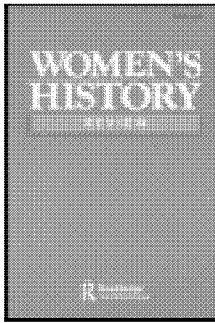


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Women Intellectuals and Intellectual History: their paradigmatic separation

Hilda L. Smith

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This article integrates an exploration of intellectual history as a specialty within broader historical scholarship, its long-term omission of women and gender issues, and an analysis of the writings of early modern women, in order to suggest how the latter provide insights into current shortcomings within intellectual history. It points to the nature of intellectual history and the blinders it places on the intellectual contributions of women: a focus on paradigms that posit universal qualities that ignore gender bias, a reliance on institutions that have traditionally excluded women, and a neglect of gender as a fundamental ideological category underpinning many of the societal judgments of past thinkers. The article argues that Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell, in particular, amongst early modern women writers saw such limitations most clearly, and more so than many contemporary feminist theorists. Early modern writers can, therefore, offer useful insights as to how intellectual historians can more effectively open up their specialty to women's knowledge and gender analysis.

In attempting to grapple with the complexities involved in linking women, gender theorizing, intellectual history, women intellectuals and the history of women, one is continually struck by the degree to which scholars in these different enterprises do not address one another. It is not simply that they do not treat the same subjects or individuals, but that they develop or utilize categories that obscure questions and people not fitting such categorization. Intellectual historians, both those with traditional emphases on links among ideas and great men over time, and those who question the intellectual and social exclusivity of traditionalists, still ignore women intellectuals and gender analyses as a means to rethink the assumptions of their area of study. On the

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other hand, gender theorists and feminist scholars define women and the significant qualities attached to being female in ways that seldom, if ever, isolate the mind as characteristic of, or even important to, being a woman. This article, then, will first analyze the reasons behind the limited foci of intellectual history and feminist scholarship as they relate to women's intellectual history, and, second, the thought and commentary of early modern women thinkers to provide guidance as to where women intellectuals fitted (or didn't) into their cultural and intellectual milieu.

There have been a limited number of attempts to write a history of the specialty of intellectual history. Perhaps the most recent, and in some ways most inclusive, has been Donald R. Kelley's *The Descent of Ideas: the history of intellectual history* where he touches upon the history of philosophy, literature and science. His introduction makes the work appear fully inclusive with the use of the term 'human' rather than man, and listings that feature race and class as well as gender. But the material included in the work itself is much less inclusive than the introduction would indicate. Kelley's introduction highlights one of the particular problems of dealing with intellectual history—falsely universal and broadly inclusive terms are continually employed and give the impression that topics applying to all are the subject of the field, when they seldom are. Philosophers develop analyses of society based overwhelmingly on the experience of those like themselves, consistently male and with sufficient resources and learning to contemplate the abstract and complicated questions and theories they pose. And historians who study them focus on these analyses as if they were written by a 'representative' human voice speaking to broadly human experience. Thus, intellectual history consistently deals with formulations that are twice removed from reality: first, in their original formulation and, second, in the scholarly analysis of this formulation.

Kelley, in his effort to characterize the field, intersperses judgments about the history of ideas tied to iconic male thinkers with language suggesting inclusivity. He states that '[p]hilosophers try to preserve the transcendent vision of Plato and the dialectical wisdom of Aristotle, but historians have discovered that they must remain in the cave of human discourse in which words and not ideas provide the medium of exchange and targets of inquiry'.¹ He works to advance a more contextual framework for the history of ideas and claims for the field:

this is one reason for the recent shift from 'history of ideas' to 'intellectual history'—and one reason why I speak of the 'descent of ideas'. Darwin's famous question in *The Descent of Man* was 'whether man... is descended from some preexisting form'.²

Kelley's goal is to shift from a linear account to one that takes into consideration shifts in the nature of contemporary scholarship, including references to feminist scholarship. But his shift does not move to an inclusion of women thinkers and only to a limited acknowledgement of women scholars.³

Kelley's choice of title is especially telling in this regard; he bases it on Darwin's *Descent of Man*, one of the clearest examples of women's existence beyond a central intellectual framework of what it means to be 'human'. Women did not evolve in the way that European males did (nor, of course, did men and women of color generally), and thus Kelley's descent of ideas is limited by his formulations and assumptions in the

same way that Darwin's evolutionary descent was limited by his gender biases. And those biases are especially relevant to the topic of this article; Darwin's broadest discussion of gender difference appears under the heading, 'Difference in the Mental Powers of the two Sexes' and is replete with typical social and biological explanations for women's intellectual inferiority. In the following sentence he links gender, evolution, and race to women's restricted intellect:

It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization.⁴

His assessment of men's intellectual nature also repeats common stereotypes:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands.⁵

Before discussing how Darwin viewed the specific role of evolution in these differences, I would like to include an amusing, but telling, reference. It supports one of the theses of this article, viz. that categorical distinctions based on gender are so ingrained in most thinkers that they miss issues of both power and irony. To document men's greater genius and intellectual accomplishment, Darwin turns to an unlikely source, John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women*. Mill's work asks fundamental questions about a society's treatment of women and its relation to the use of power and a standard of justice in constituting an advanced civilization. Darwin, in justifying male superiority, obscures Mill's meaning and aim with his concluding comment: "The things in which man most excels woman are those which require most plodding, and long hammering at single thoughts." What is this but energy and perseverance? Darwin next links these qualities to male genius: 'He may be said to possess genius—for genius has been declared by a great authority to be patience; and patience, in this sense, means unflinching, undaunted perseverance'.⁶ He then claims imagination, reason and abstract thought for the male sex, ignoring totally Mill's points about power and control.

In many ways, most telling is Darwin's discussion of the generational transfer of intellectual qualities. Broadly speaking, his work underpins later anthropological assumptions made under the heading 'men in groups', that men's superior abilities are based on the skills attached to group hunting and the positive qualities associated with aggression and competition. Darwin consistently stresses the need to best other males to win sexual partners and to keep females after they have been conquered, and the level of energy and mental acuity such contests entail.⁷

Elsewhere I have written that women do not age in the early modern period in the sense that aging involves maturing along a series of stages and skill developments, and are distinguished only as 'maid, wife, and widow', based on their sexual and marital identity.⁸ Darwin offers an interesting adumbration on this thesis by claiming that the qualities he associates with sexual selection are transmitted at the point of maturity

from one generation of males to the next, so that female offspring do not inherit fully the qualities of genius, courage and perseverance at the highest level of human evolution. Or, in his words: 'here men also excel because of their greater acuity based on sexual selection' and:

... partly through natural selection, that is, from success in the general struggle for life; and as in both cases the struggle will have been during maturity, the characters gained will have been transmitted more fully to the male than to the female offspring.⁹

For Darwin, this affects directly the nature of manhood, such qualities transmitted from a mature male to an adolescent or adult man. Such a transfer offsets the broader principle that all mammals pass on their genetic qualities from each sex to both sexes. Thus, those special characteristics attached to 'civilized' European men involve particular qualities denied women based on their lesser mental reach and general timidity. Because these qualities 'have been continually put to the test and selected during manhood' they would tend 'to be transmitted chiefly to the male offspring at the corresponding period of manhood'. This gendered evolution explains why 'man has ultimately become superior to woman'.¹⁰

Darwin does not limit his judgments to the struggles of primitive men for females that underlay these differences but explores the possibility of women later overcoming them. Again, key is the age of transmission. One might turn to education to seek an equalizing effect, but education at what stage? The broad principle is that 'early acquired characters [are] transmitted to both sexes' and that 'characters acquired by either sex late in life, [are] transmitted to the same sex at the same age'. Thus, training young girls and boys equally would have little positive effect:

In order that woman should reach the same standard as man, she ought, when nearly adult, to be trained to energy and perseverance, and to have her reason and imagination exercised to the highest point; and then she would probably transmit these qualities chiefly to her adult daughters.¹¹

But he cautions that all women 'could not be thus raised' for it would take many generations of exceptionally strong physical and mental specimens among the female sex to marry and produce exceptional daughters to change women's essential nature.¹²

It is not, then, that Darwin reflected Victorian attitudes concerning differences in intellect and character between men and women, but that his evolutionary explanation afforded him a framework beyond individual examples. This gender-distinct inheritance of mature male qualities constituted a scientific explanation for why women could never think and behave like men. It made male and female learning and ambition distinct categories that offered little opportunity for overlap. Intellectual historians have missed this reality in Darwin, and in so many thinkers of the past, because they have failed to link the thinker's first principles with his discussion of gender broadly or women specifically.

Another factor that has made including women in their vision difficult for intellectual historians is their focus on institutions. This has led to inordinate attention being paid to universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and to professional associations such as the Royal Society. Such analyses have obvious negative implications for women

since the use of their minds, and development of ideas, took place outside these confines. It is not simply the integration of institutional history into the history of ideas that has limited the place of women thinkers, it is also the assumption that the worth of an idea or line of thinking is to be judged by its level of influence. Who influenced whom and how many (and how important) are central issues for intellectual historians. Yet seldom is there recognition of the significance of ties formed at universities, in the Royal Society or through informal intellectual correspondence, even the latter overwhelmingly excluding women. It is much easier to be influential if one has students or one's work is recommended in an academic or public setting.¹³

While there are a number of us who view ourselves as women's intellectual historians, there has been little systematic or synthetic work in the field. This is the case for a number of reasons. Groups of scholars most apt to develop such interests have framed their scholarship in distinct, and often, conflicting ways. Feminist philosophers have been more apt to critique traditional male philosophers, to develop new categories of legitimate interest for the field such as environmental concerns and to accept gender differences which include women's distinct moral decision making, their use of emotions and the senses more than reason to reach conclusions, and their valorization of groups and relationships rather than the universal individual, so central to traditional philosophical constructs. The preponderance of the field's attention has been on a particular feminine morality, feminist epistemology, eco-feminism and the connection between feminism and other current social movements, and the assessment by feminist philosophers of traditional male thinkers. While attention has been given to current theorists, especially those adopting the methods of postmodernism, almost no attention has been given to women thinkers of the past.¹⁴

For the most part, historians of women have avoided intellectual history altogether. This is the case for a number of reasons: the close ties of the field to the new social history, which focused on the poor and working class and everyday life; the development of gender theory, which has heavily relied on a limited number of male and female theorists; and the recent attention to issues of sexuality and the body. All of these foci have discouraged those studying women and gender from studying women as intellectuals and analyzing their ideas as a valuable means to understand a particular period and women's lives more broadly.

The US women's historian Linda Kerber has published a collection of essays entitled *Toward an Intellectual History of Women*, Berenice Carroll and I have edited *Women's Political and Social Thought: an anthology*, and the French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, in a work recently translated into English as *The Sex of Knowing*, has argued for women's philosophical significance while sharply criticizing French feminists who stress difference.¹⁵ We each have attempted in distinct ways to undercut theories of difference, which deny women's intellectual nature and slight their serious social and political writings. But there is certainly nothing that could yet be termed a synthetic history of women's intellectual contributions, either for Europe or the USA, or for other regions of the world. Kerber's introduction is mostly autobiographical, and maybe this is understandable given the continuing need to justify an interest in women's intellectual history. After outlining her graduate training and beginning

teaching experiences, Kerber noted that her early studies in women's history were quite popular and heavily cited. She is, of course, most well known for her work on the concept of republican motherhood. But while her focus on women's history was thriving, her specialty was not. As she notes:

But the field of intellectual history was less resilient. Survey texts were still appearing in which, except for a nod in the direction of Jane Addams or Margaret Mead, women did not think serious thoughts. What intellectual difference might the feminist perspective make, applied to the life of the mind?¹⁶

In response to her own question, Kerber contends that it has led us to look for ideas outside of traditional sources, especially in women's diaries, and to question terms, such as separate spheres, which were taken too much for granted, with seemingly self-explanatory meanings. Some of the most original thinking in the area appeared in an essay by Berenice Carroll from 1990 entitled 'The Politics of Originality and the Class System of the Intellect' in which Carroll systematically critiqued the values used by historians and philosophers alike as to why someone was termed a genius, or presented fundamental and original ideas, or was highly influential in a particular field or controversy. She queried the use of 'originality' as a way to judge a thinker's worth and offered numerous examples of women's thought being portrayed stereotypically as derivative and popular. In our collection of women's political and social thought, we contend that interest in women's writings has overwhelmingly been limited to literary texts and feminist writings, thus slighting their broad social and political commentary; and we include a wide range of the latter running from well-known figures such as Christine de Pizan, through a range of early modern thinkers to a concluding section including Virginia Woolf, Rosa Luxemburg, Simone Weil, as well as Emma Mashinini from South Africa and the Chinese author, Ding Ling.

Michèle Le Doeuff's *The Sex of Knowing*, published originally in French in 1998, appears an angry book, often sounding more like 1969 than the late 1990s, but reflecting a perspective first offered by Simone de Beauvoir, that theorists associated with the *psych et po* movement have undercut the essential goals and integrity of postwar French feminism.¹⁷ While Le Doeuff expounds on these charges, she is most angry at traditional French scholarship and French feminist thinkers for preventing the serious treatment of women thinkers through their dismissal of women's rational nature. Her work begins with discussion of Christine de Pizan in a standard account of French literature in which the author, Gustave Lanson, contends:

Why waste time on Christine de Pizan? She may have been a good daughter, good wife, and good mother; but she was also one of the most dyed-in-the-wool bluestockings our literature has ever known, the first of an insufferable procession of women writers who can effortlessly produce any book on any subject...¹⁸

She ties such dismissals to the current assumption that educational and professional equality has been obtained. 'Meanwhile, no one bothers to ask about the substance of what is commonly called knowledge or about the cultural milieu in which individuals and "knowing" meet.' She quotes Jacques Derrida:

Feminism is nothing but the operation of a woman who aspires to be like a man. And in order to resemble the masculine dogmatic philosopher this woman lays claim—just as much claim as he—to truth, science and objectivity in all their castrated delusions of virility. Feminism too seeks to castrate. It wants a castrated woman.¹⁹

Basically Le Doeuff returns to an earlier stage of feminism where access to serious learning and intellectual respect were central tenets. Over the last few decades such goals have been seen as dated, or as elitist, and whose aims hold little relevance for women broadly. In some ways it seems ironic for academic feminists to give scant attention to the slighting of women's intellectual past or to dismiss the liberating effects of serious learning. At one level, owning one's mind and one's intellectual tradition has as much significance in regard to personal agency as owning one's body.

Certainly, early modern women thinkers worked to establish their intellectual standing and were especially concerned with the products of women's minds being recognized and respected. And in doing so, they often took on the intellectual establishment of their day. Margaret Cavendish, sometimes speaking in language that would later be associated with utilitarianism, criticized male scientific efforts as having little worth for the real needs of human beings. Anne Conway critiqued the overly abstract nature of theological concerns, which ignored links between humans and nature.²⁰ And Mary Astell illuminated the inconsistencies of English revolutionaries by pointing out their unwillingness 'to cry up liberty to poor female slaves'.²¹ Most centrally, Astell urged young women to pursue systematic learning. During her lifetime, her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, to establish a women's academy based on Cartesian methods, was her most popular work, gaining much attention and some financial support. But within the last couple of decades her *Reflections upon Marriage* has garnered greater attention from scholars. At least to my mind, such a shift is tied to the limited attention paid to women's intellectual history.

Contemporary feminists often interpret early modern works in relation to topics driving current gender theory and scholarship. And those interpretations can slight the insights and experience of early women writers. Such views are widespread, but a good example is the work of Susan Bordo on the significance of the birthing process to understanding Descartes' thought and influence.²² When one contrasts her views with those of Mary Astell, who applied Cartesian principles to her feminist arguments and curricular structure, it seems clear that they are not easily resolved. Bordo sees the shift from a medieval holistic viewpoint and animalistic science to Renaissance individualism as a type of birth, while Descartes' later methodological shift is characterized as a rebirth. The problem with her claim, other than its oversimplification of periodization and historical change, is that women get linked to an earthly physicality beyond epistemological shifts. To understand Descartes better, she contends, we need to capture his 'anxiety over separation—from the organic female universe of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance', which is a journey in Bacon's terms of 'a masculine birth of time'. Other than having difficulty in simply knowing what an organic female universe might be, and especially one tied to particular historical periods, such a perspective is wholly absent from late seventeenth-century women thinkers. Mary Astell took Descartes'

directions at face value, and applied them personally and in her instructions for other women.²³

One of the most common concerns among women thinkers of the 1600s was the denial of serious learning to women. While Astell gave the issue its most thorough attention, references to the nature of women's training can be found in the works of Margaret Cavendish, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Hannah Woolley and, of course, Bathsua Makin. Marjorie Nicholson, an early editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, spoke of Descartes' ideas as a liberating force when they were introduced into England, especially for women and the young.²⁴ They allowed the individual to pursue intellectual interests outside the context of hierarchical and exclusionary institutions. Astell wanted women to read difficult works that required all their analytical powers and to avoid a petty and harmful focus on dress and other trifles. A concern with power relations never lay much below the surface in her work, and she utilized sharp language such as this in the introduction to her *Serious Proposal*: 'Women are from their very Infancy debar'd those Advantages, with the want of which they are afterwards reproached, and nursed up in those Vices which will hereafter be upbraided to them'.²⁵

It is the second part of the *Proposal* that contains the most detailed account of her program for women's serious learning. Here, she praises Cartesian epistemology. Astell also reiterates her concerns over the trifling nature of women's lives, and lambastes their conformity as follows: 'Singularity is indeed to be avoided except in matters of importance, in such a case Why shou'd not we assert our Liberty, and not suffer every Trifler to impose a Yoke of Impertinent Customs on us?'²⁶ Men may claim that women are incapable of profound acts or learning, but given women's lack of training, 'instead of inquiring why all Women are not wise and good, we have reasons to wonder that there are any so. Were the Men as much neglected... perhaps they wou'd be so far from surpassing those whom they now despise'. And she refers to women scholars, and their 'examples in all Ages, which sufficiently confute the Ignorance and Malice of this assertion'. Thus, any failing, if such exists, 'is acquired not natural'.

Astell divides the nature of our knowledge into three categories: faith, science and opinion. She gives equal standing to faith and science and does not see them in conflict, as she believes if one properly applies one's mind, a belief in God, and a Christian version of that God, is inevitable. They simply represent two different ways of seeking knowledge. Reason is the means to all learning: 'a good Natural Reason after all, is the best Director, without this you will scarce Argue well, tho' you had the Choicest Books and Tutors'.²⁷ Women's obligation then, is to read the best works, to apply one's reason, and thus, 'we have no more to do but to look attentively into our Minds, Having as we said above, laid aside all Prejudices...'²⁸ Such a set of interlocking principles allowed Astell to combine a position which urged serious learning and the claim that such a life does not depend upon a university education or significant library. Clearly, Astell allied herself with rationalism and metaphysics, and gave little attention to the emerging empiricism of late seventeenth-century scientific experimentation.

Her work both supports women's mental equality and proposes a means to allow some women to demonstrate it. Reason and religion were the two pillars of her life. Her strong religious beliefs—and her academy was to be based jointly on religious and

intellectual principles—rather than undermining her commitment to reason, provided its foundation: ‘God does nothing in vain, he gives no Power or Faculty which he has not allotted to some proportionate use, if therefore he has given to Mankind a rational Mind, every individual Understanding ought to be employ’d in using it’. She was particularly upset with so-called religious teachers who urged women simply to follow their husbands’ or ministers’ guidance.²⁹ She next outlined a series of principles based on Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* that would enable women to think in complex ways about what they read and come to a reliable and defensible position about its meaning. Astell reinforces Nicholson’s judgment as to the intellectually liberating impact of Descartes’ views as they were imported into England. If one followed Descartes’ directives, such efforts could aid everyone:

All have not leisure to Learn Languages and pore on Books, nor Opportunity to converse with the Learned; but all may *Think*, may use their own Faculties rightly, and consult the Master who is within them.³⁰

Her four main principles follow Descartes and urge women students to seek distinct ideas. She and others influenced by Descartes were not troubled by the mind–body split, which has so driven recent feminist commentary about him. I am not disputing the legitimacy of such concerns; yet ignoring the positive use contemporary women thinkers (as well as male feminists such as Poulain de la Barre) made of Descartes has resulted in scholars questioning women’s rational nature and marginalizing their viewpoints.³¹

Much of current gender analysis is based on ideologies which are either explicitly biased against women, such as Freudian psychoanalytic analysis, or ignore gender as a fundamental category in understanding the nature of human beings and the power relations among them. In the latter case, sexuality, which emphasizes women’s biological and physical nature and duties at the expense of their intellectual qualities and the social and political systems that underpin unequal power structures, is often allowed to stand as a placeholder for gender. Age, as stressed earlier in my discussion of Darwin, played a crucial role in Freud’s portrayal of the two sexes. His language here, and that of so many other thinkers who highlight gender difference, should give us pause before employing harmful stereotypes attached to the categories of masculinity and femininity. Freud stated that a man of thirty is:

a youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities... opened by analysis. A woman of the same age, however, often frightens us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability... There are no paths open to further development... as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person involved.³²

By using the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ as if they were not culturally charged terms, feminist scholars are subject to legitimizing such views. And, for the early modern period, such analyses present problems of ahistoricity. Then, the term masculine, in particular, lacked qualities of gender distinction as we would normally define it; rather, it was a term of approbation which could be—indeed was—applied to either sex.

One area in which such an emphasis on gender difference has played itself out has been through feminist treatments of the history of science. More than any other area of knowledge, science has been seen as a masculine endeavor, and one dangerous to women, or more accurately to the feminine principle. In turning again to Susan Bordo, and to the pioneering scholarship of Sandra Harding, Carolyn Merchant and Evelyn Fox Keller on which she relies, these arguments are made clear. For example, according to Bordo, objectivity emerges from Descartes' methods of posing the self against the universe so that 'the human being emerges as a decisively separate entity, no longer continuous with the universe with which it had once shared a soul'.³³ For the seventeenth century, much of the most influential scholarship comes from Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, which saw Baconian science, the origins of the Royal Society and the Newtonian Revolution that followed all as masculine attacks on feminine qualities attached to the earth, human nature and nature more broadly.³⁴

Bordo sees Cartesian epistemological shifts as part of an attack on nature and the body and the unity of all living things. Because of 'Cartesian reconstruction... the spiritual and the corporeal are now two distinct substances', she writes. While admitting that dualism could also be found in Plato and Aristotle, not to mention Augustine, in her view, Descartes' move was unique: 'But while dualism runs deep in our traditions, it is only with Descartes that body and mind are *defined* in terms of exclusivity'. In a section devoted to 'The Masculinization of Thought', she claims:

[t]he Cartesian reconstruction may also be described in terms of separation from the *maternal*—the immanent realms of earth, nature, the authority of the body—and a compensatory turning toward the *paternal* for legitimization through external regulation, transcendent values, and the authority of law.

Such a move returns her to the 'medieval cosmos' which she views as a '*mother* cosmos... and the soul which Descartes drained from the natural world was a *female* soul'.³⁵

In Bordo's discussion of nature and the earth she contrasts their female qualities with Descartes' masculine epistemology: 'The female element here is *natura naturata*, of course passive rather than creative nature. But passivity here connotes *receptivity* rather than *inertness*; only a living, breathing earth can be impregnated'. And, movement to an individual who utilizes reason contrasts with 'sympathetic' knowing which she connects to women; it is 'the only mode that *truly* respects the object' and its method of knowing involves merging or 'marrying' the object in question, not maintaining the distant and controlling knowledge of the male thinker. Bordo quotes Sandra Harding as terming modern science a 'supermasculinization of rational thought'. Using Freud's understanding of individuation, she sees Descartes' thinking being as representing 'compensation for a profound loss [:] the sundering of the organic ties between person and nature'.³⁶

Not simply does this thesis identify women with the body, nature and passivity and dissociate them from the mind and reason, it contrasts sharply with Margaret Cavendish's understanding of the power and place of nature in the creation, again limiting voices of early modern women and missing, in this instance, their use of nature as a

source of power, not a passive, impregnable body. In a poem introducing her *Philosophical Fancies*, Cavendish contended:

For Nature's Unconfin'd, and gives about
Her severall Fancies, without leave, no doubt.
Shee's infinite, and can no limits take,
But by her Art as good a Brain may make.³⁷

By placing nature in God's stead, and speaking for her, she established a forum to legitimate herself and to feminize the infinite. Also, as Cavendish's rejection of orthodoxy was so often tied to gender inversion, it is difficult not to think this was one of the reasons behind her particular constructions. She continually engenders powerful and creative elements female, and as her use of terms such as 'hurles' makes clear, her supreme nature is not a stereotypically feminine force, but a dominant, commanding authority.³⁸

Readers familiar with Cavendish's works are familiar with the innumerable prefatory materials that introduced them. They were filled with apologia or explanations of what readers had failed to grasp in an earlier work. They also reflect a shift in her scientific approach in her later works. Early on she exhibited an enthusiasm for the introduction of microscopes better to display nature's mysteries. Later, she shifts, based on a utilitarian assessment of their limited usefulness. In 'Of Micrography, and of Magnifying and Multiplying Glasses', from *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, she outlines in greater detail this distrust. After saying that she does not use such instruments, she continues that this art:

... with all its Instruments, is not able to discover the interior natural motions of any part or creature of Nature; nay, the questions [*sic*] is, whether it can represent yet the exterior shapes and motions so exactly, as naturally they are; for Art doth more easily alter then inform.³⁹

She continues with the construction of cylinders and concave and convex glasses which represent objects not 'exactly and truly, but very deformed and misshaped'. For an example she offers: 'a Lowse by the help of a Magnifying-glass, appears like a Lobster, where the Microscope enlarging and magnifying each part of it, makes them bigger and rounder then naturally they are'.⁴⁰ Her more important criticism, rather than simple misrepresentation, is how little humans gain from such an enterprise. Most importantly, microscopes only enhance our knowledge of the surface of an animal or object, and they distract from more serious learning. Their use 'has intoxicated so many mens brains' and led them to dwell on 'but superficial wonders'. Her basic utilitarian skepticism follows:

But could Experimental Philosophers find out more beneficial Arts... either For the better increase of Vegetables and brute Animals to nourish our bodies, Or better and commodious contrivances in the Art of Architecture to build us Houses, or for the advancing of trade and traffick to provide necessaries for us to live... [they] would not only be worth their labour, but of as much praise as could be given to them.⁴¹

But these instruments have not demonstrated a practical application, and rather, the scientists who employ them could be described:

But as Boys that play with watry Bubbles, or fling Dust into each others Eyes, or make a Hobby-horse of Snow, [they] are worthy of reproof rather than praise, for wasting their time with useless sports; so those that addict themselves to unprofitable Arts, spend more time then they reap benefit thereby.

Cavendish suggests instead that they take up husbandry, architecture ‘or the like necessary and profitable employments’.⁴²

It should be remembered that early microscopes lacked the capabilities of today’s powerful counterparts, and that much of the earliest science employed carnivalistic display, lacking the practical results desired by Cavendish. Her utilitarian skepticism with microscopic research is tied to her claim to intellectual independence. Women were excluded from both philosophic training and scientific demonstrations. Her search for fame was tied to both resentment of, and pride in, her ability as a woman working in her isolated study to read and assess the work of natural philosophers and experimentalists. Early modern women developed their own perspectives on the intellectual movements of their day, adopting those methods and ideas that they found most applicable to their own thought, and discarding those they did not. While representing a uniform attachment to reason and philosophical pursuits, there is an early utilitarianism not always found in male thinkers.

In many ways, they were more directly at odds than later scholars with contemporaries who demeaned women’s minds. Aphra Behn, for instance, in her translation of Fénelon’s *Plurality of Worlds*, was often critical of the work, which has been identified favorably as an instance of attention paid to women’s interest in science and philosophy. Behn rather pointed to Fénelon expounding ‘his wild Notion of the Plurality of Worlds to that height of Extravagancy’. And she felt quite competent to judge it, although a playwright and novelist. ‘The Whole Book is very unequal; the first, fourth, and the beginning of the fifth Discourses are incomparably the best.’ But it was the treatment of his young female pupil that most offended her: ‘[a]nd for his Lady Marquiesse, he makes her say a great many very silly [t]hings, tho’ sometimes she makes Observations so learned, that the Greatest philosophers in Europe could make no better’.⁴³

Any hint of condescension particularly upset intellectual women during the 1600s. Catherine Trotter Cockburn, later, reiterated Cavendish’s utilitarianism in her defense of John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*, in order to silence his detractors. In the preface, she begins: ‘[a]s the Science of true Morality is of the most Universal and highest Concernment to Mankind’, understanding Locke’s unified system of mental and moral principles is essential to building the good society. And she ties its broad use to a similar skepticism of the science of her age in an introduction directed to Locke:

But, Sir, The Essay of *Human Understanding* is a Publick Concern, which every one has a Right and Interest to defend; It came too late into the World to be receiv’d without opposition, as it might have been in the first Ages of Philosophy, before Mens Heads were prepossess’d with imaginary Science... it wou’d have prevented a great deal of that unintelligible Jargon, and vain Pretence to Knowledge of things out of the reach of Human Understanding, which make a great part of the School Learning, and disuse the Mind to Plain and solid Truth.⁴⁴

Yet, with the scientific direction of natural philosophy, the women, along with Thomas Hobbes as outlined in *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, were on the losing side; experimental science did ultimately triumph over rationalist thought, at least in that realm of study designated as 'science'.⁴⁵ Clearly, their rationalist loyalties also reflected their status as outsiders from the classical training and the relatively recent Royal Society that provided a venue for scientific exploration. As Astell stated, one could work to convince individual women to neglect their minds and focus on social and familial matters, but one could not separate them from their minds, in the way that women were excluded from universities and fraternal societies. Thus early modern women thinkers' attack on the irrelevance and preening associated with much university learning, and the lack of applied knowledge to be gained by experiments such as blowing up mice in a vacuum, reflected not simply their personal intellectual values, but their exclusion from the intellectual life of their society as well. And, as today, significant components of early modern scholarship encompassed responses to professional rivals, answering another's argument or questioning his data or sources. For women, such scholarly disputes occurred in forbidden circles, and the substance of these debates often appeared as puffery and posturing, not additions to the storehouse of knowledge. It is thus important to understand the dual significance of their viewpoints.

How, then, do those of us who pursue women's intellectual insights from the early modern period relate to other emphases within feminist scholarship? Is it necessary for us first to develop a more synthetic account of women's philosophical, political and scientific works? And how can we integrate our focus on women's minds with foci on other elements in their lives? Do the subject and methods of women's intellectual history necessarily differ from other specializations within the field? Or do those studying women's intellectual history, and those focusing on other areas, simply need to see an intellectual focus as another piece to the puzzle of women's past? In trying to grapple with this issue, I would like to point to Patricia Crawford's and Laura Gowing's collection of primary sources, *Women's Worlds in Seventeenth Century England: a sourcebook*. They have a section entitled 'Mental Worlds', but a quick perusal of the section's contents makes clear it has little connection to women's intellectual endeavors. The headings are: depression and despair; fits and disorders, dreams and visions, and prophesying the future. While the volume as a whole includes sections on religion, sexuality, marriage, etc., still the materials in this last section on mental worlds come mostly from personal crises in the lives of religious writers.⁴⁶ How, then, do women's historians create interest in women's intellectual life, while still representing their daily lives within the family and at work? I am not sure we are at a place yet where we can answer that question, but I hope our ultimate solution will include a legitimate role for the operation of women's minds in the past and their intellectual contributions to their age without characterizing intellectual movements as excluding the voices of women thinkers.

Notes

- [1] Donald R. Kelley (2002) *The Descent of Ideas: the history of intellectual history* (Aldershot: Ashgate), p. 1.

- [2] Ibid., p. 2.
- [3] Ibid., pp. 1–8.
- [4] Charles Darwin (1896) *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd edn (London: John Murray), p. 563.
- [5] Ibid., p. 564.
- [6] John Stuart Mill (1869) *The Subjection of Women*, p. 122 quoted in Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 564–565.
- [7] See Lionel Tiger (1969) *Men in Groups* (New York: Random House) and feminist critiques of Tiger's work, especially Michelle Rosaldo & Louise Lamphere (Eds) (1974) *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press). A more recent article which presents an overview of feminist anthropology is Micaela di Leonardo (1992) Women, Culture, and Society Revisited: feminist anthropology for the 1990s, in Cheris Kramarae & Dale Spender (Eds) (1992) *The Knowledge Explosion: generations of feminist scholarship* (New York: Teachers College Press).
- [8] Hilda L. Smith (2001) Aging: a problematic category for women, *Journal of Women's History*, 12(4), pp. 77–86.
- [9] Darwin, *Descent of Man*, p. 565.
- [10] Ibid., p. 564.
- [11] Ibid., p. 565.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] The most thorough and perceptive discussion can be found in Berenice A Carroll (1990) The Politics of Originality: the class system of the intellect, *Journal of Women's History*, 2(2), pp. 136–163. Carroll documents the ways in which men (especially in the academy and professional societies) have set up measurements for significance and prominence that require posts and influence consistently denied to women.
- [14] An inclusive collection by Alison M. Jaggar & Iris M. Young (1998), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell), includes selections on differing regions, particular perspectives (such as rationalism, empiricism, and postmodernism), and different disciplines such as the natural and biological sciences and psychoanalytic feminism, but no discussion of women philosophers. Another introduction to feminist philosophy features feminist interpretations of the history of philosophy, feminist epistemologies, feminist ethics of conflict and transnational feminism, again giving slight attention to women philosophers. (Robin M Schott [2003] *Discovering Feminist Philosophy* [Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield]).
- [15] Linda K. Kerber (1997) *Towards an Intellectual History of Women: essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); Hilda L. Smith & Berenice A. Carroll (Eds) (2000) *Women's Political and Social Thought: an anthology* (Bloomington: University of Indiana); Michele Le Doeuff (2003) *The Sex of Knowing* (Kathryn Hamer & Lorraine Code, Trans.) (London: Routledge; originally published as *Le Sexe du Savoir*).
- [16] Kerber, *Towards an Intellectual History of Women*, p. 17.
- [17] Simone de Beauvoir (1984) France: feminism—alive, well, and in constant danger, in Robin Morgan (Ed.) *Sisterhood is Global: the international women's movement anthology* (New York: Viking Penguin), pp. 232–238; Michèle Riot-Sarcey documented the resistance of French historians to moving beyond a political history that was tied to a universal 'masculine' and the essentialist treatment of women as different that justified a separate (and irrelevant) women's history. In her words: 'women's history in France is reluctant to engage in a historical analysis which would take into account the founding role of hierarchy, which is central to gender'. Michèle Riot-Sarcey (1997) Women's History in France: an ill-defined subject, *Gender and History*, 9(1), pp. 15–35; (1999) The Difficulties of Gender in France: reflections on a concept, *Gender and History* 11(3), pp. 489–498, citing p. 490.
- [18] Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, p. ix.
- [19] Ibid., p. xi.

- [20] For a fuller discussion of this topic see Hilda L. Smith (2005) *Margaret Cavendish and the Microscope as Play*, in Judith Zinsser (Ed.) *Men, Women, and the Birthing of Modern Science* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press), pp. 35–47; for a fuller discussion of the correspondence between Cavendish and Huygens see Nadine Akkerman & Margu rite Corporaal (2004) *Mad Science Beyond Flattery: the correspondence of Margaret Cavendish and Constantijn Huygens*, *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Special Issue, 14, pp. 1–21; for a discussion of Anne Conway see Sarah Hutton (2004) *Anne Conway: a woman philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). In the final chapter on Conway's legacy she places her thought within the neo-Platonic, Cartesian God-centered philosophies, especially those which equate God with the created universe. Also, in a new edition of Anna Maria van Schurman's central work the editor stresses the breadth of her intellectual correspondence, but neither woman is characterized as establishing her own school or having a significant following. Anna Maria van Schurman (1998) *Whether a Christian Woman Should be Educated, and Other Writings from Her Intellectual Circle*, Joyce L. Irwin (Ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- [21] Mary Astell (1996) *Astell: political writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- [22] Susan Bordo (2001) *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought and the Seventeenth-Century Flight from the Feminine*, *Feminism: critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, selections in Mary Evans (Ed.) *Feminism: critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, 2 vols (London: Routledge), vol. 1, p. 161; another influential work isolating women from reason is Genevieve Lloyd (1984) *The Man of Reason: 'male' and 'female' in western philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- [23] Susan Bordo (2001) *The Flight to Objectivity*, in Mary Evans (Ed.) *Feminism: critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*, 2 vols (London: Routledge), vol. 1, p. 155.
- [24] Marjorie Hope Nicholson (1929) *The Early State of Cartesianism in England*, *Studies in Philology*, 25, pp. 364–380.
- [25] Mary Astell (2002) *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest, Parts I and II*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press), pp. 16–17, originally published in 1697.
- [26] Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II*, p. 6.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- [30] *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- [31] For a discussion of Poulain de la Barre, see Siep Stuurman (1997) *Social Cartesianism: Francois Poulain de la Barre and the origins of the Enlightenment*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58(4), pp. 617–640.
- [32] Smith, 'Aging: a problematic category', p. 35.
- [33] Bordo, 'The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought', pp. 161–162.
- [34] Carolyn Merchant (1980) *The Death of Nature: women, ecology, and the Scientific Revolution: a feminist reappraisal of the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row).
- [35] Bordo, 'The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought', pp. 163–166.
- [36] *Ibid.*, pp. 167–170.
- [37] Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1653) *Philosophicall Fancies* (London: Printed by Tho. Roycroft for J. Martin and J. Allestrye), 'A Dedication to Fame', n.p.
- [38] See 'Of the working of Severall Motions of Nature' in *Philosophical Fancies* (London: Printed by Tho Roycroft for J. Martin and J. Allestrye), p. 30.
- [39] Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1668) *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (London: printed by A. Maxwell), p. 7.
- [40] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- [41] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [42] *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

- [43] M. de (Bernard Le Bovier) Fontenelle (1688) *A Discovery of New Worlds, from the French, made English by A. Behn* (London: Printed for William Canning), 'Translator's Introduction', n.p.
- [44] [Cockburn [Trotter], Catherine] (1702) *A Defence of the Essay of Human Understanding, Written by Mr. Lock* (London: Printed for Will. Turner and John Nutt), 'To the Excellent Mr. Lock', n.p.
- [45] Steven Shapin & Simon Schaffer (1985) *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the experimental life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- [46] Patricia Crawford & Laura Gowing (Eds) *Women's Worlds in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Routledge).