

Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England, by Jennifer Evans (Woodbridge: The Boydell P., 2014; pp. 225)

In this bold, ambitious and pioneering book, Jennifer Evans argues that aphrodisiacs were central to how sexual desire, pleasure and fertility were understood, regulated and practised between 1550 and 1780. Engaging with historiographies of demography, religion, family, gender and sexuality, Evans analyses manuscript receipt books, as well as printed medical treatises and advertisements, botanical texts, ballads and erotic literature, to argue that aphrodisiacs worked to promote lust and venery as well as to treat impotency and barrenness. Broadly speaking, such substances were categorised according to the humoral medical system, but were adapted to the needs of individuals, and, as common elements within the everyday diet, grown in kitchen gardens or found in hedgerows, aphrodisiacs were 'an integral part of sexual health practices' (p. 13).

In Chapter One, Evans argues for the diversity of advice in writings about fertility. Manuscript recipe books mixed old and new knowledge accumulated from various sources and refined over time, some of which was crossed out by later users if they deemed particular information to be obsolete or ineffective, while many medical writers aspired to show off their learning and knowledge in print, resulting in texts which incorporated both old and new opinions aimed at a broad audience. Alongside handbills and newspaper advertisements, such materials provided a means of obtaining treatment without exposing oneself to a medical practitioner, with some texts playing upon these ideas of secrecy and privacy, while ballads focused on the need for husbands to provide their wives with sexual pleasure and gratification.

Chapter Two discusses how gender determined advice about reproduction. Medical treatises promoted both a two- and one-sex model of the body, emphasising anatomical differences between the sexes and noting that the size and shape of reproductive organs impacted upon the ability to engage in reproductive sexual intercourse, while simultaneously acknowledging that lack of heat, seed or sexual pleasure had a negative impact on the fertility of both women and men. Barrenness and impotence could have the same causes and be treated on the basis of humoral principles, but became gendered terms—the former associated with women and implying complete infertility, the latter associated with men and implying lack of strength and power, as well as erectile dysfunction. These developments increased scepticism in the one-sex model and encouraged beliefs that reproductive problems were not solely the fault of women.

The power of aphrodisiacs lay in their similarity to, or sympathy with, the reproductive organs, and substances taken from animals while they were engaged in sexual activity were deemed most potent. Chapter Three discusses how aphrodisiacs functioned to enhance sexual pleasure and fertility, arguing that they invigorated the reproductive organs by increasing the heat of the body as well as the quantity and quality of seed. Hot meats, herbs and spices were held to improve fertility and stimulate sexual desire in both women and men, while, by contrast, windy meats and flatulent foods worked best for men, facilitating their ability to achieve an erection and expel their seed with force, but risked impacting

negatively on women's fertility since wind in the womb was regarded as a dangerous condition.

Chapter Four discusses the use of aphrodisiacs to combat impotence and infertility caused by witchcraft. Such magic was most often targeted at men, and accusations of witchcraft-based impotence cases were rare, possibly due to male anxieties about loss of control, or belief that impotence was due to natural causes. Not all medical treatises specified how bewitchment took place, but the most common methods appear to have been the ligature spell and the use of enchantments in the house or close to the body of the victim, usually leading to erectile dysfunction, lack of sexual pleasure or desire, and the impeding of the flow of seminal fluid. Natural and magical remedies might be used to treat such problems, although the boundaries between the two categories were permeable, and treatments included not only aphrodisiacs but also prayer and fasting or occult and ritual means involving cunning folk.

While Chapter Four focuses primarily on male infertility problems, Chapter Five discusses advice to women on how to avoid miscarriage and protect their fertility. Fertility problems and advice changed as women moved from conception to pregnancy, with aphrodisiacs more often allowed before rather than after conception, as they might encourage sexual intercourse which risked damaging the foetus. Such substances were believed to be especially effective when prescribed alongside emmenagogues, which had the power to increase or renew the menstrual flow, aiding conception and providing nourishment for the foetus.

This is a book which is destined to have a significant impact on how historians write about medicine, gender and sexuality in early modern England. Throughout the book, Evans engages critically with numerous authors in these fields, and is to be commended on the wide range of primary sources that she has examined, with a particular strength of the book being her analysis of numerous printed medical treatises, which has enabled her to offer a panorama of the range of different forms of advice available to the literate upper and middling ranks of English society. However, this is a book primarily about prescriptions rather than practices, and, although Evans is at pains to put women and men on an equal footing, inevitably her choice of materials privileges the male voice. Women are by no means absent, since many of the receipt books Evans cites were compiled by women, but to what extent these offer proof of women using such treatments, or what they thought of such remedies, requires further investigation, perhaps through reference to life writings, depositional evidence, and the representations of everyday lives and popular mentalities found in cheap print. This is the topic for another sort of book, but one (should it be written) which will have to use Evans's work as its inspiration.