increasingly their fellow professionals’ (Holmes 1982:14). For Holmes, increasing wealth, as the colonies expanded on the back of slavery and Britain developed international trade, fuelled this rise in professional people, who all used each others’ services in a network of mutual benefit.
Women’s roles: from confidantes and consorts to consultants

Looking to the premodern, key forerunners to (women) consultants in advising the leaders of the major organisations of the day were the consorts of male leaders. Typically the intimate relationship of the wife or mistress and her access to the details of what went on in the organisation – be it city, state or estate – mirrored the trusting relationship cultivated by the more visible, usually male, adviser. For every Machiavelli we can identify an Eleanor of Aquitaine, for every powerful Cardinal a queen consort with the king’s ear. Further down the social scale every village or community had its ‘wise woman’ whose advice was valued on a whole range of issues, often in the realm of the personal.

Women have figured little in this review so far, partly since finding their words directly recorded in the premodern is a relative rarity. This section reviews early figures, confidantes and consorts (chiefly queens and mistresses of kings), the salonnieres of the 17th and 18th centuries and finally early management consultants.

Early figures

Hildegard of Bingen (11th-12th centuries) was so popular with leaders in Europe that she did four lecture tours: ‘an unimaginable undertaking in the early Middle Ages, particularly for an ageing woman in poor health.’ (Diehl and Donnelly 2002:58) She wrote to a patron:

‘I am not accustomed to speak of the various elements in the lives of men and what their future will be. For poor little untaught feminine form that I am, I can know only those things that I am taught in a true vision.’ (Diehl and Donnelly 2002:58)

It was apparently a frequent device of hers to speak as unworthy and humble so as not to invite criticism and to be respected for humility – and interesting that here she names her position as a woman and as a passive vessel for ‘true vision’. Her tone of humility thus contrasts with that of Alcuin in its gendered nature, although both take the humble initial tone, conventional at the time in addressing important personages and in enacting the identity of churchman or nun.

Christine de Pizan was born at the end of the 14th century and famously wrote her Treasury of the City of Ladies reviewing history from women’s point of view. The Italian widow of a French courtier, she earned her living from writing, including advising women on their roles (Leyser 1995). She was invited to England by Henry IV but never went. Her Book of Deeds of Arms and Chivalry of 1410 (Willard 1984), was very popular and unique in being written by a woman yet presenting substantial and pragmatic detail about how to pursue war – notably she advises not to do it without plenty of money and men to back you (Barker 2005). The book was one of the first Caxton printed such was demand.

Few other figures can be seen in these early centuries until we recognise the women who were the consorts, confidantes and mistresses of rulers.

Confidantes and consorts: ‘I plainly tell you…’

Most hidden and yet perhaps most obvious advisers in the premodern are women who had the king’s ear and influenced their husbands, lovers, sons and brothers: consort queens and mistresses. This section shows how these women carried out the adviser role principally through working on relationships; how they were nonetheless viewed as distant and Other; how they carried out a key role of intercession linked to the
values of upholding the rights of the common person against sovereign power; how they struggled to be paid their due; and how they were (and some still are) often perceived negatively.

Consort queens are universally one of two types: the foreign princess or the home-grown. They nonetheless share key features: Leyser (1995) discusses foreign princesses:

‘as foreigners .. a likely target for criticism. Perhaps this was part of the job … [occupying] so distinctive a space as both consort and outsider … [with] tasks only they could perform… [the] shield of the king, taking on their own shoulders some of the criticism of his handling of affairs’ (1995:84-86)

She expresses the paradox of being close and intimate to the king yet perpetually distant, never an insider. Eleanor of Castile was loved by the populace and Edward I but at the same time ‘in certain circles, resented and reviled both as a foreigner and as a spendthrift.’ (Leyser 1995:84-5) However the view that it was part of the job to be foreign and distant created problems for the home-grown consort. These women come in for more, and more unwarranted, criticism than foreign consorts; for example Elizabeth Woodville, queen to Edward IV, was heavily criticised for promoting her relatives and for extravagance. However she had one of the smallest, most solvent households of any queen and her relatives did not earn more than those of other queens (Crawford 1994), nor did she promote as many friends and relatives as others did, such as Eleanor of Provence (queen to Henry III) (Howell 1998).

Exploring the interesting space occupied by queens consort suggests it may both prefigure and construct the resentment of close trusted advisers in general. One cannot criticise the king so the queen is criticised for her influence, as one of his ‘evil counsellors’. I review several very different queens to develop this exploration.

Some of the earliest consorts whom we know had influence are ancient Egyptians: Nefertari, wife of Ramses II, and Nefertiti, wife of Ahkenaten. It is possible that their influence is known due to the ripples it caused at the time, since neither of them were pharaoh’s sister (and so above criticism) nor a foreign princess, and so must have been Egyptianvi. Nefertiti’s apparent influence (a statuette inscription (Tyldesley 1998b:151) reads: ‘one trusted of the king … great in his lifetime’) has led to assertions that she led Ahkenaten into his religious revolution of monotheistic sun worship. This reminds us that a queen only had influence so long as the king existed. A tomb inscription about her illustrates the key queenly role of intercession for others with the king: ‘may she grant the entrance of favour … and a happy recollection in the presence of the king’ (Tyldesley 1998b:81.

Howell (1998), only biographer of Eleanor of Provence, comments that contemporary chroniclers like Matthew Paris wrote of real queens differently from the typical mode of allegory with the Virgin and intercession linked to humility. Paris described Blanche of Castile, Eleanor’s mother, as ‘sexu femina, concilio mascula’ [in sex female, in advice male](1998:260) making the issue of gender explicit. Queens in 11th and early 12th century Europe were active in governing with the king e.g. Matilda with William the Conqueror. They were not servile and were simply an alternative to the legalistic power of the king – interceding more personally for individuals. This feature extended to other royal women not just the queen. Equally there was ‘a mass
of male intercessors’ (1998:258) so again the women simply stand out by their rarity relatively.

Philippa of Hainault and her intercession for the burghers of Calais, shows the king can choose to listen or not: if he does there is no loss of face and no precedent is set – the argument has to be made again in the future. This view of the person receiving advice suggests it does not show weakness to use advice. Philippa intervened strongly yet was ‘at the same time … humble and pregnant’. (Leyser 1995:86) The source of her power remains unclear – that of queen or of symbolic woman-in-a-vulnerable-state. All her extant letters are written on behalf of others, pleading a cause e.g. to release from prison, welfare of a ward, extortion of more fines than proper etc.

The important aspect of queenly intercession or mediation is taking up the cause of the ordinary (not royal) person i.e. someone with less power. Londoners expressed this public expectation in their Bill to Anne of Bohemia, wife to Richard II, in 1382: they wished her to ‘assume … the role of mediatrix between your most illustrious prince [and ourselves]’ (Leyser 1995:86) as her predecessors had done. Anne subsequently acquired a reputation as mediator with the king (Crawford 1994). With Princess Joan, her mother-in-law, Anne intervened in the fate of John Wyclif, the religious reformer, despite the orthodoxy of Richard II (Crawford 1994:17). To challenge the king on matters of religion was a major undertaking and demonstrates their strength and certainty.

English queens were entitled to ‘queen’s gold’, a tax collected on certain legal transactions and due the queen. With it she could acquire and dispose of estates, in addition to her dower lands. Until the late 19th century only the queen, as a married woman, could hold and dispose of property. However, much extant correspondence of queens from 12th to 16th century concerns problems in accessing and retaining this money and land, even for very powerful women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine or Margaret of Anjou (Crawford 1994). These resources were their right but seem to have come at the end of other priorities for the king or his ministers. Clearly this reflects something of the marginality of the queen’s power, yet the awareness and determination of queens that this is a key right, as well as the reluctance of men to pay them.

I shall now turn to some actual words of queens consort, taken from their letters, to explore their advice-giving roles.

Matilda, queen of Henry I, was highly educated and caring of ordinary people – she built St Giles Hospital and roads and bridges in the Lea Valley. Henry appointed her regent in his absences and so clearly trusted her. Chronicler Robert of Gloucester praised her influence: ‘the goodness she did to England cannot be here written nor by any man understood.’(quoted in Crawford 1994:21) Her letters are the earliest English queen’s letters extant and seem to have been dictated by her. She writes here to Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, in exile due to a breakdown in relations in the previous reign, still not resolved. Matilda was close to Anselm who had helped achieve her marriage. She writes about how she is trying to influence the king:

*I am encouraged to hope [for your return] from the confidence which I have in the prayers of good men, and from the good will which, by skilfully investigating, I find to be in the heart of my lord [i.e. the king].*
His mind is better disposed towards you than many men think; and, I favouring it, and suggesting wherever I can, he will become yet more courteous and reconciled to you.’

Letter from Matilda wife to Henry I to Anselm Archbishop of Canterbury c.1103 (Crawford 1994:22)

She gives a picture of subtle indirect influence; she recognises her skill in both questioning and suggesting, yet is clear that her favour alone has some influence with the king. Her daughter, Empress Matilda coincidentally had a similar mission in her turn. She wrote to Thomas Becket to try to broker peace between him and Henry II:

‘my lord Pope sent to me, enjoining me, … to interfere to renew peace and concord between you and the king, my son... You, as you well know, have asked the same thing from me; wherefore, with the more goodwill, for the honour of God and the Holy church, I have begun and carefully treated of that affair. But it seems a very hard thing to the king … seeing he so loved and honoured you … believing he might trust you rather than any other; and … he declares that you have … roused his whole kingdom against him; nor was it your fault that you did not disinherit him by main force …. One thing I plainly tell you, that you cannot recover the king's favour, except by great humility and most evident moderation.’

Letter from Empress Matilda to Thomas Becket 1185 (Crawford 1994:28-29)

The Empress speaks bluntly and makes clear her multiple roles and loyalties. She emphasises taking great care and talks of the trust connecting advisers to the king. She sets out reasons for the enmity and impresses on Thomas how close he came to destroying the king – implying that this would have been in no one’s best interests. She is clear in her advice: ‘I plainly tell you’. It is noteworthy that both queens are intervening to mend relationships between the major power centres of the day: church and sovereign, at the request of the men involved, including the Pope himself.

Eleanor of Provence writes regarding her task in Henry III’s absence of raising money for his defence of Gascony:

‘…all the earls and barons of your kingdom, who are able to cross the sea, will come to you in Gascony, with all their power; but from the other laymen … we do not think that we can obtain any help of your use, unless you write to your lieutenants in England firmly your great charters of liberties, and let this be distinctly perceived by your letters to each sheriff… and publicly proclaimed …since by this means they would be more strongly animated cheerfully to grant you aid … we shall hold a conference … about the aforesaid aid and we supplicate your lordship that you will write us your good pleasure concerning these affairs with utmost haste. For you will find us prepared and devoted according to our power to solicit the aforesaid aid for your use and to do and procure all other things … which can contribute to your convenience and the increase of your honour.’

Letter from Eleanor to Henry III 13 February 1254 (Crawford 1994:74)

Eleanor is stating her advice unequivocally: ‘we do not think’, ‘distinctly perceived’, ‘we shall hold’, ‘utmost haste’. She is spelling out how people feel about what he has asked her to do and its consequences. At the same time she keeps the deference of the adviser and consort in the final lines.

Katherine of Aragon wrote letters as regent during war with Scotland when Henry VIII was in France at the Field of Cloth of Gold in 1513. Here writing to Wolsey she
makes clear she wants to amend a decision about a noble French hostage. She points out the inconvenience; she will house him in the Tower:

‘Here is none that is good for it [guarding the Duke] but my lord Mountjoy, who now goes to Calais [i.e. to join Henry] as chief captain of 500 men. And for this cause and also that I am not so well accompanied as were convenient for his keeping here, it is thought to me and my council that it should be better the said duke be, as soon as he comes, conveyed to the Tower; especially the Scots being so busy as they now be and I looking for my departing every hour, it should be a great incumbrance to me … I pray you shew this to the king …’

Letter from Katherine to Wolsey 1513 (Crawford 1994:172)

Katherine writes in delicate and careful understatements. She distances and qualifies her views: ‘not so well’, ‘it is thought’, ‘it should be better’. She bolsters her position by making clear she and her council think this. She talks of the Scots as ‘busy’ which plays down the dangers of the war and the coming battle (which was the victory of Flodden). Yet she conveys clearly what she will not accept (‘great incumbrance’) given what else the king is asking her to manage. She asks Wolsey to show this to the king, perhaps to make clear that she is not complaining to the king himself but would still like him to know with what she has to contend.

Philip of Spain, consort to Mary Tudor, presents a marked contrast to these queens. Kamen, his biographer (1997) comments that Philip had no power to intercede in Mary’s executions of Protestants – he worked indirectly, his chaplain preaching against this. He is known habitually to have referred matters to the queen, staying ‘detached from affairs’ (Kamen 1997:62). This differs from the intercessive role of consort queens and their involvement on behalf of the king in matters of state. Unlike foreign queens who were often unpopular, Philip seems to have been popular, except for his Spanish retinue. This may be another example of criticism of followers to avoid criticism of the king – Philip was king of Spain in his own right and thus seen as much more powerful than a consort alone. This probably influenced his decision not to be (seen as) a major influence on Mary and so upset the power balance in England. Philip’s approach makes clear the woman consort approaches the role differently, by expectation of others as well as in how she can act.

Alongside consort queens, there was the similar role of influential mistresses. The names of these women are numerous and many are attributed with substantial influence, such as Madame de Pompadour, Madame de Montespan. Two examples are noteworthy here for their acknowledged and more public advisory roles. Diane de Poitiers, the long-established mistress of Henri II in 16th century France was much older than him and acquired such influence that letters of state were signed in the joint made-up name of ‘HenriDiane’. Her intelligence was considerable and like other advisers she was also in charge of the royal children's education (Kent 2004).

Secondly, George I came to England with two women in his ‘inner German court’ (Beattie 1967): Fraulein von der Schulenberg, later Duchess of Kendal, who it is widely thought was married to the king, and Sophie-Charlotte von Kielmannsegge, thought to have been his half sister, being the daughter of his father’s mistress. Both were assumed his mistresses at the time of their arrival, perceived as close to George and so influential they were cultivated by courtiers and politicians. The Duchess was
more influential especially later in the reign. The king always dined with her. Ministers ‘mentioned’ to the duchess things they wanted the king to agree: for example Stanhope writes to Sunderland in 1719:

‘I have mentioned to the dutchess [sic] … and she has promised and judges it most proper to open it herself first to the king.’

(Quoted in Beattie 1967:241-2)

She became progressively more important politically once the Walpole administration was established after 1722, but was however seen as actively profiting from her position as favourite, receiving payments from those she assisted. The French king Louis XV wrote to his ambassador in 1724:

‘there is no room to doubt that the duchess of Kendal, having a great ascendancy over the King of Great Britain, and maintaining a strict union with his ministers, must materially influence their principal resolutions. You will neglect nothing to acquire a share of her confidence, from a conviction that nothing can be more conducive to my interests.’

(Quoted in Beattie 1967:247)

Here she is clearly seen as critically influential – how far this was perception or reality is a moot point for Beattie. He sees her as a linking person primarily, a conduit, especially for ‘delicate subjects’ – this may be his own (gendered) view. Walpole said (reported in Lady Cowper’s diary) that she was ‘in effect, as much Queen of England as any ever was’ (Beattie 1967:248).

We can see then that consorts and confidantes hold an intimate place in the history of advice-giving. They may epitomise the trusted adviser who can speak out strongly, yet they are dependent on the monarch and must defer to his/her power. They are concerned with emotions and relationships as well as with policy. They have taken an intermediary role, often on behalf of those with less power and for whom it would be difficult to reach the king. They have been the subject of resentment and unpopularity, in effect absorbing criticism that may otherwise be directed at the monarch. To some extent this is seen as their role, especially the foreign queen as the perennial outsider. In addition, the gains, whether monetary or otherwise, of the consorts and advisers as a result of their positions feature in what is written about them and in what they say, much as the fees of modern consultants are subject to comment.

Salonnieres
In discussing the professionals of the 17th and 18th centuries earlier, effectively I describe the activities of men. But in this period a new arena developed for women—a space between the public and private spheres. Salon hostesses from early 18th century onwards presided over groups of (mostly) men active in both arts and sciences and Enlightenment thought generally. Such women, usually of independent wealth, wielded much influence as their confidantes and advisers, albeit in a subtle, nuanced form. Women shone as salonnières: their role as ‘intermediaries’ explains why women hosted the salons so well (Davison 2005).
They were viewed as possessing tact and discretion to bring out the best in their circle, encouraging others to shine, rather than attracting attention to themselves. In contrast Landes (1928 in Franko 2004) comments that despite this positive role ‘women, especially salonnières, were accused repeatedly of artifice and authorship of stylized discursive practices in conflict with nature.’ Thus this new space for women remained contested and for some represented an unacceptable shift for women.

The material presented comes from the letters of salonnières or their guests’ letters or memoirs. Firstly the multi-faceted service of Madame de Lafayette for the Duchesse de Savoie is remarked on:

"She watches everything, thinks of everything, combines, visits, talks, writes, sends counsels, procures advice, baffles intrigues, is always in the breach, and renders more service by her single efforts than all the envoys avowed or secret whom the Duchesse keeps in France."

M. de Lescure writing on Madame de La Fayette (Mason 2001[1891])

Nor is the value of these services unrecognized:

"Have I told you," wrote Mme. de Sevigné to her daughter, "that Mme. de Savoie has sent a hundred ells of the finest velvet … to Mme. de Lafayette, and a hundred ells of satin to line it, and two days ago her portrait, surrounded with diamonds, which is worth three hundred louis?"

(Mason 2001[1891])

Mademoiselle de Lespinasse’s (1732-1776) salon was a forum for criticizing prospective published articles. Many ‘philosophes’ relied upon such assistance: for example Voltaire was coached by Madame du Chatelet (Lewis 1992). Mlle de Lespinasse wrote:

‘[I] shall never be on my guard against you; I shall never suspect you. … I will let you see the trouble, the agitation of my soul, and I shall not blush to seem to you weak and inconsistent. … I do not seek to please you; I do not wish to usurp your esteem.’

Letter of Julie de Lespinasse to the Comte de Guibert (Grimm 1815: 400-405)

She was friend and confidential adviser to D’Alembert (1717-1783) who knew a number of salonnières: he comments on the emotion of the process for Mme Geoffrin:

‘The passion of giving, which was an absolute necessity to her seemed born with her, and tormented her, if I may say so, even from her earliest years’

Memoir of Jean d'Alembert (Grimm 1815: 400-405 original emphasis)

These excerpts express the emotion, complex relationships and multiple functions of the women of the salons. Their capacity to influence leading thinkers is clear, although these people were mostly not directly leading what we might see as organisations, as with other pre-modern advisers considered here. Nonetheless, as a
borderland space, the salons offer an insight into the role of influential women and their quasi-invisible advice to male opinion formers of the day.

**Early women management consultants**

The most notable women in early management consulting are Mary Follett and Lillian Gilbreth. They worked in the early decades of the 20th century (although Gilbreth wrote extensively till her death in 1972). Their work has been obscure in the history of management and of consulting until recently and provides a fitting end to the female thread of this genealogy.

For Lillian, her husband Frank, who died in 1924, was viewed as the main thinker in their collaboration of twelve books although Lillian went on to write or co-write another fourteen books. Of her book in 1947 with Alice Cook, Lyndall Urwick, early English management consultant, comments: ‘the first book that has ever been published which has made a management consultant seem really human, so I have great sympathy with it’ (Urwick 1950). Gilbreth was concerned with human aspects of organisation, unlike her husband who focused on time and motion within scientific management (Diehl and Donnelly 2002).

Follett, a single woman who died in 1933, simply had no such access to publish her work in her lifetime. While Mary Follett is typically viewed as a wealthy Boston woman, Joan Tonn’s authoritative biography (2004) shows a less obvious story: her family relying on the charity of wealthy relatives; her education achieved through the interest of early teachers. Her work in the poor areas of Boston followed study of political economy and democracy; it provided both practical application of her ideas and management experience. Here she met and impressed businessmen to the point where they sought her advice. Tonn comments:

> ‘the brilliance of her analysis is due precisely to the fact that [she] was a woman … in[,] the role of ‘political outsider’ … she used her own experience … to understand the value of informal sources of power…’ (Tonn 2004:90-91)

Again the female outsider draws on informal power and her own resources to influence established male arenas, as did the consorts and salonnières.

In 1927 Follett arranged a visit to England through Urwick who worked for Rowntrees in York. Her practice was to meet key figures and discuss their business issues in a ‘masterclass’ setting rather than to undertake specific work within organisations:

> ‘I shall like also, as you both suggest, to speak to some employers in London. Having met so many of our own business men for discussion, this would be very interesting to me. I don’t mean more so than meeting your executives. [this last sentence obviously added later into space at end of line]

> I have always been paid for my [input]. We need not, however, discuss the amount. Whatever seems right to you, or is possible for you, I shall be very glad to accept. I expect to learn so much that you may think I ought to pay you!’

Letter from Mary Follett to Lyndall Urwick 28/6/26
This letter is at once business-like, careful and assertive but also playful and even flirtatious. She is careful to state her own interests but not to offend the reader in England. She sets out her position on payment which is both assertive and equivocal. Not a comment a man of that time would write perhaps. For Follett payment mattered in the light of her personal circumstances and she repeats this later to Urwick when hoping to get some of her papers published: ‘If I have the trouble of revising [them] I should like to make a little money out of them.’ (Letter from Mary Follett 24/7/27)

Follett’s comments self-deprecatingly on her English visit’s impact on men notably senior in contemporary new technologies:

‘Mr John Lee, head of Telephone system of England and Sir Geoffrey Clarke, head of Telegraph Cable construction Co, …have both (poor misguided things) expressed a wish to meet me!’ (op. cit.)

It is hard to escape the sense that Follett’s gender and the rare sight of a woman in business played a key part both in her popularity and her subsequent drop into obscurity. Her contribution in terms of democratic approaches to work and the notion of ‘power with’ rather than ‘power over’ is still being recognised (Tonn 2004).

Conclusions

This paper has explored predominantly pre-modern figures and roles, advisers or consultants to the leaders of their day. The review has been necessarily selective but considered the extant words of those involved to attempt a discursive review. The advice-giving we see reflects significant tensions:

- **Humble but sure of their advice**: advisers conformed to the conventions of a humble approach in addressing powerful people in writing; but still express their own uncompromising points of view. Whatever the advice, when it comes it is extremely clearly expressed. Advisers are certain of their view and conscious of the act of expressing it.

- **Intimate yet ‘other’**: pre-modern advisers have close, often emotional relationships with those they advise, for example as wife, relative or friend working over long periods together, but they are often in the explicit role of ‘other’ and so at the same time distant, as foreigner, woman, person of the church, someone of a lower class.

- **Autonomous yet dependent**: advisers have their own reasons to act, their own views and approaches, but are only involved so long as the key person retains power: the mistress disappears once the king is dead, the ousting of a prince can mean his adviser is imprisoned as Plato and Machiavelli found. Their livelihood depends on the favour of the powerful, despite contractual rights – as the queens found.

- **Powerful yet marginal**: advisers’ influence is clear; they are often highly sought after while remaining marginal figures with little obvious power: the salonnières, the foreign consort. They work in informal power networks, connecting people and ideas, as the salonnières and Mary Follett did. Their power lies in their lack of rivalry for the advisee’s position. Their hold on their financial due can be precarious – and resented.

- **Trust** from the person commissioning the adviser exists alongside distrust of them by others: arguably the greater the first the greater the second. Their power concerns the importance of the adviser in deflecting criticism from the leader and enabling him/her to act. The reputation of advice-givers is
important – the powerful want the best person. This tension produces for the adviser both respect and contempt together.

- *Ethics/values and ‘realpolitik’*: means and ends, personal gain and common good are all recurring themes. The importance of intercession by the queen for commoners and the resentment of advisers seen as exploiting the king for their own wealth express this tension. Plato and Machiavelli especially contrast here since Plato (and other classically inspired advisers) emphasises the ‘good’ and ‘justice’ and Machiavelli is concerned entirely with the leader staying in power. But even Machiavelli is concerned with social stability and the common good, holding strong personal views on the desirability of republicanism.

- Supporting strong people: advice-giving helps the powerful retain or extend their power. Plato is explicit about not remedying weakness and wishing to develop capable people. Advice is not about helping the weak compete with the strong. Queenly intercession confronts the strong with the weak and is identified with the ‘feminine’.

The paper offers a picture of advice-giving processes and their origins, away from views of expert knowledge or professional power. Discourses of advice-giving involve:

- *Trust* and the persistent image of the ‘trusted adviser’ where the relationship between leader and adviser is intimate, often cemented by kinship or other reciprocal ties
- *Certainty* and advisers’ sense of being right, having something to say and saying it directly
- alongside *humility* and deferring to the person being advised
- *The ‘Other’* with negative images and stories about wicked, greedy or simply foreign advisers
- *Impression management*, that is, the use of rhetoric or other powers to convince the leader (including ‘magic’ or occult attribution of the powers of the adviser)

Apparent differences in the pre-modern from viewing present-day consulting include:

- The context of strong social ties such as those forged through feudalism, kinship and religion which is much less universal in 21st century industrialised countries
- Aiming explicitly for stability rather than creating change
- The important role of intercession with those in power
- A shift from adviser to expert post Renaissance
- A shift from expert do-er to expert adviser with the subsequent rise of the professions
- A shift from visible to invisible advisers

The genealogical exploration also raises concepts important in relation to assumptions of women operating in the intimate and private realm. Several discursive and extra-discursive practices, which we might term ‘feminine’, are visible in pre-modern advice-giving:

- The importance of *relationships* with intimacy and emotion strong themes for both male and female advisers
Explicit aspiration to *mutual* gain or the public good, again for both men and women, which are identified with the feminine (Miller 1976)

**supporting** or nurturing the strong rather than viewing the advisee as deficient

The use and fostering of *dense reciprocal social networks* which enable the getting and doing of advice-giving work

That advice-giving involved *heterogeneous work* involving many small tasks/processes especially making or repairing links between people

Overall it is possible to see a shift from ‘feminine’ to ‘masculine’ in how advice-giving has been constructed, perceived and carried out, with an emphasis on trust and relationships at the core of the process. The notion of women as advisers, confidantes or consultants reflects gendered boundaries: women in the intimate private arena of the body and emotions; men operating in the rational ‘outside world’ of work and public life. The question is raised: how far are these issues still reverberating today for (women) consultants?

Arguably this genealogical exploration reflects concepts important in relation to gender and work, especially that of ‘separate spheres’ (Padavic and Reskin 2002:22) and assumptions of the ‘feminine’ as proper to the intimate and private realm. It casts advice-giving in terms we might characterise as ‘feminine’, for example the priority to mutual relationships and feelings, the patient and detailed ‘backstage’ work (Fletcher 2001).

The genealogical lens suggests some continuing threads in discourses of advice-giving that continue today: specifically the ‘trusted adviser’ (see Maister et al 2000 and Sturdy 1998), the negative discourses of performance, rhetoric and magic (see Clark and Salaman 1998, Fincham 1999, Fincham and Evans 1998). It also highlights some strands not reflected in contemporary literature, such as the paradox of certainty and humility. It is noteworthy that the contemporary literature does not discuss issues of gender or of emotion in consulting processes, except in the sparse woman-centred material. The assumption of the neutral professional is widespread and the emotional labour of consulting not explored despite the emphasis on trust, authenticity, performance and interaction.

This genealogical work raises the intriguing question of a shift from premodern advice-giving with a ‘feminine’ character to contemporary consulting built on overwhelmingly male perspectives of the organisation. It offers a productive lens to view the modern figure of the management consultant. It seems important at least to begin such work to profit from insights offered about consulting using a pre-modern lens that may (re)open a ‘feminine’ discourse of consulting to challenge the ‘masculine’ discourses of the commodified consulting project and consultant ‘systems of persuasion’ (Legge 1994), reconnecting these past approaches to develop a critical consulting practice in the present. Such a ‘feminine’ discourse would embrace emotion, and privilege processes, relationships and social purposes within consulting.

**Notes**

i. The paper is written from my position that discourse is a key concept for understanding consulting processes (Marsh 2006)

ii. Mears (2005:97) describes this Renaissance view of ‘counsel as a collaborative activity’ focusing on its process and attending to the feelings of the advisee as much as on the business at hand, reflecting my concern with consulting interaction.
iii. Kitsopoulos (2003) does refer to much earlier antecedents than the early 20th century but only extremely briefly and not in relation to a genealogical analysis.

iv. As Foucault points out, his kind of genealogy can only be sustained through tremendously detailed knowledge of original texts and comprehensive erudition. I cannot pretend to that here, as this genealogical work is contained within my broader study. But it has seemed important at least to begin such work and to profit from the insights offered about consulting using a pre-modern lens.

v. When the first printing press came to Florence in 1471 only 30,000 printed books existed; by 1500 this is estimated at 8 million (White 2004:30).

vi. In fact establishing their parentage has occupied numerous Egyptologists to this day (Tyldesley 1998a).

vii. There were a few male exceptions, such as the salons of M. de la Poplinière, Helvésius, and the baron d’Holbach.

viii. Urwick’s personal papers held at Henley College are the source for this section.

ix. This is almost wholly represented by the contents of a special edition in 1995 of the Journal of Organizational Change Management (volume 8 issue 1).

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