

Book Reviews

JACQUES GÉLIS, *La sage-femme ou le médecin. Une nouvelle conception de la vie*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, 8vo, pp. 560, illus., Fr. 150.00, (paperback).

Strictly speaking, in this work Jacques Gélis dwells on the substitution of the matron first by the educated midwife, and then by the obstetrician, as the central figure in the conduct of childbirth. In considering these changes as symptoms of long-term cultural mutations that occurred in Europe primarily from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, he amplifies in various ways the scope of his subject matter. An occupation situated "at the crossroads of life and death", which had much to do with morality and social control, midwifery involves a wide range of relationships. Hence the author, having presented much information and insight, has indirectly covered a web of different issues.

The book deals with social attitudes towards women, childhood, and family. Protecting children, and also protecting mothers' lives appear as the most outstanding claims in the effort to improve the conditions of birth. Not only from this point of view do women appear in Gélis's study, but also in a variety of topics concerning gender relations. The medicalization of birth is itself a process of gradual male intervention in a traditionally female domain, according to Gélis. He also examines modern debates on the role of women in procreation and child rearing, and the difficulties they faced in taking up midwifery as a profession.

Considerable emphasis is given by the author to the diverse forms of education for midwives and practitioners adopted in different countries, and to the theories, techniques, and debates of European luminaries on midwifery and obstetrics, a discussion that sheds light on how knowledge and power can overlap. These themes and their nuances are quite extensively developed in the first two parts of the book, particularly in relation to France. One could say that these parts are richer than the passages in which more specific facts and processes are put in the context of a broader picture of cultural changes.

Gélis's main thesis is that birth raises questions about social conceptions of life, and indeed about correlative attitudes with regard to the human body. The transformation of birth into a medically-dominated event paralleled a process of the desacralization of nature and life, of the emergence of a modern, more "linear" and "segmentary" consciousness of the life cycle, which replaced the medieval "circular" one. In setting out to explore so wide a field, especially in the final part of the book, he seems to have gone too far from his original subject, a risk that he himself anticipates in the introduction. He also seems to have adopted a controversial picture of long-term mental changes in his attempt to explain the acceptance of the new professional healers. He argues that modern people could no longer resign themselves to a medieval passivity towards suffering and death. In spite of this, in general Gélis's work is well-informed and readable.

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DOREEN E. NAGY, *Popular medicine in seventeenth-century England*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. 140, \$12.95, (paperback).

This is a bright and lively book, which, in its 81 pages of text and 46 of notes and bibliography, succeeds in its aim of showing that popular and learned medicine in seventeenth-century England were not clearly distinguishable. Doreen Nagy argues that the geographical isolation of many communities, the difficulties of travel, the small numbers of physicians and their concentration in London and towns like Bath meant that many places were without the services of "regular" licensed or university-trained practitioners. She also makes the point that the prices charged by physicians, apothecaries, and surgeons would have been too high for most people, especially the "settled poor". Her conclusion is that the practice of popular medicine by women, faith healers, and others must have been widespread, given the lack of availability of regular practitioners and of the capacity of many to pay for their services.

In what is perhaps the most original part of the book, Nagy convincingly shows that curative methods (bleeding, purging, the mixtures of herbs, animal products, and minerals) were selected by each type of practitioner from a common amorphous pool of practical knowledge. "Medical

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receipts", for instance, appear in the same form in learned treatises, manuscript collections of recipes, and in oral tradition. The book ends with a case study in the popular medicine of the time, by looking at women's work as medical practitioners. Nagy illustrates very clearly how women, especially charitable gentlewomen, were not mere nurses but undertook the treatment of the most difficult cases.

There are problems with the book: inevitably, the evidence about popular healing comes from the literate and well-to-do part of the population, who might be said to share a common outlook with regular practitioners. Whether the majority of the population had its own medical culture in seventeenth-century England is a question that neither Nagy nor any other historian has succeeded in answering. Lucinda Beier's *Sufferers and healers* covers rather similar ground, but Nagy's book will be useful as a student text. It has drawn on a wealth of primary material and has a good bibliography.

Finally, one should add that the book was originally a master's thesis and has the enthusiasm and iconoclasm often associated with postgraduate research and, now alas too rarely, with North America. Historians such as Charles Webster and Walter Pagel are roundly taken to task for their Whiggishness in concentrating on great names and male practitioners, though the duo of Margaret Pelling and Roy Porter do receive due praise for their work on the social history of medicine.

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G. S. ROUSSEAU and ROY PORTER (eds.), *Sexual underworlds of the Enlightenment*, Manchester University Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. x, 280, illus., £29.95.

This work is the second volume of a planned trilogy devoted to the study of sexuality in the eighteenth century (the first, edited by P. G. Boucé, appeared in 1982 under the title *Sexuality in eighteenth-century Britain*). As the editors point out in the preface, the history of sex still remains shrouded in darkness. In the work of Foucault we have a magnificent theoretical statement about the history of Western sexuality, but as yet we possess precious little hard data with which to assess and refine his hypothesis. The aim of the trilogy, in consequence, is to lighten this darkness by presenting a detailed picture of the history of sexuality in the century which, for good or ill, was the cultural birthplace of modern man. In this, as in the previous volume, an image of the richness and variety of eighteenth-century sexual mores is created through a series of independent and highly particular essays. There are ten essays in all, divided into three loosely defined subject areas: 'Sex and discourse', 'Sex and society', and 'Sex at the margins'. The contributors form a multi-disciplinary cast of historians, literary critics, and anthropologists, and there is no dominant ideological line. This is the editors' preference, since the purpose of the book is avowedly descriptive rather than interpretative. By contrast with the earlier volume, the present work supposedly has a wider European perspective but in fact the majority of the essays are anglocentric. Inevitably they are extremely wide-ranging, embracing topics as diverse as the dubious delights of the sexual marketplace (Peter Wagner), the libertarian potential of the masquerade (Terry Castle), and the homosexual underpinning of neo-classicism (G. S. Rousseau). Arguably the most interesting essay to the non-specialist reader is the one by Théodore Tarczylo devoted to a methodological critique of the anti-libertarian interpretation of eighteenth-century French sexuality. On the one hand, says Tarczylo, this is a view based on the unacceptable conflation of regionally distinctive demographic statistics: eighteenth-century France was a socio-geographical expression. On the other hand, historians who attempt to label the Enlightenment an age of either sexual liberty or sexual constraint are guilty of anachronism. Eighteenth-century sexual ideologies must be construed in their own terms and not through the prism of the late twentieth century.

All social and cultural historians of the eighteenth century will find this volume fascinating reading. As has been long recognized, man's sexual history defies easy penetration. The authors are to be uniformly commended for their careful and cautious reconstruction of the sexual life (more correctly, the sexual opportunities) of the man in the street. At last a picture of