

# The Birth of Mankind

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## BACKGROUND

For over a century, between 1540 and 1654, one piece of medical literature, *The Byrth of Mankynde*, was what would now be described as a bestseller and a huge commercial success. This is hardly surprising, as its contents offered information on some of the secrets of the human body that could transform the fortunes of the rich and powerful. Reading this book, society could find out about sex, fertility, pregnancy and even best practices for infant care. At the time the work was published children were used as chess pieces to forge family links, enlarge fortunes and even bring about peace between nations. Any information that could assist a couple in their journey towards achieving a healthy family of children, preferably boys, was likely to be desirable, and the sales of the book demonstrate the eagerness of English society to find out more.

## HISTORY OF THE BOOK

Despite the title of the book, its roots can be found in the landscape of Germany many years prior to the English version. It was originally published in 1513 by the City Physician of Worms, Eucharius Rosslin, who would later hold the same title in Frankfurt am Main. The early title had been rather romantic: *Der Swengern Frauen und Herbammen Rosegarten* (The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives). It is also known by the Latin version's title: *Du Partu Hominis*. The intended audience for the book was trainee midwives, since the laws of Germany and The Netherlands required such trainees to be subject to an examination by physicians about their knowledge of anatomy and practices prior to being licensed. The work appeared in the Dutch language in 1516 (where it remained continuously in print until 1742), Czech in 1519 and a re-translation of the Latin to French in 1536 and Italian in 1538. Scholars of the work believe that it was also translated into Danish (but remained unpublished)

and possibly Spanish. Finally, it was translated into English in 1540 as the reign of King Henry VIII was drawing to a close. There is a certain irony in an influential work on reproduction and fertility appearing at such a time when the chaos of death and scandal associated with queens not producing boys for England littered the floor of the English Court. Such timing may also be argued to be commercially pertinent when awareness of the need for heirs was so heightened.

## MEDICAL ADVICE

Much of the content is drawn, unsurprisingly, from the works of the ancient medical philosophers, including Galen, who in the 16th century was considered to be one of most influential. Galen lived in the 1st century AD and was responsible for refining the humoral principles of Hippocrates. Mediaeval works are also acknowledged in the book, such as Albertus Magnus dating back to the 13th century.

What is remarkable about the work is the sense of medical professional authority found in the titles of the chapters such as "Of Easy and Uneasy, Difficult, or Dolorous Deliverance, and the Causes of It; With the Signs of How to Know and Foresee the Same" which warns against a woman conceiving "over-young, as before 12 or 15 years of age", as the birth canal would be too narrow to give birth without grave difficulties. The reason this particular point proves interesting is because it illustrates that such events were rare but did occur. Modern observers would expect to find that really young women commonly bore children in early marriages at this time, but not according to this highly influential work.

At the back of the 1540 English edition can be found fertility remedies added to the work by Richard Jonas, who is described as a physician, and his input is of particular relevance to this Journal. In the chapter entitled "Of Certain Remedies and Medicines Which Shall Cause the Woman to Conceive", Richard

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Jonas puts sterility down to a simple misbalance of the cardinal humours, particularly if the woman is too cold and moist and therefore she should attend to heating and drying up the womb by the use of hot and aromatic herbs. It is the administration of the prescription that is interesting, as the woman was advised to boil water in which should be a mixture of savine (a member of the juniper family), bay tree leaves, marjoram and citron leaves and then sit over it all night with a pipe blowing aromatic steam into her vagina. She was advised to keep her clothes tight around her so as to let none of the steam escape, and then in the morning have intercourse with her husband, whereupon she would conceive. It is not common to find a caution about the likely outcome in such works. Sexual intercourse is described as being to “accompany her husband”. It seems likely that the woman would be glad of a chance to lie down after a no doubt sleepless night perched over a pot of boiling herbs with a tube in her vagina.

### HUMORAL THERAPY

Using the same principle of balancing humours by introducing what were believed to be hot herbs and spices that were also drying by their nature, it was recommended that these be administered by means of hot baths, poultices and suppositories. As women were believed to be by nature wet, cold and lacking morality whilst men were believed to be hot, dry, courageous and God’s first choice, one can see why hot humours were the more desirable in treating women in the hope of her bearing a male child.

There is evidence of treating women who leant too much towards hot humours (probably red haired and freckled) by the use of some unattractive remedies. A suppository made of hare’s dung and honey was recommended, which was accompanied by the minor

compensation that the woman should drink perfumed wines watered down so as not to be too strong.

The final part of this section of the work ends with the following statement: “Diverse others lets [obstructions] of conception and remedies for the same may have been declared, which for brevity and shortness we have for this time do let pass, making here an end of this treatise; the which we have composed and translated out of Latin, to the honour of God, the utility and profit of all honest matrons”.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain. She holds an honorary degree for ‘services to history’. She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is also Curator of Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire and is a member of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the Society of Medical Writers. She has recently been appointed a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

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### FURTHER READING

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