The Development of Misogyny in Medieval Medical Texts

Sarah Levin, 2013

From the time of Galen, the father of pre-modern anatomical and physiological thought, in the early second century through the mid-twelfth century, medical thought and practice changed little, if at all. Humoral and astrological theories regarding the nature of medicine pervade almost all medical texts of the period. While the Galenic traditions remained strong through the later Middle Ages, new voices and interpretations began to emerge in the thirteenth century, particularly in the realm of women’s health. Throughout Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, gynecological literature rested firmly in the hands of medieval medical professionals, both male and female, who sought to understand and explain the causes and discover the cures for women’s diseases. By the thirteenth century, however, these gynecological treatises, once used exclusively by physicians and midwives, came to be read by the male public as a means of discovering the intricacies of the female body with respect to reproduction – a way of making the so-called “secrets of women” known to men. This desire to demystify what lay hidden in the female anatomy developed a misogynist taint, a deeply antifeminist sentiment that transformed women’s bodies from objects worthy of investigation to dangerous entities that necessitated avoidance. Women were not simply dangerous – they were deadly. Common medieval medical beliefs held that poison seeped from menstruating women’s eyes, a poison so noxious it could paralyze the vocal chords of men and even kill babies. In my research over the summer, I sought to uncover the reasons for the rise of this medical misogyny and to better understand the ways in which this pattern of thought affected the women of the Middle Ages.

Many medieval historians, if not the majority, argue that the rediscovery of Aristotle’s works in the twelfth century is largely to blame for this newfound antifeminism. Aristotle, who believed that women were “monstrous” defects of nature, had a revolutionary impact on medieval science, theology, and natural philosophy. Religious scholars of the time combined Aristotle’s natural philosophy and scientific authority with their own biblically-based hatred of women. These ideas were once confined to theological treatises and essays but they soon emerged as pseudo-scientific fact in gynecological texts. Galenic ideas of anatomy, as well as the causes and cures of diseases in medical treatises written by women, served as the basis for the pseudo-scientific texts, but the misogyny of Aristotle and his adherents gave the works their decidedly antifeminist tone. Though Aristotle’s widespread influence on medieval thought is indisputable, a number of historians look to the social and religious context of the European continent to find an explanation for the development of the misogynistic medical tradition. These historians argue that antifeminist literature was the product of contemporary European ideas and practices. The all-male medieval university as well as sexual shame – male physicians were not permitted to examine or touch their female patients – limited men’s exposure to women’s ideas and their bodies. With no women to challenge absurd notions about the female body, gynecological literature developed an unquestioned misogynistic taint that would skew men’s views of women for centuries.

The themes of these pseudo-scientific texts would continue to be manipulated and exaggerated for centuries, leading to the production of such maligning texts as Heinrich Kepler and Jacob Sprenger’s rampantly misogynistic witchcraft manifesto, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Medieval women were accused of bizarre acts, everything from cutting off male organs to having sex with demons. While these anecdotes seem comical and absurd today, they defined the experiences of medieval women. Indeed, the women of the Middle Ages lived in a frightening world, a society that viewed them as naturally inferior, naturally corrupting, and naturally evil. While the gynecological literature examined in my research was only one facet of the greater antifeminist phenomenon of the Middle Ages, it played an fundamental role in the development of the long-lasting misogynistic tradition on the European continent.

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