

Sacred Symbioses and Feminine Succubi:

Humoral Theory and Sexual Intercourse in Early Modern Europe

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Abstract: Socio-medical tools for making sense of gender and sex in Early Modern Europe were grounded in humoralistic concepts traceable from classical medicine. Some modern scholars have analyzed the implications of the sexual dimorphism of humoral properties in terms of women's status or men's status. Still, little has focused on the actual interaction between the sexes. I use multiple mid-seventeenth-century treatises on women's health and a contemporary love poem, as well as earlier humoral musings and recent scholarly works, to explore the role of sexual intercourse in Early Modern women's humoral health.

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Introduction to the Dimorphic Humoral Constitution:

Some Early Modern physicians employed humoral theory, a framework that originated in classical medicine, in their practices. Humoralism identified four properties (which for the purposes of this paper can be described as dryness, heat, wetness, and cold) that existed or were produced inside human bodies.¹¹⁶ These properties (or humors) could exist or be produced at unhealthy levels, and these were the malfunctions responsible for sickness. The general goal of medical treatment was to bring a patient as close to a balance between the humors as possible. Remedies prescribed within this method of medicine focused on plants, foods, substances, and behaviors with humoral properties opposite to those of an illness, in order to counteract superfluous humors or rectify deficiencies.¹¹⁷ Excessive moisture might be addressed through bloodletting, diuretics, or foods judged humorally ‘dry.’¹¹⁸ It is conceivable that this eagerness to apply opposites would extend to interactions with opposite bodies. Just as a hot, dry food might be prescribed for a cold, wet ailment, might so a hot, dry body?

In ancient humoral theory, attributed mainly to Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen, humoral constitutions were more equitably distributed.¹¹⁹ Individuals contained all of these properties, but were prone to being dominated by a specific humor or a combination of such, leaving them susceptible to diseases associated with their constitution.

The foundations of humoral theory saw gender as a constitutional factor, but in the Early Modern medical world men and women were humorally classed, meaning their respective bodies innately comprised dichotomous parts of a humoral aggregate.¹²⁰ Generally, Early Modern men’s and women’s bodies were opposites in both temperature and moisture. Wetness and cold were the female properties, occurred in female bodies, and threatened women with cold, wet pathologies.

¹¹⁶ Frank M. Snowden, “Humoral Medicine: The Legacy of Hippocrates and Galen,” In *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 9-27.

¹¹⁷ Snowden, “Humoral Medicine,” 21.

¹¹⁸ Snowden, “Humoral Medicine,” 21.

¹¹⁹ Jean-Baptiste Bonnard, “Male and Female Bodies According to Ancient Greek Physicians,” translated by Lillian E. Doherty and Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet, *Clio* 37, (2013), accessed April 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cliowgh.276>.

¹²⁰ Snowden, “Humoral Medicine,” 19.

Men's bodies were the opposite: hot, dry, and healthy.¹²¹ Consequently, it could be assumed that women's humoral imbalances could have been counteracted by introducing the hot, dry substances that were men's bodies; was sex medicine?

This is the case in certain Early Modern medical texts, where women were innately afflicted by their cold wetness. The sexes had become the exemplars of their respective humoral territories. While men's semen could revive a drowning woman, women's humors would threaten his natural balance.¹²² Doctors would not advise a man to balance himself with a cold, wet woman. In his investigation of sex in classical medicine, Jean-Baptiste Bonnard explains:

[Dimorphism] results in a vicious cycle in the female body, where the excessive moisture is maintained, and in a virtuous cycle in the male body, where—except in case of illness or constitutional defect—the proper equilibrium between heat and cold, moisture and dryness, persists and continually renews masculinity.¹²³

Male bodies could maintain their perfect homeostasis, but women stood no chance against their own dispositions, which tended to render them physically and emotionally unwell.¹²⁴ And so their bodies compelled them to desire intercourse, to self-medicate with semen, in order to circumvent their humoral suffering. Physicality and emotionality, sex and romance, need and want, all blurred together in the humoral model of the female. Women might get sick, in their minds or their bodies, without their husbands.

¹²¹ Gail Kern Paster, "Unbearable Coldness of Female Being: Women's Imperfection and the Humoral Economy," *English Literary Renaissance* 28, no. 3 (1998): 416, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1998.tb00760.x>.

¹²² Paster, "Unbearable Coldness," 432.

¹²³ Bonnard, "Male and Female Bodies," 11.

¹²⁴ Fontanus, Nicholas. *The Women's Doctour, or, An exact and distinct explanation of all such diseases as are peculiar to that sex with choise and experimentall remedies against the same : being safe in the composition, pleasant in the use, effectuall in the operation, cheap in the price / faithfully translated out of the works of that learned philosopher and eminent physitian Nicholas Fontanus*. London: John Blague and Samuel Howes, 1652; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A39862.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1%3Bview>. This book, written by an English physician in 1652, catalogs the numerous conditions threatening women's dysregulated bodies.

Opposite Temperatures, Opposite Moistures:

Early Modern tools for making sense of the differences between men and women, a historically pervasive process, were primarily based in physiology, rather than anatomy—or perhaps physiology as it was understood to betray the truth of anatomy.¹²⁵ The body's retention and expulsion of fluid was an intuitive starting point for conceptualizing sexual difference and had a basic legitimacy—male and female bodies certainly processed fluid differently. Women's liquids—menstrual blood, breast milk, vaginal discharge, cervical mucus, arousal fluid, urine—flowed out of them. The female was passive in their production and emission—in Gail Kern Paster's words, they leaked.¹²⁶ Men's only fluids (semen, blood, and urine) were products of their action.

The most prevalent anatomical concept contemporary with this kind of humoralism, that women were men inside out, that their reproductive systems were internal versions of the penis and scrotum, fit well with the belief that men's relationships to their sexualities and bodily functions were more externalized, more active.¹²⁷ Women were at the mercy of their bodies' inverted processes, of which they were not in control. Certain liquids could accumulate in the body to the detriment of a person's health, and women were more vulnerable to this dysfunction.¹²⁸ In his 1652 treatise on women's health, English physician Nicholas Fonteyn saw menstrual blood as an ultimate mark of sexual difference, and of women's higher susceptibility to disease:

...therefore hath provident Nature assigned them their monethly Courses, that by the benefit of those evacuations, the feculent and corrupt blood might be purified, which otherwise, as being the purest part of the blood, would turne to ranke poyson, should it remaine in the body and putrifie.¹²⁹

Menstrual blood was continuously forged in the female, and not necessarily restricted to reproductive body parts—during pregnancy its virtuous elements fed the baby and were

¹²⁵ Bonnard, "Male and Female Bodies," 8.

¹²⁶ Gail Kern Paster, "Leaky Vessels: The Incontinent Women of City Comedy," *Renaissance Drama* 18 (1987): 43-65, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501724497-005>.

¹²⁷ There is debate over whether anatomy was important enough to characterize gendered medicine at this time. Regardless, it was at least present in the form described. See Paster, "Unbearable Coldness of Female Being," 416-440.

¹²⁸ Snowden, "Humoral Medicine," 19.

¹²⁹ Fontanus, *The Women's Doctour*, 1-2.

alchemized into breast milk postpartum.¹³⁰ When not filtered and excreted in a woman of menstruating age, in cases other than pregnancy, it would build up and cause suffering or illness. Nicholas Culpeper, a contemporary of Fonteyn, reported that this blood “onely offends [in] quantity...or [when it] is kept too long in [the] body to be corrupted and cause great Symptoms...or is out of its vessels, and so corrupts.”¹³¹ Both physicians considered monthly bleeding an intelligently designed solution, a purging of the toxicities in the dankness that was constantly generated in the female.

Humoralism, from the time of Hippocrates and Galen, considered the purgation of bodily fluids a critical remedy for various ailments.¹³² Prescriptions focused on induced vomiting, enema treatments, and bloodletting. All these techniques facilitated an aspiration towards homeostasis; there were healthy levels of fluid that the body constantly strove to maintain.

The principles of purgation were still relevant in Early Modern Europe, where men’s bodies were much more adept than women’s at self-regulating their fluids. The authors of “Blood, Milk, and Breastbleeding” state that, “Menstruation was understood as providing the function of cleansing or purging women’s bodies of the residual superfluities that their overall lack of heat prevented them from consuming or refining into semen.”¹³³ Temperature was as much a factor in womanhood, or manhood, as moisture and had various effects on the body. Galen called heat “the reason for [man’s] perfection,” it being “the first instrument of nature”; again, the male property is active, potent, and of a higher order than the female’s self-oppressing temperament.¹³⁴ A cold, and thus defective, man might be beardless, slow, and barren, or slip into femininity.¹³⁵

Cold was feminine; it perpetuated and collaborated with women’s wetness, whether to perform regular female bodily functions or to overwhelm the woman in cold, wet sickness.¹³⁶ Too

¹³⁰ M. Cabré and F. Salmón, “Blood, Milk, and Breastbleeding: The Humoral Economy Women’s Bodies in Medieval Medicine,” in *Gender, Health, and Healing, 1250–1550*, edited by S. Strocchia & S. Ritchey, 93–118. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 97.

¹³¹ Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper’s directory for midwives: or, A guide for women. The second part. Discovering, 1. The diseases in the privities of women. 2. The diseases of the privie part. 3. The diseases of the womb ... 14. The diseases and symptoms in children* (London: Peter Cole, 1662; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership), 68, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A69832.0001.001>.

¹³² Snowden, “Humoral Medicine,” 21.

¹³³ Cabré and Salmón, “Blood, Milk, and Breastbleeding,” 97.

¹³⁴ Cited in Bonnard, “Male and Female Bodies,” 14.

¹³⁵ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 132 ; Paster, “Unbearable Coldness of Female Being,” 417–418.

¹³⁶ Bonnard, “Male and Female Bodies,” 11.

much heat in the body could confuse, weaken, frighten, exhaust, anger, or depress the female, perhaps even inclining her towards “idle talking.”¹³⁷ To take an example, “the relative coldness of the breasts facilitates the conversion of the blood into milk. However, in the case of excess heat in the blood, this process cannot take place and the vapours produced by the overheated blood rise to the head, producing mania.”¹³⁸ Here proper temperature is required to guide female fluid.

Heat could make women “more apt for Venery...because they are hotter, and have their Courses in a more plentiful manner,” plentiful Courses being a sign of fertility, and sexual desire being a correlative of the latter.¹³⁹ This libidinous effect could be seen in a woman who was hotter than other women, even if still in a safe temperature range for a female. A degree of heat, healthy relative to one’s sex, was desirable for both men and women, heat being, as a property, positively associated with sexual appetite, and masculinity coinciding with both.¹⁴⁰ Some sexual symptoms of a heated but sexually inactive woman were “a spirit of salacity, and [feeling] within themselves a frequent titillation. Their seed being hot and prurient, doth irritate and inflame them to Venery, neither is this concupiscence allaid and qualified, but by provoking the ejaculation of the **seed**.”¹⁴¹ Again, draining excess liquid could solve the problem.

Among the many undesirable characteristics lurking in a woman who became too cold, Fonteyn identified a “[locking] up [of] the passages,” a heavy, unresponsive, chilly, perhaps even frigid process.¹⁴² Although his explicit concern with such a choked, clogged ‘passage’ was that it hindered the expulsion of the menstrual blood, a reader may still be tempted to consider the sexual consequences of such a condition. Women being naturally cold, without due caution could sink to temperatures cold enough as to impair the production of menstrual blood and arousal fluid, both linked to sexual appetite, and could also anatomically inhibit access to female sexuality. A temperate womb was most fruitful.¹⁴³

¹³⁷ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 5, 24.

¹³⁸ Cabré and Salmón, “Blood, Milk, and Breastbleeding,” 103-104.

¹³⁹ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 132-133.

¹⁴⁰ Amanda Lepp, “The Rooster’s Egg: Maternal Metaphors and Medieval Men,” Doctoral Thesis, (University of Toronto, 2011), <https://hdl.handle.net/1807/26509>. This work examines medieval and late medieval humoral writings concerning female bodily processes. Texts cited here were influenced by Galenic and Hippocratic thinking, and were widely read.

¹⁴¹ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 6.

¹⁴² Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 12.

¹⁴³ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 130.

Sex as a Balancing Act:

The clogged, heavy diseases in Fonteyn's anthology befell sexually inactive women especially. Wives "are more healthfull then Widowes, or Virgins, because they are refreshed with the mans seed, and ejaculate their own, which being excluded, the cause of the evill is taken away."¹⁴⁴ The dysfunctional retention of the toxic or spoiled matter which might be released in menstrual blood could also need sex to be expunged. Most critically for this examination, receiving the constitution of the man was a key factor in a woman's health. Sex might have been the difference between her falling ill or maintaining a sufficient balance. 'Refreshing' herself with semen was situated as a regular act of preventative medicine. She needed to pursue intercourse, to receive semen, and to nourish herself with its balancing, healing properties, at an unstated proper interval. This would also allow her to emit arousal fluid, cleanse her body, and remove those congested causes of imbalance.

A man's exposure to her wetness did nothing to promote his equilibrium, which could arguably be assumed—could he not have gotten too hot without her? Instead, he was in danger of losing his balance, which he was predisposed to, being naturally drier and more perfect.¹⁴⁵ Men's participation in intercourse was necessary for procreation, and for appeasing their sexual hunger, but excessive emission of semen would be unhealthy: "The hazard caused by the greedy womb is directed at men, who are drained and weakened through the loss of semen."¹⁴⁶ Fonteyn's predecessors taught that overindulgence in sex could also expose men to dangerously high levels of female fluid, especially if the woman had never menstruated or had long been chaste—virginal, widowed, or otherwise.¹⁴⁷ If this were the case, the processes of separating and eliminating the worst elements of their internal liquids, the processes of menstruation and/or release of arousal fluid, would have not taken place recently enough, or possibly at all. An actively menstruating woman was at that moment expelling her toxins, and some thought sex with her would also expose a man to poisoning, imbalancing factors.¹⁴⁸ Both Patricia Crawford and Sara Read have found

¹⁴⁴ Fontanus, *The Women's Doctour*, 4-5.

¹⁴⁵ Hippocrates, *Aph.*, cited in Bonnard, "Male and Female Bodies," 10.

¹⁴⁶ Lepp, "The Rooster's Egg," 72.

¹⁴⁷ Lepp, "The Rooster's Egg," 69.

¹⁴⁸ Culpeper, *Culpeper's Directory*, 68 ; Patricia Crawford, *Blood, Bodies and Families in Early Modern England* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 89.

Early Modern references to ‘excoriation’—a stripping, flaying, or peeling of the skin through corrosion or abrasion—of the penis through contact with menstrual blood.¹⁴⁹ A man’s libido could also be thwarted by cold. Cold semen “contains not any spirit to tickle, and warme their Phantasies, but [cold men] sit like images, and are sad, and insociable.”¹⁵⁰

So Fonteyn’s women’s male contemporaries did not need intercourse for their health but engaged in it anyway, for procreation and satisfaction. Healthy people of both sexes had reasonable sexual appetites.¹⁵¹ But women needed sex. Remaining chaste too long could bring about the ‘green sickness.’ Lord Herbert of Cherbury describes such an afflicted woman in his poem *The Green-Sickness Beauty*, published in 1665:

So, if you want that blood which must succeed,
And give at last a tincture to your skin,
It is, because neither in outward deed,
Nor inward thought, you yet admit that sin,
For which your Cheeks a guilty blush should need.

So, if your breath do not so freely flow,
It is because you love not to consume
That vital treasure, which you do bestow
As well to vegetate as to perfume
Your Virgin leaves, as fast as they do grow.

Yet stay not here, Love for his right will call,
You were not born to serve your only will,
Nor can your beauty be perpetual,
'Tis your perfection for to ripen still,

¹⁴⁹ Crawford, 88; Sara Read, “‘Thy Righteousness Is but a Menstrual Clout’: Sanitary Practices and Prejudice in Early Modern England,” *Early Modern Women* 3 (2008): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23541514>.

¹⁵⁰ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 132.

¹⁵¹ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 132.

And to be gather'd rather than to fall.¹⁵²

The narrator of this poem is coaxing a young woman from her celibacy, attributing her ill health (paleness, weakness, shortness of breath, and maybe a tinge of green in the skin—diagnosable today as hypochromic anemia) to her not having ‘admitted that sin,’ or ‘consumed that vital treasure.’¹⁵³ The writing is romantic, and promises the girl a metamorphosis into natural health—access to her fated vitality, by way of accepting a lover. These green girls were in desperate need of that internal balancing, but they also needed the interpersonality of sex, needed ‘to be gather’d,’ needed male protection and love.

In humoralism, the emotional and the physical were intertwined and interdependent.¹⁵⁴ Emotional dysregulation in women was, in general, due to their constitution, but exacerbated by lack of intercourse.¹⁵⁵ Crawford has found that menstruation “was held to be suppressed because of the ‘cares and passions’ of the woman’s mind...Physicians recommended sexual intercourse as a cure for menstrual disorders—matrimony for maids, vigorous sex for wives.”¹⁵⁶ Women cried without sex. This sickness was not just the result of built-up fluid, but also of an unmet emotional need for love, protection, and guidance—for semen. Semen could complete them, make them more perfect.

Reproduction as Perfection:

The archetypal contrast in constitution explained the harmony characteristic of the process of procreation. In *The Woman’s Doctour*, conception “is nothing else then a receiving of the mans seed in the [womb], being exquisitely and proportionably intermingled, aptly retained, and fully

¹⁵² Baron Edward Herbert of Cherbury, “The Green-Sickness Beauty,” in *Occasional Verses of Edward Lord Herbert, Baron of Cherbery and Castle-Island deceased in August, 1648* (London: T.R for Thomas Dring, 1665; Ann Arbor, Text Creation Partnership), 67-68, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A43379.0001/1:52?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

¹⁵³ J. Starobinski, “Chlorosis—the “green sickness,”” *Psychological Medicine* 11, no. 3 (1981): 459-468, doi:10.1017/s0033291700052776.

¹⁵⁴ Jacques Bos, “The Rise and Decline of Character: Humoral Psychology in Ancient and Early Modern Medical Theory,” *History of the Human Sciences* 22, no. 3 (2009): 35-36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695109104422>.

¹⁵⁵ Paster, “Leaky Vessels,” 44.

¹⁵⁶ Crawford, *Blood, Bodies and Families*, 26.

perfected.”¹⁵⁷ Semen was already perfect, women’s fluid was not.¹⁵⁸ Thus the act of conceiving a child was a microcosmic enactment, or perhaps the ultimate manifestation, of men being women’s essential medicine; women needed men to create the only version of perfection that could exist inside their bodies, and their bodies knew it. Conception was inspired by woman’s instinct to balance herself through intercourse:

Provident Nature at all times hath not a greater care of any thing, then of the propagation of mankinde...and thus she hath framed women to a delight in Venereous conjunctions, that they might with greedinesse suck in the mans seed, and dispose and cherish it to Generation.¹⁵⁹

Procreation was the physiological basis for their desire, and their desire came out of their imperfection. Bonnard has found this same thesis in the works of Galen, that pioneer of humoral theory, centuries before Fonteyn: “...for Galen [female nature’s] relative incompleteness is positive. In a teleological perspective, the Pergamene physician sees in it the design of nature: to permit the assurance of reproduction.”¹⁶⁰

Fetal development drew the “sweetest, fattest, and most elaborate part of the menstous Bloud” into the womb.¹⁶¹ Only those most pious parts could come into contact with the perfect fetus; the rest might further curdle in the body and compel the pregnant woman to, for example, crave strange foods.¹⁶² This was an internal process, and not to be taken as an endorsement of procreative intercourse during menstruation, which “hindered conception.”¹⁶³ The female body was meticulously designed for procreation; it craved the vitality in semen and was able to convert its own toxins into nourishment for a child. But menstrual blood didn’t nourish the woman, it afflicted her. Her body was not made to take care of itself. It needed men, it mothered, and it needed men to mother. It was vulnerable to itself, at the mercy of how nature had designed it.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁷ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 128.

¹⁵⁸ Bonnard, “Male and Female Bodies,” 11.

¹⁵⁹ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 193.

¹⁶⁰ Bonnard, “Male and Female Bodies,” 14.

¹⁶¹ Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 7.

¹⁶² Fontanus, *The Women’s Doctour*, 157.

¹⁶³ Culpeper, *Culpeper’s Directory*, 67.

¹⁶⁴ Paster, “Leaky Vessels,” 63.

Conclusion:

In Early Modern Europe, humoral theory had been sculpted from Galen and Hippocrates's four-pronged framework into a dimorphic structure. Scholars I have referenced above have explored how humoralistic principles polarized the bodies of men and women, and how this was incorporated into patriarchal paradigms, but their work leads to other questions: How did male and female constitutions interrelate? What did sexual intercourse mean, medically, in a humorally dimorphic world? In this paper, I have focused on answering these in terms of female bodies, as did all of the primary sources I encountered. Women's bodies tried to regulate themselves, and had recourse to do so, but could easily be sabotaged in this ability. Lack of sexual love undermined the physiological processes needed for their health and happiness. It inhibited women's bodies from taking care of themselves. Operating with these blurry metaphors about their incompleteness, their desire, and their fertility, women could ensure their best prognoses by having a good amount of sex, filling themselves with the more competent male temperament. Early Modern women needed that regency of men, to complete the homeostatic cycle their bodies could not.

As investigated in this paper, it is clear that women's biologies were considered congenitally destructive to both their own and others' bodies. It is easy to process and position this information as simply evidence of yet another medical chauvinism, but I ask if this paper can be considered as a work of emotional history instead. Can we be interested in the ideas of Fonteyn and Culpeper as expressions of human belief and curiosity, even if we may disagree with, condemn, or find undesirable their content? These primary sources may seem irrational or uncompassionate to twenty-first-century readers, but it is impossible to say that a seventeenth-century physician was interested in reading them for some reason other than his desire to help his patients. If doctors believed that women were constitutionally inferior, their humoral theorizing about sex was likely done to some degree out of concern for their flawed, sickly female patients. There may be some kind of gallantry in this framework, where men saw themselves as responsible for protecting women's health. While there may be narcissism, inaccuracy, and unfairness in feeling oneself to be solely capable of ensuring the health of another, it is easy to overlook that there may also be a nobility. And there may be a beauty, or even a truth, in the humoral idea that sexual intercourse was a unique act of physical and physiological perfection.

Can we imagine the experience of the women? It is possible that they believed what their doctors told them, as we believe our own doctors. A mother might have thought that her baby was made of the best parts of her. She might have felt a strong gratitude toward her husband if she believed that he was keeping her healthy, or if her worldview emphasized his centrality in her divine role as pregnant woman. She might have seen pregnancy as a reprieve from unproductive health problems, as a cure. A young girl flirting might have been thrilled at the prospect of transcending the virgin's physical state. Are these feelings different from ours? I think it possible, despite what you may find ludicrous or unkind in their thinking, that there could be some foundational beliefs that we share with these humoral theorists, or about which we could learn from them.

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