

G. Griffith  
Prof. Svay  
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## The Influence of the Patriarchy on Feminine Healthcare and Hygiene

For centuries, women have often been portrayed as flawless in the media. Subject to the male gaze, women are held to a standard where they must be prim and proper on a daily basis. Feminine hygiene is expected to be up to par, and numerous media sources have advertised harmful products to women so that they can reach the degree of cleanliness imposed on them by the patriarchy. Furthermore, healthcare for women is determined by men, which creates a dangerous environment for women who lack control over their own bodies. The history of women's healthcare presents a darker picture, where many events that have taken place were done without the consent of those being treated. Women remain objects, mere pawns in a game, waiting for men to make their move and succeed. The patriarchy plays a crucial role in determining the standard of feminine hygiene and healthcare, where men continue to abuse their power over women for their own benefit.

The history of feminine hygiene and healthcare is troubled, in the way that the main focus was not women. A prime example is the maternal birthing position in obstetrics and gynecology. For centuries, women have positioned themselves in such a way that allows gravity to assist the birth of their child.

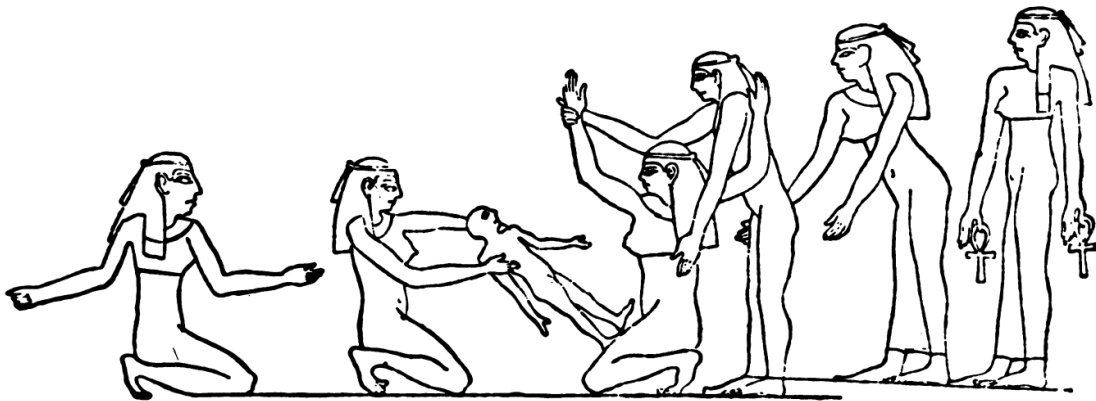


Figure 1. The accouchement of Cleopatra (BC). Bas-relief from the temple of Esneh, a town on the Nile in Upper Egypt.

In this image, one of the earliest records of maternal birth positions, we see a pregnant woman (Cleopatra) crouched low to the floor, surrounded by midwives who are facilitating the movement of the infant out of the vaginal canal. The majority of cultures throughout the world have used birthing positions such as kneeling, squatting, sitting, or standing for labor and delivery (Dudnes 636). This is further proven through the use of the birthing stool (Figure 2) where the bottom is cut out, providing easier access for the birthing process. By enlarging the pelvic opening and allowing gravity to take over, these positions focused on the well-being of women while providing a common sense approach to the safest and easiest ways to give birth.

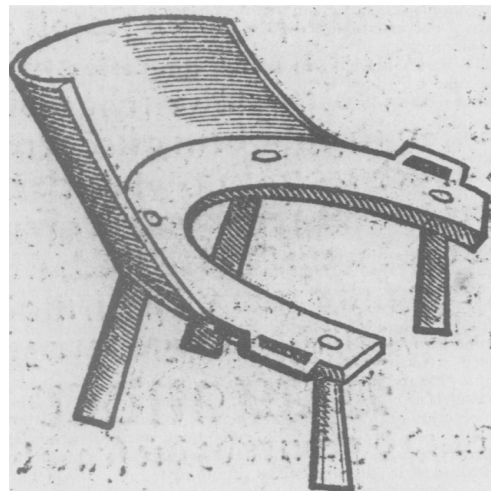


Figure 2. 14th century birthing stool

However, the more efficient birthing methods began to diminish due to King Louis XIV of France. His perverted views on the natural process of childbirth promoted a supine position for women. It was reported that he became frustrated when he was unable to view birth when a woman was on a birthing stool (Dudnes 638). This newer, reclined position prolongs labor and increases the risk of severe perineal trauma, which is any type of damage to the female genitalia during labor (Huang et al. 2019). The denaturalization of childbirth is still seen in the present day, even in the descriptions of the organs that produce life. One scientist writes that "...a woman's ovaries become old and worn out from ripening eggs every month...When you look... you see a scarred, battered organ." (Martin 487). The strong words used in this statement highlights the negative connotation towards the description of the female anatomy. Furthermore, the replacement of midwives by surgeons and doctors stems from the past views of pregnancy as an illness, which benefitted male accoucheurs who projected these false views to make themselves marketable. It is a common theme that men profit off of treating the female body as a specimen, rather than a human.

The work of J. Marion Sims also presented a disturbing side to gynecology. Sims performed excruciating surgeries on enslaved women, and believed that black women experienced pain differently than white women. These procedures were done without anesthesia and without the consent of black women. Sims described one of his patients, Lucy, as a "stupid thing," and said this: "Lucy's agony was extreme. She was much prostrated, and I thought that she was going to die. ... After she had recovered entirely from the effects of this unfortunate experiment, I put her on a table, to examine" (Domonoske). The content of this autobiography shows the lack of concern for women's health. Despite being mere inches from death, Sims still treated his patient as a test subject, and continued to operate on her. This dismissive attitude

towards the pain of black women is still seen today, further proving the existence of the unclosed wounds in gynecology created by Sims. As of 2022, black women stand an increased chance of dying during pregnancy and childbirth compared to white women (Domonoske). The lack of care for enslaved women in these procedures does not just affect current-day gynecology. In the United States, black patients receive less pain medication for their ailments than any other race, which is due to the false notion that black individuals have thicker skin than other races, therefore experience less pain (Domonoske). The history of women's healthcare is deeply rooted in current practices, and it is important to recognize this as the reason why women are treated differently in medical environments.

Media outlets throughout the 20th century further alienated women from the truth about their feminine hygiene. Marketing techniques from top-selling name brands, such as Lysol®, profited off of advertising unnecessary and harmful products to women. In Figure 3, a man is shown walking out the door with a bag, while his wife and young daughter are sitting on a chair. The wife looks upset, and the daughter appears to be worried. In the text below the image, this situation is described as a “tragedy” that Lysol® can prevent. The use of a young child in this



**Figure 3. Lysol® ad for feminine hygiene**

image further piles blame on the mother for causing this situation. Furthermore, by stating that this relationship is “shipwrecked on the dangerous reef of half-truths about feminine hygiene” (Hix), this advertisement makes women feel as if they are unclean if they don’t use this product. Also, it implies that a relationship is only reliant on whether or not a woman is clean or “fresh.”

The idea that women should have “proper feminine hygiene” for the sake of their husbands, and not their own health, allowed for the deliberate manipulation of women in numerous ways. In Figure 4, Lysol® presents a quiz for married couples to take. Once again, it is

**Love-quiz** ... For Married Folks Only



**WHY DOES HE AVOID HER EMBRACE?**

**A.** Because he is no longer happy in their marriage, constantly makes excuses to avoid the romantic intimacy of their honeymoon.

**Q.** What has she done? Is it really all her fault?

**A.** It is not so much what she has done as what she has neglected . . . and that is proper feminine hygiene.

**Q.** Can neglect of proper feminine hygiene really spoil a happy marriage?

**A.** Yes, and the pity of it is, every wife can hold her lovable charm by simply using “Lysol” disinfectant as an effective douche.

**Q.** Can this purpose be accomplished by homemade douching solutions?

**A.** No... salt, soda and similar makeshifts do not have the proved germicidal and antiseptic properties of “Lysol” which not only destroys odor but is effective in the presence of organic matter.

**Q.** Why does this husband not tell his wife why he avoids her?

**A.** Because he feels that a woman should know these important facts . . . and use every means in her power to remain glamorous, dainty and lovely to love. He resents her neglect of such fundamentals as correct feminine hygiene which is achieved so easily by regular douching with “Lysol” brand disinfectant.

**Figure 4.** Lysol®’s *Love-quiz* for married couples

shown that the neglect of the woman’s feminine hygiene is the reason that her husband refuses to embrace her. There is a clear look of disgust on his face, while the woman looks up at him in angst. The husband feels that “a woman should know . . . and use every means in her power to remain glamorous, dainty, and lovely to love” (Hix). These words are derogatory, in a sense, where they diminish women to beings that are “dainty.” Such words are also used to describe how “femininely” the egg behaves in the female reproductive system, as it is “swept,” or “drifts” along the fallopian tube, in comparison to the

masculine views of the sperm, which “delivers,” “activates,” and “penetrates.” (Martin 489). In both cases, it is clear that the more feminine specimen is inferior to its masculine counterpart. This quiz also further exemplifies the need to douche (washing or cleaning out the inside of the vagina) with antiseptic in order for a woman’s husband to love her. Largely, these ads from the 1930s display the burden women have to keep their marriage together by harming their bodies.

Over the past century, feminine hygiene and healthcare has been portrayed in the media in a more positive light. Increasing numbers of gynecologists and obstetricians have come forward on social media platforms such as Tik Tok and Instagram to spread credible and reliable information about women's health. For example, it is now more commonly known that douching can cause infertility, yeast infections, bacterial vaginosis, and disruption of the vaginal microbiota (Jenkins and O'Doherty). This information is a key contributor as to why the number of women douching is declining. Additionally, newer sources that encourage practicing good feminine hygiene actually focus on women's health. In order to maintain feminine health, women are encouraged to avoid perfumes, deodorants and powder in the vagina, maintain a healthy weight, and wear breathable undergarments ("You Don't Need"). The switch from using disinfectant in the vaginal canal to allowing the vagina to be its natural self-cleaning organ shows the growth in the mindset of society in general when it comes to how a woman should take care of herself. Furthermore, this new information which disproves the ads from the 20th century allows women to care about their health for themselves, not their partner. Although social media platforms such as Tik Tok and Instagram may expose young girls to content that makes them feel as if they are "unclean" or "unattractive," there has still been a massive reassessment in what a woman should do with her body.

Today, gynecology has also changed, where there are more options presented to women when their health is concerned. They can choose different birth control options, tests, and procedures if necessary. However, the narrative has not completely shifted over the past decades. Recently, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, limiting women's rights over their body. *Roe v. Wade* was important for the fact that it decriminalized abortions, and guaranteed this right for all women. Immediately after this case was overturned, states across America banned abortions in clinical

practices. For example, a 10-year-old girl who was raped by a 27-year-old man, twice, was forced to travel outside of her home state of Ohio to Indiana just so she could get an abortion (Folkenflik and McCammon). Abortions in the state of Ohio are banned after a fetal heartbeat can be detected (6 weeks), and the 10-year-old was 6 weeks and 3 days pregnant. The extent of this decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which now allows individual states to regulate abortion rights, has been felt across the nation. Furthermore, the harmful process of the “husband stitch” is still practiced across the country. After a woman gives birth, a doctor may stitch his patient up tighter than she was before for the sake of additional pleasure for the woman’s partner. Because the vaginal canal is stretched out during childbirth, she is seen as “loose,” so this stitch is added to maintain her previous “perfection.” In most cases, this procedure is done without the woman’s consent. Many women who receive the husband stitch experience serious pain during intercourse, infection, and a longer postpartum recovery (Miller). This proves that although women have made progress in gaining their rights in healthcare, there are still setbacks that the patriarchy will continue to impose.

Feminine healthcare and hygiene have been determined by the patriarchy for centuries. Most practices were not carried out with the health of women in mind, rather for male preference. Although society has shied away from using disinfectants as vaginal cleaning products, we continue to carry out inconvenient birthing methods, shame women for their natural odor, and take away the rights a woman has over her body. While the narrative may have shifted where credible information about the female reproductive system is widely accepted, the narrative has not changed where women are inferior to men. If we read between the lines, and between the false hope that society can fully change, we will see that the male urge to control overtakes the female ability to live.

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