

Book Review

The Story of V: Opening Pandora's box

Catherine Blackledge

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It is the seat of female sexual pleasure, the site of creation of humankind and the channel for its birth. It is also a potent arouser of sexuality. Yet we know less about the vagina — its structure & function — than we do about any other organ of the human body. Why?

Catherine Blackledge has certainly opened Pandora's box in this extraordinary study of female genitalia. The myths, the folklore and the anthropology; comparative anatomy, language and archaeology — a plethora of topics that at times felt overwhelming.

Blackledge begins with history. In ancient societies the vulva was a symbol of fertility, prized above all else. This was where life came from and in some societies the return to the vagina conferred immortality. In both the East and West the vulva was an icon. We see extant symbols in modern society in the almond shaped loaves sold at Easter in the Auvergne region of France, and the fertility rites that occur beneath vulval shaped natural rock formations. Fertility symbols date back to the Stone Age: the Venus figurines that span 20 000 years for example. In comparison, there are only a handful of male forms. Blackledge reminds us that the penis does not appear as a symbol of fertility until much later because in early societies no direct link was seen between the penis and the birth of offspring. Early theories of conception included fertilisation by the wind, or 'animalculae' in the air that somehow found their way into the female body. Even in Christianity the Virgin Mary conceived only after she had been visited by the Holy Spirit.

As well as a symbol of fertility, the vulva was considered to be divine, protecting against evil and able to rout the devil. Women could lift their skirts and show their genitals to inspire terror in their enemies. Remnants of these beliefs still exist in Western society but in the Judaeo-Christian tradition the female genitalia became pornographic, unclean and hidden from view.

Blackledge examines language and its reflection of the cultural attitudes of particular societies. Where female genitalia were prized they were described in terms of precious stones and jewels. In contrast, Western societies use the word pudendum for the female genitalia, derived from the Latin *pudere* 'to be ashamed'. The names of parts may be descriptive (vagina, for example, means a sheath), but this in itself reflects the perception of the day — that the vagina is a passive receptacle rather than the 'intelligent' organ later

described in the book [mind you, in 1983, Mackay and Beischer, still describe the 'main function' of the vagina as 'to receive the male penis during coitus and [to] form the lower part of the birth canal during the process of parturition'. (Illustrated Textbook of Gynaecology; E. V. Mackay et al. 1983; p. 8)] — capable of sorting sperm to find the most compatible mate for reproduction. Blackledge points out that there was a time when females were considered not human but monsters of nature, mutilated males. Men were the yardstick by which our anatomy was measured: women were thought to be men with internal organs corresponding to male genitalia. There is a wonderful illustration of this in the book (Fig. 2.3 p. 69).

She redresses this belief in the next chapter (devoted to the design of the vagina and genital canal), and describes the shift in the belief that this is a passive two-way system (fertilisation of the egg one way and the birth of offspring the other), to the emerging understanding of a sophisticated function, where the vagina is actually able to sort sperm. Unlike species that use external reproduction with the release of millions of gametes, the advantage of internal reproduction is the ability the species possesses to be selective. It is almost universal in internally fertilising females that sperm are never deposited directly on top of the female's eggs — the sperm deposition site is separated from that of fertilisation. This uncouples copulation from fertilisation so that even after mating sperm appear to undergo selection by the female.

The chapter on the clitoris and its role in female orgasm reveals that descriptions of its structure and function seemed to depend on society's moral view of female sexuality. Until the seventeenth century female orgasm was considered essential for conception to occur. By the late eighteenth century, however, western medicine regarded female sexual pleasure and orgasm unnecessary for sexual reproduction and the Christian church disapproved of either. Sex was solely for procreation, not for pleasure. In textbooks, clitoral anatomy was reduced or disappeared altogether, and in practice the clitoris became a scourge that should be excised in the name of science. Removing the clitoris, it was believed, could cure conditions as varied as incontinence, uterine haemorrhage, hysteria and mania brought on by masturbation. Blackledge discusses female genital mutilation across many cultures: prized by some, purged by

others. In folklore the vagina has been depicted as a toothed voracious ravenous greedy chasm capable of castrating men and killing them. It is a myth that recurs throughout history. Blackledge suggests that the Greek myth of Pandora's box is a symbol for female genitalia. Pandora was thought to be the world's first woman. She was to blame for all the 'ills that beset men'. She opened a box containing the evils of the world, letting them out and leaving only hope remaining inside. Paul Klee's illustrative interpretation of Pandora's box (overtly vaginal) is brilliant (Fig. 5.2 p. 170).

The chapter 'The perfumed garden' describes the many links between the nose and the genitals. Recognition of the physiological link between these two organs led to the emergence of a new branch of medicine in the nineteenth century — naso-sexual medicine. Blackledge questions this intimate link and suggests the following. The sense of smell is needed by the organism to respond to its environment. Smell is possessed by the simplest and most ancient unicellular organisms allowing them to find food and avoid danger. When sexual reproduction rather than asexual reproduction first arose, the sense of smell played a central role.

The last chapter looks at the role of orgasm: the language, the physiology and the theories of its functions. Religion could sanction female orgasm while the belief existed that it was necessary for conception, but when medical opinion reached the consensus that it was *not* necessary for successful reproduction the reaction was ambivalent. Some members of the medical profession believed that female orgasms were necessary for health and advocated the use of vibrators; others published papers on female patients suffering from 'masturbatory disease'. Blackledge believes that the theory that female orgasm was essential for conception was one of the most influential ideas in the history of the vagina and female sexual pleasure because it had far-reaching consequences on how western women and their genitalia were treated. The legacy remains in many societies to this day.

The book ends with the optimistic hope that as unbiased information about female genitalia and their role in sexual pleasure and reproduction is increasingly available the vagina will begin to be viewed as valuable from both a scientific and a cultural perspective.

This is an inevitably superficial look at a book which covers an enormous scope. Blackledge writes with much enthusiasm, but I needed to read this book twice before I felt I had begun to understand her subject. The depth with which she covers her topic may in fact be a problem. Quite frankly my attention wandered from time to time, particularly in the sections on anatomy and embryology. On the other hand, I found the chapter 'The perfumed garden' really fascinating. Perhaps the trick is to skim those sections that do not appeal. I also felt that the author's voice was intrusive, and this surprised me as usually I like the personal note. But on occasions I found the intimate details uncomfortable and sometimes irritating. I also found the prose somewhat over-the-top at times, but that's my own taste; others might find it adds a light touch to a difficult topic. I wondered at times where her facts came from; there is a bibliography at the back, but it was difficult to find the sources. I think a much more comprehensive cross-reference would be helpful.

This was not an easy book to read but ultimately I thought it worth the effort. Parts of it were certainly fascinating. Ultimately, it's a subject of particular relevance to sexual health medicine, and this book gives us a thorough starting point for a subject that will inevitably be written of much more in the future.

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