

The BA thesis will concentrate on the comprehension of the female body in early modern England, dating from 1400 to 1789, with a focus on the woman's reproductive system which was clearly connected to the understanding of her as a feminine being in a socio-cultural context.

Firstly, I will analyze the representation of women in English translations of the Bible, where woman is classified as an inferior being to man. The reason is that God first created Adam and from his side came Eve, which leads to an interesting analogy later discussed by Thomas Laqueur and defined by the theory of one sex model. Adopting this concept for my own analysis I shall argue that woman was biologically regarded as an "imperfect" man, therefore her organs were seen as the same as man's but incomplete. Because Eve was the first sinner, the purpose of her reproductive system, meaning mainly menstruation and labour pains, was seen as a type of punishment. It had a great impact in the cultural sphere, meaning that female sexuality conjured fear and repulsion, yet had an undeniable allure.

The discussion will continue with the description of how the female body was seen medically. Human constitution was derived from the Greek physician Claudius Galenus, whose understanding of anatomy and medicine was principally influenced by the theory of humorism, which worked with the idea of four bodily humours. Men's bodies were hotter and women's colder. The cold disposition was not very advantageous to woman's position in the world of men, because it functioned as an explanation to various reproductive issues. For example, the birth of a girl was explained by insufficient heat in the womb. Heat was seen as a source of vigour, strength, courage and intellect, which thus again meant that men were naturally superior to women.

One of the most interesting parts of the female body was the womb. It was seen as a separate organ with a will, therefore woman was wholly at its mercy. Combined with predominantly cold humour it only further weakened her. Many physical and psychological problems were attributed to it, particularly such female problems as irrationality, uncontrollable passion, hysteria and womb disease, and other diseases which will be paid attention to. Its periodical cleaning called menstruation was seen as something polluted and dangerous. As a result, woman was constantly at the mercy of her own body and any disbalance could severely change her life. She was perceived as someone who is not in control of herself and therefore must be governed by a man.

The analysis of the discourse of the body is essential in order to understand what it meant to be a woman. For example, medical books seem to be much influenced with underlying socio-cultural assumptions about the differences between the sexes and thus they participated in the construction of a proper femininity. Medical and literary works influenced each other, as when menstruation was referred to as "flowers". Such metaphorical ways of description and their cultural implications will also be a part of my analysis. I plan to incorporate various types of documents such as drama, poetry, correspondence, medical books or midwife handbooks in my analysis.