

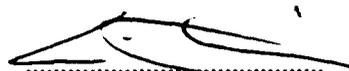


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Conceptions of Nymphomania in British Medicine 1790-1900

Clair Scrine

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Modern History
Macquarie University

February 2003

I, Clair Scrine, declare that this thesis is my own original work, and has not been submitted for admission to a higher degree at any other University or institution



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Abstract

In nineteenth-century British medical discourse, nymphomania was understood as a disorder of excessive or insatiable erotic desire. It did not refer, as many assume, to a woman's frequent sexual intercourse. This thesis traces how excessive erotic desire in women constituted a somatic disorder in the eyes of physicians. It explores the central role accorded both the clitoris and beliefs about the female body in physicians' understanding of this disorder. Generations of physicians subscribed to the view that the clitoris was inherently dysfunctional, and that woman was innately prone to disorder. This examination seeks to understand why this was so. For physicians in the nineteenth century, nymphomania raised a number of contradictions. The incongruity they confronted arose from a clash between the legacy of medical thinking about woman they inherited, and social preoccupations of their age. Women were considered weak, irrational, lacking control and prone to immoderate erotic desire. Yet at the same time, they were expected to repress their natural urges, and strictly control their behaviour. Examining the way nymphomania was conceived offers insight into the complexities surrounding women's sexuality that so pervaded the nineteenth century. At the same time, it also shows how nineteenth century medical discourse not only supported dominant expectations about woman, but fundamentally challenged such ideals.