

definitively colder so that she cannot refine her fluids to the same extent; hence their accumulation as menses which require purging.

ARISTOTLE (384–322 BC)

FROM GENERATION OF ANIMALS* (DE GENERATIONE ANIMALIUM)

Aristotelian physiology had considerable impact from the late twelfth century onwards, when his rediscovered writings began to be studied in the University of Paris.⁶⁸ He reduced the role of woman in procreation to that of 'prime matter' awaiting the 'forming' or 'moving' agency of the man's semen. He defined female sex in terms of its 'inability' to emulate male functions. Physicians and commentators sometimes disputed his most damaging deductions about woman—e.g. that she is a 'deformed male' or 'male whose purpose has been thwarted' and that she contributes no active 'seed' of her own in the act of procreation. But Aristotle's considerable authority certainly did substantiate an unflattering equation between woman and 'matter', which found an echo in commonplace etymology. The following is a selection of the points arising from Aristotle's discussion of semen and menstrual discharge, and from his enquiry whether women contribute anything to generation other than a place for it to occur.

1 (726^b) Semen is pretty certainly a residue from that nourishment which is in the form of blood and which, as being the final form of nourishment, is distributed to the various parts of the body. This, of course, is the reason why semen has great potency—the loss of it from the system is just as exhausting as the loss of pure healthy blood . . .

2 Now (i) the weaker creature too must of necessity produce a residue, greater in amount and less thoroughly concocted;⁶⁹ and (ii) this, if such is its character, must of necessity be a volume of bloodlike fluid.⁷⁰ (iii) That which by nature has a smaller share of heat is weaker; and (iv) the female answers to this description. . . .

3 (727^a) Now it is impossible that any creature should produce two seminal secretions at once, and as the secretion in females which answers to semen in males is the menstrual fluid, it obviously follows

(iii) PHYSIOLOGY AND ETYMOLOGY

Where women were concerned, menstruation was the preoccupation of medieval medicine and physiology. If, in the realms of religion, menstruation rendered her unclean and untouchable,⁶¹ in the realms of physiology it signified her inability to match the fully developed human, i.e. the male, because unlike him she displayed evidence of an inefficient bodily system that had to keep on clearing itself of residual 'bilge-water'.⁶² The beliefs derived from scientific observation about this ran from the mildly to the grotesquely sinister: any woman might be 'venomous' during menstruation, but in a woman menstruating irregularly or in an older woman whose menstrual system was deteriorating, baneful fluids seeking an outlet could be transmitted through the eyes and could poison small infants, according to a popularizing work of the thirteenth century spuriously attributed to Albert the Great, *On the Secrets of Women (De secretis mulierum)*.⁶³ Since women were for the most part excluded from the medieval universities, they lacked opportunities to refute *ex cathedra* these wilder excesses of medical lore. The authenticity of treatises by one woman, known as Trotula, who practised at Salerno in the eleventh/ twelfth century, is hard to establish—but in any case she seems not to have raised any serious challenge.⁶⁴ Possibly no one before Christine de Pizan treated in writing the 'lies' of the *De secretis* material with the disdain they deserved.⁶⁵

Some traditional beliefs about male physiology implied that woman's power over a man's life through sexual attraction was biologically adverse. Andreas Capellanus remembers 'once reading in a medical treatise that sexual activity makes men senile earlier'.⁶⁶ Since male semen was taken to be a sort of highly refined (or 'concocted') residue of blood, it was supposed in medical opinion as handed down from Aristotle and Galen that frequent sexual activity would literally drain away the vitality of a man's blood, shrinking his brain perhaps, or debilitating his eyes.⁶⁷ This is an example of a tenet that remained fairly constant amidst the shifting physiological lore of the Middle Ages. So, generally, did the idea that the production of male sperm is facilitated by man's body heat, by contrast with woman, who is

⁶¹ See Levi 15:20 ff. It was imagined in the Middle Ages that a man having sex with a menstruating woman risked catching leprosy; Jacquot and Thomasset 1988, 186.

⁶² Jacquot and Thomasset 1988, 27, translating a twelfth-century anatomical treatise.

⁶³ Jacquot and Thomasset 1988, 75–6; and see Lemay 1978, 392, on the diffusion of this text. On other baneful effects, see Isidore 3 below.

⁶⁴ Benton 1985.

⁶⁵ See Ch. 9, *City 4*.

⁶⁶ *On Love* III, 61.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 725^a, 726^a; Rousselle 1988, 12–20; Jacquot and Thomasset 1988, 55–6.

* Tr. A. L. Peck. *Aristotle: Generation of Animals* (London: Heinemann; and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 91–3, 97, 101–3, 109, 173–5, 185, 459–61. © The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1963. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Loeb Classical Library.

⁶⁸ Allen 1985, Ch. V.

⁶⁹ The process whereby nourishment is converted, especially into blood.

⁷⁰ Because not reaching the further stage of 'concoction', into semen.

that the female does not contribute any semen to generation: for if there were semen, there would be no menstrual fluid; but as menstrual fluid is in fact formed, therefore there is no semen....

4 (727^b) By now it is plain that the contribution which the female makes to generation is the *mater* used therein, that this is to be found in the substance constituting the menstrual fluid, and finally that the menstrual fluid is a residue. (728a) ... A woman is as if were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment ... because of the coldness of its nature....

5 (729^a) The male provides the 'form' and the 'principle of the movement', the female provides the body, in other words, the material. Compare the coagulation of milk. Here, the milk is the body, and the fig-juice or the rennet contains the principle which causes it to set....

6 (737^a) When the semen has entered the uterus it 'sets' the residue produced by the female and imparts to it the same movement with which it is itself endowed. The female's contribution, of course, is a residue too, ... and contains all the parts of the body *potentially*, though none in *actuality*; and 'all' includes those parts which distinguish the two sexes. Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition: i.e. it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul.

7 (738^b) An animal is a living body, a body with Soul in it. The female always provides the material, the male provides that which fashions the material into shape; this, in our view, is the specific characteristic of each of the sexes: that is what it means to be male or female. Hence, necessity requires that the female should provide the physical part, i.e. a quantity of material, but not that the male should do so, since necessity does not require that the tools should reside in the product that is being made, nor that the agent which uses them should do so. Thus the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul from the male, since the Soul is the essence of a particular body.

8 (775^a) Once birth has taken place everything reaches its perfection sooner in females than in males—e.g. puberty, maturity, old age—because females are weaker and colder in their nature; and we should look upon the female state as being as if were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature. While it is within the mother, then, it develops slowly on account of its coldness, since development is a sort of concoction, concoction is effected by heat, and if a thing is hotter its concoction is easy; when, however, it is free from the mother, on account of its weakness it quickly approaches its maturity and old age, since inferior things all reach their end more quickly.

GALEN (131-201)

Galen served as court physician to Emperor Marcus Aurelius and wrote extensively about medicine and anatomy in his native Greek. During the Middle Ages his authority—transmitted especially through Arab writings on the subject—became legendary. Although he differed from Aristotle in some respects, for example in reinstating the presence of female 'seed' in coitus (largely because he knew of the ovaries where his predecessor did not), he explicitly backed the philosopher's hierarchical theory of the sexes, and indeed grounded his medical thinking on the affirmation of a gradation of temperature between them. That difference, he believed, gave rise to a complementarity of generative organs whereby woman's are the inverse of man's.

FROM ON THE USEFULNESS OF THE PARTS OF THE BODY* (DE USU PARTIUM: LATE SECOND CENTURY AD)

I (II. 299) Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the reason for his perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature's primary instrument. Hence in those animals that have less of it, her workmanship is necessarily more imperfect, and so it is no wonder that the female is less perfect than the male by as much as she is colder than he. In fact, just as the mole has imperfect eyes, though certainly not so imperfect as they are in those animals that do not have any trace of them at all, so too the woman is less perfect than the man in respect to the generative parts. For the parts were formed within her when she was still a foetus, but could not be because of the defect in the heat emerge and project on the outside, and this,

* Tr. Margaret Tallmadge May, *Galen: On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, II. 630-2). © 1968 by Cornell University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

though making the animal itself that was being formed less perfect than one that is complete in all respects, provided no small advantage for the race; for there needs must be a female. Indeed, you ought not to think that our Creator would purposely make half the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutilated, unless there was to be some great advantage in such a mutilation.

2 (II. 300) Let me tell what this is. The foetus needs abundant material both when it is first constituted and for the entire period of growth that follows. . . . Accordingly, it was better for the female to be made enough colder so that she cannot disperse all the nutriment which she concocts and elaborates. . . . This is the reason why the female was made cold, and the immediate consequence of this is the imperfection of the parts, which cannot emerge on the outside on account of the defect in the heat, another very great advantage for the continuance of the race. For, remaining within, that which would have become the scrotum if it had emerged on the outside was made into the substance of the uteri, an instrument fitted to receive and retain the semen and to nourish and perfect the foetus.

3 (II. 301) Forthwith, of course, the female must have smaller, less perfect testes,⁷¹ and the semen generated in them must be scantier, colder, and wetter (for these things too follow of necessity from the deficient heat). Certainly such semen would be incapable of generating an animal. . . .⁷² The testes of the male are as much larger as he is the warmer animal. The semen generated in them, having received the peak of concoction, becomes the efficient principle of the animal. Thus, from one principle devised by the Creator in his wisdom, that principle in accordance with which the female has been made less perfect than the male, have stemmed all these things useful for the generation of the animal: that the parts of the female cannot escape to the outside; that she accumulates an excess of useful nutriment and has imperfect semen and a hollow instrument to receive the perfect semen; that since everything in the male is the opposite [of what it is in the female], the male member has been elongated to be most suitable for coitus and the excretion of semen; and that his semen itself has been made thick, abundant, and warm.

⁷¹ Galen calls the ovaries the female testes.

⁷² I.e., on its own: but Galen allows female 'semen' a contributory role in conception.

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (c. 570-636)

Raised in Spain during the rule of the Visigoths, Isidore was educated in a monastery, took vows himself, and became Archbishop of Seville. His great encyclopaedia of knowledge (known as *Etymologiae* owing to its emphasis on the derivations of key words under each subject heading) achieved phenomenal popularity throughout Europe and continued to be cited for many centuries.

FROM ETYMOLOGIES* (ETYMOLOGIAE)

Man and Woman

1 (XI. ii. 17) Man [vir] is so named, because there is greater force [vis] in him than in women [femina]—hence also the word 'strength' [virtus]—or, he is so named because he controls woman [femina] forcefully [vir]. (18) Woman [mulier] gets her name from 'softness' [mollietas], or as it were 'softer', mollis, with a letter taken away or changed.⁷³ (19) For the two sexes are differentiated in the strength [fortitudine] and weakness [imbecillitate] of their bodies. Thus there is the greatest strength [virtus] in man [vir], and less in woman [mulieris] so that she might be forbearing to man; otherwise, if women were to repel them, sexual desire might compel men to desire something else or rush off to another sex . . .

2 (XI. ii. 23) What is now called a 'female' [femina], antiquity called *vira* [i.e. female of vir, 'man'] . . . (24) The word 'female' [femina] derives from the area of the thighs [femorum] where her gender is distinguished from a man's. But some think she is called 'female' [femina] through the Greek etymology for 'burning force' [i.e. Greek *fos*] because of the intensity of her desire.⁷⁴ For females [feminas] are more lustful than males, among women [mulieribus] as much as among animals. Hence the word 'effeminate' [femineus] was applied to an excess of love [amor] in antiquity.⁷⁵

* New translation by Alcuin Blamires from W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi: Etymologiarum sive originum libri xx*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911).

⁷³ Gratian maintained that 'man' [vir] was from 'strength of mind' [virtus animi], and that 'woman' [mulier] arose from 'softness of mind' [mollietas mentis]; Friedberg 1955, I. col. 1145.

⁷⁴ A derivation seized on in Ch. 6, *Math.* 25, whereas defenders of women (e.g. *Laesce* 124.1-3) preferred the link with *mollietas*.

⁷⁵ A notion still widespread in the Middle Ages: hence Andreas Capellanus urges his protégé 'to restrain your physical pleasure [voluptatem] like a man [viriliter]': *On Love* III. 50. See also Ch. 8, Gower I and 3.