

WHEN AND WHY WERE MALE PHYSICIANS EMPLOYED AS
ACCOUCHEURS?

BY

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THERE can be no doubt that, until within comparatively recent times, the general practice of midwifery lay in the hands of midwives. From the works of Hippocrates, Galen, Celsus, and of their disciples, it is evident that male physicians were called in only when special difficulties arose. These writers, were, therefore, ignorant of the more natural processes of labor, and their works treat of dystocia alone. Moschion,² of the second century, was in fact the first author, and for many centuries the only one, who describes a natural labor. He is consequently the first one who writes like an eye witness upon lacerations of the perineum, and the first one who in difficult cephalic presentations resorted to podalic version. "Do not refuse," says Hippocrates, "to believe women on matters concerning parturition."³ "It is needless," writes Aëtius, "to give a treatise on midwifery, because from long experience, not only do midwives, but also all other women, know this subject perfectly."⁴ "I am informed by midwives," explains an unknown writer of the thirteenth century, "that when the head presents, all goes well; but when an arm or a foot, then danger arises."⁵ How can we interpret the inconsistency of Hippocrates, who compares the foetus in the womb to an olive in a bottle, which can only be withdrawn by the one or the other pole, and yet asserts that a pelvic presentation is generally fatal to both mother and

¹ Read before the Obstetrical Society of Philadelphia, May 4th, 1876.

² Περὶ τῶν Γυνακείων παθῶν, in I. Spachii Gynæciorum Harmoniâ Argentine, 1597.

³ Œuvres Complètes d'Hippocrate, par Littré, Tom. vii, p. 441.

⁴ Tetrabibli iv, sermo iv, cap. 14.

⁵ De Secretis Mulierum, Argentorati, 1537.

child,¹ unless the only breech cases he ever saw were those in which the head was arrested by a narrow brim, and he was called in by the midwives to extract it? How otherwise can we account for the perpetuation of this error, in spite of Moschion's teachings, until the seventh century, and for its ultimate refutation by the second practical accoucheur of antiquity—Paul of Ægina, surnamed Obstetricus?

Still, although both Moschion and Paulus Ægineta were much sought after by the women of their day, they were but isolated examples; and midwives, as in the time of the Pharaohs, continued until a much later period to monopolize this branch of medicine. These facts bring up two very interesting questions: When were male physicians first employed by women to attend them in ordinary labors? What were the causes of such a departure from a custom hoary with antiquity?

This innovation Astruc² dates from the night of December 27th, 1663, when, from motives of secrecy, Julien Clement was summoned to deliver the frail and beautiful Duchesse de la Valliere. Le Grand Monarque, having never read the history of Portia, the worthy daughter of Cato, nor that of other reticent ladies of antiquity, had the ungallant idea that a woman cannot hold her tongue. So Clement was mysteriously conducted to a certain house where a veiled lady lay in the throes of labor. She was delivered of a boy, Louis de Bourbon, and it is said that the king watched the proceedings from behind the tapestry. Clement afterwards openly attended this lady in her other labors, and this circumstance, it is alleged, set the fashion of employing a male physician, first to the princesses and to the *dames du grand monde*, and afterwards to the *bourgeoisie*. Thus does Astruc account for the origin of "male midwives," as they were contemptuously termed in England, and of "accoucheurs," as they were for the first time then called in France. "I am assured," he adds, "that the period of employing men does not date earlier than this."

Julien Clement afterwards delivered Madame de Montespan, and secrecy was again deemed so important—for Louis XIV. threw a halo of sentimental mystery around his amours—that the

¹ Op. cit. Tom. viii. p. 79.

² Histoire Sommaire de l'Art d'Accouchements, Paris, 1776, p. 38.

confiding doctor was conducted blindfolded to her bedside. So ignorant was he of the quality of his patient, that he bade the proud king, who stood by disguised, hand him a glass of water. This accoucheur had so wide-spread a reputation, that Philip V. repeatedly summoned him to Madrid, to attend the labors of his wife, Louise-Gabrielle de Savoie.¹

That this much quoted assertion of Astruc's, made just one hundred years ago, is in every respect incorrect, I shall now try to show. In the first place, it was evidently not through a fashion set by royalty that accoucheurs were first employed; for Maria Theresa herself, the wife of Louis XIV., following the custom of Austrian ladies, employed a midwife in all her labors, although she always kept Francois Bouchet on hand in an antechamber, against any emergency. Nor in the second place, is Astruc more correct in regard to the time when this innovation took place. From a very interesting little book, first published in Paris early in 1609, by Louise Bourgeois,² I gather that, for many years before this date, the services of male physicians were being preferred to those of midwives for ordinary cases of labor. It also appears that so steadily did this innovation grow into favor, that, by the year 1600, at the time of Marie de Medici, queen of Henri IV., accoucheurs were in such repute, as to make her midwife, the aforesaid Louyse, as she spells her own name, very jealous of them.

There was, as I have elsewhere shown,³ a certain M. Honoré, who—beshrew him—was a great favorite with all the ladies of quality who were breeding in those days. To him, whenever the occasion offered, this midwife behaved most spitefully. In one place she sneeringly refers to him as “that man of Paris who delivers women.” In another, she writes, “I performed this operation (version) in the presence of Messieurs Hautin, Duret and Seguin, and of that surgeon who the most frequently delivers women. He wished to help me, but I refused, knowing that I was able to do it without risk to the

¹ *Essais Historiques*, par Sue, vol. i, p. 118.

² *Observations Diverses sur la sterilité, perte de fruict, fœcondité, accouchements, etc.*, par Louyse Bourgeois, dite Boursier, Sage Femme de la Roine. A Paris, 1617.

³ *A Sketch of the Life and of the Writings of Louyse Bourgeois, midwife to Marie de Medici.* By William Goodell, M.D. Philadelphia, 1876.

“ who kept them in the fear of God and at their embroidery,” they keep about them as companions, giddy and wanton girls, “ the refuse of the provinces. In verity, these wolves in sheep-cotes ruin a vast number of our young women, even of good family, by wheedling them into intrigues, and enticing them into every kind of extravagance. . . . Children formerly remained children a long time, but now they are very knowing, and resemble those trees which flower betimes, but which the slightest frost blights. All this evil [viz., the employment of male physicians] springs from the license of young women. They roam about as free as the does of the forest, and are like young colts which sadly need a bridle. You could not think otherwise, were you to see the husbands of many of them, so overburthened by their extravagance and by their bad house-keeping, as to become withered, thin, and as yellow as wax. . . . Our young women think themselves wiser than ever their mothers were, and in very truth they certainly have greater boldness than the women of bygone times. They are always dressed for paying or for receiving visits, where there is no lack of tittle-tattle. When their conversation flags, for it is as incoherent as the dung of a goat, they set upon any chance visitor who may be a breeding, and entertain her with all the possible dangers of travail, and even invent those which have never happened.” And this, of course, frightens her into the employment of a male physician.

She then goes on to say that she knows this from sad experience. In one instance the poor young lady had been so wrought up by these idle tales, that when the midwife called for thread and a pair of scissors to cut and tie the cord, she, supposing it was to cut her open and sew her up again, went off into fits, which never ceased until she died, “ which shows”, says our excellent authoress, “ that a midwife should never be without her own thread and scissors.”

“ There are at present,” she continues, “ very few women who so *affection* their midwives as they did of yore, when, upon the death of their midwives, they wore deep mourning, and prayed to God not to give them any more children, — which was not right, but their affection carried them that far. Many women still employ them, but simply as female vintagers who are changed at every vintage, and are paid by the day.

A sauce needs much piquancy to make it taste pleasant to a sick person without appetite, as our young women do, who from their first labors make choice of a man to deliver them. This makes me blush for them. For to resort to this without need is a great piece of shamelessness, (*une effronterie trop grande*), such as, I am sure, their mothers and grandmothers would never have exhibited. Difficult cases of labor will, it is true, happen, in which, as I have enjoined and still enjoin, a surgeon should be called in. But his presence is enough to make the woman blush up to her ears, and the husband greatly vexed, were the need not urgent, or the affair whispered to others. It should, therefore, be so arranged, that neither the woman nor her husband should know of his coming. Neither should the woman see the surgeon, nor he her face." She then proceeds to relate that, in a tedious labor, being importuned by the lady's friends, she took advantage of the absence of the husband, and sent for a surgeon. But, knowing that her "patient would die from very shame and fright at the sight of him," she so disposed the pillows, bolsters and coverlaid as to obstruct her view. The surgeon then crept up noiselessly to the foot of the bed, and made the needful examination without the knowledge of the "*honneste Damoiselle*," who after all "was delivered by no other help or artifice, than that of God and of nature. . . . Since this indecency has become the fashion, dangers greater than those of former times present themselves, which would be better met by skilled persons, [viz. by midwives,] were they only let alone."

These extracts conclusively prove that accoucheurs were employed long before the year 1600, and that Astruc is therefore historically incorrect. It remains, therefore, for me to consider the causes that brought about this very remarkable change in public opinion — an opinion coeval, as far as history records, with the pyramids of Cheops. It was not royalty, as Astruc contends, that set the fashion, because both Marie de Medici and Maria Theresa, the queens respectively of Henri IV. and Louis XIV., were delivered by midwives. Nor was it the wantonness and the immodesty of the women, as the blushing Louyse Bourgeois complains; for, as the current literature abundantly attests, the further one goes back in French history, the greater does one find the immorality to be. But it was, as I shall try

works of considerable merit by Francis Rousset, Jean Liebeaut of Paris, Jean le Bon, Albertus Bottanus of Padua, Felix Plater of Basle, and by Maurice de la Corde of Paris. In 1597, Israel Spachius, an industrious physician of Strasburg, collected the standard obstetric works of his day, and published them under the title of *Gynæciorum Harmonia*. After 1600 the number of obstetric works is legion.

These authors no doubt paved the way for the employment of male physicians; but in my opinion it was mainly the great weight attached to the name of Ambrose Paré. In 1551 this eminent man published a small tract on version, which attracted much attention. Twenty-two years later, when his name was a household word, he wrote his work on Obstetrics, which was translated into every European language, and soon became the text-book of all the schools. Thus far, the ignorance of midwives had been gently censured, but no effort had been made to dislodge them from public favor; but in 1587 a very remarkable work appeared from the pen of Gervais de la Touche, "*Gentilhomme Poitevin*," in which he bitterly attacked midwives as a class, and, urged, for the sake of humanity, that the practice of midwifery should be entrusted to men. The title is a very curious one, and as it fully explains the character of the book, is well worth giving in full:—

“La tres-haute & tres-souverains science de l'art et industrie naturelle d'enfanter, contre la maudite & perverse impéritie des femmes, que l'on nomme Sages-Femmes ou belles-meres, lesquelles, par leur ignorance, font journellement perir une infinité de femmes & d'enfans à l'enfantement: à ce que desormais toutes femmes heureusement & sans aucun peril ni destourbiez, tant d'elles que de leurs enfans, estant toutes saiges & perites en icelle science.”

This quaint book was dedicated to “all queens and princesses, to all dames and damoiselles of honor, and to all debonair matrons of chastity and of long-suffering” and no doubt had its weight in opening the eyes of the “long-suffering” public to the shortcomings of midwives. But the increasing intelligence of the community was undoubtedly the true reason why the practice of midwifery gradually drifted out of their hands; and yet both Astruc and Louise Bourgeois missed it. The

former, who boasts in the preface of his work on midwifery, that he never delivered a woman, very naturally overlooked it. The latter, while imputing the cause to the wantonness and immorality of the women, unwittingly gives the true reason. For she advises that, in cases of flooding or of other dangerous complications, the midwife should send early for a surgeon, and not delay as long as possible, as many do lest he should get the credit of delivering the woman. This advice she excuses, on the ground that "extreme cases need extreme measures;" and as "I very well know from experience," she adds, "that if another midwife is called in, they go at each other tooth and nail (*se prendre de bec*), forgetting in their furious passion alike their patient and their duty." Therefore "It is far better to live at the hands of a bold and skilful surgeon than to die in those of an ignorant and rash midwife."

It would seem, then, that in proportion as people grew wiser by reading books and by having them to read, the ignorance of midwives became more and more manifest. The physician developed with the times, the midwife did not. The former wrote elaborate works on obstetrics, which the latter, with rare exceptions could not even read. What more natural than that intelligent women should prefer the teacher to the inapt pupil; should place their lives in skilled hands, than in those that were unlettered? What more inevitable than that the male physician, who was hurriedly sent for in cases of emergency, or was kept in waiting in an antechamber for such an emergency, should, despite tradition, prejudice and religion,—should, in spite of himself, for it was long deemed dishonorable for him to practice midwifery,—ultimately usurp the place of the midwife by the bedside of the woman in travail? The battle between knowledge and ignorance is never a drawn one; either Christian must die or Apollyon give way.
