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Political and Social Constructs of Gender

It is very clear from various readings that gender and gendered sexuality have a lot more to do with the medical and political agenda than one might initially think. According to various sources, these constructs are often created by the medical profession, which is rooted in the conservative aspect of American culture. This is reflected in articles about the Bush Sr. administration's attitude towards gay rights and AIDS activism, the quest for a perfect penis and the alleged importance of a perfectly hard man, as well as the literature regarding 19th century sexual surgery on women. Evidence from these articles, and others, suggests that wealthy white men have manipulated ideas of gender and sexuality for their own interests by using the medical and political arenas.

One of the most alarming articles in the series read was Barker-Benfield's "Sexual Surgery in Late Nineteenth-Century America," which looks at the various ways in which women's sexual and reproductive organs were mutilated and experimented upon in the late 1800s. The reasons for the operations were based on economic and racial factors, as well as the desire for control over the women. Women from culturally "undesirable" classes and races, such as the poor Irish and black populations, were used as guinea pigs for the gynecologists to practice techniques they would then use on the wealthy women, brought in

by husbands and fathers who wanted to control their outrageous sexual appetites or somewhat terrifying menstrual cycle (Barker-Benfield 92). There was some evidence of the upper class women regarding their disfigured genitals as attractive, but mostly these surgeries led them to depression and despair, which furthered the cycle of drugs and more surgeries. This pattern served to keep the upper class women in their place of being beautiful, controlled, and without desire, although curiously the castrations and hysterectomies meant that they could not reproduce to combat the rising populations of immigrants and non-whites, which may have been another sign of the complete insanity of the male elite in Victorian America.

The medical profession's involvement in female sexuality was a precursor to its involvement with male sexuality and gender, which it has affected in a profound way. Instead of controlling and subverting sexuality, as the medical profession had done with women, they instead try to aggrandize and mechanize the male sexuality, which is entirely focused on the penis and its functionality. The articles "In Pursuit of the Perfect Penis" and "Pills and Power Tools" both look at the concept of impotence as it relates to male sexuality and how integral the penis is to the societal construct of gender in the US. The articles suggest that men are valued only by their ability to achieve and maintain an erection during

(heterosexual) sex, and that any problem with this is seen as a lessening of their manhood (Tiefer 151). The portrayal of the penis as a metal, mechanical, "tool" object is evidenced in common language as well as in the medical literature that compares erectile function to "hydraulics" and attempts to justify mechanical solutions to what are essentially biological and psychological problems (Bordo 150). By making the concept of masculinity a medical issue, men are socially absolved of having to create emotional and psychological bonds, or use the rest of their bodies in their sexual attitudes and arenas or create their gender roles based on anything other than one single body part. The other problem is that erectile function becomes the sole variable in masculine sexuality and performance, disregarding the rest of the man altogether, as if his penis really is a sex machine devoid of emotion and consequence (Tiefer 160).

Finally, the awareness of the heterosexuality of these assumptions and arguments is pointed out by the article "Beating Around the Bush" which describes how George Bush Sr.'s administration largely overlooked the AIDS issue, and by association the gay movement (Rollins 32). This assumption of heterosexuality is also apparent in the previous articles about controlling women as male property and in the literature and attitudes of male erectile functionality. These articles inform

us that assumptions about sexuality are often constructed in part by those in power, in subtle and harmful ways.

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