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Prefiguring Frankenstein*, ed. by Judy A. Hayden

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The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein, ed.
by Judy A. Hayden

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Laura Miller, Ph.D. (Assistant Professor of English, University of West Georgia) studies the intersections of literature, media, and science during the eighteenth century. She has forthcoming publications on English editions of *Il Newtonianismo per le Dame*, medicine in M.G. Lewis's *The Monk*, and Samuel Pepys's collection of sea ballads. Miller is currently working on a book project about print, celebrity, and the career of Sir Isaac Newton.

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Reviewed by Laura Miller, University of West Georgia

The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein is an interdisciplinary volume that explores women's varied interactions with experimental science and other branches of natural philosophy during the long eighteenth century. The common narrative of Restoration and eighteenth-century science describes men's scientific contributions and influence, beginning with the foundation of the Royal Society during the Restoration and transforming into a source of British pride as well as the partial architect of its industrial and colonial strength. This collection creates an effective parallel narrative of women's contributions to science, with thirteen essays arranged in ascending chronological order.

Judy A. Hayden's introduction reveals that women participated in science through multiple channels, including education, research, and domestic economy. The book's first chapter, Sarah Hutton's "Before *Frankenstein*," addresses flaws in the historiography of women in science and pairs well with the introduction as a survey of the topic. Hutton states that, in spite of women's exclusion from some emerging scientific institutions, women did desire and pursue active participation in science. Focusing on the exclusion of women from science, as many historians have done, denies these women the active participation they strove for within a sexist society.

The Restoration is well represented in the collection. Alvin Snider's chapter on "Hutchinson and the Lucretian Body" studies Lucy Hutchinson's translation of Lucretius, finding that Lucretian ideas concerning "bodily sensation and consciousness became centers of theoretical reflection" to Hutchinson which echoed in her later Christian epic *Order and Disorder* (31). Jacqueline Broad's "Cavendish, van Helmont, and the Mad Raging Womb" evaluates Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters*, in which her criticism of van Helmont "complicates some of our common perceptions about Cavendish as a natural philosopher and a feminist" (49). To foreground the literary discourse suggested by the collection's title, Broad argues that Cavendish's fictional female addressee for the letters is a "convenient rhetorical device" that "represent[s] Cavendish's ideal of an intellectual exchange" among women (54). Overall, the essay reveals that Cavendish exemplifies philosophical thinking during a time when many were "receptive to modern ways of thinking but at the same time reluctant to abandon an ancient conceptual framework" (61). Chapter 4, by Holly Faith Nelson and Sharon Alker, describes how Lady Anne Conway creates "a distinctly gendered space for herself by using personal bodily disorder and commotion, typically the mark of female fragility, to prescribe a new order of medical and metaphysical thought" (66). In contrast to Cavendish, whose interests in natural philosophy faced derision, Conway's "intellectual engagement and moral commitment became heroic acts that illustrate[d] her endurance" (69). The new order Conway imagines includes a disabled body that is "immensely abled and creative . . . possessing considerable agency" (79).

Several of the collection's chapters focus on the connections between scientific writing and literary conventions. Karen Bloom Gevirtz's chapter, "Behn and the Scientific Self," connects

late seventeenth-century narrations of science to the narrator's self in Behn's work, including an expanded discussion of narration in *Oroonoko*. The absence of *Oroonoko*'s narrator "challenge her claims to influence and to importance and, therefore, her credibility" (91). Gevirtz indicates that exposing the observer as an unreliable narrator—vulnerable to illness and gender—connects to other narrative trends in natural philosophy, including Newton's depersonalized prose in the *Principia*, which "de-emphasizes the body of the experimenter" to privilege "data and conclusions" (92). For Behn, however, "the material reality of the observer must be acknowledged, even if it cannot be delineated" (92). In "Astell and Cartesian '*Scientia*,'" Deborah Boyle appraises the differences between Descartes' use of the term *scientia* and Mary Astell's applications of the word "science," concluding that their dissimilarities hinge on Descartes' search for "clarity and distinctness" (104) compared to Astell's perception that "we can never have *distinct* ideas of either the soul or God . . ." (105). Judith P. Zinsser's chapter on Emilie Du Châtelet describes a woman who was "certainly not a feminist in [. . . the] modern sense" (133) but who arguably accomplished more than any eighteenth-century woman of science, including her translation of Newton's *Principia* and her collaborations with Voltaire (134-135). Although Du Châtelet is mostly known for her scientific work rather than as a writer of fiction—her *Dissertation sur la nature et la propagation du feu* is the source of Zinsser's inquiry—the chapter resonates with the rest of the collection because of its focus on the connections between scientific rhetoric and literary rhetoric.

The intersection of popular science and popular literature also receives attention in this collection. Hayden considers Susanna Centlivre's perspectives on amateur science in *The Basset-Table* and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, finding that Centlivre "pretends at mockery of the philosophical lady while simultaneously presenting a plot in praise of female curiosity and inquiry" (113). Although she ridicules the amateur virtuoso in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* and seems critical of Valeria, *The Basset-Table*'s female virtuoso, Centlivre favors Valeria because of her "love of learning, which Periwinkle clearly lacks" (128). In the essay that seems most closely to "prefigure *Frankenstein*," Julie Park links Vaucanson's automata to the realistic characters in the work of novelist Frances Burney, emphasizing "the new technology of lifelikeness her novel-writing practice presents . . ." (149). Elizabeth Inchbald's *Animal Magnetism*, a satire of early hypnotism, is the subject of Frederick L. Burwick's essay. Inchbald exposes the theatricality of mesmerism by staging it; tellingly, it was so easy to satirize that the playwright could do so "without deviating significantly from the language" (170). Although Inchbald's play "shows the grand potential for charlatanry" in mesmerism, enthusiasts still enjoyed and revived *Animal Magnetism*, including Charles Dickens (178). Marjean D. Purinton's essay analyzes Sophia Lee's *Almeyda: Queen of Granada*, contemplating science and literature from the perspectives of medicine, race, and gender, assessing the ways that "the medical discourses of late eighteenth-century Britain sustain[ed] gender and racial ideologies" (186). She concludes that *Almeyda* "subverts first the proper social role of woman and second the medicalized assumptions about madness in order to achieve agency in her situation" (198).

The last two chapters look outward in time and space. Dometa Wiegand explores the influence of James Cook's voyages and the work of Edmund Halley on the poetry of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, including the concepts of "infinity, genesis, and . . . poetical journeys of fancy" (203). Rather than find evidence for the Romantic rejection of Enlightenment science, Wiegand identifies a trajectory of thinking about "infinite time and space" that passes from Halley through Barbauld

and on to the Victorians (215). Pam Perkins writes about ethnography in Anne Grant's *Letters from the Mountains* and *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders*, which described life in the Scottish Highlands. Perkins shows that Grant's works were more than memoir; she was "both explicitly and implicitly arguing a thesis about cultural progress" that resembles what later social scientists have called "auto-ethnography" (223, 229).

Overall, the collection shows women in dialogue with natural philosophy: as respondents, as critics, and as admirers. Scholars with an interest in any of the women writers mentioned will wish to explore individual chapters; however, the full volume is exceptionally rich for literary scholars and those who explore the interconnectedness of gender and science. The collection might gain from additional continental representation; it focuses on British women writers, with the exception of Du Châtelet. A collection with *Frankenstein* in the title could also have benefited from more commentary on Mary Shelley's novel, perhaps in an afterword. *The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein* advances contemporary scholarship in literary studies, gender studies, and the history of science. It is an essential read for those whose research lies at the boundaries of these topics.