Nymphomania: A History

In the 19th century, medicine helped to recreate women's innate character—formerly thought to be lustful—as modest and submissive. This did not mean that women were assumed to be devoid of sexual desire; only a few medical men actually proselytized that extreme view. In fact, medical attention focused on the potential for sexual desire to overwhelm women. Within this context, nymphomania was a disease in the making.

This paper examines the history of nymphomania: an organic disease in the 19th century, a psychological disorder in the 20th. Today, it seems to have taken on a somewhat humorous tone, although a darker side still lingers. Examining the changing nature of the medical theories about female sexuality, reminds us just how much these supposedly scientific notions are themselves a reworking of older stereotypes of women.

Biography
Carol Groneman is professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and long-time member of the WSC and of the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians. She has taught the history of women, sexuality, and gender and is the author of Nymphomania: A History (Norton, 2000).