

“An mola sine viri congressu concipi possit?” The Uterine Mole in Medical and Philosophical Texts between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period

“An mola sine viri congressu concipi possit?” A mola uterina nos textos médicos e filosóficos entre a Idade Média e o início da Época Moderna

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Abstract: The uterine mole was the subject of various interpretations regarding its aetiology. In the Middle Ages it was considered produced by women through nocturnal emission of their ‘seed’. The idea of the *mola* as a product of a blend of male and female seed became dominant in 16th century thanks to the re-discovered of a Galenic text. This contribution aims to highlight the different ways of interpreting the *mola* in the period between the Middle Ages and the 16th century, showing how the different interpretations were significant for judging women in ethical terms.

Keywords: uterine mole; *mola*; generation theories; female sexual behaviour; superfetation; monstrous births.

1. Physicians and philosophers of nature have shown interest in the uterine mole and its genesis since antiquity. To mention just a few examples, the first reference can be found in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, in which it is described by the author of the treatise *Diseases of Women* as a fleshy mass (μύλη) in a woman’s womb produced through a combination of heavy menses and a scant sickly seed². There are references to the mole in Aristotle’s *De generatione animalium*, in which the philosopher describes the case of a woman who thought she was pregnant after sexual relations with her husband as she had an enlarged abdomen and other signs of pregnancy. Nothing happened when the birth was due, however, and her belly remained swollen for another three or four years. Finally, after a heavy case of dysentery, she is said to have given birth to a fleshy mass, a μύλην. Aristotle explains that the pheno-

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² Hipp. *Mul.* I 71 (LITTRÉ, VIII, 148-151). For Hippocratic (and Aristotelian) references to the mole, see GAZZANIGA (2013) 665-666. On the origins of the Greek term in the agricultural world and its metaphorical use in medicine, see SKODA 1988, 297-300.

menon was due to the inability of the womb to produce sufficient heat for the normal development of the embryo. The mole could remain in a woman's womb at length, even until old age, sometimes becoming so hard that it was difficult to cut into two even with an "iron edge"³.

Differently, in Soranus's *Gynaikeia*, the most important gynaecological work of antiquity, the mole is not described as the product of a failed conception but as the result of an ulcer due to the inflammation of the uterus⁴.

Instead, in *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny describes the phenomenon (*mola*) as deriving from conception by a woman on her own without the contribution of the male seed, which explains why the mole only has a vegetative life:

*Molas... gigni putant, ubi mulier non ex mare, verum ex semet ipsa tantum conceperit. Ideo nec animari, quia non sit ex duobus, altricemque habere per se vitam illam quae satis.*⁵

³ ARIST. GA, IV, 7, 775b 24-776a 8. On the difference between Hippocratic and Aristotelian thought regarding the mole, Valentina Gazzaniga writes: "La mola è in qualche modo il parallelo e il completamento estremo del concetto di *teras* aristotelico; pensare il deforme come il prodotto dell'allontanamento della possibilità di replicare il padre è concetto fortemente affermato in *Generazione degli animali* quanto assente nei testi ippocratici" (GAZZANIGA [2013] 666). Part of the passage of GA is reproduced in *Historia animalium* X, in which the mole is compared to a windy egg (*ὕπηνέμιος*) — an infertile egg produced by birds without the male seed. The mole is said to result from heat in the uterus and the poor mixing of male and female seed (HA, X, 7, 638a 10-25). The work is considered spurious by the majority of scholars, above all because «the author describes a woman as contributing seed to conception in the same way a men does» (DEAN-JONES [2012] 181). Aristotle's embryological doctrine, expressed in the GA, in some books of the *Historia animalium* and the *De partibus animalium*, identified the male seed as the active contributor to conception. Being without seed, the woman was said to contribute passively by providing her menstrual blood. The *Historia animalium* X was accepted as genuine by medieval Islamic scholars, especially Avicenna. See O'NEILL (1974) 224. Differently from Aristotle, the Hippocratic authors and then above all Galen postulated the existence of a female seed alongside the male one, both of which were necessary for the formation of a foetus. For an overview of embryological theories, see MARTORELLI VICO (2002) 13-16; ZUCCOLIN (2017) 77-83.

⁴ SOR. *Gyn.* III 36-37. See GOUREVITCH (1996) 2109-2110. Soranos of Ephesus was active in the second century AD.

⁵ PLIN. *Nat.* 10.184. There is also a description of the mole in *Nat.* 7.63. The term mole is also related to the agricultural world in Latin literature. On this matter and for a reflection on the metaphorical use of the expression, see BRACONI (2008) 42-43 and in particular 46, note 70.

The mole is described as a fleshy mass in the majority of sources, with symptoms similar to those for pregnancy such as a break in menstruation, a swollen belly, and sometimes the perception of a weight, if not movement, in the abdomen by the woman. Unlike the normal product of conception, however, it could remain in the uterus at length, if not throughout the woman's lifetime; it often had serious repercussions for her health and became her eventual cause of death.

In the Middle Ages, the most important reference texts for theories on the genesis of the mole were Avicenna's works, which were translated into Latin from Arabic in the twelfth century: the subject is addressed in both the *Liber Canonis* and the *De animalibus*⁶. Above all in the latter work, as we shall see, the author acknowledged that the mole could form in the absence of male sperm.

Given the indeterminate nature of the genesis of the phenomenon, medical theories borrowed from reference authorities were accompanied by descriptions of teratological wonders. These were frequently supported by fanciful legends and 'popular' beliefs, as a result of which the mole was interpreted on a par with animals, often assuming imaginative forms, or was in any case associated with them. The connection between the mole and anomalous animate forms continued through the Renaissance, while some of the theories on its genesis were revisited in the second half of the sixteenth century following the rediscovery of texts from antiquity that were almost unknown in the Middle Ages, above all book XIV of Galen's *Περὶ χρείας μορίων*⁷.

Given these premises, and without claiming to be exhaustive, this article will present some of the most widespread theories about the origin and formation of the mole in the Middle Ages and the early modern period by analysing several representative medical and philosophical texts. In this way, it will underline that generation theories on the matter were strongly associated with female sexual behaviour in various ways, thereby influencing the way in which the women who gave birth to moles were morally judged.

⁶ Avicenna attempted to reconcile Aristotle's theories with those of Hippocrates and Galen regarding the theory of the two seeds. See MARTORELLI VICO (2002) 17-19.

⁷ It was translated in 1317 by NICCOLÒ DA REGGIO but it had limited distribution. On the Latin translation of the Galenic Corpus, see FORTUNA (2012) 391-412.

2. Medieval theories on generation and embryology were widely influenced by the Latin translation of two works by Avicenna, the *Liber Canonis* and the *De animalibus*. In Book X of the latter, the Persian physician posits the theory that the uterine mole is a product generated solely by female sperm secreted during a nocturnal emission (*pollutio*) triggered by an erotic dream. He acknowledges that a mole could also form during sexual relations with a man, although male sperm plays no role due to the prior blockage of the uterus:

*Et quando mulier somniat coitum tunc clauditur eius matrix, et apparent in ea sinthomata impregnationis. Et quando clauditur matrix super illud sperma, et accidit mola matricis. Et dico ego quod hec mola accidit secundum istam viam in spermate mulierum, aut quando coit mas, et intrat sperma femine in matricem et non intrat sperma maris.*⁸

The *Liber Canonis* provides a far more technical and detailed explanation of the entity, but it is still described as the result of a surfeit of female matter in the presence of heat, or indeed coitus characterised by a *defectus virtutis masculinitatis*⁹.

There are frequent references to the subject of nocturnal emission in works such as the *Quaestiones super De animalibus*, a thirteenth-century work by the theologian and philosopher of nature Albertus Magnus¹⁰. For him, the failure of the two seeds to commingle impedes the formation of a foetus, the normal and natural product of coitus. The production of a mass of amorphous flesh instead of a foetus is said to derive from female nocturnal emission, attributed to the imagination, when the woman dreams of intercourse with a man, and the warm womb attracts female sperm¹¹. For Albertus, this

⁸ AVICENNA (1508) 44va. He associates the mole with *ova venti* a concept dating back to Aristotle.

⁹ AVICENNA (1556), *Lib. III, fen XXI, Tract. II, cap. XVIII*, 721.

¹⁰ Albertus was one of the most important commentators on Aristotle's *libri naturales*. He also acquired information from Arabic, Greek, and Latin authorities, and influenced generations of authors of medical texts. He used many different medical sources, including most notably Avicenna's works. See SIRAISI (1980) 379-404.

¹¹ ALBERTUS MAGNUS (1955), X, Q. 5, 218: *Unde mola, ut dictum est, generatur ex spermate per pollutionem emissio ad os vulvae et iterum ad fundum retracto et inviscato cum immunditiis matricis augetur*. As Martorelli Vico highlighted (MARTORELLI VICO [2002] 29), Albertus was one of the first to read the 1232 translation of Avicenna's *De animalibus*. With

is nature's way of adapting¹², creating what Maaïke van der Lugt defines as the product of a "parthénogenèse incomplete"¹³.

The idea that the male seed played a dominant role in mole formation was therefore generally ruled out, overridden by the notion — expressed by various natural philosophers during this period — that it could also depend exclusively on the woman¹⁴.

It is curious that Albertus makes a point of specifying that female nocturnal emission can also occur without an accompanying erotic dream, such as in the case of nuns¹⁵. This explanation implicitly demonstrates that the delivery of a mole could lead to a negative moral judgement on the woman in question, as the fantasies and erotic dreams that prompted the emission of seed could be a source of reproach, especially for a theologian.

Medical texts addressing the phenomenon of the mole tend to suggest that it had its own form and above all its own life. Even Giovanni Matteo da Grado, a fifteenth-century physician who worked in Pavia, states that on more than one occasion he has personally observed *frustum aliquatenus figuratum, quod movebatur, et ita vixit per horas*¹⁶ in his commentary on Book IX of the *Liber ad Almansorem*, expanding the passage of the Latin translation of Rhazes's text¹⁷.

regard to mole produced through nocturnal emission, see also Peter of Spain in the thirteenth century, who writes in a passage of Book IX of his *Questiones super libro De animalibus Aristotelis*, 280: *Et queritur quare ex polutione in mulieribus mola, in avibus ova venti, in aliis autem animalibus generatur nihil ex polutione* (PETRUS HISPANUS [2015] 280).

¹² ALBERTUS MAGNUS (1955) 217: *non intendit natura producere molam, cum retrahit semen, sed fetum, et ideo emittit semen mulier ad collum matricis, ut obviet spermatis maris, putans se in somnio coire cum viro. Sed deficiente isto spermate virili natura frustratur... et melius est facere molam, carnem talem scilicet, quam nihil.*

¹³ VAN DER LUGT (2004) 126.

¹⁴ See Luciano Cova's commentary (COVA [1991] 195) on the work of Jean Vath, a thirteenth-century Parisian philosopher and commentator on Aristotle who, like Albertus Magnus, relied on Avicenna for the description of the genesis of the mole.

¹⁵ ALBERTUS MAGNUS (1955), 217: *Sed in vigilia saepe accidit pollutio absque imaginatione, ut compertum est in monialibus.* On nocturnal emission in the work of Albertus Magnus, see JACQUART-THOMASSET (1985) 94-95.

¹⁶ IOHANNES MATTHEUS DE GRADI (1560) 394rb.

¹⁷ Rhazes limits himself to describing the mole and the state of health of the woman who delivered it. *Mola* is described as «*frustum carnis informe*»; RHAZES (1497) IX, 88, 50va.

The idea that the mole could assume a shape, especially taking the form of an animal, is also expressed by Albertus Magnus. In Book X of the *De animalibus*, he writes that women called the *mola a caput ovis vel vituli*¹⁸, but above all in the *Quaestiones* he specifies that a *bufo* is delivered by women in some regions: an animal generated because of the particularly suitable constituent material of the accompanying mole¹⁹.

The association of the mole with certain animal forms or imaginary beings is well expressed in the *Lilium medicine* by Bernard de Gordon († 1320?), a physician and professor at the University of Montpellier. He explains that the mole was also described as an *arpia* or *frater lombardorum* and was largely the result of corrupted female seed (*ex semine mulieris corrupto*), the absence of male sperm (*ex carentia spermatis viri*), and unnatural heat. The mole is said to be generated mainly by the women of Lombardy, as they work a lot, or as a result of poor nutrition, as in the case of the women of Puglia²⁰.

An association between nutrition and the abundance of women's seed is found in the commentary on the *Liber ad Almansorem* by Jean de Tournemire (1329-1396), another physician in Montpellier. He states that the mole sometimes took the form of a monstrous animal commonly referred to as an *arpa*²¹, whose name derives from its claws and mouse-like pointed snout (*layci appellat arpa quia habet arpas et rostrum acutum sicut mus*), while in Italy it was also known as a *frater lombardorum*²². The texts of both French physicians feature

¹⁸ ALBERTUS MAGNUS (1916), X, II, 2, 750-751.

¹⁹ ALBERTUS MAGNUS (1955) 218: *Sed in quibusdam regionibus, ut dicitur et audiui, semper cum mola producit bufo, quia ista materia est aptissima ad generationem bufonis.*

²⁰ BERNARDUS DE GORDONIO (1496) 219rb: *Et frequentius ut dicitur generatur in mulieribus lombardie aut quia magis laborant quia magis sunt subiecte aut propter corruptionem nutrimenti sicut in Apulia quia dicitur communiter quod italice pessime vivunt sicut ex fructibus et herbis sed bene induuntur.*

²¹ See also PETRUS HISPANUS (2015) 280: *Et quare mola non habet animam cum alteri ex superfluo concepti generetur animal sicut in mulieribus salernitanis generatur in utero bufo qui vocatur harpem.* About *arpa* in Salernitan medicine, see AUSÉCACHE (2007) 7. The sources report different ways of indicating this entity: *arpia*; *arpa*; *arpo*. See for example the passage in *Salernitanes questiones* (ante 1200) quoted in the *Dilage* (2018), 64: *Esta autem arpo vermis quedam ad modum bufonis, et generatur ex spermate in matrice, et nascitur cum fetu.*

²² IOHANNES DE TORNAMIRA (1490) 136vb.

references to the *frater lombardorum*, an alternative term to the *frater salernitanus* mentioned by some authors at the Medical School of Salerno: Platearius (*Practica*)²³ and above all Gilles de Corbeil (a French physician who worked in Salerno in the twelfth century)²⁴. Both the *frater salernitanus* and the *frater lombardorum* are said to have been generated by women in Salerno; the different definitions stem from the fact that the area was under Lombard rule until the arrival of the Normans in the eleventh century. In Gilles de Corbeil's work, *frater salernitanus* is the name given to a small monstrous animal delivered by a woman shortly before giving birth to a live foetus. The author explains that it was instantly clubbed to death by the women assisting the delivery as it was believed to be a potential cause of death of the mother if it managed to touch the ground after leaving the womb²⁵. It is easy to think that the French physician was conveying a 'popular' legend mainly transmitted by women, who were the only people allowed to attend childbirth at the time. In any case, the *frater* is never described using the term *mola* in texts by Salernitan authors. Furthermore, although never explicitly specified, it seems to have been viewed as the result of superfetation, namely an additional conception by the woman after her first impregnation, one of the theories behind the generation of twins²⁶. Indeed, Gilles de Corbeil refers to previous misdeeds committed by women who delivered the two beings (baby and animal), including allowing themselves to be seduced by strangers²⁷. As the theory of superfetation established that two conceptions could also occur with sperm from different men, it inevitably led to a negative assessment of female sexual behaviour.

In the fifteenth century, an association between the *mola* and a monstrous product of superfetation can be found in two works by Michele Savonarola: the *Practica maior* (1440-1446) and the *De regimine praegnantium* (1460 c.) (despite its Latin title, the treatise is written in the vernacular of Ferrara)²⁸.

²³ PLATEARIUS (2016) 734. *Terminus post quem* of Platearius' work: mid-twelfth century.

²⁴ AEGIDIUS CORBOLIENSIS (2017), IV, vv. 666-699, 311-312.

²⁵ About the entity called *frater Salernitanus*, see AUSÉCACHE (2007) 5-23.

²⁶ See ZUCCOLIN (2019) 34-39 and *passim*.

²⁷ See AUSÉCACHE (2007) 12-13.

²⁸ SAVONAROLA (1547), VI, XXI, 27, 276v; SAVONAROLA (1952) 143. See ZUCCOLIN (2019) 51-53.

Although the physician suggests that the mole can be generated by female nocturnal emission and the absence of male seed, he mentions that a *fera* was born together with a foetus in some regions. The form of the *fera* supposedly corresponded to the type of coitus engaged in by the woman that resulted in superfetation. If it looked like a noble animal such as a sparrow hawk, it meant that the woman had given herself to a noble man after having been impregnated. Instead, if she gave birth to an owl, lizard, or similar animal, the second intercourse had been with a peasant²⁹. Savonarola does not clarify whether the *mola* and the *fera* are manifestations of the same phenomenon, but a close association is drawn as they are described in the same chapter. In a similar way, the physician Alessandro Benedetti (1450-1512) compares the *mola*, said to be conceived by the woman alone through her lustful imagination, to living animal and monstrous forms generated together with a normal foetus — therefore through superfetation — by women in certain parts of the Italian peninsula (Puglia and the Pisa area)³⁰.

3. Gynaecological and obstetrical treatises were distributed widely from the sixteenth century onwards. This was not only as a result of increased interest in anatomy studies, and thus in the female body, but also because of the rediscovery of many gynaecology texts by ancient authors, most notably the relevant works by Hippocrates, partly following the publication of the complete Corpus in Latin in 1525³¹. The phenomenon of the uterine mole received more extensive coverage in these works, in the section specifically dealing with issues related to generation, and was also examined in *Curationes* and *Observationes*, texts which combined clinical case descriptions of patients,

²⁹ SAVONAROLA 1547), VI, XXI, 27, 276v: *et asserunt illae mulieres quod quando cum illo foetu oritur bestia, seu fera nobilis, ut ancipiter et huiusmodi quod tunc foetus ille ex nobili viro conceptus fuit quando si fera fuerit rustica, ut bubo, lacerta, et huiusmodi, ex rustico et vili homine factus est.*

³⁰ ALEXANDER BENEDICTUS (1549), XXV, 36, 482: *Id vitium Apuliam infestat, ac ora maritima Italiae circa Pisanum agrum, plures enim molas simul parere visuntur. Nam quibusdam in locis superfoetant, bubonis similitudinem et animal dirum pariter cum partu humano aedunt interdum harpiae (ut dicunt) forma vivere subinde eas dicunt.* Benedetti's work was published for the first time in Venice in 1493.

³¹ See POMATA (2013) 313-341; KING (2007) 1-64; GREEN (2008) 276-283.

often treated by the authors themselves, with theoretical sections of varying complexity³².

As in the Middle Ages, in various medical texts from the first half of the century the origin of the uterine mole is still attributed to the failure of the two seeds to commingle and the increased presence of female sperm combined with abundant menstruation³³. Nevertheless, the theory of generation through the female seed alone is still posited, for example by the French physician Nicholas de la Roche, who borrows his definition in the *De morbis mulierum curandis* (1542) from Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*:

*Molas gigni putant, ubi mulier non ex mare, verum ex semetipsa tantum conceperit, ideo nec animari, quia non sit ex duobus: altricemque habere per se vitam illam, quae satis arboribusque contingat. Fit a seminis [sic] muliebris, et plurimi sanguinis menstrui in utero retentione et affluxu, quem calor immodicus cogit, ac in carnis formam transmutat.*³⁴

The Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius attributes women's ability to give birth to animate flesh on their own specifically to a strong libido in his *Occulta naturae miracula* (1559), a work that describes various wondrous phenomena³⁵. In this case, Lemnius describes the phenomenon as *partus lunaris* because the woman falls pregnant in the fourth moon, when she has more abundant menses. The lack of male seed is thus the "formal cause" which determines why the product of the birth is devoid of human form³⁶.

From the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, the cause of mole generation is classified differently from medieval theories. This is due to the reading of ancient treatises that became available again as reference

³² On this type of treatise, see POMATA (2010) 193-236.

³³ For example in Jacok Rueff's work (first edition, 1554) we read: *Quod si autem hoc [male sperm], paucius, mulieris vero copiosius fuerit, tunc menstruis aucta molam generare solent;* RUEFF (1580) V, 1, 37.

³⁴ ROCHE (1542) 81v-82r.

³⁵ LEMNIUS (1559) 22v: *Perficitur autem spurius hic conceptus nonnunquam citra virilem operam ex imaginaria Venere in iis quae admodum pruriunt, impenseque sunt salaces ac lascivae, sic ut ex crebro virorum contuitu contactuque muliebrae semen cum sanguine menstruo conglobari contingat ac coalescere.*

³⁶ Ibid.: *Verum quum desit causa formalis, nempe viri semen opificis rationem obtinens, materia quam mulier suppeditat, alienam, absurdamque formam asciscit.*

sources during this period. Of particular significance is the long chapter on the subject in the gynaecological-obstetrical work by Girolamo Mercuriale, a physician and erudite humanist, first published in 1586. He underlines certain incongruences between previous sources in a wholly original way, questioning the theories of influential figures in medicine and natural philosophy in antiquity and the Middle Ages. He targets Albertus Magnus, among others, for criticism, but focuses above all on Avicenna:

*Avicenna 10 de Animalibus [...] scribit fieri molam quando in uterum mulieris ingreditur semen mulieris et non semen viri, tunc enim inquit, si temperatura uteri fuerit optima [...] Verum haec sententia Auicennae, etiam aliquas difficultates subire videtur. Primo quia ut colligere est Galeno 14 de Usu partium 17 fieri non potest, ut conceptus fiat in animalibus viviparis, absque concursu et foeminae et masculi. Dico in animalibus viviparis, ut excludam ovipara, quae concipiunt absque concursu maris, ut sunt, ova subventanea [...] Altera, quia si sententia Avicennae vera esset, posset fieri (ut dicit ipse) ut virgines etiam non utentes coitu concipiant molam, quia potest ex pollutione nocturna, ingredi semen muliebre in uterum atque confirmari in molam. Quod quidem experientia falsum esse constat, nam solae mulieres molam concipere possunt, quae cum viro consuetudinem habent.*³⁷

For Mercuriale, therefore, the mole cannot be generated by female seed alone, as in the case of infertile eggs laid by birds. Its origin can only be traced back to an anomaly resulting from regular coitus, an affirmation substantiated by Galen in book XIV of the *De usu partium*. This implicitly suggests a change in judging the morality of women giving birth to a *mola*, especially in the case of presumed virgins or women who were supposed to maintain their virginity like nuns, who Albertus Magnus also focused on. One stigma against impure thoughts leading to nocturnal emission could thus be replaced by another regarding possible secret relations with a man. This is why the Portuguese physician Amatus Lusitanus raises the issue of expressing a correct diagnosis without damaging the patient's reputation in *curatio* 36, in the fourth *Centuria* (*curatio* 4, 36) of his *Centuriae Curationum*, written between 1551 and 1566. This *curatio* was subjected to religious censorship in Spain,

³⁷ MERCURIALE (1597) 220. He also questions the author of the *De morbis mulierum* in the Hippocratic *Corpus*, which states that the *mola* originates from a sick seed. He claims that a seed of this kind could only generate an abnormal foetus. However, as the latter has a form, it is not a *mola*, which is shapeless flesh.

which is why the text is no longer included in most editions of the Portuguese physician's work³⁸. He explains that he examined a cloistered nun who was deemed to be showing all the symptoms of a *mola* by the other nuns, a diagnosis with which he duly agreed. He also refers to Galen's passage in the *De usu partium* as the basis of the definition of the origin of the mole, agreeing with the fact that it could not be produced without sexual relations with a man:

*Caeterum molam et huiusmodi caetera absque viri commercio gigni non posse tradit summus Galenus libro decimoquarto De usu partium, dicens: Mulierem nemo unquam vidit sine viro, vel molam, vel eiusmodi quippiam, concepisse.*³⁹

As this explanation clearly could have questioned the nun's virginity and thus also her reputation, Amatus advises her fellow sisters to hide the event or indicate another kind of complaint⁴⁰, and mentions that there were at least two past accounts of conceptions occurring without full coitus. The first of these is an anecdote reported by Averroes in the *Colliget*, telling of a woman — one of the author's neighbours — who falls pregnant after using a public baths where some *mali homines* ejaculated into the water⁴¹. The second decidedly original account is probably the reason why Amatus's *curatio* was censored. It concerns the birth of Ben Sira (*Benzyra* in Amatus's work), son and grand-son of the prophet Jeremiah, as recounted in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a much debated work of Hebrew literature written between the eighth and tenth century in Iraq⁴². In the text of the *Alphabet*, after Jeremiah is forced

³⁸ About this subject, see FRONT (2001) 290-296 and MARTÍN FERREIRA-DE LA ROSA CUBO (2019) 108-111.

³⁹ The quotation is from the 1557 edition, which contains four *Centuriae*, in a book in which the text of the *Curatio* can still be read: AMATUS LUSITANUS (1557) 562.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 562: *proinde aut rem occultarent, aut alterius morbi genus asseverarent, consului.*

⁴¹ AVERROES (1562), II, 10, 22vb: *Et vicina quaedam mea de cuius sacramento confidere multum bene poteramus, iuravit in anima sua quod impraegnata fuerat subito in balneo lavelli aquae calidae, in quo spermatizaverunt mali homines, com essent balneati in illo balneo.* As explained by Maaike van der Lugt (VAN DER LUGT [2004] 101), the tale was quoted by Averroes in order to demonstrate Aristotle's thesis that a woman's pleasure, and therefore her seed, was not necessary for conception.

⁴² The *Alphabet* is a collection of stories about Ben Sira, the ancient sage and author of the *Book of Ben Sira*, also known as *Sirach* or *Ecclesiasticus*. For a discussion of the work, along with a transcription and translation of the account of the birth of the protagonist,

by some men to ejaculate in a public baths, his daughter conceives a son by her own father after bathing in the same water, as in Averroes's version.

These two conceptions are instrumental to Amatus's defence of the nun's morality. However, the author shows that he really believes that a woman could also conceive without coupling directly with a man, as evidenced in *curatio* 7, 18, which features an account of copulation between two females, a widow and a married woman. As the latter has had sexual relations with her husband before the Sapphic encounter, his sperm is transferred into the womb of the widow, who thus falls pregnant. Amatus again refers to Averroes to authenticate the story, highlighting once more the detail of the birth of Ben Sira⁴³.

Leaving aside the originality of these tales, and the reliance placed on Averroes and Hebrew literature, it should be noted that in *curatio* 4, 36 Amatus preceded Mercuriale in ignoring the medieval theory of the uterine mole generated exclusively from female seed. This theory would have made it easier to defend the nun's moral integrity⁴⁴, but Amatus placed total trust in Galen, referring to book XIV of the *De usu partium*.

This book cannot have been familiar to medieval authors though; when the Galenic treatise in question, the *Περὶ χρείας μορίων*, was translated into Latin, entitled *De iuvamentis membrorum* and distributed from the thirteenth century onwards, it was a compendium taken from an Arabic text and included only the first twelve books of the original Greek treatise⁴⁵. The complete translation of the Greek version became available at the beginning of the fourteenth century through the work of Niccolò da Reggio, but only achieved widespread distribution through printed editions of Galen's *opera omnia* from 1502 and entitled *De utilitate particularum*. The title *De usu partium corporis*

see STERN (2004) 423-447. On the reception of Ben Sira's birth tale by Christian theologians, in particular Peter the Venerable (12th century), see VAN DER LUGT (2004) 99-100.

⁴³ *Curatio* 7, 18: *Annectenda historia haec est Averrois historiae, de matrona pudica vicina sua in balneo praegnante, veluti alteri Abenscirae, quas superioribus libris attigi.*

⁴⁴ In the 1620 edition of Amatus's work (Bordeaux: Ex Typographia Gilberti Ver-
not), *Curatio* 4, 36 features no references to the story of Ben Sira, but above all, the pro-
tagonist is no longer a nun but an anonymous *puella*.

⁴⁵ "Il s'agit d'un compendium en neuf ou dix livres effectué à partir du texte arabe
qui comportait des erreurs et des lacunes"; BERLIER (2013) 960.

humani, cited by Amatus and Mercuriale in abbreviated form, was first attributed to the work in the Paris edition of 1528, in which the text was revised and rendered in a style better suited to Renaissance tastes⁴⁶.

In the passage referred to by the two physicians, Galen denies that the female seed plays a formative role, expressly stating that a woman has never been seen to conceive a uterine mole or anything else without the participation of a man. He concludes by referring to physicians who have written about the *mola*:

*Si igitur eousque volunt procedere sperma foeminae primum quidem quod parum praebent ei artificiosae actionis (quod utique fortasse et soli menstruo inherit) manifestum est omnibus. Secundo autem quod neque veritatem dicunt de historia eorum quae fiunt. Non enim sicut gallinae absque masculis pariunt ova: sic visa est mulier unquam absque viro gravis reddita.*⁴⁷

The reception of Galen's text and the prestige of the author therefore influenced the way in which early modern authors understood the formation of the mole: it was no longer seen as the product of a woman's nocturnal emission but of coitus, and therefore a combination of male and female seeds.

Superfetation is also taken into consideration by sixteenth century authors. This is said to have been corroborated by Hippocrates, as seen once again in the work by Girolamo Mercuriale:

*Nam fieri etiam molam ex superfetatione videtur colligi posse ex Historia quinta lib. Epidem. narrata illius uxoris Gorgiae, quae post menses quatuor annis suppressos, concepit et peperit foemellam illam, deinde post quadraginta dies carnem superfetatam.*⁴⁸

The episode featuring Gorgia's wife, which as Mercuriale correctly states can be found in Book V of the *Epidemics* of the Hippocratic *Corpus*⁴⁹, and cannot have been considered in the Middle Ages, as in the case of Galen's text. Indeed,

⁴⁶ This version was maintained, along with its title, in subsequent editions. See BERLIER (2013) 962.

⁴⁷ GALENUS (1528) 412. More specifically, the following can be read in the edition Venetiis, Apud Iuntas 1565, 206: *non enim, sicut gallinae, sine maribus ova pariunt, ita mulierem aliquando viderunt sine viro vel molam vel eiusmodi quippiam aliud concepisse.* My emphasis.

⁴⁸ MERCURIALE (1597), 221.

⁴⁹ HIP. *Epid.*, 5. 11, (LITTRÉ, V, 210-213).

as Pearl Kibre's studies highlight, the book only became available in the West at the start of the sixteenth century⁵⁰. The same applies to Book II of the *Epideemics*, from which Renaissance authors took a passage that was sometimes used to compare the mole to an anomalous foetus with a human semblance. The excerpt in question provides an account of the child-birth experience of a woman who is said to have delivered a baby that was four fingers long with no bones⁵¹. Significantly, the Hippocratic account is quoted in a 1584 work by Pietro Salio Diversi, a physician from Faenza, in reply to a question about whether or not the mole could assume human form (*Mola an possit esse cum humana forma*), transcribed in the margin of the page featuring the relevant text⁵². The account does not satisfy the physician, who wonders whether it would be more appropriate to include the product of the birth in the category of monsters. Nevertheless, the episode later features among the examples of monstrous births provided by various authors, such as the Portuguese physician Rodrigo de Castro in the chapter *De monstroso conceptu* of his gynaecology treatise *De universa mulierum medicina*, first published in 1603⁵³.

4. Although Renaissance physicians trusted the passage in the rediscovered work by Galen, the reason for the formation of a mole continued to raise questions.

An mola sine viri congressu et sine virili semini generari possit? is the question later posed by the German physician Daniel Sennert in Book IV of his *Practica medicina* (1632), specifying that

*non parvi momenti haec est quaestio, et in qua interdum cardo pudicitiae et impudicitiae foeminarum versatur.*⁵⁴

⁵⁰ KIBRE (1985) 138-139.

⁵¹ The translation of the Hippocratic text is cited in the following way in Cornarius's 1546 edition (II, 413): *Antigenis uxor habitabat iuxta Nichomacum, peperit puerum carnosum quidem, verum qui haberet maximas partes discretas, magnitudine vero esset quatuor digitorum, et sine ossibus, deinde crassus ac rotundus.*

⁵² SALIO DIVERSI (1584) 513-14.

⁵³ CASTRO (1617), *pars secunda sive praxis*, III, 2, VI, 399. See also *infra*, notes 57 and 58.

⁵⁴ SENNERT (1632) 345-347. Sennert describes the uterine mole in a long chapter, in which he cites many Renaissance and some medieval authors. His description of the mole became an important point of reference for seventeenth-century physicians. See CONFORTI

Sennert notes two opposing factions of physicians: those who claim that the mole has to be generated by a combination of the two seeds, including cases of superfetation, as it is often found together with a normal foetus; and those who instead still acknowledge that it can form without the addition of the male seed⁵⁵. Among the members of the latter group, Sennert mentions some physicians from the second half of the sixteenth century (Julius Caesar Scaliger, Marcellus Donatus, and Rembertus Dodoaneus), who are said to have provided examples in their works of *molae* generated by noblewomen of proven moral integrity.

Sennert expresses his personal opinion at the end of the chapter, excluding the possibility of mole generation exclusively from female seed in the case of young virgins ('presumed' virgins), while mooting a remote possibility for widows that have already borne children, although he explains that these would be non-viable moles in any case. Ultimately, he concludes

*mola vitalis sine virili semine in virgine vel vidua generetur, vix possibile esse puto, et propterea earum pudicitiam merito suspectam esse, quae vitales, quam quae non vitales molas edunt.*⁵⁶

This assertion by the German physician confirms that the delivery of a mole could influence the way in which a woman's morality was judged. As we have seen, this happened in various ways according to the relevant medical, and philosophical theoretical framework. At the same time, the medieval interpretation that explained the phenomenon as a 'teratological wonder' was never abandoned in the early modern period, and the *mola* continued to be associated with animate forms of life resembling animals, imaginary or otherwise. Significant in this respect is the example of *curatio* I, 27 of the work by Amatus Lusitanus, which describes various cases of women who gave birth to one or more little frog-like animals either in place of or together with a foetus. The physician explains that they should be included in the category of the uterine mole. Subsequently, Rodrigo de Castro includes these animal forms among the examples of monstrous conceptions, together with those

(2009) 134-136. On mole in texts of the early modern period, see also MCCLIVE-KING (2007) 223-238; MC CLIVE (2002) 219-223.

⁵⁵ SENNERT (1632) 345-346.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 347.

written about by Alessandro Benedetti⁵⁷ and the *fera* described by Michele Savonarola⁵⁸.

It can therefore be said that aside from the generation theories with definitions of the mole, this complex and elusive entity tends to cross over into the category of monstrous births, in which there is increasing interest in the early modern period⁵⁹. This takes shape in medical treatises, which still also sometimes attribute responsibility for the occurrence to female behaviour⁶⁰.

As an “extremely long-term notion in the history of medical knowledge”⁶¹, the uterine mole has always been an object of interest and can still be found today as a specific entity in medical manuals and specialized studies⁶².

⁵⁷ CASTRO (1617), *pars secunda sive praxis*, III, pars II, VI, 397: *Quintum eorum est corporum, quae bruti alicujus ex toto, vel mixtim plurium speciem ac figuram repraesentant, ut ranae, vel lacertae, qualia ea de quibus Lusitanus [...] seu bufonis, de quibus Alexander Benedictus et Guainerius, talia monstra, ferae sive belvae communiter dicuntur*. The work by Guainerius, who is referenced, makes further mention of the women of Puglia, who generate a *bufo* or similar animal along with a foetus. Sometimes it kills the foetus at birth with a venomous bite: *Frequentius tamen cum fetu ipso nascitur simul in cuius exitu ipsum momordet interdum ex quo venenoso morsu infelix fetus moritur statim*” (ANTONIUS GUAINERIUS [1517] 77ra). See RODNITE LEMAY (1985) 327. Guainerius' s text was written before 1440.

⁵⁸ CASTRO (1617) 399: *Porro si bestia haec seu fera nobilis est ut accipiter, refert Savonarola ex mente muliercularum; foetum ex nobili viro fuisse conceptum; si vero rustica, ut bubo aut lacerta, ex rustico*.

⁵⁹ There is a huge bibliography on the subject of monsters; suffice it here to mention the now classic volume by Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park (DASTON–PARK [1998]). See the information collected throughout the volume by Gabriella Zuccolin (ZUCCOLIN [2019]), as well as its updated bibliography. See also FONTES DA COSTA (2005).

⁶⁰ See NICCOLI (1980) 402-428. The scholar outlines the way in which the generation of a monster was associated with sexual relations with a menstrual woman.

⁶¹ CONFORTI (2009) 129: «la *mola* [...] è una nozione di lunghissimo periodo nella storia del sapere medico».

⁶² The hydatidiform mole is now classed as a gestational trophoblastic disease resulting from the abnormal fertilization of an oocyte. It can coexist in woman's uterus with a live foetus. There are numerous studies on the subject: see, for example, MAKARY *et alii* (2010) 30-32.

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Resumo: A mola uterina foi objeto de várias interpretações, no que diz respeito à sua etiologia. Na Idade Média, considerava-se que era produzida pelas mulheres por meio da emissão noturna de sua 'semente'. A ideia da *mola* como produto da mistura das sementes masculina e feminina tornou-se dominante no século XVI, graças à redescoberta de um texto de Galeno. Esta contribuição coloca em evidência as diferentes formas de interpretar a *mola*, no período entre a Idade Média e o século XVI, mostrando como estas tiveram significativa importância no julgamento ético das mulheres.

Palavras-chave: mola uterina; *mola*; teorias de geração; comportamento sexual feminino; superfetação; nascimentos monstruosos.

Resumen: La mola uterina fue objeto de diversas interpretaciones con respecto a su etiología. En la Edad Media se pensaba que las mujeres la producían por medio de una emisión nocturna de su "semilla". La idea de *mola* como producto de la mezcla de las semillas masculina y femenina se convirtió en dominante en el s. XVI, gracias al redescubrimiento de un texto galénico. Esta contribución pretende destacar las formas diferentes de interpretación de la *mola* en el período entre la Edad Media y el s. XVI, mostrando la relevancia que tuvieron las diferentes interpretaciones para juzgar a las mujeres en términos éticos.

Palabras clave mola uterina; *mola*; teorías de la generación; comportamiento sexual femenino; superfetación; nacimientos monstruosos.

Résumé : La môle utérine fit l'objet de plusieurs interprétations, en ce qui concerne son étiologie. Au Moyen Âge, on estimait qu'elle était produite par les femmes grâce à l'émission nocturne de leur 'graine'. L'idée de *mola*, en tant que produit du mélange des graines masculine et féminine domina tout le XVI^{ème} siècle, grâce à la redécouverte d'un texte de Galien. Cette contribution permet de saisir les différentes façons d'interpréter la *mola*, entre le Moyen Âge et le XVI^{ème} siècle, et de montrer à quel point elles ont été importantes lors du jugement éthique des femmes.

Mots-clés : môle utérine ; *mola* ; théories des générations ; comportement sexuel féminin ; superfétation ; naissances monstrueuses.