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Review of Sigrund Haude and Melinda S. Zook, eds, *Challenging Orthodoxies: The Social and Cultural Worlds of Early Modern Women: Essays Presented to Hilda L. Smith*

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Review of Sigrund Haude and Melinda S. Zook, eds, *Challenging Orthodoxies: The Social and Cultural Worlds of Early Modern Women: Essays Presented to Hilda L. Smith*

Abstract

This article reviews Sigrun Haude and Melinda S. Zook, eds, *Challenging Orthodoxies: The Social and Cultural Worlds of Early Modern Women: Essays Presented to Hilda L. Smith*.

Keywords

early modern women, feminist, feminist history, women's writing

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Sigrun Haude and Melinda S. Zook , eds, *Challenging Orthodoxies: The Social and Cultural Worlds of Early Modern Women: Essays Presented to Hilda L. Smith*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. Xi + 265pp. ISBN: 978-1409457084.

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Furry Girls. Gun-slinging women, and female gunmakers. Lice narratives. Juries of matrons. This excellent collection of essays in honour of Hilda L. Smith is full of surprises and scholarly delights. Smith's pioneering, intellectually rigorous, and illuminating work has, as the title of the volume indicates, consistently challenged orthodoxies and asked readers to think about the historically denied and still often ignored phenomenon of the "woman who thinks." The publishing arc evident in the progress from the defiantly titled *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (1982) to her co-edited Pickering and Chatto multi-volume *Women's Political Writings, 1610-1725* (2007) is suggestive of her contribution to the changing content of history books and historical studies, though less immediately evident from this overview is her refusal to settle for any form of intellectual laziness in creating easy stories about the past. "My work has often been as strongly at odds with the direction of women's history, and later gender studies, as with traditional historical scholarship," she wrote in 1999; excited by her encounters with past voices, she was dismayed "by the degree to which interceding years of historical scholarship have worked as much to obscure the realities of these subjects as to illuminate them" (211). She has been influential in many ways, as this collection shows, but most significantly in refusing to accept the casual intellectual segregation assumed by a patriarchal academy that is still often in sloppy but self-perpetuating force today. Her work summons up a community of female voices, dead and alive, that dare to think, to disagree, and to act against the norm. This important and invigorating festschrift is a model of how such tributes should work: while celebrating the subject, the energy and interest of the essays are also testament to the lasting urgency and fascination of the areas of scholarship Smith continues to open up and illuminate through her calls to listen to the past rather than to impose our narratives upon it.

Berenice A. Carroll's moving concluding chapter quotes Hannah Arendt on the "authentic diversity" of the politically disempowered; such diversity, such seizing of power in unexpected ways at specific historical moments, is reflected in the range of topics in this collection (216). Here we are introduced to women who lend money, work as female lawyers, sit on juries, make guns and use them, and take their employers to court. Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, is (fittingly) a recurring figure through the collection, appearing by turn in her various guises as author, scientist, eccentric, and rebel, but the essays are more united in spirit than they are in subject—indeed, as my opening words suggest, they are gloriously diverse, sharing a respect for Smith, an eye for those relegated to the sidelines by history and historians, and, often, an infectious rage at the injustices of history. The collection is divided into three parts, of which the first and the third are perhaps the most exciting, though all the essays are informative and engaging. The first section, "Challenging Cultural and Social Traditions," includes three very different but superb essays: Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks' fascinating piece on the boundaries of womanhood as tested by the case of the furry Gonzales sisters; Lois G. Schwoerer's gripping account of women and guns in early modern London; and Barbara J. Todd's revelatory essay on female investors in public finance. Part II, "Challenging Scientific

and Intellectual Traditions,” holds fewer surprises overall, but Lisa T. Sarasohn brings a fresh perspective to microscope practice in her exploration of lice narratives, Melinda S. Zook explores women’s relationship to the patriarchal Church of England, Judith P. Zinsser gives an Enlightenment case-study insight into the *querelles des femmes*, and Ann Thompson turns our attention to the Shakespeare critic Charlotte Lennox. Part III offers some thrilling close reading by Mihoko Suzuki of women and the world of law while Anna Suranyi grips with her tales of the fates of female servants sent to the colonies. Carroll closes the proceedings with a reflective essay in which emails from Smith—commenting with indignation on the ubiquitous acceptance of prejudice—are interwoven with the more public musings of Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*. Generally, the most successful essays in *Challenging Orthodoxies* are those which are most focused, but in this case Carroll’s choice of texts, and her account of her shared history with Smith as a feminist scholar over four decades, achieves a thought-provoking balance between celebration and ruefulness at the endurance of assumptions that women are, have been, and will be the second sex. Woolf’s exhortation to find “new words” and “new methods” is a sobering but powerful cry from the past with which to close the book.

The essay is a particularly fitting form for discussions of Smith’s work: it is a form in which she excels, and which suits her scholarly style. The lengthy selected list of Smith’s articles, book chapters, and review essays included at the end of this volume spins us out beyond the festschrift contributors and shows us a scholar always engaged in debate, always questioning, researching, and answering back; but it also brings us back to this group of scholars who have produced one of the best festschrifts I have read in twenty years. By tracing the often-dismissed lives of the furry, female, illiterate, and impoverished, they encourage and inspire us, as Hilda L. Smith and another Hilda—H.D.—do, to refuse facile universalisms, and to “take the moon in your hands / and turn it round,” “perceiving the other-side of everything” (H.D., “The Moon in Your Hands,” *Collected Poems*).