

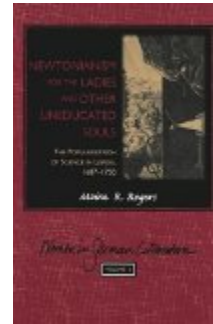
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Moira R. Rogers. *Newtonianism for the Ladies and Other Uneducated Souls: The Popularization of Science in Leipzig, 1687-1750*. New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 2003. xiii + 181 pp. \$61.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-5029-2.

Reviewed by Andre Wakefield (Department of History, Pitzer College)
Published on H-German (May, 2005)



Enlightenment Leipzig Gets Some Ink

Much has been written about science and the Enlightenment, but little of it deals with Germany; even less focuses on the early German Enlightenment; and less still concentrates specifically on Saxony. We have good reason, then, to welcome Moira Rogers's volume on the popularization of science in Leipzig. With its prominent university and its world-famous book fair, Leipzig was a center of the German Enlightenment. It was here, argues Rogers, that science made "its first appearance in the world of the uneducated in German soil" (p. 37). Rogers frames her study in terms that will be familiar to all readers of Kant and Habermas: the Enlightenment sought to cultivate autonomous thought and action, while relying on an expanding public sphere of readers to achieve those goals. Latin gave way to German as the preferred vehicle of communication, and reformers like Christian Thomasius led the way with German-language lectures and journals. Others followed, and science became a new weapon in the arsenal of Enlightenment. None of this is new.

But the argument does not confine itself to enlightened Leipzig. Instead, Rogers examines the role of women in the process of popularization, arguing that popular science did not merely diffuse knowledge to a wider public, but also established the boundaries that would separate science from other forms of knowledge. In other words, this book is about "the many forces that converged in making science a revered ideal" (p. 117). Within this framework, the popularization of science served to reify existing social boundaries and dis-

tinctions, while print culture, with its mechanisms of control, divided the knowledge-maker from the recipients of knowledge. "The popularization process created the distinction between high and low science, between the producers of scientific knowledge and the consumers thereof" (p. 125). Though Rogers links these mechanisms of literary control to the systematic exclusion of women from German scientific societies and universities, she balks at drawing a direct causal connection between the two. Still, she is quite clear about the moral of her story: "I believe that by unearthing some of these mechanisms, we may look at the roots of contemporary sexism and elitism and contribute to undoing the power it still has in contemporary culture" (p. 126).

Some good material is sandwiched between Rogers's excursus on popular science and her critique of Enlightenment elitism. Her discussions of didactic poetry and its role in popularizing Newton's teachings, for example, contain much of interest. Moreover, the chapter about Francesco Algarotti's work, "Newtonianism for the Ladies," provides an interesting analysis of how boundaries were placed upon the "scientific sphere" in the Saxon Enlightenment. In each case, Rogers shows real sensitivity for the importance of genres, which "establish the difference between those who have true access to the miracles of science and those who have to remain irremediably as outsiders" (p. 103). In the end, argues Rogers, it was electricity, displayed publicly and liberated from the strictures of textual control, that gave a wider public access to science. The literature of science had given the

reading public a taste for science; now electricity could satisfy the craving.

In the end, I found myself wanting more specifics about enlightened Leipzig and fewer generalizations about popular science and literary mechanisms of exclusion. This may be personal prejudice, but let's face it: we all have ready access to Habermas, Foucault, and

Chartier; it is less easy to access the manifold worlds of early modern Leipzig. In this volume, the vibrant welter of everyday life is sometimes in danger of suffocating beneath a host of theoretical constructs. Nevertheless, Moira Rogers deserves credit for pointing the way, and for suggesting how much remains to be discovered in this fascinating and still largely unexamined area.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Andre Wakefield. Review of Rogers, Moira R., *Newtonianism for the Ladies and Other Uneducated Souls: The Popularization of Science in Leipzig, 1687-1750*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10506>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.