

The anatomy of culture

by Florence Boos

The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century, by Patricia A. Vertinsky. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990, 279 pp. (US distribution by St. Martin's Press, \$59.95 hardcover.)

The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929, by Ornella Moscucci. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 278 pp., \$49.50 hardcover.

Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle, by Elaine Showalter. New York: Viking, 1990, 242 pp., \$19.95 hardcover; Penguin Books, 1991, \$9.95 paper.

EACH OF THESE three books treats late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attitudes towards women's sexuality, health and physical capacities. All three focus on men's more than women's actions and beliefs, document repellent forms of sexist and gynophobic regimentation with horrific examples and note ways in which the constrictive patterns they describe remain with us. Patricia Vertinsky and Ornella Moscucci modulate and focus their outrage with the aid of careful historical method, Elaine Showalter with irrepressibly eclectic virtuosity of arrangement and presentation.

The Eternally Wounded Woman takes its double-edged title from Jules Michelet's claim (in *L'Amour*, 1858) that after menarche each woman is for fifteen or twenty days out of twenty-eight "not only an invalid, but a wounded one. It [is] woman's plight to ceaselessly suffer love's eternal wound." Few readers of *The Women's Review of Books* will suffer from the illusion that professional scientists have been constant friends to women, but even those already familiar with the historical data may wince as they read Vertinsky's careful documentation of nineteenth-century British and American dogmas about menstruation, menopause and female health, and at the phobic intensity and coercive virulence of male doctors' efforts to suppress women's attempts to provide health care for themselves.

Identification of normal female processes with disease was completely orthodox in the period Vertinsky studies, and women's alleged physical debility also provided convenient "scientific" support for denying them access to most non-servile occupations and to all forms of higher education, including medical education. The male guild-masters seem to have been especially alarmed at the thought that female successors might subvert the "professional" authority they had established. Among many other sources, Vertinsky cites a Dr. Gardner in New York, who noted in the 1870 *Conjugal Sins* that contact with menstrual blood could cause a penis to suffer "disease, excoriations and blenorhagias," and correspondents in the *British Medical Journal* for 1879, who debated whether a menstruating woman would contaminate the food she touched.

Commentators were especially adamant about the immediate need to repress women's energies at puberty—a kind of physiocratic rationale for the subtler psychological barriers still imposed on adolescent women. An 1879 gynecology text by a Dr. Emmet, for example, warned that adolescent girls should spend the year before and two years after menarche "at rest," and an American doctor proscribed "excessive" exercise on the grounds that "woman has characteristic differences from man in every organ and tissue." The anthropologist George Romanes claimed that menstruation reduced the (al-

ready weak) female brain, and the "progressive" Herbert Spencer believed that menstruation barred women from serious study or physical activity.

The average late nineteenth-century American woman's lifespan was about 51 years, so one might have expected that some members of this weakened and depleted class might enjoy a few years of post-menopausal freedom. Not so, however. The end of menstruation—the "death of the woman in the woman"—would be even more traumatic than its onset: one British practitioner catalogued no fewer than 120 potential diseases.

There was no effectively organized resistance to the "authority" these views represented, and it was clearly difficult for educated women of the period to avoid internalizing some of them. Vertinsky examines in some detail the reactions of pioneering women doctors, most of whom viewed themselves as exceptions to the "natural" pattern of women-as-mothers, but did oppose the most extreme and patronizing restrictions on women's activities and behavior. There was also something of a generation gap. Vertinsky contrasts attitudes toward female exercise expressed by several early female physicians and educational advisers—Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Mary Jacobi, Eliza Mosher and Clelia Duell Mosher—with those of later, more conservative and eugenicist counterparts—Arabella Kenealy, Elizabeth Sloan Chessier and Angeline Parry.

Vertinsky devotes an entire chapter to the proto-totalitarian views about female health and physical education advocated by the American educator G. Stanley Hall, and follows this with the book's most extended study of female resistance, "The New Woman and Nervous Illness: Charlotte Perkins Gilman," which reviews Gilman's lifelong preoccupation with physical fitness, and the frustrations of her inability to realize ideals of women's physical emancipation. Vertinsky even provides a kind of wry comic relief, with a section which examines the suspected political agenda of women on bicycles. Their locomotion seems to have raised a subversive spectre of independent travel, rather like the upper-class Saudi women who recently dared *en masse* to drive their own cars.

In her epilogue, Vertinsky finds several echoes of overwrought male scientism in more recent medical and physiological practices, including a tendency to exaggerate the effects of competitive sports on the ability to bear children, and a reluctance to encourage vigorous exercise among older women. For me this book gathered momentum as it went along, and densely academic allusions to "sexual construction" yielded to concrete and explicit examples of the conflicts embodied in nineteenth-century doctrines about women's exercise. I would have liked to learn more of Vertinsky's own views about contemporary health practice, and alternative modes for the promotion of women's physical well-being.

IN THE PREFACE to *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929*, Ornella Moscucci examines some of the same topics as Vertinsky, including male clinical views of menstruation and female physiology. Her book is a contribution to the "Cambridge History of Medicine," however, and it is primarily a history of professional and institutional change, including the founding of hospitals for women, and the impulses which eventually led to the creation and amalgamation of the medical specialties now known as obstetrics and gynecology. The result is a highly accomplished book which actually includes two separate treatises—a brief and powerful feminist polemic, followed by a more cautious traditional history. Unfortunately, these two disparate contributions never quite seem to blend fully together or reinforce each other.

In her more explicitly feminist mode, Moscucci argues that "gynaecology" should not exist, and she remarks that "One day

Giacomo and... Jessica [her two children] will know why this book is dedicated to them." Does an interesting personal narrative underlie this brief prefatory time-capsule? More abstractly, she notes that no science of male reproductive tract disorders exists called "andrology"; reminds us that a "historically contingent notion of woman" has long provided dogmatic exercises to subject women to special surveillance and control; and concludes that "The chief object of this study will be achieved if the reader can be persuaded to ask why, on the eve of the twenty-first century, we still need a 'science of woman'."

Embedded within later sections devoted to "The Problem of Femininity" and discussions of women's diseases are analyses of medical and scientific treatises on the elusive boundaries of sexual difference(s), critical observations about ovariectomy and the use of the forceps and speculum, and citations of revealing views of women, such as this by the gynecologist Robert Barnes in 1882: "To appreciate justly the pathology of women we must...never for a moment lose sight of those physical attributes which indelibly stamp her as a woman, which direct, control, and limit the exercise of her faculties. This collateral study is of infinitely more importance in the pathological history of woman than it is in that of man."

In the rest of her traditional-historical chapters, Moscucci provides several professional biographies of those who founded and directed professional organizations, outlines the day-to-day operations of the women's hospitals, and reviews the increasing professionalization and "virization" of women's health care: the rise of male midwives, for example; the separate organization of the practice of obstetrics; the growth of "women's hospitals," which treated diseases specific to women; ideological and clinical debates over women's health; and a variety of turf-disputes among general practitioners, surgeons, obstetricians and physicians trained in gynecology.

Moscucci expresses few judgments on the conflicts involved, and the reader may be sometimes uncertain about the relation (if any) between these accounts and the concerns expressed in her preface. Some of her assessments are straightforward: early practitioners of ovariectomy were reckless, at best; other forms of invasive abdominal surgery were overpracticed for "professional" reasons; and motivations for rejection of the speculum ranged from professional conservatism to prudery to genuine concern for the feelings of patients. Equally explicit is Moscucci's (and the reader's)



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reaction to the case of one woman, discovered during an ovariectomy for “uterine tumor” to be pregnant, who died from the operation.

This part of Moscucci's narrative, however, is a relatively dry record of male control of women's bodies, summarized in her conclusion that “medicine is a divided profession, in which groups and individuals vie with each other for the protection of sectional and personal interests.” I was also somewhat disappointed by the brevity of her coverage of attempts by women physicians to enter the world of “female science,” which occupies only two pages of her book. Were there no alternative female views of “ob/gyn” before 1929? If there were, how important or insightful were they, and what resistance did they provoke? How many women, if any, were certified by the new College in 1929?

In her conclusion Moscucci remarks that “For the scientist, the march of progress had pushed the boundaries of gynaecology forward. The historian will be more inclined to view this development as the expression of an enduring ideology.” No doubt. But what alternative “ideologies” does feminist science offer us in this case? What could the history of women's health care have been, for example, in the absence of a male-defined “gynaecology”? And what does Moscucci think that it could now become? Should women's reproductive tract cancers be treated like men's, in departments of internal medicine? Should childbirth be assisted primarily by certified midwives?

Some of these questions would be very difficult to answer, of course, and the issues they raise may be marginal to Moscucci's essentially institutional history. But the absence of a sustained countervailing voice or interpretive guideline leaves a divided book. The window of Moscucci's institutional history closes with the formation of the College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1929, and she never quite specifies, even indirectly, what the consequences of the alternative, non-sexist medical institutions she evokes in her preface might be. Awareness that “gynaecology” involves “ideology” will not itself lead to changes in its practices. It remains to be seen how gradual reconstitution of such “ideologies” by women may contribute to these changes.

THE STYLE OF Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* contrasts markedly with Vertinsky and Moscucci's scrupulously anatomized world of medical control over

women's bodies. Showalter surveys the literary, cinematographic and cultural effect of debates about gender and sexuality in two societies—Great Britain of the 1890s and late twentieth-century United States—in an impressive 240-page tour de force.

New-historicist protocol dictates that one alternate discussions of a period's texts with free-associated interpretation of contemporary or later writings or films, and Showalter's chapters follow this pattern. In the chapter on “Odd Women,” for example, she juxtaposes an account of late Victorian attitudes toward single women with a description of the constraints imposed on single professional women in late twentieth-century North America. In another, neutrally entitled “The Woman's Case,” she assimilates nineteenth-century physicians' clitoridectomies to late twentieth-century acts of criminal mutilation. In still another, she segues from Rider Haggard's *She* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to an analysis of several versions of Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*.

The *fin de siècle* cultural world tolerates such leaps rather well, for it was a period of great variety and ferment, in which women debated and fought repressive restrictions in every area of their lives, a few men allied with them, and most mounted counteroffensives of fictional and editorial backlash. Showalter has a marked gift for dissection of Victorian plots, as her capsule interpretations of *She*, Olive Schreiner's “Dreams,” Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* make clear.

At her best, she applies the methodology of recent academic gender studies in a vigorous, jargon-free manner, and deftly interprets an impressive range of recondite and intriguing facts in her discussions of 1890s sexual debates. She also moves freely across the current spectrum of gender studies in her discussions of late nineteenth-century feminism, male phobias and sexual violence directed against women, male homosexuality and homoerotic subcultures, and recent literary responses to AIDS. Showalter's tacit claim is that all the phenomena she observes are related, as she fast-forwards from sexual debates in 1890s culture to their 1990s counterparts, and shakes in her kaleidoscope hundreds of fragmented and crystallized *mentalités*.

But why the “anarchy” in her title? Within the book, the word has ambiguous connotations. Attempts at reform seem “anarchic” to their enemies, for example, but fantasies of violence and repression are also “anarchic.” Such dialectical ambiguities reflect something of the work's method and tone; unfortunately, Showalter's treatment of 1890s culture and “anarchy” gives little or no attention to the anarchist movement's significant political history and feminist associations. Nineteenth-century political anarchism was noted for its prominent women activists, among them Louise Michel and Charlotte Wilson, and these women and other writers and speakers such as Emma Goldman and Crystal Eastman contributed radical critiques of the family and sexual coercion.

The book's subtitle is “Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle.” Everything is now “culture,” of course; but Showalter's “culture” is that of literature, polemic, film and performance, not art, music, history, or folk legend. Her implicit assumptions about “gender” categories also seem more pervasively psychological than economic or political. She makes no systematic attempt, for example, to apply her ideas of “sexual anarchy” to members of the turn-of-the-century working class, or consider what the writings of poor women might have revealed about their conformity to and rebellion against sexual norms. A brief discussion of *fin de siècle* prostitution (largely a poor woman's occupation), for example, might have balanced well the book's account of the prevalence of male syphilis. Are there also no late twentieth-century forms of women's economic or political activism which Showalter might have used to balance the work's grimly extended accounts of the *mentalités* of the radical right?

Anyone looking for a sympathetic brief introduction to British *fin de siècle* literature and social issues might well begin with this book. I am somewhat less certain whether Showalter has points of comparable insight and authority to make about contemporary gay literature, or about AIDS, now a catastrophic Third World pandemic. The author and editor of four important books of feminist criticism may have decided to turn her attention briefly but resolutely to one form of “the Other,” and registers sincere horror at the destruction this disease has wrought, but her tone in these sections is pontifical, at once grieving and helplessly detached.

In fairness, Showalter's decision to end her book with a discussion of the Anglo-American literature associated with AIDS does give *Sexual Anarchy* a sense of opened mordant discomfort—a quasi-post-modern reality-check and source of (literal) malaise which is balanced in part by her final reminder of familiar hopes and ideals: “What seems today like the apocalyptic warnings of a frightening sexual anarchy [‘frightening’ to

whom?] may be really the birth throes of a new sexual equality.”

All three of these books—historicist and new-historicist—present some of the somber and obsessive realities of a continuing history of male control, lightened by impressive acts of judgment and resistance. Vertinsky's and Moscucci's scrupulous reconstruction of the heavy burdens of an evolving patriarchal past seem animated, in part at least, by an implicit conviction that we may yet overcome the *diktat* of male control over women's lives and bodies. Showalter's virtuosic leaps seem in the end markedly less hopeful and meliorist, for their chronological cross-cuts suggest a grim vision of a sexually troubled world, one in which the competing forms of struggle have partially neutralized each other.

Despite her many humanist calls for enlightened tolerance (“If we can learn something from the fears and myths of the past, it is that they are so often exaggerated and unreal, that what looks like sexual anarchy in the context of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties may be the embryonic stirrings of a new order”), I put down her book with a sense of lingering anxiety that the “new order” she invokes may be indefinitely postponed. Only the finest of spectral lines may separate breadth of vision from the “helpless detachment” I spoke of above; Showalter's eloquent but cautious overview of sexual malaise suggests that this is a little we have not yet learned to cross.

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