

## PAEDAGOGUS

### VOICES FROM THE UNDERWORLD: THE FEMALE BODY DISCUSSED IN TWO DIALOGUES

The following pair of dialogues was composed with the aim of presenting Graeco-Roman views about the female body to a class of students engaged in the study of women in classical antiquity. This semi-dramatic structure, in which several interlocutors take distinct positions on a selected topic, has the advantage of eliciting a high degree of involvement by the students and consequent engagement in the subject matter. The dialogues do not follow the Platonic model that employs the Socratic method of *elenchus*, inasmuch as there is no single speaker asking questions, then challenging the responses from the others in such a way as to draw ultimately a preferred answer. Rather, the dialogues imitate a symposium gathering in which diverse voices are heard, in the first instance (Dialogue 1) among male medical writers and philosophers, and the second (Dialogue 2) in which different women describe their in-body experiences. The contrast between the two dialogues, each with a variety of perspectives and consisting of voices from a variety of contexts ranging over seven hundred years, uncovers roughly consistent gendered perspectives and a type of discourse familiar to all of us working with Graeco-Roman texts.

The dialogues are set in the Underworld, so as to include participants from various time periods, ranging from 600 B.C.E. to the second century C.E.<sup>1</sup>

#### Dialogue 1

*Setting: A meadow, where some idle souls (Greeks and Romans), who had formerly inhabited the bodies of philosophers and physicians, discuss the nature of the female body. The former Plato is the host.*

*Plato:* Let us while away the time today by reflecting on the nature of women. All of us had experience of women, but how well did we know what they were *really* like?

My own view is that while women may have the intellectual gifts to enable them to take on the role of men in the state, still their *bodies* are not strong,<sup>2</sup> and certainly not controllable. They are always affected by their wombs, in one way or another. These wombs are like hungry animals with a will of their own, moving around inside women, never satisfied.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the opportunity to have presented these dialogues at the CAAS meeting in Wilmington, Del., in October 2003, and for the feedback I received on that occasion, as well as for the feedback from the anonymous readers for *CW*. I also want to thank Beate Gundert and Ann Hanson for much helpful advice. The abbreviation for the textual references in the notes to English translations of the ancient texts found in M. R. Lefkowitz and M. B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (Baltimore 1992) will be indicated by *WLGR*, and L. refers to the volume number, book (if relevant), chapter, and page numbers of the Greek texts of Hippocrates edited and translated by E. Littré: *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate*, vol. 6–8 (Paris 1849–1853).

<sup>2</sup> For Plato's discussion of the relative strength and weakness of men and women see *Resp.* 5.451e.1–2.

<sup>3</sup> *Pl. Ti.* 90e–91d, *WLGR* # 338.

*Hippocrates I:* Yes, you're absolutely right, Plato. Those darn wombs are always after it—after the wet, I mean. Women, poor creatures, need to stay wet; that spongy flesh of theirs just soaks it up.<sup>4</sup> Not at all like us men, with our taut, muscular bodies, so fit for exercise, beautiful to see in the gymnasium. No, women are mushy and need to stay mushy. If that womb of theirs doesn't get its moisture, off it goes, smacking up against the liver and hitting at the diaphragm; then it sails on to occupy the breathing spaces at the center of her body. The first thing you know the poor woman is suffocating: she loses her voice, her teeth chatter, her eyes roll, and sometimes foam spills out of her mouth. The best thing I've found for this condition is to wipe the woman's nostrils with seal oil or ground-up deer horn.<sup>5</sup>

*Hippocrates II:* Fumigating the uterus when it is out of place is also very helpful—all you need are herbs or dung heated in a pot underneath her and a reed to direct the fumes into her womb. One must be careful not to fumigate on a windy day, however, lest she be chilled or perhaps burn herself. You can always try inserting a pessary made of cantharid beetles. If she gets her period, make sure she sleeps with her husband, for what she needs for a total cure for this restless womb is to give birth.<sup>6</sup>

*Hippocrates III:* Now menstruation is another big problem for women. Let menstrual blood get backed up and not flow out, and your woman is in real trouble: she really needs that monthly cleansing. We men purge our bodies with the sweat of exercise and hard work and, after all, we do not have that excess fluid in our bodies that women have to worry about. And we constantly exert ourselves in the gymnasium, so our bodies maintain a perfect balance among our fluids. The way that nature tries to maintain a balance in women's bodies is through the menses, but often that temperamental extra female organ gets closed or clogged, and it is up to us doctors to advise women how to keep their fluids flowing freely down and out. Women, of course, do not work as hard as men and lead a good, soft life if their menses behave as they should. But let that blood back up in the womb instead of flowing out and a woman is in real trouble. Then she had better call on one of us to slip in a pessary of cow dung or beef bile in quick order.<sup>7</sup>

*Hippocrates IV:* Come on, you know there is a better remedy than that. Easy to hand, too. Let that woman who's backed up call in her man. This

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<sup>4</sup> Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.1. (L. 8.12), *WLGR* # 343. The Hippocratic writer suggests (by way of analogy) placing in a moist environment two pieces of cloth, one a dense fabric and one soft wool. The wool, like the woman's flesh, will in time absorb much more moisture.

<sup>5</sup> Hippoc. *Mul.* 1.7, 2.126, (L. 8.32, 272), *WLGR* # 343, 345.

<sup>6</sup> Hippoc. *Nat. Mul.* 2, (L. 7.314), *WLGR* # 347. From Pliny the Elder (*NH* 29.95) we get the report that ground cantharid beetles (scarabs) were given to women to induce menstruation (therefore presumably also to terminate a pregnancy) and as a diuretic. This strong medication, known as "Spanish fly" in modern times, has been used as an aphrodisiac.

<sup>7</sup> Hippoc. *Loc. Hom.* 47 (L. 6.346), *WLGR* # 344. The text specifies that "[t]he following inflammatory drugs bring on menstruation: cow dung, beef bile, myrrh, alum, galbanum and anything similar; use as much of these as possible." It is not hard to see how these suppositories would bring on inflammation!

opens up the passage quicker than anything else.<sup>8</sup> Want proof? You've heard tell of the trouble virgins get into. Their cervix hasn't been persuaded to open by the useful tool we men have, which warms up our women and gives them the moisture they need at the same time. As for the excess: well, nature takes care of that by getting the girl pregnant. The fetus uses up the accumulated fluid as nourishment.

Those poor girls who go crazy because their menstrual fluid can't get out! Some of them have tried to hang themselves or jump down a well because the blood backed up and accumulated all around their hearts and mid-sections, making them delirious.<sup>9</sup> Some don't get so desperate, of course; they just ramble and utter obscenities. All for the want of a man!

*Hippocrates V*: And think of the pleasure women get from sex! Right up until her man ejaculates, too. This is good. It releases her seed into the womb. And, if she has just had her monthly cleansing, the time is ripe for conception, best of all. You see, that excess she gets rid of makes her just like a field when the rains of late winter are over—she's just waiting to get plowed by her man.<sup>10</sup> Once her womb is emptied of blood, there is a nice empty space for male seed to journey way deep inside and do its work. *Work* it is, you know, to produce a child.<sup>11</sup> If that sperm is of the strong sort, and her seed is the same, presto, a boy is conceived. If weak meets weak, well, there comes another future mother. (If she has a weak seed and he a strong one, then we only get a boy if there is more of the strong one.) Once the work is done, the womb-jar closes its seal while the embryo grows. Tidy little system.<sup>12</sup>

There are those occasions when this work is inconvenient, of course. Who wants their favorite courtesan to get put out of circulation with a pregnant belly? Now, you know our code as physicians: we aren't supposed to slip a properly married woman those handy little pessaries that open up the seal again and let the embryo slip out.<sup>13</sup> Most women with husbands seem to want to produce boy babies to ensure the continuation of the family line, and they fear that such pessaries might compromise their fertility in the future. But those women who ply the world's oldest profession are another story, and most of them know the ways. If they don't, we doctors can help them out. Last fall I had a choice dancer call

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<sup>8</sup> This "phallic" therapy is a transparent claim for the wife's dependence upon a man for sexual satisfaction, whereas men's sexual activity was bisexual (and not monogamous).

<sup>9</sup> Hippoc. *Virg.* 1 (L. 8.468, 470), *WLGR* # 349.

<sup>10</sup> The image of a woman as a fertile field waiting to be plowed by a man was a popular one, judging from its frequent occurrence in the Greek poets. Ancient sources are collected in P. Du Bois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago 1988).

<sup>11</sup> The male idea of sex for procreation as *work* is found first in Hesiod's account of the consequences of the creation of woman, namely imposing labor upon men (*WD* 91, c. 700 B.C.E.). Compare the consequences of the Old Testament account of the creation of Eve and her rôle in causing the labor that is imposed upon humans after the expulsion from Paradise.

<sup>12</sup> Hippoc. *Nat. Puer.* 4, 6, 7 (L. 7.474, 476, 478), *WLGR* # 341.

<sup>13</sup> The prohibition against administering abortive agents is familiar to us from the Hippocratic Oath. Nonetheless, there is evidence in the corpus that practitioners gave advice and prescriptions for expelling an embryo.

me for some quick advice. She knew she had taken the generating seed and that the mouth of her womb had sealed over and retained it. Her mistress couldn't afford to have so valuable a slave-girl out of commission with a fat belly and then a baby. So I gave her the right advice: "Girl: just jump in the air seven times and kick your buttocks with your heels!" Easy for her, a dancer, and soon enough the seed fell out, much to her surprise.<sup>14</sup>

*Aristotle*: Well, these antics are ridiculous, and I'm sure glad I'm not a woman! By nature they're just inferior men, anyhow.<sup>15</sup> Weaker for sure. And not just because they're soft and mushy. Nature didn't give them enough of that all-important ingredient, vital heat. Cold, women are, cold. Their food turns into blood, all right, and lots of it. But they can't cook it up to the temperature that we men can. They can't froth it up like we do our semen. That froth, *that's* what it takes to make real seed. Women just have all that blood swirling around when they are having sex with a man. The blood is useful for feeding an embryo once the male has given them one,<sup>16</sup> but don't tell me that it contains seed that can generate a new human being! Women just have blood, blood, blood.

By the way, as for that wandering womb—I don't believe a word of it.

*Hippocrates VI*: Well, I do. Haven't you seen women suffering from suffocation because of their womb? That's because it wanders! And another thing I'm sure of is that women *do* produce seed, whether their nature is cold or not. Seed doesn't come from cooked blood at all, frothed or unfrothed; that white generating seed comes from the gray matter of the brain. It goes down the spinal cord and is injected into the womb, then gets mixed with the seed the man ejaculates.<sup>17</sup>

*Hippocrates VII*: Yes, down from the brain it comes, but only after it has been gathered from all over the body.<sup>18</sup> How do you think that we get perfect toenails or armpit hair unless we get some input from these places?

Going back to that dancer: I don't blame women for wanting to avoid pregnancy. They have other tricks to expel the seed after the womb has sealed over it. One of the best is to get immediately out of bed, squat, and tickle your nose with a feather. A big sneeze can drive the seed right out. If this doesn't work, the woman can always go for a ride on a draft horse or an ox. Bumpy, but effective.<sup>19</sup> Midwives know all the tricks. Smart as physicians, they are.

<sup>14</sup> Hippoc. *Nat. Puer.* 13, (L. 7.490), *WLGR* # 341.

<sup>15</sup> The *locus classicus* for this statement of Aristotle's view of women's inferiority is *Pol.* 1254b13–14: "The male is by nature superior (*κρείττων*), and the female inferior (*χείρων*), and the one rules and the other is ruled."

<sup>16</sup> *Gen. An.* 726b, 727a, 716a, *WLGR* # 339. Consistent with Aristotle's theory that things are created by the imposition of form on matter, he assigns matter to the female and the formal element (of movement and generation) to the male (329a9–19). The difficulty of explaining the resemblance between children and the mother he acknowledges (769b) but accounts for this by the potential residing in the woman's blood, actualized by male semen. For a discussion of this, see L. Dean-Jones, "Aristotle's understanding of Plato's Receptacle," in M. R. Wright, ed., *Reason and Necessity: Essays on Plato's Timaeus* (Swansea and London, 2000) 101–12.

<sup>17</sup> For the origin of semen (the Greek word for "seed") in the brain, see Hippoc. *Genit.* 2 (L. 7.472, 474).

<sup>18</sup> Hippoc. *Aër.* 14 (L. 2.58); *Morb. Sacr.* 2 (L. 6.364).

<sup>19</sup> Hippoc. *Ap. Sor. Gyn.* 1.61, 64.

Women don't have it easy. Their bodies are always getting blocked up here and there or getting too loose in places. The womb is one of those places that's apt to get blocked. Then the poor woman complains of cramps and is miserable.

*Herophilus*: Well, I know a lot about the womb, firsthand. I've cut women open—dead ones of course, but lots of live female animals, exposing their wombs to view. I know a good deal about the inside of men's bodies, too. I even got to cut up some men alive—King Ptolemy gave me some criminals condemned to death, so that I could carry out my investigations while their blood was still coursing through their veins. (There weren't any women criminals; since they're not legal persons it's hard to catch them breaking the law.) But even the female corpses and the female animals made it clear to me that women's parts are not all that different from men's. I agree with you, Aristotle: women and men are cut from the same cloth: women have ovaries, men have testes—variation on a theme. The only difference is that women menstruate, get pregnant, and produce milk. But you were dead wrong, Aristotle, about the matter of the female seed. Women do produce generating seed. I've seen the place in females where it is produced, along with the seed-carrying ducts through which the seed travels. Still, Nature didn't give women all the mechanics they need to make a real contribution to conception. First of all, the woman's seed travels down the oviducts into the neck of the bladder, not into the uterus. Out it goes, unproductive.<sup>20</sup> As for men, their seed is, as you say, Aristotle, refined blood. It needs some final processing in the testicles, however, before it is able to do its job. Those balls are essential!

*Soranus*: I agree with you about the delivery of the seed to the bladder.<sup>21</sup> Too bad you didn't have the benefit of some of the learning I picked up long after you were down among the shades. Women would not have had such a rough time of it, if only physicians had understood that many of the therapies you applied did more harm than good. I hate to think, for instance, about what women have gone through in the name of steering that womb up and down. The worst I have heard about is the bellows technique: take the blacksmith's bellows and blow air up the vagina! Blowing in vinegar must have felt pretty bad, too. Then there were all those foul-smelling fumigations—burnt hair, extinguished lamp wicks, charred deer's horn, burnt wool and rags—applied to the nose to repel the uterus back down to its proper place in the body, or applied to the vagina to drive it back up again and to keep the woman's passages clear for seed to travel to the womb. Any impression the womb gives of movement in the body is the result of inflammation and stricture in the ligaments that root it in its place,<sup>22</sup> and rushing to fill the womb with seed is not always a good idea.

<sup>20</sup> Herophilus T 109 Von Staden. Von Staden explains the error by the fact that Herophilus was still considering the male body as prototype, concluding that the female "spermatic ducts," like the male ducts from each testicle, lead to the neck of the bladder (H. Von Staden, ed., *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria: Edition, Translation, and Essays* [Cambridge 1989] 168).

<sup>21</sup> On Soranus' adoption of the error of Herophilus see V. Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (London and New York, 2004) 198 with n.87. Nutton suggests that the shared error could have arisen from superficial dissection that suggested a continuity between the utero-ovarian ligament and the rear of the ureter.

<sup>22</sup> Sor. *Gyn.* 3.29. Soranus ascribed to the "Methodist" school of medicine, which viewed health as a proper balance of the lax and the constricted, and pathology as

You know, if I had been a woman, I would have stayed a virgin. Now there's a healthy state, for both men and women!<sup>23</sup>

But if a woman wants children, she had better stay sober. Give a woman a drink and she has those dreams and fantasies. You know the result of that: her thoughts mark her offspring, and she produces monster babies. Sometimes the kid even looks like a neighbor, since she was thinking of him when she conceived.<sup>24</sup>

*Areteus*: I sure am glad that we were practicing medicine long after you fellows got dissection underway. It made our job so much easier. I'm still convinced that the womb wanders, though. Plato, I like your idea of the womb as an animal, crazy as can be, wandering around looking for satisfaction.<sup>25</sup>

*Galen*: You've got to be kidding, Areteus. The womb is simply not mobile. Any self-respecting physician can see that by opening up female animals. Their wombs are tied down with more ligaments than a ship in harbor. Sometimes the ligaments get tight, when menstruation doesn't happen and the blood vessels around the uterus fill up. Then I suppose the womb might shift a little. Women do suffer from uterine suffocation all right, but it's from lack of intercourse. Widows: now there's a real problem. I know one poor soul whose nurse had to cure her from suffocation with massages and warm remedies. She helped her evacuate all that pent-up liquid.<sup>26</sup> But let's be frank, boys. We need sex, too. What would happen to us if our semen backed up and couldn't get out? Putrefaction causes disease, as you all know.

Now Herophilus, I have to have it out with you on one thing. Those oviducts don't carry the woman's seed into the bladder. Nature would not be so stupid. The woman's seed may be weak and thin and cold, but it's still useful for conception. It lubricates the uterus and nourishes the male seed. It's the nature of women to be concerned with taking up male seed and nourishing it as a baby in the womb. Everyone knows that.

I agree with all of you who see women and men as essentially made of the same stuff, albeit that the woman is inferior. Nature just made her that way: she had her reasons. Women have organs like men, but when there is an embryo developing in the womb they just don't get enough heat to move their parts outside their bodies.<sup>27</sup> Useful, I suppose, for a woman harboring a child; imagine trying to carry around a growing fetus in a bag outside! Women are definitely less perfect than men; look at the fact that they can't grow a beard, for example! But I suppose it's all for the best.

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the excess of either of these. He presumably understood the ligaments as able to stretch, accounting for some small degree of movement of the womb.

<sup>23</sup> Soranus makes a radical departure from the earlier position that advised women to marry young, have intercourse, and bear children to regulate their flow of blood. As a remedy for uterine suffocation he prescribes gentle treatments such as warm compresses, massaging with olive oil, and rocking in a hammock (*Gyn.* 3.28).

<sup>24</sup> Sor. 1.39.

<sup>25</sup> Aret. SA 2.

<sup>26</sup> On this singular reference to female masturbation, see Gal. *Loc. Aff.* 6.5 (C. G. Kühn, ed., *Claudii Galeni Opera Omnia*, vol. 8 [Hildesheim 1965] 420).

<sup>27</sup> Gal. *UP* 14.6–7.

## Dialogue 2

*Setting: Another meadow, across the river Cocytus from the first meadow. This one is full of flowers and lush green grass. The host of the discussion is Sappho, who has overheard the other discussion.*

*Sappho:* All for the best indeed! It certainly is, and there is no doubt in my mind about who is the more perfect creature, woman or man. Look at our spongy flesh. Soft, pliable, smooth, delectable to the touch.<sup>28</sup> Who wants to stroke rough, hairy bodies? Lean back in the grass, ladies, and note how like the moist, green wonders of creation we are. Pliable, we bend in the breeze. Abundance, that's what we have, abundance. Lots for ourselves, for each other, for our children. Men, with all their heat, are as dry as sticks. Useful as kindling, I suppose, if that is your taste.

All this talk about the wandering womb, about seeking men's liquid. Don't we have enough wetness already? These men have said as much, but then they never listen to their own foolishness.

*Koritto:* Well, if it's satisfaction we want, we can get it without men. When I lived my last life in Alexandria, I was the most satisfied woman of all. I had the biggest collection of dildoes in town. Kerdon the shoe-maker perfected the art, and I got a sample of each model he designed.<sup>29</sup> These little friends don't make you pregnant, either.

*Scribonia Attike, a midwife:*<sup>30</sup> Well, lucky for you! I saw more suffering in my thirty-five years as a midwife than I care to relate. Poor young things, those girls, so many of them too small to carry a child when they were but a child themselves. And the things those physicians told me to do, to ease the women's pain. I carried around my birthing chair with its open seat. But I also lugged around the other tools of my trade, the cantharid beetles, cabbages, asses' milk, etc., so much truck that I had to travel from house to house with my own ass! I absolutely refused to perform some techniques, however. Imagine, tying a woman upside down on a ladder to fix a prolapsed uterus!

It's a good thing that we midwives have been around to pick up after these physicians, or there would have been fewer mothers around. Not that we get much credit, mind you: think of all our home remedies that those Hippocratics wrote up as their own!

*Lampito, a Spartan woman:* Well, folks, getting back to ladders, I've climbed a good many in my time—right-side up, mind you. I can fix roofs, prune trees and vines, build sheds. There is rarely a man in sight, and I enjoy the work. I could throttle a bull. When the ol' hubby returns from the front, we go at it. Sometimes he loans me to a friend for a romp, so's I

<sup>28</sup> A word that Sappho frequently uses of women's flesh is ὑπαλός, a word that has connotations of soft tenderness (see, for example, fr. 94 V 16, 22). The richness of moisture in nature and its affinity with the beauty of women can be seen in Sappho's fr. 96 V., where she expresses longing for a woman she pictures walking in moonlight, while the dew pours down and roses and other soft flowering plants surround her.

<sup>29</sup> Herod. *Mime* 6.

<sup>30</sup> The tomb of Scribonia Attike, midwife, with her physician-husband, was found at Isola Sacra, Ostia Antica. The pair is shown with the tools of their medical trade (tomb # 100).

can produce a child for his buddy. Having kids is no problem. I'm fit as a fiddle, womb in place and ready to spring into action: you should see me jump-kick my butt! Don't need cow dung or ladders, not me.

*Scythian slave-woman*: Me, neither! Work hard, I do, for m' mistress, from dawn to dusk, washin', cookin', cleanin', tendin' the horses, an' milkin' the mares—never sit down for a minute. Drop my kids as I work in the fields, too; never lost a seed o' man or plant.

*Sappho*: Why in the world do men think that women aren't strong? We can run races: think of all those women's festivals when we ran all night, in races honoring the goddess. We're fit *and* soft. Who would ever think of softness as a sign of imperfection? Look around us. Nature knew what was perfect when she created women. Shapely beauty, moistness, wonderful perfumes. Like flowers, sweet nectar within.

Leave men to their fantasies and us to each other.

#### Notes to the Underworld Dialogues

##### *Dialogues*

The Greek philosopher Plato developed the genre of philosophical dialogues, conversations between men, frequently of the question-and-answer form, in which topics of mutual interest were discussed. His *Republic*, for example, develops the construction of the ideal state in this way; his *Symposium* focuses on the nature and power of erotic love and its ability to enable lovers to transcend the physical dimension of love and develop an idea of absolute beauty and perfection.

A "symposium" (lit., a "drinking together") was an Athenian institution, where men gathered around the wine jar after dinner and conducted a discussion on matters of interest, heavy or light.

##### *Dramatis personae*

*Plato* (c. 429–347 B.C.E.): Athenian philosopher, pupil of Socrates. In the ideal state outlined in his *Republic* he allotted women the same rights as men, but acknowledged their relative lack of physical strength.

*Hippocratics*: physicians/medical writers of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. following in the tradition of Hippocrates (469–399 B.C.E.). See below.

*Aristotle* (384–322 B.C.E.): Pupil of Plato's. Developed the classification of the biological sciences used today. Often regarded as a significant force in the abiding view of women and women's bodies as inferior. Conception occurred, according to Aristotle, by the man's imposing "form" on the "matter" provided by the woman.

*Herophilus* (c. 330/320–260/250 B.C.E.): Practiced in Alexandria, where it seems clear that he had access to cadavers and live prisoners for dissecting.

*Soranus*: Greek physician who practiced in Rome 98–138 C.E. Subscribed to the theory (widespread at the time) called "Methodism," based upon the belief that illness results from extreme constriction or looseness of parts of the body. Author of *Gynecology*, in which he argued that virginity could be a healthy choice for women and prescribed therapies that took into account the comfort of the patient.

*Aretaeus* (c. 150–200 C.E.): Physician from Cappadocia who greatly admired Hippocrates.

*Galen* (c. 129–199 C.E.): Born in Pergamum, court physician to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Practiced animal dissection and, while he greatly admired Plato and Aristotle, made independent contributions based upon his knowledge of anatomy.

*Sappho* c. 600 B.C.E.: Poet from Lesbos. She was a leader of women in cult and culture, and her sensual poetry expresses love for women.

*Koritto*: A fictional Greek woman in Alexandria, from a literary sketch by Herodas, writer of mimes (probably 3rd century B.C.E.). These mimes were a popular form of entertainment in which actors portrayed scenes from everyday life. The risqué was not avoided.

*Spartan woman*: Because Spartan men were frequently at war, they lived in barracks for most of their adult life, leaving women to manage the household. Spartan women (unlike Athenians) engaged in gymnastics etc., considering the strength of their body important for producing strong soldiers. Lampito was the name given to the Spartan woman in Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata*, in which women of Athens and Sparta conduct a sex strike in order to persuade their men to stop fighting each other. In the play, Lampito makes comments similar to the above (81–82).

*Scythian slave-woman*: The Scythians were a semi-nomadic tribe who lived in what is now southern Russia; they were considered by the Greeks to be the roughest of barbarians.

#### Notes on the Text

The Underworld setting for these dialogues, while it has the virtue of allowing participation of interlocutors from 600 B.C.E. to the second century C.E., does present discourse arising from experience in quite different cultural settings. The long shadow cast by Plato and Aristotle's teleological framework and by Aristotle's unambiguous casting of women as inferior men is felt, however, even in the succeeding centuries in the writings of Herophilus and Galen, who had access to evidence which could have challenged this. Soranus' more sympathetic approach to women, on the other hand, and his de-pathologizing of women's reproductive functions, reflects the possibilities generated by life in Rome four centuries later than Aristotle.

#### *The wandering womb*

Arising naturally from a belief that the male body was the "normal" example of the physical human form was the theory that the uterus was considered to be extraneous and have no natural setting in the body, and hence, was unstable. Popular belief, along with male medical practitioners and writers, targeted this organ to explain a wide range of pathologies in women. This they combined with the general belief that women's bodies were moist and men's dry, encouraging the expectation that women would need both to evacuate and to replenish a high degree of liquid in order to maintain their normal balance of moisture. Hence, the tenacious and long-lasting understanding arose of the uterus (*ἡστέρη*) as mobile, traveling throughout the body in order to preserve its wetness (it was, after all, the site from which women routinely leaked moisture). Plato's description (*Ti.* 90e–91d) may be an imaginative formation of this belief, but is grounded in the general perception that a malfunctioning uterus accounted for abnormal female behaviour. Compare the condition to which we apply the modern word "hysteria" (lit., "disease of the uterus").

*Hippocratics*

Although the manuscript tradition of Hippocratic texts has come down to us with the label “Of Hippocrates,” internal inconsistencies found in the treatises argue against their being composed by a single individual (see, for example, under *Contraception and Abortion*, below). Hippocrates practiced medicine in Cos in the latter half of the fifth century B.C.E. He had the reputation of teaching students for a fee and promulgating his views on medicine (Pl. *Prt.* 311B and *Phdr.* 270c–e), but it is now generally accepted that his pupils and their successors, who practiced much as did apprentices in a medieval guild with an allegiance to their master reflected in the Hippocratic Oath, are responsible for the “Hippocratic corpus.” These treatises were written down in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Central to the Hippocratic understanding of the human body was a belief that wellness required an equilibrium of the humors, frequently named as two (phlegm and bile) but later as four (the additional components vary but include black bile, blood, and pus). Disease for the Hippocratics was produced by an uneven distribution of these, as well as of opposite elements, such as hot/cold, wet/dry, etc.

*Fumigation of women*

A kind of aromatherapy was applied to women to redress the displacement of the womb and to establish an open conduit within the body for the passage of blood and semen. This open passage extended from the lower external opening from the womb (the lower *στόμα*, “mouth”) and the upper openings (mouth, nose); smoke would fill the conduit bearing foul- or sweet-smelling odors to repel or attract the uterus.

*Intercourse as therapy*

The Hippocratic writer of *On Virgins* 1 (L. 8.466) warns that virgins who do not marry experience hallucinations, particularly at the time of their first monthly period. When the neck of the uterus (the *cervix*) is not opened up by intercourse, blood can flow back into the womb and bring on insanity. Another advantage of intercourse is provided by the author of *Generation and Nature of the Child* 4 (L. 7.476), who explains that the uterus gets moistened in this way. A dry womb becomes extremely contracted, causing pain. In addition, intercourse heats the woman’s blood, making it more fluid and less likely to have difficulty in flowing out as menses.

*Contraception and abortion*

A good discussion of the ethical distinction between these two interventions in women’s reproduction and of the complex ethical issues surrounding abortion, is found in Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.19. There are different views about expelling the embryo by physical means, he says, as opposed to intervening with drugs. This may, he thinks, account for the fact that leaping in the air is prescribed in *Generation and Nature of the Child*, for example (also known as the “Lacedaemonian leap”—see the Spartan woman). On the differing views about abortion in the Hippocratic corpus, he explains that some writers banish abortion on the ground that it is the specific task of medicine to guard and preserve what has been engendered by Nature. Others prescribe abortifacients but with discrimination. They do not do so when a person simply wishes to destroy an embryo, when it is the result of adultery or for the sake of eugenics. They justify this by prescribing such drugs to prevent subsequent danger to the mother during childbirth.

*Midwives*

Midwives were important figures in addressing a variety of concerns that women had about their health, since they were able to obtain confidences from women that would not have been shared with the male practitioners. Soranus praised the virtues of midwives and presented a detailed sketch of the ideal credentials for a good one.

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