

Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

Merry E. Wiesner — *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 264.

Complexity and contradiction as well as consistency characterize the experiences of women divided by rank, religion, and nationality over the early modern period. The forces of the Renaissance, the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, rising capitalism, and the Enlightenment have traditionally defined the temporal boundaries of mainstream history in regional, national, and thematic studies. Women's history challenges and re-orders the chronology of this era; in the context of women's experience all assumptions about change or progress are suspended. Merry Wiesner offers this fundamental premise: "at no time or place did [changes] mean the same for men and women" (p. 255). This is not a novel thesis. However, so powerful are the established forces of chronology that this assertion is rightly placed front and centre in a text which will be prized by academic and general readers.

Wiesner offers students new to this subject a brief but essential overview of the origins of women's history, its twentieth-century political roots, and the historiographic debates which have informed the last 30 years of research. The volume is engagingly structured. Current scholarly and historical debates are synthesized according to the paradigms which circumscribed women's lives. Wiesner divides the book along the powerfully gendered concepts of body, mind, and spirit. This bold and conceptually effective structure removes the traditional thematic and chronological categories so long criticized by women's historians. The reader's gaze is thus directed to the delimiting characteristics assigned the female sex. The intellectual distinction between the sexes, which for so long justified the subjugation of women, is made clear in Aristotle's two questions: "What *is* man?" and "What are women *for*?" (p. 13). The Renaissance revival of Aristotelian philosophy re-emphasized the biologically conceived separation of male and female potential.

Wiesner's study of the body ranges from the distinctively gendered female life cycle to women's selective patterns of economic participation. Life cycles for women were perceived very differently from those of men. A man's life was envisaged in seven stages, while a woman's was delineated by two criteria only: her

sexual status and her relationship to a man. The female body and its cycles were defined by a patriarchal tradition in which the female experience was constrained by prohibitions. Sexuality, for example, was seen as a force to be contained. Authorities generally concurred with the contemporary statement that “All women are thought of as either married or to be married” (p. 41), whether marriage was to man or church. Widowhood was another stage of the female life cycle, however — a period of life with opportunities for the fortunate few who could enjoy economic independence, perhaps by continuing in their husband’s trade or position. For the poor, it was a stage of life with dangers. Widows increased in number from the Middle Ages. Wiesner notes the hypothesis which connects the growth of the European economy to the expansion of the work force, in which appeared growing numbers of women and widows.

However, in spite of extensive formal and informal participation in the work force, women possessed no corporate identity equivalent to that of male artisans or traders. More than almost any other factor, this distinguished women from men in the early modern experience of work. Status in the working world was assigned to males. Similarly, skill was an increasingly gendered concept wherein guild members expressed antagonism to “unskilled” female competitors. Enclaves of sweated labour were feminized. Guildsmen in many parts of Europe disdained proto-industrial domestic production as dishonourable labour, as women’s labour.

Set at the centre of this volume, after detailed delineations of the context of women’s physical life, is an examination of female literacy and the degree to which women participated in and created culture. Teaching basic literacy fell within the purview of women of many religious traditions. The Reformations stimulated reading in both Protestant and Catholic areas. In all regions, however, there was a striking difference in the subjects taught to boys and girls. For the latter, obedience and domestic skills were central. The exceptions to this general rule were exceptional women indeed, whose class, wealth, and family connections secured them an arena where their talents could flourish. Some women writers, scientists, and painters stepped into the male academies, claiming, like Gentileschi, “the spirit of Caesar in the soul of this woman” (p. 146). Against all disabilities a few women claimed the right to be creators in the male sphere. However, many who stepped outside the prevailing gender roles suffered the stigma assigned the “disorderly” woman.

There was no more powerful stereotype for disorder than the witch. In the concluding section on the spirit, Wiesner surveys the mass of research on the witch craze undertaken over the past decades. She offers an effective synthesis showing the Christian and Aristotlian roots of early modern misogyny, but also explores the profound regional variations in the witch hunts, as influenced by local political and religious structures. Women were actors in these and other political and religious dramas. They also claimed roles for themselves in local economic protests. However, in so doing, most recognized the narrow path they trod between acceptable behaviour and actions likely to be defined as disorderly. Notions of gender and of disorder were closely intertwined, and sanctions against disorderly conduct were always gendered sanctions.

The vision offered of the early modern era is rich in nuance and detail. Extensive bibliographies attached to each chapter add to the practical value of this volume. Wiesner paints a vivid portrait of rural and urban women marked by social rank, inspired by religious zeal, constrained by education, and defined by marital status: generations of women whose sex determined much of what they would experience throughout their lives.

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Andrew McClellan — *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xii, 289.

It is well known that the French Revolution first established a national museum in the palace of the Louvre and that, enriched with Napoleon's plunder, it contained during his reign perhaps the greatest collection of art in history. It is less recognized that the museum was the culmination of a long process of planning and development throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, during which the purpose of a museum was determined and the modern survey museum received its definitive form. That is really the subject of Andrew McClellan's book.

Perhaps the most important lesson we learn is that there is a lot more to creating a museum than simply hanging pictures on the walls, even for as small an exhibition as the galleries in the Luxembourg Palace, opened in 1750 to display some of the finest works from the royal collection. The motive was to afford art students the opportunity to study the works of the masters, in the hope of improving the quality of French artists. In keeping with the classical and absolute ideas of the period, it was felt that all paintings and artists could be judged by the same objective criteria, applied to the four fundamental qualities of composition, drawing, colour, and expression. Therefore, the galleries were provided to allow students to compare these attributes, rather than to emphasize historical development or national schools.

The closing of the Luxembourg gallery in 1779 led to plans for a large national museum in the Louvre in which most of the royal Old Master paintings could be displayed, as well as sculpture and French history paintings. The expressed hope that such an exhibition would not only provide useful instruction, but would also lead to the recognition of the existence and excellence of a French school, reveals a new nationalistic note.

The decade of the 1780s was occupied with plans for the reconstruction of the Louvre's Grand Gallery as a museum, but the project was delayed by indecision, lack of funds, and political conflict, all of which McClellan examines and explains in considerable, if occasionally confusing detail. During this period paintings were purchased to complement the royal collection, many of which needed cleaning and restoration, and we learn that the period saw significant advances in preservation techniques. The administration also commissioned a number of history paintings