



Rebecca Sacshe

Graeco-Roman fertility understandings of 'compatible coupling' and its misuse in 21st-century debates on women's reproductive rights.

Despite the many developments in reproductive health knowledge over the last fifty years, ancient Graeco-Roman understandings of women's reproductive systems continue to be employed in damaging ways. My paper explores the concept of 'compatible coupling' in Graeco-Roman writers and how, despite developments in medical knowledge, it is still used in the modern day to control and politicise women's bodies. In the fourth century B.C.E., Aristotle identified that unity and love were necessary between a couple for conception to occur. Equally, Graeco-Roman gynaecological works reiterated that compatibility was essential for successful conception, whereas infertility resulted when couples were incompatible. Previously, historians have included 'compatible coupling' in discussions on divorce and building stronger political ties in Imperial Rome through marriage and resulting offspring. However, from a feminist hermeneutical perspective, 'compatible coupling' can also bring sexual violence to the forefront of the discussion. Such beliefs further victimised women in the Graeco-Roman world, where the functionality of their wombs was of utmost importance. Yet, although 'compatible coupling' sounds like an outdated view, similar outlooks continue to permeate the politics and TV storylines of the twenty-first century. Remarks by US Republican Representative Todd Akin in 2012 demonstrated the continued belief by some that women had inbuilt defence systems that would block conception from occurring during acts of sexual violence. Connecting these past and present understandings highlights a crucial need for research to consider how beliefs of the past can impact our modern-day in hurtful ways despite advancements in medical knowledge.