

H-France Review Vol. 15 (February 2015), No. 24

François Rousset, Jean Liebault, Jacques Guillemeau, Jacques Duval, and Louis de Serres, *Pregnancy and Childbirth in Early Modern France: Treatises by Caring Physicians and Surgeons (1581-1625)*. Edited and translated by Valerie Worth-Stylianou. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 23. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2013. xxix + 412 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, glossaries, bibliography, and index. \$45.95 CAN (pb). ISBN 978-0-7727-2138-9. E-book: Iter Inc./Scholars Portal Books, ISBN 978-0-7727-2139-6.

Review by Claire Carlin, University of Victoria.

“The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe” series has provided valuable translations of early modern texts since its inception at the University of Chicago Press in 1996. Still under the direction of founding co-editors Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr., the series moved to Toronto in 2010, and is currently published by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto, which offers the series as e-books to subscribers to Iter (the on-line “Gateway to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance”). The Toronto series has continued the tradition of favoring texts by women while including a small number of male-authored works that address the concerns of women or challenge stereotypes of female inferiority.

Valerie Worth-Stylianou, a professor of French at Trinity College Oxford, is well known for her research on the early modern French practice of medicine for women, resulting most notably her excellent study and annotated bibliography, *Les Traités d'obstétrique en langue français au seuil de la modernité* and her bi-lingual website, *Birthing Tales*.^[1] France was at the forefront of medical treatises in the vernacular from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, when over twenty treatises were published in seventy different editions, signalling the wide success of the genre (p. xvi). In the texts selected for this anthology, four male physicians and one surgeon discuss gynecology and obstetrics with sympathy and appreciation for women. Addressed variously to medical practitioners, including midwives, but also to literate lay people, including women, these treatises were the result of recent discoveries in anatomy which led to a less misogynist evaluation of the status of women, whose bodies had traditionally been defined either from the Aristotelian perspective (as incomplete males) or according to Galen (as irrational beings governed by an unstable uterus).^[2]

The original documents are usually hundreds of pages long, so extracts had to be chosen for this volume. In helpful introductions to each selection, Worth-Stylianou explains her choice of the chapters included, although the General Introduction provides no explicit explanation why these particular treatises were retained among the twenty or so possibilities. Narrowing the time frame to the period between 1581 and 1625 is justifiable, however, in that the turn of the century saw a renewal of the *Querelle des femmes* that had begun at the end of the Middle Ages. In varying degrees of praise for female qualities, the medical treatises intervened in the quarrel on behalf of women, counterbalancing innovations in invective on the part of satirists and theologians.^[3]

Worth-Stylianou's choices are certainly justified by the interest of each treatise and the variety among their themes. François Rousset's *New Treatise on Hysterotomotoky, or Childbirth by Cesarean* of 1581 sparked controversy across Europe with its promotion of caesarean delivery in living women. The *Three*

Books Dealing with the Infirmities of Women of Jean Liebault was the translation and continuation of a treatise in Latin by Giovanni Marinelli, revised and enlarged yet again in 1609 by Lazare Pena. Worth-Stylianou notes that this treatise “was one of the most enduringly popular works on this subject in the French language” (p. 66) with at least ten French editions between 1582 and 1674. Jacques Guillemeau, the only surgeon among these authors, published *On the Safe Delivery of Women* in the same year that the first volume of royal midwife Louise Bourgeois’s *Observations diverses sur la sterilité, perte de fruits, fécondité, accouchements et maladies des femmes et enfants nouveaux naiz* appeared, in 1609.[4] Specialist surgeons “were adopting an increasing role in deliveries in Paris” (p. 142), pointing to an increased medicalization of childbirth, previously the province of midwives. Obstetrics are again the focus of the first third of Jacques Duval’s *On Hermaphrodites, Deliveries of Women* (1612), although the sections on hermaphrodites, a popular topic of the time, occupy the majority of his text. The *Treatise on Sterility among Women* of 1625 by Louis de Serres provides the most in-depth study for the time of procreation, especially conception and the care during pregnancy of women who had suffered repeated miscarriages.

Sterility had been considered an exclusively female affliction before the early modern era. De Serres advances the critique of this view along with other indications of the inferiority of women such as the notion that women who bear only daughters should be considered sterile (p. 299). Indeed, this treatise along with that of Liebault go the furthest in celebrating “women’s dignity and civilizing influence,” in the Neoplatonic tradition (p. xxiii). Despite understandable limits on their proto-feminism, all five texts treat women as individuals worthy of being heard. They share the goal of successful pregnancy and childbirth, pointing out the importance of women’s health for a healthy society.

The critical apparatus of this volume includes three glossaries (medical authorities from classical to early modern times, medical terms, and early modern herbal remedies and medicines), a primary and secondary bibliography (though the latter is fairly succinct with fewer than fifty entries), and indexes of proper names and places along with a general index. Even more impressive are the twenty-seven illustrations, including numerous engravings depicting scenes of childbirth, medical instruments, and anatomical figures, as well as the original title page of each treatise. Also provided in each case are a translation of the title page, the front matter (dedications, prefaces, etc.), the translated table of contents in its entirety, all supported by copious notes.

Modern editions of these treatises in French would be most welcome to early modernists, but of course, this fluent translation into English makes them available to a much wider audience of students as well as researchers. The growth of interest in texts treating women’s health has been developing since the 1980s alongside that in women’s history and literature in general. Historians of medicine and art, medical anthropologists, and literary scholars have all fertilized the field.

The contributions of Valerie Worth-Stylianou are all the more important for their variety. This edition/translation complements her wide-ranging 2007 study in French, as does her on-line project, unfortunately not mentioned in the volume under review.[5] One can only speculate about this omission. *Birthing Tales* seeks to provide extracts, often quite short, in both French and English, from twenty-four medical treatises published between 1500 and 1630, including those treated in the work under review here. Perhaps the publisher did not care to have the site compete with the publication, but such a strategy would be misguided. The site’s content differs from and enhances the book. Or perhaps the inherently impermanent nature of internet-based research projects made including the URLs in a print publication seem inadvisable. The preservation of digital humanities projects should be vital for the scholars creating them, but as is becoming increasingly evident, many projects, even if placed in a repository, will not remain usable. The ideal strategy for scholars may well be the one adopted by Worth-Stylianou: dissemination in print as well as digitally, ensuring that her stimulating scholarship will reach the widest possible audience both inside and outside the academy.

NOTES

[1] Valerie Worth-Stylianou, *Les Traités d'obstétrique en langue français au seuil de la modernité: bibliographie critique des "Divers Travaulx d'Euchaire Rösslin" (1536) à l'"Apologie de Louyse Bourgeois sage femme" (1627)* (Geneva: Droz, 2007). *Birthing Tales*:
<http://www.birthingtales.org/> accessed 17 July 2014.

[2] Worth-Stylianou's General Introduction briefly discusses the impact of the practice of dissection in sixteenth century, but for a deeper examination, see the pioneering studies of Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore, *Un corps, un destin: la femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance* (Paris: Champion, 1993) and Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[3] A thorough overview of the Quarrel during this era can be found in the series *Revisiter la Querelle des femmes. Discours sur l'égalité/inégalité des femmes et des hommes, de 1400 à 1600*, eds. Armel Dubois-Nayt, Nicole Dufournard and Anne Pauper, and *Revisiter la Querelle des femmes. Discours sur l'égalité/inégalité des femmes et des hommes, de 1600 à 1750*, eds. Danielle Haase-Dubosc and Marie-Élisabeth Henneau (Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2013). For a discussion of the renewal of the Quarrel at the turn of the century, see C. Carlin, "La polémique misogynique et le parasitage des savoirs renaissants," in Christine Noille & Bernard Roukhomovsky, eds., *Un autre dix-septième siècle, mélanges en l'honneur de Jean Serroy* (Paris, Champion, 2013), pp. 135-146.

[4] A new edition in English of Bourgeois's work is forthcoming in "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe" series, translated by Stephanie O'Hara and edited by Alison Klairmont Lingo.

[5] See note 1 above.

Claire Carlin
University of Victoria
ccarlin@uvic.ca

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172