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“In pain you shall bring forth children” Humble Acceptance of the Pain of Childbirth? A Brief Overview from the Middle Ages to the Sixteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

While the Bible, and later the exegesis of theologians, gave meaning to childbirth pain, the acceptance and alleviation, if not the total elimination, of such pain is still a topical issue in the current age of increasingly safe medical intervention. Some historians have stated that suffering was long taken for granted in the West as God's will, and therefore passively accepted without any possibility of change. But is this true? Can we apply such an assumption to the past generally, or would a greater historical contextualisation lead to different considerations, particularly if coupled with an evaluation of individual texts, above all in the medical field? The aim of this article is to show that the idea of abandoning women in labour to their painful fate seems at times to have been unacceptable, particularly in the Middle Ages.

Key words: Childbirth pain - Middle Ages - Early modern period - Medical texts - Women studies

Introduction

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing: in pain you shall bring forth children” (Gen. 3:16).

This is God’s curse, bestowed on Eve for the original sin committed by both progenitors. Adam and Eve’s rebellion against their Maker not only leads to expulsion from the Garden of Eden but also introduces death and disease into the human realm, along with the severe pain experienced by women in childbirth. Such distress would have been spared before the sin. Indeed, contrary to the claims of some exegetes, the sexual act for the purpose of reproduction would not have been excluded from the divine plan; as St Augustine recounts, it would have taken place “without the tumultuous ardour of passion”, while the child, generated from the seeds of both parents, would have been born “without any labour and pain”¹.

Through the original sin, humankind thus experienced the impure pleasure of coitus for the first time. Only the Virgin Mary would later defeat the post-Edenic law, conceiving without carnal sin or suffering from the pangs of childbirth.

While the Bible, and later the exegesis of theologians, gave meaning to childbirth pain, recent centuries have often spawned heated discussion about the acceptance and alleviation, if not the elimination, of such afflictions, with developments in the use of chemicals for this purpose (for example, Queen Victoria of England gave birth using chloroform in 1853). It is still a topical issue today, with gradual improvements in the safety of medical procedures². With regard to women’s suffering in the past, it is sometimes written that the pain of childbirth has always been unquestioningly accepted in the Western world. In her overview of a vast subject matter, including the history of generation, childbirth, and birth from antiquity to the present day, Nadia Maria Filippini writes: “In western culture suffering has thus been naturalised in the sense that it has been seen as intrinsic to a nature regulated by divine law, and as such fixed and not subject to change”³. The scholar refers in particular to the work of Scipione Mercurio (c. 1540-c. 1615), a physician and friar who, as we shall see, justifies women’s pain in relation to Eve’s sin. In a work on the history of childbirth before the age of the clinic, Mireille Laget explained that “the woman who gives birth without suffering is suspect. Her victory over physical evil has something diabolical about it”⁴. This summarised a passage from *Naître* by Bernard This, who attributed these behaviours, sometimes associated with witchcraft, to “backward medieval times” (“temps medievaux, obscurantists”)⁵. The latter definition is now known to be outdated and perceived as anti-historical, as is referring to witchcraft throughout the Middle Ages⁶. In fact, no concrete example has been cited by scholars to support such a claim. Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore employed greater historical precision in more focused research based on French medical sources from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Her studies identified the seventeenth century as the point when acceptance of and resignation to pain became an integral part of the devotion and religious feeling

that women were supposed to display towards childbirth, which can also be inferred from the prayers of the time. Medical discourse sometimes also became an “instrument of pastoral care”, especially in the following century⁷. This was the result of the Catholic Reformation, with the mother’s health (not only her pain) becoming secondary to the salvation of the baby’s soul⁸.

On the basis of these assumptions, and without claiming to be exhaustive, this article analyses a number of written sources from the Middle Ages, mainly medical texts, and the early modern period, which saw a sharp increase in treatises on gynaecology and obstetrics⁹. As far as the latter period is concerned, it focuses almost exclusively on works written in the vernacular, since they were addressed to a wider public, and on the geographical area of the Italian peninsula and France, where a remarkable number of such treatises flourished¹⁰. The article stresses the redundancy of generalising about childbirth pain in Western culture from a single, fixed idea, underlining the need to think in diachronic terms, and how the perspective of abandoning women in childbirth to their painful fate seems to have been unacceptable at times.

1. Medicine and Labour Pains

Late antiquity bequeathed several works on gynaecology and obstetrics, the most important of which is the *Gynaecia* by Mustio or Muscio, written between the fifth and sixth centuries. In a simplified and reworked translation, the author offered western readers parts of the Greek treatise (*Gynaikeia*) by Soranus of Ephesus, written between the first and second centuries. Although this was the most exhaustive medical source on childbirth in antiquity, it was not translated into Latin except in some reworked sections, including Mustio’s treatise, which is set out like a handbook¹¹. No passage in the text mentions religious matters, or, therefore, Eve’s sin.

In one of the three texts of the *Trotula* (eleventh-twelfth century), the author of the *Liber de sinthomatibus mulierum*, a compendium of Greco-Roman and Arabic medicine, refers to the creation of the world in *Genesis* (2, 20-25), explaining it in Galenic physiological terms¹². Created with a cold, moist complexion, woman acted as a check on man’s excesses because she counterbalanced his hot, dry nature. Her own nature, however, was a source of weakness. The author writes: “Therefore, because women are by nature weaker than men and because they are most frequently afflicted in childbirth, diseases very often abound in them, especially around the organs devoted to the work of Nature”¹³.

Not only is there no mention of the divine curse, but the text includes ways to help soothe a woman in distress, including some *carmina*, about which more below.

There was no lack of philosophical-medical treatises on the anatomy and physiology of women, and indeed conception, over the following centuries¹⁴. However, Western physicians and surgeons only began to include instructions on obstetrics in their treatises on diseases of the human body in the fourteenth century, following the tradi-

tion established by Arabic-speaking authors like al-Zahrāwī (Albucasis) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (translated into Latin at least a century earlier)¹⁵.

A reference to women's sin and pain can be found in the gynaecological-paediatric treatise written in the Paduan-Ferrarese vernacular by Michele Savonarola (1385-1468), a court physician and prolific author of moral works¹⁶. In one passage, a rhetorical device is used to simulate a consultation with a woman who asks: "tell me now, why has nature given so much pleasure to the man in impregnating and conceiving, and so much pain to the woman in giving birth? Just as coitus is necessary for generation and the conservation of the living species, so is childbirth, because without childbirth an individual could not multiply"¹⁷.

The author regrets his inability to answer the question and affirms that God indeed demonstrated greater intransigence towards women despite the guilt of both proto-parents and the female constitutional weakness. In this regard, it is probable that Savonarola wanted to echo the theories of theologians who, from Augustine onwards, variously re-read the original sin on the basis of the relative culpability of Eve, symbolising the lower part of the soul, and Adam, representing the rational will¹⁸. At the same time, as seen above with regard to the *Trotula*, women were also thought to have a weaker physical constitution, described as cold and wet on the basis of Aristotelian and Galenic thought. As a result of this implicit 'injustice', the author declares his full compassion towards women in labour, for whom he says he will write down "methods and rules" for a straightforward delivery. The treatise is dedicated to the (noble) women and midwives of Ferrara, but it is actually addressed to a male reader, a noble and wealthy *pater familias*. Indeed, as midwives were mostly illiterate, they were unlikely to have any contact with the text¹⁹. The discourse on women's pain thus seems to be an expedient adopted to make husbands more sympathetic to the sufferings of their wives, especially as such a statement is not included in the lengthy section on gynaecology and obstetrics in the same author's influential *Practica maior*, a work in Latin intended for a specialist readership on which the vernacular text relies heavily. Moreover, Savonarola points out that if a man were to endure some pain during his wife's delivery, "he would have greater certainty of his actual paternity"²⁰. With what is probably a touch of irony, he invites a woman in labour to dramatise her expression of pain—as if this were necessary—by exaggerating her screams. If she does this, he claims, family members will shower her with pity and attention after the event: "and know *frontosa*, that screaming loudly in such a situation is very beneficial to you, which is why Avicenna says 'do let her cry out', and even if it does not hurt so much, I recommend that you scream loudly, so that your pain is believed, and your husband and family will feel compassion for you, lighting a great fire for you and serving you capons, sweets, and excellent wines"²¹.

Avicenna had explained that a woman should lie down for a while and then go up and down stairs while screaming ("ascendat gradus et descendat et clamet": *Liber*

Canonis, Lib. III, fen 21, tract. 2, c. 23). After that she had to hold her breath and push down, as Savonarola explains in the *Practica maior* (VI, 22) and in the vernacular text: “she should take in as deep a breath as possible and then close her mouth and nose, and then hold her breath as long as she can in the lower parts of her abdomen”²². Similar instructions are offered by Antonio Guaineri, a fifteenth-century physician from Pavia, who also displays feelings of compassion towards women and their cruel pain: “When she [the parturient] feels sharp pains and a great weight in her lower abdomen which cruelly, ceaselessly and powerfully molests her, the poor woman must cry out, and raise her mournful voice to the heavens”²³.

The way in which the pain takes shape is said to foreshadow the duration of childbirth: a brief delivery is signalled by discomfort in the anterior part of the abdomen. Following Avicenna’s indications (*Liber Canonis*, Lib. III, fen 21, tract. 2, c. 23), Savonarola (*Practica Maior*, VI, XXI) and Guaineri specified that posterior abdominal pain pointed to a more problematic childbirth.

It is significant that the parturient’s pain becomes paradigmatic as a form of suffering also ‘appropriated’ by men in their accounts of illness, as seen in the collections of healing miracles attributed to some saints. It is written for example: “Patiebatur... sicut dolores parturientis” (they suffered the same pain as women in labour)²⁴. When the miracle in such texts concerns childbirth, the saint’s thaumaturgical powers, with rare exceptions²⁵, are directed towards saving the mother before the baby. Although hagiographical texts, by their very nature, always aim to demonstrate the saint’s qualities in every way possible²⁶, this aspect points to a multifaceted outlook, contradicting the assumption, sometimes even reiterated by historians, that the Church was only interested in saving the baby. This does not apply to the medieval period, and there are various examples in which saintly thaumaturgical abilities are demonstrated through the complete elimination of labour pains. One such miracle was ascribed to Louis of Toulouse; after an invocation by the parturient and her vow to donate a candle, the saint brings her relief²⁷. Another miracle, performed by Charles of Blois, features a woman in labour with a dead foetus in uterus, described by medical sources as a dramatic eventuality that was difficult to resolve; thanks to the mediation of the saint “liberata fuit absque dolore et angustia” (she gave birth without pain or anguish)²⁸. Finally, Ivo of Treguier worked a miracle in which even a ‘contracta’²⁹ woman managed to give birth while sleeping, without even the help of midwives³⁰. Such examples also show that women who gave birth without pain were not necessarily viewed with suspicion.

This aspect can also be glimpsed in the vernacular treatise dedicated to midwives, *La Comare o ricoglitrice*, published in 1596 by Scipione Mercurio, a medical expert and member of the Order of Preaching Friars. Although he makes a point, as written above, of mentioning the sin of Eve (“the instrument of the devil”)³¹, he tells of women who gave birth with almost no labour pains due to their constitution. While admit-

ting that only the Virgin Mary had that genuine privilege, he goes to write: “however, there are women who suffer so little when giving birth naturally that they are able to stay at home until the very last hour before birth. I have often heard some of them say that they suffer more from baking a cake than from giving birth. It is very true that tall, young, robust and very active women, and the ones who are naturally cheerful, feel less pain”³².

Unlike his medieval counterparts, Scipione did not advocate shouting, as he explains in *De gli errori popolari d'Italia*: “A serious mistake that pregnant women often make is screaming loudly during childbirth. In fact, although it seems that screaming because of pain soothes the soul, the opposite happens in childbirth”³³. For him, it was necessary to go straight to the stage where the woman had to hold her breath, because “holding one’s breath speeds up the delivery process and makes it a lot easier”³⁴. Even in cases of unnatural childbirth, with the baby in a podalic position, in *La Comare o ricoglitrice* he specifies that the woman should be exhorted “a non gridare, ò piangere” (not to shout or cry)³⁵.

Parturients who followed these instructions would therefore neither have expressed their pain nor given cause for suspicion. Moreover, although it is never explicitly stated, Scipione might have seen the avoidance of crying and screaming as a way for women to visibly submit to a just punishment.

This is made even more likely by the fact that he takes a totally different line from medieval treatises and Renaissance authors who wrote treatises on obstetrics and gynaecology a few years before him. One such text was Eucharius Rösslin’ *Der Schwangeren, Frawen vnd Hebammen Rosengarten*, the most famous and influential work on teaching the practice to midwives, published in German in 1513 and translated into at least eight languages including Latin (1532), French (1536) and Italian (1538). Rösslin also recommends that women scream out loud while ascending and descending stairs, before holding their breath³⁶. This advice is not surprising since Rösslin’s work borrows from Savonarola’s *Practica*³⁷. The same can be said of the physician Giovanni Marinello’s treatise *Le medicine partendenti alle infirmità delle donne*, written in 1536, although the link between the two works has not yet been highlighted or studied in any detail³⁸.

Marinello also writes that the birthing woman should jump from one foot to the other when in severe pain. Following this, she should shout and breathe deeply³⁹. He goes on to specify: “Therefore, we advise that as soon as the woman feels oppressed by severe pain, she should scream, as this is known to bring great relief to the ailment. And while she is screaming and feeling the pain, walk around the room... Movement will relieve and shorten the pain”⁴⁰.

Neither Marinello nor Rösslin refers to God’s curse for Eve’s sin. While no personal experience of childbirth can be ascertained among the authors mentioned so far⁴¹, the same cannot be said for the surgeon Ambroise Paré (1510-1590), who certainly wit-

nessed the event several times. Not only does he refrain from mentioning original sin, but by giving ‘scientific’ explanations of pain, God’s work is referenced to emphasise the extent of his power in the providence of Nature. This allowed the closed orifice of the vagina to dilate to the point where a baby could come out, which was perceived as far beyond human comprehension⁴². Scientific explanations of the difficulty of childbirth can also be found in the physician Laurent Joubert’s *Erreurs populaires* (1578-79). He argued that the most severe pain was due to the displacement of the coccyx by the movement of the baby. Furthermore, he admitted that childbirth was easier for some women, including prostitutes and the apparently more lascivious Genoese, because this bony part of their bodies had been softened by their gyrations during frequent intercourse⁴³.

The only sixteenth-century French gynaecological text which emphasises that ‘just’ pain is reserved for women in labour is that of the fervent French Catholic Gervais de la Tousche. Despite electing to write a treatise on the subject, albeit one with limited circulation, he was a nobleman with no experience in the art of medicine, let alone obstetrics. Unlike Scipione, he did not write a treatise for midwives. In fact, in addressing noble ladies, he violently criticised the work of professionals for being useless, if not harmful, as well as the use of the birthing chair. He recommended that the parturient should position herself on the ground, like a female animal, in order to return to the primal order of nature. Help could only be provided by friends and relatives, who were responsible for ensuring that the birth followed the rhythms of nature. Moreover, the parturient “with patience and modesty would suffer the anguish and pain that God the creator would reserve for her at his pleasure because of the sin committed against him by Eve”⁴⁴.

These statements foreshadow the prayers written from the seventeenth century onwards, which women in labour were urged to recite to demonstrate their devotion and supine acceptance of pain. See, for example, an excerpt from one penned by Francis de Sales (1567-1622): “And above all because your righteous anger made the first mother of humans, with all her sinful posterity, subject to many pains and sorrows of childbirth, O Lord I accept all the pains that it will please you to permit me to experience for this event”⁴⁵.

While it is true, as Berriot-Salvadore writes, that medical discourse was sometimes used as an instrument of pastoral care at the time, thereby recalling Eve’s sin, it would be wrong to generalise. Although this is an issue that goes beyond the temporal limits of this study, it is impossible not to mention at least the work of the surgeons Jacques and Charles Guillemeau and their extensive experience in the delivery room. They pointed out that painless childbirth was rare as God himself had condemned women to give birth in agony. Nevertheless, it was an eventuality that could not be entirely ruled out. To this end, they referred to stories with a mythological flavour about childbirth in the New World⁴⁶. Most importantly, though, the same surgeons also supported the

practice of embryulcia-embryotomy on a living foetus in order to save a woman unable to give birth. This involved dismembering and removing the foetus using hooks, since, they specified, “the mother is dearer than the child”⁴⁷. A few decades earlier, the Bolognese anatomist Giulio Cesare Aranzio (1530-1589), had opposed this practice, thereby allowing the woman to die, even if he did not invoke divine punishment⁴⁸.

2. “partum accelerare ac dolores mitigare multum”

“If you want a woman to give birth quickly and without great pain, place this charm in her right hand and she will give birth without danger... ‘Anne gave birth to Mary, Mary to the Saviour, Elizabeth to John the Baptist’... So this woman will give birth safely. ‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, child in the womb, whether you are male or female, come forth: Christ calls you to see the light and desires you. Do not delay’”⁴⁹.

The *formula* transcribed above comes from the *Rituale* of Lyon of 1498, a manual of prayers and gestures that priests were obliged to use in various circumstances. It refutes the notion that the Church was indifferent to the pain experienced by women during childbirth and shows that passive devotion such as the prayer by Francis de Sales was anachronistic in the late Middle Ages.

References to the births of Anne, Elizabeth and Mary are a constant in medieval birth *formulae*, but the latter is mentioned most often as she was the only one privileged enough to give birth without pain. In theological thought, Mary is the second Eve, who “conquered the post-Edenic natural law that man and woman couple in lust to produce children and the woman suffers the pains of labour”⁵⁰. For the sake of completeness, however, it should be pointed out that a theory was developed, starting at the end of the twelfth century, according to which she too experienced the painful spasms of labour, albeit at the time of her son’s crucifixion⁵¹.

Formulae, or *carmina*, for childbirth are no exception, as they were developed for many different illnesses in the Middle Ages in association with a more ‘traditional’ pharmacopoeia, including various herbs. The *formulae* and their accompanying rituals cannot simply be classed as superstitious rites, as they often are, since they were an integral part of the medicine of the time. Indeed, they were also justified by a holistic view of the sick⁵². For example, the *De phisicis ligaturis*, an eleventh or twelfth century text, likely translated by Constantine the African from a lost ninth-century Arabic text of Qustā ibn Lūqā (a Melkite Christian scientific and medical writer) endorses the use of ligatures, amulets, or *incantamenta*, which are said to influence the patient’s mind and consequently also the ‘complexion’ of the sick body⁵³.

It is impossible to give an account here of the numerous birthing *formulae* and accompanying rituals. Suffice it to say that they are to be found in various works including religious texts (one is transcribed by Hildegard of Bingen⁵⁴) and medical texts, especially recipe books. Perhaps the most original is the fifteenth-century physician

Thomas Fayreford, who, in his still unpublished handbook on medicine, suggested writing the names of the three persons of the Trinity on three hosts, which were then to be fed to the parturient one at a time. If she gave birth after the first, the other two were to be destroyed and so on. The author demonstrated great confidence in the remedy, and he was almost certain that the baby would leave the maternal womb before the woman had eaten all the hosts⁵⁵.

The *formulae* do not always state the intent to soothe the woman's pain, as is the case with the *Rituale* of Lyon. However, the acceleration of childbirth implicitly had that function, along with safeguarding the woman's health. Indeed, this took precedence over the wellbeing of the baby, which was sometimes 'commanded' to leave the womb with the imperatives *adiuro* and *coniuro*, echoing the terms used in exorcisms⁵⁶. Various items were used in addition to *formulae*, as well as herbs that were believed to speed up childbirth and remove pain, like cyclamen root when held in the right hand, as stated in a text by a late antique author known as Pseudo-Priscian ("radix cyclaminis dextra manu parturientis tenta mulieres sine dolore parere cogit"⁵⁷). Other texts feature magnets or vulture feathers, or snake skin after moulting⁵⁸. Drinking the milk of another woman could also aid the birthing process, especially if the foetus had died, as also specified in the *Liber de Sinthomatibus Mulierum* in the *Trotula*, in which there are various *formulae* for giving birth⁵⁹. As Guaineri explains, several authors write about objects and substances with intrinsic and extrinsic properties, most of which have the property of speeding up childbirth and greatly relieving pain ("partum accelerare ac dolores mitigare multum")⁶⁰. In this case, he mentions a magnet, coral, a heart freshly extracted from a hen and cyclamen root. Although some of these items were still mentioned by authors in the early modern period, *formulae* tended to disappear, viewed with increasing suspicion by the Church⁶¹. At most, it was suggested that prayers taught by the Church be recited, in keeping with orthopraxis, but no more mention was made of rituals.

Marinello is an exception in this respect, although he qualified his words by stating that midwives behaved in the manner he went on to describe: "many midwives... address God with prayers such as this one, saying into the parturient's right ear *Memento Domine filiorum Edon in Hierusalem*, followed by three *Pater Noster*, and immediately she gives birth. Some midwives have virgin paper on which is written the psalm *dixit dominus meo* up to *tecum*. The paper must be attached with thread to the woman's neck by the hand of a virgin girl while reciting three *Pater noster*"⁶².

This is actually no more than a translation of a passage from Savonarola's *Practica*, which stated (in Latin) that Christians generally believed in the efficacy of words spoken and written in this way⁶³. Savonarola had also mentioned the use of the *Agnus Dei*, a wax disc commemorating the papal coronation which depicted the mystical lamb—hence the name—and an effigy of the commissioning pope on one side. It was a Church-endorsed sacramental object which was ritually blessed to protect peo-

ple from a series of nefarious events—including corruption of the air, which was believed to be a cause of pestilence, fire, and catching death—and to provide assistance to women in labour “just as the Virgin Mary had escaped all the perils of childbirth”⁶⁴. Marinello shows no interest in the *Agnus Dei* but recalls another ritual for giving birth quickly, which is steeped in incomprehensible words. It is said to have been revealed to a physician, whose identity is not specified, by a woman from Salerno. The Renaissance physician writes: “an excellent physician wrote that an old woman from Salerno confided to him under oath that she had caused many women from Salerno to give birth quickly in this way: she took three peppercorns one after the other at the moment of delivery, and for each grain she said a *Pater noster*. And when she had to say ‘deliver us from our evils’, she said ‘deliver this woman N. [at this point, the woman’s name was elicited] from the difficult birth’. The parturient then had to swallow these three peppercorns one after the other, with water, in order to not break them with her teeth. After three *Pater Noster* she [the old woman] said these words three times into the parturient’s right ear: *bizamie, lamion, lamiad, azerai, etc...* Sabaoth. *pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua Osanna in excelsis Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini Osanna in excelsis*”⁶⁵.

Here again, Marinello ‘forgets’ to specify that the physician in question was the Catalan Arnaldo da Villanova (c.1240-1312), or, more specifically, that the ritual described could be found in the *Breviarium practicae*, falsely attributed to Arnaldo, which was available in printed form at the end of the fifteenth century⁶⁶.

It is interesting to note that the *Trois Livres appartenant aux infirmités et maladies des femmes*, a volume by the physician Jean Liébault published in 1582, does not contain a description of the ritual. It is generally referred to as a translation of Marinello’s work, but a comparison of the two texts suggests that it is actually a free and original rewrite⁶⁷. It only mentions the usual pharmacological remedies or the use of items such as a magnet, a vulture feather, and the familiar cyclamen root tied to a thigh⁶⁸.

Conclusions

The sources examined reveal a strong desire to alleviate the pain of childbirth in the Middle Ages despite the biblical explanation. This aim was entertained by both physicians and churchmen, as the *Rituale* of Lyon demonstrates. Stories of miracles in which the saint intercedes to eliminate labour pains in their entirety are also notable, as is the flourishing of *formulae* and *carmina* to accelerate childbirth. Eve’s sin is not mentioned in medical texts, apart from in Savonarola’s vernacular work. However, the author shows compassion towards women by suggesting that the divine punishment did not treat them equally to man. Sources from the Middle Ages show the opposite end of the spectrum from passively abandoning the parturient to her pain. In the sixteenth century, at least in Italian and French territory and in vernacular medical works, the only references to original sin are made by Scipione Mercurio and Gervais de la

Tousche. The latter's text reads more like the ravings of a misogynist who, standing in opposition to the work of the midwife, wants to return childbirth to a hypothetical primordial order. However, he had no medical expertise. For his part, Scipione Mercurio, unlike the other authors, urged women not to scream or cry even in the case of difficult deliveries like breech births. If women had managed to follow such advice, they would not have been able to express their grief without being suspected of witchcraft. It is certainly true that the humble acceptance of pain tended to become an integral part of the devotion and religious feeling that women were expected to display towards childbirth. As Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore points out, though, this phenomenon can only be ascribed to the seventeenth century and beyond. In any case, we cannot generalise, at least as far as medical texts are concerned. This is illustrated by the briefly outlined example of Jacques and Charles Guillemeau, who supported the practice of *embryulcia-embryotomy* on a living foetus in order to save a woman unable to give birth. But this period and this context are beyond the scope of this study.

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Abbreviations

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1. "ut sine ullo inquieto ardore libidinis, sine ullo labore ac dolore pariendi, fetus ex eorum semine gignerentur"; Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, IX, 3.6. In: Zycha J (ed.), *Prague-Vienna-Leipzig: F. Tempsky-G. Freytag*; 1894. pp. 272. On this subject, I refer to the seminal article by Scafi A, *Giving Birth in the Garden of Eden*. In: Gislson Dopfel C (ed.), *Pregnancy and Childbirth. History, Medicine and Anthropology*. Moraga: Saint Mary's College of California; 2018. pp. 31-42.
2. On the different techniques used in recent history against the pain of childbirth, see Skowronski GA, *Pain Relief in Childbirth: Changing Historical and Feminist perspectives. Anaesth Intensive Care* 2015 (History Supplement): 25-28.
Among other things, the scholar analysed the different waves of feminist thought that moved from an initial enthusiasm for the elimination of pain to a more natural birth, which emphasised "the importance of childbirth as a life experience for women, claiming that pain relief, especially methods like epidural analgesia which could completely eliminate pelvic sensation, limited the childbirth experience and could adversely affect mother-child bonding" (ibid., p. 27).
3. Filippini NM, *Pregnancy, Delivery, Childbirth. A Gender and Cultural History from Antiquity to the Test Tube in Europe*. London-New York: Routledge; 2021. p. 28. The scholar, while generalising, certainly due to the need to consider such a wide historical period and subject in the volume, nevertheless refers mainly to eighteenth-century sources.
4. "On doit souffrir pour être mère. La femme qui enfante sans souffrir est suspecte. Sa victoire sur le mal physique a quelque chose de diabolique"; Laget M, *Naissances. L'accouchement avant l'âge de la clinique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil; 1982. p. 160.
5. "Revenons à ces temps médiévaux, obscurantistes où certaines femmes accouchaient, rapidement, sans douleur [...] Les malheureuses étaient, en ces temps de justice expéditive, rapidement condamnées et brûlées"; This B, *Naître*. Paris: Aubier Montaigne; 1972. p. 138.
6. On the subject of the 'midwife-witch', see Foscati A, *Le meraviglie del parto. Donare la vita tra Medioevo ed Età moderna*. Torino: Einaudi; 2023. pp. 17-22.
7. Berriot-Salvadore E, *Un corps, un destin. La femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance*. Paris: Champion; 1993. pp. 164.
8. See, Prosperi A, *Dare l'anima. Storia di un infanticidio*. Torino: Einaudi; 2005.

9. Apart from the physicians' interest in the woman's body in relation to the development of dissections and a control of midwives' work, renewed attention towards gynaecological matters was largely due to the rediscovery of many texts by ancient authors, above all those by Hippocrates, which also led to the publication of the entire Latin translation of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* in 1525. See King H, *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium*. Aldershot: Ashgate; 2007; Green MH, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008. pp. 267-87.
10. See Worth-Stylianou V, *Les traités d'obstétrique en langue française au seuil de la modernité. "Bibliographie critique des Divers travaux" d'Euchaire Rösslin (1536) à l'"Apologie de Louyse Borgeois sage femme" (1627)*. Genève: Droz; 2007.
11. See, Marchetti F, "Figura ita est": origine e uso delle illustrazioni dei manuali di ostetricia dalla tarda antichità al Medioevo. In: Foscati A, Gislon Dopfel C, Parmeggiani A (eds), *Nascere. Il parto dalla tarda antichità all'età moderna*. Bologna: Il Mulino; 2017. pp. 15-31.
12. Green MH (ed.), *Trotula. Un compendio medievale di medicina delle donne*. Firenze: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo; 2009. pp. 63-64.
13. Green MH (ed. and English transl.), *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania; 2001. pp. 70-71: "Quoniam ergo mulieres uiris sunt debiliores natura, et quia in partu sepiissime molestantur, hinc est quare in eis sepius habundant egritudines, et maxime circa membra operi nature debita".
14. See, Jaquart D, Thomasset C, *Sexualité et savoir médical au Moyes Âge*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; 1985.
15. See, Green MH, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* Ref. 9. pp. 102-17.
16. About this text, see, Zuccolin G, *Nascere in latino ed in volgare. Tra la "Practica" e il "De regimine"*. In Crisciani C, Zuccolin G (eds), Michele Savonarola. *Medicina e cultura di corte*. Firenze: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo; 2011. pp. 137-210. See also the introduction of the volume: Michele Savonarola. *A Mother's Manual for the Women of Ferrara: A Fifteenth-Century Guide to Pregnancy and Pediatrics*. In: Zuccolin G (ed.), Marafioti M (Translated by), New York-Toronto: Iter Press; 2022. pp. 1-52.
17. Despite the language of the treatise, the title is in Latin. Belloni L (ed.), *Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare "Ad mulieres ferrarienses de regimine pregnantium et noviter natorum usque ad septennium"*. Milano: Società Italiana di Ostetricia e Ginecologia; 1952. p. 116: "ditime il perchè ha la natura dato tanto delecto a l'huomo ne l'impregnare e generare, e a la femena tanto dolore nel parturire? Che come è il coito trovato come cossa necessaria ad generare et conservare le spetie de li animali coitivi, cussi è trovato il parturire come cossa necessaria a conservatione di quella, che senza il parturire non pote-rebeno multiplicare gli individui". I transcribe the translation from: Michele Savonarola. *A Mother's Manual for the Women of Ferrara*. Ref. 16. p. 150.
18. For a detailed analysis on the subject, see, Vecchio S, *Il piacere da Abelardo a Tommaso*. In: Casagrande C, Vecchio S (eds), *Piacere e dolore. Materiali per una storia delle passioni*. Firenze: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo; 2009. pp. 67-86.
19. See Zuccolin G, *Nascere in latino ed in volgare. Tra la "Practica" e il "De regimine"*. Ref. 16. pp. 148-51.
20. Michele Savonarola. *A Mother's Manual for the Women of Ferrara*. Ref. 16. p. 150; L. Belloni (ed.), *Il trattato ginecologicopediatrico in volgare "Ad mulieres ferrarienses de regimine pregnantium et noviter natorum usque ad septennium"*. Ref. 17. p. 117.

21. Ibid., p. 121: “E sappi, frontosa, chel cridar forte in tal caxo ti è molto giovativo, imperò dice Avicena *et clamet*: e se anco non ti dolesse tanto, pur ti consiglio crida forte, a ziò chel te sia creduto il tuo male, havendote compassione il marito e li altri di caxa, asmorendo tal fuoco grande cum capuoni, confecti e vini avantezati”. Translation in: Michele Savonarola. *A Mother’s Manual for the Women of Ferrara*. Ref. 16. p. 156.
22. Ibid., p. 153. Belloni L (ed.), *Il trattato ginecologico pediatrico in volgare “Ad mulieres ferrarienses de regimine pregnantium et noviter natorum usque ad septennium”*. Ref. 17. p. 120.
23. Antonio Guaineri, *De egritudinibus matricis*, XXXV. In: *Opus preclarum*. Lyon: in Vico Mercuriali; 1517. fol. 142ra: “Cumque dolores inmites et magno cum pondere in pectinem partura senserit que eam crudeliter et sine intermissione molestent potenter paupercula clamet et ad celum usque lamentabiles voces emittat”. See, Lemay HR, *Women and the Literature of Obstetrics and Gynecology*. In: Rosenthal JT (ed.), *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*. Athens: University of Georgia Press; 1990. pp. 189-209.
24. Albanès JH, Chevalier U (eds), *Actes anciens et documents concernant le bienheureux Urbain V, pape (...)*. Paris: Bibliothèque de l’École des chartes; 1897. pp. 150, 293, 295.
25. In these cases, the reference is to ‘caesarean section’ from a dead mother. See Foscati, A, “*Vocabatur vulgo Ingenitus*” Il parto cesareo nel Medioevo. *Reti Medievali Riv* 2021;22(1):63-83. See also Foscati A, The miracle of childbirth: characters and rituals in hagiographic sources between the thirteenth and sixteenth century. *Reti Medievali Riv* 2018;19(2):63-83.
26. See Foscati A, Miracle Tale as Privileged Sources for a Historical Investigation of the Diseases in the Middle Ages: Canonization Processes and *Libri miraculorum*. *Medicina nei Secoli* 2024; 36(1):133-48.
27. *Processus canonizationis et legendae variae sancti Ludovici O. F. M. Episcopi Tolosani*. *Analecta Franciscana*. Firenze: ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, Quaracchi; 1951. p. 295.
28. de Sérent P-A (ed.), *Monuments du procès de canonisation du Bienheureux Charles de Blois, Duc de Bretagne, 1320-1364*. Saint-Brieuc: Imprimerie L. Prud’Homme; 1921. p. 331.
29. The adjective *contractus*, which was very common in hagiographic texts, referred to physical disabilities, including paralysis and congenital physical deformities of varying severity.
30. de la Borderie A, Daniel J, Perquis RP, Tempier D (eds), *Monuments originaux de l’histoire de saint Yves*. Saint-Brieuc: Imprimerie L. Prud’Homme; 1887. p. 293.
31. Mercurio Scipione, *La comare o ricoglitrice*, I, 1. Venezia: Appresso Gio. Battista Cioti; 1596. p. 3.
32. Ibid., I, 12. p. 55. “Vi sono però alcune donne, che nel parto naturale tanto poco patiscono, che stanno per casa sino all’hora del partorire, et da alcune ho sentito dire più volte, che penano più a fare una torta, che non fanno a partorire. E ben vero, che le donne grandi, giovani, robusti, e di molto essercitio, e quelle, che sono di natura allegre, sentono assai manco dolori”. The same statement – namely that it is sometimes easier bearing a child than to bake a cake– is readable in a letter from Eleonora d’Aragona to Isabella d’Este on the occasion of Beatrice d’Este’s first time giving birth in 1493. I am grateful to Gabriella Zuccolin for suggesting this source.

33. Mercurio Scipione, *De gli errori popolari d'Italia*, libri sette, V, 25. Venezia: appresso Gio. Battista Ciotti Senese; 1603. fol. 255v: "Error anco notabile è quello, che cosi frequentemente commettono le gravide di gridar ad alta voce nel far i figliuoli; impoche se bene par, che ne' dolori il gridar sfoghi l'animo, e minuischi il dolore, nel parto nondimeno fa contrario effetto".
34. Mercurio Scipione, *La comare o ricoglitrice*, I, XX. Ref. 31. p. 81.
35. Ibid. pp. 22; 23.
36. I quote from the Italian translation: "che la gravida alquanto poco, cioe per una hora, o circa stia ferma: dopoi levandosi, andando su e giu per le scale, e forte gridando, che la si stracchi"; Rösslin Eucharius, *Libro nel qual si tratta del parto delhuomo e de tutte quelle cose, che cerca esso parto accadeno (...)*. Venezia: Giovanni Andrea Vavassore; 1538, fol. Biiiv.
37. Green MH, The Sources of Eucharius Rösslin's "Rosegarden for Pregnant Women and Midwives". *Medical History* 2009;53:167-92.
38. This article also demonstrates some aspects of the connection between the two works.
39. Marinello Giovanni, *Le medicine partendenti alle infermità delle donne*, III, 11. Venezia: Appresso Giovanni Valgrisio; 1574. fol. 272v.
40. Ibid. fol. 268r: "Però imponiamo, che la donna sentendosi da gravissimi dolori punta gridi: perciocche è atto, che porge grande refrigerio alla sopravvenuta noia. Et, mentre gridando si duole; vada passeggiando per la camera... il moto allevierà et farà brevi i dolori".
41. Rösslin was an apothecary. It is difficult to think of a direct commitment on the part of Savonarola, Guaineri and Marinello. Regarding Scipione Mercurio, there are contrasting theories (see, Pancino C, *Scipion Mercurio e la carriera di un medico nella prima età moderna*. In: Biondi A (ed.), *Modernità: definizioni ed esercizi*. Bologna: Clueb; 1998. p. 269).
42. Paré Ambroise, *De la generation de l'homme*, XV. In: *Les Œuvres*, XXIV. Paris: Gabriel Buon; 1585. p. 944.
43. Joubert Laurent, *Erreurs populaires au fait de la medicine et regime de santé*, III, 1. Bordeaux: par S. Millangespar; 1578. pp. 334-36.
44. "avec toute patience et modestie, recevoi les angoisses et douleurs que Dieu le createur par son bon plaisir, luy a preparees pour le peché contre luy commis par la premiere femme Eve"; de la Tousche Gervais, *La tres haute et tres souveraine science de l'art et industrie naturelle d'enfanter. Contre la maudicte et perverse impericie des femmes que l'on appelle saiges femmes (...)*. Paris: chez Didier Millot; 1587. fol. 11v. Note how calls for 'natural rhythms' and the normalisation of the pain of childbirth have come from disparate moments and situations throughout history: from the ramblings of a fervent Catholic in the sixteenth century to feminist groups in recent years. See *supra* note 2.
45. "Et d'autant que juste courroux rendit la première mère des humains, avec toute sa pécheresse postérité, sujette à beaucoup de peines et de douleurs es enfantemens; ô Seigneur, j'accepte tous les travaux qu'il vous plaira permettre m'arriver pour cette occasion"; de Sales, Francis, *Œuvres complètes*, III. Paris: Albanel et Martin; 1839. pp. 721-22. The prayer is also cited by Filippini NM, *Pregnancy, Delivery, Childbirth*. Ref. 3. p. 27. Berriot-Salvadore cites another example of a prayer composed in the seventeenth century, again devoted to preparing women for a resignation of pain (Berriot-Salvadore E, *Un corps, un destin. La femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance*. Ref. 7. p. 164).

46. Jacques Guillemeau wrote a work entitled *De l'heureux accouchement des femmes* in 1609, which was reprinted several times by his son Charles, with some additions, from 1620 onwards. I quote from one of these amplified editions: Guillemeau Jacques, *De la grossesse et accouchement des femmes*, II, 5. Paris: chez Abraham Pacard; 1621. pp. 168-69.
47. Ibid. p. 242. On this subject see, Foscati A, *Le meraviglie del parto. Donare la vita tra Medioevo ed Età moderna*. Ref. 6. pp. 70-76.
48. Aranzio, Giulio Cesare, *Anatomicarum Observationum liber*, XXXIX. In: *De humano foetu liber, tertio editus, ac recognitus, eiusdem anatomicarum observationum liber*. Venezia: Apud Bartholomaeum Carampellum; 1595. p. 106.
49. "Si tu veulx que femme enfante tantost et sans grant douleur, si luy metz ceste oraison en sa main dextre: et elle delivra sans peril... Anna peperit Mariam. Maria Salvatorem. Helysabeth Joannem Baptistam... Sic mulier ista pariet illesa. In nomine Domini Nostri Iesu Christi. Puer qui es in utero: si sis masculum vel puella, veni foras: Christus te vocat lucem videre, te desiderat, ne moraris". The transcription of this text appears in Bonzon A, Venard M, *La religion dans la France moderne, XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle*. Paris: Hachette Livre; 1998. p. 145.
50. Scafi A, *Giving Birth in the Garden of Eden*. Ref. 1. p. 53.
51. Bino C, *Dal trionfo al pianto. La fondazione del "teatro della misericordia" nel Medioevo (V-XIII secolo)*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero; 2008. pp. 244-45.
52. On *formulae* in general, see, Bozoky E, *Charmes et prières apotropaïques*. Turnhout: Brepols; 2003; Delaurenti B, *La pratique incantatoire à l'époque scolastique. Charmes et formules des réceptaires médicaux en latin et en langues romanes (XIIIe-XVe siècle)*. In: Draelants I, Balouzat-Loubet C (eds), *La formule au Moyen Âge*, II. Turnhout: Brepols; 2015. pp. 473-94. On the *formulae* for childbirth, see: L'Estrange E, "Quant femme enfante..." Remède pour l'accouchement au Moyen Âge. In: McClive C, Pellegrin N (eds), *Femmes en fleurs, femmes en corps. Sang, santé, sexualités, du Moyen Âge aux Lumières*. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne; 2010. pp. 167-81. Even in Antiquity, amulets were believed to speed up childbirth: see Hanson AE, *A long Lived "Quick-birther" (okytokion)*. In: Dasen V (ed.), *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité*. Fribourg: Academic Press; 2004. pp. 265-80.
53. See Wilcox J, Riddle M, Qustā ibn Lūqā's Physical Ligatures and the Recognition of the Placebo Effect. *Medieval Encounters* 1995;1:1-50. For a possible limitation of the involvement of Constantine the African in the genesis of the work, and for the problems of attributing the work to the author Melkita, see Long B, *Decoding the De physicis ligaturis: Text, Translation, Attribution*. *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 2022;32:241-276.
54. Hildegard of Bingen, *Physica*, IV, 7. In: PL 197. col. 1255.
55. "Ad difficultatem partus scribatur in una oblata in nomine patris lazare in alia et filii [At this point of the text, the writer has been added above the line: "veni foras"] in terciā et spiritus sancti Christi vocatur et dentur paciēti si sufficiat una comburantur duo si oportet dari aliam comburatur terciā raro contingit quod oportet dare terciā"; ms. London, B. L. Harley 2558, fol. 117v.
56. For example: "Adiuro te infans per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum sive puer sive puella sis, Christus te advocat: veni foras". It is quoted by Olsan LT, *Latin Charms in British Library*, ms Royal 12.B.XXV. *Manuscripta* 1989;33(2):122.
57. Theodorus Priscianus ad Octavium Filium. In: Rose V (ed.), Leipzig: B. G. Teubneri; 1894. p. 341.

58. See Foscati A, *Le meraviglie del parto. Donare la vita tra Medioevo ed Età moderna*. Ref. 6. pp. 39-59.
59. Green MH (ed. and English transl.) *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*. Ref. 13. p. 102.
60. Antonio Guaineri, *De egritudinibus matricis*, XXXV. Ref. 23. fol.142vb.
61. Their disappearance from medical treatises and religious texts does not mean that they did not continue to be used, as the French priest Jean-Baptiste Thiers testified: Thiers, Jean-Baptiste, *Traité des superstitions*, II. Paris: chez Antoine Dezallier; 1697. pp. 93-94.
62. Marinello Giovanni, *Le medicine appartenenti alle infermità delle donne*, III, XI. Ref. 39. fol. 284v: "molte levatrici... si rivolgono a Dio con orationi quale è questa che dicono nell'orecchio destro della donna. Memento Domine filiorum Edon in Hierusalem, con tre pater noster, et subitamente ne fa figliuoli. Alcune hanno il salmo dixit dominus domino meo scritto in carta vergine fino a *tecum*, et con il filo il fanno attaccare al collo della donna per mano di fanciulla vergine con tre pater noster. Alcune dicono il Miserere".
63. Michele Savonarola, *Practica maior*, VI, 21. Venezia: Apud Iuntas; 1547. f. 281rb: "Quidam ex christicolis in verbis confidentes quae facta sunt, dixerunt quod si in aure dextra patientis dicatur, Memento Domine filiorum edom in die hierusalem qui dicunt exinanite, cum pater noster ter quod statim pariet. Dixit Dominus Domino meo, usque ad tecum inclusive in charta non nata et cum filo collo suspendatur per virginem cum tribus pater noster. Item multa alia de Miserere mei Deus hanc virtute habet".
64. "Et sic eos liberare digneris ab omnibus periculis, et in puerperio laborantes, sicut matrem tuam ab omni periculo liberasti"; Dykmans M, *Le cérémonial papal de la fin du Moyen Âge à la Renaissance*, III. Bruxelles-Rome: Institute Historique Belge de Rome; 1985. pp. 339-40.
65. Marinello Giovanni, *Le medicine appartenenti alle infermità delle donne*, III, XI. Ref. 39. fols. 284v-285r: "troviamo scritto per alcun eccellente medico, che una vecchia Salernitana gli affermò con giuramento di haver fatto partorire subito il piu delle donne Salernitane col seguente modo. Toglieva tre grani di pepe l'uno dopo l'altro nel tempo del partorire a nome di colei, a cui faceva di bisogno, et per ciascun grano diceva un pater noster, et quando haveva a dire, sed libera nos a malo, diceva, sed libera hanc mulierem N. ab hoc difficili partu, et così le faceva tranguggiare questi tre grani l'uno dopo l'altro, con uno, ò acqua in guisa, che non ne toccava co' denti per rompergli. ilche fatto con tre pater noster le diceva tre volte dell'orecchia destra queste parole. bizamie, lamion, lamiad, azerai, etc... Sabaoth. *pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua Osanna in excelsis Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini Osanna in excelsis*".
66. Marinello's passage is practically a literal translation of the Latin one. See Ps.-Arnaldo da Villanova, *Breviarium Practicae*. Venezia: per Baptistam de Tortis; 1494. fol. 42rb. The passage is even quoted by de la Rosa Cubo C, *Cum auxilio Dei*. La ayuda divina en los textos médicos latinos. In: De la Rosa Cubo C, Martín Ferreira AI (eds), *Que los Dioses nos escuchen. Comunicación con lo divino en el mundo greco-latino y su pervivencia*. Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid; 2012. p. 81.
67. See Bourbon F, Jean Liébault (1535-1596), médecin hippocratique. Vers la gynécologie moderne. *Renaissance and Reformation* 2010;33(3):61-84.
68. Liébault Jean, *Trois Livres appartenant aux infirmités et maladies des femmes*, III, 46. Paris: chez Jacques du Puy à la Samaritaine; 1582. p. 888.

