

Pelvic Pain and the Rabid Womb in Ancient Gynecology and Narrative Medicine

This paper argues that ancient descriptions of pelvic pain promote healing by separating the female body from the self through the use of animal metaphors. Hippocratic and post-Hippocratic doctors who use this technique explain their patients' suffering by visualizing the internal female body as an environment where organs, especially the uterus, exist as animals who must be placated or controlled by various means (King 1998; Faraone 2011). Although Soranus and Galen reject this belief (King 1998; Green 2005), they still offer methods of healing which stem from this rationalization of female suffering, suggesting that their own views were the exception in antiquity, not the norm. Similarly, while scholars like Helen King (1998) and Monica Green (2005) argue that the animalized womb, along with the wandering womb, uterine suffocation, and hysteria, perpetuate misogynistic ideas about the female body, others like Jessica Hughes (2017) and Ada Nifosi (2019) see the potential for such descriptions to connect female patients to a symbolic understanding of their naturally liminal bodies. New research into chronic pelvic pain from Giuseppe Benagiano and Ivo Brosens (2011) and Carman Nezhat et al. (2012) also confirm that doctors have routinely ignored or minimized symptoms of endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, pelvic inflammatory disease, etc. for centuries.

Papyri and amulets which use the womb-as-animal metaphor offered female patients alternative ways of coping with chronic pain that their doctors did not provide (Björklund 2016 and Nifosi 2019). By turning to magic and folk medicine, sufferers of chronic pelvic pain took control of their illness and promoted their own methods of healing. In naming their condition as the "gnawing of a dog" (*ἀπδήξης εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ὡς κύων*, PGM 7.260–72, Betz 1986), "roaring of a lion" (*λέων βρυχᾶσαι*, Spier 1993), "coiling of a snake" (*ὄφις εἰλύεσαι*, Spier 1993), and the actions of other animals like serpents and bulls, women gained power over their bodies, which

were routinely managed without their consent by male authority figures. These papyri and amulets offer a model for narrative-based medicine today, where patients' complaints of pelvic and abdominal pain can provide a useful context for medical practitioners seeking to manage and treat these newly identified diseases.

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