On the history of French sexology

The English words sexology and sexualogy were coined in the 1860s and 1880s, respectively, whereas the French word sexologie emerged around 1910.

However, sexual science started taking shape much earlier. Even though it could be dated back to Ancient Times, there are more arguments for placing its birth in the context of the 17th-century scientific revolutions. Under this hypothesis, Dr Nicolas Venette (1633–1698) can be said to be the first major French ‘sexologist’. Notwithstanding these considerations, modern sexology actually saw the light of day during a period when scientism reigned and the term “sexuality” took its current meaning, namely the second half of the 19th century. In the universe of scientific ideas, it sprang up at the junction of the progress being made in the physiology of the sexual function (the first scientific description of orgasm by Dr Félix Roubaud in 1855) and the psychopathology of sexuality (Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia sexualis in 1886; Alfred Binet’s theory of ‘fetishism in love’ in 1887). In society and culture, sexology mainly arose out of the feminist, homosexual, eugenic and neo-Malthusian movements with their insistence on sexual pleasure, the freedom of contraception and abortion rights. Although, as we see, the word ‘sexology’ appeared in French later than in English, France is, beyond any doubt, one of the principal birthplaces of modern sexology. But oddly enough, relatively few comprehensive studies have been made of the history of French sexology during the 19th and 20th centuries. Since this special issue of Sexologies may well be the first collective work devoted to study of French sexology, we have tried to open our journal to a wide variety of approaches. First of all, a chronological approach: André Dupras’s article focuses on the latter part of the 17th century; Philippe Brenot’s, on a long period from the 18th till the mid-20th century. Three articles, by Michel Erlich, Sylvie Chaperon and André Béjin, cover at least the 19th century. Two articles, by Alain Drouard and Alain Giami, concentrate exclusively on the 20th century, and two others, by Yves Ferroul and by Mireille Bonierbale along with Jacques Waynberg, on the 20th century and start of the 21st. Secondly, a variety of themes are treated. Out of these nine articles, three are biographical (on three physicians: Venette, Toulouse and Zwang); two concern major sexual dysfunctions (frigidity in women and premature ejaculation); and the remaining four deal with sexual surgery, the attitudes of French physicians and sexologists toward masturbation and sexual education, and the recent professional development of sexology in France. Thirdly, an approach via various issues. This special issue of Sexologies brings together five specialists in history and the social sciences (by alphabetical order: Béjin, Chaperon, Drouard, Dupras and Giami) and five physicians (Bonierbale, Brenot, Erlich, Ferroul and Waynberg). This balance between specialists will help readers to form an idea about the singularity and synergy of the work done in these various disciplines. This joint work, we are full aware, is a first step. When will a scholarly edition of Venette’s treatise (which dates back more than three centuries) be published? When will monographs of Félix Roubaud, René Guyon, Pierre Vachet, Paul Chanson or Georges Valensin be written? When will a compendium on 20th-century medical sexology in France be edited? Much is still to be done. Let us hope that this special issue will inspire those interested in sexology, physicians as well as other specialists.

A. Béjin (PhD)
Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS),
centre Roland-Mousnier, Histoire et civilisations,
Paris-IV-Sorbonne, France
E-mail address: Nbejin@aol.com (A. Béjin).

A. Giami (PhD)*
Inserm, U822, 94276 Le Kremlin Bicêtre, France
INED, 94276 Le Kremlin Bicêtre, France
Faculté de médecine, IFR69, université Paris-Sud-XI,
94276 Le Kremlin Bicêtre, France
E-mail address: giami@vjf.inserm.fr (A. Giami).

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