

Rebecca FLEMMING
Introducing Late Antique Gynaecology

Whilst perhaps not counting amongst the best known or loved items of classical literature, several of the surviving gynaecological treatises of late antiquity have intriguing prefaces or prologues; particularly those that claim a range of female audiences and construct their textual authority accordingly. Here images of male knowledge meet motifs not only of female ignorance, but also concealment; the male gaze meets, and attempts to negotiate, female shame and propriety; male genericity has to engage with the problems of female particularity.

This paper seeks to explore these themes within the wider contexts of the transmission of medical knowledge and the contours of medical practice in the late antique world. It will focus on the introductory passages to the gynaecological works of Theodorus Priscianus, Caelius Aurelianus, and Muscio, and use these as a way into contemporary ideas about relations between medicine as a whole and gynaecology in particular; about relations between male and female practitioners and patients; about the figuration of woman not just as an object but also a recipient of medical knowledge; as a highly complex site of medical intervention. But it is not just the late antique workings of gender - the ways in which understandings of sexual difference organise, and are organised by, medical discourse and practice in the later Roman Empire - that is at issue here. The status of two of these texts as Latin translations from (or looser latinisations of) Soranus' earlier Greek, now being undertaken in different cultural and religious circumstances, raises further questions about continuity and change, about the persistence of literary, intellectual, and practical, traditions across time and space.

Indeed, the intersection of these different lines of enquiry into women and medicine in late antiquity are of particular interest in a number of respects, and tie in with debates in various other areas, it is these wider issues that this paper hopes to elucidate through its chosen set of texts.