

**BOOK REVIEWS**

Carla Bittel, Elaine Leong and Christine von Oertzen (eds.), *Working with Paper: Gendered Practices in the History of Knowledge* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), pp. ix + 310, \$55.00, hardback, ISBN: 9780822945598.

*Working with Paper* is a rich and engaging investigation into what is traditionally viewed as the humblest of materials, but which has immense value beyond its role as a data carrier, as this book demonstrates. Its essays examine paper practices and their intersection with constructions and negotiations of gendered power and knowledge, ranging from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries across Europe and North America. This approach encourages examination of different ‘sets of affordances given to papers’ by households, institutions and societies across time and space (5). Jacob Eyferth’s afterword reflects on the chapters’ shared themes through a study of nineteenth-century China. It emphasises the notions of paper as a ‘presence’, and paper practices as ‘socio-material processes that underlie knowledge production’ (211), rather than a ‘blank medium that exists only to be inscribed with signs’ (209). This attentiveness to materiality, and to different social actors’ engagement with it through skill, labour and learning, is the collection’s major strength.

The work is rooted in recent studies of everyday technologies, materialities and gender. However, by integrating and extending the scope of these fields, it explores how individuals and communities both reinforced and challenged societal constructions of gender through paper tools used to create and organise knowledge; ‘knowledge practices and gender relationships materialise through the making, using and handling of paper’ (12). Rejecting the ‘great man’, bookish approach to histories of knowledge, this collection focuses primarily on paper’s meanings for female identities, empowerment and oppression. Several contributions show how women’s paper-based skills, often related to domestic work, contribute to traditionally masculine spheres, such as science (Elaine Leong and Elizabeth Yale), academia (Matthew Daniel Eddy) and institutional or state bureaucracy (Elena Serrano, Christine von Oertzen and Dan Bouk). However, male identities are consequently approached tangentially. One important exception is Gabriella Szalay’s study of German pastor Jacob Christian Schäffer’s paper trials and their significance for competing masculinities in eighteenth-century Europe. As the volume moves beyond traditional historiographies of elite communities to the ‘uncharted waters’ of popular paperwork (2), the analytical framework of class seems equally significant as, if less explicit than, gender.

Divided into twelve chapters across three thematic sections, this book is supplemented by glossy colour plates providing useful visual aids. Part 1 foregrounds the importance of paper’s material properties for the formation and navigation of social identities and relationships. Part 2 shifts the focus to paperwork as a tool for knowledge creation and management within wider social, economic and political structures, and Part 3 continues to untangle the connections between paper technologies, epistemic practices and gendered power. The volume is arranged roughly chronologically until Yale’s Chapter 9 returns to early modern England. It is perhaps best read alongside Leong’s earlier essay and creates a slightly disjointed structural effect. Additionally, some essays in the latter sections marginalise the importance of paper’s material properties in favour of the social significance of its use. This seems somewhat contrary to the introduction’s aims. However, the focus on who produces, owns, shares and values knowledge produced through paper never wavers, from Heather Wolfe’s examination of Elizabethan letter-closing techniques to Bouk’s study of twentieth-century American population research, which balances a story of female expertise against one of oppressive population control.

The diverse ways in which paper practices influence, and are influenced by, knowledge of the human body emerge as a key theme of this collection. Chapter 2 is a highlight, as Leong builds on her recent study

of early modern domestic recipes books by discussing the paper technologies found within them.<sup>1</sup> Her research on paper as a *materia medica*, used for example to make plasters, is particularly interesting. Interactions between domestic and scholarly spheres are also considered in Simon Werrett's essay on the reuse of eighteenth-century wastepaper, including for hairdressing techniques bound up with contested notions of femininity and masculinity. Moving into the modern period, Carla Bittel and Linker both explore how innovative paper tools facilitated bodily knowledge among medical practitioners and patients. Bittel argues that charts studying the human skull enabled phrenologists to construct authoritative, gender-specific identities and simultaneously allowed laypeople to subvert gender stereotypes. The 'schematograph' is Linker's focus; she shows how tracing paper could protect women's privacy during posture examinations, becoming an instrument of female power within science. Anna Maerker also demonstrates how the materiality of new medical technologies, specifically papier-mâché anatomical models, shaped and challenged gender perceptions. By portraying mechanistic rather than aesthetic bodies, the models both empowered and restricted their female makers and users across different imperial contexts.

Another recurring, though more subtle, theme is the link between materiality and morality. Several essays refer to the appropriation of paper technologies by certain communities to claim moral superiority, and socio-political authority, over others. For example, Chapter Four sees Szalay argue that different male groups' engagement with paper, through intellectual book knowledge, artisanal physical labour and commercial acumen, was central to their competing claims for masculine honour. Serrano's outstanding contribution explores how a female philanthropic association, the Junta de Damas, asserted power over the Madrid Foundling Hospital through traditionally feminine management practices, rather than masculine commercialism. Von Oertzen similarly examines the permeability of the domestic-bureaucratic boundary through paper. She explains how domestic data-processing supported nineteenth-century Prussian governance as housewives sorted, counted and organised census cards at home. By emphasising the value of household 'orderliness' to the state, this essay foregrounds the relationship between micro- and macro-level institutions which underpins several other chapters.

In conclusion, *Working with Paper* makes an original and significant contribution to the histories of knowledge, work and gender through the lens of one extremely important material. It is itself a valuable epistemic paper tool for students and experts alike.

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Kalle Kananoja, *Healing Knowledge in Atlantic Africa: Medical Encounters, 1500–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. xii + 258, \$99.99, hardback, ISBN: 9781108491259.

While Kikongo and Kimbundu-speaking healers prospected for novel min'kisi, such as statues of Our Lady of Conception, Portuguese and Italian-speaking missionaries and soldiers sought takula, enkasa, seahorse genitalia and other drugs in medical exchanges throughout West Central Africa. Pluralism and curiosity over medicine, anatomy and the salubrity or noxiousness of diverse environments shaped interactions between Atlantic Africans and Europeans between the first decades of the sixteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century. Kalle Kananoja explores how practices and ideas blended in West Central and West Africa as individuals combined and remade medicine from multiple cultural

<sup>1</sup>Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science and the Household in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).