

Women's Medicine (1550-1603)

We haue little skill in herbes, yet in what we might we would
seeke to ease your maladie with weomens medicines...

—The eldest sister, *Greenes Mourning Garment* (1590), p.26



MEDICAL PRACTICE throughout the Tudor period was largely a woman's domain. Male physicians trained at university or at the Royal College were too few and too expensive to be of service to the general public. Barbers pulled bad teeth, drew blood, and performed superficial surgeries. Apothecaries (until 1617, members of the Grocers' Company) were the Tudor equivalent of pharmacists; their wares included wine, spices, perfumes, herbs, and rat poison. Women were barred by law from these professions, except as assistants to a father or husband in the respective guild. But physicians and apothecaries were dependent in turn upon *herb-wives* – women who supplied the herbs and spices used for health care. Women not only nursed those who were ill, they supplied much of the medicine, or *physic*.

Virtually all country-women maintained a private herb-garden, from which were gathered *simples* (single-herb treatments), plus the ingredients wherewith to mix favored remedies for common ailments. Headaches were relieved with sweet-smelling herbs such as rose, bay, lavender, marjoram and sage. Feverfew helped with colds and agues. Stomach pains were treated with wormwood, mint, balm, and chamomile. A cream of almonds could repair blemishes in the skin. Licorice and comfrey were thought good for the lungs of smokers and consumptives. Multiple herbs were available for every ailment, though not always effective.

When someone fell ill and home-remedies failed, the usual recourse was to a *wise woman*, whose medicines often included an incantation or secret ritual to assist the potency of her herbal prescriptions. Feminine ailments – menstrual irregularities, vaginal infections, soreness or lumps in the breast, morning sickness – were treated by female practitioners without license or oversight by the College of Physicians. Though never recognized as such under the law, the special knowledge of England's wise women and herb-wives constituted a *mystery*, a body of lore passed from one generation of trained insiders to the next.

John Gerard in his *Herbal* (1597) speaks respectfully of “our women physicians.” By the end of King James's reign, public opinion had shifted. In *The Arraignment of Urines* (1623), Dr. James Hart, for one, sets out to expose “the manifold errors and abuses of ignorant urine-mongering empirics, cozening quacksalvers, women physicians, and the like stuff.” In the decades and centuries that followed, women were systematically forced out of medical practice, eventually even from the birthing chamber, to be replaced by male physicians. But in the sixteenth century, herb-wifery was an essential limb of what passed then for a health-care system.¹

In Robert Green's *Quip for an Upstart Courtier*, a poor man mocks a wealthy lord for his dependence on professional apothecaries when the city's herb-women, indeed, his own wife, have compounds that work as well as pharmaceuticals, and for a fraction of the price: “If I be ill at ease,” says a proud Goodman Cloth-Breeches, “I take *kitchen physic*”:

I make my wife my doctor, and my garden, my apot'ecary's shop – whereas queasy Master Velvet-Breeches cannot have a fart awry, but he must have his purgations, pills, and clysters, or evacuate by electuaries. He must, if the least spot of morpew come on his face, have his oil of tartar, his *Lac Virginis*, his camphire dissolved in verjuice – to make the fool as fair, forsooth, as if he were to play Maid Marian in a May-game or morris-dance. Tush, he cannot disgest his meat without conserves, nor end his meal without suckats, nor (shall I speak plainly?) please the trug his mistress without he goes to the apothecaries for *eringion*, *oleum formicarum alatarum*, and *aqua mirabilis*, of £10 a pint.²

¹ *our women physicians*] J. Gerard, *Herbal* (1597), book 2, p. 890; *the manifold errors...like stuff*] J. Hart, *The Arraignment of Urines* (1623), title page; cf. Hart, *Klinike* (1633); *empirics*] practitioners without academic training; *cozening quacksalvers*] swindling quack physicians.

² *physic*] medicine; *clysters*] medicinal enemas; *electuaries*] medicinal pastes mixed with honey or sweet syrup; *morpew*] rash, acne, lesions, or other skin disorder; *oil of tartar*] saturated solution of potassium carbonate; *Lac Virginis*] a cosmetic that smoothed and cleared wrinkles and blemishes; *camphire*] a bitter aromatic herb that was used in facial creams or, taken internally, as an aphrodisiac; *verjuice*] the acid juice of unripe grapes; *tush*] exclamation of mild disapproval; *digest*] digest (archaic form); *conserves*] medicines or confectionaries in which flowers or herbs were preserved in sugar; *suckats*] succades, candied fruit preserved in sugar; *trug*] prostitute or low-waged mistress; *eringion*, *oleum*, *aqua mirabilis*] costly liqueurs thought to assist with erectile dysfunction in men. Robert Green, *Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592), Cr4, ed. DWF.

From Tudor literature and stage-plays can be gleaned dozens of references to the herb-wives of Cheapside (today one of the world's great financial centers; but then, London's central market for herbs, spices, fruits, and vegetables). Claudius Desainliens alias Hollyband supplies an especially illuminating anecdote in his *Campo di Fior* (1583), a primer in four languages for the instruction of schoolboys and home-taught girls. The text, a dialogue in parallel English, Latin, French, and Italian, illustrates the everyday life of the nation, rich and poor. In one lesson, two children are sent on an errand to the Cheapside market, to buy salad lettuce, radishes, and cherries. While en route the girl tells the boy about "a certain herb-wife of whom, if you do buy, I know that both we shall have a better market of her than of any other, and that she will give us, for a vantage, either cherries or some lettuce – for her daughter was once my mother's maid" [...]

"But I pray you," asks the boy upon reaching the crowded market, "where is this, your old woman?"

The girl leads the way. Finding her, the boy offers to buy produce from the elderly herb-wife so long as she gives him some free cherries to eat. When she declines, he mocks her for the "foul spots" on her neck, "the filth which is painted on thy hands."

The old woman replies, "If thou get thee not hence, thou shameless boy, thy cheeks shall feel these *filths*."

Taunting her further, the lad eats some of her cherries without paying, then spits out the seeds and complains that her cherries were sour. "Old witch!" he says. "Thou sellest cherries here to the people, to *choke* them!"

"Petty thief," cries the woman, "Lay down the cherries!"

Without purchase or payment, the boy dashes off to school, where the language-lesson segues to the alphabet as pronounced in Latin, French, and Italian (and without pause to consider what other lesson young readers might draw from Hollyband's episode of the witty youth and the filthy herb-wife).¹

With the great migration to the cities that took place during Elizabeth's reign, competition for market share developed between the female herbalist who sold her simples direct to the consumer, for pennies, and the male pharmacist who depended on the same plants and essentially the same body of dubious lore to produce patent medicines that he sold at a premium. *The Trumpet of Apollo* (1602), "by John Clark, Apothecary," advertises "A Notable Defensative Cake against the Plague – a tasty and chewable prophylactic against the black death. Patented (Clark reports) by a physician of Italy, it proved effective in London during the severe plague year of 1593. Attesting to its efficacy, Clark cites "Goodwife Russell, an herbwife in Cheapside. Having buried her husband of the plague, she and her maid were both preserved by taking this defensative." Clark in the same pamphlet advertises his "general purgative," a potion having various applications, with satisfied customers that again include the apothecary's female competition: "One Joan, an herb-wife dwelling in Chatterhouse Lane, and keeping her standing commonly over against the Star in Cheapside on the market days, was helped with this medicine."²

John Clark predicted in his *Trumpet of Apollo* that the summer of 1602 would usher in a new visitation of the plague. He was ahead of his time by a year; but when the plague returned in 1603, the epidemic was horrific, killing a quarter of London's population in a single season – more than a third, if one counts only those who were forced by economic necessity to remain in the city. (Landowners with their domestic servants fled to the country, leaving behind tradesmen, laborers, and beggars.) Thomas Dekker reports that the prisoners of plague-ravaged London in 1603 went about like roast pigs on a banquet table, their ears and nostrils stuffed with rue and wormwood to stave off inhaled infection. "The price of flowers, herbs, and garlands rose wonderfully, insomuch that rosemary, which had wont to be sold for twelve-pence an armful, went now for six shillings a handful." Windfall profits notwithstanding, the herb-women were brought to their knees with the rest of London: "Herb-wives and gardeners (that never prayed before, unless it were for rain or fair weather) were now day and night upon their Mary-bones."³

Just as the practice of midwifery during the late 1500s contributed to the publication of obstetrical literature, so too did the lore of herb-wives contribute to the rising demand for printed guides to herbal remedies: *A Book of the Properties of Herbs*, from 1537 to 1565, passed through fourteen editions. Other herbals in multiple reprints included *The Great Herbal* (1526); *The Virtues and Properties of Herbs* (1526); *The Virtuous Book of All Manner of Herbs* (1527); *A Little Herbal* (1550); *A New Herbal* (1551); *William Turner's Herbal, the second part* (1562); *The Hope of Health* (1564); *The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magus* (1565); *The Profitable Art of Gardening* (1572); *A Godly Garden* (1576); *A New Herbal, or History of Plants* (1578); *The Poor Man's Jewel* (1578); *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* (1585); *The Englishman's Treasure* (1586); and *The Gardener's Labyrinth* (1586); plus many additional titles with entire sections devoted to herbal medicine. The

¹ *a certain herb-wife...the cherries*] Hollyband (Claudius Desainliens), *Campo di Fiore* (1583), G3-8 recto, ed. DWF; Shakespeare borrows from this scene in *Campo* (F4r) for the Gobbo scene in *Merchant of Venice* 2.2.

² *Trumpet of Apollo*] Goodwife Russell, A8v; *general purgative*, C2v; *One Joan...this medicine*] C8v; ed. DWF.

³ Dekker] *The Wonderful* (i.e., astonishing) *Yeare*, sigs. D2v, D2r.

men who wrote these books, wherever possible, cited classical sources – Hippocrates, Aristotle, Dioscorides, Galen, Avicenna – but much of their material was drawn from a centuries-old English tradition, passed along by herb-wives, a debt that the authors sometimes acknowledged, and that was doubtless repaid in the form of increased demand, as literate consumers self-diagnosed their ailments and purchased the recommended herbs.

It will come as a surprise to some modern readers that there was enormous demand, throughout the medieval, Tudor, and Stuart periods, for abortifacient herbs, with many effective recipes and a plentiful supply. John Gerard in his comprehensive *Herbal* (1597) names only four herbs commonly used to assist barren women with conception, against more than sixty herbs used to induce menstruation after one or two missed periods. Not all of the treatments that he names were reliably effective, and some were dangerous, bringing a risk of hemorrhage and death if taken in too strong a dosage. But herbalists and medical writers provided such information as was available to them without editorializing. Thomas Twyne, M.D., in his discourse on “Pot Herbs” (1576), writes that hyssop “driveth forth worms, and causeth abortion, and helpeth to disgest our meat.” Parsnip “helpeth fleshly lust, provoketh the terms, and engend’ reth discommendable blood.” Cresses “provoke desire of women’s company, cleanse the lungs and take away the wheezing, help stopping of the milt, and procure abortion.” Parsley “provoketh urine and women’s terms.” Sage “provoketh the terms and procureth abortion; the broth wherein the twigs and leaves are boiled repress the thoughts of lust, and motion to venery.”¹

What will surprise most readers is that Christian women, in great numbers, used abortifacients during the first months of pregnancy with no greater scruple of conscience than when taking an emetic or a laxative for digestive ailments. The Church’s doctrine that the fertilized egg constitutes an independent human being is a development of the nineteenth century (a late concession to advances in secular embryology). For the first seventeen centuries of Christianity, no authority of record, either Catholic or Protestant, taught or suggested that the fetus during the first two or three months after insemination was a human being. *Ensoulment* or *quickening* was an act of God: in His own good time – typically, in the third or fourth month – God *infused* the dormant seed with a human soul, created *ex nihilo*. Christian embryology was modeled on observation of plant life: seeds deposited in the autumn show no sign of life until germination the spring, at which time one seed may become “alive” while the other rots in the ground, never to become a tree. Like transubstantiation, the doctrine of ensoulment mystified nature for the glory of God: it was deemed an essential point of Christian ontology that the individual life was created by an act of the Almighty in Heaven and not by a horizontal act of the parents. The child received nothing from its parents but flesh and blood, and its innately sinful condition. When the “lump of flesh” was at last quickened, the newly created soul became instantly tainted by *original sin*, a condition inherited from the parents (indirectly, from Adam and Eve), prior to any moral act by the child but resulting in its damnation. A fetus or newborn thus contaminated could not be admitted into Heaven without Christian baptism, and could not be baptized unless it was delivered alive. Augustine taught that all such infants suffered eternal damnation – a lamentable fate for which mother Eve was to blame.²

To address the sorrow of parents whose miscarriage or newborn was thus condemned, the Church softened this view, placing infants in Limbo [*Limbus infantium*], on the outer edge of Hell, where there is no corporal punishment other than everlasting exclusion from the bliss of Heaven. But the Vatican remained vigilant against parents who tried to sneak their unregenerate infant into Heaven. The Council of Langres (1452), for example, denounced the practice, widespread especially in France, of baptizing a dead infant on a pretense that it was momentarily resurrected at the christening, thereby to receive salvation of its soul.³

To underscore its unwavering commitment to the doctrines of a created soul, original sin, and the necessity of baptism, the Church strictly forbade burial of a baptized infant in consecrated ground. When both mother and infant died without a successful delivery, some bishops required that the coroner actually perform a post mortem Caesarian section so that the dead child could be buried outside the churchyard, not with its Christian mother. But while insisting upon the eternal perdition of stillborn infants, the Vatican throughout the medieval period was surprisingly complaisant about induced termination of pregnancy. The medieval Popes are virtually silent on the subject, while ecclesiastical courts, on the Continent as in Britain, record interest in abortion only in extraordinary circumstance, as when one of the parents-to-be was a priest or nun; or when the abortion was

¹ *driveth forth...venery*] T. Twyne, *The Schoolemaster* (1576), ed. DWF, sigs. D3r-4r; *disgest*] digest; *provoke the terms*] induce menstruation; *stopping of the milt*] blockage of the spleen; *motion to venery*] inclination to have sex.

² *A note about terminology*] Twenty-first century usage differs from the conceptual possibilities of the English language as spoken through the end of the 17th century: for Catholics and Protestants alike, *abortion*, *abortment* and *miscarriage* were interchangeable terms, no matter whether the loss was spontaneous, accidental, or induced; moreover, such events were ontologically possible only after the quickening – prior to which, the accidental or induced expulsion of the fetus was called an *effluxion*, or (more commonly) a *bringing down* or *procurement* of the obstructed *menstrues* (*courses*, *terms*, *monthly sickness*).

³ *At what time...womb*] *Saint Augustine his Enchiridion to Laurence*, anon. trans. (1607), p. 201, ed. DWF.

terminated by a physical beating; or when the mother herself perished, possibly by homicide, sometimes by reckless administering of a potion too potent for the mother's body to withstand.

In the sixteenth century, when grumbling is at last heard from the Vatican against abortifacient herbs, the objection is not ontological (the fetus is a person) but was raised on grounds of perversity (abortifacients permit women to sin without consequence). That some women took abortifacients long after the quickening was always a concern, exacerbated now by social change. Urbanization in the sixteenth century led to increased prostitution, which contributed in turn to the epidemic of syphilis. At the same time men were kept away from home by trade and warfare. It was feared that abortifacients permitted women to prostitute themselves without the knowledge of their priest or absent husband. To ban them altogether, upon threat of excommunication, was seen by Pope Sixtus V as a means to control adult sexual behavior. On 29 November 1588, Pope Sixtus issued the papal bull, *Effraenatam* ("without restraint"), denouncing in purple prose any termination of a pregnancy whether through medicine, violence, or excessive exercise or labor. Excommunication was declared for anyone who supplied or consumed abortifacients, or who practiced any form of contraception other than abstinence. *Effraenatam* is sometimes cited today as evidence that the Church always viewed conception as the commencement of life or personhood, but that is untrue. The objection was again on grounds of perversity: to have sex for pleasure or profit defeated the purpose of God, who intended intercourse for the begetting of children. Sixtus V did not himself believe or teach that the fetus during the first eighty days had a soul or sentient existence. Opposed by the laity and unsupported by the clergy, *Effraenatam* was promptly revoked in full by Pope Gregory XIV in 1591, immediately after the death of Pope Sixtus. Pope Gregory reinstated the Church's traditional position: that it is a venial sin to terminate a fetus prior to ensoulment, and a mortal sin to do so thereafter.

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THE ENGLISH CHURCH, after its break with Rome, followed public opinion dating ensoulment not in the first trimester but at the first felt movements inside the mother's womb – as late as six months after insemination but never within the first six weeks; prior to which, no life was lost by the resumption of menstruation and expulsion of the fetus. Rev. Christopher Carlile (d. 1588) articulates Elizabethan orthodoxy:

After the conception, that thing that is conceived hath none other life until the seventieth day (or, at most, until the hundredth day) than the *vegetative* life which is common with all other living creatures as well (herbs, plants, trees, beasts, fishes, fowls, as men); and consisteth in growing, nourishing, and increasing. And from the seventieth or hundredth day after the conception, until the sixth month, cometh into it the *sensitive* life (and this is only in beasts, *in animantibus*, and in men, and not in herbs and trees); and this consisteth in feeling, discerning, desiring, moving, willing, seeing, hearing, breathing, fearing, and sorrowing. About the sixth month the immortal soul is infused.¹

In 1603, the Brownist, Henry Jacob, advanced a number of novel theological ideas, one of which was that the human fetus might be ensouled before the body is fully formed. Anglican Bishop Bilson condemned Jacob as a heretic, endorsing Roman Catholic orthodoxy with one exception: whereas Catholicism sent the unborn and stillborn to an eternity without God, Bishop Bilson declared that such infants have no life or afterlife at all:

The Catholic faith did truly and constantly teach that the souls of men were not, before they were inspired into their bodies. And consequently, the body must first be framed, before the soul can be inspired. And the contrary conceit, which you now take hold on, is a manifest repugnancy to the Church and faith of Christ. [...] What kind of creatures, I pray you, call you those abortions and scapes that pass from their mothers, when they are yet but seed or blood, before the body be framed? [...] What name then will you give to these unfashioned births, having reasonable and immortal 'spirits' as you imagine? or what place will you assign them after this life? They have nothing to receive for anything done in or by their bodies, which they never had; neither can they expect the resurrection of the body which pertaineth not to them.²

The consensus of English Protestants (Anglican, Puritan, and separatist) remained essentially unaltered throughout the seventeenth century: "His Spirit quickens us, as the soul doth a lump of flesh, when God infuseth it. [...] "The soul is the life of the body, God of the soul. The spirit gone utterly from us, we are dead" (Rev. Thomas Adams, 1614). "Women that go with child, when they have sometime felt the child stir in the womb, do thereby know that they have quickened and have truly conceived" (Rev. Thomas Gataker, 1623). "When a child quickens in the mother's womb, she finds a great change" (Rev. Edward Leigh, 1654). "A woman that hath newly conceived begins to suspect her conception; by and by, some other signs cast into her

¹ *After the conception...infused*] C. Carlile, *A Discourse concerning Two Divine Positions* [1582], sig. Z2, ed. DWF.

² *The Catholic faith...not to them*] Thomas Bilson, *The Survey of Christs Sufferings* (174-5), ed. DWF.

mind that she is deluded. Afterwards, she feels the fruit of her womb quicken, and then her opinion is constantly confirmed" (Rev. John Hacket, 1675). "A woman knoweth whether the child in the womb be quickened, yea or no: she knoweth it by the stirring" (Rev. Thomas Manton, 1684).¹

Puritan clergy, with their more literal reading of Scripture, cited the creation of Adam as evidence that the child is not to be considered a human person until it has drawn breath: God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). Rev. Thomas Jenner (1656) notes that "The fruit in the womb being quickened," even then it "wanteth the full proportion of its parts till the forming power of generation do, by weeks and months, more and more perfect and fashion them all to a comely being and creature; which at last is brought forth." Puritan infants that miscarried after ensoulment, or that were stillborn, having no spirit or breath (Greek *pneuma*) were thereby spared spending eternity in either Hell or Limbo. Near the end of the seventeenth century, at least one Puritan divine extended the grace period even further: on a literalist reading of Leviticus chapter 27, Rev. Richard Steel concluded that, in the eyes of God, the individual human life commences about four weeks *after* birth: "we need not be so critical as to begin it at his [...] quickening in the womb (though he doth then begin to live and to grow), sith the Holy Ghost in the Scripture above-said makes no reckoning of his age until he be a month old." But neither did the Puritan clergy encourage abortion. Rev. William Fenner notes that the human fetus is different from that of an animal precisely because it has the *potential* to become an ensouled human being, God willing: "Though the fruit in the womb be not yet quickened with reasonable soul, yet it grows in the womb, feeds in the womb, and yet it hath no other life in it than may be in a beast; yet because it is (*in fieri*) a man, the mother complains not, saying, "Oh, I am afraid I have a beast in my womb!" No, she will wait God's leisure to quicken it. It is secure enough from being a beast, for it hath such dispositions as will not long be without the soul."²

Many, perhaps most, medical doctors in England prescribed abortifacients during the first trimester. All Tudor physicians opposed their use in the last trimester for purpose of abortment. Savin, one of the most commonly used herbs, was also one of the strongest: it was often used to induce labor, or to expel a dead fetus, or to bring forth the afterbirth after delivery. But when early-term abortion failed, women in the second or even third trimester sometimes took strong doses of savin; the patient in such instances was usually an unwed mother, often a prostitute, and therefore the object of severe censure. William Bullein, M.D., in his *Bulwark of Defense against All Sicknesse* (1562, 1579), writes of savin that this "venomous herb," when "rightly used, is of a singular virtue." "It groweth in gardens: the berries are gathered in harvest." He recommends savin to treat syphilis in either sex ("The fume of this herb doth prevail against the French pox"). He acknowledges that *savin*, as "commonly known," can induce menstruation and terminate pregnancy; induce labor; and expel a dead fetus ("by subfumigation, it doth draw down the dead child from the matrix of the mother"). But Dr. Bullein denounces as a "practice of harlots" the use of savin to procure the late-term destruction of a viable fetus. From savin, he writes, "divers devilish drabs have gathered venom to destroy their bastardy children, to cover their filthy whoredom withal (and yet oft-times it happeneth that the mother is slain, and the child is delivered and by God's providence is helped and saved)."³

Secular law in Britain conformed to what were then the teachings of the Church. A late case in point: at the London Assize begun on 13 December 1676, the first person tried was a pregnant woman who was already in her fourth or fifth month, with a noted baby bump, when she decided to abort. She was charged under the 1624 Infanticide Statute that she did "make away her bastard child." The expelled fetus was produced in evidence against her. But the midwife and coroner both testified that the fetus "had not gone above sixteen weeks and had never been quick, the abortive infant being not above eight inches long and no symptoms of wounds or bruises being to be seen on the body to argue any violence used to it." The mother was therefore declared not guilty of abortion and spared the gallows.⁴

¹ *His Spirit...dead*] T. Adams, *The Devills Banket* (1614), 51; *women...conceived*] T. Gataker, *Two Sermons* (1623), H4v; *When a child...change*] E. Leigh, *A System or Body of Divinity* (1654), p. 539; *A woman...confirmed*] J. Hacket, *A Century of Sermons* [1675,] 171; *A woman...stirring*] T. Manton, *A Second Volume of Sermons*, [1684], 306.

² *breath of life*] Hebrew *neshema chay*, Latin *spiraculum vitae* [Greek *pneuma*]; *living soul*] Hebrew *ruach*, Latin *animam viventem* [Greek *psyche*]; T. Jenner, *The Path of Life* [1656,] 18-19; R. Steel, *A Discourse concerning Old Age* [1688,] 4-5; W. Fenner, *Practicall Divinitie: or, Gospel-Light* [n.d., 1647], 210.

³ *venomous herb...saved*] W. Bullein, *Bulwarke of Defence against all Sicknesse, Soarenesse, and Woundes* (1562; repr. 1579, sig. G1r-v); *subfumigation*] suffumigation (from the 15th through the 19th centuries); the patient sat upon a close-stool or in a covered tub, wherein herbs were smoked for medicinal purposes; *matrix*] womb.

⁴ *Assize*] See *A Narrative of the Proceedings at the Sessions begun the 13th of December 1676* (1676/7); *not guilty of abortion*] through the end of the 17th century, the terms *abortion* and *abortment* denoted any termination or delivery between the quickening and full-formed child, no matter whether the loss was spontaneous, accidental, or induced; prior to ensoulment, the accidental or induced expulsion of the fetus was called an *effluxion*, or (more commonly) a *bringing down* or *procurement* of the obstructed *menstrues* (*courses*, *terms*, *monthly sickness*); thus for

AMONG ROMAN CATHOLICS, the view that human ensoulment may be coincident with fertilization was first suggested in 1620, by Thomas Fienus of the faculty of medicine at the Catholic University of Louvain. His hypothesis was condemned by the Vatican and not again countenanced until the modern era: Rome held the line for ensoulment at 10-15 weeks after insemination.

James Wadsworth, an English Jesuit at Valladolid, states the Church's position as it stood from Saint Thomas Aquinas through the mid-nineteenth century (not excepting the bull *Effraentatam*):¹

Saint Thomas distinguisheth two births, *nasci in utero*, and *nasci ex utero* (to be born in the womb, when the soul is infused and we become reasonable creatures; and to be born out of the womb, when we first come into this light) [and acquire *pneuma*, spirit] [...] We do only contract original sin at the time when we are quickened and receive life in our mother's womb. For though, at the instant of the very first conception, those informed and mixed seeds may be said improperly (*in debito*) to have an obligation to be *afterward* subject to original sin, when it comes to be a living human creature; yet properly and truly (*in effecto*), the child is not infected with original sin until it come to have the soul infused and united to the body, which is not till the quickening. And having no soul, it is not a perfect human creature, but only little more than a mass of flesh; which, without soul, cannot be said to be really *capable* of any sin.²

The uniform *Rituale Romanum* (1614) restated the doctrine that no unborn or stillborn fetus may receive Christian baptism, a prohibition that remained in place until 1895. So, too, the strictures against Christian burial. The *Book of Oaths* (1649) stipulates respectful disposal of the corpse, though outside consecrated ground: "Item, if any child be dead-born, you yourself shall see it buried in such secret place as neither hog nor dog, nor any other beast may come unto it, and in such sort done as it may not be found or perceived (as much as you may); and that you shall not suffer any such child to be cast into the jakes [latrine] or any other inconvenient place."³

The nineteenth-century campaign against abortion (continuing in the twentieth, and down to our own generation) arose not from the Roman Catholic Church but from the medical profession. Advances in secular embryology rendered untenable the Church's historic commitment to delayed ensoulment. From a medical point of view, the fetus developed from the moment of fertilization, and received all of its constituent parts from the parents. Physicians in North America and Britain skeptical of the Church's doctrine of "delayed hominization" began to refuse medications even for early term abortion. In England, the 1861 Offences against the Person Act outlawed abortion together with the herbs and potions used to induce it. In the U.S., the state of Connecticut passed America's first statutory abortion regulation in 1821, prohibiting abortifacients after the fourth month of pregnancy. In 1856, Dr. Horatio Storer organized a national drive by the American Medical Association to end legal abortion altogether. Abortifacients continued to be sold on the open market (often with a disclaimer that the potion should be used only for "female obstructions") until 1873, when the Comstock Act banned access to information concerning all methods of birth control except abstinence.

Obligated by scientific knowledge to abandon the doctrine of divine ensoulment *in medias res*, and prompted by the growing outcry against abortion by an all-male medical profession, the Church was faced with a dilemma whether to date personhood from the moment of conception (and risk the doctrine of divine ensoulment), or from the moment the child received its spirit or breath (and deny existence to countless infant souls already in Limbo). In 1869, Pius IX overturned nearly two millennia of Church teaching: the Bull *Apostolicae Sedis* declared that any termination of a human pregnancy constitutes homicide (irrespective of fetal development or the mother's marital status). Herb-wives and wise women were not heard from – they had long since vanished from the cultural scene. So, too, had witches. During the Victorian period, women who took abortifacients to terminate a pregnancy became the new figure of the bad mother who kills defenseless children.

example in Elizabethan dictionaries: "abortion, untimely birth"; "bring forth or bear a child abortively before it be perfect" (Richard Huolet, *Huolets Dictionary* [1572], YY4r, F3v); *abortus, abortion*, as "An untimely birth nigh to the time of deliverance, whereby the child dieth" (Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus linguae Romanae et Britannicae* [1578], 4v); et seq. for all English dictionaries of the 17th century. For a more nuanced view, and a survey of opinion, see Helkiah Crook, M.D., "Of the Nature and Differences of the Birth," *Mikrocosmographia* (1615), 332-4.

¹ *coincident*] See T. Fienus (Feyens) (1567-1631). *De formatione foetus liber, in quo ostenditur animam rationalem infundi tertia die* (Antwerp, 1620).

² *Saint Thomas...any sin*] J. Wadsworth (1572-1623), *The Contrition of a Protestant preacher, converted to be a Catholique Scholler* (Jesuit College at St. Omer, n.d.), 201.

³ *Item...inconvenient place*] Father Richard Garnet, S.J., attrib., *The Book of Oaths* (1649), 289; an irony of the times: the Church consigned to eternal misery the sentient soul of an unbaptized fetus or stillborn infant, and refused admission of its corpse to a Christian cemetery; but it was uncharitable to dispose of the physical remains in a latrine.