

The Body of Excess: Representation of Female Body in the late 19th Century Medical Narratives and Popular Fiction

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Abstract

Cultural influences play a major role in shaping medical treatise and how they form representative images of female sexuality for producing docile bodies. Medical narratives through ages have tried to exert a moral control over women by medicalization of perceived aberrant conduct. There is a sense of power that comes with scientific training and is implicit in much of the medical writings till date. The authority procured from it has a far-reaching impact culturally as the lay reading public are likely to believe them as absolute truths. From the latter half of the 19th century, medical narratives showed an interest regarding what constituted normality in female sexual behaviour and the boundary at which such desires could be termed as excessive. There was a rise of medical attention to acts of self-pleasuring and how it affected the body. It was accompanied by a developing industry in pornography and the emergence of a new kind of medical narratives that were guided with erotic sensibilities. *Nymphomania* by M. D. T. De Bienville or M. Tissot's *New Guide to Health and Long Life* could be taken as examples of the genre. Popular culture took up the empty space left unexplored regarding the physical effects of female masturbatory habits on the one hand, and paranoia about dire consequences of such transgression on the other. However, the idea of embedding such desires in the textual realm of reading and writing ran common in both medical texts and popular fiction of the period. It had the effect of putting the female reader at stake, representing her as a prototypical victim of imaginative excess. The scientific ideas that are found in the historical studies of Western medicine mostly fail to place them in the socio-political milieu of that period. By employing the theoretical tool used in literary criticism as well as history, my paper, 'The Body of Excess: Representation of Female Body in the late 19th century Medical Narratives and Popular Fiction' attempts to analyse the prejudices, ideologies, and fault line running through the specialized understanding of sexual representation of women.

Keywords: Late 19th century England, medical narratives, popular fiction, sexual excess, female reader, female sexuality, historiography of medical texts.