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WONDERFUL BIRTHS AND
BEGGING IN MODERN AGE ¹
Topics in the History of Culture and Ideas

1. November, 1726. In London the news of an extraordinary case circulates: it is said that in Godalming, a village near Guildford in Surrey, a common woman has been giving birth to rabbits for some months. The echo of this news rapidly spreads towards the capital and reaches the Court; by the time the King decides to send a doctor to verify the news, the woman has already given birth to fourteen rabbits and it seems as though there were more on the way. This, they say, is a prodigious event: perhaps it is a miracle, or perhaps its origin is diabolical. There is reason for believing that only a hundred years before, for an event of this kind, a woman would have risked ending up on the rack and then at the stake. According to the rumours, all this is the consequence of an unsatisfied desire or an

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unexpected trauma of which the woman was a victim of during her pregnancy. In fact, everyone knows that maternal fancy can change the shape of the fetus, perhaps even to the point where it changes, as in this case, the very species.[1] But some might think that this is only a fraudulent device, a conjurer's trick, and that the woman is just a gossip.

I have tried to reconstruct the episode with the help of some news reports published between the end of 1726 and the first few months of the following year.[2] These are the reports written by the doctors involved to defend their work and cast aspersions their colleagues. The case is emblematic, whether viewed in an epistemological key or from a socio-historical perspective. In any case it is my opinion that it gives us an interesting opportunity to reflect on the practice or art of deception – a supposed skill attributed to the malice and wickedness deeply rooted in those at the margins of society (particularly among beggars) – and connected with a particular representation of the female body that has shaped ideas on procreation for three centuries.

Let's take a closer look at the episode, starting with the first statement made by the "coney-

breeder” to the doctor sent by George I.

The antecedents date back to the spring of 1726, when Mary Toft, a few weeks pregnant and busy weeding a hop field, sees two rabbits and tries in vain to capture them. From that moment, every time she thinks back to those rabbits, she is overcome by an irresistible desire to eat their meat, but she is too poor to buy one.[3]

To experience strong desires during pregnancy is really dangerous. During the age of the Stuarts, only a few years before the case of Mary, a midwife had reported that a woman who gave birth to a child with a cleft lip had claimed that this occurred because of a fright, during pregnancy, caused by a hare that had crossed the street and her subsequent desire to eat its meat.[4]

In August, Mary aborts a shapeless mass and, not long after, what seems to be the liver of a rabbit; following this, she expels the pieces of a whole rabbit, in addition to three paws and the intestines of a cat. A gentleman from Guildford, on the 9th of September, will write to a doctor in Ipswich that these parts «were formed in her Imagination from a Cat she [Mary] was so fond of, as to let it lye on the Bed by her at Nights».[5]

Doctor John Howard, an old obstetrician in Guildford, after some perplexities, offers to

assist the woman during her first deliveries – eight, within a timespan of a month – and he orders her to be transferred to his home so that he could follow the extraordinary case, which he hopes will bring him fame, more closely. In the meantime, Nathaniel Saint-André, “Surgeon and Anatomist to His Majesty”, arrives to Guildford, in the company of the Prince of Wales’ Secretary, Samuel Molineux, just in time to be present at the birth of 14th rabbit.

She was lodged – will write Saint-André – over against Mr. Howard’s House, we found her dress’d in her Stays, sitting on the Bed-Side with several Women near her. I immediately examined her, and not finding the Parts prepared for her Labour, I waited for the coming on of fresh Pains, which happened in three or four Minutes, at which time I deliver’d her of the entire Trunk, strip’d of its Skin, of a Rabbit of about four Months growth, in which the Heart and Lungs were contained with the Diaphragm entire. I instantly cut off a piece of them, and tried them in Water; they seemed but just specifically lighter than it, and Mr. Molineux pressing them to the Bottom they rose again very slowly.[6]

These are the doctor’s impressions which were published two weeks later in a detailed memoir.

Mary seems «to be of a healthy, strong Constitution, of a small Size, and fair Complexion, of a very stupid and sullen

Temper».[7] she is mother of three children and married to Joshua, a «poor journey-man clothier», son of Joshua Toft and a midwife. She affirms she is a simple woman and she admits the big defect that she repeats continually the curse “*Odd rawbitt me!*”, to such point that she has been given the nickname *Rawbittin-Merry*. [8]

It seems as though the case caused such an uproar and a certain amount of agitation: it is said that people don't want to eat rabbit anymore, and the consumption of rabbit in the capital – complain the breeders – has dropped by two thirds. [9] Strange: Mary gave birth to rabbits not because she ate them but because she desired to but could not do so!

A woman gives birth to rabbits, one after another, and this is caused by her imagination which, fired by unrequited desire, contaminates and modifies the fetal material. Let us put this story aside for a moment and reflect on some questions that are unlikely to be asked today, but at the start of the 18th century were worth asking and were in line with the experience and epistemological climate of that age.

For the early eighteenth century, it was not altogether incredible that women could give

birth to animals. Besides the unlimited power of the imagination, for a long time it was thought possible to generate offspring through *nefario concubitu*, the mating of a man or a woman with an animal. In 1671 in Copenhagen, the abortion of a strange *molæ* shaped like a bird was examined, and several doctors had described parts of tailless mice, moles and snakes.[10] According to Dr. Schenck there could also have been cats, rabbits, polyps and leeches generated by women. Two centuries before, Michele Savonarola [1385-1468] specified that noble women could only give birth to noble animals such as eagles, while women of a lower class give birth to beasts with a humble appearance such as lizards: pure nonsense – commented others – to think that nature generates monsters respecting titles of nobility, as if the creation of monsters could depend on the social hierarchy.[11]

Still in the mid-eighteenth century, on the coast of Flanders, it was said that sometimes children are born accompanied by a small monstrous animal called a *sooterkin*: [12] a creature as big as a mouse. It was said that Dutch women loved to keep a brazier under their skirts to keep warm and that this could lead to the formation of small animals in their bellies. The English physician John Maubray,

in *The Female Physician* (1724), had upheld the possibility of women giving birth to a sooterkin and, at the time of the Godalming case, he greeted the news of the strange deliveries of Mary Toft with satisfaction, considering them proof of his theory.[13] Maubray, who believed in the limitless power of the imagination in shaping the fetus, warned women against excessive familiarity with pets, so as to avoid giving birth to children who resembled them.

Probably what were termed *sooterkin* were actually *molæ*: growths or tumours. And these could also be exchanged - God only knows how! - for real babies, as we know from the case of an amazing "birth" which was said to have occurred in 1276, when the Countess Margarete, wife of Herman, Count of Henneberg, gave birth to 365 children who died with their mother after being baptized in a basin: 182 were called "John", 182 "Elizabeth," one was a hermaphrodite. The event, it was reported, had happened

... perché essendo capitata innanzi alla contessa una povera donna con due figliuoli nati ad un parto, a domandare la limosina, essa in luogo di ajutarla, l'incaricò, dicendo, che non si potevano far due figli ad un tratto, se non avessero parimente due padri; di che risentendosi forte quella poveretta, pregò Iddio, che per

manifestare la sua pudicizia, permettesse, che la contessa, già gravida, partorisce tanti figliuoli, quanti giorni ha l'anno.[14]

Until a few years ago there was a walled inscription as evidence of this story in Loosduinen, near Den Haag, in the monastery of the nuns of St. Bernard. This inscription began with the words «Laudunum sive Losdunum. In temple hujus pages tumulus comitisse, quae uno partu trecentos sexaginta quinque infantes edidit»[15], and the basin used for the children's collective baptism was still in place. Thanks to Margarete's marvelous delivery, Loosduinen became a place of pilgrimage, frequented for many years by barren women, just like the temples of fertility found in every age and which are still found today.[16]

The case of Margarete had kept its reputation and its strong educational and moral value, because it stood as a warning against offending those in need or in distress, penalty the wrath of Heaven and its terrible retribution. In the same tone there is an even more amazing story told by the Franciscan monk Bertrand Lot (1265-1333) about an infant "born" from the thighbone of a man in a village in Flanders in 1330. This, too, happened as divine punishment, and struck one Ludovico Roosel, who had laughed at

his wife during the birth pangs: from that moment, the man felt a pain growing worse in the right thighbone from which, nine months later, a child was born.[17] However it is worth noting that the focus of this story is not the improbable birthing by a man, but rather the fact of the birth occurring from a femur, and thus the suspicion that the baby may not have contracted "original sin" – whose vehicle, as "you know", is woman – and therefore the doubt that the newborn may not have required baptism.

Like the birth of monsters, the human generation of animals and animal generation of human or semi-human beings, have long been regarded in various ways: as freaks of nature (*lusus naturæ*), as manifestations of God (*ostentum Providentiæ*), or as the effects of *nefario concubitu*. But the conception of animals by women could also be attributed to ingestion and incubation of a fruit seed or the result of a curse. By attributing these cases to natural causes, Della Porta had explained in 1558 that toads can be generated by the coupling occurring during women's menstrual period, because «the menstruation blood of women can readily decompose and give rise to toads, frogs, lizards and other similar animals. Likewise from corruption in the bowels

sometimes women generate critters like worms»[18]. These extraordinary conceptions contradicted common sense and common knowledge, but they were not at odds either with experience or with the authorities nor with the current embryological models which still swung between the dogmatic tenets of Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen, nor yet with the uncertain ideas on the predominance of the male or female seed or egg.

Between 1500 and 1700, amid so much uncertainty, the human generation of animals had slowly but increasingly been explained by the close connection between maternal imagination and the shape of the fetus. This connection, in the Godalming case, far from appearing a bizarre theory, was, both in learned circles and amongst the common people, the most acceptable explanation for the mysteries of neonatal appearance.

The particular fit of the *vis imaginativa* theory, in the second half of the seventeenth century, at the expense of other theories of morphogenesis (and teratology, in particular), can be explained above all by how it accords with the physiological model based on the mechanistic approach and, in the last quarter of the century, with the emerging preformist hypothesis.

But let us return to Mary's rabbits.

On November 19th, the King sends the physician of the royal family, Dr Cyriacus Ahlers, to Guildford, with the task of writing a report on the matter. Ahlers, after witnessing the birth of the sixteenth rabbit, declares himself fully convinced of the authenticity of the event and departs for London with some specimens, preserved in alcohol, to show to the Court.[19] According to the evidence given by Dr. Howard, Ahlers personally and with great satisfaction extracted several parts of the animal from the woman (?) and, later, gave Mary a guinea, promising her that he would personally see to it that the King give her a pension;[20] as others would confirm several days later on being called to testify before the Mayor of Guildford.[21] Even the owner of an inn, the White Hart, remembers hearing Ahlers say that he had no doubts about the episode. On November 22nd, the seventeenth and last rabbit is born. A few days later in London, in the presence of the King and many physicians, Saint-André performs an anatomical demonstration on some of the bodies extracted from Mary, to prove – it seems with scanty success – their preternatural nature. By now everyone is talking about Mary's rabbits. At the end of the month, in a climate of ever-growing curiosity, several

pamphlets are published in favour or against the authenticity of the case. In the meantime, Dr. Daniel Turner's treatise on skin diseases is republished for the third time with a new chapter (the twelfth) entirely devoted to maternal fancy as the cause of molae (Massimo, moles significa talpe) and congenital deformities in general.[22] With the coming of December, events precipitate: while Mary is taken to London to be shown to the Court, some common people of Godalming start revealing the background of the story. A weaver tells how in the last few months he had sold Joshua Toft some small live rabbits and one dead one (which Mary's husband considered just as useful as the live ones).[23] On the same subject, we find the testimony given by a stable man, a farmer's wife and Mary's wet-nurse.

On December 5th, the woman is accused of having hatched a scam. A well-known obstetrician, Richard Manningham, enters the scene, whom Mary, in her confession, will describe as follows: «the wurst of them all was a fine-faced long-nosed Gentilman, with a Neck lik a Crain; he was to purformin an oppurashun, as he call'd, and tawkt of making Insinshuns, and Cesarium, and the Lord noes what»[24]. Manningham bluffs: he talks of making a painful experiment to see if Mary is

like other women internally or if she is hiding «some peculiar way of conveying Rabbits into her Uterus»[25]. The trick works and on December 7th the woman, terrified, confessed to the fraud.

In a grammatically wrong account attributed to Mary, she is forced to uphold the fact that she was tricked by the doctors who as «all the world noes, ar nun of the omnistist men»[26]. The story about the rabbits seen in the field was masterfully invented against her will and the facts are far from what was declared. One day, the woman was invited to lunch by a man who, while making strange proposals, makes her taste a rabbit with a very peculiar flavour: it was really good, she had never tasted anything like it before, and after this small taste the desire for more remained. Following this, many doctors touched and tormented her repeatedly, without her ever knowing exactly what was going on. As for rabbits born, Mary claims she knows nothing about them; as far as she is concerned, the doctors themselves could have “slipped them” in her. «As for the suriohns, tha hav mad a fine kettle of Fish; but war is that to me? as tha bru let um bak. I am resolved to clere miself, and let them git off as well as tha can»[27].

Mary seems not too bright a victim, but in any case, ignorant of the whole affair which

however, and this she knows only too well, could cost her dearly. Maybe it was the desire for the delicious rabbit, maybe the doctors plotted against her, in any case she assures everyone «gentil or simpl, that tha may ete Rawbitts monin, noon, or nite, without any fere or dangur for the futur; for alla as bin sad [...] is a damd kunfounded ly»[28]. One of the most severe positions assumed is that of doctor Thomas Braithwaite, who brands Howard and Saint-André with the epithet “gulliverians”, people who spread fairy tales – with an explicit reference to Jonathan Swift’s book published a few months earlier –, and he invites Saint-André to write a satisfactory retraction.[29]

An unlikely Lemuel Gulliver, «Surgeon and Anatomist of the King of Lilliput and Blefuscu, and Fellow of the Academy of Sciences in Baluibaldi»[30] –we can easily recognize Swift’s pen– in 1727 accuses Saint-André of carelessness, incompetence and overconfidence. Nothing managed to pour as much ridicule on the position of the medical profession as the story of Mary Toft, according to S. A. Seligman . It provided a strong argument to those who doubted the competence of men who, in this situation, were shown to be ignorant in comparison with the midwives on the subject of the female

body, so that during the eighteenth century, doctors were forced to listen to women for information on reproduction.[31]

Sceptical about the powers attributed to the *vis imaginativa*, James A. Blondel, an English naturalized Huguenot physician, commented that if the Godalming fraud had not been exposed, the case would have been an excellent example for the “imaginationists”. [32]

Mary ends up in jail but is freed not long afterwards. Thanks to her reputation, she is sometimes exhibited as a freak. Shortly after the confession, Ahlers shows a complacent attitude, swearing that he never believed in the authenticity of the case; Saint-Andre, fallen from grace, publishes an announcement in which he assumes the responsibility for encouraging belief in the fraud, and promises to write a confession.[33] In 1727, the story passes from medical pamphlets into satirical literature, into the repertoire of the storyteller and, shortly thereafter, into the extraordinary engravings by William Hogarth.[34]

In the same year, Blondel’s treatise is published anonymously to confute the plastic power attributed to the imagination of the mother during pregnancy: the pretext is offered by the Mary Toft case, but the real target of this polemic is the twelfth chapter of

the treatise by Daniel Turner, and the imaginationist theory in general.[35]

2. It is certainly not the first time in the early 1700s, that fraudulent stories of prodigious events are advertised in England. At the beginning of the century, a young boy was exhibited because he had two words written above his eyes: *Elohim*, in Hebrew characters on the one part; *Deus*, on the other. The case awoke the interest of the local synagogue and an inquiry was set up to verify whether this had something to do with the *Messiah*. J.A. Blondel remembers seeing this boy, as well as the fact that he prudently avoided expressing an opinion on him for fear of the crowd's reaction. Not long after, the trick was revealed. It consisted in a sort of contact lens placed in each eye, «two thin Pieces of painted glass, commonly known as name of “artificial eyes”», on which two words were engraved and then placed in the eyes of the young boy.[36] In 1584, Reginald Scott had called attention to similar episodes.[37]

The practice of deception, such as the display of anything that can awake the curiosity or compassion of others, is an economic resource for the very poor. Besides, anyone lacking some sort of mutilation or defomity to exhibit, could always fake them in

the many ways described in the various *Libri vagatorum* and *Caveat* published in the second half of the 1500s, adopting the tricks that filled the literature on roguery and were the subject of commonplaces on the malice of the poor and beggars.[38]

One particular area is represented by the public exhibition of abortive masses and unusually deformed children, which are able to provoke amazement instead of pity, shown in the market square by lifting a sheet after the payment of a fee.[39]

Their birth was usually explained by their parents as a prodigious manifestation, or, as more often occurred during the end of the 16th century, as the effect of the mother's imagination on the fetus after seeing an image. Some went so far as to maintain that the birth of a monstrous child in needy families was a blessing, like Fortunio Liceti, who, in 1616, wrote of parents who improved their social position thanks to the exhibition of a deformed child.[40]

The suspicion that a monster or a small mutilation perhaps masks a fraudulent manipulation of a newborn child, places more attention on the reputation of the parents. Doctors who give out news about monstrous births, to give credit to their stories, or dispel the doubt that it is a trick, emphasize the

honesty of the mother. In the «Miscellanea Curiosa» reports, it is usual, almost obligatory at the beginning, to find expressions such as *foemina honesta, nobilissima matrona, honesta uxor, paesana fide digna, honesta mulier, uxor spectabilis*, etc. Balthasar Chiliani (1682) in a dissertation on the serious deformities of newborns lists four cases, and each time he is careful to characterise the protagonist as *honesta* or even *honestissima*.^[41]

Another physician comes close to the extremity of grotesque in his use of these terms when describing the protagonist of a paradoxical case in which an “*honesto*” man who, when trying to *persolvere debitum coniugalem*, discovers that the woman he just married is a hermaphrodite: «Civis quidam honestè natus, et honestè educatus, nec inhonestè vivens, honesto proposito matrimonium ingressurus, eligit sibi virginem, parentum honestorum filiam, famae itidem not inhonestæ»^[42]. The man’s amazement is understandable, though it may seem strange that he did not suspect something unusual in the girl, who had - so he said - a robust physique, a manly voice and traces of beard on her face.

The reliability of the woman guarantees the evidence she gives about the circumstances

that generated the deformities, ulcerations or marks: if the fault confessed is caused by a muddled imagination, the deformities are quietly justified, changing from effects to causes, with an appeal to the imagination, accepted in the name of experience. In this period the attention given to the patient's statements is an element which is not taken for granted; the practice of anamnesis is still relatively new and only towards the end of the 1500s does importance start to be given to the description of the symptoms given by the sick, in open contrast with Galenic medicine and its diagnostic procedures. Up until then, the mother, encouraged by doctor, but often on her own initiative, scans her memory when a malformed baby is born. She reflects on the time between conception and birth, in search of an event, even an insignificant one, that could explain this defect as a teratogenic factor. On this subject, Giovanni Argenterio (1556) noted that women often say that they had never thought about the things that the marks on the newborn remind one of, but later, working backwards from effects to causes, they find, by analogy, an acceptable explanation for the deformities.[43]

Some examples.

Prague, 1610: a child born with its intestine outside the body dies a few hours after birth.

The mother, questioned by Gregor Horst, declares that she is not to blame, and justifies herself by recalling an event which had occurred about three months earlier, when a soldier forced her to look at a calf which had been cut up into pieces.[44]

In Louvain, the apostolic protonotary Philipp Meurs states that he had a sister born with a normal body, but with a huge shell in place of her head. The monstrous child lived for eleven years, and she died because she squeezed the spoon which fed her so tightly between the “valves” that they broke. All this happened, explains Meurs, because the mother – as she remembered later – was unable to satisfy a desire to eat some mussels that she saw in a fish store.

Two children joined together at the forehead: according to Sebastian Munster, this was caused because someone, joking, bumped the mother’s head with the head of another woman.

In 1517, near Fontainebleau, a baby was born with a face that resembled that of a frog. This fact, told by Ambroise Paré (1573), was observed by many gentlemen, amongst others a notary and one of the King’s lawyers. The father of the child, questioned as to the cause, could only remember that nine months earlier, he had had relations with his wife while she

was holding a frog in her hand, as recommended by a neighbour as a cure for an attack of high fever: the *vis imaginativa* did the rest.[45]

Thus a red mark a newborn's hand gives rise to the idea that it was caused by fire and – in the same way – a hairy mole on a baby's neck is justified by the mother, who was asked where the *signaturam muriformem* came from, as the consequence of her fear, four months before giving birth, that a rat could have fallen on her.[46]

On March 1670, near the little village of Waltersdorf, a monstrous child was born to very poor parents. Informed by some neighbours, the minister refers the case to the local Senate, which as soon as possible entrusts the *meritissimo Physico* Vom Lankish with the dissection of the newborn and an interrogation of the mother to check whether if she should be accused of any failing.[47] The woman only remembers having earlier had another deformed son and having carefully avoided tiring jobs and any frights and bruises. This case reminds us how the position of the woman who has given birth to a deformed or monstrous child is noticeably closer to that of a suspect than to that of a patient. Only then can we understand how, in a context in which a monstrous birth might be the sign of

unnatural or immoral relations, the mother is seriously suspected to having had abominable or adulterous sexual relations. She thus does not hesitate – shifting attention to a lesser fault – to admit, in the case of deformity, the transfer to the baby of some unsatisfied desire of hers or the effect of some frightening sight, which in nine months were sure to have occurred. It is in her best interests to come up with some event that could justify the effect; moreover it is by these means - almost always calling into play the imagination - that the horror of the deformed creature is reconstructed and the serious suspicions as to the mother's conduct (and as to the operations of midwives and doctors too) are averted

Sometimes the midwife or the doctor put words into the mother's mouth by asking her if by any chance, during her pregnancy, she desired a certain type of food that more or less resembles the shape of the mola, or of the head of the fetus. This kind of influence is far from disinterested, because it not only quietens the mother's fears, but it sometimes removes any blame that might attach to the midwife or the doctor for damaging the fetus during extraction.

Fortunio Liceti, in the *De monstribus*, warned against the lack of skill among surgeons «haec

autem extra uterum monstra gignuntur, quaecumque artis ministerio constituuntur».[48] Blondel dedicates to this subject one of the «general reasons against the opinion that says the maternal imagination brands or marks children», pointing out the fact that this is often used as an excuse to cover up mistakes that occur during birth. Certain children are born with deep wounds that seem to have been provoked by sharp instruments rather than by the sight of something frightening. For this reason it's not necessary to call upon fantastic causes – observes Blondel – because it's well known that certain stories, in reality, only serve to minimize accidents and mistakes that can happen during birth.[49]

Faced with a child born with a deep cut attributed to a serious fright that the mother experienced some months before giving birth, Hildano had already questioned how the fetus could have survived up until birth.[50] But the protection that the amniotic liquid gives in these cases to the fetus is just as great as maternal imagination, as in a note published on «Philosophical Transactions» (1696) by Doctor Cyprianus, after assisting at the birth of a child who presented a deep chest wound two fingers long. The cause is dated back to a moment two months earlier when the mother

had heard a touching story of a woman murdered by her husband with a knife wound to the chest: «at which relation she changed but not excessively».[51] The doctor, aware of the fact that a knife wound unchanged after two months is very suspicious, states beforehand that the birth was spontaneous and easy, and that the child was born without stress «so that consequently it got not this Wound in its Birth». The fact remains that, in two months, the wound would have had time to go septic, whereas at the moment of birth, the child was bleeding abundantly; and the wound, for all that time, remained unchanged because of the insulating ability of the amniotic liquid which prevented any contact with air.

In a similar case which took place in 1735, the birth of a baby girl with a cut on her head and a deformed face, brings an accusation against the midwife by the other women who assisted with the birth. The women stated that these deformities were caused by the clumsy actions of the midwife, also accusing her of knowing certain unnatural and illegal practices by which she could have changed the natural appearance of the newborn. Denying any responsibility, the midwife answers that she is unaware of any strange procedures; as for the deformities of the child, they could only be caused by the imagination of the mother, as

the only thing that could have produced «so great a change from the natural form the child might otherwise have had».[52]

The cases in which an investigation of the offers an explanation different from that of the almighty power of the imagination, are rare. A model case of this sort, can be read in the story of a young servant of Ebeleben who in 1680 gave birth to two twins monstrously joined together. The girl states that she became pregnant after being raped and that she tried to hide her condition by wearing clothes so tight that the fetuses were united by the compression of the womb. Doctor Scharf accepts this version and comments that women should stay away from similar artifices, so as not to give birth to deformed children.[53] But this opinion is not shared by those – the imaginationists – who doubt the version of the mother, drawing attention to the fact that prostitutes have the same habit of tightly wrapping their abdomens when pregnant, but nevertheless they give birth to normal children.[54]

The explanations that bring us to mechanical causes – traumas and bruises in the abdominal area, deformities of the womb, malnutrition – are barely considered at least not until the middle of the 18th century.

In 1754, Jean Baptiste de Boyer, Marquis

d'Argens, affirms that to explain the somatic alterations of the fetus, it is not necessary to go searching for the strange effects of passions – fear or an over-active imagination – since it is enough to consider what serious consequences are produced mechanically by the violent movements of the abdomen in a woman who is deeply moved. For the same reason it is not necessary to strain for a likeness between marks on the skin and whatever might have frightened or upset the pregnant woman: it is not so much the fear that marks the fetus, as «les impressions corporelles che cette peur de sa mère lui occasionne, par les mouvements du diaphragme et des muscles de l'abdomen, qui compriment avec force les intestins, sont cause que la matrice foule le *fetus*, et le prive même quelquefois de la vie»[55]. The author of *Lettres Juives*, in this way repeats the warning by J.A. Blondel which was ignored by his detractors: Blondel emphasized that the aim of his treatise was not to deny any relation between the feelings of the mother and the fetus, but only the presumed plastic capacity of the mother's imagination.

The Child may also suffer by the Affections of the Mother's Mind. For the Disappointment of what she desires is sufficient to make her uneasy, and pine away [...]. Frightful and Ugly Objects, which are shocking event to Men of Courage, are to be carefully removed

from the Sight of pregnant Women, as being apt to disturb their Minds, and to fill them with Horror, Fear, and Apprehension. Anger is a Passion that puts the whole Fabrick of the Body out of the Frame. [...] Surprise is very dangerous: I appeal to persons who have been frightened, if they did not feel their heart fluttering, a general *Tremor*, and the Bowels, as it were, drawn inwards, and their Back opened in two. The Cause is the violent and convulsive Motion of the *Diaphragm*, and of the Muscles of the *Abdomen*, which, like a strong Bar, strike upon the *Viscera*. Now, where's the Wonder, that such a Force pressing upon the *Uterus*, which is also in Convulsion, should knead the tender Child, and cause Dislocations, Fractures, Mutilations, Hernias, Ecchymoses, etc.? [56]

I started this story with an incident that took place in the 1700s, to introduce a contextual framework for the link between the exploitation of the anomalies of generation (seen as a possible resource of the very poor) and the ideological support for a theory (the presumed plastic power of the mother's imagination on the fetus) which for many years justified congenital deformities or those caused deliberately. Anyway, be it woman's fancy or the malice of the poor and beggarly – even including the *wicked comprachicos* described by Victor Hugo in *L'homme qui rit* (1869)[57] –, those deformed and mutilated newborns, who cannot be attributed to nature or the good Lord, must be the effect of a

serious fault, responsibility for which is to be sought amongst the weakest classes of society. From the time of Blondel's treatises and up until the emergence of the science of embryology and, later, genetics, the power of the mother's imagination in shaping the fetus will no longer be considered a scientific and tenable hypothesis, but it remains to this day a part of widespread popular traditions all over the world.

NOTES

- [1] On the powers attributed to the mother's imagination in shaping the fetus during the Modern age, see my *Le meraviglie della generazione: Voglie materne, nascite straordinarie e imposture nella storia della cultura e del pensiero medico – secoli XV-XIX* [*Wonderful of Generation: Maternal Cravings, Extraordinary Births and Vagrant Cheats in the History of Culture and Medical Thought*], Mimesis, Milano 2012. See also: J. Epstein, "The pregnant imagination, fetal rights and women's bodies: a historical inquiry", *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities*, 1995, 139; C. Pancino, *Voglie materne: storia di una credenza*, Clueb, Bologna 1996; C. Mazzoni, *Maternal impressions: pregnancy and childbirth in literature and theory*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2002.
- [2] All contemporary texts devoted to the case of Godalming are now collected in *Eighteenth-*

Century British Midwifery, ed. Pam Lieskie, Pickering and Chatto, London 2006. About this case, see also: G. Leslie, "Cheat and imposture: debate following the case of a rabbit breeder", *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 1996, 27; C.A. Pickover, *The girl who gave birth to rabbits: a true medical history*, Prometheus Books, New York 2000; L.F. Cody, *Birthing the Nation: sex, science and the conception of Eighteenth century Britons*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

- [3] N. Saint-André, *A short narrative of an extraordinary delivery of rabbits perform'd by John Howard, surgeon of Guildford, published by Mr. St. André, surgeon and anatomist to His Majesty*, London 1726: 24.
- [4] Cody, *Birthing the Nation*, cit.: 120.
- [5] Anonymous: *The wonder of wonders, or a true and perfect narrative of a woman near Guildford in Surrey, who was delivered lately of seventeen rabbets*, Ipswich 1726: 6.
- [6] Saint-André, *A short narrative*, cit.: 8.
- [7] *Ibidem*: 23.
- [8] Anonymous: *Much ado about nothing: or, a plain refutation of all that has been written or said concerning the rabbit-woman of Godalming, being a full and impartial confession from her own mouth, and under her own hand, of the whole affair, from the beginning to the end*, London 1727: 19: «I had alwas an ugly wa of cryind Odd Rawbett me! at evry turn. This ugly wurd I uzd in gest or arnist; for if I was angri with ani bodi, I wood cry odd Rawbitt um; or if I was gokin or plan the fool with ani bodi, I had alwas Rawbitt um at my tungs end: so that I had got such a habit of using myself to this wikid wurd, that I was

niknamd Rawbittin-Merry long enuff afore this Misfortin happed».

- [9] L. Gulliver (J. Swift), *The anatomist dissected or the man-midwife finely brought to bed, being an examination of the conduct of mr. St. Andre, touching the late pretended rabbit-bearer; as it appears from his own narrative*, Westminster 1727: in conclusion.
- [10] L. Joubert, *Erreurs populaires*, Paris 1578; T. Bartholin, “Mola volatilis”, *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1671: obs. CLX.
- [11] Bartholin, *Mola volatilis*, cit.: *scholion*.
- [12] *The Wonder*, cit.: 9.
- [13] J. Maubray, *The female physician, containing all the diseases incident to that sex in virgins, wives and widows*, James Holland, London 1724. Recently, the case of *sooterkin* has inspired a novel written by T. Gilling (*The sooterkin*, Penguin Books, London 1999).
- [14] C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Piergiovanni Costantini, Perugia, 1765: III, 39: «The countess had mistreated a poor mother of twins, saying she could not have given birth to them without having coupled with two fathers; the poor woman, full of resentment, prayed to God to avenge her honour, and at once the Countess gave birth to as many children as there are days in the year».
- [15] «In the church of this village is the grave of the Countess who, in one delivery, gave birth to 365 children».
- [16] J. Bondeson, A. Molenkamp, “The Countess Margaret of Henneberg and her 365 children”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1996, 89. Thus, in the late eighteenth century, to cure infertility, there were those who went on a pilgrimage to the basin of Margarete, and who

attended the portentous "heavenly bed" prepared in 1778 in London, in *Temple of Hymen*, by J. Graham, who joined practices with a magic air to vague information on magnetism (see L. Syson, *Doctor of love: Dr James Graham and his celestial bed*, Alma Books, London 2008).

- [17] The extraordinary event will be reported by J.C. Frommann (*De fascinatione tractatus*, Endeteri, Nürnberg 1675: 645).
- [18] G.B. Della Porta, *Magiæ naturalis sive de miraculis rerum naturalium* (1558); used ed., Firenze 2008: 164. Della Porta quotes Pliny the Elder who writes in his *Naturalis historia* (Milano 1983: 45): «Woman is the only one amongst living beings to menstruate and therefore it is only in her uterus that there are so-called molae: shapeless masses of flesh, without life, impervious to shock or penetration by iron».
- [19] Saint-André, *A short narrative*, cit.: 31.
- [20] *The several depositions of Edward Costen, Richard Stedman, John Sweetapple, Mary Peytoe, Elisabeth Mason, and Mary Costen, relating to the affair of Mary Toft, of Godalming in the county of Surrey, being deliver'd of several rabbits*, London 1727: 34, evidence of John Howard.
- [21] *The several*, cit.: 33-40.
- [22] D. Turner, *De morbis cutaneis: A treatise on the disease incident to the skin. With a short appendix concerning the efficacy of local remedies* (1714), IIIrd ed., R. Bonwicke, London 1726: XII «Of Spots and Marks of a diverse Resemblance, imprest upon the Skin of the *Fetus*, by the Force of the Morher's Fancy: With some Things premised of the strange and almost incredible Power of *Imagination*, more especially in pregnant Women».

- [23] *The several*, cit.: 3, evidence of Edward Costen: «Joshua Toft [...] asked this Deponent if he had anymore, and this Deponent replied, he had one dead [...] to which the said Toft replied, if you had not throw'd it away, it would have done as well for me as a live one».
- [24] *Much ado about nothing: or, a plain refutation of all that has been written or said concerning the rabbit-woman of Godalming, being a full and impartial confession from her own mouth, and under her own hand, of the whole affair, from the beginning to the end*, London 1727: 16.
- [25] R. Manningham, *An exact diary of what was observ'd during a close attendance upon Mary Toft, the pretended rabbit-breeder of Godalming in Surrey, from Monday Nov. 28, to Wednesday Dec. 7 following: Together with an account of her confession of the fraud*, J. Roberts, London 1726: 31.
- [26] *Much ado*, cit.: 12. As said by the editor, Mary's confession is published «in *puris naturabilis* (i.e) in her own Style and Spelling, without any adulteration, which would but spoil its natural Simplicity, and renders it less Genuine and Credible». The confession has also been attributed to Jonathan Swift («Gentleman's Magazine», 1842, part I).
- [27] *Ibidem*: 17.
- [28] *Ibidem*: 21-22.
- [29] T. Braithwaite, *Remarks on a short narrative of an extraordinary delivery of rabbets, perform'd by Mr. John Howard, surgeon at Guilford, as publish'd by Mr. St. Andre, anatomist to His Majesty. With a proper regard to his intended recantation*, N. Blandford, London 1726.
- [30] Gulliver, *The anatomist*, cit.: frontispiece.

- [31] S.A. Seligman, "Mary Toft - the rabbit breeder", *Medical History*, 1961, 5: 349
- [32] J.A. Blondel, *The power of the mother's imagination over the fetus examin'd*, J. Brotherson, London 1729: 23-24, he comments: «If the Woman of Godliman [Godalming] in Surry [Surrey] had not been detected in her Roguery, what a noble Figure had she made in History». Blondel was born in France with the name Jacques Augustin.
- [33] "Advertisement", *Daily Journal*, December, 9th, 1726.
- [34] See the "representation", *The Doctors in Labour, or a New Whim Wham from Guildford* (The British Museum, reg. n. Cc,3.183), and , in particular, the engraving of William Hogarth, *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism Amedley*, 1728.
- [35] Anonymous (J.A. Blondel), *The strength of imagination in pregnant women examin'd*, J. Peele, London 1727. The anonymous treatise of Blondel is probably the first such one written to confute the plastic power attributed to the imagination of the mother on the fetus. For the few doctors who wrote on this subject before Blondel, but without his solid reasoning, see: J. Huarte, *Examen des ingenios para la ciencias*, Juan Bautista de Montoya, Baeza 1575; P. Zacchia, *Quæstiones medico-legales*, Jacobum Mascardum, Roma 1621; E. Marcot, *Mémoire sur en enfant monstrueux*, «Mémoires de l'Academie Royale des Sciences», 1716.
- [36] Blondel, *The Power*, cit.: 29.
- [37] R. Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, London 1584: XIII, chap. XXII: "The art of juggling discovered, and in what points it dooth principally consists".

- [38] On this topic: E. Barisone, *Il gergo dell'underworld elisabettiano*, Il Melangolo, Genova-Ivrea 1984; *Il libro dei vagabondi*, ed. P. Camporesi, Einaudi, Torino 1984.
- [39] F. Bouchard, "De infante monstroso lugduni in viam publica die V martii a. MDCLXI exposito", *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1671: XIII: «Præsens monstrum habet inusitatæ magnitudinis caput, cranium capillis æquè longis consitum velut infans decem aut duodecim mensium. Cerebrum natabat in serositatibus sive aquis contra naturam, quæ Hydrocephalum seu tumorem aquosum in eo causaverant; Partes duæ laterales superiores cranii formant eminentiam præternaturalem propter attactum cerebri natantis^a.
- [40] F. Liceti, *De monstrorum causis (De monstribus)*, 1616), H. P. Frambotti, Padova 1668.
- [41] In G. Clauder, "De hermaphrodito", *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1684: obs. LXXV.
- [42] *Ibidem*.
- [43] G. Panseri, "Medicina e scienze naturali nei secoli XVI e XVII", *Storia d'Italia, Annali*, vol. 3, Utet, Torino 1980: 356-357.
- [44] The examples are taken from Turner, *De morbis cutaneis*, cit.; they are moreover very common and appear repeatedly in the imaginationist literature.
- [45] A. Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges* (1573), in *Œuvres complètes*, J. F. Malaigne, Paris 1840: 25.
- [46] G. Seger, "De Nævis maternis", *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1672, obs. CXCVII; J. Lecheli, "Hydrocephalus vitio spinæ bifidæ", *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1683, obs. CLVIII: 366: «Mater infantis quæsita, an tempore gestationis terrorem ex re aliqua passa sit, unde signaturam illam muriformem foetus acquivisset? Respondit, se quidem à muribus ordinariò non moveri, sed

accidisse ante 4 Menses, ut Maritus parvulum sacculum herbarum odoriferarum plenum, lusum ergo ipsi ex improvise in occiput jacuerit, quo perterrita sibi imaginatam esse, murem ab alto in occiput cecidisse, & partu citius locum affectum digitis parum fricuisse».

- [47] J. Jænissii, “De Infante sine Capite”, *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1672, obs. CCLXXVII.
- [48] Liceti, *De monstrorum causis*, cit.: chap. XXX.
- [49] Anonymous (J.A. Blondel), *The strength*, cit.: 25-26, «Some Children are born with large and considerable Wounds, which, according to Custom, are reported to have been made without any immediate Application of an Instrument to bruise, divide, and dilacerate; but only by the Fancy and Imagination of the mother, at the sight of some dreadful Object. But it is easy to perceive, that this Reports are often raised to palliate and excuse the faults and Accidents that happen in the Delivery. [...] Let the Blood and Spirits be in never so great a Hurry, they can't do the Office of a Musket Ball, of a Hammer, or of a Knife: And what Necessity is there to alledge chimerical Causes, when there are Fingers, and Nails, or other Tools near at Hand?».
- [50] F. Hildanus (W.F. von Hilden), *Observationum et curationum chirurgicarum centuria III*, Oppenheimi 1614: cent. VI, obs. 65.
- [51] Cyprianus, “Part of a Letter from D. Cyprianus to Dr. Sylvestre, giving an Account of a Child born with a large Wound in the Breast, supposed to proceed from the force of Imagination”, *Philosophical Transactions*, 1696, trans. 219.
- [52] T. Sheldrake, “A letter from Mr. Timothy Sheldrake to Sir Hans Sloane, concerning a monstrous child born of a Woman under sentence

of transportation”, *Philosophical Transactions*, 1736: obs. X, 341-343.

[53] B. Scharf, “Monstrum à constriction”, *Miscellanea Curiosa*, 1683: obs. CII.

[54] L. Schröck, *Scholium*, in *Ibidem*, appendix.

[55] J. B. de Boyer Marquis d’Argens, *Lettres juives, ou Correspondance philosophique, historique et critique, entre un juif voyageur en différents états de l’Europe, et ses correspondants en divers endroits* (1754), Paupie, La Haye 1766 : 209-210.

[56] Anonymous (J.A. Blondel), *The strength*, cit.: 3-4.

[57] V. Hugo, *L’homme qui rit*, Lacroix, Paris 1869: chap. I, “Les comprachicos”.