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Why Mammals Are Called Mammals: Gender Politics in Eighteenth-Century Natural History

LONDA SCHIEBINGER

IN 1758, IN THE TENTH EDITION OF HIS *Systema naturae*, Carolus Linnaeus introduced the term *Mammalia* into zoological taxonomy. For his revolutionary classification of the animal kingdom—hailed in the twentieth century as the starting point of modern zoological nomenclature—Linnaeus devised this word, meaning literally “of the breast,” to distinguish the class of animals embracing humans, apes, ungulates, sloths, sea cows, elephants, bats, and all other organisms with hair, three ear bones, and a four-chambered heart.¹ In so doing, he made the female mammae the icon of that class.

When examining the evolution of Linnaean nomenclature, historians of science have tended to confine their study to developments within the scientific community. They trace the history of classification from Aristotle through Conrad Gesner and John Ray, culminating ultimately with the triumph of Linnaean systematics.² Linnaeus’s nomenclature is taken more or less for granted as part of his foundational work in zoology. No one has grappled with the social origins or consequences of the term *Mammalia*. Certainly, no one has questioned the gender politics informing Linnaeus’s choice of this term.

It is possible, however, to see the Linnaean coinage as a political act. The presence of milk-producing mammae is, after all, but one characteristic of mammals, as was commonly known to eighteenth-century European naturalists. Furthermore, the mammae are “functional” in only half of this group of animals

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¹ The 10th edition of Linnaeus’s *Systema naturae* (1758) and Carl Clerck’s *Aranei Svecici* (1757) together form the starting point of modern zoological nomenclature. See *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature*, W. D. L. Ride, ed. (London, 1985), 1: 3. The term *Mammalia* first appeared in a student dissertation, *Natura pelagi*, in 1757 but was not published until 1760. *Amoenitates academicae* (Erlangen, 1788), 5: 68–77.

² The literature on Linnaeus is voluminous. See British Museum, *A Catalogue of the Works of Linnaeus*, 2d edn. (London, 1933); Henri Daudin, *De Linné à Jussieu: Méthodes de la classification* (Paris, 1926); Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Heinz Goerke, *Linnaeus*, Denver Lindley, trans. (New York, 1973); and Gunnar Broberg, ed., *Linnaeus: Progress and Prospects in Linnaean Research* (Stockholm, 1980). Broberg’s *Homo sapiens L.: Studier i Carl von Linnés naturuppfattning och människolära* (Stockholm, 1975), by contrast, considers broader contexts.

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