

Doctors in the medical world today still look back to the world of ancient Greece, when they take the oath traditionally attributed to the great Greek physician Hippocrates. Hippocrates established a school and a tradition of medicine in his native state that was immensely influential throughout the classical world; and, as was the case in virtually every profession in antiquity, the physicians and medical writers who followed Hippocrates were uniformly male. Nevertheless, medical science in the Greco-Roman world had to take account of the anatomy and the illnesses of women, and the Hippocratic writers, as well as many others, concerned themselves with that curious construct that was the female body.

Some writers sought to explain the observable differences between men and women by means of sweeping theories such as the one Aristotle espoused: he thought that the reason women were women (and not men) was that they were too wet and cold. If only they had sufficient heat and dryness, they could “cook” themselves into men. Other writers had a narrower focus, and, not surprisingly, saw the great difference between the male and the female in the area of sexual anatomy and reproduction. Even here, the distinction was often seen in terms of female inferiority, rather than complementarity. Here is what Galen, a physician of the Roman empire has to say on the matter:

*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 because of the defect in the heat emerge and project on the outside, and this, 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 of the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutilated, unless there was to be some great advantage in such a mutilation.*

Particularly curious, enthralling, and troubling to the medical writers of antiquity was the female womb. The Greek word for it was *hystera* (from which we derive the word “uterus”). Since it was an item lacking in the male body, the male-dominated medical establishment was never quite

able to bring it into the “norm” of human anatomy; for them, females were always alien and the “other”. And the fact that the male body had no place for a womb may explain one of the most peculiar of ancient medical fallacies: the wandering womb.

The wandering womb was actually just one manifestation of a broader set of problems that females were prone to, problems which fell under the general rubric of *hysteria* or, literally, “wombiness”. The ancients believed that a woman’s very femaleness was something that was apt to betray her at any moment, and drive her to distraction. If her womb acted up in some fashion, then she would be bound to suffer all kinds of mental and emotional instability as well. Virgins were particularly prone to the brand of hysteria that arose when menstrual blood was prevented from leaving the uterus. It then backed up in the body cavity, and drove the girl mad, making her psychotic, delusional and suicidal. The only cure was to induce menstruation (or at least a nosebleed) as soon as possible. “My prescription,” says one Hippocratic writer, “is that when virgins experience this trouble, they should cohabit with a man as quickly as possible. If they become pregnant, they will be cured.” We can certainly see the interests of patriarchal society operating in this prescription!

But the wandering womb was an even more peculiar problem. According to many writers, from the Hippocratics in the Classical age of Greece to the physician Aretaios during the Roman empire, a woman’s womb was liable to detach itself from its regular home, and wander off at will through her body. Such vagrancy naturally created a host of unpleasant symptoms for the woman, the commonest of which was “hysterical suffocation”, as the displaced womb deprived the body of breath. Aretaios gives us a vivid description:

*In the middle of the flanks of women lies the womb, a female viscus, closely resembling an animal; for it is moved of itself hither and thither in the flanks, also upwards in a direct line to below the cartilage of the thorax, and also obliquely to the right or to the left, either to the liver or spleen; and it likewise is subject to prolapsus downwards, and, in a word, it is altogether erratic. It delights, also, in fragrant smells, and advances towards them; and it has an aversion to fetid smells, and flees from them; and, on the whole, the womb is like an animal within an animal. When, therefore, it is suddenly carried upwards, and remains above for a considerable time, and violently compresses the intestines,*

*the woman experiences a choking, after the form of epilepsy, but without convulsions. For the liver, diaphragm, lungs and heart are quickly squeezed within a narrow space; and therefore loss of breathing and of speech seems to be present. And, moreover, the carotids are compressed from sympathy with the heart, and hence there is heaviness of head, loss of sensibility, and deep sleep.*

Since the male body, to the ancients, was the norm of human nature, and since it clearly had no place for a uterus, it may have been thought that the female body had no real place for a uterus either – hence the itinerant nature of the organ. Little could be done to prevent the onset of such an alarming and potentially fatal disorder (the womb at its most savage could actually choke its host to death), but the Aretaios passage gives a hint as to one of the commoner remedies. A disorderly womb could be coaxed back into position by the application of various odours. Since the womb sought sweet smells and shunned foul ones, it made sense to present noxious substances to a woman's nose: liquid pitch, burnt hairs, burnt wool, squashed bedbugs, and old urine. To help matters out, one should of course waft appealing scents, such as nard and cinnamon, at the woman's other end. With luck, the roving nomad would find its way back home. Future peregrinations of a similar nature might be forestalled by keeping the woman pregnant, since a pregnant uterus is a happy uterus (as far as the medical establishment of antiquity was concerned), and a happy uterus has no reason to roam.

There were some influential medical theorists and practitioners of antiquity who recognized the preposterous nature of these ideas. One of them, Soranus (who is often an oasis of reason in the zany world of ancient medical theory), declared flatly, "the uterus does not issue forth like a wild animal from the lair, delighted by fragrant odours and fleeing bad odours." But Soranus's contemporary was Aretaios, a most vehement proponent of the wandering womb – it's clear that mutually exclusive theories (and practices) existed side by side in the cosmopolitan world of the Roman empire, which had inherited much of the teaching of the Hippocratics. It is no doubt fortunate for the women of today that only the Oath of the Hippocratics is still in use.