A Short History of Horror: Early Modern Jews and their Monsters
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My presentation will argue for the specific fertility of fear as an object of historical study, and offer a short survey of one particularly troubling source of fear—and indeed horror—in the early modern period, namely—the womb. A mysterious, uniquely feminine organ, for centuries the womb has been the stuff of fantasies and nightmares. It has been imagined at one and the same time as a haven and a hell, a nest and a tomb, a source of pleasure and pain, life and illness. That the womb would be conjured in such seemingly conflicting contexts is, in a sense, unsurprising. Located at the crossroads between existence and inexistence, self and other, inside and out—the womb transgresses all these discursive binaries, making it a perfect metaphor for the transgressive, two-faced nature of women more generally.

The enclosed sources offer an initial encounter with some early modern monstrous wombs. In my discussion of these sources, I will argue that the increased interest in the womb and its ailments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is closely linked to more general concerns about feminine agency and particularly feminine speech, which arose during this period. I will begin my discussion by looking at medical depictions of the sick womb and the monstrous birth, and continue with a reading of an early eighteenth century Yiddish folktale, which brings the interconnectedness between the monstrous birth and the problem of women’s agency in early modern thought, into sharp critical relief. Finally, I will offer a discussion of Glikl’s memoirs as a source for an alternative, specifically (Jewish?) feminine view of the womb in particular, and feminine agency more generally.

INTRODUCTION

The following excerpts come from different genres, spaces, and languages. And yet, in all of them we find essentially similar tropes, motifs and indeed, fears.

The first two excerpts are taken from two medical compendiums written around the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first text appears in Italian
physician Jacob Zahalon’s 1683 *Otzar ha-chayim* (Treasure of Life). The second is an excerpt from Metz-born physician Tuviah Ha-cohen’s much more familiar *Maaseh Tuviah*, published in 1708. Zahalon’s book is often considered the more conservative of the two, relying almost exclusively on ancient and Jewish sources of knowledge. However, as I show in a forthcoming study, parts of *Otzar ha-chayim* are, in fact, a translation of one of the most popular Latin medical books of the seventeenth century—Lazare Rivière’s, *Praxis Medica* (1631).

The third excerpt appearing below is taken from a Yiddish booklet published anonymously sometime between 1714 and 1722. The tale is an extensively Judaized adaptation of the tale of the princess and her seven brothers, made famous centuries later by Hans Christian Andersen. A transcription of the tale in its original old Yiddish is available in Sarah Zfatman’s article cited below. The Yiddish excerpt is taken from this article, while the English translation is my own.

The fourth and final excerpt is taken from the German-Jewish merchant-woman Glikl’s late seventeenth century memoirs. The memoirs constitute the most extensive autobiographical text written by an early modern Jewish woman, and offer an exceptional view into Jewish women’s reception (or rejection) of misogynist themes in early modern Ashkenaz. The Yiddish excerpts are taken from Chava Turniansky’s bi-lingual (Yiddish-Hebrew) critical edition of Glikl’s memoirs, cited below. The English translation is my own.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

On the primary texts discussed herein:


Sarah Zfatman, “Maaseh be-shivat bney Horkanus she-hafchu le-avazim: le-darkey ibudah be-Yiddish shel maasiyah benleumit” [The tale of Hyrcanus’ seven sons who were transformed into...


On the monstrous womb and on monsters more generally:


Question 5 How is the disease of frenzy[, ] caused by the sickness of the womb [which results] from desire for intercourse[, ] to be cured?

Answer Due to the unrestrained nature of a woman’s sexual lust she desires intercourse excessively until she goes out of her mind and speaks filth without shame, as though demanding to be come upon[. ] And this is caused by the female seed[,] which is abundant and is of hot humour and enclosed in the seminal vessels[. ] And poisonous vapours arise from [this seed] to the brain and confuse the mind[,] And there are those who argue that this is caused by a woman’s seed that becomes mouldy in its vessels […] and there are those who argue that it is a dire disease called hysterika…. And we find this in a girl whose humour is hot with green and bloody bile and with black and dry bile or [who] consumes many spices and the scent of civet musk and so on, or [who] reads in books of love and affection of people with filthy mouths and sleeps long[,] particularly in beds of feather[. ] And when this sickness begins her heart becomes concerned. And she goes silent[,] and then her face turns red and her breathing and pulse are accelerated and then she cries and immediately jumps and speaks much nonsense[,] and this occurs periodically[,] and finally she explicitly demands intercourse and if she is not cured quickly, the disease of mania is brought about[,] which is a frenzy of wrath.

The cure to this sickness requires the cooling down of the warm blood, and its purging and letting through green bile purifying techniques[. ] And blood should be let from the arm and then from the leg and the anus. . . . And if she is permitted to have intercourse that is her cure.
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Yaakov Zahalon, The Treasure of Life (Ozar ha-ḥayim), Venice, 1683.
Chapter 4. Discusses the woman who suffers from excessive desire for intercourse[,] the reasons [for this disease] and its cure.

Diseases known in the Greek tongue as salacis¹ or satyriasis are found in women as they are in men[,] for just as constant erection may occur in men so too in women it happens that the clitoris discussed above becomes erect and this was the case with the tribadist women mentioned in (the gemara, Yevamot, ha-arel)[.]² And the physicians have told many wondrous things, but because of the scoundrels of the generation I have omitted their words[.] But know this sometimes [a woman’s] desire rises and she opens the mouth of her womb and swallows the member embracing it in an almost inseparable manner[.] And there was once a student from the school of medicine in Padua who came upon a whore and she opened her womb and embraced the adulterous member until he was tied to her like a hound[.]

And word was sent to the scholars and they decided to fill a syringe with cold water which was cunningly injected into her womb and no sooner was this done and they were separated (and damned be the saviour). And as a rule [a woman who suffers from] such a sickness of excessive desire[—]her womb is always open and [she] desires intercourse. And in the past I prepared a cure for a woman of one of the renowned here[.] And God save all the daughters of Israel from this ailment.

And at times she will lose her mind and this is known in Latin as furor uterino that is folly of the womb and this sickness is found in virgins who have reached maturity but have not yet been had and also in widows and deserted wives[—]who are used to intercourse[—]when the male is absent. And know that there are those women whose faces are covered in shame and [who] refrain from intercourse but become blind or fall into the green sickness. And so every God-fearing man should try to give his daughters to a man before they reach maturity[,] and needless to say no man of Israel should desert his wife[,] God forbid.

¹ Salacitas.
² BT Yevamot 76a.
The signs of the sickness are that such a woman will be loud and talkative and will be a gadabout in the market\(^3\) and in the streets shall sound her voice. And Sinkius\(^?\) wrote of a mad woman who escaped to a tavern, and whose mind was not cooled until fifteen men came upon her that night and in the morning she returned to her home and was freed of her illness\(\)\(\). And the physicians have said that this sickness is like the madness of beasts in the days in which they require one another.

There are differing opinions as to the cause of this sickness\(\);\) some say that it is caused by the surplus of seed which awakens the movement of the soul\(\)\(\). And it [the malady] has been likened to a man who has a nocturnal emission and so the sleep is the cause of the desire and the emission of seed and thus dementia is the dream of the awake and the dream is the dementia of the sleeper. And supposedly just as nocturnal emission occurs during night-dreaming so too womb frenzy occurs during waking. But the school of Sylvius\(^4\) connects it to various luxuries that are stuck in the [menstrual] blood and the lymphatic fluids that cause a boil until the flame rises up from her and she will be insolent. Another reason was brought forth by Sinertius\(^5\) [who told of] a woman who drank a glass of wine containing borax\(,\) immediately after which she fell into this illness\(\)\(\). And another case tells of a man who anointed his member with warm and precious oils of good scent like myrrh and apharusemon and the like and when the woman was had by him her womb became warm and she fell into this sickness.

The cure depends on the cause. However as a general rule anything that stops the seed and cools the womb as mentioned in the chapter on the French sickness\(^6\) in the case of bleeding\(\)\(,\) and they are roots of white ninophyras\(,\) roasted in hot ashes or agnus castus\(^7\) seeds or ruta\(^8\) seeds or cannabis seeds or horseradish and portulaca\(^9\) or zucchini. And most efficient are boiled willow strands whose strength is testified to by the fact that a woman who drinks such stew regularly becomes barren.

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\(^3\) Tuviah uses the term: “yaz’anit” which has the double meaning of going out and being sexually promiscuous. On the term and its historical meanings see: Gilad J. Gevaryahu, “And Dinah the Daughter of Leah Went Out: The Meaning of Yatz’anit in Rashī’s Commentary,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37.2 (2009): 121-123.

\(^4\) Franciscus de la Boe.

\(^5\) Daniel Sennert.

\(^6\) Syphilis.

\(^7\) Chaste tree.

\(^8\) Rue.

\(^9\) Purslane.
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Tuviah Ha-Cohen, Sefer maaseh Tuviah, Venice, 1708.

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הם. או דרור אנגניקאשנ"ו או דרור רום או דרר קנבו"ו או חותרת פרפרולאך"ו (קשקו). והוותר
שוויג ערב נחל הנסולו בהים. או הראה כћה חם שאשה המפגידה בשתייה שלوه והנישה עקרוה.
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Eyn sheyn mayse.


A wonderful and very useful pleasant tale, which has not yet been brought to print. Each person can take an example from this tale: firstly, that one should never let a curse escape one’s mouth, because one cannot know what the hour is; secondly, when things go miserably, one must always have faith in God. . . .

There once was a king who reigned in Jerusalem and was called Hyrcanus. He had seven sons, the liked of whom were not to be found in every way. But the king and queen asked God, blessed be he, that he grant them a daughter as well, and so it happened. The queen became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. There was no other such child under the sun and she had a gold star on her forehead, at which all men gazed in wonder.

Now, when the child turned one, it became very ill, so much so that all the doctors were despaired. [. . .] One day a distinguished doctor cried out: “my dear people, if I could quickly receive fresh fountain water, I would prepare something, so that the child could perhaps, with God’s help, recover.” Now who is happier than the father and mother, and particularly the seven brothers, who immediately took a silver can and went to the well themselves and each brother wanted to take the water himself and said: “the child should get well by my hand.” And so the can fell into the well. The queen had been waiting in anguish for her sons to return with the water. But when they came and told her how it all went about, she thought that they had done it on purpose so that the child should die, because the child was more cared for than they all were. Then she said in anger: “may you all be cursed, so that I should never see any of you again!” And because it was a bad hour, no sooner had she let these words out of her mouth, there stood before her seven geese and flew away. . . .

[the girl sets out to find her brother and discovers them in the woods. There ensues the following exchange:]
“Dear faithful sister, we do not have much time, [. . .] we have only one hour each
day to be human, and when that hour has passed we are once again turned into
humble geese and fly away, we ourselves do not know where we fly to. . . .”
When she heard this she began to cry: “if you do not want to tell me how to help
you, then I swear to the Heavens, that I will kill myself right in front of your
faces.”
When they heard this, the eldest said: “Dear faithful sister, if you wish to help us,
then you must for seven years, seven months, seven days, seven hours and seven
minutes be silent, and let no one know who you are, and for three and a half years
you may not see any man, and because you were raised so nobly, how could you
possibly bear it?” [. . .] Then [the sister] said: “I can no longer bear this sorrow, but
I am ready to help you with my life and limbs.”
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Eyn sheyn mayse.


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Glikl’s Memoirs.


All my life I would mock and laugh at the women when I heard that a woman had lusted after something and that it had caused some damage. I wanted to believe none of it. Indeed, there were several occasions when I was pregnant, that I went to the market and saw all the nice fruit, and took notice of them, but if they were too expensive I let them be, and indeed, it did me no harm. But not all times are the same. When I was nine-months pregnant with my son R’ Joseph, my mother, may she live long, had something to settle with an advocate who lived on the horse market. My mother, may she live long, asked if I could not go with her. [. . .] And so I went with my mother, may she live long, to that place. As we approached the advocate’s house, there lived across the street a woman who had medlars for sale. I had always loved to eat medlars. So I said to my mother, may she live: “Mame, do not forget when we are on our way back, I would like to buy some of the medlars.” We then went to the advocate and did what we came to do there. But when we were done it had become very late and was nearly night-time, and so we went on our way, and both of us forgot about the medlars. When I came home, however, I began to think about the medlars and to think to myself, and to regret that I had forgotten to buy the medlars. But I did not give it much notice, not more than when someone wants to eat something he does not have.

. . . sometime after midnight I started to feel contractions and the midwives were called in and I gave birth to a young son. My husband, may his memory be blessed, immediately received the news and was overjoyed that he would be able to have once again the name of his pious father, may his memory be blessed. But the women, who were with my during the birth, I saw putting their heads together and confiding in one another. . . . I wanted to know what the matter was. Finally,
someone told me how the child was full of brown marks over his entire body and head. . . .
And so I said to my mother, may she live long: “my dear mother, I ask you, please let my Shabbat-woman come to me, I would like to send her away somewhere.”
My mother, may she live long, asked where it was that I would like to send her. I said to my mother, may she live long: “I have the whole time been thinking what caused the brown marks on the child and that he is so weak, and I have asked myself whether the blame is not for the fact that I had such desire for the medlars and did not satisfy it, and indeed, it was in the very same night that I came into childbirth. I would like to send the woman to get me some medlars for a pair of shillings. I want to rub a little on the child’s mouth. . . .”
Even though the whole world laughed at my nonsense, still I held my ground and they had to do as I explained above. As the caretaker stroked the child’s mouth with the soft medlar, the child opened its mouth so eagerly as though he would swallow the whole thing at once. . . .
And from that moment until the bris, all the marks on his face and body were gone apart from one mark on his side which remained, that was the size of a wide lentil, and at the time of his bris, he was a fresh and healthy and wholesome child, who was, thank God, Judaized¹ at the right time, and received a respectable bris, the likes of which was not held in Hamburg for a long time.

¹ Meaning circumcised.