

**Kateřina Halousková**  
***Understanding the Female Body in Early Modern England***  
**(BA thesis, ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2018, 56 pp.)**  
**Opponent's review**

The thesis proposes to map the philosophical, social and medical constructions of femininity in Early Modern England and their interrelationship. Its core argument is the dependence of the medical discourse of the female body on the more general understanding of feminine "nature" based on concepts derived from the interpretation of the Scripture (and, one should add, from Classical philosophy, though this source is not explicitly identified). At the same time, the thesis also shows how the "facts" of female anatomy and bodily functioning served to support the ideological construction that informed them in the first place, the resulting complex of ideas then being used to justify specific social structures and institutions. Finally, the thesis also aims at showing how these ideas influenced the general perception of women as well as their self-perception, using as evidence women's diaries and the drama of the period.

The indisputable focus and the main strength of the thesis is the analysis of the medical writings and their way of dealing with female sexuality. Kateřina Halousková succeeds in demonstrating how the understanding of the female body, especially the treatment of specifically "female" diseases, fits in with the specifically Protestant emphasis on marriage as opposed to earlier praise of virginity.

The chapter surveying the philosophical constructions of femininity, on the other hand, is largely a list of generalized commonplaces; it also fails to substantiate the claim that "the Early Modern female gender was a socio-cultural construct fluid in its development over the years" (p.20), because the image which it projects is decidedly monolithic. Can it indeed be maintained that the understanding of femininity and woman's social position remained thus stable from the year 1500 to 1789?

While the thesis works competently with primary texts, it would definitely benefit from a broader theoretical foundation; at least a brief mapping of the state of research in the field would be in order.

The thesis would also need a language revision to avoid awkward formulations (e.g. "[Milton's] work shows that his mind-set was *based* on an inequality *between* the two genders", p.13; "the *beginning* of menarche," p.24). The referencing is occasionally problematic in that the text quotes or paraphrases the statements of a specific author but the footnote references a book in which s/he is already cited (e.g. p.33, Holbrouke/Read); sometimes the extent of the paraphrase (and hence the source of a specific information) is not clear (the "crooked rib" argument, p.12).

I would like to suggest the following specific themes for further discussion and clarification in the defence:

- 1) Could the author explain the criteria for her choice of material in the category of conduct books?
- 2) The case of greensickness: how does the proposed cure (pp.36-7) relate to the injunction not to marry before menarche (p.26)? Do the medical books which the author surveyed in any way comment on the matter?
- 3) Could the author explain how (or whether) the medical writings of the period reconcile such concepts as the "independent" uterus with the one-sex theory?

In conclusion, though the text displays some deficiencies in form and argument, its core thesis is relevant, sound and well presented. With respect to the reservations expressed above, I recommend it for defence with the provisional grade of very good (**velmi dobře**) depending on the result of the defence.