

Abortion methods in England.

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It had long been envisaged in English law, that 'potions' might be given to women 'to destroy the child within her', yet we have seen that this was not a criminal offence. We hear, somewhat indirectly, of instances. Firstly, there was a concern that the various medicines given to help women might also be used to procure an abortion. From the middle ages onwards there were many remedies. For instance a mixture of dittany, hyssop and hot water would help 'abort' a foetus dead in the womb.¹ Other herbal remedies were used to 'provoke the termes', that is to help with menstrual troubles.² Culpeper stated that there were various herbal remedies to make menstruation come, but he warned midwives 'give not any of these to any that is with Child, least you turn murderers...'³ Boorde also noted that there were certain laxatives which caused 'abortion' and that 'light women', that is immoral women, might use them.⁴ The danger was formally recognized in midwives' certificates. For instance one for 1722 included the clause 'Item, you shall not give Counsel, nor Minister any herb, Medicine, potion, or any other thing to any woman being with Child, thereby to destroy or cast out what she goeth withall before her time.'⁵ Contemporaries were aware of the danger that 'phisick' might endanger a child in the womb.⁶ It was from apothecaries shops that 'medicine' was sometimes obtained, and it was alleged that knowledge of what was useful was passed on to surgeons and physicians by knowledgeable local women.⁷

The nature of the potions taken is sometimes revealed, usually in bastardy or infanticide proceedings. In one ecclesiastical court case, we are told that Thomasine Lockyer 'did usually drink rew and other medicines to rid herself from being with child.' In another case, her man 'did advise and press her to take bearsfoot and savon boiled, and drink it in milk, and likewise, hay madder chopt, and boiled in beer and drink it to destroy the child conceived in this examinant's body.' He also brought 'raisons of the sun for her to eat.'⁸ The rector of Leaden Rothing, Essex, in 1574 was supposed to have made a woman pregnant and, 'brought her from London a roughe herbe, which he called saven (willing her to use yt in drincke for hindering the childe yf she should have any).' She proceeded to have a premature child which died 'not having either heare (hair) nor nayles.'⁹ In Colchester, a woman who was with child was told to take 'savin', but it had no effect so she tried other 'phisicke'.¹⁰ Other cases in the depositions at later seventeenth-century Assizes refer to general medicines, but only one mentions a specific substance, namely mercury and oil and 'steel filings in a bottle.'¹¹

¹ Dawson, Leechbook, p.97

² Sharp, Midwives, p.243

³ Culpeper, Midwives, p.78

⁴ Boorde, Breviary, p.8

⁵ LPS 4, p.57

⁶ Groasnt, Lismore Papers, p.83

⁷ Quaife, Wanton, p.119-20

⁸ Quaife, Wanton, p.118

⁹ Consistory Court Cases Book m.n. Eccl. Rec. (2)

¹⁰ Colchester Examination book, 1619-1945, 2-4

¹¹ Assizes 45/13 Yorks, Charles II

It is likely that there were a number of known abortifacients. A recent article suggested that hemp was 'grown quite extensively in the eastern counties and was called 'The Devil's Flower' and was used to procure miscarriages.¹² The steel filings referred to above were one instance of the use of 'iron-sulphate, and iron chloride which, along with cantharides (a kind of insect, sometimes known as 'Spanish fly') were referred to as the major English abortifacients.¹³ Opium and seed of water cress were other known abortifacients.¹⁴

The most important, however, seems to have been 'savin', which is referred to three times above. 'Savin' was used for various medical purposes and was indeed something of a universal remedy in the seventeenth century, when advertisements made no mention of its dangerous properties.¹⁵ According to the authority referred to by Bloch, 'English women use mainly *Juniperus Sabina*, the needles of the yew...'¹⁶ 'Savin' is in fact the popular name for this juniper, but also a name applied to similar bushes such as the Sea Wormwood and dwarf Juniper. We are told that 'the dried tops of this shrub is used as a drug. 'Savin is strongly poisonous; it possesses emmenagogic properties, and hence was a common means of procuring abortion.'¹⁷ 'Emmenagogic' means, to draw down the menstrual blood. We can see more clearly now what Culpepper and others were warning about. The same drug was good for helping with menstrual disorders, but in a large dose when a woman was with child would cause a miscarriage. Dryden in 1693 wrote 'Help her to make Manslaughter; let her bleed. And never want for Savin at her need.'¹⁸ 'Savin' continued to be used into the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Thus a powerful herbal drug to induce an abortion was probably widely available in the form of Juniper.

Another main method seems to have been to batter the body physically. We have noted that 'if a man strike her, whereby the child within her is killed', this was not homicide on the child. In one case a girl was entreated 'to bruise her body thereby to destroy the child.'²⁰ We are told of a sixteenth-century case where a priest's mistress who was pregnant 'tightened her girdle and performed exercises with a rolling pin in order to destroy the fetus.'²¹ Unfortunately it is not clear what the exercises were. If they were physical exercises, rather than battering, then this was also another technique. There was a common belief that women who were several months pregnant should 'walk very much.'²² This, however, could be intentionally overdone as is implied in **Aristotle's Masterpiece**. The question was

¹² Country Fair, March 1970, p.29

¹³ cited in Bloch, *History of Sex*, 313; Norwegian medical books of the sixteenth century mentioned 'rusty iron' as one ingredient of abortion portions (Benedictow, Milky (xerox), 33

¹⁴ Schnucker, *Elizabethan* (xerox), 659

¹⁵ Houghton, *Husbandry*, iv,428.

¹⁶ Bloch, *Sexual*, p.313

¹⁷ OED, s.v. 'Savin'

¹⁸ quoted in OED, s.v. 'Savin'

¹⁹ Smith, *People's Health*, 75. According to Hibbert, savin was popularly known as 'Cover Shame' (Hibbert, *The English*, 398).

²⁰ Quaife, *Wanton*, p.118

²¹ Houlbrooke, *Thesis*, p.160

²² Culpepper, *Complete Midwife*, p.8-9

asked 'why doth wrestling or leaping cause the casting of the child, as some subtle women do on purpose?' to which the answer was 'the vapour is burning, and doth easily hurt the tender substance of the child, entering in at the pores of the matrix.'²³ Finally, we have noted the method of 'tightening the girdle.' This again verged on various normal practices in childbirth. It seems to have been customary to wear a 'swatheband' that is a belt or bandage to support the belly during pregnancy.²⁴ Obviously if this were too tight, or wrongly placed, it might cause a miscarriage. Thus there is a report of women who induced abortion by lacing themselves very tightly.²⁵ Finally, there were a number of pessaries or suppositories. We are told that 'These were apparently to induce enough vaginal bleeding so that the foetus would be flushed out of the womb.'²⁶

²³ Aristotle, Works, p.164-65

²⁴ Culpepper, Complete Midwife, p.8-9

²⁵ Schucker, Elizabethan (xerox), 658-9

²⁶ Schucker, Elizabethan (xerox), 659