

Agnodice Biography

Agnodice

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Biography

Agnodice (born ca. 300 BC) is credited with practicing medicine in ancient Greece, at a time when women were legally barred from that occupation. Some question the likelihood that she was an historical figure. Little is known about her life, other than information supplied by Hyginus, a first century Latin author.

According to legend, Agnodice wanted to learn medicine. By cutting her hair and wearing men's clothing, she was able to become a student of the famous Alexandrian physician, Herophilus. After her studies were completed, she heard a woman crying out in the throes of labor and went to her assistance. The woman, thinking Agnodice was a man, refused her help. However, Agnodice lifted up her clothes and revealed that she was a woman. The female patients then allowed Agnodice to treat them. When the male doctors discovered that their services were not wanted, they accused Agnodice of seducing their patients. They also claimed that the women had feigned illness in order to get visits from Agnodice.

When Agnodice was brought to trial, she was condemned by the leading men of Athens. At this point, their wives became involved. According to Hyginus, they argued that "you men are not spouses but enemies, since you're condemning her who discovered health for us." Their argument prevailed and the law was amended so that freeborn women could study medicine."

Antiqua Medicina commented on the legend of Agnodice by noting that, "...it is highly unlikely that Hyginus' account is based upon fact." Archaeologists have unearthed a number of figurines identified as the mythical woman Baubo. According to Greek legend, she amused the goddess Demeter by pulling up her dress over her head and exposing her genitals. It may be that the story of Agnodice may simply be an explanation for such a figure. The article went on to note that the name itself, Agnodice, was translated in Ancient Greek to mean "chaste before justice," a device "not uncommon in Greek literature."

Whether or not her tale is based on fact, it is one to which the world of medicine has long ascribed. Agnodice will be remembered as the first female gynecologist.