Revisiting Metaphors of Women’s Sexuality in Female Sexual Dysfunction

In 2006, at the conference, Making Sense Of: Health, Illness, and Disease (Mansfield College, Oxford), I gave a presentation on metaphor and female sexual dysfunction (FSD). At that time, I associated the highly metaphorical language used by experts to describe women’s sexuality, a well-documented part of the process of developing diagnostic criteria for FSD, with both the ambivalent outcomes of research on women’s sexual difficulties and the broader medicalization women’s sexuality. I also offered rhetorical analysis as a method for critiquing the medicalization of sex, noting the necessity of persuasion in the production of diagnostic categories that will, in effect, encourage individuals to, first, see their sexualities as problematic, and second, to seek treatment. Above all, I argued that, while persuasion is a necessary part of the medicalization process, persistent metaphors of female sexuality narrowed the outcome of FSD research. In short, the failure to discover a pharmaceutical treatment upholds a view of women as sexually “mysterious” or “complex.” Lately, FSD has been the subject of renewed controversy. This year, for example, Boehringer announced that they were on the verge of a pharmaceutical treatment, only to retract the promise of new drug for FSD. My presentation will extend my earlier analysis to consider how metaphors of female sexuality may account for new developments on FSD, particularly this latest failure to satisfactorily diagnose, and treat, women’s sexual problems.

Biography
Monica Brown is a PhD student in English at the University of British Columbia, where she specializes in the history and theory of rhetoric, and studies under the supervision of Judy Z. Segal, author of Health and the Rhetoric of Medicine (2005). While her dissertation study, Persuasion and Panic in the Public Sphere, focuses on risk communication and public deliberation in the context of global pandemic, she also uses rhetorical theory to critique the medicalization of human problems, and has written and presented on female sexual dysfunction.