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# Herbal Abortifacients and their Classical Heritage in Tudor England

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# HERBAL ABORTIFACIENTS AND THEIR CLASSICAL HERITAGE IN TUDOR ENGLAND:

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Although birth control is often considered to be a modern innovation, various forms of homeopathic anti-fertility measures have been in use since ancient times. Discussed at length by the great Greco-Roman medical authorities, certain herbs have long been utilized for their abortion-inducing properties. Centuries later, the extensive herbal guides and other medical texts of Tudor England seem to largely ignore the subject of anti-fertility herbs. Despite this apparent silence, however, classical knowledge of herbal abortifacients did not disappear in sixteenth century England. Influenced by changing attitudes and social acceptability concerning abortion, English medical and herbal writers included disguised information about certain herbs' potential abortive uses, providing Tudor women with an important means to control their fertility.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to overlook the inclusion of abortifacients when examining Tudor medical and herbal sources since they generally do not overtly reference or explain the uses of these herbs. However, these and other texts show that, in practice, Tudor women both commonly knew of and used herbal abortifacients. Most of the direct references to the practice denounce it but, in doing so, the authors show that they viewed the use of such herbs as a substantial problem. *Malleus Maleficarum* (the widely-circulated treatise on witchcraft originally published in 1486 and infamous for fueling the witch craze of the following centuries) states that "a man can, by natural means, such as herbs, savin [juniper] for example" either prevent a woman from conceiving or force a miscarriage if she is already pregnant.<sup>2</sup> The authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* devoted a considerable amount of space to

vehemently condemning the practice, indicating its prevalence. In the mid-seventeenth century, Jane Sharp, author of *The Midwives Book*, also criticized women who used “destructive means to cause barrennes,” but admitted, “some persons have presumptuously ventured upon it.”<sup>3</sup> Non-medical sources also contained veiled references to abortive herbs, including Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (written during the late 1590s) in which a mad Ophelia gathers herbs and keeps only rue for herself: “there’s rue for you; and here’s some for me; we may call it herb-grace o’Sundays. O! you wear your rue with a difference.”<sup>4</sup> While rue in this context functions partially as a symbol of regret, it is also a powerful abortifacient. By having Ophelia keep some for herself, Shakespeare gives credence to the popular theory that Hamlet’s mad lover is pregnant.<sup>5</sup> It can be assumed that Shakespeare’s audiences would understand his references, indicating a general public awareness of rue’s special uses. These types of references make it clear that abortive herbs were both commonly known and at least somewhat frequently used.

If contemporary medical books did not overtly explain how to use abortifacients, how did women learn of such practices? Many Tudor women probably learned about the special uses for certain herbs from one another.<sup>6</sup> Oral transmission, however, was not the only method of disseminating herbal knowledge. Modern scholars minimize the extent to which ancient classical texts served as a major source of information about herbal abortives. Literacy rates during the sixteenth century markedly rose, making textual resources increasingly accessible in Tudor England.<sup>7</sup> This is due to the rise of the humanists and Protestantism, both of which emphasized the importance of reading original texts for oneself. Both groups pushed for literacy and education that extended to women as well as men, emphasizing a “broad classical education” for young girls, particularly among the upper classes.<sup>8</sup> With higher literacy rates, sixteenth century women as well as men would have been able to interact with textual sources of herbal knowledge, both ancient and contemporary.

Like sixteenth and seventeenth century sources, medieval medical texts did not list specific herbs or how exactly to use them. The late thirteenth century book of “women’s secrets” entitled *De Secretis Mulierum* is similar to Tudor texts in that it referenced abortifacients mainly in order to condemn their use: “There are some evil women,” a commentator wrote, who “procure an abortion by boiling down certain herbs which they know well.”<sup>9</sup> The author gave no hint as to what these “certain herbs” might be. Other books of secrets mentioned specific herbs known to act as abortifacients, but these authors did not describe their potential abortive uses.<sup>10</sup> Medieval Europe’s most influential text on women’s medicine, the *Trotula*, does not even address the topic, mentioning only amulets and other magical cures (such as carrying a weasel’s testicles) as potential anti-fertility measures.<sup>11</sup> Thus, medieval texts seem to be largely silent as sources for Tudor women’s knowledge of abortive herbs.

Classical texts on medicine and botany provide a more likely option for the source of such information. Greco-Roman tradition strongly influenced English medical practice during the sixteenth century. Medical practitioners revered authors such as Galen, Dioscorides, Pliny and Hippocrates. These men discuss abortifacients quite openly, specifically indicating drugs that will cause an abortion (*abortum facit*).<sup>12</sup> Greeks and Romans used both contraceptives and abortives, distinguished by Soranus in his *Gynaecology*: “a contraceptive [*atokion*] differs from an abortive [*phthorion*], for the first does not let conception take place, while the latter destroys what has been conceived.”<sup>13</sup> Many authors—including Aristotle, Caelius, Aurelianus, Dioscorides, Galen, Pliny, Soranus, Theodorus Priscianus, and Hippocrates—described certain herbs’ abortive qualities and how to best take advantage of them in a similarly frank, open manner.<sup>14</sup> For example, *De Mulierum Affectibus*, a Roman medical text in the Hippocratic tradition, proclaims that “there is nothing better” than *elleberos* (a type of plant more commonly known as “squirting cucumber”) used as “an abortive pessary.”<sup>15</sup> These

classical writers were equally clear about the effects of such drugs. Dioscorides used a phrase that translates directly to “kills the Embrya” in the description of a number of plants, including eleboros, rue and calamint.<sup>16</sup> The discussion of herbal abortives extended beyond medical texts, with the famous playwright Aristophanes including quips and puns referencing pennyroyal (a commonly known abortifacient) in a number of his works.<sup>17</sup> The inclusion of such references in plays intended for a popular audience clearly indicates a widespread public knowledge of abortive herbs. Aristophanes is not simply an aberration; other authors, including Procopius and Ovid, made similar references, underscoring a certain degree of general acceptance and understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this common acknowledgment, anxiety about abortifacients and birth control is evident in some classical sources. The root of this concern, however, stems not from moral qualms but instead from the fact that female control of reproduction threatened male hegemony. Roman laws on abortion dealt only with the father’s right to make a decision on the issue.<sup>19</sup> Given the Roman family structure, which depended so heavily on the complete control of the paterfamilias, it is no surprise that the problem here is one of masculine power and control, not of morality.

Another source of concern for classical texts is the potential health risks of abortive herbs. In discussing abortifacients, Soranus concluded, “it is safer to prevent conception from taking place than to destroy the foetus.”<sup>20</sup> Nowhere in his verdict did he mention a sense of right or wrong; he made his conclusion based on the woman’s health. Any Greco-Roman concern was legal or medical, not moral, in nature. Thus, although abortifacients were the subject of legislation and discussion, there was no sense of “taboo” or censure surrounding them.

Classical moral neutrality towards abortifacients ended with the rise of Christianity. The church taught that intercourse should only be procreative and, therefore, condemned

abortifacients. For example, the Epistle of Barnabas, thought to have been written during the first half of the second century, advised, “thou shalt not procure abortion, thou shalt not commit infanticide.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Barnabas equated abortion with infanticide, reflecting the church’s increasing association of the two. Three centuries later, St. Jerome unequivocally stated the church’s views: “some, when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when (as often happens) they die with their offspring, they enter the lower world laden with the guilt not only of adultery against Christ but also of suicide and child murder.”<sup>22</sup> The Church clearly conflated abortion and murder, condemning anyone who aborted their child. In a world dominated by religious dogma, this view heavily influenced English opinions on abortifacients and, as the early Church of England showed few theological differences from the Catholic Church, this mindset held dominance through the Tudor Period.

British law codes reflected the change in attitudes towards abortion dictated by the Catholic Church. Unlike Roman law, which only regulated abortifacients in their relation to a father’s rights, English law banned abortion entirely. Henry de Bracton’s thirteenth century *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* (Of the Laws and Customs of England) states, “If one strikes a pregnant woman or gives her poison in order to procure an abortion, if the foetus is already formed or quickened, especially if it is quickened, he commits homicide.”<sup>23</sup> This law reflected the belief that a fetus acquired a soul after its first movements, known as quickening, which usually occurred around 18 weeks.<sup>24</sup> The fetus’ movements mark it as human, which is why “poisoning” the child after this point was considered murder. Aborting a fetus before quickening was legal but considered sinful, which correlated with the Church’s position.<sup>25</sup> This policy remained part of English common law through the sixteenth century and beyond. Therefore, in the Tudor period, providing a woman with an herbal abortifacient was punishable by law.

Although such instances represented an intersection

between canon and civil law, abortion and anti-fertility cases were usually tried in ecclesiastical court, indicating that such offenses may have been viewed more as moral crimes than as acts endangering the welfare of society as a whole.<sup>26</sup> Before the 1534 Act of Supremacy, anti-fertility measures were under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church. Pope Innocent VIII's papal bull of 1484 reiterated the Church's views on abortion and contraception, condemning those who "ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women... and hinder men from begetting and women from conceiving."<sup>27</sup> Significantly, the Pope labeled such people as witches, illustrating a significant connection between birth control and witchcraft. Even after Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church in 1534, this link with "dark magic" and its unequivocal denunciation of abortion continued to influence popular attitudes.

Concern with abortive herbs was only further heightened with the rise of widespread persecution of witchcraft in Early Modern Europe. Known as the "Witch Craze," this outbreak of accusations and trials is estimated to have been responsible for the deaths of over 40,000 people, mostly women.<sup>28</sup> The *Malleus Maleficarum*, a text infamous for its role in encouraging accusations of witchcraft, condemns witches for procuring abortions "by natural means, such as herbs," naming such practices as one of the "horrible crimes which devils commit against infants," and encouraging the association of witchcraft with abortifacients and herbs in general.<sup>29</sup> The *Malleus* also links witchcraft and midwifery, as midwives were responsible for all aspects of women's reproductive systems and possessed information on herbs' anti-fertility properties.<sup>30</sup> Any public discussion of abortifacients would have risked not only religious condemnation but also prosecution for witchcraft.<sup>31</sup> In sixteenth-century England, abortifacients were a decidedly taboo subject.

As already indicated, a close examination of Tudor-era medicinal texts reveals that many authors managed to include information about the abortive properties of certain herbs. The

sixteenth century witnessed a profusion of instructive guidebooks on both midwifery and herbs. The latter, known simply as “herbals,” catalogued and described the uses of many different plants and herbs, medicinal or otherwise. These works relied heavily on classical sources, influenced no doubt by humanist emphasis on the importance of primary texts. The authors of these works constantly cited Greco-Roman sources, validating their statements with phrases like “Dioscorides writeth” or “saith Pliny.”<sup>32</sup> In some cases, the English writer simply translated the earlier source, copying it nearly verbatim.<sup>33</sup> However, in their reliance on ancient sources, Tudor herbalists encountered the problem of how to discuss abortifacients: classical authors’ frank descriptions of abortive herbs would have been quite unacceptable for sixteenth-century England.

In order to include the information of their sources and provide as comprehensive a guide as possible, writers disguised the abortive uses of herbs. Plants that ancient authors claimed would abortum facit were listed as helpful in bringing on delayed menstruation, aiding a difficult childbirth, expelling the afterbirth, and, more rarely, drawing out a dead child.<sup>34</sup> Within the Tudor texts, these maladies were merely a guise.<sup>35</sup> All of these uses were legally and morally acceptable, as well as legitimate medical complaints, yet still conveyed the same end result as an abortion—expelling substances from the uterus.

Jane Sharp’s popular guide for midwives, *The Midwives Book; or, the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered*, offers an interesting example.<sup>36</sup> Taken at face value, Sharp seemed to criticize the use of contraceptive or abortive measures, stating that she “cannot think justifiable” women who intentionally cause infertility.<sup>37</sup> However, this offers a relatively weak rebuke when compared to condemnations invoked by sources like the *Malleus Malificium*. A sarcastic comment about the immorality of the Catholic clergy immediately follows her reprimand about abortifacients, leaving the overall impression that she did not fully support the denunciation of abortions.



Sharp offered a more pointed statement on the abortive potential of certain herbs when discussing remedies to bring on menstruation, warning her audience of midwives to “do none of these things to women with child, for that will be Murder.”<sup>38</sup> In reference to this quote, John Riddle—a modern expert on herbal abortifacients and contraceptives throughout history—wonders “whether she wrote out of conviction or intimidation.”<sup>39</sup> Given the fact that providing a pregnant woman with “poison in order to procure an abortion” was considered homicide and punishable by law, it is not surprising that Sharp included this disclaimer.<sup>40</sup> Buried in the midst of a number of long sections on how to “provoke the termes,” cure “Menstrual blood stopt,” and “Bring away the Secundine, or after-burden,” this one-line warning seems relatively insignificant.<sup>41</sup> In fact, by including this line, Sharp informed her readers, perhaps intentionally, that the herbs listed to encourage menstruation—including mugwort, myrrh and calamint—can also procure an abortion.<sup>42</sup> These were all abortifacients acknowledged by ancient sources, indicating that their associations with abortive properties had survived into Sharp’s time. Additionally, Riddle points out that some of Sharp’s instructions to “urge the terms” (“terms” being a common English euphemism for menstruation at this time) are a bit odd. For “strong country people” she recommends a number of mixed syrups and pills from the apothecary instead of simpler and far more practical garden variety abortifacients (these would have been easier for “country people” to obtain), which she certainly knows of and discusses elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> One explanation is that Sharp is purposefully including information that her intended audience would know how to interpret. “Urge the terms” (or “encourage menstruation”) could be read as code for an abortion in that forcing the body to menstruate (“urging the terms”) while pregnant would bring an end to said pregnancy—a fact that any trained midwife would understand.

Like Sharp, some of the great herbals of Tudor England include remedies to help encourage menstruation, speed

delivery and expel afterbirth. Two of the sixteenth century's most important herbals were those of William Turner and John Gerard. Turner's popular and influential *New Herball*, originally published in 1551, was one of the earliest English books of its kind and earned Turner the title "father of English botany."<sup>44</sup> In addition to a strong reliance on classical sources, Turner drew heavily on continental medical works.<sup>45</sup> John Gerard, a highly respected English botanist, published the *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* in 1597.<sup>46</sup> This well received work, covering a vast body of herbal knowledge, is largely a translation of the widely read herbal by Dutch botanist Rembert Dodoens.<sup>47</sup>

Both Turner and Gerard discuss herbs known to have abortive properties; however, Gerard was generally a bit more explicit about their potential use. This may be attributed to Gerard's later publication date or the fact that Turner, a Protestant minister, may have been more conservative.<sup>48</sup> In either case, Turner never directly referenced abortive properties while Gerard boldly explained how stinking gladdon (xyris) "will cause abortion."<sup>49</sup> Gerard's treatment of abortion is not at all condemnatory; in fact, he said that it "profiteth being vsed in a pessary" (a pessary being a vaginal suppository, at this time almost always used for contraceptive purposes).<sup>50</sup> Turner, in contrast, only stated that xyris is "good to sit over for weomen's diseases."<sup>51</sup> It is important to note, however, that Gerard's bluntness in this case was extremely unusual and, as Riddle points out, this is the only time Gerard actually uses the word abort or abortion.<sup>52</sup>

Besides this one instance, however, information on abortifacients is not given directly but instead disguised with ambiguous phrasing or as cures for delayed menstruation or birthing difficulties. Comparing the herbals with their ancient sources, it becomes clear that authors like Turner and Gerard strayed from the original instructions as little as possible, often using vague terms that allowed for multiple interpretations. Herbs valued for their abortive properties, therefore, retained

connections with more “acceptable” reasons for flushing the womb, such as encouraging menstruation or easing birth. This allows for the identification of the most commonly utilized herbal abortifacients during the Tudor period.

To identify the herbs popular in Tudor times, it is necessary to examine the classical counterparts to the English herbals. Plants belonging to the *Artemisia* family, including mugwort and southernwood, were some of the most frequently referenced and widely used abortive herbs in the Greco-Roman period.<sup>53</sup> *Artemisia* had long been connected with women’s reproduction and for good reason—modern studies have proven that it is an effective abortifacient.<sup>54</sup> The major authority on this herb’s uses is Dioscorides, who explained that all types of *artemisia* are:

good to be put into womanish insessions [baths] for the driving out of the menstrua, and the secondines, and the Embryo...Much of the herb being applied to the lower part of the belly moves the menstrua, but the juice of it being kneaded together with myrrh, and applied, doth draw from the matrix as many things as the [bath]; the hair of it is given in drink the quantity of 3 dragms for the binging out of the same things.<sup>55</sup>

English discussions of *artemisia* drew directly from this text. Turner’s description of mugwort was essentially a translation of Dioscorides, maintaining the same instructions (mix in with baths, apply to the “nethermost parte of the belly,” eat the “toppes and leaves”) and measurements (“in the quantite of thre drammes”).<sup>56</sup> There is, however, an important change. Whereas Dioscorides referred to driving out “the menstrua and the secondines and the Embryo,” Turner wrote, nearly identically, “their sykenes... their secondes and their byrth.”<sup>57</sup> Dioscorides’ uses the term *ἐμβρυον*, meaning literally “something that grows within,” referring to a growing embryo.<sup>58</sup> He was not describing

an already dead human or a fully developed child ready to be born; he was providing instructions for the abortion of a fetus. Turner, however, used the word *byrth*, a vague term that could refer to a forced early “birth” (i.e. an abortion), the expulsion of a stillborn, or simply a regular delivery.

Other Tudor medical writers also discussed *artemisia* in a way that clearly shows their knowledge of Dioscorides. Gerard recommended it be “boyled as bathes... to bring downe the monethly course,” while a practitioner in *physicke* known as “A.T.” described a poultice applied to the navel which helped speed delivery and afterbirth.<sup>59</sup> Though none of these sources explicitly mention *artemisia*’s abortive properties, their intimate knowledge of Dioscorides’ methods indicated that they were not ignorant of the usage he reported; they simply rephrased it. Sharp, for example, recommended the potion and bath described by Dioscorides as aids to help “provoke the Termes.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, she offered her readers a disguised description of *artemisia*’s potential—for what is an abortion if not the forced provoking of delayed menstruation.

Another abortifacient known to both the ancients and sixteenth century English writers was *rue*, a plant commonly found throughout Europe. Like *artemisia*, modern experiments on animals have shown that *rue* is capable of inducing abortions, especially when administered within the first few days of pregnancy.<sup>61</sup> Dioscorides labeled *rue* explicitly as an abortifacient that can bring on menstruation and kill “the Embrya.”<sup>62</sup> Given his heavy reliance on Dioscorides and other classical authors, Gerard must have known of *rue*’s abortive potential. His description, however, was not quite as blunt. According to him, *rue* purged “the secondine” (afterbirth fluids and materials), “the dead childe, and the unnaturall birth.”<sup>63</sup> Like Turner’s discussion of *artemisia*, Gerard’s use of phrases such as “unnaturall birth” and “dead childe” without specifying whether or not the fetus was already dead before the use of the herb leaves room for interpretation. If references in Shakespeare are any indication, the English public

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Medieval illustration of gardening Rue, from the Tacuinum Sanitatis



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Thirteenth century depiction of an herbalist preparing pennyroyal, a traditional herbal abortifacient

was somewhat aware of the abortive qualities of rue.<sup>64</sup> Women seeking to terminate pregnancy knew how to interpret Gerard's rather vague language and follow his recommendation of "the iuyce of Rue drunke with wine."<sup>65</sup>

Several members of the mint family, specifically pennyroyal and calamint—often confused or regarded as the same herb—were other commonly known abortifacients. The Greeks and Romans knew pennyroyal well as an anti-fertility drug, with references ranging from the plays of Aristophanes and Herodas to the medical texts of Pliny and Galen.<sup>66</sup> Such sources also knew of the herb calamint. Of the plant, Dioscorides stated, "the leaves beaten small and given in a Pessum [a pessary] doth kill the Embrya, and expel the menstrua."<sup>67</sup> Centuries later, Gerard more delicately wrote that calamint is "maruellous good for young maidens that want their courses."<sup>68</sup> Although he did not identify it as an abortifacient, an unwanted pregnancy would certainly encourage a "young woman" to "want their courses." Gerard clearly read Dioscorides (in fact, he quotes the Greek author directly earlier in his section on mints) and therefore knew that calamint could cause abortions.<sup>69</sup> Turner's discussion on "The Vertues of Calamint" also hinted at the herb's abortifacient capabilities. He wrote, "the leues brused and layd in wolle and put into the place of conception draweth douune weomens syckenes."<sup>70</sup> Turner's discussion of calamint was surely drawn from Dioscorides' text, as the English text explicitly referenced the Greek master and Turner copied the method of application almost directly.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, Turner's use of the phrase "place of conception" when referring to the vagina seems unusual, especially when compared to Gerard's euphemistic references to a woman's "secret part" or Sharp's ambiguous words like "privities" or "secrets."<sup>72</sup> The phrase "place of conception" implies that the conception has already taken place; thus, the cure for the so-called "weomens syckenes" is actually an abortion.

Another herb recognized for its abortive and general anti-fertility properties is known as aristolochia or, perhaps

more fittingly, birthwort. Dioscorides reported that, when drunk with wine, pepper, and myrrh (another supposed abortifacient), aristolochia “doth cast out all the remaining purgaments, and the menstrie and the Embrya.”<sup>73</sup> Both Gerard and Turner repeated Dioscorides’ recipe.<sup>74</sup> When translating Dioscorides, the Tudor herbalists replaced the word *embrya*, the Greek author’s statement indicating abortion. Turner claimed that the herb could draw forth “weomens floures and their byrth and all the burdenes that the mother is charged with.”<sup>75</sup> The final phrase is incredibly vague and could refer to a wide range of “burdenes,” including, of course, an unwanted pregnancy. Gerard’s statement is slightly more concrete: the aristolochia concoction “expelleth whatsoever is left in the matrix [uterus] after the childe is deliuever, the floures also and dead children.”<sup>76</sup> By “dead children,” readers could assume Gerard meant miscarriages (children who have died in the womb); however, he technically did not specify if the child was already dead before administering the concoction, only that the herb “expelleth... dead children.” For a female reader looking for abortifacients, this may have been enough of a hint. Aristolochia does, in fact, act as both a contraceptive and abortive drug, showing a one hundred percent interceptive rate for mice in recent studies.<sup>77</sup>

Juniper, also known as *savin* or *savine*, is another abortive herb described by both ancient and Tudor sources.<sup>78</sup> Like aristolochia, juniper has proven to be an extremely effective but somewhat toxic abortive drug, interrupting a significant percentage of animal pregnancies, especially with increased dosages.<sup>79</sup> Dioscorides offered a relatively generic statement on juniper: “being dranck with wine they... driue out the Partus [offspring, birth, a thing from the womb.]”<sup>80</sup> Galen, however, explicitly identified the herb as an abortifacient, as well as a contraceptive, stating simply “*ekballei*,” which means, “it aborts.”<sup>81</sup> This, perhaps, is the text from which Gerard drew his relatively unconcealed statement of juniper’s abortive properties: “The leaves of *Sauin* [*savin*] boyled in Wine and drunke... bring



downe the menses with force, draw away the after-birth, expell the dead childe, and kill the quicke.”<sup>82</sup> Gerard’s specification that the herb brings on menstruation “with force” is suspicious in itself, but the final statement, that savin will “kill the quicke” is the most blatant statement of the herb’s abortive possibilities. “The quicke,” in this case, is vernacular referring to a quickened or moving fetus; essentially, the text provides instructions for an abortion relatively far into the pregnancy.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps Gerard was less disguised when discussing this abortifacient because he wanted to impart to his readers that savin may be used for later-term abortions, indicating that other herbs may have been most effective shortly after pregnancy (as modern research suggests is actually the case). It is possible that he thought such an insignificant phrase would become lost within his nearly 1,500-page epic of an herbal. In either situation, however, one must wonder at how Gerard got away with such blatant speaking, as well as why he chose to be so explicit here when he clearly recognized the necessity of disguising his information elsewhere.

Despite vague language or phrasing, it seems that the authors understood the abortive properties of these herbs (artemisia, rue, pennyroyal, calamint, aristolochia and savin, among others). They sought to furtively communicate such uses to their readers with suggestions on how to encourage menstruation, expel afterbirth, or speed delivery. This indicates that Tudor women knew much more about herbal abortifacients and, more generally, anti-fertility agents than historians have otherwise assumed. The availability of this information would have enabled these women to control their own reproductive systems, providing them with a strong, albeit largely hidden, tool to assert some degree of power over their lives in a male-dominated society.

The social structure of Tudor England was heavily weighted in favor of patriarchic control at the expense of female independence. Legally and socially, women were subordinate to the men in their lives: first their father and, later, their husband.

They were only legally independent if they became widows. A woman's purpose was to marry and become a wife and mother; those who failed to do this—spinsters—were seen as oddities or failures, destined to live unhappy lives dependent on their charitable relations.<sup>84</sup> In a seventeenth-century commentary on English law, the anonymous "T.E." wrote that women, "are understood either married or to be married and their desires are subject to their husbands."<sup>85</sup> Legally, a husband had total power over his wife as well as her property; wives had "no action" (no legal redress) under common law.<sup>86</sup> A voice or position in 'higher matters,' such as law and government, was beyond their reach. As T.E. stated, women "make no laws, they consent to none, they abrogate none."<sup>87</sup> They certainly held no posts in government and were excluded from nearly all professions.<sup>88</sup> As Elizabethan political theorist Sir Thomas Smith declared, women were "made to keep home and nourish their family and children and not to meddle with matters abroad, nor to bear office in a city or commonwealth, no more than children or infants."<sup>89</sup> Tudor women seemingly had little power over their own lives or society at large.

Despite this male dominance, however, women may have been able to exercise more control in less obvious capacities. Compared to their contemporaries on the Continent, English women enjoyed a rather high degree of liberty. A visitor to England in 1575 commented that while "wives in England are entirely in the power of their husbands...they are not kept so strictly as they are in Spain or elsewhere."<sup>90</sup> Travelers marveled that English women were able to go to market without their husbands and often managed the household. Although women were officially excluded from taking a profession, there were often economic partnerships between husband and wife, especially among the lower classes.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, in a recent article, Barbara Harris argues that though women were officially excluded from government institutions, they may have played an influential role in English politics from their positions at court and in large

aristocratic households.<sup>92</sup>

Knowledge of abortifacients would have provided women with another mechanism of control, giving them a hidden source of power over their health. By the Tudor period, medical practice had become increasingly professionalized, requiring license and education, which automatically excluded women.<sup>93</sup> Almost all medical texts were written by men (Gerard, Turner, A.T., among many others), with Jane Sharp's midwifery text serving as a notable exception. However, women were receiving medical training, just not in an official capacity. In preparation for their roles as household managers, women learned the essentials of healing, which included herbal remedies.<sup>94</sup> Lady Margaret Hoby, for example, discussed the health of her friends and dependents in her diary, describing various healing measures and medical remedies.<sup>95</sup> Beyond this, midwives and "wise women" certainly played a large, albeit decreasing, role in day-to-day healthcare for their fellow women. Although their main task was assisting with childbirth, these women would have possessed both the knowledge and the specific herbs necessary to help induce an abortion.

Beyond those working in the medical field, knowledge of herbal abortifacients gave all women a higher degree of control over their reproductive decisions and more sexual independence both within and outside of marriage—a fairly revolutionary concept. Canon and civil law as well as societal pressure condemned extra- and pre-marital intercourse for women. Men, however, conducted affairs often, both as bachelors and once married. A man, for example, could visit brothels quite publicly and still lead a successful life within the community.<sup>96</sup> Women, on the other hand, were held to much stricter standards: they were expected to remain chaste until marriage and faithful once wed.<sup>97</sup> Women who engaged in extra-marital affairs were shamed and punished. "Cucking stools" were used to reprimand adulterous wives by dunking them repeatedly into a body of water, meant to "cool [their] immoderate heat."<sup>98</sup> Other women were paraded

through the streets in procession with an angry mob.

These different standards for men and women were addressed in a 1617 pamphlet written by an unknown woman using the pseudonym Ester Sowernam: “if a man abuse a Maide & get her with child, no matter is made of it, but as a trick of youth; but it is made so hainous an offence in the maide, that she is disparaged and vterly vndone by it. So in all offences those which men commit, are made light and as nothing, slighted ouer; but those which women doe commit, those are made grievous and shamefull.”<sup>99</sup> If the maid Sowernam described had not gotten “with child” the indiscretion could have remained secret and her reputation would have been preserved. Women risked much more with pre- or extra-marital affairs because they, unlike men, could bear the physical proof of their moral indiscretion in the form of a child. Unwed mothers were considered to be “ruined women” and they, along with their bastard children, experienced ostracism and humiliation. In addition to this social stigmatization, these mothers potentially faced raising their child unprotected and unassisted—a very difficult task in such a male-dominated world where women had limited economic opportunities. One must also take into consideration the extreme danger associated with childbirth in Tudor England. Without modern hospitals or knowledge of sanitation and disease, the maternal mortality rate was quite high, probably upwards of 1% (i.e. one in 100 births).<sup>100</sup> With such dire consequences for extra-marital pregnancies, it is perhaps not surprising that illegitimacy rates were quite low, averaging at around 2.5%.<sup>101</sup>

Such evidence has indicated to many that Tudor women conformed to societal standards regarding pre- and extra-marital sex; however, if these women knew of means to end or prevent pregnancy, the low number of illegitimate births would not necessarily mean they did not engage in affairs. As sex, especially pre- or extra-marital sex, remained a taboo subject, it is difficult to find concrete evidence of this type of sexual practice. Other sources, however, implied that women’s affairs were more

common than societal standards dictated. Popular bawdy plays and literature often featured young maids sneaking out with their lovers and many widely known jokes poked fun at cuckolded husbands.<sup>102</sup> These comic tales are by no means proof positive of female sexual practice; however, they do show that the idea of women engaging in pre- or extra-marital intercourse was well-established in the public consciousness.

Knowledge of herbal abortifacients would have made such affairs more feasible by providing women with the ability to reduce the chance of physical evidence and burden in the form of an unwanted child. The fact that knowledge of abortive herbs was included in major medical guides and seems to have been relatively widespread indicates that women were utilizing the information. This means that Tudor women were quite possibly more sexually independent and engaging in pre- or extra-marital intercourse more frequently than both their contemporaries and modern scholars have otherwise assumed. There is, however, no concrete evidence to support this type of scenario. Pre- and extra-marital intercourse was a serious sin and affairs still risked discovery even without resulting in pregnancy. Additionally, herbal abortifacients could be dangerous if not administered properly and were not 100% effective. The important point, nevertheless, is that such affairs would have been more feasible and potentially more common as women possessed the means to somewhat control their own fertility.

Even within a marriage, herbal abortifacients allowed women a higher degree of control over their lives. There are many reasons why a married woman may have wanted to engage in intercourse with her husband without producing a child. As already discussed, childbirth was quite dangerous for women and other health concerns may have factored in as well—a woman who was already weak, sick or had a history of difficult births would have had ample reason to avoid becoming (or staying) with child. Additionally, many wives, especially in poorer families (who certainly would have had access to common

garden-variety herbs with abortive properties) simply did not have the time, desire, energy or resources to care for a child, especially if they already had a large family. England's high child mortality rate may have also served as incentive for parents to avoid the risk and emotional distress of a child: infant mortality may have been as high as 20% and only seven or eight out of every ten children were expected to live to age ten.<sup>103</sup> There is, in fact, some statistical support for the use of "family planning" methods within a marriage. The birth rate in Europe between the late fifteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries averaged around six children per married woman. This is significantly less than what would have been expected—a recent study found that without any form of fertility regulation the rate should have been between 9.8 and 11.6 children per married woman.<sup>104</sup> This deficit can, of course, be attributed to many different causes, one of which is simply abstinence. With such widespread knowledge of herbal abortifacients, however, it seems likely that herbs such as artemisia, rue and pennyroyal probably played a role. Since child rearing was generally the responsibility of the mother, the ability to limit the number of children she had would have been an important area of control for a Tudor woman.

In a largely male-dominated society where women had few legal rights, knowledge concerning abortive herbs was not just practical, it was powerful. It gave both married and unmarried women a means to control an important aspect of their lives: their sexuality and fertility. The durability of such information—from the texts of classical antiquity to Tudor herbals—proves that it was both remembered and utilized by generations of women.

<sup>1</sup> An abortifacient is defined as a substance that can be used to induce the termination of a pregnancy.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (London: Pushkin Press, 1948), Part 1, Question XI, 77.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book; or, the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered*, trans. Elaine Hobby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 128.

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, iv. 5, noted by John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>5</sup> See Riddle, *Eve*, 49; Rebecca Laroche, *Medical Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550-1650*, (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 2; Robert Painter and Brian Parker, "Ophelia's Flowers Again" *Notes and Queries* 41 (1994) 42-4.

<sup>6</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> "The Sixteenth Century: Review," *Norton Anthology of British Literature*, accessed 22 April 2012. <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/16century/review/summary.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Balmuth, "Trends in Female Schooling and Literacy: England, 1500-1700," (paper presented at the Annual Conference of the New York State Reading Association, Kiamesha Lake, NY, November 7, 1984)

<sup>9</sup> Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets : a Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 103.

<sup>10</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 101-2.

<sup>11</sup> *The Trotula: a Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, trans. Monica H. Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 34, 97, 99.

<sup>12</sup> Soranus, *Gynaecology*, trans. Oswei Temkin (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1956) i.62.

<sup>13</sup> John M. Riddle, "Oral Contraceptives and Early-Term

Abortifacients During Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” *Past & Present* 132 (Aug. 1991), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Plinio Prioreschi, *A History of Medicine: Roman Medicine* (1998, Reprint, Omaha: Horatius Press, 2001), 644.

<sup>15</sup> Riddle, “Contraceptives,” 20.

<sup>16</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, trans. John Goodyer (1655), ed. Robert Gunther (1934, Reprint, New York: Harper, 1959), 3.52, 3.43, 4.150.

<sup>17</sup> John Scarborough, “Contraception in Antiquity: the Case of Pennyroyal,” *Wisconsin Academy Review* 35.2 (March 1989), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Prioreschi, *Roman Medicine*, 645.

<sup>19</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Soranus, *Gynaecology*, i.62.

<sup>21</sup> Barnabas, “Epistle of Barnabas” trans. Kirsopp Lake, *Early Christian Writings*, accessed 22 Apr. 2012. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/barnabas.html>; L. W. Barnard, “The Date of the Epistle of Barnabas: A Document of Early Egyptian Christianity,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 44, (Dec. 1958), 101-107.

<sup>22</sup> St. Jerome, “Letter to Eustochium” trans. W.H. Fremantle, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II, Vol 6*, ed. Phillip Schaff (Canterbury: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 27, letter 22, section 13.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Bracton, *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, ed. George E. Woodbine (1915, Reprinted, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942) l. 28, 2.341.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah M. Butler, “Abortion by Assault: Violence against Pregnant Women in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth- Century England,” *Journal of Women’s History* 17.4 (2005), 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 129

<sup>27</sup> George Lincoln Burr, “The witch-persecutions” from *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania,



1897), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Lois Martin, *A Brief History of Witchcraft: Demons, Folklore and Superstition*. (London: Constable and Robinson, 2010), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Malleus, 77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> For more on the connection with witchcraft, see Henry Boguet's *Examen of Witches Drawn from Various Trials* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 88; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, 2nd Edition, (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010); and Laroche, *Medical Authority*.

<sup>32</sup> William Turner, *A New Herball, or The First and Seconde Partes of the Herbal of William Turner Doctor in Phisick* (1551 Reprint, London: Arnold Birckman, 1568), 61; John Gerard, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: Bonham and John Norton, 1597), 718-719.

<sup>33</sup> See for example: Dioscorides 3.127 and Turner, 64.

<sup>34</sup> Some continental sources, such as Leonhart Fuchs' *De historia stirpium* (Basel: 1542), are more direct in their discussions of abortifacients. Although herbal guides from the continent served as models for English authors, the same degree of 'plain-speaking' is not found in British texts. See Riddle, *Eve*, 142-143.

<sup>35</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Although Sharp's book was not published until later in the seventeenth century, her work was extremely important in reflecting the experiences and advice of a practicing midwife. It is also highly likely that Sharp's information (especially concerning recipes for medicines to "provoke the terms") reflects what was available during the Tudor period because, as Elaine Hobby argues in her introduction to the text, early-modern midwifery manuals borrowed extensively from each other. See Elaine Hobby, introduction to *The Midwives Book* by Jane Sharp, xvi-xx.

<sup>37</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 128.

- <sup>38</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 221.
- <sup>39</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 154.
- <sup>40</sup> Bracton, *De Legibus*, l. 28, 2.341.
- <sup>41</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 198, 179, 167.
- <sup>42</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 220.
- <sup>43</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 154.
- <sup>44</sup> Laroche, *Medical Authority*, 29.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 182-4.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Laroche, *Medical Authority*, 29.
- <sup>49</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 60.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> Turner, *A New Herball*, 23.
- <sup>52</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 184.
- <sup>53</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 32.
- <sup>54</sup> Laroche, *Medical Authority*, 167; Riddle, *Eve*, 48.
- <sup>55</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 3.127.
- <sup>56</sup> Turner, *A New Herball*, 64.
- <sup>57</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 3.127; Turner, *A New Herball*, 64.
- <sup>58</sup> Henry Alan Skinner, *The Origin of Medical Terms* (1949, Reprint, Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1961), 158.
- <sup>59</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 1104-1105; A.T., practitioner in physicke, *A Rich Store-House or Treasury for the Diseased*, (London: Thomas Purfoot, 1596) cap. 206.
- <sup>60</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 198.
- <sup>61</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 14-15.
- <sup>62</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 3.52.
- <sup>63</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 1257.
- <sup>64</sup> See notes 3 and 4
- <sup>65</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 1257.
- <sup>66</sup> Scarborough, "Contraception in Antiquity," 21-22.
- <sup>67</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 3.43.

- <sup>68</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 688.
- <sup>69</sup> Of Mints: “Dioscorides teacheth that being applied to the secret part of a woman before the act, it hindreth conception.” (Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 682).
- <sup>70</sup> Turner, *A New Herball*, 103.
- <sup>71</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 3.34.
- <sup>72</sup> Turner, *A New Herball*, 103; Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 682; Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 38.
- <sup>73</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 3.6.
- <sup>74</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 849; Turner *A New Herball*, 59.
- <sup>75</sup> Turner, *A New Herball*, 59.
- <sup>76</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 849.
- <sup>77</sup> Anita Pakrashi, Bulbul Chakrabarty and Anasuya Dasgupta, “Effect of the Extracts from *Aristolochia Indica* Linn. on Interception in Female Mice,” *Experientia* 32.3 (15 March 1976), 394-5.
- <sup>78</sup> Elaine Hobby, glossary to *The Midwives Book*, 320.
- <sup>79</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 54-5.
- <sup>80</sup> Dioscorides, *De Materia Medica*, 1.104.
- <sup>81</sup> Galen, *De Simplicium Medicamentorum*, 6.2.15 (Kuhn ed.), noted in Riddle, “Contraceptives,” 13.
- <sup>82</sup> Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes*, 1378.
- <sup>83</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 184.
- <sup>84</sup> Alison Plowden, *Tudor Women: Queens and Commoners* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 164.
- <sup>85</sup> T.E., *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights, Or, The Lawes Provision for Woemen: A Methodicall Collection of Such Statutes and Customes, with the Cases, Opinions, Arguments, and Points of Learning in the Law, as Doe Properly Concerne Women.* (London: Miles Flesher, 1632) Book I, Section iii, 6.
- <sup>86</sup> T.E., *Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights*, Book III, Sections i & vii, 116-118, 128.
- <sup>87</sup> T.E., *Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights*, Book I, Section

iii, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Plowden, *Tudor Women*, 165.

<sup>89</sup> Smith, *De Republica Anglica*, as noted by Jeffrey Singman, *Daily Life in Elizabethan England* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>90</sup> Van Meteren as noted by R.E. Pritchard, ed. *Shakespeare's England: life in Elizabethan and Jacobean Times* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 29.

<sup>91</sup> Pritchard, *Shakespeare's England*, 28.

<sup>92</sup> Barbara Harris, "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England," *The Historical Journal* 33.2 (June 1990), 259.

<sup>93</sup> Riddle, *Eve*, 122.

<sup>94</sup> Singman, *Daily Life in Elizabethan England*, 53.

<sup>95</sup> *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby (1599-1605)*, ed. Dorothy M. Meads, (London: Routledge, 1930), 68. For example, Hoby discusses the death of her friend Doctor Brewer, attributing it to "a medeson he ministred to him self to cause him to sleep" (68).

<sup>96</sup> Singman, *Daily Life in Elizabethan England*, 51.

<sup>97</sup> An important exception is intercourse between an engaged couple which, while officially condemned, was far more acceptable and, it seems, relatively common. See Pritchard, *Shakespeare's England*, 27.

<sup>98</sup> Pritchard, *Shakespeare's England*, 42.

<sup>99</sup> Sowernam, Ester, "Ester Hath Hang'd Haman: or an Answere to a Lewd Pamphlet, Entituled, The Arraignment of Women" (London: Printed [by Thomas Snodham] for Nicholas Bourne, 1617), 24.

<sup>100</sup> For reference, according to a 2010 report by the CIA, the world's highest modern maternal mortality rate is 1.1% (Chad), with the United States holding at around 0.02% and the United Kingdom at 0.012%.

For statistics for Tudor England, see Singman, *Daily Life in Elizabethan England*, 37 & Pritchard, *Shakespeare's England*, 28.

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- <sup>101</sup> Pritchard, Shakespeare's England, 27.  
<sup>102</sup> Pritchard, Shakespeare's England, 28.  
<sup>103</sup> Singman, Daily Life in Elizabethan England, 39.  
<sup>104</sup> Riddle, Eve, 173.

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Page 56: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/legal/history\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/abortion/legal/history_1.shtml)