

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH

ANITA GUERRINI

*Department of History  
University of California, Santa Barbara*

Shapin, Steven, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) XXXI, 483 pp. US\$29.95 (cloth) ISBN: 0 26 75018 3

Apart from its other merits, Steven Shapin's *Social History of Truth* is undoubtedly the only topic upon which Mordechai Feingold and Margaret Jacob have ever expressed agreement. Their reviews of Shapin's book, as well as others, compose the topic of this essay. These reviews give a sense of where the historiography of early modern science is (you will notice I did not say Scientific Revolution) and where it seems to be going. In many ways, early modern science formed the basis of the history of science as a discipline. Now it is the battleground for conflicting views of what the history of science should be as it enters its second century as a discipline.

Despite some conciliatory words in the past few years on the old internalist-externalist dichotomy in the historiography of science, in the very title of his book Steven Shapin appears to throw down the gauntlet in favor of the social construction of scientific knowledge. This is not surprising from one of the founders of the "strong program" of the social studies of knowledge. But in fact, this work represents a retreat from the strong program into some rather less well-defined territory. Enthralled with the many recent studies of court culture and civil discourse, Shapin seeks to apply these concepts to the English experience. Since the English court was minimally involved in natural philosophy—Charles II gave the "Royal" to the Royal Society, but not much else—Shapin has turned to the broader category of gentlemanly culture as the basis of his account of mid-seventeenth century English natural philosophy. He focuses on Robert Boyle, who, by his definition, was both the quintessential gentleman of the Restoration and its most important natural philosopher.

For a long time, Marie Boas Hall's 1958 book on Boyle re-

mained the main source on his life and significance, and the historiographical emphasis was on his chemical work and his position as a precursor of the “chemical revolution” of the eighteenth century. But in recent years, a Boyle industry has sprung up, largely spearheaded by Michael Hunter, which begins to rival the Newton industry in size and scope. Boyle has emerged as perhaps the most significant player in English natural philosophy in the second half of the seventeenth century. Shapin, however, would go further, claiming that Boyle indeed founded a specifically English variety of natural philosophy concerned with experiment and the verification of those “matters of fact” which, to Shapin, constitute scientific knowledge. Ferdinando Abbri, one of two representatives of continental Europe in the reviews surveyed, questions whether Boyle and English natural philosophy in fact possess this paradigmatic quality.<sup>1</sup> This question will be returned to later in this essay.

Shapin defines truth as a “social institution” (p. 6) whose collective identity is fundamentally a matter of trust among individuals. He is surely correct to acknowledge the collective nature of scientific knowledge, which is never simply a matter of an isolated scientist confronting nature. The issue of trust brings a further dimension to this concept of collective knowledge, although we can debate whether trust is the most important criterion in determining truth—in her review, Margaret J. Osler suggested the title would better be “A social history of trust,” arguing that “there is more to truth than trust.”<sup>2</sup> According to Shapin, trustworthiness is a function of the disinterestedness of the individual, and in early modern England, the most disinterested individual was the gentleman, who could act freely without fear of social or economic consequences.

Shapin draws his definition of the gentleman from the conduct or courtesy literature of the period which prescribed gentlemanly behavior. But this literature, by its very existence, acknowledges that the “gentleman” was a highly contested category, by no means capable of a simple or single definition; courtesy literature was prescriptive, not descriptive. Shapin himself illustrates the contested nature of “the gentleman” in his account of Boyle’s family, whose members displayed very different facets of the gentlemanly personality. If wealth and birth were what counted, Boyle only

---

<sup>1</sup> *Nuncius*, 10 (1995), 828-830, at 830. The other non-Anglo-American reviewer is Pierre Laszlo, discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27 (1996): 121-122.