2022

Rabbits and Hogs and Bears, Oh My! Monstrous Births and Control Over Pregnant Bodies

Elizabeth Klein
Hollins University, kleinel@hollins.edu

Rabbits and Hogs and Bears, Oh My! Monstrous Births and Control Over Pregnant Bodies

On April 23, 1726, Mary Toft, a resident of Godalming, England, encountered a rabbit while weeding in a field.[1] She chased after it but it escaped her grasp, setting in her "a longing for Rabbets, being then, as she thought, five Weeks gone with Child."[2] After a similarly frustrating encounter the next day, the pregnant woman dreamt she was sitting in the field with the two rabbits in her lap, and from then on experienced a "constant and strong desire to eat Rabbets," but was unable to fulfill her craving due to her poverty.[3] Seventeen weeks later, she suffered a miscarriage, and on September 27, she began to feel very ill.[4] Her mother-in-law, a midwife, was sent for, and she delivered Toft of several indiscriminate animal parts.[5] These were brought to John Howard, a local midwife, who attended Toft and delivered more animal parts, which he identified as rabbits.[6] Two weeks later, the incident was thought "over with" and she was churched.[7] However, this was just the beginning of a series of births in which Toft delivered dozens of rabbits and rabbit parts; attracted the attention of numerous doctors, some from the Royal Court; and was moved from Godalming to Guildford to London throughout the fall of 1726 as she continued giving birth to rabbits.

Toft's case is one example of the monstrous birth stories that so occupied early modern European society between the 16th and 18th centuries. These stories depicted gruesome and fantastical births influenced by the imaginations and ill virtue of pregnant women, and the tales were the subject of much interest within the intellectual and medical community. The discussion

---

[1] S. A. Seligman, "Mary Toft—The Rabbit Breeder," *Medical History* 5, no. 4 (1961), 349.
[2] Nathaniel St. André, *A Short Narrative of an Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbets, Perform'd by Mr. John Howard, Surgeon at Guilford* (London: Printed for John Clarke, 1727), 23.
[3] St. André, *A Short Narrative*, 24.
[4] Ibid, 24-25.
[5] Ibid, 25.
[6] Ibid, 25.
[7] Ibid, 25.

of these births that took place among the male members of such communities were particularly revelatory of the way female bodies were viewed and controlled in early modern Europe. These conversations are evidenced in the writings of 16th and 17th-century European physicians about the power of women's imaginations over their pregnant bodies, in the retelling of monstrous birth stories that emphasized the importance of women's virtue, and in the case of Mary Toft herself and the physicians who attended to her. Through these sources, male medical professionals and educated men utilized monstrous births to assert their role in pregnancy, revealing their desire to exert control over women's bodies.

The work of early modern European physicians illuminates developing conceptions of monstrous births. These doctors claimed that monstrous births and birth defects were often the result of the overactivity of the maternal imagination, which was easily influenced by the sensory information pregnant women encountered. Ambroise Paré argued this point in his 1573 book *On Monsters and Marvels*.[8] In the text, Paré, a famed French physician and surgeon to multiple royal households, offers insight from his professional experience with birth defects and records his knowledge of monstrous births. In chapter nine, he discusses the effects of women's imaginations on the development of the fetus. Building on the knowledge of physicians of antiquity, Paré writes, "The ancients, who sought out the secrets of nature...have taught of other causes for monstrous children and have referred them to the ardent and obstinate imagination [impression] that the mother might receive at the moment she conceived."[9] He supports his argument by referencing his firsthand experience with monstrous births as a physician, providing one example of a woman who gave birth to a baby "as furry as a bear" because while conceiving,

[8] Ambroise Paré, "An Example of Monsters That Are Created Through the Imagination," in *On Monsters and Marvels* (1573; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[9] Paré, "An Example of Monsters," 38.

she looked too intensely at a portrait of Saint John the Baptist wrapped in bearskin.[10] Because of the danger of their imaginations, he writes, "it is necessary that women—at least at the hour of conception and when the child is not yet formed...not be forced to look at or to imagine monstrous things."[11] In these statements, Paré asserts his belief that women were so easily influenced that merely seeing a disturbing image was sufficient in producing an effect on their pregnancies.

Decades later, Dutch physician and author Levinus Lemnius maintained a similar claim. In 1658, he published *The Secret Miracles,* a collection of four books that combines his personal philosophy with his observations of the natural world as a physician.[12] In chapter four of the first book, while discussing the particularities of conception that could lead to physical differences in birth, Lemnius expresses an idea that echoed Paré's argument about the power of the maternal imagination. He writes, "The principal cause of this effect seems to me to consist in the tacite imagination of the woman. For if she conceive in her mind or do by chance fasten her eyes upon any object, and imprint that in her Mind, the child doth commonly represent that in the outward parts."[13] This, he claims, is the reason behind many birth defects among babies. Lemnius also cautions that "care must be had, that that Sex may see nothing, that may move their mind to think absurdly, which in framing the child may bring hurt."[14] In this language that mirrors Paré's warning, Lemnius offers pregnant women instructions to prevent the maternal imagination's impact on their unborn children.

---

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid, 39-40.
[12] Levinus Lemnius, "On the Likeness of Parents and Children," in *The Secret Miracles of Nature: In Four Books* (London: Printed by Jo. Streater, 1658).
[13] Lemnius, "On the Likeness of Parents and Children," 11.
[14] Ibid, 14.

In both texts, the physicians argue that pregnant women are susceptible to the malleability of the maternal imagination. Lemnius and Paré take care, however, to follow their theories with medical advice given on the basis of their professional expertise. In doing so, they assert their authority over matters related to women's reproduction. This idea is supported by historian Lisa Forman Cody's claim that male physicians and natural philosophers had, by the early 1700s, established themselves as authorities on reproduction, giving them a sense of "intellectual authority over reproductive anomalies and, by extension, reproductive normalcy."[15] Paré and Lemnius attempt to build this sense of intellectual superiority by prescribing women strict suggestions to avoid over-exciting their imaginations, passing themselves as experts on women's pregnancy when it is clear that their theories about monstrous births are rooted more in speculation than scientific investigation.

Paré and Lemnius's instructions to pregnant women reveal a deeper desire to assert control over women's bodies. In claiming that women's imaginations could alter the development of their pregnancies, the physicians admit the inherent power of women's bodies. Though they diminish pregnant women's agency by saying that they were at the whim of their imaginations, the physicians grant them a sort of power by acknowledging women's ability to manipulate and impact their pregnancies, intentionally or not. Though both men caution pregnant women to avoid looking upon certain images, they can do no more than offer their professional opinions because pregnancy is an aspect of reproduction they are simply not a part of. In these texts, male medical professionals have become observers of women's pregnancies, cautioning them from the sidelines but unable to control the outcome. Although Paré and Lemnius's books

[15] Lisa Forman Cody, "Imagining Mothers," *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120.

detract from women's agency over their pregnant bodies, they assert that women had a level of control over their bodies that men could not touch.

The stories circulated about monstrous births in the 17th century revealed men's continued attempts to control pregnant bodies. In such stories, monstrous births were seen as the product not of an overactive maternal imagination but of the moral shortcomings of the mother. The story of Tannakin Skinker provides a compelling example. Published by a pamphleteer in London, 1640, *A Certain Relation of the Hog-Faced Gentlewoman* tells of a pregnant woman who gives birth to a daughter, Tannakin, who is born with the face of a swine.[16] The pamphlet explains that Tannakin was "bewitched in her mothers wombe" by a beggar who was rudely rejected by the expectant mother.[17] As the beggar left, she cursed the woman, saying, "As the Mother is hoggish, so Swinish shall be the child shee goeth withall."[18] Thus, Tannakin is born with "all the limbes and lineaments of her body, well featur'd and proportioned,"[19] but has the nose of a swine which renders her appearance "lothsome, contemptible, and odious to all that lookt upon her in her infancie."[20] In this story, the punishment for Tannakin's mother's decision to curtly reject the beggar is enacted on her pregnancy. Her body, and the resulting deformed body of Tannakin, must endure the consequences of her wrongdoing.

The legend of the Lamenting Lady provides a similar resolution. Preserved by parliament member Samuel Pepys in the late 17th-century, *The Lamenting Lady* is a 13th-century ballad that tells the story of a woman who gave birth to 365 children. In the beginning of the ballad, the lady expresses her frustration at being unable to conceive.[21] When she comes across a poor woman

[16] Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership (EEBOTCP), *A Certaine Relation of the Hog-Faced Gentlewoman Called Mistriss Tannakin Skinker* (London: Printed by I. O., 1640).
[17] EEBOTCP, *The Hog-Faced Gentlewoman*, paragraph 12.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, paragraph 5.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Samuel Pepys, *The Lamenting Lady* (London: Printed for Henry Gosson, [17th century]), paragraph 2.

with twins, her feelings are heightened, as she feels it is unfair that the woman should have two children when she has none despite her status as a lady and the other woman's poverty.[22] She takes her anger out on the woman, saying, "Thou art some Strumpt sure I know, / and spend'st thy days in shame, / And stained sure thy marriage bed / with spots of black defame."[23] The woman, offended, curses the lady, responding, "And for these children two of mine / heaven send thee such a number / At once, as dayes be in the yeare."[24] The lady becomes pregnant shortly after but gives birth to "As many children at one time / as [days] were in the yeare,"[25] all of whom die and are buried in the same grave.[26] Like Tannakin's mother, the lady in this ballad is punished for her treatment of the poor woman by a monstrous pregnancy and subsequent birth. At the end of the ballad, however, she has learned a lesson: God sends blessings to both rich women and poor and warns the reader, "Therefore let none desire to have / the joyes of worldly things / Except it be his sacred will / that is the King of Kings."[27]

These stories demonstrate that in addition to the maternal imagination, virtue was used as a rhetorical tool for men to assert their control over women's bodies. Both pregnant women in the texts are portrayed as neglecting morality and acting without virtue, and they are punished for their behavior in the form of monstrous births. The antidote to this immorality is provided by an element the stories leave out: the pregnant women's husbands. Although both texts mention that the women are married, the husbands are entirely ignored by the stories and are, importantly, not present during their wives' interactions with the beggars. Their absence allows the texts to use

[22] Pepys, *The Lamenting Lady*, paragraph 7.
[23] Ibid, paragraph 8.
[24] Ibid, paragraph 12.
[25] Ibid, paragraph 16.
[26] Ibid, paragraph 20.
[27] Ibid, paragraph 22.

the concept of virtue to moralize about the dangers of women's control over pregnancy by suggesting that pregnancy requires the intervention and guidance of men.

The authors of these sources support the same argument. Although his interest in preserving the document was at least partly historical, Pepys's decision to do so during an age in which the dissemination of monstrous birth stories was increasing demonstrates a desire to contribute to the conversation such literature inspired about pregnant bodies. Additionally, the moralizing tone of *The Lamenting Lady*, especially with its cautionary ending, reveals Pepys's interest in advising pregnant women and subsequently creating a role for himself and other men in pregnancy. The same can be said of *The Hog-Faced Gentlewoman*. Although the author of the pamphlet is not attributed, it is safe to assume that they, like Pepys, were an educated male given the rarity of the publication of women's writing in early modern Europe. In publishing the pamphlet, the author uses the concept of virtue to show that pregnant women cannot be trusted as the primary controllers of pregnancy. Ultimately, both of these monstrous birth stories claim that when women were left to control their pregnancies on their own, the effects could be disastrous. This supports the argument that only under the guidance and with the intervention of men could pregnancy be safeguarded from the shaky morality of women.

In these stories, men become more involved in women's pregnancies than Paré or Lemnius because rather than taking the role of observers of monstrous births, they invent stories of their own. This allowed them to insert their advice into the literature of monstrous births, giving the story a moral and outcome that gave them more involvement in women's pregnancy. However, it was with the case of Mary Toft that early modern European men were able to become the most involved in monstrous births. S. A. Seligman summarizes the events of Toft's

monstrous births in his article "Mary Toft—The Rabbit Breeder."[28] He writes that after midwife John Howard began consistently delivering Toft of rabbits in November of 1726, the case garnered attention in the newspapers.[29] Howard made an offer to anyone in the medical community to come to Guildford, where he would allow them to deliver a rabbit.[30] Nathaniel St. André, an anatomist and surgeon to the court of King George I,[31] eagerly accepted this offer and, on November 23, arrived in Guildford, where he began performing examinations on Toft and the rabbits she delivered, recording his studies in a work he later published as *A Short Narrative of an Extraordinary Deliver of Rabbets, Perform'd by Mr. John Howard, Surgeon and Guilford*.[32] A surgeon named Cyrus Ahlers[33] arrived soon after, sent by King George I to investigate what St. André referred to as "the Truth of this Fact."[34] Taking up Howard's initial offer, Ahlers attempted to try to deliver one of the rabbits of Toft, but St. André notes that he did not "proceed as one who understands Midwifery should do," so St. André instructed the man until he was able to bring away the parts of a rabbit "of about three Months Growth."[35] This experience apparently left Ahlers apparently fully "convinced of the Truth."[36]

Another physician notified of the case was Sir Richard Manningham, an obstetrician who, Seligman notes, was immediately doubtful of the truth of the situation.[37] Though he was unable to deliver a rabbit despite his expressed wishes, when he examined Toft on the night of the 27th, he found a piece of a hog's bladder in her vagina, nowhere near the now-closed

---

[28] Seligman, "Mary Toft—The Rabbit Breeder."
[29] Ibid, 350.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Jan Bondeson, "Mary Toft, the Rabbit Breeder," in *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 124.
[32] St. André, *A Short Narrative*, 28.
[33] Seligman, "Mary Toft—The Rabbit Breeder," 352.
[34] St. André, *A Short Narrative*, 31.
[35] Ibid, 34.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Seligman, "Mary Toft—The Rabbit Breeder," 353.

cervix.[38] His suspicions heightened, Manningham insisted that "he would not be satisfied unless he could actually remove from the uterine cavity some material identical" to that which he had found in Toft's vagina.[39] Howard and St. André attempted to reassure the obstetrician, leading to a heated argument which resulted in Toft's relocation to London under Manningham's observation.[40] Toft's labor pains began again and Manningham expected another delivery, but on December 4, a porter at the bagnio where Toft was lodging alleged that he had smuggled a rabbit into Toft's quarters.[41] Although Manningham persuaded the court to grant a few more days of examination in the hopes that something soon would issue from Toft's uterus, a justice of the peace named Sir Thomas, highly suspicious of the case, threatened Toft severely, and "all her labour pains vanished."[42] Manningham, accepting the falsehood of the case, tried to get Toft to confess, threatening her with "a very painful experiment" should she refuse.[43] On December 7, in the presence of court officials as well as Sir Richard Manningham, Toft began to deliver her confession, admitting that after her miscarriage earlier that year, she put the rabbit parts into her womb at the urging of a "woman accomplice, not named," who assured her the attention the births would receive would provide her a good and continued source of income.[44] Toft was charged in court as a "vile cheat and impostor"[45] and was detained in prison for several months before eventually returning to her home in Godalming.[46]

Much has been written by scholars about the monstrous births of Mary Toft and the incident's effects on the medical community. However, very little research has attempted to

---

[38] Ibid, 353-4.
[39] Ibid, 354.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 355.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 356.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Bondeson, "Mary Toft, the Rabbit Breeder," 141.

reconstruct Toft's experience of the events of 1726, paying more attention to the physicians involved in the case than the woman at the center of it. Karen Harvey's article "What Mary Toft Felt: Women's Voices, Pain, Power and the Body" addresses this problem in its analysis of Toft's experience.[47] In this text, Harvey uses the overlooked source of Toft's own confessions to explore the births and subsequent examinations from her point of view. What Harvey finds is evidence that Toft was not a scheming manipulator pulling a major hoax on the English medical community but a woman who may have been coerced into a plan that brought her a significant amount of pain and fear. Harvey finds in the confessions seventy-one references to pain in thirty-six pages.[48] Although she acknowledges that Toft exaggerated in some instances to garner sympathy, much of her pain was likely extreme and she experienced "a genuine physical trauma" during the repeated examinations she was subjected to.[49] The physicians present throughout her births were not in any way attentive to this pain. Harvey writes, "For the doctors, pain was the only observable evidence of the hidden events taking place inside Toft's body. So it is that examinations take place during her pains."[50] She notes that in the narrative he published detailing the births, St. André "comments on [Toft's] 'exquisite torture'" while neglecting to do anything about it.[51] Harvey writes that he is "more interested in [the] animal bodies than in Toft's."[52]

It is undeniable that all the physicians involved in Toft's case had an interest in her body, but it was an entirely self-serving one. Where Paré and Lemnius could only offer observation and the publishers of the monstrous birth stories imagined scenarios, the physicians of the Toft case had a chance to use a real-life monstrous birth to create a role for themselves in women's

[47] Karen Harvey, "What Mary Toft Felt: Women's Voices, Pain, Power and the Body," *History Workshop Journal* 80 (2015).
[48] Harvey, "What Mary Toft Felt," 41.
[49] Ibid, 42.
[50] Ibid, 44.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, 41.

pregnancy. Bypassing Toft's control over and experience of her own body, Howard, St. André, Ahlers, and Manningham excitedly took turns delivering Toft of the rabbits and performing examinations without any regard to the pain they caused her. They hoped that doing so would prove the validity of monstrous births and support the idea that educated and medical men needed to be involved in women's pregnancy. This, however, was an idea that would soon be vehemently contested.

The argument that male medical professionals could contribute more to women's pregnancy than other women could was already in decline by the mid-18th-century, and the public's reception of the Toft case only hastened its downward turn. Midwife Sarah Stone exemplified this sentiment in her 1737 book *A Complete Practice of Midwifery*.[53] In the preface, she cites her disdain for the dependence on Man-Midwives, writing, "I cannot comprehend, why Women are not capable of compleating this business when begun, without calling in of Men to their assistance."[54] She argues that "the Modesty of our Sex will be in great danger of being lost, for want of good Women-Midwives, by being so much exposed to the Men proffering this Art."[55] Finally, Stone takes issue with the idea that Man-Midwives were more educated than their female counterparts, writing, "these young Gentlemen-Professors put on a finish'd assurance, with pretence that their Knowledge exceeds any Woman's...and so, if the Mother, or Child, or both die, as it often happens, then they die *Secundum Artem*; for a Man was there, and the Woman-Midwife bears all the blame."[56] Lisa Forman Cody supports this point in chapter five of her book *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* by acknowledging that in the wake of Toft's monstrous births, some used her case to "launch a

[53] Sarah Stone, *A Complete Practice of Midwifery* (London: Printed for T. Cooper, 1737).
[54] Stone, *A Complete Practice of Midwifery*, ix-x.
[55] Ibid, xi.
[56] Ibid.

critique of man-midwifery, arguing that men could be easily deceived by the wily tricks of women and that women alone therefore had the power to know their reproductive bodies."[57]

Stone and Cody's observations show that the physicians' hopes of using Toft's case to assert their importance to pregnancy largely backfired. The physicians suffered incredible embarrassment for believing Toft's births when the hoax was eventually revealed, and the incident was a stain on the medical world of 18th-century England. Additionally, the outcome was detrimental for the theory of the maternal imagination; Cody writes that after 1726, belief in this concept was seen as "a central sign of backwardness" and fell almost entirely out of favor.[58] Ultimately, by providing a real-life example of a monstrous birth case in which the involvement of men only revealed their lack of knowledge, the Toft case put the final nail in the coffin for the rhetorical manipulation of monstrous births.

The progression of men's use of monstrous births, from the writings of Paré and Lemnius to the stories of the 17th-century to physicians' involvement in the Toft case, demonstrates a consistent attempt by male medical professionals and educated men to carve out space for their authority within pregnancy. However, the effort made by these male authors and figures to diminish pregnant women's agency reveals their discomfort with the control and power women had over their pregnancies. What the writings mentioned in this essay suggest is that despite the best attempts of early modern European male medical professionals and educated men to assert their roles in women's pregnancy, this aspect of reproduction was ultimately out of men's control.

[57] Cody, "Imagining Mothers," 121.
[58] Ibid, 122.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership. *A Certaine Relation of the Hog-Faced Gentlewoman Called Mistriss Tannakin Skinker.* London: Printed by I. O., 1640. *University of Michigan Library*, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12308.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext.

Lemnius, Levinus. "On the Likeness of Parents and Children." In *The Secret Miracles of Nature: In Four Books*, 10-16. London: Printed by Jo. Streater, 1658. *Wellcome Library*, https://archive.org/embed/b30326084.

Paré, Ambroise. "An Example of Monsters That Are Created Through the Imagination." In *On Monsters and Marvels*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. First published in 1573.

Pepys, Samuel. *The Lamenting Lady*. London: Printed for Henry Gosson, [17th century]. *Magdalene College, Pepys*, http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20210/xml.

Saint-André, Nathaniel. *A Short Narrative of an Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbets, Perform'd by Mr. John Howard, Surgeon at Guilford.* London: Printed for John Clarke, 1727. *Boston Public Library*, https://archive.org/embed/shortnarrativeof00sain.

Stone, Sarah. *A Complete Practice of Midwifery*. London: Printed for T. Cooper, 1737. Accessed May 17, 2021, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/xv9daunt.

Secondary sources:

Bondeson, Jan. “Mary Toft, the Rabbit Breeder.” In *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities*, 122–143. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. Accessed April 25, 2021. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvv41291.9

Cody, Lisa Forman. “Imagining Mothers.” In *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons*, 120-151. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. https://tinyurl.com/3uj6h9ev

Harvey, Karen. “What Mary Toft Felt: Women’s Voices, Pain, Power and the Body.” *History Workshop Journal* 80 (2015): 33–51. Accessed April 18, 2021. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/597420.

Seligman, S. A. “Mary Toft—The Rabbit Breeder.” *Medical History* 5, no. 4 (1961): 349–360. Accessed April 18, 2021. doi:10.1017/S0025727300026648.