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## Scientific and Religious Assessments of Physicality and Sexuality During the Middle Ages

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Due to religious anxieties about sexual praxis and organs, intellectuals during the High Middle Ages (ca. AD 1000-1300) considered it necessary to determine the extent to which bodily qualities were under the mind's control. If an article is beyond an individual's command, that person is not morally responsible for it. To find precise answers regarding physicality, scholars in diverse fields used the internal logic of their respective disciplines to distinguish which qualities were determined by nature, and which were functions of free will. Such qualification was vital because of the close relationship between sexuality and sin. Since certain elements of sexuality are natural and others were considered manifestations of the psyche, differentiating these facets of corporality was paramount to articulating definitions of sexual transgression. Theorists primarily regarded the morality of fluid emissions, carnal pleasure, physical desire and bodily characteristics. These issues were addressed and explicated differently by secular intellectualism than by theology. Theological analysis inquired as to whether certain physical features were part of God's divine plan or sinful aberrations. Natural sciences such as astrology and anatomy sought to understand whether these attributes of the body existed independently of the soul, or were under its direction.

The inherent physical order of the world was seen through the lens of natural philosophy. The ancient Greeks

formulated this set of theories in the effort to explain the condition of the universe. These ideas were put forth in both physical and metaphysical terms. For example, natural philosophy alleged that all objects were composed of four fundamental elements: earth, air, fire and water. This Aristotelian characterization of the material sphere was highly preserved throughout the Middle Ages; however, it is the supposed manner of interaction between the physical and spiritual realms that is most relevant to the conceptualization of the female body.

The regard for the relationship between soul and body during the Middle Ages was based on Catholicism's interpretation of neo-Platonism. Although there are physiological differences between men and women, Plato regarded the eternal soul as without gender. To be precise, men and women were considered morally and psychologically equivalent. Centuries after Plato, Paul's letter to the Galatians 3:28 echoes this sentiment when he writes, "There is no...male or female for you are all one in Jesus." Thus both philosophical and religious authorities concur that the connection between body and soul is not simply linear. It follows that the mental and physical components of a woman do not have a direct moral relationship. While this sort of argument does not effectively comment on the status of the gendered bodies, equating the supernatural qualities of men and women implicitly contradicts the

notion that a person's physique is determined by her soul.

However, even more basic than natural philosophy when discussing physiological determinism was astrology. While there was no real consensus among scholars on the extent to which celestial bodies directly controlled individuals' actions, both Arabic and Christian scholars accepted that the stars affected the makeup and development of the human body. More specifically, the movement of the planets established the sexual traits of the fetus. This was an important point since sexual behavior was among the most important discussions within astrological treatises.

Some astrologers argued that human action was verdict of the cosmos. However, this stance was untenable within the free-will-dependent matrices of Christianity and Islam. Therefore, this view could not be held by the faithful. Instead, the utility of astrology was derived from its alleged ability to discern factual data and infer the stars' influence over the material world. That is to say reading the heavens could reveal the sex of a child presently within an expectant mother, but not a person's future fate. One of the more common uses for the science however, was to find out whether a young woman were sexually corrupted. This aspect of astrology sought merely to assess the truth value of certain questions. The other component of the discipline attempted to calculate the construction of the physical body.

As previously stated, the movement of the planets acted on the gestating fetus at certain stages of development and imparted the baby with specific characteristics. For example, certain movements of a planet were thought to craft the child's feet while those of another produce the various fluid ducts. Some astrologers even believed that a person's material desire and propensity for specific pleasure, such as sexual orientation,

were manifestations of the cosmos. While the stars were not alleged to control a human's fate or soul because of religious conflicts, there was no inconsistency in the idea that stars mould parts of the human body. In this fashion, the specific physical characteristics of male and female bodies, including the sexual organs and functions, antecede birth and even consciousness.

This is a very important point because regardless of the notion of Original Sin, no child in the womb could actively commit moral wrongdoing. Yet each infant is ineluctably bound to eventual pubescence. Therefore, the certainty of sexual development a priori indicates the future sexual body of a blameless infant must also be without blame. By this logic physicality precedes morality; the state of the body is not equivalent to the condition of the soul, ergo good and evil are not reflected in the natural sexual body. The sexual organs of man and woman are simply objects; they are neither sinful nor pernicious in and of themselves.

This uncoupling of mind from sexual body within natural philosophy and astrology is a vital component of medicine as well. Canonical Arabic physicians such as Rhazes, Ridwan and Avicenna discussed astrological effects on health and sexual development. In his seminal text "The Canon of Medicine," Avicenna delineates one of the mechanisms by which the stars can factor into human health.

The changes dependent on celestial bodies, such as the stars, are thus :- if many luminous stars are in one region of the sky, and the sun approaches towards that region, the people living directly or nearly directly under the sun's rays are exposed to greater heat...the rising and setting of the stars alters the nature of the atmosphere because when the sun approaches them or they it, the air becomes hotter. Under contrary conditions, the air becomes colder.

According to contemporary medical theory, the state of the body was a function of humor balance. These fluids were in turn modified and regulated by the four “primary powers...heat, cold, moisture and dryness.” As Avicenna explained, the celestial bodies could alter the levels of the primary powers and thus directly interact with an adult’s health or the development of a fetus. It is nature, not virtue, that affects health. In fact the influence of the stars on an individual’s physicality was seen as a step removed from the actual controlling elements. That is to say the stars imparted direction to the primary powers, which in turn exert control over the four humors, which give the body its characteristics. Thus physicians deemed astrology as just one of many natural factors that sculpt a human’s corporality.

While the stars influenced the substances and qualities that determined sex, humoral theory explained the primary physiological distinction between the sexes as a disparity between levels of coldness and moisture. Consistently interpreting the medical difference between the sexes in this morally neutral manner spans nearly two thousand years. Avicenna around the year 1000 A.D. explains “the female is of colder temperament...the female is also moister [than the male].” This follows the reasoning of Hippocrates who around 400 B.C. wrote “the woman’s body draws moisture both with more speed and in greater quantity from the belly than does the body of a man.” The same explanation is reproduced in an English midwife’s handbook in the 1400s A.D., “women have less heat in their bodies than men and have more moisture.” This formulation explains not only the obvious differences between the bodies of men and women (such as breasts and difference in genitalia) but also more subtle characteristics such as “the accumulation of

excrementitious matters in the female,” and the corresponding “purgation once every month.”

The matter of menstruation is one of the most crucial medical divisions between the sexes. While menses could be perceived as intimately linked to female sexuality and thus possibly a result of sexual praxis (either normative or deviant), physicians considered woman’s monthly bleeding to be integral of health. It is important to note that the construal of any bodily function as “healthy” automatically signifies not only its endorsement by God, but that it is part of God’s creation and therefore divinely good.

Monica Green explains that women were told not to be ashamed of their monthly period “because it is a natural purgation, given by God.” This conclusion was derived from the understanding that cyclic purgation was fundamental to a healthy woman’s body. The logic is that over time toxins accumulate in and corrupt the humors. These poisons were thought to be the consequence of environmental factors such as atmosphere, diet and sedentary lifestyle. Soranus was an ancient Greek canonical physician attributed with greatest authority on gynecology. When discussing the physiological need for menstruation, he explains “women accumulate [surplus matter] in considerable quantity...when menstruation is impeded, there follows heaviness of the head, dimness of vision, pain in the joints, sensitiveness at the base of the eyes, [and several other health problems].” He further notes that one of the words for menses is “katharsis,” which can be rendered as a cleanse that elicits renewal. Soranus depicts the menstrual cycle as vital to fitness; it decontaminates the body of substances which would otherwise cause pain and ailment.

The idea of monthly purgation as the body’s natural system of renewal

proliferated as integral to a physician's knowledgebase. During the Middle Ages, doctors regarded menstruation as functionally similar to how bloodletting allegedly promotes health. A late medieval gynecological treatise states that women "have [monthly] bleeding which makes their bodies clean and whole from sickness." This demonstrates how millennia of gynecology correlate menses with wellbeing. Theorists concurred that menstruation was a bodily function as natural and as healthy as any other. Similar to evacuation of the bowel or bladder, a woman's monthly bleeding was thought to simply remove toxic substances from her body. Not only is such a function natural and therefore morally neutral, but it is actually crucial to bodily integrity and therefore beneficial.

In the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus wrote "because of menstruation – consequence of the Fall though it may be – women alone are enabled periodically to purge the poisons from their humors in a monthly effusion of blood." This statement contains a powerful tension; Albertus indicates that menses primarily cleanses the body of dire toxins, yet he also alludes to the sin of Eve, a subject closely associated with menstruation. Such an affirmation embodies many of the topics covered by theologians in debates regarding female physicality. He thereby references both medical and theological assessments of the female body.

It is a truism to state that churchmen were anxious about how to approach sexuality; many Christians believed sexuality lay at the heart of sin. However intercourse is a requirement of God's mandate to reproduce. In that case, under what circumstances are sexual acts and traits endorsed by God and when are they despicable? Some questions had simple answers. For example, adultery is explicitly denounced in the Ten Commandments;

whereas, sex under wedlock for the specific purpose of producing a child is acceptable. However, the issue becomes far more complicated when dealing with sexual desires and gendered organs as possibly out of the realm of an individual's control.

For example, while every component of the Virgin Mary's body is ideal, those same parts of an adulteress carry a highly different moral significance. In fact, this is the sort of logic used by theologians when discerning the morality of the female form. For the most part sinfulness was determined using comparisons between the bodies of the Virgin Mary and Eve. Mary was seen as the archetype of feminine perfection, the quintessentially divine incubator of God. Therefore, modeling investigation on Mary provides a theologically sure baseline for the meaning of womanly "goodness." The question of Eve is much more complicated, however. Clearly she was a woman both before and after the Fall, yet this event marked her transition from blessed to outcast. Thus, theologians pondered the following question, since her pre-Fall physique was by default moral, to what extent were the post-Fall changes in her body coterminous with sin?

Thirteenth century Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas grappled with this difficult problem. He primarily approached the issue from the perspective that Eve's physicality before the Fall must have been pure. The argument is that Eve was a direct creation of God; therefore, both she and her body were in a state of sinlessness before her fruity transgression. Aquinas investigates the bible passage Genesis 2:18 which states "The Lord God said 'It is not good for him [Adam] to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' " Shortly thereafter, God fashions the woman Eve. Aquinas argues that Eve was created instead of a male friend for the purpose of sexual companionship because

“in all other respects a male helper clearly would have been preferable.” His perspective is that since men allegedly make better helpers, comrades and partners, the only reason to have a woman around is for sex.

This explanation is key in understanding the assessment of the sexual act and sexual organs. In Aquinas’ mind, there is no manner by which a woman out-competes a man in terms of companionship, except as a sexual partner. Since God has chosen a woman to be the first man’s perfect companion, it follows that God has deemed it proper for Adam and Eve to copulate at will. By this reasoning Aquinas explains that before the Fall, God must have endorsed sexual intercourse, and implicitly genitalia. Saint Augustine corroborates this argument by claiming that the physical act of intercourse was never evil, only the lust and concupiscence that came after the Fall. Therefore, to preserve divine consistency, moral meaning must be preserved after the expulsion from Eden. Thus sex being good before the Fall continues to be good afterwards. However, here the theology begins to stutter. Supposedly menstruation was a feature of the female body that developed after Eden.

Menses carries dual connotations within theology. Briefly stated, it represents both Eve’s punishment and also God’s implied forgiveness within the mandate to be fruitful and multiply. Charles Wood characterizes this paradoxical interpretation in his description, “menstruation was both a mark of that sin – the curse of Eve – and the necessary companion of [women’s] fertility.” That is to say Eve’s sin was sufficient to revoke her immortality but not so great as to cause humanity’s extinction. Thus menses is better rendered as a reminder of the first transgression and the conditions for its forgiveness. In turn the act

of menses itself does not carry a moral charge.

Nevertheless, theologians debated menstruation under another lens as well. If the Virgin Mary menstruated, of course it could not be shameful. Mary was immaculately conceived and therefore without Original Sin. As a result, reason indicates that Mary ought to have been amenorrhetic since she is free from association with Eve. However, this logic would also release Mary from her obligation to bear a child. The notion of a childless Mary obviously contradicts the very foundation of Christianity. In this fashion Mary posed a challenge to medieval medico-theological theories about the nature of the reproduction. If the solution to this problem were simply attributed to the catchall of God’s omnipotence, it would deny Jesus’ inherent humanity. Rather, Dominican theologians severed the direct connection between menstruation as consequence of Original Sin, thereby allowing Mary fully human reproductive capabilities. The ramifications of this explanation exonerated monthly bleeding as a sinful act and greatly reduced its association with Eve’s sin.

Such rationalization takes a broad view over all female bodies. It does not regard the souls of individual women. Pope Gregory the Great approached the subject of menses with the perspective that the condition of the soul must be taken into account. He poses the question, “if no food is impure to him whose mind is pure, why should [menstruation] which a pure-minded woman endures from natural causes be imputed to her as uncleanness?” Gregory’s quandary is rhetorical, his meaning is that the natural state of a woman’s body does not correlate with the purity of her mind. In the statement he alludes to Paul’s epistle to Titus 1:15 which reads, “unto the pure, all things are pure.” In the letter, Paul urges potential converts not to let stringent kosher



laws deter them from following Jesus. He asserts that the physical nature of food is no longer relevant to religious transgression. Gregory takes this idea a step further and claims that the physical nature of the female body no longer signifies her purity.

Gregory's logic is steeped in the aura of the early Christian break with Jewish customs. His moral justification of menstruation also recalls the gospel of Matthew 9:20-22 which reads, "just then a woman who had been subject to [vaginal] bleeding for twelve years came up behind Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak....Jesus turned and saw her. 'Take heart, daughter,' he said, 'your faith has healed you.' And the woman was healed from that moment." What is notable is that both in Gregory's comparison to dietary laws and the biblical story about the sick woman, the construal of vaginal bleeding as high ritual impurity is shifted to a stance of moral irrelevance. This denotes the metamorphosis of Jewish institution into a Christian theological matrix. Transgression as fleshy, external and apart from the soul's discretion is discarded; by Christian definition, only the spirit can commit sin.

In fact, Gregory described sin in these terms; he gives a three part mechanism for the emergence of sin, "Suggestion is occasioned by the Devil, delight is from the flesh, and consent from the mind." By this formulation, the devil and the flesh are merely actors encouraging evil within the

heart. It is the heart itself which consents, thereby committing sin. While this reasoning disqualifies the existence of sin within corporality; it does paint the body as passively complicit with the devil.

The theologians Gregory, Thomas Aquinas and even Jesus himself deny the moral culpability of vaginal bleeding. Furthermore, secular disciplines explain sexual corporality in terms of natural forces and elements. Sexual organs and practice were construed as merely bits of God's creation; elements of the material world as banal as elbows, birds and grass. While such a reading of sexuality submits to the strictest internal logics of natural sciences and theology, such a cerebral and rationally perfect view of the subject was by no means normative. Whereas theologians absolve the feminine physique in one dissertation, women were still seen as objects of temptation to be sequestered away from chaste male clerics in another. While astrologers and natural scientists described the female body as conforming to the more perfect laws of materiality, male physicians who would have read these very texts were still forbidden from practicing obstetrics. While the female body was theoretically conceived as sinless, its practical meaning differed.

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