

The Wandering Womb: A Cultural History of Outrageous Beliefs About Women

Lana Thompson

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“The womb is an animal that longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body ... it ... provokes all manner of diseases.” This statement by Plato is just one of the many outrageous beliefs about women that Thompson explores in her book, *The Wandering Womb*. Her historical survey of outrageous beliefs is presented chronologically, looking at perceptions of the womb in each age and leading the reader up to the present with Thompson’s projections and warnings about the future of the womb.

The news is not good. Women have been the targets of “specious and faulty thinking” about their bodies throughout history. While that and many of Thompson’s other conclusions ring true, Thompson’s history suffers both from being too selective and from being taken out of context.

Until the advent of modern medicine, outrageous beliefs about the human body—male and female—ran rampant. Thompson makes the implicit mistake of comparing each age’s understanding of the womb to our own. That is a test virtually no history can withstand, not to mention that it denies the malleability over time of our own cultural beliefs. And by selecting from each age the “outrageous beliefs” that serve her purpose, Thompson loses sight of the big picture and fails to look at those beliefs in relation to other beliefs that were held at the same time.

Though made even shorter by endnotes and numerous illustrations, this brief historical survey is still informative and amusing. *The Wandering Womb* will peak the interest of a great many readers and, perhaps, inspire them to further reading about the politics and history of the female body.

NAVA HALL (March / April 1999)

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