Essay Review: Gender and the Scientific "Civilizing Process"*

PAULA FINDLEN

Department of History
University of California
Davis, California 95616

In recent years the history of the body and the relationship between gender and science have become the sites of some of the most fruitful interdisciplinary work in the history of science and medicine. Scholars such as Evelyn Fox Keller, Ludmilla Jordanova, and Carolyn Merchant have unearthed the political and intellectual foundations of the historic links between "natural" categories and the cultural assumptions of gender.1 Historians such as Peter Brown, Carolyn Bynum, Piero Camporesi, and Thomas Laqueur have identified the body as the repository of multiple images of a society and as a sensitive meter with which to gauge changing attitudes toward medical, political, and religious culture, gender divisions, and the broader consequences of biological assumptions.2


Both Londa Schiebinger's and Dorinda Outram's books attempt to recuperate neglected areas of scientific inquiry and to extend the analytical framework provided by recent scholarship. While Schiebinger parallels the experiences of female practitioners of science from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century with ancient and contemporary views of the anatomical basis of sexual difference, Outram maps the intersections between physiology and politics during the French Revolution. Each, in markedly different ways, substantially contributes to the political and cultural history of the biomedical sciences, and to the literature on gender and science.

WOMEN AND EARLY MODERN SCIENCE

At the beginning of The Mind Has No Sex? Londa Schiebinger comments: “Science is not a cumulative enterprise; the history of science is as much about the loss of traditions as it is about the creation of new ones” (p. 2). This remark sets the tone for the discussion that follows. Drawing on a wealth of archival materials, literary images, medical and scientific texts, and iconographic evidence, Schiebinger ambitiously attempts to write an histoire totale of the place of women in science. From the theoretical intellectual equality offered by Cartesians such as Poulain de la Barre, to the place of women as an audience for and as practitioners of science, Schiebinger opens up an almost unexplored area of the early history of science.

The study focuses on inclusion as well as exclusion. The presence of women as patrons, and occasionally practitioners, of learned culture in the courts and salons offers a marked contrast to their virtual absence from the universities and their progressive marginalization from the new scientific societies of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Schiebinger persuasively identifies the relationship between gender, social status, and intellectual authority as the reason for the notable presence of female patrons of Galileo, Descartes, Leibniz, and many philosophes, and their disappearance by the end of the early modern period with the decline of a court- and salon-centered system of patronage. The aestheticized nature of scientific inquiry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provides further evidence of