

WOMAN AS A MODEL OF PATHOLOGY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Doctors have always thought, it seems, that the female body is more susceptible to illness than the male. Ancient medicine founded this dogma on the doctrine of elementary qualities, in attributing to woman a cold and humid constitution. As heat is the principal instrument which nature uses to produce the forces of the body and to maintain them, it must be lacking in woman, as is proved by her weakness, the softness of her limbs, her lack of external sexual organs and the crudeness of her menstrual blood.¹ If the Aristotelians and the Galenists diverge, in the Renaissance and in the XVIIth century, about the nature—fertile or not—of the “female seed,” they agree to pledge the female body to illnesses. Such a predisposition is explained by the female constitution: its coldness and its humidity, as well as retaining women’s strength badly, contribute to giving them a “soft, slack body, of rare texture,” little suited to letting the body fluids, of which it is full, circulate correctly; their blood, corrupted by humidity, instead of being properly heated like it

Translated by Michael Crawcour.

¹ Galen, *De l'usage des parties du corps humain*, Lyon, 1566, p. 836.

is in men, accumulates, blocks up the too small blood-vessels and causes all the illnesses of which they are the habitual victims. To this it is necessary to add the pathogenic importance of the womb, "a part of the body so sensitive and so easily upset, that its least indisposition causes an infinity of strange and almost unbearable evils."² The indispositions which affect this part of the body are always in relation to humidity or dryness, that is with "the two excrements" which it receives: sperm and menstrual blood. Whether, insufficiently impregnated by the virile liquor, "it mounts to the liver and other higher parts of the body to suck humidity from them until it becomes moist,"³ or it retains for an abnormally long time the seed, which decays inside it; or the periods are suppressed, or on the other hand they are produced too often; all womens illnesses are a question of impeded or excessive discharge.⁴

In this medicine of qualities and body-liquids, woman is opposed to man like the passive to the active, matter to form, the imperfect to the perfect.⁵ Tempered in another way than he, she is a more fragile and unstable mixture. But the disorders which she knows and that are hers—pregnancy, menopause, the menstrual cycle—make necessary the abundance and, to a certain extent, the retention of body fluids; a woman could not conceive if, less humid and warmer, she burned up all the "matter" with which she is provided; on what would the embryo nourish itself? Woman is less perfect than man, certainly, but like one species in relation to another. Taken by herself, she is what she must be if generation is to be possible: on the condition that one remembers that there is a hierarchy of species, each may be perfect in itself.⁷ Aristotelic-Galenist physiology, anxious to attribute a function to each being, had to justify the female constitution and its inevitable irregularities in assigning it a place in the general economy of nature. If the female species is

² J Liébaud, *Trois livres des maladies et infirmité des femmes* (1582), Rouen, 1649, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁴ Cf. for example, J. Varandal, *Traité des maladies des femmes*, Paris, 1666.

⁵ Aristotle, *Generation of the Animals*, II, 3, 737 a 29; IV, 1, 765 b 31.

⁶ Galen, *op. cit.*, p. 836.

⁷ For a good exposition of this thesis, M. Cureau de La Chambre, *L'Art de connoistre les hommes*, Paris, 1659, p. 54.

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destined to illness more than the male, it is in the same way that the hare runs more quickly than man and the lion is stronger than the lamb: in the name of the variety of living forms, at the heart of which each has its particularities. Woman does not, in her special pathology, incarnate here any general tendency of life.

The weakness of woman, the softness of her tissues remain the constants among doctors of the XVIIth and XVIIIth century, even if they cease to attribute them to a cold and humid constitution. Sydenham does not doubt that female tissue is "less closely knit and less firm" than that of the male,⁸ and Malebranche expresses a widespread opinion when he attributes "very soft and very delicate" fibres to the brain of children and women.⁹ But this theme acquires, in the medical systems of the XVIIIth century, a completely new meaning: her "delicateness" goes to make woman no longer one species beside another, distinguished by a different constitution, but a being in which the principle of all life and all illness is eminently manifested.

Let us distinguish two aspects of this disorder in the representation of woman, according to what is defined as mechanical life, such as movement regulated by fluids in the body, or what is identified with the property reserved to living matter, of being sensitive, *that is*, irritable. Between the mechanism of Hoffmann or Hecquet and the vitalism of Roussel or de Sèze, we shall give La Caze a place apart, in showing how, from 1775 onwards, he establishes certain ideas¹⁰ which, taken up and enlarged upon twenty years later, will come to confer a remarkable privilege to the female body in the definition of life and illness.¹¹

For Hoffmann or Hecquet, the principle which rules the body

⁸ Sydenham, *Médecine pratique*, tr., Paris, 1659, p. 54.

⁹ Malebranche, *Recherche de la vérité*, II, 11, I, § 1.

¹⁰ Cf. on this point J. Roger, *Les Sciences de la vie dans la pensée française du XVIIIe siècle*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1971, pp. 636-639.

¹¹ On all these authors, cf. P. Hoffmann, *La Femme dans la pensée des Lumières*, Paris, 1976.

and governs health and sickness must be looked for in movement. "One defines life exactly, the progressive and circular movement of the liquors, caused by the pressure of the heart and the arteries and the elasticity of the fibres, which, by means of secretions and excretions, conserves the whole body in its integrity, preserves it from corruption and rules all its functions."¹² Health, therefore, cannot exist in anything but the regular movements of the fluids, whereas sickness is linked with their disorder. It is known that the most usual cause of the disturbance of movements must be looked for according to the doctor, de Halle, alongside the *spasm* and its opposite, *atony*. If spasmodic contraction attacks the whole body, fever results; if it only affects some parts, one is dealing with a spasmodic movement; a spasm of the exterior membranes of the head is called cephalalgia, that of the nerve ligaments of the teeth, odontology, etc.; the third category of diseases consists in the alternance between a contraction and an expansion: these are convulsive diseases, which always commence in the nervous system; finally the fourth class of diseases is atony, or the weakening of general movement, which leads to grave cases of paralysis.¹³

It is here that we find again the female body and the privilege, if it can be called such, that it enjoys in this general pathology of the spasmodic contraction. Hoffmann and Hecquet were to establish that woman is predisposed, through the particular organization of her body, to spasms or convulsions in such a way that, in these medical systems which unify all pathology in a derangement which serves as a model, she comes, in an exemplary fashion, to incarnate the most general possibility, for all living things, of being sick. Two properties of the female body lend themselves to spasms and convulsions: a very soft fibre and very narrow blood-vessels on the one hand; a "very tender, very sensitive and easily unsettled" nervous system on the other.¹⁴ The firmer the fibres, according to Hoffmann, the more force they have to cause the fluids to circulate; women, who have

¹² Fr. Hoffmann, *La Médecine raisonnée*, French trans., Paris, 1739-1743, vol. 1, p. 114. Cf. also Ph. Hecquet, *De la digestion et des maladies de l'estomac*, vol. 1, Paris, 1730, *Discours préliminaire sur la Trituration*.

¹³ Hoffmann, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 135-136, 152, 170.

¹⁴ Hecquet, *Le Naturalisme des convulsions*, Soleure, 1733, vol. 1, p. 2.

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softer fibres and who also have narrow blood-vessels, are unsuitable subjects for the regulated movement of body fluids and risk amassing a superfluous quantity of blood at any moment. "In feeble subjects strength and movement are lacking, excretions are difficult and little good blood or good fluid is formed in the body; the liquors thus become too abundant and too full of impurities, and the retention of the juices that should be eliminated and the stagnation of those which ought to circulate is an ever underlying cause of illnesses."¹⁵ The traditional themes, those that the doctors of antiquity and the Renaissance never failed to note: softness of fibre, bad circulation of the body liquids, the blockage of blood-vessels, all these are taken up again here, but they now fit into a pathology of the human being and no longer only of the female species.

To weakness of fibre one must add the particular fragility of the nervous system. That of woman is of such a sensitivity that it is always on the point of provoking spasms, convulsions or, in any case, uncontrolled movements. Is there, asks Hoffmann, a contradiction between a weak constitution and a sensitive nervous system? Assuredly not. "One must not hesitate in counting among the number of weak people those who have an extremely sensitive body, that is, who succumb on the least occasion and for the most meagre reasons to spasmodic and convulsive disorders of movement."¹⁶ It is necessary to note the equivalence between weakness and the excess of sensitivity, because it will in its turn be taken up again, though amplified, by those who, in the last part of the XVIIIth century, will make of sensitivity a definition of life. Integrated here with a general physiology of the movements of fluids, the excessive sensitivity of the nerves combines with softness of fibre to make of woman a being convulsive by definition. Hecquet says so with all possible clarity: the human body, completely composed of nerves filled with fluid which causes contractions, is a machine "very close to convulsion;"¹⁷ woman, by reason of the disposition of her blood-vessels and the delicate nature of her nerves, is inexorably

¹⁵ Hoffmann, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁷ Hecquet, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

predisposed to convulsive illnesses: it is almost a miracle that she is not overcome by them.¹⁸

In these medical systems in which the human body is likened to an hydraulic machine, woman shows in an exemplary fashion the risk inherent in such a type of mechanism: the obstruction of passages and the stoppage of the circulation of fluids. The pathology of woman is no longer only the pathology of a particularly fragile species, as was the case in Aristotle or Galen, but rather that of the whole genus, in which it is she who throws light on the virtual disorders which lie in wait for it.

La Caze never stops being a mechanist, in a certain sense, although he himself remarks on his incompatibility with what he very clearly calls "the subjugation" of medicine "to the laws of experimental physics."¹⁹ He considers life as "the unity of many movements which are linked by a mutual dependence, and which are only executed or perpetuated in counterbalancing themselves reciprocally, by means of continual efforts that all the parts of the body make, one against the other."²⁰ Differently from Hoffmann, La Caze nevertheless centralizes on a point of balance of movements and tensions. All the "springs" which converge in general movements find their balance in a "principal spring" on whose movement or repose depends that of all the others: the diaphragm.²¹ The centre of action and reaction, it governs both health and sickness. And perhaps it is necessary to view the limit of the "mechanism" of La Caze in this careful consideration of the organization of the body as a game of causes and effects where "at any moment the effects become causes and the causes in their turn become effects."²²

Less systematic, without doubt, than Hoffmann, La Caze does not attribute to spasmodic contractions a less exemplary bearing

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9; cf. Hoffmann, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 353, vol. 5, 5; p. 78.

¹⁹ L. La Caze, *Idée de l'homme physique et moral*, Paris, 1755, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 328; cf. also the exposition of La Caze's thought by Ménuret, in the article "Spasme" in the *Encyclopédie*.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

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on the genesis of illnesses. As health depends on the equilibrium of the forces of the body and of the diaphragm, it is enough for this last to be too weak, or for one of the organs to be too strong for the harmony of the whole to be disturbed.²³ “Immediately,” explains Ménuret, “this equality of action and reaction which constitutes a type of natural spasm is troubled; this last elasticity augments the sphere of its movements, the fibres which compose it are irritated, stretched, cramped and in an orgasm which in itself constitutes a *spasmodic* state against nature.”²⁴ We have no longer here to deal with an hydraulic machine threatened by obstructions and blockages, but with an equilibrium of *tensions* always susceptible to degeneration into *contractions*; if in Hoffmann the spasm sets the model for illness, it is in as much as it provokes, more or less, the restriction of the canalizations; in La Caze, it is because it immobilizes in a sort of cramp an alternative process of tensions and relaxations.

Here again woman is invested with the same privilege. But La Caze bases it on the particular nature of the uterus. This organ, in intimate correspondence with the diaphragm, receives a quantity of movement, an “elasticity,” which it cannot employ every day, like the other excretory organs.²⁵ It thus charges itself with a considerable energy to which the diaphragm, in its turn, must react with a proportional action. Now, “continually pulled and irritated by the action which it must perpetually counterbalance,” it enters into a state of “defective sensitivity,” of constant irritation.²⁶ This state of the diaphragm, in addition to the fact that it engenders discomfort and disquiet, makes indispensable a contribution of new sensations which excite and maintain its elasticity at the desired level. This is why women, more than men, need novelties and multiple stimulants: they stimulate thus the “phrenic centre” so that it is in tone with uterine sollicitations.²⁷ This is so important, according to La Caze, that we

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 420. One finds extensions of this thesis in Diderot, particularly in the *Rêve de d'Alembert*. Cf. on this point M. Hobson, “Sensibilité et spectacle: le contexte médical du ‘Paradox sur le comédien’ de Diderot,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1977, n. 2.

²⁴ The article “Spasme,” in *Encyclopédie*.

²⁵ La Caze, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 280 and 421.

must see in this balance, always put to the test, the principal cause of female behaviour, and even the differentiation of the sexes “from which we should conclude that more or less resistance to the action of phrenic forces is the first physical cause which produces the distinctive character of the two sexes.”²⁸

As all disorder in the human body is the result of a lack of equilibrium between the phrenic centre and the other organs, woman, by reason of her having a uterus which accumulates a greater quantity of movement than it can excrete, and which, for this reason, continually threatens the balance of her body, represents in an exemplary fashion the risk inherent in a life conceived as an equilibrium of tensions. If Hecquet had already understood life as “the concert of all movements,” and if he had noted that such an equilibrium is precarious, always ready to degenerate into convulsions, La Caze adds to these remarks the idea of a circular causality between the uterus and the diaphragm, which gives women over to a morbid hunger for new sensations, indispensable, but of which the effects amplify the need. With the Montpellier doctor an idea takes form, according to which life is a catastrophic equilibrium, in that the solutions it requires for its maintenance also destroy it. Here, without doubt, La Caze’s originality is manifested. Because it is indeed an inherent necessity to retain life by an increase in the sensations which feed antagonism between the phrenic centre and the organs. But, so true is it that “the sphere of our natural needs will never be able to satisfy spirit or sentiment as much as is needed”, that we are left with “the tumult of our passions” to fill this emptiness, knowing that it will exacerbate this same lack. It is true that La Caze also sees in “the exactitude to all our duties,” and in “the emulation which brings us to be deserving of society and the common interest,”²⁹ a less catastrophic means of regulating our virtual disequilibrium. But apart from the precariousness of this road, it seems reserved for men only. How could women, whose organism is such that it destines them to unbalance, compensate with civil virtues the vices of the uterus?

Woman thus illustrates the natural means (in the sense in

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 369-370.

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which the *natural* state is opposed to the *civil* state) by which life avoids annihilation at the same time as it encourages it. Passion is the remedy-poison used by life to survive. And woman, who is dedicated to it, expresses in it the movement of life by which, assuredly, she resists death, but, like a downward chute, temporarily dispenses with falling. Vitality is about to be born here, in recognition of the specificity of the living, which includes in its definition sickness and death.³⁰

No doubt, the vitalism of Bordeu and doctors of the last third of the XVIIIth century had borrowed some justifications from the Hallerian concept of irritability, understood as a force inherent in the fibres. But this is to immediately challenge the dualism which made sense of it, and to include muscle irritability in the general property of impressionability. Hallerian dualism ceded thus to the necessity—of a Newtonian type?—of the unification of living matter.³¹

It is conceivable that circulation of the fluids had to stop seeming “a principle of medicine serving as the basis for the theory of art,” in order to become “a simple fact of physiology.”³² If impressionability constitutes living fibre, it is the nervous system, in which the rôle is attested in the reception and transmission of the impression, that is now going to find itself invested with the essential function of living beings. Whether they explicitly criticize the Hallerian concept of irritability, like Bordeu and Whytt, or whether they implicitly amalgamate irritability and sensitivity, like Tissot, Bienville or Fabre, most doctors after 1775 describe the nerves as “the principal agent of the animal

³⁰ See on this point the analyses of G. Canguilhem in *La Connaissance de la vie*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1967, p. 156 *et seq.*, and in the article “Vie” of the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol. 16, p. 764. On the vitalism of La Caze, cf. J. Roger, “Méthodes et modèles dans la préhistoire du vitalisme français,” in *Science et philosophie. XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, XIIe Congrès international d’Histoire des Sciences*, vol. 3, Paris, 1971.

³¹ See on this subject the just remarks of K. Sprengel, *Histoire de la médecine*, French trans., Paris, 1815, vol. 5, pp. 357-359, and of Ch. Daremberg, *Histoire des sciences médicales*, Paris, 1870, vol. 2, p. 1083.

³² La Caze, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

organism,”³³ “the essence of man.”³⁴ The living being is no longer the hydraulic machine that it was for Hoffmann; it is characterized first and foremost by its sensitivity and its faculty for reacting to the received impression: a living body is a sensitive system, it being intended that reaction depends on sensation, even if this is not a conscious one. Is it not in this way that Fouquet defines sensitivity in the *Encyclopédie*? “Sensitivity is a property of the living body which permits certain parts of the body to perceive impressions of external objects, and, in consequence, to produce movements proportional to the degree of intensity of this perception.” Assuredly, it was there that Hallerian irritability was explicitly subordinated to the sensitivity of Bordeu, and it will be so again with Barthez a little later on.³⁵ One can, however, find a similar doctrine in Paris, without going to Montpellier. Do Le Cat, Le Camus, Fabre profess anything else? Anxious to distinguish sensitivity from irritability, they consider both, however, as dependent on a common fluid—the vital fluid³⁶ or medullary juice³⁷—which fills the nerves, and thus losing all the force of the Hallerian distinction, they finish by confounding them with the general property of life. Le Camus, for his part, characterizes fibre by its tonic force, which is a “continual tendency to reduction” but which is also, in his opinion, “the first principle of sensitivity,” a principle “inseparable from life.”³⁸ Thus, beyond the authors explicitly rallied to Bordeu’s thesis, and sometimes even in those who want to oppose it, as is the case of Tissot, one constantly finds a definition of life understood as the capacity to feel and react to this sensation, localized, if one dare say it, in the nervous system. The Hallerian dualism of sensitivity and irritability gives in everywhere, among the doctors, to a monism

³³ D. de Laroche, *Analyse des fonctions du système nerveux*, Genève, 1778, vol. 1, p. 4.

³⁴ Bordeu, *Recherches sur les maladies chroniques* (1775), 1818 ed., vol. 2, p. 923.

³⁵ Barthez, *Nouveaux éléments de la science de l’homme* (1778), Paris, 1858, vol. 1, p. 252: “One cannot help assigning the production of the principal phenomena of irritability to the sensitivity of a living animal body.”

³⁶ C.-N. Le Cat, *Traité des sensations et des passions en général*, Paris, 1767, vol. 1, p. 85.

³⁷ P. Fabre, *Essai sur différents points de physiologie, de pathologie et de thérapeutique*, Paris, 1770, vol. 1, p. 38.

³⁸ Le Camus, *Médecine de l’esprit*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1769, p. 9.

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of nervous fluid. One will not be astonished, therefore, that by virtue of such an identification between life and nervous fluid, these doctors attribute to the latter a capital importance in the production of health and illness. In a sense, states Whytt, all illnesses are nervous because in all of them the nerves are affected.³⁹ Musgrave thinks, for his part, that in every disorder of the animal organism “the first morbid impression is made on the nerves, from where the fatal germ extends itself exclusively through the other parts of the body, and that, on the contrary, when health is reestablished the first salutary impression is likewise made on them in such a way that they are the focus from which health and sickness issue.”⁴⁰ They have, according to the doctors of the end of the XVIIIth century, a privileged position: intermediaries between the body and the spirit, to take up Tissot’s expression,⁴¹ they are the necessary starting point for operations on both, and in their turn govern the general equilibrium of the organism; there is no harmony in our composition without the correct functioning of the nervous system.

According to Tissot health depends on three conditions: a regular perspiration, a strong fibre which gives a sufficient action to the blood-vessels, and good nerves, which are not too sensitive.⁴² Excessive sensitivity in the nervous system is in effect always accompanied by a weakness of the organism. All agree in saying that an exacerbated sensitivity *exhausts*, more or less rapidly, the vital forces and that it manifests itself at the expense of the body’s energy. In order to be more sensitive, the nervous fibre must, in effect, be slacker; less taut according to some, less dense according to others, it is always the *requisite* of a more lively sensitivity, the more so, affirms de Sèze, as the “fibres are of a more delicate texture and furnish fewer obstacles to its incessant activity (vital in principle).”⁴³ The weakness of the organism is the forced companion of a too strong sensitivity,

³⁹ R. Whytt, *Traité des malades nerveuses*, vol. 1.

⁴⁰ S. Musgrave, *Considérations sur les maladies des nerfs*, Bouillon, 1779, p. 9.

⁴¹ Tissot, *Traité des nerfs et de leurs maladies*, Paris, 1778, vol. 3, p. 280.

⁴² Tissot, *Essai sur les maladies des gens du monde*, 3rd ed., Lyon, 1771, pp. 9-13.

⁴³ De Sèze, *Recherches physiologiques et philosophiques sur la sensibilité ou la vie animale*, Paris, 1786, p. 79.

but on the other hand the latter makes the former even weaker.

One will, no doubt, have easily recognized the portrait of woman in this description of a being at the same time weak and exaggeratedly sensitive. This relationship is not omitted by any of those who treat the constitution of the female body. Before Roussel and Bienville, Le Cat writes: "The female gains in delicateness what she loses in solidity; her nervous system, frailer, is also more susceptible to shocks, to fine sensations."⁴⁴ The traditional theme of female weakness, of the tenderness of the parts of her body, is taken up again systematically here, but in opposition to this other motif: her exaggerated sensitivity. "The sensitivity attached to the essence of women (...) causes their fibres, brought to the limit of delicateness, to be affected by the least mishap," writes Raulin.⁴⁵ Thus it is that the least *stimulus*, the faintest odour, for example, the most imperceptible noise, the passions of the spirit, the alternances between hot and cold, can cause them to suffer convulsions throughout the whole body.⁴⁶ This redoubtable aptitude to spasmodic complaints shows that the "exquisite" sensitivity of women is bought at the price of a particularly fragile constitution which condemns them to nervous illnesses on the one hand, but also to all the disorders which nerves end up by provoking in the organs. In fact, in order to be susceptible to the strongest contractions, their muscular fibres must be less closely knit;⁴⁷ the mucous tissue which surrounds their organs must be softer to offer less resistance to the oscillations and vibrations of the nervous fibre which, "more exposed to irritations, feels more frequently, more vividly."⁴⁸ Such a texture considerably weakens their organism. Because, if they are more *mobile* than men, one must remember that mobility and vigour vary for inverse reasons: "We must distinguish the facility with which the contraction is executed; the force with which it is executed. We name the first *mobility*, and the second *vigour* of the muscular fibres."⁴⁹ This is why everything threatens

⁴⁴ Le Cat, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴⁵ J. Raulin, *Traité des affections vaporeuses du sexe*, Paris, 1758, p. XIX.

⁴⁶ Whytt, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁴⁷ Beauchêne, *De l'influence des affections de l'âme dans les maladies nerveuses des femmes*, Amsterdam, 1783, p. 13.

⁴⁸ De Sèze, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁴⁹ De Laroche, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 251. Cf. J. P. Peter, "Entre femmes et

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woman. "A woman," writes Chambon de Montaux, "is a being which nature always forces to walk on the edge of a precipice which is ever lying in wait."⁵⁰ Altered by the least excess, by the least irregularity, she requires all sorts of care in order to avoid the chronic illnesses which ever menace her.⁵¹ In particular one must be careful that an idle and luxurious life, a constipating nourishment, or lascivious reading matter, do not gravely augment this natural weakness. If woman is a being susceptible to all these evils one must add that life-style contributes greatly to this risk, in debilitating an already weak constitution. "The excessive sensitivity of the spirit and the weakness of the organs have rendered most women who live in big cities subject to the vapours."⁵² Most authors add a sociology of illness to their analysis of feminine pathology.

It is therefore *because* woman is weak that she is particularly sensitive,⁵³ and one must add that the inverse relationship in its turn reinforces this. In a page of the fifth chapter of *Rapports du physique et du moral*, dedicated to "the influence of sex on ideas and moral affections," Cabanis kept as close as possible to this essential definition of woman. His premise is the softness of the "cerebral pulp" and the tissue which covers it. This flaccidity causes all movements to be accomplished in an easier and stronger manner; like de Laroche, Cabanis links the mobility to the weakness of the tissues. Therefore, adds the author of *Rapports*, "promptness and speed of action in the nervous system are the measure of the general sensitivity of the subject." An organism which is too dense, fibres which are too taut, render more difficult or less intense the propagation of sensation; the female body, of which the texture is less close-knit, lends itself admirably to multiple repercussions at the slightest stimulus. But Cabanis does not stop there. On the one hand "the effect

médecins. Violence et singularités dans les discours du corps et sur le corps d'après les manuscrits médicaux de la fin du XVIIIe siècle," *Éthnologie française*, 3/4, 1976, pp. 341-348.

⁵⁰ Chambon de Montaux, *Des maladies des femmes*, Paris, 1784, vol. 1, p. XXVI.

⁵¹ Raulin, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁵² Beauchêne, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵³ Roussel, *Système physique et moral de la femme*, (1775), 5th ed., Paris, 1809, p. 28.

of this sensitivity, so great and so rapid" is to produce, or rather to augment, the "weakness of the fleshy fibres." On the other hand, "in animal economy there is no energetic stimulus, when this impulse does not meet with resistance: its very ease weakens and destroys it. If the energy for reaction depends on that of action, in its turn action depends on the reaction which succeeds it and which becomes for it an indispensable stimulant."

We find here, as in La Caze, this circular causality between excess of sensitivity and weakness; with this difference, though, that here the uterus is not invoked, but only the antagonism between the nervous system and the muscular system. Although in man both are reinforced, in woman it is the contrary. In every instant her sensitivity increases her weakness, which in its turn exacerbates the former.⁵⁴ Illness and, after illness, death, are registered in her as her immediate destiny.

There is a paradox here on which we should pause for a moment. Because if life is defined by capacity for feeling, to the point that the principle of life is, according to Whytt and de Laroche, "inherent in nerves," we must accept that, of all living beings, woman is the one who incarnates, to a notable degree, all the essential properties of life. Roussel does not fail to remark: "More sensitive than strong, more mobile than capable of moving, woman thus possesses all the vital qualities to the most exquisite degree."⁵⁵ But at the same time this exceptional creature is, more than any other, exposed to illness. Does this mean that life itself, according to the doctors, harbours a contradiction of which woman is the proof? In effect, to live is to feel; now, this is the definition of woman but it is also the origin of her illnesses and of the inevitable weakness which leads her to final exhaustion. A nervous system cannot avoid being sensitive to impressions: it is thus that life is distinguished from inanimate matter;⁵⁶ but this function seems to be acquired at the cost of a fragility which grows at the same time as the function develops. Nerves are made to feel and to reflect sensation, but the more they feel, the more they compromise the organism they regulate.

⁵⁴ Cabanis, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, Paris, P.U.F., 1956, vol. 1, p. 284.

⁵⁵ Roussel, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ De Sèze, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

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De Sèze has expressed, in a forceful way, the image of life which consumes itself in the same proportion as it develops the sensitivity and mobility which are its attributes. "Life is thus a cause of death; that is, the more it exerts itself in animate bodies, the sooner it consumes the instrument it uses;... one dies the more quickly the more actively one has lived; it is a fire which, having become more ardent, devours much more quickly the substances on which it nourishes itself."⁵⁷

In the description which, at the end of the XVIIIth century, doctors give of woman, nothing, to tell the truth, is new. However, by reason of the complete change, at the same time, in the theory on the function of the human organism, the female body acquires a radically new significance. It becomes, in a certain sense, at once a model and an example not to follow. Model in that it clearly expresses the definition of life in general; counter-example in that it shows no less clearly that there is a tendency—or a risk—in life by virtue of the function which defines its existence, of exceeding its conditions of equilibrium. In a double sense of the term, the *economy* of life would require it to diminish in intensity in order to gain in longevity. But a system whose definition is to be sensitive cannot avoid increasing its sensitivity. This excess spells its ruin. And it is this contradiction between the function and the norm that woman, at the end of the XVIIIth century, manifests in the most striking manner.

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⁵⁷ De Sèze, *op. cit.*, p. 79.