

The Medical and Magical Significance in Ancient Medicine of Things Connected with Reproduction and Its Organs

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THE problems of sex have received in recent years such wide and at last such outspoken discussion in literature which is easily accessible to the general public that it is hard for those who have been thus informed to picture to themselves the situation in Roman times. The ideas that then prevailed about the functions of the organs of reproduction and about the birth processes of human beings and animals seem to us very rudimentary and often so faulty as to do harm. We may, however, more fully understand those ancient conditions and be perhaps more patient with the Romans when we learn how many of the same and analogous ideas are still discovered among the more primitive and ignorant inhabitants of civilized lands.

The Romans were, of course, well aware of the far-reaching importance of man's sexual life to his health and happiness, even though they did not have anything that approached scientific knowledge of the psychology of sex relations which can mend or mar his well-being today. It was, we may be sure, Ovid's own personal experience, in other words, empirical knowledge, which made the poet's *Ars Amatoria* such an effectively demoralizing "Manual of Seduction" for an age that hardly needed any encouragement. Catullus had no Freud or Stekel to explain to him how he could combine in his emotions for his sweetheart Lesbia such a devastating amount of love and hatred at the same time. Yet there are enough anticipations of modern thought and practice discoverable among ancient Latin writers to cause a researcher no little surprise. This paper will be concerned chiefly with some medical aspects of the subject of sex relations that have not won much attention.

Two millennia before our physicians began to mete out glandular extracts and prescribe animal organs in the diet to cure the diseased and rejuvenate the spent, medical books were full of prescriptions that called for the use of almost every part and organ of man and beast.¹ Occasionally

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¹ We hardly need to state that organo-therapy flourished among the Egyptians long before our

Greek and Roman authors were writing about it. The layman may be referred to an interesting book by Palmer Findley, *Priests of Lucina: the story of obstetrics*, 13-14.

these were taken more or less ruthlessly from the living. As a rule, they came from the dead. Particularly prevalent was the use of such parts of the body as were credited with mystic virtues or with a special potency because they were connected in one way or another with generation or birth. Our interest is heightened when we find popular belief in Italy today perpetuating some of the quaint and superstitious notions. For the time of the Roman Empire we can draw enough illustrations for our purpose from the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder alone, although, as too often in other connections, we cannot always be sure whether the remedies were mere book lore which was derived from Greek medical writers and from the wild inventions attributable to the Magi and others of their ilk, or were actually employed by his fellow countrymen and in some cases originated with them in their remote rustic past. And right here, at the start, the reader may need a caution.

It would be a mistake to assume, merely because Latin literature has its share of obscene and pornographic writing, that the Romans would not define as indecent much the same things that we do, and that people in reputable society could not be as careful of speech and deportment as high standards of modesty would require. The ancients had their euphemisms for the pudenda virilia and pudenda muliebria, and although perhaps few Romans ever attained the indecent decency of our mid-Victorian prudery, urban communities safeguarded the eye against the shocks of bodily exposure. When, therefore, practitioners of medicine prescribed things that seem to us utterly vile and abhorrent, we cannot assume that they were not so regarded by the patient. Often they were administered to him in some palatable form or foisted upon him in his food without his suspecting it. In some cases the very sensationalism of the remedy may have recommended it to the morbid imagination of a desperate man, but most of the remedies with which this paper deals commanded confidence from doctor and patient largely because they could in some way be connected with one of Nature's greatest mysteries, the perpetuating-of animal life. We may begin with the least unnatural or peculiar remedy of the materia medica with which we are going to deal, namely, woman's milk.

Although it might seem somewhat difficult to get,^{1a} milk from the

^{1a} For explanations and illustrations of modern methods of expressing milk the curious may be referred to such readily accessible books as Gladys Sellew, *Pediatric nursing*, 31-32, figs. 3-5; Carolyn C. Van Blarcom, *Getting ready to*

be a mother, 122-124, figs. 27-29. Cases of harelip, *dentio praecox*, etc. may prevent children from getting the mother's milk in the normal way.

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human breast is mentioned in many passages of our ancient medical authorities as an ingredient of remedies or as a vehicle for such as required a solvent. It is possible that it was prized merely for its physical characteristics and dietary value, but in view of the mystic use of other things from the human body that can be connected with the life of sex, we must harbor some doubts about it.² Pliny the Elder assigns an entire chapter in one of the books of his *Natural History* to remedies that depend upon it.³ He describes it as the sweetest and mildest of all milks, the most nutritious, and the most useful in medicine.⁴ Of course a certain amount of superstition is obvious in the prescriptions. Especially efficacious milk is that which comes from the mother of a male child or, best of all, from one who has borne twins of that sex.⁵ She who has had the lesser fortune to bear a girl baby provides milk that is beneficial only for the diseases of the face.⁶ A mere taste of woman's milk is said to keep dogs from ever having hydrophobia.⁶ Then we find the curious assertion that in order to be free during one's whole life from any dread of eye troubles a person need merely anoint himself or, it may be, his eyes, with the milk of a mother and a daughter, using both at the same time.⁷ There are many ailments for which the fluid is recommended for purely pharmacological reasons with no taint of such superstition. These, of course, will not detain us here.

Anything in the anatomy of man or woman which ancient thought could connect with either conception or parturition was likely to be reputed a remedy for disease, an aphrodisiac, or an agent of magic.⁸ The afterbirth, *i.e.*, the placenta and membranes which are expelled after delivery, served the purposes of both the medical and the magical art.⁹ For example, a membrane from a she-ass, particularly if its foal were

² Upon its modern use: *Notes and Queries*, 1917, ser. 12, 3, 431; A. De Nino, *Usi e costumi abruzzesi*, 5, 68, 151.

³ Plin. *N.H.* (hereafter abbreviated *N.H.*) 28.72-75; cf. also 28.123; 28.171; 28.173; 28.176; 30.118.

⁴ *N.H.* 28.72; 28.123. Of the five milks, human, cow, goat, mare, and ass, the first is richest in sugar, but the protein and fat often have to be considered: A. Dingwall Fordyce, *The hygiene of infancy and childhood*, 58-60; Eustace Smith, *On the wasting diseases of infants and children*, 44.

⁵ *N.H.* 28.72.

⁶ *N.H.* 28.75.

⁷ *N.H.* 28.73. On the belief that milk direct from the breast is good for inflamed eyes: B. L.

Gordon, *The romance of medicine*, 397.

⁸ For products of coition: *N.H.* 28.261: *Asini . . . a coitu spuma*; cf. 28.181.

⁹ On the superstitious belief that both the navel cord and the afterbirth are living beings and continue in a sympathetic union with the infant after separation from it, so that they must be safeguarded, see C. J. S. Thompson, *The hand of destiny, The folklore and superstitions of everyday life*, 11-13; P. Findley, *The story of childbirth*, 34; Germans keep it safe in the belief that future fortune depends on it: 36. For its magical utility in animal husbandry: *Notes and Queries*, 1868, ser. 4, 2, 557; for its therapeutical use: John G. Bourke, *Scatalogical rites of all nations*, 354-355; cf. 218.

male, was one of the vile-smelling objects that were supposed to ward off an epileptic attack if put beneath the victim's nose.¹⁰ That of a cow, applied still moist to ulcers of the face, was reckoned a dependable remedy.¹¹ This prescription may be interpreted as merely medical, but I suspect that it was something more than that in the estimation of its user. So, too, the covering membrane of a kid, which was expected to expel the afterbirth for a woman if she took it in wine after it had been dried for that purpose.¹² That of a bitch, if it has been kept from touching the ground, should act, they said, as an expellent of the human fetus.¹³ If a person carried this somewhere on his person, no dog would bark at him.¹⁴ We might be able to conjecture a reason for this if the belligerent animal were a male, but why should the dung or fur of a hare act as the same sort of quietus? Finally, we may note Pliny's statement that a ewe might provide the uterine membrane of its young as a remedy for female diseases. This afterbirth, too, had to be taken (after proper drying and powdering, I suppose) in a draught of wine.¹⁵ Let us turn now to modern times.

During several thousand years at least, a belief has persisted among superstitious people that pregnant women should have every whim granted lest, being disappointed in one of them, they mark the baby before it is born with some sign of it.¹⁶ However, according to instructions I find in Italian folk medicine, such birthmarks due to unsatisfied wishes (*voglie*) may be removed by bathing them with some blood from the placenta. Placental blood should also be used as an ointment for the entire body of the baby so that when it grows up it may have a milky white skin.¹⁷ This sort of cosmetic is at least less offensive than the human excrements which some Italians value for the same purpose.¹⁸ The mother who has been delivered of a child should be given some of the placenta in her broth.¹⁹ It may be done without her knowledge. The intent is to

¹⁰ *N.H.* 28.225.

¹¹ *N.H.* 28.183.

¹² *N.H.* 28.256.

¹³ *N.H.* 30.123.

¹⁴ *N.H.* 30.147. Soranus thought that looking at monkeys would make the mother's baby simian: W. M. Feldman, *The principles of ante-natal and post-natal child hygiene*, 32. On the fatuity of these beliefs: Frederick C. Irving, *The expectant mother's handbook*, 196-197; Joseph Garland, *The youngest of the family*, 14; J. Morris Slemmons, *The prospective mother*, 86. Not so certain are Alfred C. Cotton, *The medical diseases of infancy and childhood*, 163; Louis Fischer, *The baby and growing child*, 4.

¹⁵ Z. Zanetti, *La medicina delle nostre donne* (hereafter abbreviated *La medicina*), 138. A Pennsylvania German way to remove a birthmark is to rub it with the hand of a corpse: E. M. Fogel, *Beliefs and superstitions of Pennsylvania Germans*, 296, no. 1567. On the other hand, the afterbirth is recommended for rubbing away a goitre: 277, no. 1455, and to give baby a fair complexion; 51, no. 138.

¹⁶ Z. Zanetti, *La medicina*, 139; *Nonne e bambini*, 16.

¹⁷ M. Pasquarelli, "Medicina popolare basilicatese," *Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari* (hereafter abbreviated *Archivio*), 16. 54.

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assure her thereby an ample supply of milk for her nursing.¹⁸ Since the placenta had served in pre-natal nourishment, why should it not in post-natal? If at birth the infant itself seems likely to die or to be suffocated, a fumigation made by burning close to its nose some of the placenta may be used as a restorative.¹⁹

Any of the placenta that is not used may be consigned to a flowing stream or put in a bag and hidden in the stable in the manure, so as to keep it safe from foraging cats and dogs. As it disintegrates, the baby increases in size.¹⁹ Some dispose of the entire organ as soon as the mother's milk comes by putting it under a stone in a running stream so that no animal can get it. By analogy with the flow of the water, the discharge that comes from the womb and vagina after the birth (what an obstetrician terms the lochia) is expected to be abundant. In some places the placenta is deposited preferably under a fig tree to insure a good supply of milk. Unripe figs yield a milky juice. This, therefore, is a case of resorting to sympathetic magic.²⁰ Zanetti informs us that in Perugia women expect their milk to come on the third day after childbirth. If, after the supply has been abundant, it ceases suddenly, it indicates that some female animal has found the placenta where it was thrown out, let us say in a ditch, and, by devouring it, has secured the flow of milk for its own young.²¹

Among the disgusting things which might be put in a love charm to arouse passion even in the coldest lover was the so-called hippomanes which—so Tibullus informs us²²—drips from the groin of a mare when in heat. Pliny the Elder lists it among aphrodisiacs.²³ Long before Pliny's day Aristotle had discussed several different charms which bore this name.²⁴ Vergil mentions "horse-madness" in his *Georgics* as a magic substance that heartless stepdames gather for nefarious purposes;²⁵ for the difference between such philtres and poisons was recognized as slight, and serious illness or death from the love charm provided by a witch was probably no great novelty.²⁶ Pliny has perpetuated the yarn that if some hippomanes is merely thrown into the melted bronze that is to be cast to make a statue, it will make stallions go mad for a mare.²⁷ The exact connection between such a metal and amorous beasts is not clear.

¹⁸ G. Finamore, *Tradizioni popolari abruzzesi* (hereafter abbreviated *Tradizioni*), 69.

¹⁹ G. Pitrè, *Usi natalizi, nuziali e funebri del popolo siciliano*, 24.

²⁰ Z. Zanetti, *La medicina*, 132.

²¹ Z. Zanetti, *op cit.*, 145.

²² Tib. 2.4.57-58.

²³ *N.H.* 28.261.

²⁴ Arist. *De Animal. Hist.* 6.18.4; 8.24; cf. *Juv.* 6.133 and the Schol.; *Ael. Anim. Nat.* 14.18.

²⁵ Verg. *Georg.* 3.280-283.

²⁶ Ovid *Am.* 1.8.8; *Med. Fac.* 38; *Prop.* 4.5.18.

²⁷ *N.H.* 28.181.

Vergil and Ovid tell us of another charm that might be termed hippomanes, a membrane or growth which was found, they said, on the forehead of a colt when it was born, but which the mare would bite off at once. Any witch who needed one of these things in her business had, therefore, to act very quickly if she hoped to forestall the mare.²⁸ Pliny presents some lore about it in entertaining fashion. He says that a colt is born with a poisonous substance on its forehead as large as a fig and black in color, and that its mother will not suckle her young until she has eaten it. If a person can remove it before the mare, he has always ready at hand a powerful philtre to engender passion in the frigid or indifferent. The mere odor of it will make the animal frantic.²⁹ The modern zoologist tells us that hippomanes is a concretion which is occasionally found in the liquor amnii. The mare disposes of it instinctively, even as animals ordinarily do of the afterbirth.

Pliny quoted Anaxilaüs to the effect that if the fluid that comes from a mare when the stallion covers her is burnt on the wick of a lamp, it produces strange appearances that look like the heads of horses.³⁰ Our Latin text is so dubious here that we cannot discuss this phenomenon to any advantage. The same yarn is told of the ass. This is reminiscent of another weird idea which Pliny has preserved for us to the effect that hairs which have been plucked from the tail of a she-mule while the stallion is covering it need only to be knotted together during the sexual congress of human beings if one would make the woman conceive, whether or not she desires pregnancy.³¹

It may be pertinent to our study to note that the Romans recognized that the arrival of puberty and the first sexual union might cure ill health. There was a belief that if certain diseases, notably epilepsy, were not checked at this time, they could be expected to become chronic.³² Of course, there was plenty of nonsense connected with all this. For instance, coition was said to bring relief to a man who was suffering from the wound made by a scorpion or snake, but the contrary result to a woman.³² It remained for the age when syphilis invaded Europe for the belief to arise that

²⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 4. 515-516; Ovid. *Ars Am.* 2.100; Schol. on *Juv.* 6.133.

²⁹ *N.H.* 8.165; cf. 28.180.

³⁰ *N.H.* 28.181.

³¹ *N.H.* 30.142.

³² Cf. Cels. 2.1.20; *N.H.* 28.44; 28.58; 28.83; Mart. 11.71.1-2. So far as epilepsy is concerned,

there may be something significant from the mystic's point of view in the Hippocratic dictum that coition is a brief epilepsy (Gell. 19.2.8.) *Similia similibus curantur?* For an Italian opinion upon the beneficial effect on eyesight: G. Pitirè, *Medicina*, 275.

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sexual intercourse with a virgin would cure a man of that disease.³³ Many Italians of low birth are as confident of this as are the same sort of criminal ignoramuses of other lands. The belief has been responsible for a pitiful number of assaults on little girls. Pliny declares that infrequent sexual indulgence is more wholesome, but admits that a certain amount of intercourse brings back to good condition athletes who become stale, and restores a husky voice to its normal clarity.³⁴ It is remedial also, he states, for pains in the loins, dimness of sight, insanity, and melancholia.³⁵ Faith in its relief of the last has some justification. There was a Greek, Doctor Ictidas, who warranted that a woman would recover from a quartan fever if she submitted to embrace at the very beginning of her courses.³⁶

Puberty had its special significance in the superstition of ancient medicine. A good example is a certain prescription of the cobweb of the fly-hunting spider which was to be applied to the forehead in such a way as to reach to both temples in some sort of compress as a cure for defluxions of the eyes. We are assured that it will work wonderfully well (*mirabiliter*), provided it be a boy who has not reached the age of puberty who secures it and puts it on with his own hands. But he must have taken care not to be seen by the patient for three days during which neither of them should have touched the ground with his feet unshod.³⁷

The monthly periods of a woman were much too mystifying a phenomenon not to figure prominently in the lore of magic and medicine. Blood from a wound carrying off man's vital principle must have been always a terrifying sight. Its flow periodically from obviously sound and healthy females who had suffered no violence such as might be responsible for external wounds could not fail to impress a primitive mind. The eventual recognition of the uterus as a life-giving organ which contained and nourished the future child gave its product a new significance as a fluid that would have many potencies. In one and the same section of Pliny's hodgepodge of information we are told that still-born babies were cut up limb by limb in the criminal operations of sorcery, and menstrual

³³ M. Pasquarelli, *op. cit.* (note 17), 16, 52; R. Corso, "Reviviscenze," *Studi di tradizioni popolari italiane, Serie prima*, 7; J. B. Andrews, "Quelques croyances et usages napolitaines," *Archivio*, 1899, 15, 43; Z. Zanetti, *op. cit.* (note 15), 242 (gonorrhoea); G. Pitù, *Medicina popolare siciliana*, 463 (gonorrhoea). Cf. Benjamin L. Gordon, *The romance of medicine* (one of the many popular books on the history of medicine which must be used with caution), 334. For the obstetrical importance of coition

during parturition, see Z. Zanetti, *op. cit.*, 123, note 3.

³⁴ *N.H.* 28.58; cf. Cels. 1.1.4. For infibulation for the protection of health and voice in the case of adolescents: Cels. 7.25.3. See also on the *fibula* of singers: Juv. 6.73; 6.379; Mart. 7.82.1-2; 11.75.8; 14.215.

³⁵ *N.H.* 28.58. Its beneficial effect on eyesight: G. Pitù, *op. cit.*, 175.

³⁶ *N.H.* 28.83.

³⁷ *N.H.* 29.131.

fluid might be employed in a magician's expiatory ceremonies.³⁸ Preternatural power was ascribed to the menses. Lightning, hail, and gales could be averted by a woman who bared her person to the storm during her courses. But even when she was not in that state, she could still a tempest at sea by merely uncovering.³⁹ So ran ancient assertions, but we may well query whether any Greek or Roman mariner ever welcomed a woman passenger on board in the expectation that she might some day save the vessel from shipwreck by such a simple breach of modesty. Some winds might not be easily shocked.

There were writers foolish enough to declare that the fluid itself could be fatal to men if sexual congress took place when sun and moon were in wrong relationship to each other.³⁹ If a dog consumed any of it, it went mad and its bite was lethal.⁴⁰ Only by using a thread that had been dipped in catamenia could workmen divide the bitumen of Judaea, so sticky and tenacious was that substance.⁴¹ Almost any yarn that came out of such a remote part of the Empire would gain credence with some of the inhabitants of Rome. We are asked to believe that if the discharge were burnt and the ashes from it then sprinkled on clothes, they would impair the dye.⁴² It was asserted that the woman's mere presence when she was in her periods would spoil purple, and purple was a very expensive color indeed. Moreover, if she walked unclothed around a field of corn, the caterpillars, worms, beetles, and other pests would fall off the plants.⁴³ We are warned, however, that this magic rite cannot be performed as the sun is rising without withering the crops.⁴⁴

Again, we are assured that while a woman is menstruating, her mere touch makes the fruits of the field sterile, ruins young grapevines, kills instantly the medicinal plants rue and ivy, empties hives of their bees, blackens linen in the wash, dulls the implements of a barber, covers copper vessels with a fetid verdigris (all the more if the moon happens to be at that time upon the wane), and even causes pregnant mares to miscarry.⁴⁵ If a woman is menstruating for the first time, or the first after losing her virginity, the mere sight of her, no matter at what distance, works the

³⁸ N.H. 28.70.

³⁹ N.H. 28.77.

⁴⁰ N.H. 7.64; 28.79; 28.84.

⁴¹ N.H. 7.65; 28.80; cf. Joseph. *Bellum Jud.* 4.8.4(480); Tac. *Hist.* 5.6; Strab. 16.243 (764).

⁴² N.H. 28.80.

⁴³ N.H. 28.78.

⁴⁴ N.H. 28.79.

⁴⁵ N.H. 7.64; 28.79. For the reasoning back of the belief, so persistent everywhere through the ages, that the "unclean woman" is a menace to the community see, e.g., Benjamin L. Gordon, *The romance of medicine*, 20-22. Modern illustrations are not difficult to adduce; cf., e.g., E. M. Fogel, *op. cit.* (note 15) 191, no. 928; *Notes and Queries*, 1881, ser. 6, 4, 286; 334. See also John G. Bourke, *op. cit.* (note 9), 350-354.

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same effect upon the mare.⁴² It is hard to imagine a more devastating person to have around. Nor is this all. She tarnishes mirrors into which she looks, blunts the edge of steel implements, and takes the polish off of ivory.⁴⁰ On her approach, musk turns sour, grafts die, garden sprouts are dried up. Fruit falls when she sits under the tree. Bees die when she looks at them. She corrodes brass and rusts iron, giving them a dire odor.⁴⁰ A woman herself can suffer from another's menstrual discharge. Contact with it or stepping over it will make a pregnant woman miscarry.⁴² Pliny gives us other yarns of a similar character which he does not credit and we need not repeat.⁴⁶ My reader is probably asking himself why they didn't disprove the more absurd of these fictions by actual testing, and the reply must be: "Why don't superstitious people of today rid themselves of some of their imbecilities by that very process?"

True to the inconsistency which is usual in such nonsense, ancient authorities ascribe certain good properties to the menses which are equally apocryphal and absurd. A topical application of the fluid is recommended for the relief of gout.⁴⁷ A menstruating woman by her mere touch can bring help, they say, to anybody who is afflicted with scrofulous tumors, mumps, swellings, erysipelas, boils, or defluxions.⁴⁷ There is a nauseating recommendation that to ease a woman's delivery of her child she should be dosed with some of the liquid that escapes from the uterus of a weasel by its genitals.⁴⁸ Since this animal was domesticated as a mouser in Roman houses before the use of the tame cat, it might be more readily found during a woman's lying-in than it could be today.

Two women who wrote on the diseases of their sex, Salpe and Laïs, soberly report a remedy to be used for the bite of a mad dog as well as for tertian and quartan fevers which perhaps reveals the asininity of their whole work. The person afflicted should wear in an arm amulet made of silver some wool from a black ram after the wool has been stained with menstuous blood.⁴⁷ This sort of magic treatment has the support also of a certain Diotimus of Thebes, and a midwife Sotira recommends use of the fluid as a liniment on the soles of the fevered person. This works most effectively, we are told, if the menstruating woman rubs it on without allowing the patient to know what she is using.⁴⁹ It is said to be a good agent to use also if one would bring an epileptic out of a fit.⁴⁹ Perhaps the reason why some were ready to ascribe potency to it was because of a

⁴⁶ N.H. 28.81-82.

⁴⁷ N.H. 28.82.

⁴⁸ N.H. 30.124.

⁴⁹ N.H. 28.83.

belief that, coagulated by the seed of man in procreation, it receives form and life and so eventually produces a baby.⁵⁰

There was general agreement—so Pliny would have his readers believe—that if the bite of a dog made a man fearful of water so that he would not drink it, somebody had only to put under his cup a small piece of cloth which had on it some of the catamenial fluid and his hydrophobia would disappear.⁵¹ The line of reasoning back of this is familiar: the stuff was deemed to be deadly and a cause of madness to dogs. It was, therefore, a case of curing madness in a man with what would cause madness in a dog. Elsewhere I find it stated that the menstruous blood of a bitch will work the same cures, but there is no indication that it has to come from the animal that did the biting.⁵² Ashes from burning the discharge served as an ingredient for what was deemed an excellent remedy for ulcers on beasts-of-burden.⁵³ This was also recommended as an application to cure a headache. Mixed with rose oil to produce something fragrant as well as emollient, it was rubbed on the forehead. It is stated that women were particularly benefited by this liniment.⁵⁴

We have other quaint particulars about the catamenial fluid. For example, the stains from it can be removed only by using on them the urine of the woman who discharged it.⁵⁵ A mere touch of the former substance on the door posts of a house would bring to nought any and all witchcraft of the magi.⁵⁴ And so it goes, one wonder after another, and the greatest wonder of all is that anybody could be simple enough to believe any of the nonsense, or a woman lend her support to it.

When we consider the persistency of superstitious beliefs in general and of all these wild notions that the Greeks and Romans cherished about the menstrual discharge in particular, we may not be greatly surprised to learn that there are in the Italy of today persons who attribute to it both medical and aphrodisiacal powers. So we find it, for instance, recommended as an application for the removal of warts.⁵⁵ In the affairs of love it plays sometimes a most unpleasant rôle. In the backward regions of the Province of Basilicata one may find mothers who seek to insure the marital fidelity of their prospective son-in-law by putting some of it in

⁵⁰ *N.H.* 7.66. According to the Talmud, it was the white seed of the male and the red of the female that developed the fetus; see Palmer Findley, *op. cit.* (note 1), 16.

⁵¹ *N.H.* 7.64; 28.84.

⁵² *N.H.* 29.98.

⁵³ *N.H.* 28.84.

⁵⁴ *N.H.* 28.85.

⁵⁵ G. B. Corsi, "Sena vetus, superstizioni, canti, indovinelli e giuochi," *Archivio*, 1891, 10, 31. Since warts have a tendency to disappear spontaneously, almost any remedy is likely to gain credit among unscientific and credulous users.

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his wine or coffee.⁵⁶ A Neapolitan witch who is reputed an expert in the arts of seduction will inform a woman client how to attract a lover by preparing cakes for him which have among their ingredients either catamenial fluid or sperm.⁵⁷

We suspect that one of the reasons why the study of folk medicine has been so fascinating to some of its investigators is that it is always taxing their ingenuity to conjecture how primitive people arrived at some of their notions. Perhaps nothing can exercise the imagination of a student more than the task of explaining just why the genital organs were eventually so highly valued as a source of remedies for disease and of agents in the operations of magic. The merely erotic significance of them was, of course, recognized sometime before the birth of Cain and Abel. But any certainty as to the initial responsibility of the organs for the actual birth of children belongs, we must believe, to an age that was much more sophisticated than that of our first parents. Recognition of their rôle in the propagation of animal life was bound to add to their importance in the estimation of man. According to a somewhat plausible theory,⁵⁸ it was when he first reflected on the fact that his genitals were the seat of involuntary phenomena that he began to suspect that agents external and superior to himself had something to do with them. As soon as one postulates the presence and activities of daemonic powers in anything whatsoever, fancy can range widely in the realms of the occult and mystic. I suppose that the last part of the human body that a scholar can imagine the art of magic ignoring would be the organs of reproduction. They are bound to figure prominently not only in witchcraft⁵⁹ but also in mystic medicine.

Students of Italian superstition are familiar with the continued use from ancient days of an amulet⁶⁰ which figures a closed hand with the thumb inserted between the index and the middle fingers so that it can well suggest either the union of male and female organs or the appearance of the male pudenda. However those who made a manual gesture of this sort or who wore a charm that represented it may have interpreted it, it has been, like that better known gesture and amulet which represents the

⁵⁶ M. Pasquarelli, *op cit.* (note 17), 15, 326-327.

⁵⁷ J. B. Andrews, "Neapolitan witchcraft," *Folklore*, 1897, 8, 7.

⁵⁸ Cf. William G. Sumner, *Folkways*, 432.

⁵⁹ Numerous illustrations can be adduced, of course, from all periods of Italian history. Pliny offers such gems as the burial of a dog's

genitalia beneath the threshold to protect the house against all enchantments: *N.H.* 30.82.

⁶⁰ For specimens, ancient and modern, see G. Bellucci, "Amuleti italiani antichi e contemporanei," *Annali della facoltà di medicina e memorie della accademia medico-chirurgica di Perugia*, 1900, 12, 260.

sign of the horns, one of the most trusted avertives of evil of any sort that magic can provide. In the sign of the horns the index and the little fingers are thrust out, while the thumb holds down the middle two, or is inserted between them.

The significance of the phallus in the superstitious doctrines of antiquity is too large a subject to be discussed in detail here. Such household articles as lamps were made to reproduce in one way or another its form, and it was represented on many things. Even pastry was made up in its semblance.⁶¹ As everybody who is at all well versed in the literature of the occult knows, these fancies were not born of a mere wish to amuse or to shock by something obscene, but from a desire for the magic protection of a symbol of power. Some Italians still use a phallic amulet to ward off the injuries that are held to proceed from an evil eye.⁶² It is especially prized as a safeguard for innocent children who do not know how to protect themselves by either prophylactic words or gestures. While the history of such objects goes back to the age of iron, if we may judge by archaeological evidence,⁶³ no man can guess just what was in the mind of primitive man when he put his trust in them.

In a church at Venosa which is the modern town that occupies the site of ancient Venusia, the birthplace of Horace, who would have been greatly delighted by the survival of pagan superstitions, Norman Douglas saw an ancient round pillar which had been worn smooth by the bodies of Italian women who had squeezed between it and the wall in order to become mothers.⁶⁴ One of my friends told me how he had once sailed from Capri to Positano expressly to see in the flooring of the local church a similar phallic semblance which was supposed to make a woman fertile; but to his disappointment the parish priest had removed it, with what effect on the population my informant could not state.

The ubiquitous appearance of phallic and kindred designs for amuletic purposes makes natural enough the many uses of the actual genital organs of man and beast as remedies for disease. They were important agents in occult therapy as it is described by our Latin writers.⁶⁵

The animals which had to give up their genitals for the good of humanity are usually those that were to be found in and about the

⁶¹ Cf. August. *De Civ. Dei*, 6.7.9; 7.21.24.

⁶² Cf. G. Bellucci, *op. cit.* (note 60), 255; *Il feticismo primitivo in Italia e le due forme di adattamento*, 53, fig. 35a.

⁶³ G. Cocchiara, *La vita e l'arte del popolo siciliano nel museo Pitrè*, 96.

⁶⁴ Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria*, 4th ed., 40; *Siren land*, 256.

⁶⁵ Our country today offers illustrations of similar magic and medicine: E. M. Fogel, *op. cit.* (note 15), 277, no. 1451.

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dwelling-house or in the farmyard. Apparently the organs of but few of these were safe from sciolists, quacks, believers in magic, and others of their kind: horse, ass, cow, calf, ram, swine, cock, and weasel are mentioned, but field and forest might have to provide hare, deer, fox, bear, and hyaena. Just where the hippopotamus would be deprived of its organs, whether as one of the beasts which were exhibited in the arena or while it was still living in far-away Egypt, we can only guess.

Among all the wild animals perhaps none had more parts to which medicinal utility was attributed than the hyaena. Naturally, the genitals of such a fierce and powerful beast should be medicinally highly potent, as any of the magi could prove to a doubting invalid who had lost all faith in legitimate medicine. The vulgar belief that it changes its sex every year and that the female without intercourse with the male bears young would be enough to convince anybody who was at all open-minded to superstition that its generative organs would possess an especial occult virtue.⁶⁶ The hyaena should be captured at the time that the moon is passing through the sign of Gemini. Twins might point to double power. At any rate, they are genetically out of the normal.⁶⁷ We are expected to believe that merely eating the eye of a hyaena in combination with liquorice root and anise is such a corrective of sterility in a woman as to make her conceive within three days.⁶⁸ Can we wonder then that its genitals, taken in honey, are thought to be an aphrodisiac? They work on a man, even though he hates the very idea of intercourse with a woman.⁶⁹ So taught, we may suppose, the magi, but we have no signed testimonials of success from any of the beneficiaries. Then we are invited to believe that a man's whole house can be kept in harmony if he keeps in it the first joint of the animal's vertebrae along with its organ of generation.⁶⁹ Incidentally, the former was one of the many curatives for epilepsy, and the latter, when used in a fumigation, should bring one out of a spasm.⁷⁰

It is hard to conceive of even a superstitious reason why the testes of a hippopotamus, taken in water in doses of one drachm (or thereabouts), should be thought a cure of the bite of snakes.⁷¹ Are we too sceptical if we conclude that they would not cure anything at all? According to another prescription, the same misfortune calls for the use in a drink of wine of either the genitalia of a stag or the mumbles of a deer.⁷²

We have reason to think that baldness was less usual among the old

⁶⁶ *N.H.* 8.105; 28.92.

⁶⁷ *N.H.* 28.94.

⁶⁸ *N.H.* 28.97.

⁶⁹ *N.H.* 28.99.

⁷⁰ *N.H.* 28.103.

⁷¹ *N.H.* 28.121.

⁷² *N.H.* 28.150.

Romans than it is among Americans. In the first place, the Italians are still relatively a hairy people. In the second, the amount of fun that is poked at those afflicted with loss of hair would suggest that they were few enough to be safely teased by jesters. However this may be, there seem to be an inordinate number of references to depilatories for misplaced hair and to restoratives to put on heads that time has depilated. Ashes from burning the genitals of an ass are among the things recommended for use on the hair. They should make it grow thick and keep it from turning gray. The hopeful user must first shave his head, then apply the ashes after they have been pounded up with oil in a leaden mortar. To thicken one's locks one may use the same organs taken from the foal of an ass, burning them and mixing the ashes from them with urine. To this vile combination nard had to be added in order to make the user less offensive to everybody, including himself, while his hair was sprouting.⁷³

We have other assurances of cures that may strike us as equally fatuous but, in some cases, as more likely to cause trouble than many that we have given if the Romans really depended on them at all. The genital member of a fox bound to the head should relieve a headache if a faith cure was in order.⁷⁴ Its testicles are prescribed for parotitis or mumps,⁷⁵ and for scrofulous tumors.⁷⁶ For fractures of the ears the doctor is advised to prepare a glutinous remedy from the natural parts of a calf. It was to be dissolved in water when applied.⁷⁷ When employed in a case of facial ringworm, this glue was to be liquefied in vinegar and live sulphur, properly heated. It should then be thoroughly stirred together with a branch from a fig tree.⁷⁸ Minutiae in prescriptions encourage faith. A show of learning still magnifies a doctor.

When we read that the magi bade a person who was suffering from pains in the loins to eat the testes of a hare,⁷⁹ and that, besides providing other parts as remedies for the special ailments of women, the uterus of the female animal and the testes of the male were to be eaten by any woman who wished to have male issue, and that the leveret taken from the dam would make a woman fruitful who was otherwise past child-bearing, we may suspect that it was the proverbial fecundity of hares that led to their selection for all this sort of quackery.⁸⁰

The ancients would try almost anything, it would seem, as a remedy

⁷³ *N.H.* 28.164.

⁷⁴ *N.H.* 28.166.

⁷⁵ *N.H.* 28.177.

⁷⁶ *N.H.* 28.191.

⁷⁷ *N.H.* 28.176.

⁷⁸ *N.H.* 28.186.

⁷⁹ *N.H.* 28.199.

⁸⁰ *N.H.* 28.248.

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for epilepsy. The victim might be advised to eat the testes of a weasel or those of an ass, salted and administered in his drink, or take those of a wild boar either with the milk of a mare or with water, or those of swine, fried and beaten up in sow's milk. However, the last is not supposed to work unless the epileptic abstain from wine some days before and after he has drunk this special beverage.⁸¹ Somewhat similar is a prescription of the testes of a ram or cock. After being dried and reduced to powder, these could be taken either in water or in ass's milk, but in this case five days are set for the abstention from wine before and after taking.⁸² Another treatment for the same dreaded ailment was to administer in water or in the milk of a she-ass the testes of the male animal, after they had been properly prepared and preserved with salt.⁸³

Among the authorities in magic who knew all the niceties of procedure there is one who tells us that it is the right testicle of an ass that should be taken in just the proper amount of wine to serve as an aphrodisiac, unless a man preferred merely to wear that organ on the arm inside a bracelet as an amulet. He also advised something else, mention of which could be omitted in the interest of good taste even in a medical treatise.⁸⁴ Salpe of Lemnos, who has already appeared in these pages as a woman who wrote on the diseases of her sex and appears to have had few, if any, inhibitions, cherished or pretended to cherish such faith in this aphroditic animal that she recommends taking the genital organ of one and plunging it seven times in boiling oil so as to make an ointment to be used on what Pliny calls, with some lack of perfect definition, the *pertinentes partes*.⁸⁵ Another writer stated that the organ need be merely reduced to ashes and so administered in a beverage. He could do worse in inventing his prescriptions, and, as a matter of fact, he actually does.⁸⁵ I leave my reader to look up my reference and verify my charge. Another aphrodisiac was the dried testes of a horse. These were pulverized so as to be taken readily in a drink.⁸⁴ And there are many other testicular love charms, potions, unguents etc., mentioned in Latin.⁸⁶

In view of all these uses of the male organs it is not surprising to be told that slave dealers in their desire to delay the growth of hair on the pubes of boys so that they might have a higher commercial value would smear on them the blood that was shed when lambs were castrated.⁸⁷

⁸¹ N.H. 28.224-225; 30.90.

⁸² N.H. 30.87; 30.92.

⁸³ N.H. 28.225.

⁸⁴ N.H. 28.261.

⁸⁵ N.H. 28.262.

⁸⁶ N.H. 30.141-142.

⁸⁷ N.H. 30.41.

This was expected, I judge, to delay the coming of the signs of manhood in the young slaves.

To rouse a person from a lethargy caused by disease Roman doctors might put beneath his nose not only the liver of a weasel burnt, but its testes dried. There was, however, nothing necessarily magical about that, unless it were the speed with which we may imagine that he might wake up if he possessed any sense of smell at all.⁸⁸

We are coming to something relatively insignificant in size, though not for the size of the animal, if not in power, when we consider the value that was attached to the sex organs of a rooster. If a woman eats them from time to time after conception, she can, they tell us, look forward to having a male and not the less desired female child.⁸⁹ A cock's testes are, naturally enough, according to ancient ways of thinking, a potent aphrodisiac. The right one should be worn as an amulet in a bit of ram's skin.⁹⁰ If, however, you wished to produce the opposite effect upon somebody, you should take those of a game cock, rub them with goose grease, and attach them to the body in the ram's skin, or take those of an ordinary rooster who was not a professional fighter and put them beneath the bed along with some of the cock's blood.⁹¹

Between the anus and the external genitals of the beaver are two sacs which secrete a viscous, fetid substance which is used in medicine, as we have seen, as a stimulant and antispasmodic, and by perfumers in the making of perfume. Since the Latin term for the animal is *castor*, that word or its derivative *castoreum* is the name by which the drug is called today. Some of the ancients did not know that two of four anal pouches were the source of this highly valued medicinal substance, but thought that it came from the testes. Hence the tale of its vain attempt to bribe the hunters by self-emasculatation during flight.⁹² Even as a pseudo-testicular product, castor was sure to command respect.

Celsus advises its use when administered internally as a stimulant⁹³ and externally as an ingredient of salves for the eye and ear.⁹⁴ Pliny mentions it as a sternutatory,⁹⁵ and attributes to it power as a soporific or narcotic, when it is put on the head with sulphurwort in oil of roses (presumably to kill the smell), or when it is taken in water.⁹⁵ Lethargic or hysterical patients had to submit to a fumigation from burning it.⁹⁵ In modern times it has been much employed as an excitant. Taken in

⁸⁸ *N.H.* 30.97.

⁸⁹ *N.H.* 30.123.

⁹⁰ *N.H.* 30.141.

⁹¹ *N.H.* 30.142.

⁹² *N.H.* 8.109; 32.26.

⁹³ *Cels.* 3.16.2; 3.20.6; 3.23.7; 4.6.3; 4.27.1C.

⁹⁴ *Cels.* 6.6.8B; 6.7.7C.

⁹⁵ *N.H.* 32.28.

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water it was prescribed in Roman days as an emmenagogue and as an expellant of the afterbirth.⁹⁵ Used as an ointment or as an electuary, it was supposed to cure all sorts of ailments, such as vertigo, tetanic spasms, palsy, paralysis, epilepsy, sciatica and stomachic disorders.⁹⁶ As a potion it was thought to be remedial of bowel complaints and to counteract poisons.⁹⁶ That made it good for bites of all sorts of insects and snakes,⁹⁷ as well as for such toxic substances as mistletoe, aconite, or hellebore.⁹⁸ It might be injected into the ear to cure its pains or those of a tooth located on the same side of the head.⁹⁸

In view of all that the menstrual fluid was thought to do, it is surprising to find that the seminal fluid was less often credited with preternatural power.⁹⁹ Possibly there would be a different story if all Latin medical literature, instead of so little, had survived. We find, however, human semen recommended as a remedy for the stings of scorpions on the authority of authors who were said to be in high repute.¹⁰⁰ That of a wild boar was to be used—believe it or not—to cure an earache.¹⁰¹

For obvious reasons the external parts of a female animal were not put to as many magical and medical uses as those of the male. There was no difficulty, however, in making pictorial or plastic representations of them, or in finding certain natural objects that looked like them to serve for occult purposes. For example, from the age of iron to the present day the inhabitants of Italy have known the use of specimens of the *Cypraea* shell as amulets because of their resemblance to the vulva of a woman.¹⁰² Their appearance qualified them to avert the harm of an evil eye and the injuries effected by witchcraft on animals and human beings. The same purpose is served by a type of fish that is holed so as to present the appearance of a vulva. As a modern amulet the representation of a fish may be given a turgid shape to indicate the fecundity which wearing it is supposed to achieve in a sterile woman.¹⁰³

Obscenity seems to have been fairly intimately domesticated when we find among the Christmas cakes of Sicily one sort which reproduces the appearance of the pudenda muliebria, and is a gift that the wife makes to her husband at the glad and holy season of the Nativity.¹⁰⁴ Such modern customs may make one hesitate to interpret the obscene pictures and

⁹⁵ *N.H.* 32.29.

⁹⁷ *N.H.* 32.30.

⁹⁸ *N.H.* 32.31.

⁹⁶ The reader may be referred to the material in John G. Bourke, *op. cit.* (note 9), 355; 357-360.

¹⁰⁰ *N.H.* 28.51.

¹⁰¹ *N.H.* 28.175.

¹⁰² Cf., e.g., G. Bellucci, *Il feticismo primitivo in Italia e le sue forme di adattamento*, 38, fig. 18a; 39, fig. 19; 40, fig. 20.

¹⁰³ G. Bellucci, *op. cit.*, 42, fig. 22a.

¹⁰⁴ G. Cocchiara, *La vita e l'arte del popolo siciliano nel museo Pittè*, 105.

sculpture which Pompeii and other ancient sites have yielded as merely pornographic excitants or memorials of lubricity. There is more to it than that.

The organ of the female that somewhat corresponded in its supposed occult power to the testes of the male was, of course, the uterus. It not only produced a living thing, but, used in therapy, it was supposed to restore the ailing to a life that would be worth living. True to the doctrines of sympathetic and homoeopathic magic that like was to be cured by like, if a woman's womb was in bad condition, she could rectify it, says an ancient prescription, by taking in drink the uterus of a hyaena (presumably reduced to powder), along with the rind of a sweet pomegranate.¹⁰⁵ The uterus of a weasel is recommended as a remedy for epilepsy.¹⁰⁶ That of a bitch boiled in oil produces an ointment for agnails and hangnails.¹⁰⁷ Such ideas are far from strange to the modern world. Among the many things that an Italian woman may do during pregnancy to protect herself against a miscarriage is to wear in contact with her abdomen the skin or a part of the skin of a calf which has been taken alive from its mother's womb by a Caesarean operation.¹⁰⁸ What old Roman would not believe in that! We have already learned that testicular preparations should be used when one has been bitten by a snake, but the most effectual remedy for the wound, Pliny tells us, is the rennet of a fawn. It is, however, necessary that the fawn should have been cut from the uterus of its dam. Pliny tells us this twice,¹⁰⁹ but it could be far from true had he told it thrice. The idea that something derived from the uterus may be useful in medical therapy was carried even further. We are told that when hinds become aware of pregnancy, they swallow a small stone which is presently to be found either in their feces, or, strangely enough, in their womb.¹¹⁰ If a woman in the "family way" attaches one of these stones to her person, she is safe against suffering a miscarriage. Also valuable in both pregnancy and parturition are some little bones which sometimes appear, the ancients said, in the heart or—and this concerns us—in the womb.

What the veterinarian now calls an aegagropile, a ball of hair or a concretion which is found in the stomach of a goat or other ruminant,

¹⁰⁵ *N.H.* 28.102.

¹⁰⁶ *N.H.* 30.90.

¹⁰⁷ *N.H.* 30.111.

¹⁰⁸ Z. Zanetti, *La medicina* (note 15), 117. Among the Pennsylvania Germans it is the vagina of a cow that, hung on the door, keeps out the witches; E. M. Fogel, *op. cit.* (note

15), 140, no. 648. Even the body bands that a pregnant woman has worn may be highly valued as an amulet, especially by soldiers: *Notes and Queries*, 1915, ser. 11, 11, 440. No. 13.

¹⁰⁹ *N.H.* 8.118; 28.150.

¹¹⁰ *N.H.* 28.246-247.

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is probably what Pliny is identifying in his hazy way with a kind of "pumice" or "blackish tufa," when he locates it as an occasional occurrence in the second division of a heifer's stomach, and, in another passage—and this alone is pertinent to our story—in a cow's uterus. (For Pliny this is a relatively slight aberration in anatomy.)¹¹¹ The object, whatever we take it to be, should be a great help to woman in the midst of a difficult parturition, provided it has not been allowed to touch the earth.¹¹² We assume that our author means to have it worn somewhere on the person as an amuletic charm.

In the Bellucci collection of amulets there is a pregnancy stone in the shape of a womb, *pietra gravida* or *pietra della gravidanza*, a limonitic concretion or brown hematite, which, on being shaken, produces a sound. In his work on fetishism Bellucci describes this as an argillo-ferruginous concretion in globular form which contains fragments inside that do the rattling.¹¹³ He tells us that the prospective mother wears it nine months, fastened to the right arm, but then, at the arrival of the first pains of parturition, she transfers it to the right thigh.¹¹⁴ Women hire the use of these stones from a midwife, if they do not possess one of their own as a family heirloom.¹¹⁵ Although these amuletic objects might seem to be somewhat pagan, grateful mothers do not hesitate to deposit them as tokens of success, as *ex-votos* in a Christian Church.¹¹⁶ If one of these mother stones be put near the top of a fruit tree, it should bring to maturity a fine crop. If, however, it be placed too low down, it makes the fruit fall off unripe.¹¹⁵ Bellucci catalogues one of these amulets that was used to ease delivery for domestic animals.¹¹⁷ They are recognized¹¹⁸ as identical in character with the eagle-stones of which Pliny speaks,¹¹⁹ the trusted charms of pregnant women two millennia ago. The mobile stone inside represents the living embryo. In other words, they work results by sympathetic magic.

A biography of Antoninus Diadumenianus lists many omens which foretold his rise to the imperial power. One of them is important to our narrative. We are told that when Roman babies came into the world with a caul, the midwives preserved it in order to sell it to credulous lawyers

¹¹¹ *N.H.* 28.247.

¹¹² *N.H.* 11.203; 28.247.

¹¹³ G. Bellucci, *op. cit.* (note 62), 92-93.

¹¹⁴ G. Bellucci, *Amuleti italiani* (note 60), 253, no. 13. See also, *Catalogue descriptif d'une collection d'amulettes italiennes envoyée à l'exposition universelle de Paris*, Tav. VIII, no. 10, p. 48.

¹¹⁵ G. Bellucci, *op. cit.* (note 62), 93.

¹¹⁶ G. Bellucci, *op. cit.*, 93; 97.

¹¹⁷ G. Bellucci, *Catalogue*, Tav. VIII, no. 11, p. 48.

¹¹⁸ E. Canziani, "Abruzzese folklore," *Folklore*, 1928, 39, 211.

¹¹⁹ *N.H.* 10.12; 30.130; 36.149-151; cf. Lucan 6.676.

who believed that its possession would bring luck to those who plead cases. But Antoninus had on his head at birth no ordinary fetal membrane. His brow was bound with a narrow band, the fibres of which were entwined like those of a bowstring, making it too strong to break. Since he was born wearing this semblance of a diadem, he was called Diadematus, a name which was later changed to Diadumenianus.¹²⁰

It is a common belief even now in Italy, as elsewhere, that a baby who is born with a caul, the "silly how" or "holy hood," is destined for good fortune.¹²¹ In Istria they say that a boy who has his amnion (*il sacco amnistico*) will possess the power of a sorcerer when he reaches the twenty-fourth year of his life. Fortunately an infant may be saved from such a black career by recourse to certain magic which his elders can operate.¹²²

The child who is born with his "shirt" (*camicia*) on, or "wearing the veil of the Madonna" (*il velo della Madonna*), is said to have the power to render evils impotent to do any harm. He can cure diseases by making the sign of the cross against them. He has the Madonna, he believes, to thank for this good fortune: the caul declares her protection and his good luck.¹²³

There is an especial formula to be employed by such a divinely gifted healer when he does the blessing. He has to learn it when he grows old enough from the lips of somebody who has been similarly favored. The time to learn it is the night of Christmas. Only the initiate and his teacher should be present. If the lad ever discloses the secret, he loses his ability to effect cures.¹²⁴ When he blesses the ill person, the healer must be in a state of fasting, and he makes the sign of the cross three times while he repeats to himself secretly the magic words. Then he blows upon the place where the disease is located. The performance has to be repeated on three successive mornings. If he is likely to die in less than three days, it is clearly better to call a doctor.

Some make the sign with empty hand, some with a *breve*, a little cloth case that contains a piece of caul or a tiny image of a saint or other religious charms, some with a crucifix, or a flower. Even a knitting-needle may serve for the religious gesture. A cross may be marked in ink on a sufferer

¹²⁰ Lamprid. *Anton. Diad.* 4.2-4.

¹²¹ M. Pasquarelli, *op. cit.* (note 17), 16, 54; P. Ellero, *Scritti minori. Delle superstizioni volgari in Friuli*, 21; G. Finamore, *Tradizioni*, 70; M. Placucci, "Usi e pregiudizi dei contadini della Romagna," *Archivio*, 1884, 3, 325-326; Z. Zanetti, *Nonne e bambini*, 8; "Miscellanea," *Archivio*, 1894, 13, 453. In general, see J. Brand, *Observations on popular antiquities* (Ed. of

1900), 647-650; E. M. Fogel, *op. cit.* (note 15), 51, no. 141.

¹²² R. Cossar, "Usanze riti e superstizioni del popolo di Montona nell'Istria," *Il folklore italiano*, 1934, 9, 62.

¹²³ L. De Nardis, "Le medichesse del miracolo nella Romagna," *Il folklore italiano*, 1929, 8, 175; M. Placucci, *op. cit.* (note 121), 3, 526.

¹²⁴ L. De Nardis, *op. cit.*, 175-176.

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from erysipelas while his healer is blessing it away. Some specialize on one disease or on a limited number, others on the ills of animals, generally cattle. But the man who is expert in the veterinary cures can do nothing for human beings. Combining the functions annuls the virtue of the blessing.¹²⁵ The rules of ritual are as strict as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

The caul of the *neonato vestito* is itself deemed by many Italians a curative agent in the treatment of disease.¹²⁶ It is especially recommended for the relief of a belly-ache.¹²⁷ Some buy their piece of caul from a healer who had the power to use it medically, or they get that used by somebody who has died, but their chance of success with a purchased article is limited: there should be no traffic in such sacred things. However, even these fellows may gather in fat fees for their admittedly fallible services.¹²⁸

I understand that in the time of Lord Nelson there was some trade in cauls, because they were reputed to be a magic protection against being drowned at sea. The market price was then as high as twenty pounds per specimen, but the cost had dropped to two shillings apiece in 1912, only to be sent up, because of the activity of submarines, to the level of two pounds and ten shillings at the London docks.¹²⁹

The newborn baby's umbilical cord must not be cut too close since, if the teachings of Italian folklore be correct, riches and future virility depend upon its having the proper length. Moreover, in the case of a girl, wrong cutting might cause her private parts to be too contracted for her matrimonial life when she matured.¹³⁰ As soon as the child's umbilical cord has been tied and severed, foresighted Sicilians may put away a part of it, wrapt in a piece of cloth, against a time when they may need it as their folk remedy for colic pains. It may then be applied to the abdomen, or be given in pulverized form as an internal medicine.¹³¹ Those who live in the region of Perugia without duly appreciating the high status in scientific medicine which the town can justly boast administer the powder in a glass of wine as a remedy for epilepsy.¹³² Some Italians throughout

¹²⁵ L. De Nardis, *op. cit.*, 176.

¹²⁶ M. Placucci, *op. cit.* (note 121) 3, 326. This follows ancient precedent: cf. *N.H.* 28.256: membrane of kid an expellant of afterbirth.

¹²⁷ Z. Zanetti, *La medicina*, 56; 129.

¹²⁸ L. De Nardis, *op. cit.*, 175.

¹²⁹ *Folklore*, 1917, 28, 90; cf. *Notes and Queries*, 1881, ser. 6, 3, 286; 1899, ser. 9, 3, 175; 1915, ser. 11, 11, 439; 1915, 12, 439. Dan McKenzie, *The infancy of medicine*, 327. For superstitions about the caul in modern countries the reader may be referred to C. J. S. Thompson, *op. cit.*

(note 9), 13-18. For those in North America see Fanny D. Bergen, *Current superstitions collected from the oral tradition of English-speaking folk*, 22; *Notes and Queries*, 1899, 3, 175, 295, 408, 491. On the need of keeping it white and dry as long as one lives: *Notes and Queries*, 1886, ser. 7, 1, 145; 1899, ser. 9, 3, 26: It is hard to bathe a baby who was born with a caul: he sits on the water like a cork.

¹³⁰ Z. Zanetti, *La medicina*, 136.

¹³¹ G. Pitri, *Medicina*, 366.

¹³² Z. Zanetti, *op. cit.* (note 15), 144.

their lives wear a bit of it, properly dried, as an amulet (*breve*) attached to the neck.¹³³

Zeno Zanetti, our chief authority on the folklore of the inhabitants of Perugia, tells us that if a woman wishes her baby son to turn eventually to a religious life, she puts the umbilical cord in a book of prayers, or under the altar steps, or under the picture frame of some painting that portrays the saint, male or female, who founded the religious order of her preference. Should she wish him to become a farmer, she places it under a plough, if an artisan, within some implement that is used in the craft of her choice; if a doctor, lawyer, or literary person, in some book of the profession that she favors.¹³⁴ The piece must be kept out of reach of the ever-hungry cat since, if it gets it, the boy will grow up to be a thief. If the cord be put in water, he will die by drowning; if in the fire, he will always be scratching like a hen in the ashes, or end by being burnt to death.¹³⁵

Some Italian women believe that every time a child is born to them, they should have it eat in its pap a tiny morsel of the umbilical cord of the son that was last born. This is supposed to make the two cherish for each other a strong affection.¹³⁵ There is also a superstitious belief that when a daughter has reached marital age, giving a bit of her cord to her fiancé will make his love for her so compelling that he will surely wed her.

¹³³ G. Finamore, *Tradizioni popolari abruzzese*, 70. This Italian superstition makes us wonder just what was the source of those of some Pennsylvania Germans that a child born with its umbilical cord about its neck will become great and popular: E. M. Fogel, *op. cit.* (note 15), 41, no. 70, and that keeping it will insure the child's becoming clever and bright: 48, no. 119. See

also *Notes and Queries*, 1915, ser. 11, 11, 440.

¹³⁴ Z. Zanetti, *op. cit.*, 143-144. Somewhat similar is the superstition that to hasten the time when a baby begins to talk a female key should be put frequently in his hand: *op. cit.*, 142.

¹³⁵ Z. Zanetti, *op. cit.*, 144.