

The Mysteries of the Medieval Vagina

by Mistress Magdalena la Sanguigni

If you read the medical and philosophical treatises written about women (by men, of course) during the period between 100 and 1800 c.e. you will learn that women were scary. Most of the sexual behavior flaws that we attribute to men in the modern age, we attributed to women from the Roman era up until the 1900's. The medieval woman was wonton, unpredictable, and sexually insatiable. She wasn't very emotionally stable and had a tendency to follow her vagina where ever it wanted to go, especially to the penises of men she wasn't married to. Women thought about sex all the time. Only men could lay aside their desires and pursue rational thought. Remind you of any current cultural stereotypes?

Our health issues were fascinating. Most of the medical knowledge used through the Renaissance had its beginnings with the writings of physicians of the Roman Empire. The Church collected these writings, stored and copied them. They continued to cultivate Latin as the language of scholars. It's no surprise that the Church took the beliefs of an already patriarchal culture and put an even more ominous spin on them. These medical assumptions influenced and informed the religious beliefs about women.

The great debate for most of antiquity can be boiled down into the 1 seed vs. 2 seed theory. It was generally agreed in the Roman era that both men and women produced sperm. Both ejaculated when they had an orgasm. Both male and female sperm were needed to make babies. Therefore it was impossible for a woman to become pregnant from rape. If she didn't enjoy it then a baby would not exist. The other theory, more popular as Christianity took hold, stated that male sperm contained tiny babies and women were fields in which these tiny babies were planted. Women still had sperm but it was a growth medium that, while necessary for creating life didn't contribute to the actual baby. All babies were created by men. Only logical, in a faith designed around a male creator god.

One troubling disease that continued through both time periods and theories was the belief that female sperm could "back up" in our systems and cause dangerous congestion. This malady was accompanied by another troubling symptom-the wandering womb. You see, according to the great Roman physicians our uteruses are not attached to anything. If our bodily humors become unbalanced and our fluid becomes congested, our uteruses can float around our bodies causing a number of aches and pains. They can even float in to our throats, causing suffocation. This gruesome affliction has the charming name "The Suffocation of the Mother".

This "congestion" caused all kinds of symptoms including fainting, insomnia, loss of appetite, bloating, a feeling of heaviness, depression, nervousness, shortness of breath, anemia, seizures, constipation, diarrhea, suicidal thoughts, mania, and a variety of aches and pains.

All these symptoms, the congestion, and the wandering womb could be cured with sexual intercourse (with the approved male partner). The disease came to be called "Paroxysm of the Womb" or "Hysteria"

The diagnosis of Hysteria in the 19th century was an entirely different malady having more to do with the new belief that women had no normal sex drive. The definition in the period the SCA covers was caused by the opposite problem. Lack of sexual intercourse caused the back up of fluids that led to every other malady. The sexual suppression, either because you were a virgin, or a widow was easily solved by marrying you off. But if marriage didn't solve the problem, or you were a nun for whom prayer was not enough, there was another treatment.

The physician Soranus in the 1st c. c.e. – developed a technique in which he placed the patient lying down on a table or in a hammock, then applied oil to her vagina “ We.... Moisten these parts freely with sweet oil, keeping it up for some time.”

In Galen's (another physician) notes: “Following the warmth of the remedies and arising from the touch of the genital organs required by the treatment, there followed twitching accompanied at the same time by pain and pleasure after which she emitted a turpid and abundant sperm. From that time she was free of all the evil she felt”

What follows is 18 centuries of attempts to speed up the process of a treatment many doctors and midwives found tedious. It is what the vibrator was invented for; a medical device to get the doctor out of the room as quickly as possible and on to the next patient. Because, though description after description of the treatment seemed to have desired effect, for some reason the symptoms would always return, requiring more treatment.

Ambroise Pare (1517-1590) “Those who are free'd from the fit of the suffocation of the womb either by nature or by art, in a short time their color commeth in to their faces by little and little, and the whole beginneth to wax strong, and the teeth, that were set, and closed fast together, begin (the jaws being loosed) to open and unclosed again, and lastly som moisture floweth from the secret parts with a certain tickling pleasure; but in some women; as in those especially whom the neck of the womb is tickled with the midwife's finger, in stead of that moisture com's thick and gross seed, which moisture of seed when it is fallen , the womb being before as it were raging, is restored unto it's own proper nature and place, and little by little all symptoms vanish away”

A later addition to the theory of the medical need for sex (or at least orgasm) was the belief that anal sex had the opposite effect, causing the recipient to wither and die from repeated exposure.

Ecclesiastical and secular authorities jumped on the “no sodomy” bandwagon as well, using medical opinion to establish laws specifically banning the act.

San Bernardino da Siena makes reference in a sermon:

“Once I found myself in a place where a man had taken a pretty girl for his wife. She lived with him for eight years and was still a virgin; during that time she was with him continuously in a most grave state of sin against nature! Oh! Oh! Oh! Do you know to what state this poor thing was reduced? She was wasted away, near death, pallid, wan. She came to me asking, by the Grace of God, if I could help her in any way. She told me that she had been to the bishop. For this problem and also the podesta (chief magistrate) and both had told her that for that which she claimed they would have to have proofs”

There are other essays to be written on History's fear of butt sex. Let's not lose the thread here. We are still talking about the mysteries of the vagina.

So there is a bit of an historical pattern here in viewing women's sexual behavior as inherently pathological, or at the very least weird. When I teach this in class it always gets a laugh, partly I think, because today women are considered the more sexually stable, and men are thought of as insatiable. There is a lesson here that cultures can bring together science, and religion to form a cultural norm that is based on assumptions only. While there is some truth to the idea that everyone is happier when they get laid every once in awhile, I think we can agree that the lack of it will not cause seizures. Makes you wonder what assumptions we are making now.

Also, the thought of 2 millennia of women going to doctors to get a hand job is funny as hell.

Works Cited:

Maines, Rachel P. The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Ruggiero, Guido. The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.