

On Conception: a treatise about Making Babies

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Introduction

For many years, I've been researching medieval attitudes about sexuality and family building. Some of that research developed into a class called "How to make a Medieval Baby" which I've taught at a couple of RUSH sessions. This subject has been fascinating and is always leading to more questions. It's been difficult for me to express this information in an SCA setting. On one hand, you have to fight the haze of Victorian attitudes about sex and on the other you have the completely licentious Renn Faire view of the Middle Ages. The answers, as I found them, are somewhere in the middle.

I've wanted to do a research paper on this topic but that always seemed to crumple under the weight of ever expanding information. Also, there is a tendency to make something unfun when you start to deconstruct it. Finally, I hit on the idea of writing a treatise. I figured I should limit the topic and decided to specialize in medieval advice for the infertile.

In researching several projects over the years I have had opportunities to read period treatises on many topics: dentistry, painting, drawing, metallurgy, and now medicine. There is a certain voice that one gets in these works. The author is often speaking to the ages with the conceit that their writings will be helping people centuries in the future.¹ They cite classical authors, but religion is often tossed in there with other advice. Cennini advised his art students "Your life should always be arranged just as if you were studying theology, or philosophy, or other theories, that is to say, eating and drinking moderately, at least twice a day, electing digestible and wholesome dishes..."²

There is another kind of medieval writing exemplified by such works as *The Goodman of Paris*, a late 14th century treatise on housekeeping written by an elderly husband to his young wife. The writer is kind and doting, but also superior and exacting. The relationship between the author and the audience is intimate, but since the manuscript exists in three copies, it was clearly read by others.³

In choosing the voice for the author of this treatise, I could only imagine a mother writing a letter to her daughter. Mom is far away and at a loss as to how to help her daughter. She worries for the health and the state of the young woman's marriage.

The extent of female literacy is still a debated topic. However some authors suggest that noble women had access to and could read medical texts written in vernacular.⁴ Even if the author had this sort of access, she also did what many male writers loathed – that is mixed in religion and folk remedies along with the

¹ "The very fact of choosing to write a medical treatise in the Middle Ages necessarily entails positioning oneself as the most recent commentator in a long line of authorities." Harding, Wendy "Medieval women's unwritten discourse on motherhood: A reading of two fifteenth-century texts." *Women's Studies*, May92, Vol. 21 Issue 2, p199

² Cennino D' Andrea Cennini. *The Craftsman's Handbook. The Italian "Il Libro dell' Arte"*. Translated by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1933, by Yale University Press. **Chapter XXVIII** .

³ Bayard, Tania. trans and ed. *A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in the Fourteenth Century*. Harper Perrenial, 1991. p27

⁴ Hellwarth, Jennifer Wynne. "I wyl wright of women prevy sekeness": Imagining Female literacy and Textual Communities in Medieval and Early Modern Midwifery Manuals." *Critical Survey* vol 14, n 1, 2002.

science. Female letter writers such as the 15th century Pastons wrote often of their medical problems and sent remedies and advice back and forth.⁵

Attitudes about infertility in the Middle Ages are difficult to pin down. Old Testament attitudes about barrenness being a curse certainly influenced medieval thinking on reproduction.⁶ Officially, barrenness was not considered grounds for a divorce. However, for the sufficiently motivated spouse there was always a way to nullify a marriage. Usually, a preexisting condition such as being too closely related or a prior betrothal was suddenly discovered.⁷ Therefore, in noble families, couples felt a considerable amount of pressure to reproduce.

Who would write such a letter? The period medical texts I have cited for content were all available by the time of my persona in the late 13th century so this conceivably could have been written by my persona's mother to me. However, the best of the lay treatise writers are from the late 14th and 15th century. I tried to pick a name for this author but the Goodman from Paris was anonymous. I see her writing in the early 15th century since that's when my best examples are from.

⁵ Witaker, Elaine E. "Reading the Paston Letters Medically." *English Language Notes* Sept 1993 vol 31 n1 p 19.

⁶ I compared references from three different translations of the Bible (**New American Standard, King James, and Douay-Rheims** found at this site <http://unbound.biola.edu/> (accessed 6/23/05)

⁷ James A. Brundage. "Sex and Canon Law" *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage. eds Garland Publishing. 1995. p 37.

Here begins the book “on the conception of healthy children”

Worshipful and well-beloved daughter, I know of the great sadness in your heart that in these 5 years of marriage you have not born a child. Know that though I have not had the opportunity to see you since you wed you are most deserving in praise for your modesty, comportment, and in the keeping of your household.

The advice that has been cast upon you from all sides has confused you and tried the patience of you and your good husband. Take heart! Did Sarah not laugh and yet still bear a child.⁸ I have consulted with the doctors of Paris who have many great books and knowledge and have herewith collected some items that may be of use to you. I have no wish to add to your despair so have no fear of me. Take as much or as little of this advice as you wish.⁹

I have heard that the priests in your area are known to preach on the virtue of virginity. Do not let this frighten you. The religious life is not for everyone and since you are so happily married, I beg you not to listen to these men. Marriage is a sacrament and blessing for those who cannot follow the religious life.¹⁰ Intercourse is an essential part of marriage. Coitus is the union of two for the purpose of introducing the sperm so that our species may continue. It works best if coitus continues until the sperm has been completely emitted. Also make sure that in your lovemaking that you are not on top.¹¹ Your husband should be able to plant his seed and have it not run back out.¹²

Determining the cause of Infertility

According to Dame Trotula, If a woman remains barren by fault of the man or herself it will be perceived in this manner. Take two pots and in each one place wheat bran and put some of the man’s urine in one of them with the bran and in the other put some urine of the woman. Let the pots sit for a week or more. In the pot of the faulty party you will find many worms and the bran will stink. If you find this in neither, then in neither is there any defect and they can be aided by the benefit of medicine so that they might conceive.¹³ There is another test for men according to Aristotle. The sperm of a fertile man will float for a time on water and then sink, while the infertile man’s will be diffused and diluted.¹⁴

Any good doctor will tell you that some people are hot and some people are cold according to their humors. Nature is upset when these humors are out of balance. To return to the balance that the Lord expects from all of us, it is necessary to treat with the opposite. To determine your humor take a piece of wool and

⁸ Sarah - Genesis 16 to 21, Elizabeth – Luke 1.

⁹ The inspiration for this introduction of prologue is the *Goodman of Paris*. I’ve chosen it because it is between two people who know each other quite well. However, it was also written, it appears to me, with a larger audience in mind.

¹⁰ Frederick Pedersen. “Did the Medieval Laity Know the Canon Law Rules on Marriage? Some evidence from Fourteenth-Century York Cause Paper” *Medieval Studies* 56 (1994) p111-52.

¹¹ Arano, *Tacuinum Sanitatis* plate 9. Yes, there are pictures.

¹² It’s difficult for me to pin down where everything in this paragraph came from. The 13th century saw a revolution in how marriage was perceived and how it was legislated. In reaction to Cathars, Catholic theologians had to come up with good spiritual reasons for marriage and sexuality. PPA Biller. Birth-Control in the West in the 13th and 14th Centuries. *Past and Present* 1982;(94):3-26.

¹³ Green *Trotula*. p 77 I intend to paraphrase the advice from translations of period sources. However, this passage amazes me so I’ve quoted it nearly in full. I’ve often wondered if this worked. Perhaps this test would reveal some sort of metabolic problem. For instance, the urine of a diabetic would contain sugar and make the the pot of wheat bran a good environment for worms.

¹⁴ James Rochester Shaw. “Scientific Empiricism in the Middle Ages: Albertus Magnus on Sexual Anatomy and Physiology.” *Clio Medica* 1975 10(1)53-64. Albertus Magnus has this test coming from Aristotle. The way it is worded and in the context, Shaw thinks Albertus may have tested this one. BTW the word “sperm” is a translation of the Latin “sperma” which mean ejaculate in general not the individual sperm we think of today.

anointed it with a hot oil such as laurel, and place it near an orifice for the night. If it is taken into the body then the person is frigid and seeks warmth but if it is expelled from the body then they are hot.¹⁵

Daughter it has been a while since we saw each other. I ask you, are your lips dry and chapped as though you faced the north wind and are you always thirsty and has your hair grown thin? If so, then you suffer from excessive heat and dryness. I know you were not like this in your youth but if this has continued for many years then we may as well stop now, for there is no hope for conception. However, if this has only just occurred, then take marsh mallow and mugwort and cook them in water. Use this to fumigate yourself three or four times. Then make pessaries for your vagina with musk and this will strengthen your womb. Then make *trifera magna* in the size of an acorn and wrap it in cotton and tie it with a string. This will further fumigate the womb and make it soft and strong. Then have intercourse with your husband. Repeat if the symptoms continue.¹⁶

I know that your barrenness saddens you but are your eyes always moist? You may have excess humidity of the womb. The womb and the brain are connected by nerves so that they suffer together. Purge yourself with *theodoricon euporiston*. Then make three or five pills of *Theodoricon* wrap them in linen and place them in your genitals. If this doesn't alleviate the wetness use some *trifera* as above but leave it until it is dried out. If you become thirsty you will know that you are well purged then have intercourse frequently so that you might conceive.¹⁷

Here is something else you could try. Take the testicles of an uncastrated male pig or a wild boar and dry them and let a powder be made, and drink this with good wine after the purgation of your menses. Then have intercourse frequently so that you might conceive.¹⁸

Or take 1 handful each of calamint, catmint, fennel, pellitory, savory, hyssop, artemisia, rue, anise, cumin, rosemary, thyme, and mountain origanum, a pitcher of wine, 6 pitchers of water, boil them, and take this medicine all together. Then take 3 ounces of powder of clovers and the yolks of 4 raw eggs, mix the powder and yolks together, bake on a hot stone, and then eat this after a 4 day fast.¹⁹

Also, make sure that both you and your husband are neither too fat nor too thin, for both are outside of God's plan and indicates an imbalance of humors. Do not let excess piety keep you from eating. If you are too fat, take a hot bath three or four times a week. Be sure to be covered in water up to your neck and that you sweat a lot. This works for men as well.²⁰

Make sure you remember to make proper prayers to the saints. There are many who would see to your needs as they have had similar problems.

Elizabeth

Anne

Margaret of Antioch²¹

¹⁵ Green, *Trotula* 89. The basic tenet of humoral theory. It is illustrated many ways and many times in medieval medical literature but I like this simple image.

¹⁶ Green, *Trotula* p 86. Yes, I know how that sounds. Repeat both parts!

¹⁷ Green, *Trotula* P 86. The translator deliberately left these terms un-translated so I've followed suit. She suggested concoctions would have been well known in context.

¹⁸ Green, *Trotula* p 78

¹⁹ Beryl Rowland. trans. *Medieval Women's Guide to Health: The First English Gynecological Handbook*. Kent State University Press, 1981. p 147.

²⁰ Green, *Trotula* p 92.

²¹ John M. Theilmann. "English Peasants and medieval Miracle List." *Historian* Feb 90 52(2): 286 - For medieval prayers to saint for fertility. According to an online directory there are many saints to choose from Agatha, Anne, Anthony of Padua, Casilda of Toledo, Felicity, Fiacre, Giles, Henry II, Margaret of Antioch, Medard, Philomena, Rita of Cascia, Theobald Roggeri. Terry Jones. ed. *Patron Saint Index*. <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/indexsnt.htm> (last accessed 6/23/2005)

You might try writing their names in this prayer on a scrap of good parchment and binding it to your body. In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti amen et per virtutem Dei sint medicina mea. Sancta Maria peperit Christum Sancta Anna peperit Mariam Sancta Elizabeth peperit Johannem. Sarah et Rebecca. sine dolore et tristitia. O infans, sive vivus sive mortuus, exi foras, quia Christus vocat te ad lucem + sanctus + sanctus + sanctus + dominus + deus + amini potens + qui + es et qui eras + et qui venturus es, Amem.²²

In a Man three things can cause an impediment to conception. There is a defect in the spirit impelling the seed, a defect of spermatic humidity, or from a defect of heat. To lift his spirits we aid him with an unguent. If he does not have enough heat then anoint his loins with musk oil and pennyroyal oil. For defective seed he should eat foods that generate seeds such as onions, parsnips and similar things.²³ Daughter does your husband have trouble maintaining his manhood?²⁴

There is a great deal of talk on how to conceive a male or a female child. Daughter I beg you to ignore such advice. You cannot afford to be too picky right now. Also, as Aristotle says, those women who are unable to conceive, save with the help of medical treatment or some other adventitious circumstance, are as a general rule apt to bear female children rather than male.²⁵

Let me warn of conditions that may cause barrenness. Galen tells of a certain woman who suffered from suffocation of the womb. Her womb was drawn upwards into her stomach and she suffered much. She lost her pulse and her voice and many thought her dead but Galen put some well carded wool to her nose and mouth and could see that she was still alive. This is caused by an abundance of female emissions stopped inside the woman and it often afflicts widows and virgins. Do not shun your husband dear daughter! His love will keep you healthy.²⁶

Here are some things you should eat

Pine nuts –These are warm and dry. They stimulate the bladder, kidney and the libido

Asparagus - By its nature it is moderately warm and moist.

Chicken Eggs - whites are cold and humid while the yolk is warm and humid. They increase coitus and are very nourishing.

Chestnuts - They are warm and dry to the second degree. They are favorable to coitus and very nourishing. Cook them in water.

Onions - These are very warm and moist. They generate milk and sperm.

Here are some things you should avoid for the your health and the health of your child

Lettuce - It is cold and humid and is harmful to not only coitus but eyesight.

Fennel - Warm and dry in the first degree. It can harm the menstrual flow.

Purslane - Cold and humid. It is a danger to sperm and coitus.

Wine - Warm and dry in the second degree. While wine may warm the senses don't forget that too much with deaden them and end a night of love.²⁷

Pepper - is of course, hot but it can drive out the embryo²⁸

²² This suggestion is derived from a popular charm for delivering a child that lists several biblical moms. Fiona Harris Stoertz. "Suffering and Survival in Medieval English Childbirth." *Medieval Family Roles*. Ed Cathy Jorgensen Intyre. Garland, 1996. p 105-106.

²³ Green, *Trotula* p 87.

²⁴ Mom doesn't want to go into this but impotence was a legitimate reason to annul a marriage. A man would have to be examined by a physician and by a matron "used to such procedures" who would observe the couple's attempts at lovemaking. Vern L. Bullough. "On Being Male in the Middle Ages." *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* ed. Clare A Lees. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

²⁵ Oddly enough this is still true today.

²⁶ Green, *Trotula* p 71.

²⁷ Arano, *Tacuinum Sanitatis*.

²⁸ John M. Riddle. "Manuscript Sources for Birth Control". *Manuscript Sources of Medieval Medicine: A Book of Essays*. ed Margaret R. Schleissner. Garland Publishing, 1995. p 149.

Pennyroyal, and rue – Above all else please make sure you avoid these plants. They can be used to bring on the flowers of menstruation but can also cleanse the womb of a baby.²⁹

Should you become pregnant have care

Galen reports that the fetus is attached to the womb like a fruit to a tree. It can be extremely delicate until the time of quickening. When it is grown unto the third month or so the soul infuses the child and you will feel it move and it will not slip out so quickly.³⁰

First month	purgation of the blood
second month	the blood and body are expressed
third month	the fetus produces hair and nails
forth month	it begins to move and the mother is nauseated
fifth month	the fetus takes on the likeness of it's father or mother
sixth month	the nerves are constituted.
seventh month	the bones and nerves solidify
eighth month	“Nature moves and the infant is made complete in the blessing of all its parts”
ninth month	It proceeds from the darkness into light. ³¹

Dear daughter I get ahead of myself. When the time comes for your child to be born (and I am sure you shall bear one) I will visit you and bring the midwife who attended your birth.³² Pray that God all-Highest, Our Lady, Saint Margaret, Saint Elisabeth, Saint Anne and Saint Catherine will grant you grace and courage to sustain and bear in peace the burdens and struggles of this world.³³

Conclusion

One critique I've with this treatise is that it is too explicit. Everything in here is from period sources! The proximity of so many items on infertility has no precedent, but that's what treatise writers did, collected information on a topic in one place. That also explains how some of the transitions are rather jarring. In period medical treatises, the authors or compilers skip from on condition and its treatment to the next.

How does this impact the modern reenactor? In many ways, not at all. These remedies are not useful. (The few that I've tried haven't worked. (The next treatise will be about adoption in period.)) However, as a modern sufferer of infertility I can assure you that folk remedies exist along side modern medical recommendation. Well meaning friends are just as apt to advise one or the other on any given day. Learning about period medical practices of any kind is a window into the daily lives of the people we emulate.

I would like to someday combine this and some of my other medieval medical writings into a little book with appropriate calligraphy and illustrations.

²⁹ Pliny, Galen, Soranus and others mention that rue bring on the menses and pennyroyal is still known to cause spontaneous abortions. John M. Riddle. “Manuscript Sources for Birth Control”. *Manuscript Sources of Medieval Medicine: A Book of Essays*. ed Margaret R. Schleissner. Garland Publishing, 1995. p148.

³⁰ Green *Trotula* p 78-79

³¹ Green, *Trotula*. p 82. This is another one of those great passages where you say “I didn't know they knew that.”

³² Peter Biller. “Childbirth in the Middle Ages.” *History Today*. August 1996 p 42-49.

³³ Paraphrase of the end of Cennini's *Craftsman's Handbook*

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I would love to share resources on this topic with all those who are interested. Please contact me at mary_m_haselbauer@yahoo.com or call 314-660-3323

Warning –the archaic advice in this treatise may lead to belly aches, snuggling, dumb cologne commercials, and of course dry mouth. Side effects are generally mild to moderate and may include sneezing, dry mouth (I warned you), nausea, increased appetite, dizziness, sleepiness, insomnia, tremor, and sexual side effects. Women who are or may become pregnant or are nursing don't really need this now do they. No animals were harmed in the making of this treatise though the cats would really like if I left the computer alone and played with them a little. Void where prohibited. Cannot be reproduced, redistributed, or rebroadcast without the express written consent of a certain grumpy fighter chick. As seen on TV. Not responsible for direct, indirect, incidental or consequential damages resulting from any defect, error or failure to perform. At participating locations only. Employees and their families are not eligible. Substantial penalty for early withdrawal.

