Keiko Kawashima


This is a book focused on three women. Two are heroines of the history of science; the third one is the author herself, professor Keiko Kawashima of the Nagoya Institute of Technology. By saying this, I mean that every woman involved in scientific/academic research could identify herself for a while with the episodes related. It may well be that the key word of the book is “empathy.”

This French translation is based on the original published in 2005 by University of Tokyo Press. It consists of four chapters: in the first, Émilie du Châtelet and Marie-Anne Lavoisier are treated together, while at a certain point we read of their lives separately. The author’s aim, in fact, is not a double biography of two women with a strong passion for science (and not only for science), but a reflection on the role of gender in the scientific world. Kawashima speaks about France and the 18th century, but it becomes clear, page after page, that the Émilie’s and Marie-Anne’s desire for glory might be found in other countries, as well as in other times. The expression “still today” is very frequent in the text, as is a great deal of general reflections on gender studies. Maybe this depends on the (semi-declared) aim of the author: to turn the readers’ attention to gender equality, or to propose gender as an analytic parameter for scientific documents.

Kawashima’s previous research works on the two protagonists as translators are well known to the community of the historians of science (see for example her contribute to the Symposium “Mediators of Science. Women translators of Scientific texts 1600–1850,” to the XXIII International Congress of History of Science and Technology). However, in this book she does not focus on the translations of the two femmes savants, choosing instead a wider audience – a choice reflected in a lighter scholarly style. In fact, there are almost no footnotes, a few quotations from primary sources, and paragraphs are rather short. In-depth explanations occupy boxes (i.e. about the Académie des sciences) also used to illustrate to the lay and non-specialized reader curiosities or anecdotes (the Bernoulli mathematicians’ family tree, or a tentative reply to the query “Was Les institutions de physique a bestseller?”), that are not really necessary for the main narrative.

Obviously, the best known scientific works of the two protagonists are translations: Émilie translated works of physics from Latin into French, while Marie-Anne translated chemistry from English into French. These important contributions did not free them from the ambiguous definition of “femmes savantes,”
which, in Kawashima’s opinion, denotes at the same time an object of veneration and of ridicule.

Kawashima mentions iconic literary characters of women: among them, her favorite as a model for her two translators is the Marquise of the *Pluralité des mondes* by Fontenelle. However, but in the book our Émilie and Marie-Anne seem not to have always much in common with her, above all regarding her affectation, as already outlined in the *Preface* by É. Badinter.

The first chapter focuses on science of the 18th century and its origins in the scientific revolution of the previous century, in order to show to the reader that the neutral empire of science, was, to tell the truth, an empire for men involved in science. Women were queens of *salons*, which are described as the dark side of the scientific academies, where women members were not allowed and “lucky women” could only contribute as spectators. From this point of view, the author can speak of barriers created by men for women in science, to the extent that her heroines are heroines since they try and escape from those barriers, denying them access to scientific enterprise. At the same time, men involved in science, in Kawashima’s opinion, needed the *salonnières*’ interest in order to become celebrities in France. Another aim of the author seems to be to delve into the invisible net composed by fathers, husbands, lovers, teachers, which existed around these women and their scientific legacy. The two translators’ main lovers, Voltaire and Lavoisier, had both been outstanding public men: arguably, Kawashima suggests, we are interested in Émile and Marie-Anne just because they were their partners. In fact, from a practical point of view, we find more details on their love affairs than on their scientific contributes. The author seemingly implies that this happens because they could not leave traces in the scientific dominion, but not in the dominion of their relationships with public men.

In trying to offer a frame of characteristics shared by du Châtelet and Lavoisier Kawashima highlights their uncommon education. She thus provides us with a brief history of female education, also touching upon turning points for female careers in science, such as the existence of children. Émilie had two children, and the second was a boy, so she that had performed her duty as wife of a marquis when she was only twenty. This means that she was free to dedicate herself to science. On the other hand, Marie-Anne had no children, so that, following her early marriage at age thirteen, for a long time her duty was only to assist her talented husband in the laboratory.

One of the most important outcomes of this book is that, chapter by chapter, it leaves us with the idea that there is a great difference between a *femme savant* and a *créature pensante*, a group to which Émilie and Marie-Anne rightly belong. This is also testified by the realistic image she offers of the ‘perfect’ love