BATHS, SCRUBS, AND CUDDLES: HOW TO BATHE YOUNG INFANTS ACCORDING TO SIMON DE VALLAMBERT (1564)

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Bathing newborn babies and infants is nowadays common practice: a staple of the self-help books on infant care, and the topic of innumerable specialized text books for nurses, midwives and caregivers, the bath appears to be one of the first cares given to babies.\(^1\) The collective representation and conceptualization of this first immersion is remarkably stable in our Western civilization. Browsing the web in search of instructions for bathing babies, one may be struck by the similarities between the selected questions and the organization of the discourse from Greek Medicine, West European Middle Ages and Renaissance, to our modern online pages. To give only one example, on the page devoted to infant care,\(^2\) the article on “Bathing Babies” is introduced by a short essay, where the main parts seem to be directly copied from the French treatise published in 1565 by Simon de Vallambert, *L’art de nourrir et gouverner les enfans*. The subtitles of the introduction (How often should babies be given a bath? When is the best time to give babies a bath? What type of bath should I give my baby? Health and safety) are replicas of the chapter titles found in de Vallember’s Renaissance pediatric treatise, itself inspired by, amongst others, Galen, Soranus, and Avicenna. This recognition of continuity, allied with our own contemporary practice, may encourage the belief that bathing babies is an invariable and permanent feature of infant care, a necessary and universal gesture, shared by all human beings in all times and places. For a Westerner, the memory of numerous representations of the Nativity, and of Mary’s or John the Baptist’s birth, featuring a washtub in the front of the picture, may also reinforce the idea of a stable, ‘natural’ act.

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Commonplaces are often deceptive: in the recognition of our practices, there always lingers the possibility of an anachronistic bias. And modern scholars are not the only victims of this unwanted prejudice: medieval and Renaissance doctors also sought to establish their own theories and recommendations on the model of the Ancients, thus privileging permanence against change, faithful continuation against rupture. The methodological defiance against such a desire of traditional anchorage must be reinforced by another caution: examining a practice from written accounts, and moreover, from prescriptive written accounts, given by doctors to midwives, we lack the direct and unmistakable immediacy of first hand and transparent documentation. We do not possess testimonies from the actual players of the play (mothers and midwives), but only from theoreticians, who were excluded from the scene of birth and who wrote their works in Latin, a language mostly ignored by the very actors. By carefully examining the discourse regarding infant bathing given in 1565 by Simon de Vallambert, and comparing sources and sequels, I will attend to maintaining contradictions and differences—in spite of our proclivity to recognize similarities and forget the difficulties of paradox or controversy.

This essay will explore the different practices of infant bathing in Western Europe in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, specifically in France. It will seek to establish not so much the confirmation of the practice, well attested and described, as its function within the system of health care, its justification within the larger conception of mankind, infancy, and hygiene, and, last but not least, its spiritual and implicit connotations for a Christian culture where baptism is the first and essential sacrament.

In 1553, a publisher in Tours published a re-edition of a lost treatise of pediatrics, entitled *Pedenemicon*, written in Latin by Gabriel Miron, the former Physician of Francis Ist. Gathering, according to the scholastic tradition, everything that had been written on his topic and organizing his material as debates upon rubricated topics, Miron devotes several chapters to infant bathing. Remarkably, though, he cuts short his exposition of various types of baths, length, functions and uses by underlining the optional and ambiguous quality of the bath: “We can even say that we do not resort to it because of necessity but because of will, moved only by our will, as the bath is neither natural nor against nature and its administering pertains either to the conservation of health or to the healing of diseases.”

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3 Gabriel Miron, *Pedenemicon* (Tours, 1553), chapter 21, p. 46: […] licet enim ei non occuramus necessario sed voluntarie uel quasi sola uoluntate moti, cum non sit res