

THE FOLK PRACTICE OF GYNECOLOGY AND OBSTETRICS IN THE MIDDLE AGES*

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In order to discuss the practice of medicine in the Middle Ages, we must make a careful distinction between school and folk medicine, for in that time more than in almost any other they represent two basically different ways of dealing with the physical problems of existence. School medicine is—usually—scientific medicine, that is to say, practices, medications, and treatments are developed from a logical testing of observations and theories. Folk medicine is the practice of various techniques for the purpose of correcting physical ailments by a practitioner unschooled in medicine who works from experience and hearsay, and probably a native talent, without the *systematic* testing of any of the practices.

But in both cases there is an underlying working principle. School medicine begins with a theory about the cause of disease, and builds from that a system of medicine. Folk medicine follows very much the same course, but in place of a theory about the cause of disease, one finds a mythology, that is, an attempt to explain the mysteries of life. This introduces the element which we often call the superstitious aspect of folk medicine. In the Middle Ages this mythology was, of course, that of Christianity, including the classical Roman and Greek, Germanic, and Hebrew elements that had been incorporated.

Practitioners of this kind are usually found in rural areas where there is no access to professional medicine, and—in the Middle Ages—also in monasteries, where there could have been access to professional medicine, but very often was not. We know, for example, that before the prohibitions of the twelfth century, beginning with the Council of Rheims in 1131, against the practice of medicine by the clergy, that monks and nuns—Hildegard of Bingen, for example—ministered not only to their brothers and sisters but also served as court physicians, taught medicine,¹ and probably also provided medical care to the people of the countryside.

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¹ See David Riesman, *The Story of Medicine in the Middle Ages* (New York: Hoeber, 1935), pp. 21-22 for a brief account of the most famous.

In such a role the monasteries also served as the preservers and furtherers of medical tradition by storing, copying, and transmitting manuscripts. They did this not only for school medicine, but also for the folk medicine tradition. Thus we come to the focus of this discussion today—a unique manuscript from the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century in which is preserved a fairly large amount of material on gynecology and obstetrics.

The basically Latin manuscript, Codex 803 of the Burgerbibliothek in Bern, Switzerland, is a rotulus 631 cm. long and an average 13 cm. wide, written on both sides in a variety of hands. Comprised of 16 pieces of parchment of varying length both glued together and fastened with scraps of parchment, the manuscript contains 1314 lines, 619 on the front side, 695 on the verso. Of these verso lines 296 are Latin to German glosses, alphabetically ordered, that serve partially as glosses to the text proper.² The text of the manuscript is of the most varied content, almost entirely medical. There are 221 recipes for medications or treatments for humans, one recipe completely in German, five sections on the medical uses of different plants—on the value of betony (betonica), caniculata (Ms: erchantilla), dracontium, cinquefoil (pentaphyllum), and hyssopus, six sections on the medical uses of different animals and their parts, including the vulture, the young of swallows, the badger, the male goat, wild boar, bull and hare—the latter is the most extensively mentioned—ten recipes for ailments of domestic animals, three methods of removing insects or snakes, one cosmetic recipe, and 28 magical items, incantations and amulets. If this seems to be a somewhat vague and disorganized listing of the contents, be assured that the contents themselves are just as disorganized. Imbedded in all this are 126 lines dealing with the specific physical problems of women and with childbirth. This seems at first glance like very little out of a thousand lines, but remember that it was written in a monastery.

The exact provenance of the manuscript has not yet been determined. It came to the Bern library in the manuscript collection of the Count of Mülinen, one of the leading families of that city. He, of course, like all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collectors, kept no record of where he obtained it. The manuscript itself contains a notation that yields some information about its fairly recent history. In a hand of the seventeenth century in Latin: medical recipes (experi-

² Steinmeyer-Sievers, *Die Althochdeutschen Glossen* (Berlin, 1879-1898), Vol 3, MXII, MLIV.

menta medica) against various ailments, together with an alphabetical index of plants in Latin and German . . . ; given to Conrad Pfister, Professor in Basel, by Caspar Gruenewald, Diploma holder; from some Alsatian monastery.³ Conrad Pfister was Professor of Botany at the University of Basel from 1614 and librarian from 1622. In the latter position he founded the library and built up the collections—books and manuscripts—until his death in 1634. Gruenewald was a student there, and came originally from a small town in the Alsace, Gebwiler, in which the priests from the monastery of Murbach, a few miles distant, had a town house. One immediately conjectures that the manuscript originated there and at the dissolution of the monastery came into lay hands and thence to Gruenewald.

Professor Henzen of Bern also established on linguistic evidence that the manuscript was written in the Alsace.⁴ Murbach was the most illustrious monastery in that area, a center of learning and an influential scriptorium. If it was written as seems likely at Murbach, we must ask who used the gynecological material.

But before we discuss further the possible users of this manuscript let us examine the gynecological contents. When we turn to a consideration of birth and the physical structures and processes leading to it, we are dealing with the greatest mystery of life in the medieval view, and we should not be surprised to find an array of mythological elements, both openly expressed and subtly concealed. Let us examine some representative sections from the gynecological material of this manuscript, in which we find the interplay of pragmatism and mythology. These sections are found at the end of the article.

I

The first section deals with a common problem and is representative of the way in which recipes are placed together. They are short and precise—at this time one rarely finds the very long recipes of the late Middle Ages—and they provide all that the scribe has been able to collect on that topic. Since this manuscript was written over a long period, about 50 years, it does tend to repeat itself and in one section it even copies itself.

³ By comparison of this entry with Pfister's letters in the manuscript collection of the University of Basel, I have been able to establish that it is in his own hand.

⁴ "Der Rotulus von Mülinen" in *Geschichte, Deutung, Kritik*, ed. Maria Bindschedler and Paul Zinsli (Bern: Francke, 1969), passim.

The first proposed treatment is an early example of *Dreckapotheke*: “Let the woman drink the urine⁵ of a she-goat. It will call forth the menstrual period.” It is not entirely excluded that the drinking of a repulsive substance could produce an internal upset that would provoke the flow, particularly if the woman were not pregnant. But at work here is also the sympathetic principle so common in medieval medicine. Urine flows and from seemingly the same place as menstrual blood, perhaps the urine of a female goat can induce the flow of blood. But with the goat we come to another level—the mythological one. The goat was a sacrificial animal in the cult of Artemis (Roman: Diana) and thus according to classical mythology was inhabited by a saving and healing spirit that could combat evil-causing demons. And Artemis was a protectress of women. The herb artemesia was named after her because of its efficacy in certain ailments of women, and in a circular way was then used against any ailments of women *because* it bore her name.

The sympathetic principle is at work too in the next suggestion. Hibiscus yields a slimy violet-red extract; whether it is also a purgative and hence likely to produce a suitable stimulus I have not been able to determine. The seeds of clover, however, the *clicon* of the next item, are a known purgative, and may have been efficacious under certain conditions.

This particular section is not part of an entire series on female ailments, but rather one portion of a series dealing with ailments of the stomach and abdomen. It may thus merely have been copied from another manuscript along with the sections that were of importance in the monastery.

II

The next recipe: against paralysis, and in birth, and to draw spearheads (or possibly infectious matter) from wounds, is one of a series dealing with poisons, worms, and epilepsy, that is, all ailments that were sometimes attributed to demonic possession and interference. Demons were a very important part of Eastern—Babylonian and Hebrew—folk medicine. To them was attributed especially interference in sexual matters and birth because of envy of humans—the Lilith

⁵ This is one of the terms contained in the Latin-German glossary at the end of the manuscript, as well as *clicon* below. Some of the Latin terms in this manuscript are found in none of the major dictionaries of Medieval Latin.

legend is an example of this. The juxtaposition in this recipe of three quite different problems makes it clear that there was thought to be an underlying common cause and that the same remedy—namely the exorcism of the demon—would be useful in all. In the part dealing with birth the instruction to *place* the herb on the genitals makes it clear that it is not a matter of medication. The plant *vizwurz*, modern German *Weisswurz*, is Solomon's Seal (*polygonatum vulgare*), also known in German as Solomon's Seal (*Salomonssiegel*). Its berries are supposedly an emetic, but here the green plant is used. Also the plant is used in folk medicine against epilepsy, which is invariably attributed to demonic causes, because the name implies the Seal of Solomon which according to Josephus was used in exorcising demons.⁶ In medieval Latin paralysis is a very general term covering a number of ailments and the drinking of a concoction made with Solomon's Seal may well have helped.

III

The next recipe proposes a means of determining sterility that has an extremely long tradition. "In order to know whether the man or woman is sterile. They should urinate at night each in a separate container, and in each [container] their own skin scrapings should be macerated and that one is sterile in whose container worms grow."

In a slightly different version it is found in Papyrus Carlsberg No VII (19th-20th dynasty). From Eric Iversen's reading: "You shall put something (most probably the women's excrements) [the parenthetical remark is Iversen's] in bags of cloth together with sand from the beach. The woman shall pass her water upon the bags every day, they being filled with . . . and dates. If they produce worms, and . . . she will not give birth. If they do not produce worms that which she shall bear shall live."⁷

No Greek version that could have been the model for the medieval two-pot technique has been found, but the version as the Rotulus has it was known throughout the Middle Ages—being found even in Albertus Magnus, in *Libellus de formatione hominis*. As late as 1699 it is found in Franz Paullini's *Neu Vermehrte heilsame Dreckapotheke* (Frank-

⁶ Max Höfler, *Volksmedizinische Organotherapie und ihr Verhältnis zum Kultopfer* (Berlin, n.d.), p. 95.

⁷ *Papyrus Carlsberg No. VII* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1939), p. 11.

furt).⁸ It would seem to be a test to reveal the presence of a life-destroying demon, there is a clear link between demons and worms—the worm being in this magical medicine a kind of arch-demon of illness—that I do not have the time to establish here. Demonic possession would be revealed in the body tissues and excrements by the growth of worms. I have no corroborative evidence from other sources, however, and the presence of the prescription in Albertus Magnus is evidence of the widespread confidence in the truth of it. Certainly the technique can have no validity although there might well be generation of parasites from the skin scrapings. In this case the prescription could well be very harmful. Think of the marital tensions when one spouse blamed the other because in his or her jar there were worms!

It is followed in the manuscript by a section on determination of sex. Soranus' idea that a male was carried on the right side and a female on the left is shown in the statement: "If the right breast is larger than the left, she is carrying a male." If the expectant mother is rosy-cheeked she is carrying a male; if pale-cheeked a female. It is also said that if a pregnant woman is offered a lily and a rose, she will choose the lily first if she is bearing a male, the rose if a female (11. 484-88). In medieval literature the rose is also often the symbol for the female. One finds it difficult to understand how the superstition persisted—it is widespread, occurs in almost all European folk traditions—and presumably any potential user knew about it. Perhaps she believed to be able to influence the sex by her choice.

IV

The next item is included as an example of a purely magical text—an amulet for establishing the truth. It represents a peculiar perversion of an old Christian saints legend—that of the seven sleepers. Seven young Christian men in the very early days of Christianity in Rome escaped to the hills and hid in a cave to avoid persecution. They fell asleep, the cave was walled up. After sleeping for 400 years they awoke, went into town because they were now hungry. When they tried to purchase food with their ancient coins they were captured and brought under suspicion to the emperor. He was not a Christian, was still persecuting them, but was converted by their tale, which he believed. So Rome was freed from persecution and the seven sleepers were celebrated. The

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

legend captured the imagination of the Germanic tribes and was very widespread.

The sleepers tell the truth of the sleeper and those she has slept with. For the medieval practitioner truth was truth, whether the abstract truth of religious belief, or the hard truth of the physical fact. It is part of an entire section beginning with the test for sterility, in which all the items are magical in nature. Even the first one we saw reflects the possible presence of demons, and the last four (of which you do not have an example) are all charms for stopping an excessive flow of blood. Here the belief in the power of the word outweighs any practical consideration.

V

The next one, to reduce painful swelling of the breasts, uses the principle of the conservation of energy—spiritual energy, that is—for such was thought to be present also in the excrements. Hence, the application of an ointment of feces in urine, mixed with rain water, is efficacious. To the modern mind there is a curious paradox in a concern for the purity of the water to be mixed with the excrements, but if we regard it as an exercise in spiritual power—which they did—we see that no possible outside demonic contamination can be allowed.

Up to this point there has been a haphazardness in the material; that is also true of the material from the first side that we have not specifically discussed, but when we turn to the verso of the manuscript we find a certain rigor, a certain attempt at completeness. First there is a long connected (151 lines) section, classically arranged beginning with ailments of the head and going to the feet. Then a variety of recipes, and finally a long connected section (42 lines) on the ailments of women and the problems of childbirth, in which the greatest attention is given to expelling a dead fetus.

VI

In this section, where we would expect to find greatest evidence of demonic influence, we find only pragmatic and sympathetic measures suggested: pennyroyal (*pulegu*, i.e., *mentha pulegium* L.), poppy extract and seeds, human milk (the sympathetic principle, a woman who has already given birth can perhaps influence this birth), artemesia of which we have already spoken.

Nor is there any magical material in the other measures. Since the section is so lengthy, we can be reasonably sure that its inclusion was deliberate, that is, it was not merely an isolated recipe copied along with other material whether the scribe found it useful or not. I believe that it was intended for use and perhaps the monks instructed the midwives, or even made the manuscript available to them. We will come back to this point later.

VII

The last section we shall discuss in detail is taken from a long section on the value of the organs of the hare against ailments. Animal medications were extensively used in the Middle Ages, and some of them were still officially used well into the modern period. This part deals with fertility—or the lack thereof—and shows the clear cultic nature of such animal medications. Not because the hare itself was particularly fertile was it thought to be useful in sexual matters, but because of its association with fertility gods, among the Greeks in the Dionysian cult, as well as among the Germanic tribes.

The hare is proscribed in the Old Testament (Lev. XI-6); on the other hand Pliny says all parts of it are of tremendous use to women (XXVIII, 77). By 755 its use as an aphrodisiac was so widespread that it was forbidden by the Pope.⁹ But its easy accessibility assured its continued use.

In this example it is intended mostly to insure the conception of a son, but it seems also to be thought of as a contraceptive. The wording (and the concept) of the first two items is a little curious. "Put dried and powdered hare's womb in a potion, and if the woman and man drink at the same time she will conceive. If she drinks alone she will conceive neither a male nor a female." The heading *Ad conceptum* could mean either "to insure conception" or "against conception." If the latter, then perhaps the presence of the blood from the hare's womb was thought of as a conceptual fruitfulness that hindered a real fruitfulness.

Such manuscripts provide the only information about medieval gynecological practices. Soranus' influence was not great in the Middle Ages although there are some fragments preserved; under the impact of Galen he was largely forgotten. It is primarily the influence of Christianity, however, and its obsession with sex and sexual matters

⁹ Höfler, *op. cit.* (n. 6 above), p. 58.

that is most responsible for this situation. Male physicians could not treat women in these intimate matters, thus it passed into the hands of midwives, who were undoubtedly often very skillful but not encouraged to gain theoretical knowledge. Then there is the other class distinction: obstetrics belonged to surgery, surgeons were looked down upon by school physicians. Thus there remained no home for these crucial matters other than with midwives.

In German the word for midwife is attested to from the ninth century on, and in two texts of the twelfth or thirteenth century there is mention of seizing (*greifen*) in birth suggesting manual help at birth,¹⁰ but the real history of midwifery only begins to be written in the fourteenth century.

Bern Codex 803 contains the most material of this kind among the early manuscripts and, certainly in Germany, the only early example of any extensive writing on the subject. I remind you of the form of the manuscript, a scroll 20 2/3 feet long, extremely cumbersome to use. In the late Middle Ages physicians used a rolled parchment because it was easy to carry, but they were short pieces. From experience I know that it takes considerable time to roll a 20-foot piece of parchment in order to reach the recipes at the end. So one must ask the purpose. There are many other rolls: the necrological rolls, the governmental rolls of England, the play-script rolls, rolls hung before congregations that they might have solace from the prayers thereon. But none of these purposes relates to the Mülinen Rotulus. There is a small group of late medieval English rolls that contain protective prayers. They are all about 180 cm. long, that is, supposedly the length of Christ's body, and hence were thought to be efficacious in warding off physical harm.¹¹ One of these, Wellcome Ms 632, was used as a birth girdle.

This suggests the possibility that the Mülinen roll by virtue of its form was thought to have a certain protective power. The large amount of magic in the manuscript offers some support for this possibility.

In my opinion, however, the form of the rotulus had a purely pragmatic origin and purpose. Parchment was precious and the pieces used in the roll are irregularly shaped and unevenly finished. It was probably easier and more economical to glue them together than to cut them to regular book shape. And thus it continued to grow longer. It is somewhat carelessly written and has no ornamentation. The manuscript

¹⁰ Heinrich Fasbender, *Geschichte der Geburtshülfe* (Jena, 1906), p. 78.

¹¹ See Curt F. Bühler, "Prayers and charms in middle English scrolls," *Speculum*, 1964, 39: 270-78.

is greatly worn and must have been read a great deal. All this suggests that it was a working manuscript, and not merely documentation. I think it hung on the wall of the infirmary, turnable by means of a wooden dowel, supported perhaps at the bottom so that one could read it while turning. I believe the monks collected the material in it systematically and deliberately to aid themselves *and* the lands people of their area, made it available to them, and in the case of the gynecological material perhaps even instructed the midwives in its contents.

We in our twentieth-century wisdom may find it superstitious only, but they in their twelfth-century deep Christian belief, and their ability to find the commonalty in seemingly diverse things—for example, in Christianity and the remnants of Greek, Roman, and Germanic religions that had come to them—worked with the resources at hand to find a practical solution to the physical problems of birth and a spiritual response to the tremendous mystery they perceived in it, and to combine them in a useful way.

Excerpts from Codex 803, Burgerbibliothek, Bern, Switzerland;
11th/12th Century

- I *Ad menstrum provocanda.*
Locium caprae mulier bibat. menstrua prouocat. Item. Hibiscum in aqua coctum si mulier bibat, menstrua prouocat. Item. Clicon decoque in aqua et da bibere menstrua prouocat. Similiter fetus pregnantibus discutit. et sedatas matribus deducit. (11. 94-98)
- II *Contra paralysin. et ad partum mulieris. et ad spicula a uulnere retrahenda.*
Viz wrz que inter scopulos nascitur. cum ferramentis diligenter eruta. arefacta. trita. et cum uino cyatis .iiibus. sumpta. paralysin mire sanat. Si autem herbam uiridem colligis et tundis. mulieribus in partu laborantibus. genitalibus apposita. statim parturit. etiam fetus ex matricibus mortuos educit. Similiter quoque si uulneribus superponitur. . . . (11. 347-53)
- III *Vt scia utrum uir an mulier sterilis sit.*
Nocte in singulis uasculis urinam faciant. et in ea separatim furfures macerentur et de cuius uase uermes creuerunt sterilis est. (11. 481-83)
- IV *Vt mulier dormiens interroganti verum dicat de adulterio.*
Aiohel. Deomedius. Eugenius. Probatus. Sabatus. Stephanus. Quiriacus. Hec nomina scripta in carta uirginea. inter mamillas pone dormienti. omnes adulteros nominat. (11. 488-92)
- V *Ad mammas a partu tumentes.*
Fimum in urinum cum aqua pluuiale tritum illinito. tumorem sedat. (11. 492-93)
- VI *Si mulier puer in utero moritur.*
Pulegu uiticis manipulos tres cum ueteri uino tere. et da bibere. Item. Catta papaueris cum semine suo pone et eum mulier liberata fuerit mox tolle. Item. lacasine cum aqua salsa ana in potu da statim liberatur. . . .Item. si tarda uerit parere aut mortuum in utero hauerit lac mulieris cum oleo bibat statim parit. . . . Item ut cito pariat et secunda sequatur. artemesiam in sinistro latera liga. et cum pepererit omni festinatione eam tolle. . . . (11. 896-912)
- VII *Mulier ut masculum pariat.* Leporis uulus fide sicata et erasa in pocione e efficit. et si mulier et masculus simul biberint nascetur. si enim sola mulier biberit nec masculum nec feminam concipiet. *Ad conceptum.* Lepus indicitur et sanguis quia uulua fundit datur inliniat sibi naturam de coagulo eius. *Si uolerit masculum partu.* Leporis testiculum post purgationem suam mulier cum uino transuoret masculum concipiet. *Vt mulier pariat masculum.* Leporis coagulum datur obolis duobus uiro. femina autem quadruplo debet bibere. debet autem esse coagulum de lepore masculo. . . . (11.1002-14)