



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Posudek vedoucí na bakalářskou práci Kateřiny Halouzkové “Understanding the Female Body in Early Modern England”

Femininity is a very complex term burdened with a long history. Difference in gender seems a fundamental category of early modern forms of thought, shaping and shaped by the complex network of discursive differentiations and convergences that makes up the cultural texture of the period. Ideas about proper female conduct derive from the “supposed sexual character” of women. Consequently, the discourse of the body influences and is influenced by the cultural construction of women’s gender. Ms Halouzková’s BA thesis valuably points out the necessity of paying attention to the ways the female body was represented and its workings understood. She also, quite logically, focuses her attention on the reproductive system, with special attention to the womb and various forms of bleeding.

For her underlying theory, Ms Halouzková relies fully on Thomas Lacquer’s one-sex model, which claims the (near) universality of the beliefs inherited from Aristotle and Galen. There was, however, even in the sixteenth century some disagreement in the discourse of sexuality, and moreover, there were differences (or rather nuances of differences) between the two ancient scholars. Aristotle notoriously described women as deformed, incompletely developed males, the consequence of insufficient heat in generation having caused their sexual organs to remain internal (this is where the humoral theory comes into account). It is from his authority that comes the one-sex model (which actually means the lack of a separate concept of female! Something that the subsequent late 17th and 18th century would deny, claiming in their turn that there is a “sex in our souls”, see *The Spectator*). This was later reinforced by Galen’s description of the homology in genitalia (female as an inverted form of the male) and Galen’s idea that both men and women contributed semen provided a potential for a more balanced view of the sexes. And perhaps the language of Jane Sharp’s *The Midwives Book* (with its year of publication in 1671 and written by a well experienced midwife, it falls fully within the remits of the period) blends with the traditional views also elements that we may consider more modern, such as that women ought to take pleasure on their bodies.

Also, the early modern period saw great advances in anatomical description as a result of new developments in medicine, experiments and technological improvements. Did these affect in any way the discourse of sexuality?

And, the arrival of the new sexually transmitted disease *morbus gallicus* (the French pox) may have also resonated in attitudes to women: for example, there was a belief that one cure was to have sexual intercourse with a virgin (who, upon losing her virginity and becoming a harlot, could contract the disease).

I appreciate very much the original idea for the thesis and the attempt to bring in a whole range of early modern texts - from the canonical to the virtually unknown. A whole treasure trove of primary sources has been collected. The thesis clearly shows how such seemingly objective factual accounts such as medical books and books for midwives are always coloured by cultural assumptions which in their own way stem from the ways differences between the sexes are constructed socially. However, sometimes the readings of

texts like *Hamlet* of Shakespeare's sonnet 18 (page 29) prove to be rather forcefully one-sided. Rather than seeing the sexual analogies as enriching visions for further branching out in a range of interpretations, they basically limit the readings.

The structure is clear, arguments logically articulated. The BA thesis is written in good academic English (with some careless errors mainly in the first parts). However, one could take issue with the differences of dating the period of concern in the two abstracts and then again on page 11. Some sources are not provided with a full reference in the footnotes. Keeble's book is an anthology of texts and the reader must know the sources quoted from Cavendish and Makin (page 15) and Seba (25).

Some more questions and comments are included below:

1. The idea of celibacy in Protestant England was indeed much less in vogue (page 18 and further) and seemed a socially unsanctioned alternative to the desired chaste marriage, as e.g. the development of the pejorative connotations of old maid and spinster testify. These reasons were, however, not only religious but also economic, as the need for women's household labour decreased, especially in the 18th century. However, in a country that was ruled by an unmarried woman the case cannot be thus simply dismissed. Also, there were some quite forceful representations of celibate women, e.g. the social utopias of Mary Astell's Protestant educational convent in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, or Sarah Scott's fictional *Millenium Hall*.
2. Of what nature was the illness of the Countess of Cumberland (page 38)? How could she actively contract it? And how was it related to greensickness? However, in this context I must mention how greatly I appreciate your alerting me to the significance of this "disease" and, more generally speaking, your dedicated commitment to the exploration of the difficult area of early modern corporeality and sexuality.

The submitted BA thesis fully meets the requirements for such a work. Consequently, I most definitely recommend it for defence. The preliminary suggested grade (the final one will be the result of the defence) is very good (v e l m i d o b ř e).

V Praze dne 12.6.2018

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