

BOOK REVIEWS

Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society. Edited by Lynette Hunter & Sarah Hutton. Sutton 1997. Pp. xx + 292. \$49.95 paper.

The essays collected in *Women, Science and Medicine* achieve a balance of both familiar and innovative materials. Some of the papers, notably those by Elizabeth Tebeaux and Lynette Hunter, use source material previously neglected in studies in this period. Others offer new interpretations of more familiar topics and materials, for example Sarah Hutton's examination of Bacon, Adrian Wilson on midwifery and Margaret Pelling's use of the College of Physicians' records to understand older female practitioners. Pelling questions the legitimacy of the 'crisis of misogyny', in which context female practitioners are often considered, and offers a new perspective on a familiar topic.

Through their variety of approaches, these writers broaden our definitions of science and medicine in this period. The appearance of such a volume at this time indicates increasing interest in science and medicine as contextually situated practices, rather than in terms of the significance of particular discoveries for posterity. *Women, Science and Medicine* balances its attention between science and medicine — to consider either in isolation would be an anachronistic severance of two inextricable elements.

The traditional emphasis on the authority and attitudes of medical and scientific institutions of this period has promoted a range of assumptions about the profile of medical practitioners in England. *Women, Science and Medicine* reveals something that is untouched by such histories: the experimental and medical practices of genteel ladies in private homes. These activities were recorded in diaries and personal notes. Most of the women discussed in this volume fall outside categories such as apothecary, wise woman or midwife. External to the usual axes of interpretation, these women have been widely assumed to have been uninvolved in, or even actively excluded from, scientific and medical practices. However, these essays indicate that we have been neglecting an important group of participants.

The view of medicine and science as arising not simply from 'virtuoso' scientific activity, but from pragmatic domestic chemistry, forces us to re-evaluate not only the place of women, but also our characterisation of medical and scientific practice in this period. The perspective supported within *Women, Science and Medicine* provides a welcome antidote to the search for the 'essence' of scientific transformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Recent research has questioned whether the 'scientific revolution' is a historical or a historiographical phenomenon. The papers collected by Hunter and Hutton reiterate this scepticism, leaving us with the pricking awareness that if this was the 'origin' of Modern Science, then it was born, not in the laboratory, but in the kitchen.

As John Henry has noted in another anthology of essays on medical practice in this period, a knowledge of medicine was an important component of genteel education for both men and women. *Women, Science and Medicine* shows that women of aristocratic origin were often part of a vibrant experimental culture in their own domestic settings. The involvement of ladies in such experimentation leads us to interrogate the assumption that science is somehow inherently masculine, a distinction reified by even the most 'progressive' scholars. This volume makes a serious examination of both new and familiar areas within this period and scrutinises our assumptions about the exclusion of women from the masculine world of science.

Several of the essays examine developments across both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the main emphasis is on the latter. A diversity of approaches is represented, from the literary background of Margaret Hannay and Elizabeth Tebeaux, the feminist sociology of Hilary Rose's foreword and various historians and philosophers of science. The editors contributed two essays each. Sarah Hutton will be familiar to readers in early modern studies, for her work on Renaissance thought. Hutton's opening essay, a re-interpretation of Bacon's masculinism, is a delight to read, as is her paper on Anne Conway (on whom she has worked extensively) and Margaret Cavendish. Co-editor Lynette Hunter, whose background is in rhetoric and textual analysis, offers two papers on 'Lady Experimenters'. Indeed, the medical and scientific activities of genteel ladies constitute the focus of the majority of essays on the seventeenth century by Reid Barbour, Frances Harris and Rob Illiffe with Frances Wilmoth.

This anthology extends our knowledge of the science and medicine of this this period through the incorporation of new material and the

recognition of a different group of practitioners. It considers the range of women who practiced medicine and science, and circumstances under which they did so. It asks what these issues can tell us about the level of education, general knowledge and interests of women in England at this time. Studies of this period have engaged in lengthy debates about the role of women, particularly the perceived distinction between science as masculine and the feminine private sphere. *Women, Science and Medicine* is a fascinating and innovative set of essays which indicates that womens' involvement in a range of scientific and medical practices was far more substantial than has been recognised previously. Not only is this an interesting issue in itself, but it interrogates the assumption of 'inherently' gendered practices, and the origin of distinctions between male and female practitioners of science and medicine.

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Sex and Suffering. Women's Health and a Women's Hospital: The Royal Women's Hospital Melbourne 1856-1996. By Janet McCalman. Melbourne University Press 1998. Pp. xii + 420. \$39.95 cloth.

It has become customary for reviewers of hospital histories to note the lack of a patient voice. The project that resulted in the publication of Janet McCalman's *Sex and Suffering* has, therefore, evoked great interest. Access to the medical records of the hospital meant that this history would include, and possibly even centre around, the women who sought treatment from the hospital's medical and nursing staff. The book has been eagerly awaited. It has been worth the wait.

This study traces the evolution of modern obstetrics and gynaecology, along with the necessary and parallel advances in pathology, medical imaging and anaesthetics, but it does so not from the doctors' view point alone. The text is rich in case studies of individual women, their social and economic situations, their distress and the course of their treatment. It is not always pleasant reading: graphic descriptions of medical treatment prior to the development of anaesthesia and antibiotics leave little to the imagination.