

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Alison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Brandy Schillace, Editor-in-Chief of Medical Humanities for the British Medical Journal, to discuss the ways in which society has historically pathologized women's sexuality. And so, can we start by explaining what we mean when we say pathologizing?

BS: Absolutely. So, when we think about pathology, what should spring to mind is this concept of disease. This idea that something is diseased, that it is contagious, that it is dangerous, and that is part of ill health, a non-natural state of being. And so, for instance, if we pathologize grief, it's like saying "you're being sad longer than you should be sad." It's not healthy, you have slipped into depression or something along those lines. So, to say that they were pathologizing women's sexuality, essentially, I think a good word to put in there is demonizing. Pathologizing, demonizing, very similar. But from a medical standpoint, so it was very much a kind of, this is the purview of medicine, women's sexuality is a disease to be cured. And this is the kinds of legal and medical interventions that were created to police that.

AT: So, one of the big ones is that women who acted out in some way in the 1800s and well into the 1900s, women who disobeyed their parents, women who disobeyed their husbands, could find themselves locked up for basically no reason at all. And a lot of it was tied to things like fighting for women's rights or any ridiculous, the list of reasons is just insane. But anyone who is not a satisfactory daughter or wife could face this, but a lot of it was tied to sexuality and women who acted out "sexually."

BS: Really useful term to men interested in policing women's bodies and women's sexuality was "hysteria." And I like to bring this up because we've heard the words, we have an idea of what they mean, but really it's quite complex. Hysteria, hysterectomy, all of this comes from this very, very early early concept going all the way back to the Greeks having to do with this idea that the womb was wandering around the body. It was like getting out of whack basically. And because they thought of women, the Greeks were notorious for this, actually the Romans were a bit better, but the Greeks really thought women were just vessels to make babies in and not really useful in any other way. And so obviously any disorder a woman had, in any way that she disappointed, that must be related to the fact that her womb was out of whack. So hysteria, you'd think we would have dropped that term, but no, instead it gets almost codified in medicine in the 19th century. And so a lot of things can be blamed on hysteria. We've read *The Yellow Wallpaper* about a woman who's basically locked up in the attic - there's a lot of women being locked up in the attic in the 19th century - for basically what was probably postpartum depression. But saying this is a womb problem, this is a woman's sexual parts problem, that's what hysteria gave you.

But then what the symptoms of it were such things like, oh, wanting to vote. Wanting to vote meant you might be suffering from hysteria, right? And in fact, they would recommend hysterectomies to women who could not be fixed in other ways. So repeat offenders who were, and by repeat offenders, I'm talking about like suffragettes who were trying to get the vote, who were doing hunger strikes and various other things, being arrested for this, if they wouldn't repent of their behavior and behave like nice young ladies who were going to get married and

have babies, the idea was that their lady parts, their sexual organs were somehow so out of whack that they were never going to function properly. And so they would enforce sterilization by giving them hysterectomies, which on one hand, you might think like, oh, well, okay, then I suppose then they don't have to have babies. And that would that be a plus? Not necessarily. Many of these women didn't want to have their own choices about reproduction. But in addition to that, it's not up until you get that really solid germ theory, none of these surgeries are particularly safe and can have complications and lots of other bad things can happen. So, it wasn't a death sentence, but it was much worse than, it wasn't like we're giving you birth control pills, right? It was like, we are going to cut out a part of your body because we think the fact that you want to take control of your sex is literally a sickness that needs to be stamped out. So the sad thing is the term hysteria could then be used for a whole variety of reasons. So you have a daughter who doesn't want to get married to the oaf that you want her to get married to. And she says, "no, I absolutely refuse." You could say she was hysterical. And this is the plot of some 18th century novels, a very famous one by Richardson called *Clarissa*, which is literally a million pages long. And I'm not necessarily recommending you read it. But it's all about this woman who doesn't want to marry somebody her dad wants her to marry, ends up running away from home and ending up in much, much worse plight as a result. Simply because women, by the way, that book influenced the legal system to a point, they decided that women were at that point allowed to say no. Now they weren't allowed to choose who they wanted to marry, but they were allowed to say no. So that was the big movement forward in the 18th century. So just to give you an idea of how bad things really were, because women were not supposed to be in charge of their own sexuality. They weren't supposed to have sexual desires. They weren't supposed to want rights for themselves. They weren't supposed to be loud. They weren't supposed to take charge. They weren't supposed to get an education. They're all these things. So the minute a woman did something, you did not think was what you wanted her to do as her husband or father, or sometimes brother even. If the father had died, brothers could take control of their sisters' lives. You could claim they had hysteria. You could subject them to medical intervention. And if the medical intervention failed, you could have them locked away. And this was a perfectly legal thing to do at the time.

AT: And so when we're talking about this idea where everything is inherently tied to a woman's sexuality, because they only saw women as this sexual object, we're also getting into the realm of Josephine Butler and the Contagious Disease Act, if you'd like to tell us about that.

BS: I would love to tell you about that. So I actually dressed up as Josephine Butler once for Halloween. No one knows who you are when you pick historical characters that obscure. But essentially, there were problems with syphilis. So some estimates suggest possibly up to one in three people were dealing with syphilis in Victorian London. I don't know if that's exactly accurate, but there was a lot of it going around. And there was problems because A) it was a sexually transmitted disease. And so men who contracted it from prostitutes didn't want to tell their wives that that's what had happened. So the men would then go get treatment and there was treatment, you could take mercury, which is bad for you, is kind of like the chemotherapy almost. But you could take that and that would help mitigate it. Ultimately a cure for syphilis

doesn't come about until much later. And it's an arsenic compound, Salvarsan 606, I think it's called, but you could treat it with mercury and you could live a relatively long and relatively healthy life while you had syphilis, while giving it to your spouse. So they would give syphilis to their wives and the women would go see doctors and the doctors would not tell them that they had syphilis or treat them for syphilis because that would implicate their husbands had been unfaithful. So the women died typically before their husbands because they were not in fact being treated with mercury. They often also gave birth to children with congenital syphilis and the syphilitic infants would have all kinds of problems, something called saddle nose that's where the nose does not develop. So they always have a baby-size nose while the rest of their face fills in. So they call it a saddle face, I guess. There were some a lot, often the infants didn't live. They would sort of shrivel and and as a result, I argue that Bram Stoker was partly influenced by this where he talks about like, the vampires feeding on children, vampire women feeding on children. Because prostitutes were called vampires, ladies of the night in the 19th century, and looked at as though they were how all the syphilis was getting around, right? Like as if prostitutes were just magically throwing syphilis at innocent men when they walked by. No one wanted to blame men for what was going on. So, they thought, "okay, how do we control syphilis? We don't know how to get rid of this disease. Well, we can't stop men from seeing prostitutes and we certainly don't want their wives to know they're seeing prostitutes. So what we'll do is we'll pass the Contagious Disease Acts, one of the caveats of which is we are now going to medically regulate prostitutes," which sounds like a good thing until you find out what they really mean. So, this is actually anyone a police officer suspected was a prostitute. And by the way, that was anyone out after dark by themselves, so women out after dark by themselves.

AT: I was gonna say, not **anyone**, any **woman**.

BS: Any woman, yes. Women outside after dark by themselves could be considered a prostitute. And they could take that woman, arrest her, force her to undergo medical examinations, some of it quite invasive. And from what I've read, probably sexually abusive. And they could incarcerate them for a period of time to make sure they were not sick. So basically like a quarantine. And then they would sometimes dose them with mercury and then set them set them loose again. So there's a problem. At this time, the Victorian period, especially in the late Victorian period, we have industrialization. People are working in factories. If you are lower than middle class, lots of women were in fact working in factories. And I don't know if you've ever been to England, but in the winter time, the sun sets it like 3:30. It gets dark very soon. So if you were on a late shift and you were out after dark walking home from your job at a factory, they could pick you up and arrest you. And this happened repeatedly because they were like, "oh, she's a pathological, sexy woman spreading vampiric viruses with her lady parts. We must arrest her because her sexuality is so dangerous." She might actually be a factory girl trying to get home. And the other thing that happened, they would arrest you. You would just disappear for a week. Nobody knew where you were. It's not you had a cell phone and they weren't going to give you a phone call. And your boss would just hire someone to replace you. So when these girls finally got released, the ones who were factory workers didn't have jobs anymore, which made it more likely that they might have to turn to prostitution. So instead of it

solving any problems, it caused myriad more problems.

And there was a woman named Josephine Butler who saw this plight. She was actually really instrumental, not only in advocating to get the the Acts overturned, but also in helping to shift blame to men and to fathers for bringing the disease home rather than laying it on the doorstep of prostitutes. So she worked with a lot, she tried to rehabilitate a lot of prostitutes. She talked about the fact that many of them, it's not like they were prostitutes because they were like, "wow, I just love living like this." They had been put in that position by men. And there was a wonderful quote, which I'm going to butcher. I apologize. But it was from a prostitute who said, "from the time I was young, I was handed around from man to man. Male doctors put their hands on us. Male priests pray for us. Men lock us up. Men let us go again. And we will not get out of the hands of men until we die." And this was just this horrible concept that from cradle to grave, many of these women's lives were completely overseen by and controlled by men. And because men only saw women as a vehicle for either having sex with for fun or for procreating, they had no other value. So of course, every woman in their eyes was was unutterably a sexual being.

And so medical practices, literally, and truly, I don't mean kind of, sort of, philosophically, pathologized women's sexuality. They actually named it. This was a disease. Any woman who was having sex for fun or was having sex for money was a diseased person. They felt she had degenerated, that her brain was mush, there was all of these concepts. Cesare Limbroso, who is responsible for introducing physiognomy concepts for determining who "looked like a criminal" did a whole study of like, "this is how you can tell it's a prostitute because she has this degraded physique because clearly she's less evolved than other women." And so when I say pathologization here, I mean unutterably, like there's no getting around the fact that they thought women and sex together was somehow itself the disease, almost as if it was worse than the syphilis itself. They basically thought there was a form of insanity. Oh, that was another thing. They had named many, many new types of insanity, but I have a wonderful book by Shuttleworth and someone else about diagnoses of bodies, called *Embodied Selves*. And they created all these was like nymphomania and hypermania, all these different things that they named. And there's a whole section just on the women and their sexy parts that they had named new mental illnesses to account for different kinds of hysteria.

So, the womb was a very, I mean, all through the 18th century, they spent a lot of time anatomizing women and pregnant women trying to get a sense of just what the womb was really all about. It really was a kind of black box. But instead of trying to seek ways to understand it better, you have a lot of this kind of calling women vampires, like there's almost this way in which they brought the mythology forward to say, there's diseases of mind and body and sexuality and all of these kinds of things, this incubus, succubus sort of stuff. And that persists into the 20th century. So it's not like we turned the corner - it's 1901, and everyone goes, "Oh, we understand these things now." No, this concept of women who are sexual being a bad thing is partly what spawned some of the sexual revolution issues in the '70s. So I mean, we're talking well after the 19th century.

AT: It is interesting when we're talking about this concept of they assumed everything came back to the womb. And I feel like even today, you get a lot of either professional or just personal

undermining of women and what they're saying. And especially if they're angry, if they're trying to talk about a problem. You say, "Oh, she's PMSing, she's hormonal. Are you on the rag?" It's like, "no, I'm angry because you say shit like that."

BS: Yeah. Well, and I think that's partly, again, it's a way of dismissing. I study the 18th century and wrote my dissertation about the 18th century. And one of the things I wrote about was a group of women who were trying to educate themselves and educate other women. And they called themselves educationalists. And female advocates was another, another term that they use for themselves, not feminists that word hadn't been invented yet. They wouldn't know what we meant. But it was very similar kind of concepts of women working for other women. And a lot of them were very interested in Cartesian dualism, this idea that the mind is utterly separate from the body. Because they were looking for a way to go, "look, my body doesn't run me." Now, we know that our bodies and minds are really interconnected. And hormones were named, I should say, in I think 1902. So obviously we do have hormones that deeply affect the way our brains work and our brains affect the way everything else works and et cetera. But they were looking for a way of saying "stop judging what's going on in my head based on what's going on in my pants." And that was something that was huge for them. And my dissertation when I was in graduate school was called *The Alphabet of Sense*. And it was what these women called their education, that they weren't trying to learn Latin and Greek and advanced mathematics, though some of them did. Bathsua Makin, for instance, was a mathematician. But what they were trying to do was learn how to operate in society and have philosophical conversation and understand how, what we would almost think of as like social and cultural education today. And they were basically saying "**you** have taken that from us." Like, it wasn't that "we don't have that." "You won't educate us. And then you complain about how stupid we are. Well, you haven't educated us." So, you know, it's a really, really interesting, other women. Women knew that this was happening to them. So it wasn't as though women were just being farmed and not recognizing. Many women understood that they were not being given the rights that they deserved. And they fought for them, but they were so penalized for fighting for their rights that you can kind of see why if you have a comfortable life, you might not want to jeopardize that.

AT: When we're talking about classism, even women who were of higher status could still be institutionalized for, again, like no reason. And they may have been treated better at the asylum. They may have not had quite as horrific conditions.

BS: It's a subject of many a fictional novel, but it doesn't get to be the subject of fictional novels without there being some reason for that. If a woman was standing between you and something you wanted, there were lots of ways to get rid of her, I guess is one way of putting it. I'm not saying that it was done a lot, but at the same time, if you were a lady with a fortune, that wasn't always going to guarantee you good treatment. It might guarantee that rather adventurous and opportunistic people might ultimately end up in control of that. And again, this is partly why parents to their credit, they weren't trying to pick people for their daughters because they were just being jerks, a lot of them were trying to avoid their daughters falling prey to people who wouldn't treat them well. And so this is also why you get a lot of weird uneven marriages. And

just to take a moment to, I think it's so easy to villainize the parents, Victorian parents setting up marriages for their daughters. But one thing to remember is that many times, it wasn't always to build a fortune. I think we always think, okay, these adventuring parents who are basically selling off their daughters to try and get a fortune. Sometimes it was much more about, well, the daughter has the fortune, and we just want to make sure she ends up with somebody who's not going to like squander it or gamble it away or something. And then you get a lot of unequal age matches because like, okay, well, this guy was married and his wife passed away, but we know he was good at being a husband because like, so you'd have people setting them up with much, so you have a lot of very young ladies. In the 18th century, 16 was not at all unheard of to be married and already have children, whereas men were often in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and above. So that unequalness is really important to recognize too because, of course, they expected men to sow their wild oats amongst some population of women, who knows which one, right? Not the ones you have, right? Not your daughter. But then they didn't expect women to have to have welders, to have sexual feelings. So it's like, well, "I don't want to marry this like super old crusty guy." And they're like, "oh, it's fine." "I'm not attracted to them" was not an argument they were allowed to make because if you were actually motivated sexually, well, then something was wrong with you and you were damaged goods, right?

So you can see the double bind you end up with. You have these daughters that are supposed to not have any sexual feelings who are then being matched up with people that they have no feelings for, but can't communicate that, like they have to come up with other reasons. Like if you say that it's because "I don't want sexy times with this person," that's a problem because then that makes you somebody that can be pathologized and institutionalized and etc. So it's frequently, it's so much more complicated. And mothers, they wanted to find good spouses for their daughters. They did because they'd been through it already and they didn't want their kids to end up in a bad situation. And yet, if you take away someone's power and autonomy, bad situations are probably going to happen.

AT: Yeah, it almost feels like you've got these parents who are saying that we need to hand them over to another parent in the sense that we have de-sexualized her. And this is someone who is going to take care of her who is probably our age. It's just creepy.

BS: It's a really interesting one. I mean, there are plenty of cases where there were arranged marriages in history that were perfectly fine and wonderful. But you also have cases where there were love matches that, and they got into terrible trouble for it. This is all the way up. I mean, technically, the Archduke Ferdinand, whose assassination brought us into World War I, he had married "below his station" in a love match. And that was partly what, he got on the outs with the emperor, who was his uncle, I think, and probably had something to do with the fact that he was where he was when he was when he got assassinated. So if you think about it, you were taking a risk if you married for love because your family might disown you, they might take away the money, they might cast you off. If you're a woman and you have no ability to get a job and make money for yourself, well, that doesn't leave a whole lot of professions left. Well, there's factory girl work and there's prostitution, except in both of those, you can be arrested by the Contagious Disease Act. So, you know, I just want to give that sense of unbelievable cyclical

incarceration. Like it just feels like a cycle that you cannot escape. And you don't feel as though the medical community is taking you seriously either. They were manhandled by doctors as well as many other people, as well as police. And in addition, their lives frequently were not terribly valued on their own. So if you were a sexualized woman, if you were a woman who was a prostitute, or you were an unwed mother, or something of that nature, your life was not considered terribly valuable. And as an example, many people are familiar with Jack the Ripper. And of course, Jack the Ripper murdered prostitutes. And there were five victims. A lot of people don't know about the torso murderer who was operating before and after, and during the Ripper years and actually murdered more women. But again, all of the women were either prostitutes or unwed mothers or were on the outs with their family or castaways or were homeless or something like that. And therefore, police were not inherently, I mean, they were interested in stopping a murderer, yes. But it's very interesting how the victim kind of determines how seriously they take the crime. So, most people don't even know that the torso murders were going on. Most people have heard about Jack the Ripper and not the other one. They were very downplayed in the media. And they were they were quite gruesome as well. He or they, we're not actually sure who it was, basically anatomized them. So they were often in many, many pieces. And here you have police trying to solve this and yet, if this were some well-respected, important man who was being murdered and cut up, it would be a very, very different kind of investigation. So I like to bring that up to you is that if you don't value a woman already, you don't value women period, but then you especially don't value women who are considered sexual creatures outside of the control of men, then who wouldn't be in danger of being murdered or attacked or in some other way harmed. And so you can kind of understand the power and the importance of someone like Josephine Butler, who was a woman standing up for women because no one else was going to stand up for you.

AT: And when we're talking about the intersectionality, where some women are obviously at much greater risk than others, because I do think that if the torso guy had been going after rich ladies, they would have gotten their shit together a lot faster. But one of the most vulnerable groups when we're looking at this sort of issue is queer women. And my understanding is that oftentimes being a gay man or other form of queer men has been criminalized, whereas the women were pathologized. So they were putting the men in prisons and they were putting the women in institutions broadly speaking. Obviously, there are exceptions.

BS: That's a complicated one. And it depends on what country and cultural context you're talking about. For instance, in Germany, in the late 19th, early 20th century, there was there was no prohibition on lesbianism, partly because there was a sort of tacit understanding that it wasn't really sex if there wasn't a penis involved, which we will all find very funny, obviously. But that was that was one of the things that they kind of thought. So it was not criminalized. And there were a lot of women who lived with other women. And that was countenanced. There were lesbian coffee houses and lesbian reading rooms in in Germany. But it was much less tolerated actually in Britain. And so in Britain, and class matters a lot too. So in Britain, if you had money and you were a lesbian, that was kind of okay. Like if you had enough money on your own and you controlled that money, it's like it made you enough of a man that they were like, "okay, we'll

let you get away with some stuff.” But there was a case I read about, I cannot remember exactly where it occurred, but basically a woman had a stalker that was another woman. A woman who turned up at all her, she was a dancer, a burlesque dancer, and turned up at all her burlesque dances, wrote her love letters. And when they found out that it was another woman, they immediately put her into a mental asylum where she died. Like they never let her out again. So there's another example of, again, criminal behavior, you shouldn't stalk people. But when they realized it was a woman stalking her, it wasn't like, “oh, we will penalize them and arrest them.” It was “okay, she is insane. And we must put her into an asylum because she's writing to another woman.” And she might in fact have been transmasculine if that was the terminology that they had at the time. It's difficult to tell when the people writing the story are the police. But you're right, there was also, this is very strange. But as I understand it from some of the research I've done, it was more advantageous. Like women who were living as lesbian couples, but both of them as women sometimes had more trouble than couples where one of them was transmasculine. So they weren't passing. So I know there were struggles for people and that it was a difficult kind of time. But it actually seems to be worse in Britain than it was like, say, in Germany or France.

AT: And the fight for queer rights between World War I and World War II is a particular area of interest for you, right? Sure. So it's very interesting because a lot of the work that I've done looking at that interwar LGBT and trans movement was looking at trans women. And we talk about it's true, queer women were definitely targeted and had more struggles than women who were not queer. However, trans women always for some reason seem to be the biggest target. They were the ones who tended to be arrested at a much greater rate and persecuted at a much greater rate and frequently targeted for other kinds of violence and abuse. And so the story that I'm researching right now follows a couple of people who were trying to make that transition before and after surgery, just to talk about the vulnerability that comes with that. Women who were trying to become transmasculine also struggled because there weren't the surgeries that you could you could actually do a true full sex transitional surgery for trans women, even in the 1920s, a vaginoplasty, everything. You couldn't do the same thing for trans masculine people, not until after World War II. During World War II, we have a plastic surgeon who starts to really understand how to do facial reconstruction and he ends up doing the first phalloplasty on Michael Dillon after World War II. So that's when that became a thing. So it was much harder for transmasculine people to fully assimilate. They could have their breasts removed, they could take testosterone, but there was a lot of things they could not do. So there was a time where you have kind of trans lives and queer lives working together to try and get rights. And then sadly, as so often happens, division gets sowed among and between the groups. And so everyone's trying to not fall victim to what is becoming rising fascism and rising anti-gay and anti-trans things. This is right before the Nazis take over, but it's rising. You start having these schisms where instead of working together, they begin to actually kind of work against one another and it's really a shame. But it's partly you're trying to figure out “where are you? Who's safe? Which of us is the safest? Who's the least safe?” And the trans women were the ones that actually, originally lesbian groups were really welcoming to trans women. But then increasingly, they were like, “actually, no, you're not with us. So you have to go.” It's just a



sad state of affairs that was not because, I mean, the schisms were internal, but I also feel as though they weren't really internal because they were driven by all of this external pressure to try and "normalize" people. But one of the reasons that trans women got so much crap thrown in their direction was because no one - particularly what I mean here is cis white men - could understand why a man would want to become a woman. Because of course, that's the worst possible thing. So it gets back to misogyny again and again and again. This is 1930s, 1940s, where you have still the concept of woman is still the thing that seems to be what triggers people to hate, to fear, to pathologize. And that just I mean, it hasn't really gone away.

AT: I'm just trying to remember when they finally removed like being transgender specifically from the DSM. Because I believe body dysmorphic disorder, which is the underlying issue for trans people generally speaking of "I am in the wrong body," that is still in the DSM. But the state of being transgender was literally pathologized in the DSM like since its inception.

BS: There's a lot of problems with the DSM anyway, they still pathologize grief. So, but I think, what we see right now is so much of the anti- well, okay, anti-Semitism, anti-trans, anti-gay, all of these kinds of things you'll also see. You just look out at the crowd and who are you going to see there? Misogynist, anti-women, like these things connect. These groups align for reasons. You get your neo-Nazis and your anti-trans and your homophobic and your anti-women's rights. And it's all the same group of, they get along well, I guess is what I'm saying. Because so much of this still is rooted in my opinion in misogyny, not misogyny just for people born with women's parts, but misogyny for the concept of women and all of the things that that represents. And that as something that I feel, it's a weird thing that we all have in common. It's not necessarily a great thing to all have in common, but misogyny is the one thing every single group should want to fight. As a matter of fact, one of the ways that the Nazis attacked Jews ahead of the Holocaust was by saying they were too feminine. So it just gives you this sense that the hatred of women, of anything that, of things that are nurturing, of all the things that we sort of think of in that context, that's the thing that has driven so much of this hatred. And so I always feel like misogyny is almost always at the bottom of most other forms of hatred. It's like almost how we begin to hate. So if someone's a misogynist, trust me, they'll add more. There will be more, they'll hate more things. They're just getting started.

AT: Now that's a whole other conversation. Going back to the question of only seeing "woman equals something I can have sex with." I won't say someone because that seems too humanizing in the context of what we're talking about. When we're talking about people who violate gender binary norms, I feel like we also need to mention how much of the anti-drag queen legislation and propaganda and everything comes back to this claim that they are protecting children from this sexual thing. They're presenting drag queens as inherently sexualized. And it's been pointed out that you are inherently assuming that someone presenting as hyper feminized is automatically sexual, which is nonsensical.

BS: Yes, it is. But again, it's that scary women sexuality thing that is so terrifying. But I would also say that having just completed research in the 1920s and '30s interwar period, this concept

of protecting the children, that was engineered specifically to attack anyone. Like for instance, they used it against gay men, but they tended to only use it against feminized gay men, gay men who presented in a feminine way. They used it to attack Jewish people, claiming Jews were going to like turn children gay. Like this concept that basically anyone you can call a pedophile, right, is a powerful weapon. This is why Marjorie Taylor Greene uses it over here in the United States context. MTG loves to call people pedophiles. Like that's like her thing, because it has such a knee jerk reaction for people that it immediately turns them against you, even if they don't know all the details or even if there are no details. So you're right, on one hand, it's this concept that being a drag queen is somehow hyper sexualized, is a hyper sexualized woman, but also man, it's a very, they've created monsters in their minds. But it's almost always been a tactic to use against gay people, because there's another myth, which is that gay people are hyper sexual, right? And again, you can tie that right back to women are hyper sexual, therefore men who love other men must be feminized and therefore hyper sex- it's just a bizarre train of thought that makes no sense in rational terms, but which has a long, long history, at least in the West, in the white West, You have this long history of fear of sexuality that is not inherently masculine and violent. In Germany, in the interwar period, how they put it was, baldly. I like to use it because it's so bald, it's like, "well, if you are a straight white person who wants to have babies, anything you do is okay. It's okay by virtue of the fact you're doing it." Whereas if you are someone who is not straight or white or cis, then anything you do is not okay by virtue of the fact that you're doing it. So it has nothing to do with the act and has everything to do with the actor. And that has always been how they've moved the goalposts, generally speaking on rights.

AT: Last time you were here, we talked about women and autism. And there is a related issue that I think comes from this same place of not believing women, not seeing them as a whole person, where medical professionals will ignore women's pain or other conditions by telling them it's all in their head. So real medical conditions go undiagnosed because a doctor tells a woman, even today, "oh, it's probably just stress. You should go see a therapist."

[Listen to our episode on Women and Autism](#) or [read the transcript](#).

BS: Our modern medical system owes many things to its early development in the 18th and 19th century. I mean, a lot of our medical systems are still based around the same kind of systemic structures that existed then. And there's inherent bias that you don't realize is mixed in with that. And one of those inherent bias is this concept that somehow women are unreliable because of our sexual parts. That somehow, as though testicles never lie or something, but for some reason, ovaries and wombs are just going to like confuse your brain at all times. And it's really actually a shame. This is one of those ways in which patriarchy also hurts men. Men also have hormonal imbalances. Men also they go through puberty. They also go through something that's not quite like menopause, but they go through hormonal changes throughout their lives, which can really mess up all kinds of things, including your mental health, but it's ignored. So, men's own mental health and hormonal health is often ignored because somehow they're supposed to be fine without recognizing that hormones in general affect all kinds of things in our bodies. And it's a very, goose and gander kind of situation where they go, "okay, I believe the

man because his testicles don't lie to him, but I can't believe the woman because her ovaries are just telling falsies all the time." And you would never say it like that, but deep inside, there's this bias that has grown up. And if you ever go read a medical textbook that's say 10 years old, a 10-year-old medical textbook, which is probably still being used in classrooms. You'll see it right in the text, this concept that somehow the women's body. I mean, it was the '80s before medical trials even suggested that things be tested on women, they just took it as read that the male body was like standard. So, I guess what I'm saying is, I understand how this happens. And I work in medical humanities, I spend a lot of time talking about this in terms of racism and ableism, but it's true concerning gender too, which is, all of us have a bias. Everybody. And you don't correct it unless you recognize it, unless you go, "okay, here are mine, here's how I can get under them or around them." But you have to admit that they're there. And that's really, really difficult for people who feel like they're already enlightened, right? "No, I went to the best medical program in the country. I took classes on feminism. Clearly, I understand what I'm doing and I'm not discounting women," but maybe you are. I've had women doctors not listen to me. So, it's something you suck up from your environment without ever realizing that you're doing it. And so I try not to get, it does make me angry, but I realize that the doctors themselves are not always to blame. Our system is so deeply, deeply stained with racism and sexism that how anybody gets through the program without sucking up some of it into their DNA is probably impossible. So that means it's an active fight all the time to be taken seriously. But we have to recognize that all of medicine, every medical doctor you have ever been to, has at some point had in their education been instilled with the idea that women's sexuality is somehow linked to their pathology. It's just in there. It's in there. There is such a pervasive hatred of women that many women hate themselves as women. And you wouldn't necessarily think that that's what you're doing, but it's true. And I think that it's something I've wrestled with. I'm non-binary, but I identify as a woman, which is a complicated, I mean, I identify as a woman and other things. But it is something that I have to look at that, some of the reasons that we struggle with our own womanhood is because we've been taught the hatred of women since our since our crib. So, no one has escaped that. There's no place on earth that is matriarchal and matrilineal enough that you can get away from it. Unless we raised you in a vacuum of space or something, there is no place where you haven't been exposed to the hatred of women. And then if we add things to it, right, you're a woman and you're black and disabled and queer and trans, then oh my god, the hatred just is so much more focused on those groups. And so I think the first thing to do as with any problem is to recognize it. The second thing to do is to try and fix it in yourself because of course you have to start somewhere and learning self-love even as regards to the confusion of gender is not an easy thing for any of us.

AT: And we've sort of touched on this with, forced invasive, I won't even call it gynecological exams because that's, I feel like that gives it a note of credibility that it doesn't deserve. But yeah, forced genital examinations and other things. When we're talking about pathologizing women, medical trauma is very real and historically and today treatments have often made things worse, whether we're talking about bleeding someone with leeches, forcing them to have a lobotomy, Isaac Baker Brown performed non-consensual clitorectomies on women because he thought that masturbation was the source of all their problems. And I mean, that was horrific.

But even today, there are so many drugs out there. And as you were saying, women are still often excluded from medical trials. There's less research on diseases and conditions that primarily affect women. So even today, when we're looking at drugs and other forms of treatment, they can do more harm than good. And there's also the psychological trauma when we're talking about women going to get help and not being believed and not being supported.

BS: Yes, that's true and real. And, acknowledging that is something we can do for each other, but we're very far away from fixing it at the structural level.

AT: Are there efforts being made to counter these biases that we've been talking about?

BS: One of the most important things, and I say this all the time as the editor-in-chief of Medical Humanities for BMJ, is that you need a conversation with, not a conversation about, and that you need to hear from instead of talking at. And so I think representation is actually how we fix most of these things. And what I mean by that is, take publication, since that's where I started as an example. My journal, if it was only publishing the works about gender, medicine, health, and etc, from doctors who had all graduated from the University College of London and were all white and all men, or were all funded by the same funding body, etc, you're going to get a very skewed perspective on the world, and you're not actually going to change things. One of the things we have done, and we're continuing to do, and though it's not easy, is opening up basically building on-ramps for non-traditional scholars, for people for whom English is the second language, for people from the global south, for early career scholars, for black scholars, for disabled scholars, to get into print at the academic level talking about, and medical humanities is a critical lens on medicine, if you guys aren't familiar with it. It's basically looking at medicine with the humanities and going, "what's the way to actually move forward for human health?" So, you introduce those new voices and you let them speak for themselves, and you provide the means for them to actually do that, because there's a lot of obstacles for them, right? So we have to actively, we can't just say, we'd like you here, that's like telling someone in a wheelchair, I want you in my building, but not building a ramp, so you have to build the ways for them to reach you. And I think the same thing goes for medical practice. As you end up with more people getting involved in medicine who are queer and trans and black and female and etc. And then eventually they end up being educators, so some of it is simply representation. The more representation you have, the more of it you see, the more of it you read, the more of it you hear, the more of it you practice. Eventually that script will flip, but it will take the concerted effort of those of us who are interested in social justice, allowing those people to enter those spaces in the first place. And so that's one of the reasons why I don't usually start with the end of what the problems are. I tend to start over here at the beginning of just being able to make sure that those people can reach an audience, because I feel like that's where we start. We start there. You can't start at the end. We can't take it down from the top, right? We're gonna have to change it from the bottom.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.