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AMBROISE PARÉ AND LAURENT JOUBERT, KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEFS ABOUT PREGNANCY IN 16TH CENTURY FRANCE

Abstract. Our article is devoted to the science of female anatomy in the 16th century, particularly the practices and beliefs related to pregnancy and childbirth. We analysed the academic discourse presented in the *Œuvres* of Ambroise Paré (1510–1590), physician and surgeon, to compare it with the *Erreurs Populaires* by Laurent Joubert (1529–1583), physician and professor at Montpellier. Through our research, we were able to establish an overview of the knowledge, beliefs, and methods practiced at the time for treating the female body, not only in the medical field but also among the laypeople. Firstly, we examined the signs and progression of pregnancy as depicted in Paré's *Œuvres* and Joubert's *Erreurs Populaires*. Next, we focused on childbirth itself, the complications during delivery, and the solutions envisioned at the time to address them. After comparing these different discourses, we found that the approaches and objectives of these two physicians are quite distinct. Paré remains faithful to the theories of the ancients despite his extensive experience, whereas Joubert appears closer to practical applications in his attack on the numerous beliefs prevalent in society. However, while these differences significantly distinguish the two discourses and their targeted readerships differ in nature, both authors generally address the same questions and highlight the problems that women and physicians faced at the time.

Keywords: history of medicine, French medical discourse of the 16th century, pregnancy, woman

I will greatly increase your pain in childbirth; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you¹.

The female body has always been the subject of numerous inquiries. Pregnancy, as a visible metamorphosis of the female anatomy, has long been one of humanity's greatest mysteries. For this reason, both in medical circles and

¹ Gn 3: 16.

among the general populace, practical knowledge intertwined with beliefs has been developed for the care of the gravid female body, this “most fertile field and garden of Nature”², as André du Laurens (1558–1609), university physician and chief doctor to Henry IV, calls it. To account for these beliefs, it seemed pertinent to juxtapose the information found in Ambroise Paré’s *Le Livre de la génération de l’homme*³ (1510–1590), known as the father of modern surgery, with that in Laurent Joubert’s *Erreurs Populaires*⁴ (1529–1583), physician and professor at the University of Montpellier.

Although both treatises were penned by physicians, their approaches and objectives differ. Paré, aiming to explain the technical aspects of childbirth, focuses on his medical knowledge and the expertise he acquired over a long practice. Joubert, on the other hand, is driven by his desire *to extinguish and annihilate several false opinions and errors (offspring of ignorance) that have long held sway in medicine, surgery, and apothecary*⁵. Moreover, as Joël Coste has demonstrated, Joubert:

founded a literary genre that would enjoy remarkable longevity in France. For nearly three centuries, almost thirty author-physicians, whether belonging to the academic elite like Joubert or young doctoral candidates and country doctors practising in the provinces, focused on, primarily to denounce, the health-related beliefs and behaviours of their contemporaries⁶.

The aim of our article is to compare the two treatises by focusing on the female body during pregnancy. First, we will analyse the information on which the presumption of conception was based, and then examine the attitudes of the physicians towards this issue to obtain a comprehensive picture of the methods, problems, and beliefs concerning pregnancy in the sixteenth century.

The signs and progress of pregnancy

Before focusing on the woman during childbirth, we would like to present some information on how the signs of pregnancy were described and interpreted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries / or during early modern Europe.

² A. DU LAURENS, *Des parties genitales*, [in:] IDEM, trans. Th. GELÉE, Rouen: Raphael du Petit Val, 1621, p. 248 v^o.

³ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération de l’homme*, [in:] IDEM, *Les Œuvres*, Paris: Gabriel Buon, 1599 (cetera: A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*), p. 733.

⁴ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires au fait de la medecine et regime de santé*, Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1578 (cetera: L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*).

⁵ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, f^o a 5 v^o.

⁶ On the genre of *Erreurs Populaires*, we refer you to the book by J. COSTE, *La littérature des erreurs Populaires. Une ethnographie médicale à l’époque moderne*, Paris 2002, p. 9.

Ambroise Paré, in his *Livre de la génération de l'homme*⁷, devotes an entire chapter to this question, entitled *Les signes que la femme aura conçu, et est grosse d'enfant*⁸. The surgeon begins by describing the woman's general condition, and in the very first lines tells us that:

The signs by which a woman will be assured that she has conceived are, firstly, if she has had children before, she will notice when the seed does not come out of the womb: for if it is retained, she will be certain she has conceived. Similarly, she feels, when the seeds are joined, a slight shiver and contraction throughout her body, and such a thing happens because the womb compresses and its opening closes to retain the seeds [...]⁹.

This passage suggests that Paré described these signs based on practical knowledge and that he interacted with women daily. Indeed, the sensory details (“a slight shiver”) were likely gathered from women themselves. He refers in this passage to the commonly held belief that the womb has the ability to move. The surgeon asserts that it closes to retain the seeds so that pregnancy can develop. Paré naturally notes that a pregnant woman does not have her periods, but this observation must be understood in accordance with this theory of the womb. Further on, the pregnant woman is considered a patient afflicted with a thousand ailments: *she has many spots and bruises on her face, pains in her breasts, and above all, she is disturbed by cold and harmful humours*¹⁰. *To further the matter*¹¹, the surgeon recommends women use *a fomentation of warm herbs, cooked in good wine or Malvasia*¹², which is then to be applied *inside the neck of the womb*¹³. We can thus highlight, in terms of practice, the strong influence of various theories on the female body, among which the humoral theory dominates. The surgeon continues to believe that female moisture has a negative impact on the rest of the body and that, indeed, the woman suffers above all from a humoral imbalance.

However, in the *Erreurs Populaires*, Joubert makes a distinction between the *women who are in very good health: that is, who do not feel differently from their usual selves and are in full health*¹⁴ and those who suffer from the characteristic signs of a humoral imbalance. As Joubert explains, this imbalance does not occur in all cases of pregnancy, because if everything proceeds without any complications, the child

⁷ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 733.

⁸ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 733–734.

⁹ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

¹⁰ É. BERRIOT-SALVADORE, *Un corps, un destin. La femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance*, Paris 1993, p. 131.

¹¹ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 733.

¹² A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

¹³ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

¹⁴ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 291–292.

consumes as much blood as could be surplus in the mother's body: and this blood is well-qualified. Consequently, there are no depraved and useless humours, neither for the child nor the mother, that overflow into the stomach and other parts of the body: from which arise many ailments and annoyances, especially in the early months, for those who are otherwise full of bad humours¹⁵.

Since menstruation disappears during pregnancy, it was concluded that it transforms into maternal blood, becoming a sort of nourishment for the fetus and maintaining a favourable temperature for the "sprout" (the embryo). According to this theory, maternal milk is the result of this conversion and is therefore also called "whitened blood"¹⁶, which, according to Joubert, "dilates and amplifies"¹⁷ the woman's breasts from the moment of retaining the male sperm.

The alteration of women's urine is another manifestation of pregnancy for both physicians. In the *Livre de la génération de l'homme*, Paré mentions the evolution of the urine's temperature as a symptom of pregnancy. The retention of menstruation is caused by the warming of the bladder located above the womb, *thus the bladder, which is above it, connected by certain small filaments, through which the most subtle and sap-like portion of the blood remains therein, making the urine tinged with redness*¹⁸. However, in *Erreurs Populaires*, Joubert firmly declares that *it is certain that one cannot reliably ascertain by the urine whether a woman is pregnant or not. For even in other conditions, whether of man or woman, be it health, illness, or neutral state, this sign is as fallacious as anything*¹⁹. Furthermore, within this symptomatology, the cessation of menstruation itself is not a reliable sign of pregnancy for Joubert, as he notes that *in many maidens this purgation is often suppressed, and many pregnant women do not cease to have it, at least in the first months: some even throughout the entire pregnancy*²⁰.

The question of urine is by no means overlooked by Joubert. The physician professes that urine faithfully reflects the state of the veins and arteries throughout the body, but he also refers to several factors that can influence it. He mentions, among other things, diet, lifestyle, or various diseases, in which case urine can become *cloudy and thick, snotty, or as white as milk; sometimes purulent,*

¹⁵ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 292.

¹⁶ As Jean-Yves Le Naour explains: *for a long time, maternal milk was presented as "bleached blood", the menstrual blood having stopped flowing and been transformed into milk during gestation. Once again, what was impurity and a threat became, with pregnancy and childbirth, a source of life. And women are brought back to their eternal role*; J.-Y. LE NAOUR, C. VALENTI, *Du sang et des femmes. Histoire médicale de la menstruation à la Belle Époque*, <http://journals.openedition.org/clio/114> [3 III 2024].

¹⁷ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 283.

¹⁸ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 734.

¹⁹ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 273.

²⁰ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 274.

*bloody, sandy, or full of hairs and filaments, small caruncles, particles like bran, bits like coarse flour, little stones, and large gravel*²¹.

Next, both physicians raise the question of the sex of the child. Paré makes a clear distinction between the symptoms that allow recognition of the child's sex. For him, the matter is straightforward, referring once again to humoral theory, he observes that the formation of the child's sex depends on the predominance of one of the parental seeds, either the one that is hot and dry (the man), or the one that is cold and moist (the woman). The surgeon specifies that *nature resembles a painter, who portrays a thing naturally, striving to make children resemble their parents as much as possible*²². *When the seed of the father overcomes that of the mother, Paré explains with a certain common sense, then the child resembles the father, and when that of the woman overcomes that of the man, the child resembles the mother*²³. As Évelyne Berriot-Salvadore reminds us, *through the semenism of Hippocrates or Galen, fertilization appears as a battle between the two seeds within the uterine field: if the feminine prevails in quantity or quality, a girl is born, if the masculine remains the most powerful, a boy is formed*²⁴. In his study, the surgeon goes further by introducing *the idea of a hierarchy of qualities and therefore a hierarchy of sexes*²⁵. Paré reminds us that

It is certain that the hotter and drier seed engenders the male, and the colder and moister the female; for coldness has much less virtue than heat, just as humidity is less effective than dryness. Hence, the female is formed later than the male²⁶.

In addition, the embryo itself has an influence on the mother's general state and produces different symptoms depending on the sex. In the case of a girl, pregnancy will be more risky than in the case of a boy. All this is due to the humoral imbalance reinforced by the double dampness and coldness affecting a woman's body. *The decisive indication for the doctor is the state of health of the pregnant woman, because the humoral balance of the embryo necessarily affects the part that contains it and the body that carries it*²⁷. Faithful to his project, Joubert refuted the theories inherited from Antiquity, according to which the colour of the mother's complexion differs according to the sex of the child, or maintaining that all the symptoms experienced by a woman on her right side are a sign that she has conceived a son. He goes on to mention other superstitions and explains that

²¹ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 278.

²² A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 732.

²³ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

²⁴ É. BERRIOT-SALVADORE, *Un corps, un destin...*, p. 121.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 731.

²⁷ É. BERRIOT-SALVADORE, *Un corps, un destin...*, p. 128.

It is also said that if one places on the head of a pregnant woman, without her noticing, a plant of sorrel with its root, if the first name she utters is masculine, she is pregnant with a son: otherwise, with a daughter. Moreover, if a pregnant woman drops a drop of her milk into water and it sinks, it is a girl: if not, a boy²⁸.

Considering the facts, the physician indicates that there is no certainty regarding the future sex or number of children carried, as there are several factors that can make signs deceptive. Regarding multiple pregnancies, it can happen that *within the same space there may be two, three or four, and up to nine [children]*²⁹, and that *with two children, the mother may feel different movements at the same time: the two flanks will be more swollen and raised than the middle of the belly, where often one sees something like a small canal of depression*³⁰. However, Joubert remains cautious on this matter, careful to mention, like Ambroise Paré, the possibility of a “mole”³¹ formation, capable of causing symptoms similar to those of a twin pregnancy.

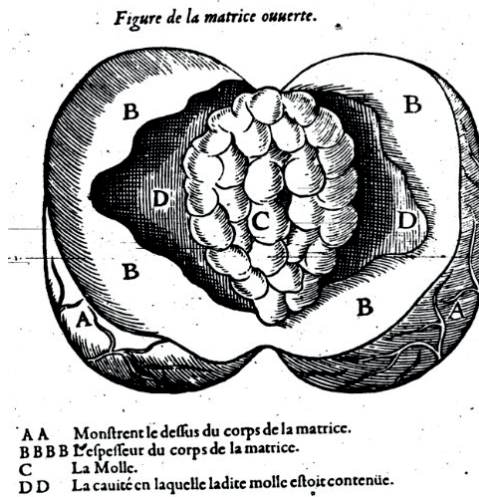


Fig. 1. La matrice ouverte, A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération...*, p. 772.

²⁸ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 287–288.

²⁹ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 290.

³⁰ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*.

³¹ The “mole” according to Paré is a false impregnation, which is a flesh without form, of round and hard figure, contained in the matrix, like a rough and without form mass, excited of a corrupted or imbecile semen, and of an excessive flow of menstrual blood; A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 733. We find a similar definition in Joubert when he explains that *It is like a wolf of flesh which has no figure or distinct manner and is engendrée an the matrix, sometimes of corrupted semances, as well of the man as of the fame, inept with the shape of an infant. By means of the menstrual blood, which flows into it, or is attracted to it, it forms such a mass and carnosity lined with filamans nerneus*; L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 373–374. See fig. 1: La matrice ouverte.

Childbirth

Since the Middle Ages, childbirth has been explained using a floral metaphor:

You must know that the child who is in the woman's bosom is also like the fruit of the tree, for you see first that the blossom where the fruit comes from is held weakly to the tree, and by little wind or rain it falls out, and first, when the fruit sets, it is held strong, and does not fall willingly; and when it sees that it is dying, it falls as well as the blossom lightly³².

In view of the effort women have to make to give birth, and the pain they experience, many customs and popular practices have been devised to help and relieve them. Doctors and surgeons are fully aware of the torments and difficulties that this delivery imposes, and do not fail to treat them.

First, let us address the issue of the woman's position during childbirth. Among other beliefs, Joubert tries to assess *whether it is beneficial for a woman to sit on the bottom of a hot cauldron or to place her husband's cap on her belly for a better delivery*³³. In the first case, the physician explains the importance of the method and location where the cauldron is placed. According to Joubert, applying it to the "os bertrand" (sacrum, coccyx) to soften it is ineffective. Similarly, placing the hot cauldron in front of the womb will, contrary to the desired effects, cause relaxation and thus obstruction during childbirth. For this solution to positively affect delivery, the cauldron must be placed, as Joubert explains, on the rump to soften it *as softening fomentations do*³⁴. It should be noted that Joubert makes a subtle distinction between the "os bertrand" and the rump. Then, concerning the husband's bonnet placed on the wife's belly, Joubert first specifies that the origin of such an idea comes rather from a sort of game, having its source in the refusal of the man's participation in the sexual act. Indeed, during coitus *the woman, enjoying herself a little, gently and pleasantly shakes the buttocks: and the husband's semen makes the passage slippery, much better than the waters do*³⁵, which facilitates the woman's labour during childbirth. However, *if nothing else is available, the bonnet is retained, which is placed on the bosom of the woman: as they say, the man's bosom is covered with this venom, as if he had a venomous point: he, or his bonnet, applied over it, acts as a counter-venom, and makes the venom pass*³⁶.

Afterwards, as regards childbirth itself, doctors usually consider that delivery is complete at the moment of expulsion of the placenta, also known by Joubert as "Agnelette"³⁷. In the *Erreurs Populaires*, we can find a number of superstitions

³² L. LANDUZY, P. ROGER, *Le régime du corps de maître Aldebrandin de Sienne*, Paris 1911, p. 71.

³³ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 340.

³⁴ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 340–341.

³⁵ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 343.

³⁶ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 342.

³⁷ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 366.

concerning the arrival of the child *clothed in his tunic, as in a shirt: which rarely covers his whole bodice, and more often than not does not go beyond his shoulders: and sometimes only covers his face*³⁸ or *all naked*³⁹, without the hindquarters. Joubert explains that when a newborn comes into the world wrapped in the organ, *this is taken as a good omen, and it is said that he will be happy: because he was born clothed*⁴⁰. The doctor goes on to say that *it is commonly said of such babies that they are happy, and that their noses are all alive: that is to say, with a great deal of strenght acquired from their parents*⁴¹. On the other hand, the absence of a placenta is synonymous with poverty, and augurs well for a morose and quiet child.

A particularly important problem during childbirth is that posed by the coccyx, to which Joubert devotes an extensive passage. As he explains, *the vulgar cannot understand that such a large bone can come out through the ordinary canal, which is the same size as the man's member*⁴². The changes in a woman's pelvi-genital canal, which guarantee the correct passage of the child during childbirth, were well known and well observed. The issue is much more problematic in the case of older women, who suffer violent pain and frequent complications during labour, as *their bodies, being harder and drier*⁴³ lack elasticity to the point of being able to kill the child during passage. Joubert points out that *the matrons and mid-wives of Genes, to avoid these difficulties, when the girls are born, separate them these bones, so that they remain always separated and widened: such as the women have no sorrow, when will come to give birth*⁴⁴. Thus, he condemns this practice with the following satire:

Behold a plethora of absurdities and lies, born from the most gross ignorance ever encountered. For one must understand that the Bertrand bone is the junction of two large bones, which are the sides on both sides, to which the thighs are attached. This very junction is formed by means of a tendon or cartilage, which binds them so firmly that it is impossible to separate them without damaging said cartilage. This can be easily understood if one observes them exposed, as when we perform an anatomy⁴⁵.

Complications during childbirth are a subject widely addressed by doctors, and particularly by the surgeon Ambroise Paré. To recognise pathological situations, Paré advised:

³⁸ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 367.

³⁹ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 368.

⁴⁰ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*.

⁴¹ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 367–368.

⁴² L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 332.

⁴³ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*.

⁴⁴ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 332–333.

⁴⁵ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 333.

contemplate her face, as we have said, to discern if it is greatly altered from its natural state, if her nose and extremities are cold and sweating, and if she frequently falls into a faint, having almost lost all consciousness. If such signs appear, one must prognosticate that death is near, and therefore leave her to nature and commend her to God. However, on the contrary, if her strength is robust, one must diligently aid her to expel the child by means of potions, baths, fumigations made of fetid substances taken through the nose and mouth, and aromatic and delightful substances taken through the lower parts, as well as sternutories and vomitories [...]⁴⁶.

As a practitioner, Paré included in his advice a description of the surgical instruments needed for difficult deliveries. We know that

since Antiquity, surgeons (unlike doctors) have often been called in to help with disaster births, when a pregnant woman who was still alive had to be freed from a dead foetus. Trained in amputation techniques, they know how to cut out a small body trapped in the womb, in order to save the mother⁴⁷.

Numerous instruments have been known since Antiquity, but Paré proposed improvements and gave various types of accessories adapted to different situations. He states that *it is impossible to describe the true situation of the child in the mother's womb*⁴⁸. We know that *the surgeon also had a whole arsenal of instruments at his disposal, the use of which was strictly forbidden to midwives*⁴⁹. In the case of childbirth, it was the matrons who accompanied the women; the doctor was only called in in extreme situations that the midwives could not cope with. *Often he [the doctor] arrived too late and found himself reduced to interventions of desperation: embryotomy (breaking up the foetus with sharp instruments) and "embryulcie" (extracting the pieces with sharp hooks)*⁵⁰. The surgeon also had experience of serious anatomical lesions such as tears, coccygeal fractures and injuries to the child. The most important thing for the practitioner was to recognise and assess the general condition of the mother and child. Paré indicates that it is necessary for the surgeon to put *his hand gently, without any violence, into the womb: by doing so, he will know in what situation and figure the child will be*⁵¹.

⁴⁶ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 759.

⁴⁷ V. WORTH, *Conjurer la mort: sages-femmes, chirurgiens et médecins au service des parturientes pendant la Renaissance française*, [in:] *Enfants De La Renaissance*, ed. C. ZUM KOLK, Paris 2019, https://www.academia.edu/40254575/_2019_Conjurer_la_mort_sages_femmes_chirurgiens_et_m%C3%A9decins_au_service_des_parturientes_pendant_la_Renaissance_fran%C3%A7aise [7 III 2024].

⁴⁸ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 744.

⁴⁹ V. WORTH, *Conjurer la mort: sages-femmes, chirurgiens et médecins...*

⁵⁰ H. STOFFT, *Ambroise Paré accoucheur*, <https://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/sfhm/hsm/HSMx1998x032x004/HSMx1998x032x004x0399.pdf> [7 III 2024].

⁵¹ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 760.

In the *Livre de la génération*, Paré again describes a personal consultation during which the child died in utero. He carefully details the steps of his intervention, noting that in such a situation, one must

cut all the muscles with the razor, as close to the shoulder as possible, observing however that before the incision the fleshy part is pulled upwards: then the bone must be cut with incisive pincers, so that the flesh covering the extremity of the bone does not cause lesions to the genitals: then this done, the feet of the little child must be sought, and it must be extracted, as we have hereinafter stated, if possible⁵².

We also find information on the use of various types of gynaecological instruments, such as hooks and pincers suitable for situations where it appears that the foetus is too large for extraction. In such situations, Paré recommends the use of *griffin feet, suitable for extracting the head of a child remaining in the mother's womb*⁵³. He explains that this instrument *opens while in the body of the womb*⁵⁴ and allows *the mole to be pulled out, if it is too large, because of its roundness, because there is no grip, and when you want to take it by hand, it turns into the womb as if it were a ball*⁵⁵. Similarly, it is also difficult to extract a fetus that is too large for the mother's womb. It is also difficult to grasp the child's head. The doctor therefore advised *pressing the mother's belly upwards and to both sides, so that the child's head does not turn*⁵⁶, in the same way as during natural childbirth. Then, for similar situations, when the foetus was already dead, Paré suggested using a curved knife *to empty and then pull it out piece by piece*⁵⁷, because *all hot and humid things held in a similarly hot and humid place corrupt and putrefy*⁵⁸. In the passage describing this instrument, the doctor also mentions the swelling of the female body. This makes it impossible to extract the child, especially when *the child's testicle remains alone*⁵⁹. According to the doctor

place your left hand in the womb, having first anointed it with lily oil or fresh butter, and look for the child's mouth, into which you will place your fingers, and with your right hand run a hook along the window, and place it inside the mouth, or the eye, or under the chin, then pull it out, if possible⁶⁰.

⁵² A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

⁵³ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 762.

⁵⁴ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 733.

⁵⁵ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 733.

⁵⁶ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 762.

⁵⁷ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 761.

⁵⁸ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 758.

⁵⁹ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 761.

⁶⁰ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

The passages quoted show us that the doctors are clearly affected by human birth. Despite the floral, metaphorical definition of childbirth (garden), they know that it is a painful ordeal.

Pathological situations are an opportunity for doctors to share their knowledge and experience, which they see as inaccessible to midwives. However, the quest for a happy birth was of great importance to them, and this required the assistance of matrons. In Joubert's speech, we even find praise addressed to them when he writes that *matrons or washerwomen are rightly called midwives: for they must be very prudent and wise: especially when there are two or three children to be delivered*⁶¹. In Paré's treatise on surgery, we can see that he warns midwives against all situations that put the life of the child and that of the mother at risk, but he does so only as a headline. We see the annotation "advertissement aux matrones"⁶² while the tone of the speech remains neutral, as in this advice:

To the midwife: however, you must order the woman (when she has waves and trenches) to be as sprightly as she can, closing her nose and mouth and having a matron press the upper parts of her belly while pushing the child downwards: because this greatly helps them to give birth⁶³.

There are also fragments in which the surgeon gives advice directly to the matrons, anticipating that they may find themselves in situations that are difficult from a medical point of view, and which they will not be able to cope with due to lack of knowledge. The doctor mentions various positions for the child and warns that there are many possibilities for childbirth. The impossibility of describing the actual position of the embryo makes the midwife's job even more complex. Paré tries to warn that

natural childbirth is when the head comes first and follows its waters: the other, which is less good and easy, is when it comes with the feet in front all the others are very difficult. For this reason, I would like to warn matrons that where they realise that the child will not come in these two ways, but will come with the back first, or with the stomach, or with the hands and feet together, or with one arm, or in some other unnatural way, they should turn them round and pull them out by the feet: and if they do not feel sufficiently experienced, they should call in the surgeons experienced in this matter⁶⁴.

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⁶¹ L. JOUBERT, *Erreurs Populaires*, p. 345.

⁶² A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 747.

⁶³ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*.

⁶⁴ A. PARÉ, *Livre de la génération*, p. 743.

Although the question of the female body during pregnancy suggests a certain unity in its treatment, we can see from the examples of Ambroise Paré and Laurent Joubert that it was possible in the 16th century to approach the subject in very different ways. Although the two texts were written by scholars, their approaches and objectives were far apart. Paré, the surgeon in the field, seems, surprisingly, much more faithful to theory and Joubert closer to common beliefs and practices. However, we can conclude that both Paré and Joubert wanted to educate, except that the *Œuvres* of the surgeon was aimed at a medical audience, as shown by his comments and advice to midwives, whereas Joubert dedicated his book to a princess, Marguerite de Valois (1553–1615). As Audrey Gilles-Chikhaoui explains,

this choice is meticulously explained by Joubert, who organises his presentation by gradually narrowing down the range of characteristics. Thus, if he refers to the choice of “a princess”, he begins with the justification of a “person of Royal blood”. He then reduces this first characteristic to sex, which not only pre-empts any criticism, but also assigns a special role to women in the mediation of knowledge [...] Joubert sees his dedicatee as both reader and mediator, involving her in an intellectual exchange with himself, based on the recognition of her human, moral and intellectual qualities⁶⁵.

Although the paths taken by Paré and Joubert differed, it is not impossible to imagine, in time, an overlap in the readership they both hoped to educate. It should also be noted that, despite the differences mentioned, the authors very often addressed the same issues, which highlights the problems faced by women and doctors at the time, as well as the deep roots of the theories inherited from Antiquity.

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