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Book Review

The Madame Curie Complex: The Hidden History of Women in Science
Written by Julie Des Jardins

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One of the greatest fictions of the professional scientist, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, was that “he” conducted his research in a solitary environment; a superman, he engaged in experiments tirelessly, reviewing his notes in isolation until—Eureka!—he discovered a new truth about nature. In The Madame Curie Complex: The Hidden History of Women in Science, Julie Des Jardins does not seek to discredit the work of Archimedes; rather, she demonstrates that the image of the superman-scientist saturated the public mindset from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s, and perhaps through the present. She shows that collaborative work has been central to modern scientific advances, and that women were systematically excluded or marginalized from a range of collaborative opportunities, from formal research teams to informal lunchroom discussions.

The “Complex” that Des Jardins attributes to Marie Curie relates to the two sides of Curie’s public image: on the one hand, as the “maternal martyr who used science for womanly ends,” and on the other, as the superhero who was “too smart, too dedicated, too focused, and too talented to be emulated by ordinary women” (43-44). In order to demonstrate Curie’s competing image in the public sphere, Des Jardins focuses on the American fascination with Curie’s work, and the discourses used by American journalists, women’s groups, filmmakers, and others who sought to personalize the Nobel prize-winning pioneer of radioactivity. Written both during her lifetime and after, these stories relied on various themes that served to both feminize and masculinize the physicist: early accounts emphasized her Puritan work ethic and monasticism, her survival on crusts of bread, the burns on her fingers, her plain clothes and inability to entertain guests; other accounts sexualized her, describing an affair with another physicist, and questioned her nurturing abilities as a mother; later stories tied her work to cancer research, and spun her commitment to radioactivity as a “maternal altruism” to humankind (42). Though intended to inspire successive generations of women in the hard sciences, these competing depictions of Curie often rearticulated masculinized fictions about scientific research—namely that a committed researcher valued the pursuit of an objective truth over his or her own health, family, and sanity.

Des Jardins’s book is not a biography of Marie Curie; nor is it a biography of DNA-researcher Rosalind Franklin, Nobel-winning Rosalyn Yalow or Barbara McClintock, Cheaper By The Dozen-inspiring Lillian Gilbreth, or the primatologists Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas, all of whom served to “feminize” science in the twentieth century. Des Jardins is well-versed in previous biographies of these distinguished scientists, and retells aspects of their narratives within her critical cultural analysis. Well-documented with meticulous footnotes, her chapters also rely on a vast amount of primary material, including century-old articles from the New York Times as well as other concurrent periodicals and scientific journals, unpublished letters, and photographs.

But as Des Jardins notes in her postscript, “I prefer nods to women in the plural and gestures that challenge the masculinist culture of science, to celebrations of a single woman’s ability to acculturate to and gain acceptance in the masculine culture” (289). These “women in the plural” appear throughout the book as technicians, assistants, wives, seemingly unaccomplished students of (often-male) scientists, and other “invisible” contributors to the field.

Though Des Jardins gives brief nods to women’s achievements in the “softer” sciences through 1940—including medicine, anthropology, and even chemistry—her book focuses largely on early physicists and engineers. Male scientists and journalists often rationalized women’s achievements in the “softer” fields to the “feminine” qualities needed to succeed in them: patience, nurturance, or the ability to measure a cup of flour (121). The thorough investigation of male domination in physics is a strength of the book. Yet without reference to women’s concurrent achievements in other fields—psychiatry and psychoanalysis, for example—the book perhaps oversimplifies the early twentieth-century scientific community.

Perhaps most useful for those seeking to teach the history of science are the three essays that introduce the time periods in
question—1880-1940, 1941-1962, and 1962-present—which familiarize the reader with themes in cultural studies (e.g. theories of media representation) by documenting changes in public opinions on science and gender.

In tracing trends in societal understandings of science throughout the twentieth century, Des Jardins documents an increasing acceptance of the subjectivity of science; of the need to relate science to human experiences; and of the political, environmental, and ethical consequences of scientific findings. In doing so, she convincingly argues that women’s contributions to science were central to this social turn.

About the Author

Andrew Shield is a Ph.D. student in European History at the CUNY Graduate Center. He conducts research in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Morocco.
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