

Consilium 69

At the Second Title of Book 3

Concerning the Simulation of Diseases

Argument

Matthia del Bello, whose husband was an exile outside the authority of the Church for more than a year on account of some crime or other, was accused by a very disreputable woman in her neighbourhood who pursued her with intense hatred, of becoming pregnant as the result of an adulterous affair, of having tried to provoke an abortion many times in order to conceal her shame because of her fear of her relatives and even more of her husband, of throwing into a latrine the living foetus which she had born and whose wailing she denied that she had heard. Indeed Matthia had already been observed by other women in the neighbourhood with her stomach swelling more than usual, and she had frequently complained to these women of the suppression of her menses for several months. On the day after the presumed birth, the Fiscus first saw to the cleaning of the latrine in order to find the body of a tiny child, which he never saw, but he discovered near the latrine only soil fouled with blood, and, moreover, in the house he came upon several rags still moist with a considerable amount of blood and holding gouts of this same coagulated blood. Thereupon he sent the woman for an examination by three midwives and a surgeon. Two of the midwives made a deposition maintaining that Matthia had recently given birth, since the lips of the uterus were still swollen and her stomach had become less swollen and the fluids from childbirth were still flowing in considerable quantity. The other midwife and the surgeon reported that there was no noticeable indication that Matthia had given birth, but rather that she had

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suffered from a flood of menstrual blood because her menses had been kept back for a long time. Therefore, since the matter was in doubt, I was consulted and responded as follows.

Summary

1. What kind of swelling of the lips of the uterus there should be in one who has recently given birth.
2. How menstrual purgings are to be distinguished from the purgings of childbirth.
3. What the bosom and breasts look like in women giving birth.
4. What kind of decrease in the swelling of the stomach should occur in women giving birth.
5. The more the uterus swells in a pregnant woman the thicker it becomes.
6. Because of a simple retention of menstrual blood, women sometimes believe they are pregnant, although this is not the case.
7. Conclusions based on the state of a woman's body and when they indicates that she has recently given birth.
8. The nature of the flow of blood in childbirth and the nature of the flow in menstruation.
9. Absence of milk removes all suspicion of a recent birth.

1. No confidence is to be placed in the depositions of the two midwives concerning a childbirth by Matthia, although they are considered experienced in their profession, since in a matter of such importance they have made their declarations relying on trivial

and equivocal signs and conclusions rather than on very reliable indications which are clearly able to attest to the opposite and which they either did not notice or ignored.

For they misunderstood everything which they presented concerning the swelling of the labia of the uterus, the matter purged in childbirth, and the subsidence of the stomach. In respect to the swelling of the lips of the uterus, it is quite evident that they observed this indication quite superficially; for it is not just a simple swelling of the aforementioned part which demonstrates that a woman has given birth, but an oedematous swelling which occupies the whole pudenda, as in *Severinus Pinaeus lib. 1. de not. virg. cap.7, as I mentioned libro tertio Quaest. Medico-Leg. Tit. 2. quest. 9. num. 18.* Indeed in childbirth those areas also swell so that the little pieces of flesh called caruncles *Myrtoides* [hymenal tags] by anatomists, which exist here and there in the walls of the uterus, are completely erased; *as I said ibid. according to Pinaeus loc. cit. and according to Riol. Anthropograph. lib. 2. cap. 32.* What the surgeon observed escaped the ignorant midwives, although this sign is considered among the most reliable and far more certain than any others, for the surgeon giving this reason for his own deposition said among other things that Matthia's uterus and all her private parts appeared as they should naturally be in women who are not pregnant and have not recently given birth, except that they were rather swollen because of her menstrual flux, but not as swollen as they would have become in childbirth, when the caruncles mentioned above are hidden by the swelling of these same private parts, and yet in Matthia's uterus these caruncles were not at all hidden or diminished, but were clearly present to those who were looking; and so it is evident that the aforementioned midwives, as if little experienced in their profession, paid superficial attention to a few

indications, but paid no attention to those signs which were more significant, perhaps because these more reliable signs were completely unknown to them, although after carefully examining Matthia's uterus, the third midwife, who agreed with the surgeon, stated that there was no evidence to indicate that Matthia had given birth, giving this proof about which we are speaking and other proofs which are considered very reliable for uncovering the facts in this matter.

2. The proof which they found from the matter purged in childbirth even more demonstrates the ignorance of the aforementioned midwives, for they did not know how to distinguish between menstrual purgings and the purgings occurring from childbirth, and yet women who have greater experience in practising midwifery know that there is a great difference between them: for they differ very greatly in respect to the substance of the blood which is usually purged and the matter which is usually purged along with the blood; for in an ordinary menstrual purging, pure blood is purged in moderate quantity and with a healthy colour, unless a serious female illness prevents this; but if a woman is not completely healthy, the blood which is purged in each menses seems mixed with other fluids and flows either imperceptibly or too heavily and is either meagre and diminished in quantity or floods out in excessive quantity. But in childbirth blood is purged abundantly, like that of a sacrificial animal, as *Hippoc. lib. de Nat. Puer. num. 11 and lib. 3 de Morb. Mul. sect. 3.* teaches, and water flows out with the blood before or even at the same time, and what ought to be noted even more carefully in this matter, milk mixed with the blood of childbirth or with urine is visible, as doctors mention, *Holler. comm. 7. Aphor. 3. in scholiis, and Laur. Joubert. lib. 4. error. Popul. cap. 11, and Severin. Pinaeus loc. cit.,* all of whom I have mentioned elsewhere in this regard.

3. Further one ought to consider how carelessly those midwives behaved in respect to paying attention to reliable signs from which they could arrive very certainly at a recognition of the truth as to whether Matthia had actually given birth or not; for they observed neither the bosom nor the breasts which swell considerably in childbirth and become firmer, although they are not swollen with milk to the fullest extent until the third day; if the midwives had observed the breasts, they would have ascertained that they were flaccid and pendulous and not consistent with Matthia's beauty, for nothing could more smirch her beauty and lovely face than such breasts, as soon as beholders were allowed to see them. Therefore, what certainty can be placed in these midwives crossing over with dry foot when this proof was definitely observed by women who are not practising the profession of midwifery? What trust should be placed in them?

4. Finally, the aforementioned midwives offered as a clear proof of recent childbirth the sudden decrease in the swelling of Matthia's stomach, and they placed great faith in this proof because in menstrual purging, if there is any preceding swelling of the body, it diminishes slowly and gradually; in childbirth the stomach usually subsides immediately, as occurred in our case: for although Matthia had a considerably swollen stomach, it subsided in a moment with purging having followed, and so it must be said that the swelling was not caused by retained menstrual blood, but by a foetus abiding in the stomach, and when it was ejected, the stomach immediately subsided, as usually happens with all those giving birth.

5. But in regard to this, these midwives do not show themselves to be sufficiently experienced or they maliciously suppose what is not there; for in childbirth, it is far from certain that the stomach subsides immediately, as the uterus, which creates the swelling

of the stomach along with the foetus, is also endowed with so much thickness from pregnancy, notwithstanding the constant enlarging which occurs to enclose the foetus, so that it usually equals the thickness of two fingers around on all sides; as anatomists attest, *Andr .Laur. lib. 5. Anatom. cap. 21., Joan. Vesling. in syntagm. Anatom. cap.7.,* this thickness does not immediately disappear after childbirth, but decreases gradually day by day, in the same way as a woman is cleansed from childbirth. Midwives like these do not know this, which is not unusual, since even among doctors there may be those who do not know that this happens, thinking that the membranes of the uterus, or I should rather say the substance of the uterus, grows thinner each day the more it distends with the growth of the foetus, and thus they will easily believe that the uterus subsides immediately after birth, just as these midwives show that they have this belief. But what occurred was the absolute opposite of this conclusion; yet they think that in menstrual purgation the stomach, if it is in any way swollen from retention of menstrual blood, subsides gradually, but in childbirth it decreases immediately; but the opposite usually happens for the reason mentioned above, since in menstrual purging the veins immediately remain empty of blood and the stomach decreases in size and subsides; for the substance of the uterus swells to the extent that the veins are found to be swollen with blood, while in pregnancy the whole uterus swells in accordance with its own substance.

6. Since, therefore, all those indications which the two midwives bring forward as proof of a birth which Matthia is supposed to have aborted are completely false and worthless, it must be concluded that their deposition is in no way to be trusted, but rather the deposition of the more knowledgeable midwife and of the learned surgeon

ought to be respected, and it must be concluded that it cannot be established by means of any proofs that Matthia has given birth, since she has never been pregnant, as can clearly be deduced from the absence of signs of pregnancy, but rather that she suffered from a prolonged retention of menstrual blood, on account of which it is not unusual that her stomach remained swollen for a period of several months, as is customary in pregnant women: for this is not uncommon; indeed, every day we observe that some women, who are suffering only from retention of menstrual blood, believe that they are pregnant, and not only do they persuade themselves on account of the swelling of stomach which occurs after several menses, but on account of all the symptoms by which all those who are actually pregnant are troubled, and yet they are encumbered with these same symptoms: however, when in the ninth or tenth month, either later or earlier, with nature providing the force, they expel the menstrual blood retained all that time, and thus they are freed from the swelling of the stomach and all the symptoms they suffered, as happened for Matthia: in which case, the rags kept in her house and found by the the Fiscus, which contained gouts of blood and were stained with this same blood, certainly substantiate the opinion that Matthia is innocent, since if she had been guilty, she ought rather to have concealed them and immediately given them to her maids to be washed. To this point also is the way the way Matthia behaved: for if she had been pregnant, she ought to have concealed all the symptoms she was suffering, since they could reveal her shame: namely the swelling of her stomach and the retention of her menstrual blood, which, however, she freely revealed to the neighbourhood women and her relatives because she was certain that she was free of all fault .and she did not need to conceal the swelling of her stomach and the

suppression of her menstrual blood from other women, since she most certainly knew that these signs could not have been the result of pregnancy.

And thus it is sufficiently evident that the Fiscus could find no justification in the soil found fouled with blood near the latrine, since it is not strange if some some portion of blood were to fall to the earth and befoul the soil as Matthia was betaking herself to the latrine to relieve her stomach with her menstrual blood flowing violently; certainly the Fiscus could not deduce from this blood that she went to the latrine to dispose of a baby in it; besides this, if the woman had committed such a crime, since she was strong and by no means weakened, she could have washed away such a flow of blood onto the soil and removed it, so that the crime could not be discovered because of such blood: however, this is not pertinent, since she was not afraid for herself, knowing that her conscience was clear and she certainly knew there was no foundation for any suspicion of her.

7. But as the negligence or rather the crass ignorance of the aforementioned midwives becomes more and more apparent, it should be noted that they did not mutter a single word in respect to the trustworthy signs attesting that a woman has recently given birth, but passed over them in silence, since they certainly knew that their absence proved Matthia's innocence contrary to their opinion; for the conclusions which can be drawn about a woman from the condition of her body are of great importance; in fact, in the first days after childbirth, however strong she is naturally, a woman is noticeably weakened on account of the labours and pains of giving birth, so that she is forced to stay in bed for many days and is quite pale and very lethargic, not only because of the labours and sufferings mentioned above, but also because of the great

quantity of blood pouring out during the birth: but the midwives could observe none of these signs in Matthia, since she had a good colour, unabated energy, and conducted herself with her usual animation; since, however, only a day after the presumed birth, they paid attention to unreliable indications so as to agree with the Fiscus rather than to uncover the truth, they announced falsely and against the truth that Matthia had recently given birth.

8. Furthermore, the midwives did not carefully observe, as they should have, the condition of her uterus; for when blood flows in the labour of childbirth, all the veins of the uterus, especially the larger ones, gape open more obviously and are exposed to view, and yet in the menstrual flux this is not the case, but happens only for the smaller veins, although it cannot be denied that when a lengthy and long lasting retention of menstrual blood has flowed out, the more ample and larger veins are fully open; in childbirth, however, along with this opening of the veins there is a very great distention of the area, which is not seen in the menstrual flux, even if this menstrual flux is retained for many month, since the cause of the distention, namely pregnancy and the existence of a foetus in the uterus, is absent.

9. And finally, the absence of milk in the breasts removes all doubt, since it is very abundant in those who have recently born a child from the third day; and although women check the flow with remedies and dry up, and completely prevent production of milk with certain potions, yet no ingenuity can prevent the breasts from swelling and from not welcoming in part the rush of the milk; therefore, although the midwives could ascertain this on the following day, and yet did not know or were negligent, since they did not even dream of such evidence and it did not allow them to strengthen their

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deposition, they omitted this proof along with other very reliable indications and conclusions and relied on more inconclusive signs from which they could with no certainty provide proof against Matthia's innocence.