

In medieval Europe any sexual activity that did not lead to conception was supposed to be forbidden. We have medieval penitentials condemning oral sex. Manual and anal sex were considered sinful and also forbidden. However, these sex acts still took place, as there is evidence of both. Thus we found the anti-masturbation device for the pious. I know a number of historians and doctors who say they have seen anti-masturbation devices for women and suggest that they were made for nuns. I have no evidence to support this claim and it is mostly conjecture.

Biographers of the 13th century St Thomas Aquinas report how he prayed for a "belt of chastity" to help him fight his lusts. Two angels were said to have appeared and bound up his loins with a belt. St Thomas Aquinas was much revered for his chastity and giving up the riches of his noble family for a life of prayer. It is possible that others tried to follow his example by wearing the aforementioned "belts of chastity".

Birthing girdles

Birthing girdles started to make a significant appearance in literature in the late medieval period. In ancient times, myths tell us of the gods girdling the earth. Erotic poems, such as those of John Donne, offer allegorical girdles replacing hands.

The idea behind such an object seems to come from an early tradition that the Virgin Mary had a girdle placed around her by angels at the start of her labour. The miraculous quality of the girdle from heaven made it a highly desirable possession. History doesn't tell us how a group of monks managed to acquire this sacred relic covered in symbols and holy writings. They could no doubt derive a lucrative return from the loan of this relic to the highest born – and the richest. King Edward I is known to have 'borrowed' the girdle for his much-loved wife during her confinements. No doubt the monks who cared for the sacred relic earned a substantial reward for their loan.

Sadly, the holy birthing girdle seems to have been lost, although I feel it might be worthwhile checking whether the Vatican Library has any reference to it. It's a pity, however, that the library is just about to be closed for 2 years for refurbishment. Though what is 2 years in half a millennium to find it again?

Future articles

The next article in this series will be on sex and quacks in the 18th century.

Sensational Sex in 7 Easy Steps: The Proven Plan for Enhancing Your Sexual Function and Achieving Optimum Health. R Shabsigh, B Scali. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2007. ISBN: 1-594-86421-7. Cost: \$15.95. Pages: 352 (paperback). Website: www.shabsigh7steps.info

I have to say that when I read the title of this book, I winced – to a health professional it speaks of false promises and pointless 'how to' plans.

OK, I admit it – I was wrong. What lies behind the cover constitutes absolutely best practice in self-help material: a book for male sexual problems written by a doctor and therefore soundly based in medical practice, but which holds at its heart an awareness of the emotional and lifestyle elements of sexual dysfunction. Of course it doesn't replace diagnosis – and that fact is constantly stressed throughout the book. But as

home study for interested men with or without a problem, to support medical treatment, or as a way forward if medical problems have been ruled out, it really works.

What's in there? A general introduction is followed by a self-test to indicate risk factors – and then a seven-step plan that covers lifestyle changes, mental health issues, relationship problems and medical treatments. The really impressive thing is that the book treads that tricky line that all practitioners in male sexual health have surely encountered: giving men the goal-focused approach that they so often need, without letting them ignore the emotional issues that may be adding so greatly to their problem. It also stresses the role of the female partner so that she too feels included, and the reader is helped to see the importance of getting her involved in his treatment plan.

Author's note

As this article was going to press, I was approached by a doctor following a talk I had given who said that she had seen an historical reference work that did discuss chastity belts as a form of contraception. The doctor said she had come across the work (said to be rooted in the 15th century) whilst studying at medical school some 30 years ago. This is of great interest to me and may be a vital link. It is true that contemporary work is not necessarily accurate or truthful (e.g. pieces in *Aristotle's Masterpiece*). However, the study of history is fluid, and newly found evidence is constantly informing and supplanting current views.

Should any journal readers remember having seen written documentation or published works that refer to chastity belts as a form of contraception then I would be most grateful if they could contact me at the address given in this article.

Finally, please note that I am very aware of the leather straps used as anti-masturbation devices – these are not for contraception but for contra-pleasure!

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Bibliography

- 1 Trotula. *A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*. Green, Monica H (ed.) (translated from the Latin). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2001. Good root background piece from the Salerno-based female professor of medicine writing in the 11th or 12th century covering the topics of gynaecology, obstetrics, health and hygiene. This translation has a preface that argues input from more than one individual. We do know that this text was widely referred to by physicians in Europe.
- 2 Lochrie, Karma; McCracken, Peggy; Schultz, James A (eds). *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Sponsored by the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Minnesota.
- 3 Karras, Ruth Mazo. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005.
- 4 Eccles, Audrey. *Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England*. London, UK: Croom Helm, 1982.
- 5 Haynes, Alan. *Sex in Elizabethan England*. Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1997.

About the author

Lesley Smith is a late-16th century historian, currently studying for the degree of MPhil in the History of Medicine at Birmingham University Medical School. She has appeared in 34 television programmes including Tony Robinson's *The Worst Jobs in History*. Lesley is also well known as a public speaker.

The content is absolutely sound. The style is chatty, full of convincing anecdotes and interactive sections. The language level can be high – usable only by a fairly literate patient – but the authors do make complex concepts as accessible as possible. In short, this is a useful book to recommend to patients (and their partners) or include in a clinic library.

A final note. I was sufficiently impressed by this book that I offered to join the Advisory Board of the accompanying website. But no, I am getting paid neither for that work nor for this review!

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