What will people read of the gendered sexual assumptions of our age? There are outpourings and analyses, with legal and social records to expose our tensions, contradictions and enthusiasms for women’s rights and health. We live in a fertile period.

Little did I know how much Ursula Potter could uncover about gendered early-medical categorisation of girls and women underlying that fascinating period during Shakespeare’s productivity. My interest has been in how much self-determination is possible for Shakespeare’s women, his wide range of voicing of women’s concerns and predicaments, and their silences. Ursula Potter, in The Unruly Womb in Early Modern English Drama (Medieval Institute Publications, 2019) has gone much deeper into the male psyche governing Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Shakespeare was even more remarkable than I thought when dramatising some girls and women’s moments as forcible, sprightly actors in their own cause.

Ursula Potter revealed that the dramatic potential was to have a father not yet old, obsessed and fearful of a daughter’s looming puberty – what if she should become a sexual being? If she is pale, she must need sex. Marry her off, lest she become lustful. I read this superb dissection of voluminous evidence in bursts, with great annoyance at the tricks of men, opportunistically exerting domain by conflating chastity with virtue, sexuality with sin, and filial aspiration met with derision. How many genders could maintain this illogicality, this disregard of female biology? And of course, men’s idea was that women belong to men. So there.

Thank God for dramatists.

I wish I could have read Ursula Potter’s revelation decades ago, but it could not have been written then. Her forensic intensity of analysis focused onto the medical interpretation of chauvinistic power is very much of our age.

There is very deep scholarship and percipience here, and it is fascinating to delve into this greater consciousness of Tudor and Stuart assumptions, with Shakespeare’s dramatisations as windows to the light, a more honest display of women. I enjoy the discussions of my beloved characters and predicaments, while at the same time I am made furious by increasing knowledge of the sexual wrongs decreed by patriarchs.

I have always been horrified at Juan Vives, and it is good to read his comeuppance, as in Potter’s revelation: “So fearful was Vives of the influence of the womb on the young female body that he urges regular severe fasts to ‘extinguish the fires of youth…. He makes it clear that to even experience sexual longings is to irreversibly contaminate her virginal state…. But women too were predatory, and Vives rather rashly asserted that they could ‘transmit a deadly poison from their eyes and annihilate you with a single glance.’ ” Well, yes.

Ursula Potter finds precise illustrations for views of the time; simultaneously sounding the reverberations which acute contemporary audiences heard. Juliet and Ophelia, it was so much worse for you than I had realised; the cruelty of your fathers’ dominance made life
truly impossible. In *Taming*, the fasting and denial of meat to Kate would have been interpreted by audiences as a means of diminishing her sexuality to make her submissive. Potter clarifies: “Such tragic daughters as Juliet, Ophelia, Desdemona, and Hero are all victim to an upbringing where a father’s assumptions of complete paternal authority, and his commitment to an ideological code of female conduct, render his daughter dependent, naïve, and incredibly vulnerable. Each of their fathers adheres to stereotypes of female behaviour and paternal authority which even then were regarded as dated. By contrast, all Shakespeare’s heroines who survive in the outside world – such as Portia, Beatrice, Rosalind, Helena, and Viola – do so precisely because their fathers are either dead or absent, and their development is thus shaped by experience and exposure to society.” (p.107)

Ursula Potter explores and expands the impact of the many plays she discusses in detail. Characters on stage successfully engage audiences. Horrifying is her skilful dissection of complicating attitudes towards menstruation, sexual organs, witchcraft, religion, – most of all, that symbol the womb which represented all that was good, limiting and troublesome about women.

This exploration is a tour de force, giving more than I could have imagined existed on sexual twists and traps from pre-Elizabethan attitudes and assumptions. The growing medical class, the rise of Protestantism – and dramatists – then brought some improvement in the understanding of the female gender. Art arrives first, then critics.

And four hundred years later? Let us learn from *The Unruly Womb*, an invaluable resource, especially for young people who wish to identify whether society and authority can frame their lives.

Alice Arnott Oppen OAM