

The Mind Has No Sex?: Women in the Origins of Modern Science

By Londa Schiebinger

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As part of his attempt to secure a place for women in scientific culture, the Cartesian Francois Poullain de la Barre asserted as long ago as 1673 that "the mind has no sex?" In this rich and comprehensive history of women's contributions to the development of early modern science, Londa Schiebinger examines the shifting fortunes of male and female equality in the sphere of the intellect. Schiebinger counters the "great women" mode of history and calls attention to broader developments in scientific culture that have been obscured by time and changing circumstance. She also elucidates a larger issue: how gender structures knowledge and power.

It is often assumed that women were automatically excluded from participation in the scientific revolution of early modern Europe, but in fact powerful trends encouraged their involvement. Aristocratic women participated in the learned discourse of the Renaissance court and dominated the informal salons that proliferated in seventeenth-century Paris. In Germany, women of the artisan class pursued research in fields such as astronomy and entomology. These and other women fought to renegotiate gender boundaries within the newly established scientific academies in order to secure their place among the men of science.

But for women the promises of the Enlightenment were not to be fulfilled. Scientific and social upheavals not only left women on the sidelines but also brought about what the author calls the "scientific revolution in views of sexual difference?" While many aspects of the scientific revolution are well understood, what has not generally been recognized is that revolution came also from another quarter--the scientific understanding of biological sex and sexual temperament (what we today call gender). Illustrations of female skeletons of the ideal woman--with small skulls and large pelvises--portrayed female nature as a virtue in the private realm of hearth and home, but as a handicap in the world of science. At the same time, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women witnessed the erosion of their own spheres of influence. Midwifery and medical cookery were gradually subsumed into the newly professionalized medical sciences. Scientia, the ancient female personification of science, lost ground to a newer image of the male researcher, efficient and solitary--a development that reflected

a deeper intellectual shift. By the late eighteenth century, a self-reinforcing system had emerged that rendered invisible the inequalities women suffered.

In reexamining the origins of modern science, Schiebinger unearths a forgotten heritage of women scientists and probes the cultural and historical forces that continue to shape the course of scientific scholarship and knowledge.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Schiebinger (history, Pennsylvania State Univ.) outlines the achievements of such 17th- and 18th-century women as astronomer Maria Winkelmann and entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian in Europe's scientific world and discusses their struggle in combating the social and cultural barriers of gender. An illuminating but scholarly volume, for history of science and women's studies collections.

- *Judith Overmier, Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman*

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Review

Schiebinger's methodical tracing of the way in which negative or fearful assumptions regarding the nature of the female mind have fed sexual discrimination--and how that discrimination has in turn helped justify the original negative assumptions--is both well researched and convincing. Her profiles of women scientists who resisted prejudice, plus her fascinating descriptions of past and present rationalizations for sexual injustice, make this a solid contribution to the history of science. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

[*The Mind Has No Sex?*] is a beautifully detailed portrayal, alternately amusing, astonishing, dismaying, and painful, of "how real men and women participated in [early modern] science" and what difference it made--to them, to science, and to our general idea of sexual difference. [This is] feminism put to work.

--Clifford Geertz (*New York Review of Books*)

Are women by nature inferior to men in scientific and mathematical reasoning? Such is a modern stereotype. Schiebinger hammers it to pieces with examples of women from the Enlightenment to the nineteenth century who did major scientific work despite relentless male opposition and scorn.

--Richard Marius (*Harvard Magazine*)

What must be applauded in *The Mind Has No Sex?* is the linking of scientific and medical phenomena with institutions, patronage, social groupings, family organization, and crafts. It is still all too rare to find historians of science willing to cast their nets so wide, in terms of chronology and the range of countries and issues considered...Historians of science have much to learn from this book, not only because of the new materials it brings to light, but also because of its attempts to understand women's participation in the acquisition of natural knowledge in terms of scientific and medical theories and of a wide range of social practices.

--L. J. Jordanova (*Times Higher Education Supplement*)

In a book remarkable for its scope and sophistication, historian Londa Schiebinger investigates the nature, extent, and consequences of the structures that have so long barred women from full participation in the sciences since the Renaissance.

--Lorraine Daston (*Science*)

Londa Schiebinger's adventure in scholarly sleuthing discovers the hidden, finds the lost, and celebrates the forgotten women in medicine and science in western Europe and America from the 16th through the 19th centuries. This important, intellectually powerful book is often very funny in relating historical reasons why there are so few women scientists...Beyond comedic virtues, this book's true power lies in its revelation of women's scientific achievements and its recasting of the question at hand: why are there so few women

scientists that we know about? The author's trained eye discovers spectacular women practitioners in astronomy, botany, entomology, physics, medicine, and other sciences whose works have disappeared from neglect, forgetfulness, prejudice, deceit, disbelief, and man's occasional inhumanity to women.

--Madeleine Pelner Cosman (*JAMA*)

The Mind Has No Sex? provides a historical backdrop for the current study of gender issues in psychiatry. It also warns us that the data of science itself is affected by cultural thinking and vulnerable to gender bias.

--Letitia Upton (*News for Women in Psychiatry*)

Readable, carefully-constructed and elegant, [*The Mind Has No Sex?*] does not force any particular view, but presents us with incontrovertible evidence of the crucial role of science in the creation of Western ideas of gender.

--Caroline Humphrey (*London Review of Books*)

In giving this account of the role of science in the creation of gender, backed by this mass of fascinating detail, intriguingly interpreted, Schiebinger has truly travelled uncharted territory.

--June Goodfield (*Nature*)

The Mind Has No Sex is important to scientists because it illuminates the complex dynamic between reason and belief, observation and preconception, theory and conviction. In rich detail, it shows us that scientists are not immune to venal motives of error. At a time when science is once more being viewed as a means to national salvation, and women and minorities are being urged to become scientists and engineers, we should be mindful of these lessons.

--Lilli S. Hormig (*Chemical and Engineering News*)

Feminist scholars will greatly profit from this work, for it points to distinct historical characters, events, and beliefs that have affected women's relationship with science and vice versa. The awareness that there exists a continuous evolution of ideas and social structures enhances any scholarship of women in science.

--E. G. Phanichkul (*Contemporary Sociology*)

About the Author

Londa Schiebinger is John L. Hinds Professor of History of Science and Barbara D. Finberg Director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Stanford University.

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