The Uterus and Female Illness: Western Uterine Medicine from the Classical Period to the Renaissance

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Abstract

From the Classical period through to the Renaissance, Western medicine blamed a woman’s womb for causing a variety of symptoms, many of which came to be grouped under an illness known as hysteria. Hyst[en]ria, an illness specific to women, manifested in a wide variety of symptoms, ranging from fainting to severe pain to madness. Common themes included the womb as an entity that wandered in a woman’s body when it was sexually unsatisfied (thereby causing illness), or the womb as a passive “field” into which a man sowed his seed to create a new life. Treatments often included marriage and sexual intercourse. As anatomical dissection became more prevalent and other aspects of medical science became more sophisticated in the 1700s, scientists began to move towards linking hysteria to the mind. Nevertheless, Western uterine medicine from the Classical period to the Renaissance provided “scientific” encouragement for women to conform to roles as wives and mothers.

Background

For many centuries, a woman’s uterus was a mysterious symbol of her sex. It bled at regular intervals; it could house and then expel a new life. Its workings were unclear, hidden away as it was inside the body – unlike the male organs that were involved in intercourse. Throughout the history of Western medicine, the uterus would come to be blamed (usually unfairly) for a variety of illnesses from which women suffered. A common classical belief was that the womb would wander around a woman’s body, causing a variety of symptoms. Out of this wandering womb theory sprang the condition known as hysteria, and its place in the medical canon as an illness from which women were prone to suffer by virtue of their sex.

The concept of the wandering uterus dates at least as far back as the Ancient Egyptians. Two of their medical texts to which we still have access today are the Kahun and Ebers papyri, in which they blame a woman’s wandering womb for causing disease. The Kahun papyrus is a gynaecological and veterinary text that blamed symptoms as varied as pain in the neck to pain in the feet on the “falling of the womb.” The Ebers papyrus also addressed some gynaecological matters. Notable among its remedies for a wandering womb was the use of male excrement. The text directed that the excrement be placed on frankincense and burned, and the resulting fumes held to the patient’s vulva. The belief that a substance from the male sex might lure the uterus was perhaps the precursor of later ideas that would personify the disease-causing uterus as sexually unsatisfied. James Ricci postulated that it is precisely from the Ebers papyrus that the ancient Greeks derived their belief in the wandering womb, since the papyrus listed treatments to “enable the uterus of a woman to return to its proper region.”

The womb and its link to hysteria is an idea that would persist in Western medicine well into the modern age, until scientific advances in the 1700s paved the way for the realization that hysteria was related to the mind and not the womb.

The Uterus in the Classical Period (ca. 1200 BCE – 476 CE)

Some of the earliest classical representations of the uterus compared the organ to a pot or vessel. In order for the womb to perform its proper functions during menses, intercourse, pregnancy, and delivery, the mouth of the pot needed to open and close at the right times. Other common representations included animals, namely, the frog and the octopus. Véronique Dasen discussed the octopus imagery on classical amulets, and noted that the octopi depicted had seven tentacles, not eight. She postulated that it arose out of earlier imagery of the uterus as a pot whose mouth was sealed by a key with seven teeth.

This comparison of the uterus to an animal was not confined to amulets and other aspects of medical folklore. The idea that it was an entity capable of movement was also espoused by some classical medical writers. There are many examples in the Hippocratic Corpus of the womb’s tendency to wander, which caused an illness that would come to be known as hysteria, after the Greek word for the uterus, hystera. Hippocrates did not say explicitly that the uterus was an animal, but instead attempted to rationally explain its wanderings based on natural laws. Various Hippocratic works referred to the humoral theory, stating that when the womb was deprived of moisture, it travelled about the body to seek it out. In On the Diseases of Women, for example:

If one of these situations exists, that the woman does not have sexual intercourse and that the abdomen is emptied more than it should be due to some stomach illness, the uterus undergoes a displacement; for it is not moist in and of itself, since it has not had intercourse, and it has room above it, since the stomach is empty, and so it moves about because it is drier and lighter than normal.
As to the suffering that an ascending womb could cause:

When [the uterus] has climbed onto the liver, it causes a sudden suffocation, intercepting the breath in the chest […] When the uterus has reached the liver and the hypochondrium and causes suffocation, the whites of the eyes roll up, the woman becomes cold, and even sometimes livid. She grinds her teeth; saliva drips from her mouth, and she appears to be having an epileptic fit. If the uterus stays on the liver and hypochondrium for a long time, the woman will suffocate to death.9

Sufferers of a wandering womb could also exhibit fever, shivering, and pain in the lower regions of the body; eventually this could turn into more widespread pain, loss of the voice, and swelling of the legs and feet.9 Because the ascending uterus could also supposedly crush the heart and lungs, the term uterine suffocation would also be used interchangeably with hysteria.

Some writers went so far as to say that the uterus was in fact an autonomous entity within a woman’s body. Aretaeus called the uterus an “animal within an animal.”10 Being an animal, it had its own needs and desires, and in its quest to fulfill these, it would wander throughout a woman’s body. Plato says, in Timaeus, “Whenever the matrix or womb, as it is called, – which is an indwelling creature desirous of child-bearing – remains without fruit long beyond the due season, it is vexed and takes it ill; and by straying all ways through the body […] causes, moreover, all kinds of maladies.”11 Aretaeus summed it up thus: “In a word, [the womb] is altogether erratic.”10

Some later classical writers agreed that the uterus caused feminine illnesses, but disagreed that it did so by virtue of its wandering. Soranus was one of these,1 as was Galen. Galen’s explanation for uterine-caused diseases was the retention of menses, which strained the ligaments connected to the uterus, “If one side pulls more strongly, the womb is attracted by the part which exerts the greater strength. Therefore, the human uterus does not move from one place to another like a wandering animal but is pulled up by the tension [of the ligaments].”12

Prescribed treatments for hysteria varied according to the etiological theory to which writers subscribed. For those who believed that the uterus could travel around the body, one of the most important treatment methods was to use odours to drive the uterus back to its proper location. For a womb that travelled upwards, for example, Aretaeus advised, “[the womb] delights, also, in fragrant smells, and advances towards them; and it has an aversion to fetid smells, and flees from them.”13 Thus, the treatment was to put noxious smells to a woman’s nose, while fragrant vapours were placed under her vagina. Those who believed that the uterus could not wander criticized this approach. Soranus prescribed a variety of therapies, including the use of warm compresses, massage with olive oil, and only “gruel-like food” in the initial stages of the illness.1 He also suggested that exercise, baths, and a varied diet were useful should the woman be subject to recurrent hysteria.1

Everyone was generally agreed, however, that there existed a female illness that was called, variously, hysteria, uterine suffocation, or uterine stoppage of respiration.12 Aretaeus said that, although symptoms similar to those of hysteria could occur in males, hysterical suffocation occurred only in females.10 As to which women were most prone to hysteria, again there were varying ideas. Aretaeus claimed that younger women were more prone to hysteria, “For those in whom the age, mode of life, and understanding is more mobile, the uterus also is of a wandering nature; but in those more advanced in life, the age, mode of living, understanding, and the uterus are of a steady character.”1216 His belief was not widely shared. Older writers argued that the hysteria-prone were more likely to be older women and widows – that is, those who did not have intercourse because they were unmarried, or those who were used to having intercourse but no longer had a husband with whom to perform it. In Hippocrates’ On the Diseases of Women, he wrote, “Sudden uterine suffocation: this affection is found most often in women who do not have sexual intercourse, and in women of a certain age rather than in young women.”79

The recurring theme in most writings, however, is that sexual abstinence provoked uterine illness, and so women were counselled to seek marriage and intercourse.13 If [women] have intercourse with men their health is better than if they do not. For in the first place, the womb is moistened by intercourse […] In the second place, intercourse by heating the blood and rendering it more fluid gives an easier passage to the menses,”14 wrote Hippocrates in The Seed. Young girls suffering from retained menses at the time of menarche were counselled to find a husband; widows were urged to remarry. It was not the union itself that cured, but rather the sexual intercourse that occurred between husband and wife.

Another facet of classical uterine medicine was the belief that the female was a less perfect version of the male,1 a belief that was extrapolated to the results of intercourse, namely, conception and embryogenesis. Hippocrates believed that men and women both produced weak and strong sperms, and their relative amounts in the uterus determined the sex of the embryo: male if there were more strong sperms, and female if there were more weak sperms.14 Furthermore, Aristotle espoused the idea that, in the act of regeneration, the woman simply provided the physical matter, while the man supplied the formative substance that imbued the resulting embryo with a human soul. “Thus, if the male is the active partner, the one which originates the movement, and the female qua female is the passive one, surely what the female contributes to the semen of the male will be not semen but material.”15 This idea that the role of women in procreation was to receive the sexual offering of the man would persist in subsequent centuries.

The Uterus in the Middle Ages (ca. 400 CE – 1450 CE)

It was the idea of the wandering womb, and not its counterargument, that was transmitted to physicians in the Middle Ages. Galen’s objections to a wandering uterus did not influence subsequent physicians, although his assertion that hysterical suffocation was caused by retention of menses persisted. Likewise, despite Soranus’ influence in this era, due to the translations of Orhusius and Mustio, his objections to a wandering uterus were presumably not included in those texts, and so had no influence on subsequent uterine medicine. In fact, in his sixth-century text based on Soranus, Mustio wrote...
of a womb that could "[rise] upwards to the chest." \(^\text{16}\)

The earlier period of the Middle Ages, sometimes known as the Dark Ages, marked the time after the collapse of the Roman Empire. A major trend in uterine medicine during this time reflected the different attitude of Christianity towards sex. Chastity was paramount, and the Church could not condone the prescription of intercourse as the treatment for a wandering womb. What they could prescribe was marriage, an acceptable male-female relationship within whose bounds the act of intercourse could take place. St. Augustine cautioned, however, that there should be no pleasure in the sexual act. It was for the sole purpose of procreation, and to indulge in it for pleasure was a sin. "Who does not know what passes between husband and wife that children may be born? Is it not for this purpose that wives are married with such ceremony?" \(^\text{17}\) A thirteenth-century text, Ricardus Anglicus’ Anatomia Vivorum, echoed this idea of divine purpose, "God created the uterus to be the instrument and the place of generation in women." \(^\text{18}\)

In the same work, St. Augustine also wrote, "...when sexual intercourse is spoken of now, it suggests to men’s thoughts not such a placid obedience to the will as is conceivable in our first parents [i.e. Adam and Eve], but such violent acting of lust as they themselves have experienced." \(^\text{17}\) Thus, because lust was sinful, the element of control over the sexual desires of the body was important. An early medieval text, Anatomia Magistri Nicolai Physici, attempted to explain rationally why, once aroused, women took longer to quench their sexual desires. For, "women, on account of their own complexion (cold and wet compared to men) as well as the complexion and solidity of the uterus, are not easily aroused, but once inflamed their desire does not quickly subside." \(^\text{18}\)

A twelfth-century medieval manual on porcine anatomy, Anatomia Porci, attributed to Copho, described the perceived function of the uterus as a "field":

"...whatever superfluities are generated during the course of the month may be sent to the organ as if to form the bilge-water of the whole body; this is the nature of the menses which women have. This organ is also nature’s field, which is cultivated that it may bear fruit." \(^\text{16}\)

It is interesting to note, in passing, the comparison of the menses to bilge-water. Historically, and across cultures, this stigma of uncleanness was often attached to menstruation, which may help to explain why medical writers, ranging from Galen to Ambroise Paré in the Renaissance, believed that retention of menses in the body caused illness.

The Anatomia Porci described the uterus as having "seven cells." \(^\text{16}\) It was echoed by the Anatomia Magistri Nicolai Physici, which expanded on the subject by describing where foetuses are formed, according to gender.

"The uterus is divided into seven cavities [...] [Some] say that both males and females are generated on the right side and also on the left; but they also say that a male generated on the left side will be a weak and effeminate man, and conversely a female generated on the right will be mannish and rough." \(^\text{18}\)

Note that males who formed on what is usually the female side were thought to emerge “weak.” The Anatomia Vivorum agreed that males formed on the right, and females on the left. \(^\text{18}\) It also agreed with Aristotle about the male and female contributions to generation, “The male sperm acts upon the female, for the male sperm naturally tends to impress the form of that from which it comes, and the female sperm tends to receive form.” \(^\text{18}\)

A discussion of uterine medicine in the Middle Ages would not be complete without a consideration of Trotula, whose obstetrical and gynaecological works were some of the most important texts that have been passed down to us from that era. Although Trotula described the womb as capable of displacement, she was sensitive to women who did not want to have intercourse, even going so far as to suggest remedies to dampen a husband’s sexual urges, which include the testis of a cock, lettuce seed, and topaz. \(^\text{18}\) However, despite not only this sensitivity, but also her intention to “write of how to help [women’s] secret maladies so that one woman may aid another in her illness,” \(^\text{19}\) and her assertion that men “fail to realize how much sickness women have before they bring them into this world,” \(^\text{19}\) she agreed that women were the trailer sex.

The stronger qualities, that is the heat and the dryness, should rule the man, who is the stronger and more worthy person, while the weaker ones, that is to say the coldness and humidity, should rule the weaker [person], that is the woman. And [God did this] so that by his stronger quality the man might pour out his duty in the woman just as seed is sown in its designated field...Therefore, because women are by nature weaker than men and because they are most frequently afflicted in childbirth, diseases very often abound in them especially around the organs devoted to the work of Nature. \(^\text{20}\)

It is notable that Trotula referred to the uterus as a “field”, as did the author of the Anatomia Porci, and that its purpose is to be “sown” with male seed, which echoed the reference in Plato’s Timaeus (given previously) to “fruit” growing within the womb. This analogy, combined with the belief that it was the male seed that actively formed the foetus, implies that a passive female role in generation was expected.

Trotula continued on the theme of female illness and wrote, “And many of the sicknesses that women have come from the ailments of this “mother” that we call the marice [uterus].” \(^\text{19}\) She attributed hysteria to evil fumes from the uterus, due to retention of menses or corrupt humours. Sufferers fainted and experienced great pain. For treatment, she advised the purging of the blood or humours, and also reverted to the classical use of fumigation:

And let the patient smell stinking things that are exceptionally odorous, such as burnt felt, dog’s hair, goat’s hair, or a horse’s bone set alight and then extinguished, or harshhorn, old shoes, burnt feathers, a wick, moistened in oil, ignited and then extinguished, a woolen rag, or a live smoking coal [...] and make a fumigation underneath of pleasant, sweet-smelling things and draw the matter down from the heart. \(^\text{20}\)
Trotula’s texts also showed a clear link between uterine illnesses and sex. Suffocation of the womb occurred in women, she wrote,

“[…] because corrupt semen abounds in them excessively, and it is converted into a poisonous nature. This happens to those women who do not use men, especially to widows who were accustomed to carnal commerce. It regularly comes upon virgins, too, when they reach the age of marriage and are not able to use men and when the semen abounds in them a lot, which Nature wishes to draw out by means of the male.”

Here, we have again the theme of marriage (the only social institution in the context of which sexual intercourse was acceptable) as a preventive measure against uterine suffocation.

The Uterus in the Renaissance (ca. 1450 CE – 1650 CE)

The Renaissance marked a period in European history when scholars looked back upon the classical period with admiration. The French author and cleric, François Rabelais (1483-1553), although not strictly a medical writer, was well-read and familiar with classical medical texts. The persistence of the idea of the wandering womb and its link to hysteria is evident in his satire, Pantagruel, where Rabelais commented dryly on women and their tendency to hysteria as a result of the uterus. This was done through the character Rondibilis, a physician, who referred to the uterus as an animal-like organ. Rabelais also cited classical authors, “Let it not here be thought strange that I should call [the uterus] an animal, seeing therein I do no otherwise than follow and adhere to the doctrine of the Academic and Peripatetic philosophers.”

Two of these “academic and peripatetic philosophers” were Aristote and Plato. Rondibilis then concluded that what would satisfy the uterus was intercourse with a man, “the said animal (i.e. the uterus) being once satiated […] by that aliment which nature hath provided for it out of the epididymal storehouse of man (i.e. sperm), all its former and irregular and disordered motions are at an end.”

The English doctor, Edward Jorden (1578-1632), also continued in the tradition of ascribing uterine causes to feminine hysteria. His work, A Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother, was notable because it rejected supernatural causes of the hysterical symptoms that were often taken, at this point in history, to indicate witchcraft or demonic possession. “The passive condition of womankind is subject unto more disease and of other sorts and natures than men are because of the uterus, and so the causes of this feminine disease must have been natural. With regard to uterine suffocation:

In English the Mother, or the Suffocation of the Mother, because most commonly it takes them with choking in the throat: and it is an affect of the Mother or womb wherein the principal parts of the body by consent do suffer diversly according to the diversities of the causes and diseases wherewith the matrix is offended.

In his last chapter, Jorden wrote of treatments that friends and attendants of the patient might perform. In keeping with his insistence on natural causes of disease, he did not have much patience for “those superstitious remedies which have crept into our profession,” including charms, amulets, and incense.

Ambroise Paré (1517-1590) also rejected supernatural explanations for the symptoms associated with hysteria. He did, however, persist in the belief that women were erratic because of their wombs and were, in addition, a less perfect version of men, with generative organs analogous to the male ones, but inverted. Interestingly, he believed that, in some cases, hysteria generated a form of madness, a furor uterinus in the woman, anticipating the time when hysteria would be seen as a condition of the mind. However, his reliance on Galenic and Hippocratic theory was evident in his insistence that sexual abstinence caused retention of the menses, which in turn caused uterine suffocation.

In general, the Renaissance would see the beginnings of a shift, as the female body came to be portrayed more and more realistically. This was in large part due to the increasing acceptance of female cadavers being displayed in medical classes for the purpose of education through dissection. Some physicians began to postulate that the symptoms associated with hysteria did not in fact have their origin in the womb. The 1700s would then usher in another new scientific era. As anatomical illustration and dissection became more sophisticated, and new technologies included microscopy, hysteria gradually became less associated with the uterus, and instead became associated with the mind.

Conclusion

In Western medicine, from the Classical period through to the Renaissance, the uterus was believed to be the cause of feminine illness. The prevailing theme was one where the uterus, whether by migrating through the female body or by acting through some other natural mechanism, caused symptoms that were brought together under the general heading of hysteria or uterine suffocation. This was deemed an illness specific to the female sex.

There are several aspects to this theme. One is that women were believed to be not only the trailer sex, but also the passive partner in intercourse and conception, with a recurring image – from the classical period through to the Renaissance – of the female womb as a “field” in which the male seed was “sown”. This implied that the female only supplied the environment in which the embryo would grow, while it was the male who supplied the vital component that would create a new life.

As to why the uterus was believed to cause illness, we must look to the perceived function of the uterus, which is to bear children. This is a theme that was covered by writers ranging from Plato in the classical age, to the medieval author of Anatomia Porci, to Rabelais in the Renaissance. It was believed that if the uterus could not fulfill its function, as a result of sexual abstinence, then it would be the source of disease, although the mechanism of this causation differed from writer to writer. Plato’s depiction of the uterus as an entity that desired to bear fruit – that is, a child – was echoed as late as the Renaissance, by such writers as Rabelais. Women were therefore instructed to marry and engage in intercourse with their husbands, and this course...
of treatment was justified by the aforementioned medical explanations of uterine illness. Although the social context of intercourse changed in the early part of the Middle Ages, when Christian morality dictated that sex was not for pleasure but for procreation, uterine illness continued to be explained as the result of abstinence, and so marriage continued to be urged upon women as beneficial to their health.

Thus, Western uterine medicine, from the Classical era to the Renaissance, provided a means of rationalizing social attitudes towards the female sex, which could then be used to justify prescribed treatments (i.e. marriage) that encouraged women to conform to their roles as wives and mothers.

References
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