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 men. 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 not 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 confinement. 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.

**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article was going to press, I was approached by a doctor following a talk I had given who said that she had seen an historical reference work that did discuss chastity belts as a form of contraception.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.


**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.