“Diseases of Women”: How Perceptions of Women’s Health in Ancient Greece Relate to Women’s Role in Society and How Those Understandings and Expectations are Still Present in our Modern Era

Avoiding overindulgence in the preservation of health is a common belief in our modern age. We are simultaneously bombarded with advertisements of deliciously fatty fast-food products while also reminded by family members, friends, and medical professionals that in order to preserve a “healthy” body weight, we must abstain from excesses of these pleasures. Maintaining good health means exercising self-restraint in the areas of consumption, relaxation, and sex, for overly satisfying any of these desires could lead to disastrous effects.

This idea of avoiding excess was no different in Ancient Greece. In his chapter Bodies, Davidson lists many addictions of ancient appetites, one of these addictions being the allure of sex (Davidson, 1998). In this framework, individuals are ranked and praised for their ability to withhold themselves from desire. Figures like Hippolytus, who are able to resist the temptations of sexual activity are celebrated while others are ridiculed for their lack of self-control. The value of restraint in ancient Greek Society is also expressed by the Greek word *sōphrosunē*, which, for fifth century Athenians, implied moderation and protection from worldly extremes and was a quality thought only to be possessed by men, as women, by nature, were inherently drawn to excess and ruled by sexual desire (Innes, 2012). In this essay I will expand on the ancient Greek and modern perceptions of scientific differences between the sexes, and how those differences related to the social expectations and behaviors of the time. I use examples from court cases, myth, and plays to elucidate the characteristics of an ideal woman in ancient Greece and provide examples of how medical recommendations to treat women’s diseases at that time supported those values. I compare this connection between anatomy and society to modern day and continue with an exploration of Greek and modern ideas of pregnancy and childbirth and how those might also inform societal expectations. I demonstrate, through an expansive collection of resources, how so called “scientific” reasons for male dominance are not a new phenomenon and how medicine and culture continue to build off one another to exert control over women’s behavior.

In order to understand how female bodies were controlled in ancient Greek society, it is first necessary to elucidate the Greek perceptions of those bodies. In Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, he describes females as like a “deformed male”, who are “the result of some disability” in pregnancy (Larson, 2012, 6.6). In this framework, being a man is the default nature for being a human, an idea which is also expressed in Greek myth. In Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Pandora, the first woman, is only introduced into the world after the generation of man, introduced only as a means of revenge, another theme which continues in the Greek portrayal of women (Larson, 2012, 3.2).

The conceptualization of women as secondary to men creates a paradox of medical treatment in the Hippocratic corpus. Though the corpus describes men as superior to women, due to their hotter and drier natures, the conditions spoken about throughout the corpus are biased towards treating a male patient. Entry 62 of the first book of *Diseases of Women* states plainly, “there is a great difference in the treatment of women’s diseases and those of men” (*trans*. Potter and Smith, 1923). From an outsider’s perspective, it seems that men and women may have even been considered as belonging to separate species. Treatments specific to women are presented in separate volumes and attribute a vast array of symptoms, including suffocation, fever, inability to eat, insomnia, cold, epilepsy, lower back pain, and distress, among others, to disorders of the uterus. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether these illnesses, when presented in female patients, were treated inversely to the standard male, owing to their differing natures, or, if all ailments in women were attributed to some malignancy in the womb.

These misalignments in the uterus were related to the idea of a *hodos*, or an uninterrupted passageway extending from the nose and mouth in a woman to the vagina. When a woman abstained from intercourse, her womb became excessively dry, and would start to move through the *hodos* to other parts of the body to absorb moisture. The cure for most of these ailments, was sex and pregnancy. The health of a woman then, is inherently precarious. A lack of sex could result in any number of fatal illnesses, but so could any overindulgence of pleasure, which lead to excess moisture in the female body. As Helen King describes in her book, *Hippocratic Women*, women in ancient Greece were inherently unhealthy, but the best way to maintain their health was to fulfil their societal duty of marrying, having children, and keeping up with their housework (King, 2002).

There is considerable literature providing these exact recommendations to wives and mothers in ancient Greece. In addition to the scientific counsel provided in the Hippocratic corpus, Xenophon, in a constructed dialogue between Socrates and Isomachus in *Economics*, provides suggestions for the proper training of Isomachus’ young wife. In the passage, Isomachus describes to Socrates how he advised his wife to “behave like the mistress of the household”, standing at the loom, kneading dough, and folding blankets and clothing items. In this way, Isomachus describes, his wife will “have a better appetite, be healthier, and the colour in her cheeks will be real” (Larson, 2012, 8.10). Hippocratic ideas about women’s health, then, were reinforced through societal expectations of appropriate female behavior.

In addition to this passage, proper womanly qualities are also emphasized in several plays. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is initially portrayed as the ideal wife and mother. Her motivations for killing her husband are understandable, as she is motivated by her love for their sacrificed daughter Iphigenia and though Clytemnestra is revealed as an adulterer, she adamantly claims that, in her husband’s absence, she has been a faithful companion who has not known delight with another man (Aeschylus, ed. Grene et. al, 2013). This emphasis on fidelity is also present in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, in which, Theseus’ wife Phaedra is infatuated with her stepson the titular character. In an attempt to cure her literal lovesickness, Phaedra leaves the confines of her household and converses with her nurse and a female chorus who are desperate to know why she is starving herself. Though the prying involvement of her nurse eventually lead to Phaedra’s, and later Hippolytus’, death, the reader is left to wonder whether both figures would still be alive if Phaedra had remained in her home and focused on housework, or if she had rather consulted a male physician for treatment.

The connection between female sexuality and a stasis in the home is perhaps most clearly elucidated in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. In an attempt to end the long-lasting Peloponnesian War, Lysistrata schemes with the young and old wives of Greece, instructing them to refuse sex with their husbands and seize the acropolis, respectively, until a peace treaty has been signed. Lysistrata’s plan is outrageous in both of its suggestions. The unrelenting sexual appetite of women is well documented in Ancient Greek Writing. This theme is expressed in Hippolytus’ speech against Pheadra (*Hippolytus*, trans. Svarlien), in figures like Circe and Calypso in the Odyssey (*Od*, trans. Wilson), and, as Foucault describes in his problematization, is one of the many burdensome attributes of the female sex (Foucault, 1985). Even the women speaking to Lysistrata express their dismay at how difficult it will be for them to abstain from intercourse with their husbands. One woman declares, “I’m even ready to walk through fire; *that* rather than give up cock” (*Lysistrata*, trans. Henderson). Despite the success of the young women in withholding sex from their husbands and the triumph of the older women in their control of the acropolis, after the treaty is signed, the women return to their roles of perfect wives and mothers within their households. As Henderson describes in his introduction to the play, the women of the Lysistrata do not seek to revolutionize the power system in Greece but rather desire only the restoration of their normal pre-war lives (Henderson, 2011). Even when the women of the Lysistrata are publicly opposing the actions of men, their actions still adhere to the social expectations of women: they recognize their place within the home and manage this domestic dispute as they would any other conflict within their house.

While there have been major advances in science and anatomical knowledge since the age of Hippocrates, the paradox at the intersection of medicine and feminism still remains in our modern generation. In her book, *Medicine as Culture*, author Deborah Lupton (2012) describes how inherent female skills, like the ability to bear and breastfeed children, have both been honored by feminists celebrating the power of women and simultaneously, historically defined as “scientific” reasons for women’s inferiority, leading to their removal from public spaces. Lupton further details that, though there were great improvements in medical care into the 19th and 20th centuries, women in society, specifically upper-class women, were still portrayed as physically delicate and controlled by their sexual organs. Despite the vast expansion in knowledge of female anatomy between ancient Greece and the 20th century, changes in social perceptions of women, as described by Lupton (2012), were scant.

Like in Ancient Greece, contemporary women continue to be defined against the standard male body. Lupton cites modern anatomy textbooks which continue to portray the male form as the conventional patient in medical practice, with the female body presented as a secondary variation, described only in contrast to its male counterpart (Lupton, 2012). In ancient Greece and modern society then, the question of the extent of differences between men and women remains undefined. Are men and women similar enough creatures to justify a male body as the default, given female bodies only minor notes in difference to accommodate for alternative primary and secondary sex characteristics? Or, are the contrasts so minute and vast that women and men become almost two entirely separate species?

While the specific differences in health between men and women may not be immediately clear or noted upon in Greek and modern medical texts, both recognize the distinct gendered contributions of sexes to future offspring. In a critique of misguided modern understandings of the science of sex and society, Cordelia Fine, author of Testosterone Rex, explains how many of our ideas about gendered behavior are incorrectly ascribed to so-called ‘universal’ biological truths. One myth that Fine focuses on is that of the unequal contribution of men and women to the generation of children.

In 1871, Darwin published *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. In it, Darwin describes his theory of sexual selection explaining why males of certain species paradoxically develop cumbersome or colorful features which limit their ability to avoid predation. This sexual selection diverges into two varieties: competition between members of the same sex for access to females, and the attraction of “choosy” members of the opposite sex. Examples of these varieties include the growth of antlers in male deer and the flamboyant displays of male peacocks, respectively. Though features related to sexual selection are also seen in the female members of some species, the vast majority of these observations are present in males. As a result, Darwin, and others, have theorized that this selection has something to do with the differing investments in offspring between the sexes. Males, in contributing abundant and easily generated sperm, provide a relatively ‘cheaper’ contribution to the generation of a child when compared to females who invest extensive time and energy into both the development of an egg and the rearing and raising of offspring.

Though Fine ultimately concludes that within a species, biological sex does not directly correlate to specific mating strategies, these phenomena nevertheless find their parallels in modern human society: the rich man who purchases a shiny Maserati to attract an array of attractive women; the teenage girl who is encouraged to limit her sexual encounters while her male classmates brag about the number of girls they’ve dated; the mother being awarded custody of her children because she is thought to provide a higher level of care and investment into their well-being than their father, despite evidence to the contrary. Women, as parents in modern society, are widely considered more involved and fundamental to the generation of a child, a notion that was interestingly absent from the Ancient Greek understanding of childhood generation and nurturing.

In, *On the Generating Seed and the Nature of the Child*, Hippocrates describes the common understanding that both men and women provide some form of element toward the offspring, called male and female sperm, though both women and men could provide either type of sperm (Leftkowitz and Font, 2005, p.230). Male sperm was thought to be stronger and more substantial than female sperm, though, if the amount of female sperm was greater than that of the male sperm, the child would still be female. Despite the known idea that both men and women contributed a biological element to their offspring, the child of their union was indisputably tied to the father over the mother.

The belief that men contribute more to the creation of children than women is ubiquitous in Ancient Greek myth and writing. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Aphrodite is described as being born only of the fluid within Ouranos’ genitals after they fell into the sea (Larson, 2012, 2.2). She is not a product of a pairing of gods but is rather generated from a single godly contribution. Similarly, in the introduction to her book on Greek and Roman Sexualities, Jennifer Larson describes how Zeus, in Hesiod’s Theogony, is able to usurp the typical roles of reproduction when he births Athena from his head (Larson, 2012). Women and goddesses, then, were not always essential to the generation of offspring.

Ideas of male contribution to pregnancy are also incorporated into court cases in Athenian society, specifically in Lysias’ writings *On the Murder of Erastosthenes*. In the case, Euphiletos is defending himself after murdering Erastosthenes, a man he caught sleeping with his wife (Lysias, 1994). Though Euphiletos’ wife is initially portrayed as an ideal companion who cares for the house and for Euphiletos’ child, it is later revealed that she has tricked Euphiletos and has been seeing Erastosthenes behind his back for some time. Not only does her adultery affect Euphiletos’ reputation as a man, but it also questions the validity of his fatherhood. Without paternity tests, any wife’s adulterous actions could result in the de-legitimizing of true-born Athenian children, a possibly devastating phenomenon in a society that places extreme value on its youth.

In this essay, I demonstrated how women’s behavior can be dictated by “scientific” knowledge and recommendations which serve to reinforce patriarchal social ideals. In Ancient Greece, the Hippocratic Corpus emphasized that the female experience is inherently problematic but can be made healthful by adhering to the societal expectations of marriage, frequent intercourse and childbearing. In a similar vein, the modern woman finds herself in a paradoxical position when pursuing economic independence. In the most extreme cases, she must reject her femininity, ignoring menstrual pains or delaying pregnancy to preserve her career or risk the loss of professional growth. Likewise, perceptions of gendered contributions to childhood also inform social cues, further dictating societal expectations of an “ideal” woman”. Though these patriarchal systems are integrated into society and difficult to alter, simply knowing about their existence and function can begin to affect beneficial change.

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