

Binding Down the Womb: Uterine Prolapse and Magical Practice

My paper will examine a treatment for a prolapsed uterus as described in the Hippocratic corpus and interrogate the treatment's potential underlying relationship with ancient magic. I argue that the medical practice for re-inserting the prolapsed uterus aims at coaxing the womb back into place and parallels magic models. The Hippocratic treatise *Nature of Women* (35-144L) describes an extreme treatment for a fully prolapsed uterus: After cleaning and anointing the uterus, the physician carefully tucks the uterus back into the body and straps the female patient to a ladder, which is turned upside down and shaken (succussion). Afterwards, the woman is released from the ladder, her legs are bound, and she is left for a day and a night. From that point on, she remains reclined and is subject to specific dietary instructions and lots of bloodletting. The prognosis for such a treatment is grim— sterility at its best, and death at its worst. It is interesting, however, that the treatment mirrors several characteristics found in ancient magic, particularly in ancient curse tablets.

There are several potential parallels between this medical intervention and magical practices, which practitioners continued to innovate over the centuries (Johnston 2001). First of all, the medical texts and magical curses share vocabulary of “binding”. Both deploy vocabulary from the verb δέω, ‘bind’, in order to achieve their goals. In the prolapse treatment, the feet and legs are bound to the ladder, or themselves (δῆσαι; ξθνδῆσαι). Secondly, the treatment begins with anointing the uterus, as if a religious or magical object, and the *PGM* features several spells that instruct the practitioners to anoint either an object or themselves (e.g., *PGM* II.19; V.65). Furthermore, the female patient is turned upside down, a clear act of inversion we find not only in magical writing, but also in the placement of drawn or actual magical figurines/dolls. In the

lead containers discovered at the fountain of Anna Perenna, seven of the containers held *defixiones*, ‘curses’, that threaten something “night and day”, along with small human figures placed upside-down (Natalias 2022). Likewise, a lead tablet from Rome depicts the image of a woman, swaddled and upside down. Scholars have interpreted this curse as one against an unborn child, but I argue that the practitioner was not only cursing the unborn child, but also perhaps the uterus itself by depicting the inverted mother undergoing treatment for prolapse.

Although much of medical scholarship has long sought to extricate the “real medicine” from “irrational practice”, we cannot rule out the possibility of conflation between some empirical medical practices and magical or supernatural tradition. We do have evidence from the Roman Imperial period for magical practitioners assimilating Hippocratic theory and medical vocabulary through the use of amulets and gemstones to address other gynecological topics like the wandering of the womb (Faraone 2011, Dasen 2015). Recently, Y. Ustinova (2023) has argued that basic Hippocratic practices (her focus is on *catharsis*) are indistinguishable from magical ones. She contends that the efficacy of both practices is cognitive and follows Sørensen’s (2007) definition of magic: ‘changing the state or essence of persons, objects, acts and events through certain special and non-trivial acts with opaque causal mediation’. This convention might work as a possible explanation for our Hippocratic doctors, who attempt to coax the womb back into its place (change of state/essence) through anointing, replacement, and succussion on a ladder (intentional acts) to bring the patient back into health (clear causal mediation). Magic seeks to manipulate through intention (Versnel 1991) and the intertwining of magical and religious beliefs with scientific ideas makes the study of gynecology complex. Ultimately, I demonstrate that it is clear the Greeks and Romans sought out various methods between the magical, religious, and “rational”.

Works Cited

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