

Texts and Documents

PROCREATION, PREGNANCY, AND PARTURITION: EXTRACTS FROM A MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

by

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A MIDDLE ENGLISH metrical version of *Sidrak and Bokkus*, medieval romance and book of knowledge, is preserved in the fifteenth-century MS. Lansdowne 793 in the British Museum.¹ Two of the six English metrical MSS extant² testify that they were 'translated owte of french in-to englishe'³ and, further, that they were brought 'unto Englyssh ryme' by the translator, one 'Hugh of Campedene,'⁴ contentions reaffirmed by Godfraye's early printed edition.⁵ The numerous prose MSS which survive in Danish, Dutch, Italian, French, and Provençal, extending from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, indicate the popularity of the opus.⁶

Topics in the Lansdowne text, which runs to more than 12,000 lines, comprehend biological science, physical science, human relations, and theology, forming the matter of four books which intersperse an episodic prologue and epilogue. Subjects, posed in question-answer dialogue between fictional King Bokkus and his Christian philosopher, Sidrak, shift with kaleidoscopic abruptness and without discernible pattern.

In a critique of the French MSS, Renan and Paris, though considering the work a success disproportionate with its real value,⁷ admit that it is an important document in the history of ideas and science.⁸ Even Langlois, who terms the compiler a 'dolt',⁹ recognizes *Sidrak and Bokkus* as one of the works of the Middle Ages which enjoyed the greatest success down to the heart of the Renaissance.¹⁰ Preliminary investigations of *Sidrak* were begun more than seventy years ago by Professor Karl D. Bülbring of Bonn and left incomplete at his death in 1917. Bülbring, in his survey of the English MSS, lauds *Sidrak* not only for the nature of its scientific investigations, but for coming to terms with the spirit of the time through an astute merging of the authority and faith of the past.¹¹

In this multi-faceted compendium eight of the questions on biological science coalesce about a tripartite theme: procreation, pregnancy, and parturition. Spelling has been modernized and essential obsolete words glossed in the presentation of those sections which follows.

III, xv

'May a man get a child, by thy life,
Every time that he toucheth his wife?'

'Man there is in this world none
That might get his wife upon
A child at every time and ay
When he fleshly by her lay,

[always]

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Nor so oft may no woman
Conceive of the seed of man
A child forth forto bring
As he might get it in plying,
For she is cold of nature
And cold to seed is no nurture.
A lecherous man is blind also
That goeth to that work much unto,
And he travaileth *him* against right, [himself]
Of his *reins* he loseth the might. [kidneys]
Then is the seed feeble and *vain* [fruitless]
And to engender hath no *main*. [might]
For a woman [seven]¹² chambers has, [possibly]
And in each of those *parcas* [more]
She may conceive a child and no *mo* [those]
And yet she has enough of *tho*,
And were a man of such power
To get when he cometh her near
At every time a child, where should she
Spere so many in her body? [store]
Also if there begetten one [immediately]
The mother closeth up *anon*
And no more conceiveth she
Till that same a-born be.'

III, xvi

'What is it and how gathereth it so,
Man's *kind* when it goeth him *fro*?' [semen] [from]
 'The kind of man that goeth from him
Is gathered out of every *limb*, [body part]
For when a man with all his mind
With a woman doeth his *kind*, [sex act]
The heart of him and the great will
That he hath his deed to fulfill
Maketh his body to sweat therewith
Blood inward from every *lith*, [body part]
And that blood cometh full swiftly
And to the *ballocks* goeth full hastily, [testicles]
And from thence it issueth so
When it cometh the *pintil* unto. [penis]
Another *skill*, then, is *froting*, [reason] [rubbing]
As when a man hath great liking
Between him and his wife in bed,
Which lecherous lust is forbid.

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Long rest also a skill is why,
And with meat and drink the body
Fulfilling it over measure
That it may no while endure,
From a man sometime for one of tho
It might sleeping go him fro,
But bodily travail and fasting
Will *beneme* him such thing.'

[eliminate]

IV, 1x

'Why may not young men get *also*
Strong children as old men do?'
 'Children that may be small and *ying*
That beeth not a-come to *waxing*
They be yet feeble of nature
To make any *engendrure*.
Their seed is yet too green thereto
And therefore may it no good do,
And the passage in the body
Where that the *nature* shall pass by
Is too *strait*, wherefore the *kind*
No *kindly* issue may it find.
And if that they any children get,
They shall never be strong nor great,
For it *falleth* in every thing
Feeble seed feeble all the *spring*,
And not so of men alone,
But of beasts every one.'

[as]

[young]
[full growth]

[congress]

[semen]
[narrow] [semen]
[fruitful]

[befalls]
[offspring]

III, liiij

'A woman with child great and heavy,
What nourisheth it in her body?'
 'God it nourisheth and maintaineth
And in her womb feeding it leaveth,
But all the food that doeth it good
It taketh of the mother's blood
That is of a vein *pertaining*
To the navel fastening.
For if the food of such thing were
That it were not *denied* there before,
Then behooved the child *needly*
Make digestion in its body.
But that blood that it liveth by

[appended]

[digested]
[necessarily]

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Is *defied* before *ready*,
And that blood is beginning
That in her [floures]¹³ doth spring.
Therefore, if a woman with child be,
No [floures]¹⁴ the while hath she,
Else every month they come her to
But if any other evil it *fordo*.’

[digested] [already]
[menses]
[except] [prevent]

IV, 1xiiij

‘How lieth a child, tell me this,
In the mother’s womb, *iwis*?’
‘A child through God’s grace
Hath in the mother’s womb a place
In a chamber, one of the [seven]¹⁵
Of the *matrice* that we *nevene*,
And his fists, *sooth* to say,
Lie before her eyes twain.
Great joy they have *them seeming*
Where they lie and great liking,
And they would never more
Come in other *stead* than there.
But when they be hither a-come
And the air here have *a-nome*,
Then would they not be there again,
Of this world they beeth so *fain*.’

[truly]
[womb] [name]
[truth]
[themselves] [apparently]
[place]
[partaken]
[satisfied]

I, 1ij

‘How may the child that full of love is
Come out of the mother’s womb, tell me this.’
‘God that all hath made of nought,
And many wonders He hath wrought,
And as He hath power thereto
That one body in that other do,
So hath He might it out to bring,
For at His will is all thing.
When time cometh that woman shall
Be delivered of that she goeth with all,
All the joints of her body
Openeth and *largeth kindly*,
Each one *save* the chin before,
And in that time the child is bore
As a sickness of death by were,
But as soon as the body bare

[enlarge] [naturally]
[except]

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Hath savoured the air that is here
And the feeble bones *gineth* stir, [begin]
Then they begin to dry anon
And waxen hard and fall to bone,
And all the joints that were open
In the woman again be *cropen*. [drawn together]
Harken and I shall tell thee how:
If a man his finger *drow*, [cut]
The joint will open and undo
And *sithen* creep again thereto, [thereafter]
So fareth women after childing
Through the grace of heaven's king.'

I, liij

'May any woman bear mo
Children in her at once but two?'
 'A woman may bear *kindly* [by nature]
Seven at once in her body,
For the matrice of woman,
If that thou understand can,
Hath seven chambers and no mo,
And each is *departed* other fro, [separated]
And she may have in each of tho
A child and with seven go,
If God's will be first thereto
And the *kind* of woman also. [nature]
If hot of kind be the woman
And great liking hath to man,
One chamber or two or three
Of *thilke* that in her matrice be [those]
Of great will open there again
When that a man hath by her lain.
The seed falleth in them anon,
And they close again each one,
And if that seed *accordance* find, [favorable milieu]
It waxeth farther in his *kind*. [disposition]
And if that the other chambers be
Open, and it be so that she
Know a man oft that same night,
Or on the morrow by the day light,
Or the second day, later nought,
And the seed be therein brought,
They close and hold fast
And children nourish at the last,

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And so long they shall be unbore
As the seed of other were sown before.
As they were gotten *wonderly* [wonderfully]
But understand not *forthly* [therefore]
That same time that a man
Knoweth fleshly a woman
That seed in her root take.
Many things may *letting* make, [blockage]
But it behooveth that he and she
Be both together of one *tempre*, [temper]
For if a man a lecher be
And haunt many, as men may see,
The child shall be sometime blithe
And sometime great *fellness kithe*. [fierceness] [manifest]
And if that it befall so
That the one of them two
Have any man greatly in thought
When the seed is to the chamber brought,
That seed may take likeness *parcas*
Of him that her thought in was.'

II, 1xxviiij

'The child that hath full the shape
In the mother, by what hap
Is it sometime brought to nought
And may not alive forth be brought?'
 'It may be three skills come to
Why it is fordone then so.
One is by sufferance of God's will
That suffereth them here to *spill*. [kill]
Another skill also there is
Why it fareth sometime amiss,
The feeble nourishing in the wife
That it may not come to life,
For the fellness of wicked nurture
Maketh the seed it may not *dure*. [endure]
Feebleness of reins is the *thrid* [third]
As when a woman is so *betide*, [betimes]
Some woman with a child may be
And feeble of reins *eke* may be she [also]
That she is not of the might
The pain of childing to suffer *right*. [properly]
The mother stireth *her* and turneth about [herself]
So that the child falleth out

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Of the chamber that lieth in,
With great pain they part a-twain,
When it is out then is it *lorne* [lost]
When it is then so dead born,
And through grace of God's might
The mother closeth anon right.'

REFERENCES

1. See the present author's unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Sidrak and Bokkus, now first edited from Manuscript Lansdowne 793* (University of Washington, Seattle, 1965).
2. The six, all fifteenth-century, except Sloane, dated 1502, include: BM Lansdowne 793, BM Harley 4294, BM Sloane 2232, Oxford Bodley 1222, Trinity College Cambridge 1287, and Meyerstein *olim* Cowper. Cp. Oxford Digby 194, a fifteenth-century Middle English prose fragment.
3. Trinity, f.lv.
4. Bodley, f.lv.
5. GODFRAYE, THOMAS, STC 3186 and 3187.
6. See KNUDSEN, GUNNAR, *Sydrak Efter Haandskriftet Ny. Kgl. Saml. 236*, Copenhagen, 1921; VAN TOL, JOHANNIS FREDERICUS JOSEPHUS, *Het Boek Van Sidrac in de Nederlanden*, Amsterdam, 1936; and BARTOLI, ADOLFO, *Il Libro Di Sidrach*, Bologna, 1868.
7. RENAN, ERNEST, and PARIS, GASTON, 'La Fontaine de Toutes Sciences du Philosophe Sidrache', *Histoire Litteraire de la France*, Paris, 1891, xxxi, p. 317.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
9. Ch. V. LANGLOIS, *La Connaissance de la Nature et du Monde au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1911, p. 198.
10. *Ibid.*
11. BÜLBRING, KARL DANIEL, 'Sidrac in England', *Beiträge zur Romanischen und Englischen Philologie: Festgabe für Wendelin Foerster* (Halle, 1902), p. 443.
12. Per Harley. Lansdowne deleted.
13. Per Harley. Lansdowne deleted.
14. Per Harley. Lansdowne deleted.
15. Per Harley. Lansdowne deleted.