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0521483786 - Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture

Joan Cadden

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In describing and explaining the sexes, medicine and science participated in the delineation of what was “feminine” and what was “masculine” in the Middle Ages. Hildegard of Bingen and Albertus Magnus, among others, writing about gynecology, the human constitution, fetal development, or the naturalistic dimensions of divine Creation, became increasingly interested in issues surrounding reproduction and sexuality. Did women as well as men produce procreative seed? How did the physiology of the sexes influence their healthy states and their susceptibility to disease? Who derived more pleasure from sexual intercourse, men or women?

The answers to such questions created a network of flexible concepts which did not endorse a single model of male–female relations but did affect views of the health consequences of sexual abstinence for women and men and the allocation of responsibility for infertility – problems with much social and religious significance in the Middle Ages. Sometimes at odds with and sometimes in accord with other forces in medieval society, medicine and natural philosophy helped to construct a set of notions which divided significant portions of the world – from the behavior of animals to the operations of astrological signs – into “masculine” and “feminine.” Even cases which seemed to exist outside the definitions of this duality, such as hermaphrodite features or homosexual behavior, were brought under control by the application of gendered labels, such as “masculine women.”

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*Cambridge History of Medicine*

Edited by

CHARLES WEBSTER, Reader in the History of Medicine, University of Oxford, and Fellow of All Souls College

CHARLES ROSENBERG, Professor of History and Sociology of Science, University of Pennsylvania

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# Meanings of sex difference in the Middle Ages

*Medicine, science, and culture*

JOAN CADDEN

*Kenyon College*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
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To  
Vivian Liebman Cadden  
*Mater and Alma Mater*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

List of illustrations	page ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	I
PART I SEEDS AND PLEASURES: THE EVOLUTION OF LEARNED OPINIONS	II
Introduction: The character and extent of medieval dependency	II
1 Prelude to medieval theories and debates: Greek authorities and their Latin transformations	13
<i>The origins of medieval alternatives: Ancient Greek authorities</i>	13
<i>Early translations, uses, and forms: The transmission of ancient ideas to the Latin West</i>	39
2 The emergence of issues and the ordering of opinions	54
<i>Traditions and transitions</i>	54
<i>Constantine the African: Texts and readers beyond the monastery</i>	57
<i>Hildegard of Bingen: Extension and integration</i>	70
<i>Questions and answers on human generation</i>	88
3 Academic questions: Female and male in scholastic medicine and natural philosophy	105
<i>Old wine and new bottles: Translated texts and scholastic methods</i>	105
<i>Seminal ideas: Female and male generative contributions</i>	117
<i>Fathers and sons: How the embryo acquires its sex</i>	130
<i>The rise and division of pleasure</i>	134
<i>The measure of pleasure</i>	150

Cambridge University Press

0521483786 - Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture

Joan Cadden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## viii Contents

	PART II SEX DIFFERENCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER	167
	Introduction: Convergence and diversity	167
4	Feminine and masculine types	169
	<i>Gendered meanings</i>	169
	<i>Being feminine and being masculine: Complexion, shape, and disposition</i>	170
	<i>Becoming feminine and becoming masculine: Creation and procreation</i>	188
	<i>Feminine and masculine types: The possibilities and limitations of a binary construct</i>	201
5	Sterility: The pursuit of progeny and the failure of reproductive function	228
	<i>The values and functions of fertility</i>	228
	<i>Impediments to fertility</i>	236
	<i>Sterility, fertility, and sex difference</i>	249
6	Is sex necessary? The problem of sexual abstinence	259
	<i>The reins of restraint: Varieties of abstinence</i>	260
	<i>The reins on restraint</i>	271
	Conclusion	279
	Works cited	283
	<i>Manuscripts</i>	283
	<i>Printed works</i>	286
	Index	305



Cambridge University Press

0521483786 - Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture

Joan Cadden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1	Disease woman	<i>page</i> 20
Figure 2	Beaver (Latin <i>castor</i> )	50
Figure 3	Constantine the African, Ali ibn Abbas ("Haly"), and Isaac Israeli	60
Figure 4	Adam and Eve at work	76
Figure 5	Fetuses in utero	179
Figure 6	Male and female mandrakes	210
Figure 7	Unicorn and virgin	262

Cambridge University Press

0521483786 - Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture

Joan Cadden

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

0521483786 - Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)xii *Acknowledgments*

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