



Physician-Writers, Women Healers and the Suffering Body:

Symphorien Champier, François Rabelais, Agrippa
von Nettesheim and Francisco Delicado

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Abstract

In early modern times, the possibilities for a woman to practice a health care profession were rather restricted. The attitude in the medical ranks towards female professionals was quite ambivalent: While physicians such as Andrés Laguna or Paracelsus recommend learning from women healers, other doctors have a negative perception of women practicing medicine because they consider an academic background and knowledge of Latin and Greek indispensable for the healing arts. Of particular interest are the fields of obstetrics and gynaecology. This time I will study the fictionalization of this controversy in literary works of physician-writers like François Rabelais, Symphorien Champier who was particularly involved in the *Querelle des femmes* or Francisco Delicado who, in his *Lozana Andaluza*, creates the character of a female healer who, thanks to her orally acquired practical knowledge, seriously competes with academic medical practitioners.

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In early modern times, the possibilities for a woman to practice a health care profession were rather restricted.¹ The case of the French healer Jeanne Lescallier denounced at the behest of the doctors of Angers in 1567 because of her success is very instructive and shows – as Broomhall observes – the “problematic relationship between women, healing and diabolical power”.² One of the arguments against the female healer was to label her as a witch and reproach her for predicting the future and

¹ Green provides documentation on a number of cases of women in late-medieval France sanctioned for engaging in medicine (GREEN, *Making*). For the situation in Spain at the end of the Middle Ages see CABRÉ, “Women or healers?”, 24: “In Iberian sources, women’s health practices that are identified as expert healing activities emerge in four different situations. First, there are authorized healers: women legally allowed to practice under certain conditions, whose licenses, granted by royal or municipal authorities, are extant; second, women who were accused of using diagnostic and healing methods that were worrying to the church and hence were investigated by ecclesiastical officials; third, women hired by individual people or institutions to carry out specific health practices, normally during a defined period of time; and fourth, medical expert witnesses required by the courts to testify in judicial cases”.

² BROOMHALL, *Women’s medical work*, 114 who further states: “The willingness with which the physicians were prepared to deploy potentially fatal allegations in order to discredit Lescallier’s medical expertise, and to eradicate her practice once and for all, may well attest to her power and authority within the local community” (*ibidem*).

being able to find lost objects.³ Davidson is sceptical about the often claimed persecution of female healers and brings in historical documents from 16th century England to support her thesis.⁴ Harley even goes so far as to state that the “myth of the midwife-witch is an obstacle to serious study of the history of midwives, women’s health and the relationship between popular medicine and religion”.⁵ The attitude in the medical ranks towards female professionals was indeed quite ambivalent: While physicians such as Paracelsus (1493-1541)⁶ or Andrés Laguna (1490-1560)⁷ recommend learning from women healers, other doctors have a negative perception of women practicing medicine because they consider an academic background and knowledge of Latin and Greek indispensable for the healing arts. Of particular interest are the fields of obstetrics and gynaecology which were according to Green in medieval and early modern times “a territory of interplay, a contest between men and women for access to and control over medical knowledge of the female body”.⁸ In the 1520s, Hippocrates’ gynaecological manual had

³ This ability is ironized in *La Lozana Andaluza* XLVI: “Aconteció que una vieja había perdido una gallina que muchos días había que ponía huevos sobre una pared, y como se encocló, echose sobre ellos, y vino la vieja a mí que le dijese de aquella gallina, y yo estaba enojada y díjele: ‘Andá, id a vuestra casa y tráeme la yerba canilla que nace en los tejados’. Y díjeselo porque era vieja, pensando que no subiría; en fin, subió, y halló la gallina, y publicome que yo sabía hacer hallar lo perdido. Y así un villano perdió una borrica; vino a mí que se la encomendase, por que no la comiesen lobos. Mandele que se hiciese un cristel de agua fría, y que la fuese a buscar; él hízolo, y entrando en un higueral a andar del cuerpo, halló su borrica, y de esta manera tenía yo más presentes que no el juez” (*LA*, 228-229).

⁴ See DAVIDSON, “The Myth”.

⁵ See HARLEY, “Historians as Demonologists”.

⁶ PARACELSUS, *De occulta philosophia*, XIV, 541.

⁷ Laguna is also aware of the considerable botanical (and medical) expertise of women healers, but he associates them quite explicitly with witchcraft. On one occasion, he recounts how “una vejezuela tudesca la cual tenía un lindo talle de bruja” (*PDA*, 417) cured him of a fever; elsewhere, he describes how he accompanied an old Celestina with a lady’s beard while collecting fern seeds in order to learn her practical knowledge (*PDA*, 495).

⁸ GREEN, *Making*, 27. For the situation in early modern England see KING, *Midwifery* and for Italy STROCCHIA, *Forgotten Healers*, who associates the female healing professions with different spaces such as courts, convents, pharmacies and pox

been rediscovered and published in Latin translation by Marco Fabio Calvi in Rome in 1525.⁹ The emergence of a specific type of medicine for women has to be seen in the context of the conviction that the female and male bodies are different and require different medical treatments.¹⁰

The assessment of women's aptitude for the practice of the healing professions is often based on notions of the specificity of the female sex.¹¹ As Bolufer states, "medicine has helped to theorize and justify gender differences and inequalities by naturalizing them".¹² The role that gender played in the practice of medicine can be illustrated by the case of a transsexual surgeon in the late 16th century.¹³ Elena/o de Céspedes was

hospitals. As regards Spain, Gutiérrez Rodilla points out that women did not exclusively treat women: "La actividad de las sanadoras, a pesar de lo que algunos discursos contemporáneos han querido hacer creer, no se limitó a la atención a mujeres y niños, en el tradicional ámbito femenino de la asistencia al parto y procesos ginecológicos: veían a pacientes de ambos sexos y de todas las edades para efectuar prácticas quirúrgicas, pero también para atender cuadros de medicina general, así como para preparar remedios terapéuticos" (GUTIÉRREZ RODILLA, "Las mujeres", 129).

⁹ See ROSENTHAL, "Zur geburtshilflich-gynaekologischen Betätigung", GREEN, *Making*, 26, and STOLBERG, *Gelehrte Medizin*, 317.

¹⁰ See STOLBERG, *Gelehrte Medizin*, 317, who reminds us in this respect that Laqueur's thesis of the one sex model (see LAQUEUR, *Making Sex*), which is cited approvingly in literary studies, has long been refuted from the perspective of the history of science. See also KING, *The one-sex body*, who gives a very detailed account of the discussion about *Making sex*.

¹¹ See WHALEY, *Women*, 48: "Men contributed to the debate concerning women from many different perspectives – biological, theological, legal and philosophical. It is the more scientific views that are the focus here. Questions raised concerned to what extent women were capable of practising medicine, and if they were, was it anyway an appropriate role for them. To what extent did women's biological and, by extension, societal constructions preclude them from the healing arts? In order to respond to these questions, we must turn our attention back to the Classical era when the debate on the nature of women and their appropriate roles originated". See MACLEAN, *The Renaissance notion*, 28-46 on the different approaches to defining the nature of women from a medical perspective in the Renaissance.

¹² BOLUFER, "Medicine", 86.

¹³ See for transgender issues in early modern Spain ÁLVAREZ SEIJO, "La negación" and ZAMORA CALVO, "*In virum mutata*".

accused in 1587 of having fraudulently benefitted from male privileges including having obtained the title of surgeon even though she was a woman.¹⁴ The files of the Inquisition trial contain detailed information about the court-ordered determination of the sex of the accused by the famous urologist Francisco Díaz (1527-1590) and a group of midwives who, unlike their male colleague, recognised the manipulations that Elena had carried out on her genitals.¹⁵ Among other things, the tried and tested surgeon had used a penile prosthesis. Such prosthesis, created for men amputated because of venereal diseases, are well documented in the medical literature of the time by Ambroise Paré (*ca.* 1510-1590).¹⁶

While the case of Elena can be read as proof of an exclusion of women from medical activity (and free disposal of their own bodies), there is also evidence of quite different females' stories. Historical case studies show that, contrary to conventional notions, neglected female figures such as Caterina Sforza (1463-1509) have articulated very modern ideas about women's relationship to their bodies and about female sexuality.

Il suo ricettario d'amore è una vera e propria miniera per l'erotologo e le sue conoscenze della sessualità sono davvero straordinarie. Caterina non

¹⁴ Research literature has often pointed out that the Inquisition records provide a glimpse of a historical female figure who “rechaza todas las normas y las prohibiciones, y que trata de imponerse a través de su naturaleza ambigua” (BARBAZZA, “Un caso”, 39). Franco Rubio emphasises the “reivindicación que hace de su propio cuerpo [...] en clara oposición al canon establecido por la sociedad patriarcal para su sexo” (“Metamorfosis”, 418) while Zamora Calvo (“*In virum mutata*”, 442) observes: “Lo que más sorprende es cómo una mujer, de origen morisco y esclavo, sin educación formal, llegó a ejercer como cirujano. Es posible que ahí resida la clave por la que Elena creó su propia historia de cambio de sexo. Tal y como revela su biblioteca personal, supo todo lo relativo al dimorfismo sexual de su época. A través de estos libros pudo documentar y dar verosimilitud a la ficción de su identidad, es decir, usó dichos conocimientos en su favor y en contra de una sociedad que la relegaba por su condición de mujer a la pasividad, el esclavismo y la inevitable inexistencia”.

¹⁵ See MAGANTO PAVÓN, “La intervención”.

¹⁶ See PARÉ, *Les Œuvres*, 721. The bibliography on Céspedes has grown considerably, especially in recent years, and I will only cite two of the most recent publications (MARTÍN CASARES, “La azarosa vida” and MORAL DE CALATRAVA, “*En buena medicina*”), which also document the state of research.

conosce limiti, prova e sperimenta tutto ciò che le possa calmare i suoi robusti appetiti e, da autentica professionista, cataloga, analizza, studia i più intimi recessi della fisiologia e della psicologia del sesso.¹⁷

The legendary mistress of Forlì was not a doctor herself, but she maintained close contact with physicians and scientists, had read Galenus and was well versed in medical science. This is also evidenced by the following piece of advice:

Ancora la simente de lino mista cum piper edata a beuere cum uino fortemente accende la luxuria.
Ancora li testicoli del ceruio ouero la somita de la coda de la uolpe e li testicoli del eaulo accende la femina a lebidine.
Ancora se la uerga de lhomo e unta cum fele de uerro e de porco seluagio excita da fare tosto la luxuria delecta ale femine.¹⁸

The openness with which the *Experimenti* (ca. 1490) deal with how women can experience erotic pleasure makes female sexually active literary figures such as Pietro Aretino's Nanna or Francisco Delicado's Lozana seem more credible. It is significant that this kind of discourse finds its place in a medical context.

The analysis of different forms of fictionalization of the controversy about women healers in the literary works of early modern physician-writers can shed light on how literature contributes to perpetuate conventional patterns of thought or creates imaginary alternatives to these traditional points of view. In the following I will focus on the presentation of the sick and suffering body in literary works penned by physicians. Particular attention will be paid to the question of the control over (pathological) corporeality through the art of healing as a gendered practice. I have singled out a series of physician-writers from the first half of the 16th century who are of particular heuristic value for this approach. Besides Rabelais (1494-1553), one of the most relevant writing doctors,

¹⁷ Rossi in his Introduction to CATERINA SFORZA, *Experimenti*, 19. See also CAMPORESI, *I balsami*, 40-42 and GADEBUSCH BONDIO, "Weibliche Gelehrsamkeit", 191. For "the art of appearance" of the illegitimate daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza see VRIES, *Caterina Sforza*.

¹⁸ SFORZA, *Experimenti*, 220.

I have chosen Symphorien Champier (ca. 1471-ca. 1540) and Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) because they were particularly involved in the *Querelle des femmes*. Francisco Delicado's *Lozana Andaluza* (1528) is also relevant for my analysis: The protagonist is a fictitious female healer who seriously competes with academic medical practitioners thanks to her orally acquired practical knowledge.

The medical view of the *Querelle des femmes*

Symphorien Champier is one of the first humanistically educated physicians in France. He also made a name for himself as a writer. His *Nef des dames vertueuses* (1503) is a plea for the fair sex, whereas in the *Nef des princes* (1502) misogynous tones are struck.¹⁹ In the two ship allegories, medical questions such as the procreation of male offspring or the nature of women (and female sexuality) are negotiated.²⁰ In the fourth chapter of the first book of the *Nef des princes*, Champier describes the composition of the human body from the four elements and the qualities assigned to them, in order to explain the process of procreation.

Le corps de l'homme est compose de quatre elemens, cest assavoir de feu,/ de leau, de lair et de la terre,/ proporcionnez ensemble par les qualitez pre/ mires, cest assavoir chaleur, froidure, humidite, et secheresse, moy/ ennant membres ordonnez a generacion et par action [et] passion, par masle et femelle. Et est forme le corps de superfluite spermatique, laquelle quant elle est/ en la matrice du ventre, si elle y est bien proportionnee par bonne chaleur et/ au costé dextre, sera vng masle et sy est au costé senestre et la matie/ re est trop humide, ce sera vne femelle.
(CHAMPIER, *Np*, 83)

¹⁹ The title can be explained as an allusion to successful works such as Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (1494) and Josse Bade's *Stultiferae naves* (1499).

²⁰ KEM, *Pathologies*, 19: "A syncretist, Champier gives consistent medical advice on infertility and sexual difference in the *Nefs* and his Latin works, such as the *Practica nova in medicina* (1517) and the *Periarchon* (1533), but he appears more interested in defending the medical profession from pharmacist interlopers and practitioners who could not read Latin and protecting males from a potentially fatal sexual excess than defending women".

As Wilhelmi aptly points out in her commentary on the passage, it is striking that the author moves immediately from conception to the time directly after birth.²¹ The editor explains this by the fact that in the classical world, in Arabic medicine and also in the Middle Ages and up to the 16th century, pregnancy and obstetrics were matters to be dealt with only by women. Gynaecology was not part of the training of male doctors, but this slowly began to change in the late Middle Ages.²² Champier does not talk about midwives, but two female healers are mentioned in the lists of famous women of the *Nef des dames vertueuses*, inspired by Boccaccio (*De mulieribus claris*). One is the mother goddess Cybele, of whom Champier reports that she “[t]rouva aussi remèdes salubres contre les maladies des enfans et des bestes”.²³ About “sainte geneviefve” the doctor from Lyon says: “Et fut si sainte qu’elle eut espent de prophetie guerir de toutes maladies”.²⁴

Women’s menstruation is frequently discussed by physicians within the framework of the *Querelle des femmes*.²⁵ As Stolberg notes, leading Renaissance physicians adopted the medieval view of menstruation as an expression of women’s constitutional inferiority.²⁶ Champier explicitly warns the prince in the *Nef des princes* against intercourse with bleeding women:

Et le prince doit se garder de participer a sa femme du temps des menstrues quon appelle les fleurs, et souuent en sont les enfant monstres

²¹ See the following chapter, in which Champier states: “Quant a la formacion du corps ne parlerons plus quant a present, car la/ matiere nest pas assez subiecte. Mais quant au gouuernement du prin/ ce quant il vient en ce monde, premierement on doit penser la nourriture,/ car nourriture est la principale partie ou les princes et aultres/ doient mettre leur entente enuers leurs enfans. Et premierement quant/ lenfant est sorty hors du ventre de la mere, on le doit bouter, baigner/ en leaue chaulde et attrempee, affin que le corps ne preigne alteration/ pour la froidure de lait ou aultre qualite”, CHAMPIER, *Np*, 83.

²² WILHELMI in her commentary to CHAMPIER, *Np*, 205.

²³ CHAMPIER, *Ndv*, 74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, *Ndv*, 109.

²⁵ McCLIVE, *Menstruation* uses the term ‘menstrual misogyny’.

²⁶ STOLBERG, “Erfahrungen”, 914.

et defaillans en leurs membres; laquelle chose est infame a vng prince et homme magnifique. (CHAMPIER, *Np*, 103)²⁷

Our humanist refers to ideas that can be traced back to medieval scholars such as Michael Scott (1175-*ca.* 1232).²⁸ In his *Nef des princes*, Champier expresses, even if only in an aside, his view of the inferiority of women. This he explains by their corporeality and he does not retract from this opinion in his defence of the fair sex.

Perhaps the most radical advocacy of women in Renaissance times appeared only a few years after Champier's works and was also penned by a physician. I am referring to the *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* by the German polymath Agrippa von Nettesheim.²⁹ The importance of the occultist for the *Querelle des femmes* has often been highlighted in research. Even though the Cologne occultist not only proclaimed the equality of the sexes, but even placed woman above man,³⁰ his excessive praise of menstruation is astonishing:

Ce rouge tribut que la femme paie tous les mois à la lune, et qui mériterait l'éloge de précieux sang, quelle force, quelle vertu lui attribueriez-vous? Oh, il en a de tant de sortes! Premièrement, il guérit de la fièvre quarte, de la rage, du mal caduc; des impressions mélancoliques, de la manie enfin il vous délivre de quantité d'autres maladies, dont il n'y en a pas une, qui ne soit des plus précieuses. C'en est déjà beaucoup, comme vous voyez:

²⁷ See also the commentary of WILHELMI, *Np*, 234.

²⁸ See STOLBERG, "Erfahrungen", 916, who quotes Scott's treatise *De secretis naturae* when he recalls that it was believed, for example, that "wer mit einer menstruierenden Frau geschlechtlich verkehrte, riskierte an der Lepra zu erkranken". The medical historian also recounts other superstitions associated with the menstrual periods: "Schon die bloße Gegenwart oder der Blick einer menstruierenden Frau ließen Spiegel blind werden, verdarben jungen Wein und gesalzenes Fleisch und verursachten Abgänge und Unfruchtbarkeit".

²⁹ NEWMAN, "Renaissance Feminism", 337, recalls that "in 1509 he delivered the brilliant inaugural lecture that became the kernel of his treatise *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus*"; explaining subsequently why the text could not appear in print until 1529. See also POEL, *Cornelius Agrippa*, 185.

³⁰ Researchers are divided as to whether this strong claim is serious, as for instance NEWMAN, "Renaissance Feminism", 337-338 and POEL, *Cornelius Agrippa*, 190-192 summarise.

vraiment! nous ne sommes pas au bout. En second et dernier lieu, cet élixir menstruel produit des effets, mais des effets qui, j'en suis sûr, vont vous jeter dans le dernier étonnement: entre les plus merveilleux, il éteint les incendies, il calme la fureur des tempêtes, il arrête l'inondation des fleuves; il écarte les chose dommageables et nuisibles, enfin il contraint les diables à déloger au plus vite du corps des possédés. Il n'y a qu'un moment, direz-vous, que vous traitez cela de purgation? D'accord, et je le soutiens encore: mais c'est par là même que vous devez rendre plus de justice à la prééminence de la femme, puisqu'il n'y a pas jusqu'à son plus vilain excrément, qui ne fait une vraie relique pour opérer d'insignes miracles. (AGRIPPA, *Discours*, 62-63)³¹

Agrippa turns the common truisms about menstruation into their opposite: the blood can heal diseases and avert natural disasters. Not only the content, but also its high style, suggest interpreting the text as a paradoxical encomium. Such “propos contraires à la commune opinion”, as Charles Estienne (*Paradoxes*, 1553) calls paradoxes in his translation of Ortensio Lando's *Paradossi* (1543), were particularly popular with physician writers.³² As Steczowicz argues, the interest of medical doctors in the praise of things unworthy of praise may be attributed to the role that paradoxes played in the scientific argumentation of the time.³³ Furthermore, this preference may be explained by the fact that humanistically educated physicians became acquainted with Lucian, the

³¹ See BÉHAR, “From the Cabala”, 462, who recalls that Agrippa refers to Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* XXVIII, xxiii and states: “To this physical phenomenon, the physiological sense of which was still unknown, Agrippa gives an interpretation that enables him to reverse all the arguments against women the misogynous tradition had drawn from it”. NEWMAN, “Renaissance Feminism”, 345, points out that Agrippa also talks about menstruation in *De occulta philosophia* and that his statements are to be positioned “between uproarious parody of received wisdom and genuine occult philosophy”.

³² One of these paradoxes has the woman as its theme; for *Pour les femmes* see CAZES, “Anatomie”, 41, who also refers to the *Querelle des femmes*.

³³ See STECZOWICZ, “*The defence of contraries*”, 149, who recalls “various medical works calling themselves *paradoxes*” from the thirties of the sixteenth century onwards, and remarks about them: “Placed at the head of a tract or a collection, the word ‘paradox’ promised controversy and departure from accepted norms and habitual ways of thinking at a time when these were increasingly being challenged by innovative physicians and surgeons”.

progenitor of satirical eulogy, during their Greek studies and often took him as a model in their literary works.³⁴ No less a figure than Erasmus of Rotterdam had translated the satirist from Samosata from Greek into Latin, and with his *Encomium moriae* he gave wings to the vogue for the paradoxical.

Agrippa's praise of menstruation is to be read against this background:³⁵ While paradoxes as a genre of medical writing "are devoted to exposing and rectifying erroneous medical opinions",³⁶ from a literary point of view, the mock epideictic is a genre based on ambiguity.³⁷ As Traninger asserts, 'the rhetorical genre rather opens up a space of possibility in which different points of view can be represented at the same time'.³⁸ In Agrippa's case, commonplaces about menstruation are deconstructed by reversing them into their opposite. At the same time the mock praise of menstrual disorders is in accordance with the often paradoxical praise of women by the humanists like Rabelais for instance.³⁹

The condemnation of midwifery by François Rabelais

The ear birth in Rabelais' *Gargantua* (1534) is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating medical narratives in world literature. It is well known that Gargamelle's delivery was complicated by the consumption of a huge amount of tripe⁴⁰ and the infant was forced to find an alternative way out of the mother's body. Research examined the medical detail of this miraculous nativity and the humanist doctor's relationship to

³⁴ See GERNERT, "Erasmus".

³⁵ For a reading of Agrippa from the perspective of mock-epideictic literature see KORKOWSKI, "Agrippa", 595.

³⁶ STECZOWICZ, "*The defence of contraries*", 150.

³⁷ NEWMAN, "Renaissance Feminism", 338 mentions "the slippery genre of *declamatio* or paradox" as "responsible for much of Agrippa's ambiguity".

³⁸ See TRANINGER, "Wandelbare Orte", 199. [Translation FG]

³⁹ See MARGOLIN, "Le paradoxe", 61 and COLIE, *Paradoxia*, 102.

⁴⁰ Gargamelle is clearly overriding the usual dietary rules for pregnant women and is punished for this self-empowerment by considerable physical discomfort.

midwives.⁴¹ As Chavaroche states, “*Gargantua* dramatized the power relations over the control of women’s unruly bodies”.⁴² In Rabelais’ novel, the *accoucheuses* are the ones who, through their unqualified intervention, block the child’s natural exit.⁴³ Chavaroche draws particular attention to the fact that “the matrons quickly demonstrate their lack of common sense, anatomical knowledge, and medical competence” and that this ineptitude is juxtaposed with “the demonstration of the narrator’s medical authority”.⁴⁴ Antonioli, for his part, emphasizes that Rabelais endowed the “dirty old woman” who leads the band of midwives with witch-like traits.⁴⁵

In the far shorter account of Pantagruel’s nativity in the novel published two years earlier, the role of the female obstetricians is by no means glorious: Through their chatter they miss the moment when the little giant sees the light of day. It goes without saying that Rabelais uses garrulity as a commonplace of misogynist satire:

⁴¹ See for instance ANTONIOLI, *Rabelais*, 164-171 and CHAVAROCHÉ, “Midwives”, 320: “In its very attempt at being satirical, *Gargantua*’s birth scene highlights the then-common assumption that midwives were nothing but ignorant, incompetent, and possibly downright dangerous, while exalting the narrator’s own medical training”.

⁴² CHAVAROCHÉ, “Midwives”, 320.

⁴³ “Soudain vinrent à tas sages femmes de tous côtés. Et la tâtant par le bas, trouvèrent quelques pellauderies, assez de mauvais goût, et pensaient que ce fût l’enfant: mais c’était le fondement qui lui escappait, à la mollification du droit intestine, lequel vous appelez le boyau culier, par trop avoir mangé des tripes, comme avons déclaré-ci dessus. Dont une horde vieille de la compagnie, laquelle avoit réputation d’être grande médecine, et là était venue de Brisepaille d’auprès Saintgenou devant soixante ans, lui fit un restrictif si horrible que tous ses larrys tant furent oppilés et resserrés que à grande peine, avec les dents, vous les eussiez élargis, qui est chose bien horrible à penser. [...] Par cet inconvénient furent au dessus relâchés les cotyledons de la matrice, par lesquels sursauta l’enfant, et entra en la veine creuse, et gravant par le diaphragme jusques au dessus des épaules (où la dite veine se part en deux), print son chemin à gauche, et sortit par l’oreille senestre”, RABELAIS, *Gargantua*, 21-22.

⁴⁴ CHAVAROCHÉ, “Midwives”, 320.

⁴⁵ See ANTONIOLI, *Rabelais*, 167.

Et comme elles cacquetoyent de ces menus propos entre elles, voicy sorty Pantagruel, tout vel comme un Ours, dont dict une d'elles en esperit Prophetique, "Il est né à tout le poil, il fera choses merveilleuses, et s'il vit il aura de l'eage". (RABELAIS, *Pantagruel*, 224)⁴⁶

Although less apparent than in *Gargantua*, the medical expertise of the matrons is called into question again. Competence in the art of healing is denied to them and in return they are endowed with a questionable proficiency in the art of divination, satirised by Rabelais in the *Panagrue line prognostication*. In the *Tiers Livre*, it is the picaresque Panurge who punningly renames the 'sages femmes' as 'praesages femmes':

Je (dist Panurge) me trouve fort bien du conseil des femmes, et mesmement des vieilles. A leur conseil je foys tousjours une selle ou deux extraordinaires. Mon amy ce sont vrays chiens de monstre, vrays rubricques de droict. Et bien proprement parlent ceulx qui les appellent Sages femmes. Ma coustume et mon style est les nommer Presages femmes. Sages sont elles: car dextrement elles congnoissent. Mais je les nomme Praesages, car divinement elles praevoyent, et praedisent certainement toutes choses advenir. (RABELAIS, *TL*, 401)

This praise of the divination capabilities of these old women is clearly to be read as a paradoxical encomium.⁴⁷

Rabelais' reference to the arts of divination, however, is not to be seen in the context of the accusation of witchcraft, which had already been brought against the midwife's guild by Heinrich Kramer in the *Malleus*

⁴⁶ Antonioli calls them "bavardes et superstitieuses", ANTONIONI, *Rabelais*, 166.

⁴⁷ See about paradox in Rabelais OGINO, *Les éloges*, STECZOWICZ, "Doctrine", Tournon, "Le paradoxe" and RIGOLOT, "Rabelais", 192, who recalls that the *Tiers livre* "s'ouvre sur une apologie des dettes et se termine par un discours à la gloire du chanvre et du lin". The scholars quoted do not address the praise of midwives, which can be read as a paradox, but with Margolin it is worth remembering the ambiguity with which Rabelais vacillates between an "antiféminisme traditionnel et un féminisme modéré" (MARGOLIN, "La nature", 45).

maleficarum.⁴⁸ The Dominican's accusation of infanticide can possibly be understood as a backlash against the exclusivity with which birth was under female control.⁴⁹ A number of doctors oppose this situation with professional arguments and demand supervision by their own profession. André Du Breil for instance is sharply critical in his *La police de l'art et science de médecine* (1580) of women healers who use the divinatory arts such as metoposcopy and palmistry to manipulate patients. He insults them as "mauvaises femmes eshontées et impudentes menteresses, qui regnent aujourd'hui et ont cours partout, lesquelles se font appeller gardes de malades, se couvrans du tiltre de sages femmes ou matrosnes".⁵⁰ The accusation of witchcraft (combined with that of poison mixing) is raised independently at a later point.⁵¹ What bothers the "Docteur régent en la faculté de médecine à Paris" most is the fact that the "mauvaises femmes" influence which practitioners are to be consulted and believed by patients. Another point of complaint relates to diagnostic methods: "Et pour montrer à leur arrivée, qu'elles sont bien entendues, incontinent elles vous manient les pauvres patiens haut et bas, dessus et dessous, de costé et d'autre, les meurtrissent [...]".⁵² The physician explicitly rejects here the way in which these healers appropriate the human body through tactile contact. Using the example of Du Breil and other medical practitioners, Klairmont Lingo has brought to light "how university-trained physicians transformed their

⁴⁸ See Part one, question 11 "that in various ways midwife sorceresses kill the foetuses in the womb and cause miscarriages, and when they do not do this, they offer the new-borns to demons", KRAMER, *Mm*, 211-212.

⁴⁹ See also COSTE, *La littérature*, 470-471: "Au début de l'époque moderne et pendant la crise de sorcellerie les pratiques parfois hétérodoxes des matrones ont été l'objet d'une attention accrue de la part de la justice, mais aussi des autorités religieuses et médicales".

⁵⁰ DU BREIL, *La police*, 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 68. "Et se trouvera le plus souvent, que telles femmes sont sorcières et empoisonneuses, car pour introduire à plus facilement ceux qu'il leur plaist, se couvrent honnestement de telles qualitez et menteries". As Klairmont Lingo observes, the "relationship between witchcraft, midwifery, and healing is not well substantiated. [...] Breil accused matrons and midwives of being witches but did not mention specific cases" (KLAIRMONT LINGO, "Empirics", 594).

⁵² DU BREIL, *La police*, 67.

competitors into a medical ‘other’, that is, a group considered morally and professionally unfit to practice medicine”.⁵³ In addition to apothecaries and surgeons, these “others” are particularly women,⁵⁴ as can also be illustrated by the example of Laurent Joubert. In the third chapter of his *Erreurs populaires* (1578),⁵⁵ he addresses the following problem: “Que les matrones faillent grandement de n’appeler médecins qu’à l’enfantement et autres maux péculiers des femmes et que même les sages-femmes doivent être enseignées des médecins”.⁵⁶ The chancellor of the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier criticises the presumptuousness of female healers especially in the field of obstetrics and gynaecology⁵⁷ and smiles at their “petits remèdes accoutumés”,⁵⁸ a form of knowledge based on experience and professional practice. Since women miss academic education, he recommends that “les médecins montrent aux sages-femmes l’anatomie des parties qui contiennent l’enfant, celles qui lui donnent passage et aident à le pousser dehors, afin qu’elles puissent artificiellement comprendre la vraie méthode de procéder à leur opération”.⁵⁹ Almost half a century after Rabelais’ novelistic criticism of the midwives’ lack of anatomical knowledge, Joubert presents a strategy to remedy this state of affairs.⁶⁰

⁵³ KLAIRMONT LINGO, “Empirics”, 583.

⁵⁴ See KLAIRMONT LINGO, “Empirics”, 593: “In the physicians’ diatribes against empirics, the woman healer and midwife became emblematic for the official male view of the empiric as the ignorant intruder into the official medical domain”.

⁵⁵ See on the genre of the *Erreurs* and especially on their proximity to the paradox CÉARD, “Paradoxe” and COSTE, *La littérature*, with further bibliographical references.

⁵⁶ JOUBERT, *Ep*, II, 167.

⁵⁷ “L’outrecuidance et présomption d’aucunes femmes est telle qu’elles pensent entendre mieux à toutes maladies péculières des femmes (comme la suffocation de matrice, l’avortement et enfantement) que les plus suffisants médecins du monde”, JOUBERT, *Ep*, II, 167.

⁵⁸ JOUBERT, *Ep*, II, 167.

⁵⁹ JOUBERT, *Ep*, II, 168.

⁶⁰ See BENEDEK, “The changing relationship”, and COSTE, *La littérature*, 471: “Un encadrement plus strict des activités des matrones a été décidé, et défini par l’ordonnance de 1560, qui a requis une instruction médicale et religieuse minimale”.

La Lozana Andaluza: a successful gynaecologist and healer

A completely different hierarchy of male doctors and female healers is outlined by the Spanish doctor and cleric Francisco Delicado. His *Lozana Andaluza* presents an exceptional female character distinguished by her desire for independence,⁶¹ who already opted for sexual freedom as a young girl.⁶² The means to attain autonomy, besides wordiness, is (medical) knowledge acquired through both travel and matrilineal oral transmission.⁶³ In conversation with the author, the protagonist boasts of her medical, magical and divinatory abilities:

Yo sé ensalmar y encomendar y santiguar cuando alguno está aojado, que una vieja me vezó, que era saludadera y buena como yo. Sé quitar ahitos, sé para lombrices, sé encantar la terciara, sé remedio para la cuartana y para el mal de la madre. Sé cortar frenillos de bobos y no bobos, sé hacer que no duelan los riñones y sanar las renes, y sé medicar la natura de la mujer y la del hombre, sé sanar la sordera y sé ensolver sueños, sé conocer en la frente la fisionomía y la quiromancia en la mano, y prenocitar. (*LA*, 215)

In the course of the text, the novel's heroine repeatedly distinguishes herself by knowing how to heal the genital health problems of women and men. She recommends a pomade to a canon suffering from a urinary tract infection to avoid amputation, whereas a monsignor entrusts her

⁶¹ In Mamotreto V, the narrator speaks of her intention to “ser siempre libre y no sujeta a ninguno” (*LA*, 26). Later, the author's *compañero* emphasises that Lozana has succeeded in freeing herself from compulsions that subjugate other women: “No, sino que tiene ésta la mejor vida de mujer que sea en Roma. Esta Lozana es sagaz, y bien mira todo lo que pasan las mujeres en esta tierra, que son sujetas a tres cosas: a la pinsión [sic] de la casa, y a la gola, y al mal que después les viene de Nápoles; por tanto, se ayudan cuando pueden con ingenio, y por esto quiere ésta ser libre” (*LA*, 120).

⁶² See for instance the description of how she lost virginity: “saltando una pared sin licencia de su madre, se le derramó la primera sangre que del natural tenía” (*LA*, 14).

⁶³ “Sé hacer alheña y mudas y tez de cara, que deprendí en Levante, sin lo que mi madre me mostró” (*LA*, 32).

with his haemorrhoids.⁶⁴ To a courtesan suffering from uterine pain after childbirth,⁶⁵ Lozana advises for instance:

Señora, sahumaos por abajo con lana de cabrón, y si fuere de frío o que quiere hombre, ponelle un cerote, sobre el ombligo, de gálbano y armoniaco y encienzo y simiente de ruda en una poca de grana, y esto la hace venir a su lugar, y echar por abajo y por la boca toda la ventosidad. Y mire Vuestra Merced que dicen los hombres y los médicos que no saben de qué procede aquel dolor o alteración. Metelle el padre y peor es, que si no sale aquel viento o frío que está en ella, más mal hacen hurgándola. Y con este cerote sana, y no nuez moscada y vino, que es peor. Y lo mejor es una cabeza de ajos asada y comida. (LA, 116)

It is significant that here, as elsewhere, she contrasts her knowledge with that of her male colleagues, two of whom in the mamotreto LIX admit both their professional inferiority and their purely profit-oriented actions.⁶⁶

Digo que me habéis llevado de las manos más de seis personas que yo curaba que, como no les duelen las plagas con lo que vos les habéis dicho, no vienen a nosotros, y nosotros, si no duelen las heridas, metemos con qué duelan y escuezgan, por que vean que sabemos algo cuando les quitamos aquel dolor. Ansimismo a otros ponemos unguento egipciano, que tiene vinagre. (LA, 296)

It is very striking that it is a woman in a novel by a medically trained male writer who denounces the professional incapacity of male doctors. With his Lozana, the Spanish doctor has created a positive counter-design to

⁶⁴ See LA, 115-116 and LA, 219 and on the former GERNERT, "Escribir el cuerpo".

⁶⁵ "Señora, como parí, la madre me anda por el cuerpo como sierpe" (LA, 116).

⁶⁶ Kruse cites the case of the Parisian woman doctor Jacqueline Félicie who was accused as early as 1322 of treating her patients like the studied doctors and was ultimately fined and banned from practising (KRUSE, *Verborgene Heilkünste*, 115). The example is interesting because – according to Kruse – her male and female patients emphasised her successful treatment methods in their testimonies and stressed that other doctors who had previously treated them had been less effective. See about Jacqueline Félicie's arguments also BENEDEK, "The changing relationship", 552.

the medical fraternity, which is portrayed as incompetent and corrupt. The proposed alternative of health care, which scores with values such as experience, is embodied by a female healer with exceptional qualities.

Conclusion

The diametrically opposed descriptions of female skills in the healing professions in Rabelais, Delicado and other physicians are an expression of an unstable and changing situation in the first decades of the 16th century, in which gynaecology and obstetrics became a male domain.⁶⁷ A final look at the French publications on obstetrics in the 16th and early 17th centuries shows that, in addition to the establishment of gynaecology as an academic and thus male discipline, women also emerged as authors of works on childbirth. After the influential publication of Eucharius Röslein's *Der Rosengarten*,⁶⁸ which was twice translated into French (1536 and 1563), a whole series of obstetric works appeared in the vernacular from the eighties of the 16th century onwards by physicians like François Rousset, Jean Liébault, Jacques Guillemeau, Jacques Duval and Louis de Serres.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that Duval cites the midwife Louise Bourgeois (1563-1636), author of the *Observations diverses sur la stérilité, perte de fruit, foecundité, accouchements et maladies des femmes et enfants nouveaux naiz* (1609), as an authority on the matter.⁷⁰ The first woman who wrote a book about midwifery insists on female expertise in childbirth:

Mais pour sçavoir les secrets des maladies des femmes, il faut avoir fréquenté les sages-femmes, et avoir assisté à plusieurs accouchements, comme avoit fait votre grand maistre et législateur Hippocrate, qui, au fait

⁶⁷ Benedek reminds that “[t]he first midwifery ordinance outside the German states was enacted in Paris in 1560” (“The changing relationship”, 557).

⁶⁸ See on the use of the vernacular and the female addressees of the text MOULIN, “Textwandlungen” with further bibliography.

⁶⁹ See the anthology in English translation by WORTH-STYLIANOU, *Pregnancy*.

⁷⁰ “Comme dit la dame le Boursier, obstettrice de la Reine à present regnante, en ses *Observations*, [...]”, DUVAL, *Des Hermaphrodits*, 200. See about this accoucheuse BENEDEK, “The changing relationship”, 563 and VONS, “La parole”.

des maladies des femmes, consultait les sages-femmes, s'en rapportait à leur jugement.⁷¹

As Delicado's Lozana did in early 16th century fictional space, Louise claims control over the female body on the basis of her experiential knowledge, which she ennobles with a clever reference to Hippocrates. Through the ages, physicians have a particular bond with the suffering body by means of their profession. As authors of literary works they obviously shape the representation of corporeality against the backdrop of their experience with ailing and agony. In the early modern period, due to the peculiar (scientific) historical circumstances (e.g. a paradigm shift in the field of anatomy due to Vesalius), this professional group develops a quite dismissive relationship to the principle of authority. This explains their freedom of thought vis-à-vis the conventional, such as gender relations or the nature of women. In their fictional works, they likewise propose counter-projects that, as with audacious scientific theses, require special forms of representation such as the paradox, which forces the reader to think on an issue through different perspectives.

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⁷¹ *Apologie de Louise Bourgeois, dite Bourcier, sage femme de la reine mère du Roi, et de feu madame. Contre le rapport des medecins*, 19, apud VONS, "La parole", 237.

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