

Mary Terrall: In Memoriam

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Mary Terrall came to UCLA as a graduate student in the History of Science in [1981]. But she quickly became more a colleague and friend than a student. She recognized immediately the change that was going on in History of Science at the time, increasingly incorporating social and cultural history into its traditional focus on intellectual history. But what the new field would look like was anything but established. Stepping into that fluid situation, Mary soon organized a reading group of students and faculty to discuss current literature. What she initiated became the kernel of the history of science colloquium, which has continued ever since. It is the oldest continuously running colloquium in the history department.

Stories of this kind are easy to come by. When Mary began work on her dissertation, which would center on the celebrated 18th Century figure Pierre Louis Maupertuis, she wanted to gain more familiarity with his metaphysical and mathematical work. So she designed with another student a graduate seminar in rational mechanics, having co-opted her advisor to host it at his home. They would provide the readings and questions while he provided pasta and salad. The collaboration produced one of the most successful seminars he ever “taught.” This same talent for getting things organized for intellectual and culinary exploration has marked Mary’s entire career at UCLA. We have all benefited immensely.

Vignettes like these help us to appreciate also the quality of Mary Terrall’s historical work, which always involved the intimate relation between the particular social lives of her characters and their intellectual accomplishments. Her 1987 dissertation, “Maupertuis and Eighteenth-Century Scientific Culture,” already signaled this orientation. Succeeding articles and books have established her international reputation for subtle analysis and elegant style.

Immediately following her dissertation, Mary began crafting path-breaking articles while serving as a grants officer for the Keck Foundation and raising her boys, Adam (1983) and Noah (1989). One of the first of these, “Representing the Earth’s Shape: The Polemics Surrounding Maupertuis’s Expedition to Lapland” won the prestigious Derek Price Award of the History of Science Society. Historians had been satisfied with describing Maupertuis’s technical success in arguing for the validity of Newtonian vs. Cartesian mechanics by showing that the earth was flattened at the poles. Dissatisfied with this simple narrative, and characteristically for Mary, she joined Maupertuis’s arguments from precision instruments and disciplined measurements with his remarkable talent for polemics in the public sphere, drawing on salon intrigue, public lectures, and anonymous satires to undermine the opposition, while presenting himself as the selfless hero struggling against wind and cold to achieve robust results.

This domain of social action received another pioneering exposition in “Redefining Femininity: Mme. Du Chatelet’s Checkered Scientific Career,” which was awarded the Margaret W. Rossiter History of Women in Science Prize. Although women in the Enlightenment had less opportunity to go on voyages or to work in laboratories, they had a key role in shaping public science. Rejecting recent attempts to portray Chatelet as a modern feminist, Mary treats her as a

historically located woman who attained recognition for her mathematical work—including the first and best French translation of Newton’s *Principia*—by exploiting her wealth and power in the intellectual life of salons, where boundaries between mathematics, wit, and sexuality were highly permeable. This and other of Mary’s studies have opened up new ways to think about the agency of gender in science. One of our former graduate students remarks that “Mary was my first role model for how to be a woman in academia.”

Mary’s first book uses Maupertuis as a lens for focusing attention on key aspects of the sciences in the Enlightenment. The Pfizer Prize of the History of Science Society and the Gottschalk Prize of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies mark the success of this illuminating study, which links Maupertuis’s works in diverse fields to the different public audiences to whom he addressed them. Mary takes her reader from his great Lapland expedition to his radical materialist writing on biological inheritance to his metaphysically informed leadership of the new Academy of Sciences in Berlin. Throughout she narrates the evolving persona of an enlightenment actor learning to navigate the thickets of complex audiences: academics debating natural philosophy, masculine café society, aristocratic women, popular pamphleteering, and the court strategies of Louis XVth and Frederick the Great.

Mary’s second book, which won the Thackray Medal of the Society for the History of Natural History, presents a completely new understanding of the history of natural history. Foucault famously reduced it to classification. She instead shows its alliance to physics, to books and correspondences, and to agricultural efforts. The central figure in this book relied on print and correspondence to gather materials and experiences from near and far, from women and men, not only to accumulate information but to understand processes of predation and reproduction. These naturalists were keenly interested in enhancing the efficiency of silkworms and poultry and their own lives became bound up in the processes and beings they explored. Like them Mary enters into her work as an engaged participant, as for example, when she devoted some of her research time at the Huntington to follow the reproductive processes of monarch butterflies—no simple matter as it turns out.

Mary’s last paper, in the final months of her life, took her into the world of Atlantic exchanges and exploration. She entered deeply into the skills of African as well as European weaving and dyeing, on a scale that was simultaneously local and global. She was never content to make grand pronouncements, but always brought together work on contrasting scales that demonstrated the interweaving of local and cosmic. Although she sometimes addressed sweeping topics, she always worked with meticulous specificity, returning again and again to thorny issues that didn’t yet seem quite right. She was an exemplary historical scholar.