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Female Patients in Early Modern Britain: Gender, Diagnosis, and Treatment (History of Medicine in Context)

Wendy D. Churchill

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This investigation contributes to the existing scholarship on women and medicine in early modern Britain by examining the diagnosis and treatment of female patients by male professional medical practitioners from 1590 to 1740. In order to obtain a clearer understanding of female illness and medicine during this period, this study examines ailments that were specific and unique to female patients as well as illnesses and conditions that afflicted both female and male patients. Through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of practitioners' records and patients' writings - such as casebooks, diaries and letters - an emphasis is placed on medical practice. Despite the prevalence of females amongst many physicians' casebooks and the existence of sex-based differences in the consultations, diagnoses and treatments of patients, there is no evidence to indicate that either the health or the medical care of females was distinctly disadvantaged by the actions of male practitioners. Instead, the diagnoses and treatments of women were premised on a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of the female body than has previously been implied within the historiography. In turn, their awareness and appreciation of the unique features of female anatomy and physiology meant that male practitioners were sympathetic and accommodating to the needs of individual female patients during this pivotal period in British medicine.

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