

The research project *Perfecta* (The Perfection of the Female Body: anatomical discourses and defenses of women, 16th-18th c., SSHRC) explores the shift in defining the female body that was launched by the "sensible anatomy" of the early 16th century in Italy (Berengario da Carpi). Whereas the traditional medical texts considered the male body an exclusive model for the "perfection" of the human body, the emphasis on observation through dissection and the philological humanist movement propelled the female sexual anatomy as an emblematic topic for renewing the medical and cultural conceptions about sex, gender, and procreation. Beyond the (alleged) first anatomical findings of Estienne (1545), Colombo (1559), and Fallopio (1561), the female organs observed and situated in this new context contributed to a general reassessment of the hierarchy of sexes.

The scope of the MHL collections and their search tools allowed the reading of this historical shift in medical theories beyond a linear narrative of "great discoveries". Consulting the collections as a treasure comprising of – along with well-known titles – obscure pamphlets, compilations, controversies, and out-of-the-discipline writings etc., we identified new sources and questions for a history of gynecology. First, we measured the resistance that cultural practices oppose to this past medical research: one example is the elusive membranous seal of virginity, called the "Hymen", whose existence was disproved quite early in the 16th c., but which has been described, commented on and "repaired" until now. Second, we heard the conversation of the reception, discussion and transmission of new ideas in secondary collections (compilations, controversies, errors, recipes, textbooks, proverbs) that are usually overlooked in a linear telling of scientific progress. Thus, we appraised the erratic polyphony of past medical investigations: chronology is deceptive in the positivist retellings of knowledge advancement and the Renaissance perfection of the body female has coexisted with enduring mentions of its imperfections.