SIDRAK ON REPRODUCTION AND SEXUAL LOVE

by

T. L. BURTON*

I

A NUMBER OF EXTRACTS from the medieval didactic dialogue of *Sidrak and Bokkus*, on the subject of reproduction, appeared in these pages in 1967. The manuscript from which the extracts were taken (British Museum MS. Lansdowne 793) is the fullest known English version of this work, but it contains some anomalies which, in places, obscure the meaning. In such cases it is helpful to compare the wording with that of the other English manuscripts (which date from the early fifteenth century to the early sixteenth)* and with that of the French manuscripts, on which the English versions are thought to be based. 3

In the question concerning the number of children a woman can carry in her womb at any one time, for example, there are twenty-four lines missing from Lansdowne (L). Their absence is not immediately obvious, since the lines that remain appear to make sense as they stand; only after comparison with the other manuscripts is it clear that L is at fault. The question (I, liij) appeared in *Med. Hist.*, 1967, 11:

*T. L. Burton, B.A., Department of English Language and Literature, University of Adelaide, South Australia.


2 The other English manuscripts, with their dates (so far as can be determined) and sigla are:
c.1400 Brudenell (Deene) I.v.101 (fragment) (D)
c.1450 Bodleian S.C. 1222 (Laud Misc. 559) (B)
c.1450–1475 British Museum Harley 4294 (H)
c.1472–1500 Trinity College, Cambridge 1287 (0.5.6.) (T)
c.1500 Society of Antiquaries of London 252 (A)
1502 British Museum Sloane 2232 (S)

I have not been able to trace the present whereabouts of the only other known English manuscript (olim Wrist Park MS. 5, olim Meyerstein). The date of S is fixed by a colophon in the scribe's handwriting at the end of the manuscript; the others are all dated approximately, on palaeographical grounds. L is contemporary with H, or perhaps marginally earlier. The printed edition of Thomas Godfray (G), to which I also refer, was formerly thought to have appeared about 1510 but is now normally put at about 1530, since the earliest book issued by Godfray to which a definite date can be assigned is his complete edition of Chaucer's works, published in 1532 (see F. S. Isaac, *English and Scottish printing types 1301–35, 1508–41*, London, Oxford University Press [Facsimiles and illustrations issued by the Bibliographical Society, no. 2], 1930, fig. 79b and notes introducing figs. 77–80).

* BTG tell us that the book was “brought” into “English rhyme” by one Hugh of Campdene (variously spelt)—presumably from French prose, in which the work is generally agreed to have been first written (in spite of the preface found in most of the French manuscripts, which claims descent, via Arabic, Latin and Greek, from the Hebrew of its hero, Sidrak [or Sydrac], a supposed descendant of Noah). Numerous French manuscripts survive, most differing in some respects, but it is not known from which of these (if any) the English version was translated. I have consulted only those in the British Museum, taking most of the quotations from MS. Harley 4486 (of which there is a microfilm in my possession), without wishing to imply that this particular manuscript is more closely related to the English versions than are any of the others.
Texts and Documents

179–180; the missing lines should be inserted between the twelfth and thirteenth lines on p. 180. Without the missing lines, the passage (in the modernized language used by Nichols) reads as follows:

For if a man a lecher be
And haunt many, as men may see,
The child shall be sometime blithe
And sometime great fellness kithe
(i.e., the child of a lecherous and dissolute father will sometimes be happy and at other times will show great fierceness, violence or guilefulness). I give below the equivalent passage from H, with marginal glosses, and with significant variants from the other English versions which contain this question (in this and all other passages given below I have supplied punctuation and capital letters in accordance with modern practice; I have not, however, altered the spelling except to the extent of replacing the letter thorn by th and the letter yogh by y or by gh, as appropriate; of separating u from v and i from j, as in modern usage; and of hyphenating words which are written as two words in the original but of which the modern equivalent is one word, and vice-versa);

For if a man a lechoure be
And haunté many, as men may se,
The seede of hym is of no myght
For febilnes of folowind right;
[following/pursuit]
5 And if a man with-holde hym long
That he nat to woman gang,
And do sithen as ye woote,
The seede of hym than is so hote
[then; know]
Than, when it is to his chambre brought,
[its] heat]
10 It brenmeth and wastith all to nought;
And if the man be of a tempre
And the woman nat so be,
But brennyng hote of grete wille,
Yet schal the seede in hir spille;
[sexual desire]
[be destroyed]
15 And if thei be bothe of tempure,
Here seede schal in his chambre dure
And fasten ther-in and wex fast
And come to man at last;
And if thei to-gidre at the bygynnyng
[together]
20 Be litle and glade in all thing,
Of glade semblant the childe schal be
As thei be bothe at the semble;
[mild]
[appearance/demeanour]
[sexual intercourse]

Texts and Documents

And if thei assemble hem wrothely, [have intercourse angrily]
The childe shal be such sikerly; [certainly]

25 And if that oon ben glad and that other nought, [one of them; not at all]
And a childe bi twene hem wrought, [engendred]
The childe shal be some tyme blithe [happy]
And some tyme gret felnessse kithe. [fierceness; show]

[Significant variants: line 4 folowind: B foulyng, G fowlynge, i.e., “debauchery”;
8 hote: B koet (? error for hote, or ? for kete “fierce, violent, strong”); 11 of a tempre: B a tempre, G of tempre; 13 grete: G good; 15 of tempure: B of oon tempure; 17 wex: B norisshen, T fostrun (both=“be nourished”), G ground “become established”; 19 (whole line): B And yf at here geder comynge, G And yf theyr together comynge, T And if they twoo to-gether comynge; 20 lithe: BT blithe, G mery; 23 wrothely: T worthili; 24 (whole line): B Wrothly shal-be the childe sothely, T Worthi shall the childe be for-thi (“therefore”), G Tother shal-be the chyld truly.]

It is clear from this that there is no connexion intended between the lecherous man and the moody child. On the contrary, the claim is that a lascivious man is unlikely to have children at all, since his semen is never given time to acquire any potency; whilst a child given to sudden changes of mood from happiness to ferocity is simply reflecting the different moods of his parents at the time of his engendering, or their different temperaments. The phrases of a tempre (line 11) and of tempure (line 15) refer to the temperament of the man or woman as determined by the mixture of the four primary qualities of ancient physiology (hot, cold, moist and dry), which is linked with the relative proportions in the body of the four cardinal humours (blood, phlegm, cholera and melancholy). Both are equivalent to the phrase in temper, i.e., having “a due or proportionate mixture or combination of elements or qualities”, or to the adjective attempre, literally, “having the proper blend of ‘qualities’, well-balanced”, hence “observing proper measure, temperate, moderate”. The B reading in line 11, a tempre, is presumably intended for the adjective, with the initial a (as frequently happens in manuscripts of the period) written separately; that in line 15, of oon tempure, would mean “of one (i.e., the same or a similar) constitution or disposition”.

Earlier in the same question it is remarked that a woman who has intercourse several times within twenty-four hours may conceive up to seven children, one for each of the (supposed) seven chambers of her womb (Med. Hist., 1967, 11: 179). Of the birth of these children L states, with evident admiration:

8 S.v. ket(e) adj. in M.E.D.
9 This idea has been confirmed by recent research—which is not, however, concerned with the moral issue of the number of partners involved—into the effect of frequent sexual intercourse on the male sperm count; see Runi Elinasson, ‘Analysis of semen’, Progress in Infertility, ed. S. J. Behrman and R. W. Kistner, London, J. & A. Churchill, 1974, vol. 2: “Semen volume and sperm density decrease when the frequency of ejaculation exceeds that of one every third day”. Similar remarks were made by Dr. William Masters in his address to the annual convention of the Planned Parenthood Federation, St. Louis, 19 October 1974.
7 S.v. temper, sb., 1 in O.E.D. For a succinct history of the doctrines of the four qualities, the four elements and the four humours, and of their effect on the temperament, see Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, Saturn and melancholy, London, Thomas Nelson, 1964, pp. 3–15 and 97–123.
8 S.v. at(tem)pre adj., 1 and 2 in M.E.D.
Texts and Documents

And so longe thei shullen be unbore
As the seed of other weren sowe bifoire
As thei were beten wonderly . . .
(i.e., the children will be born in the order in which they were conceived, in accordance with their wonderful conception). That wonderly ("wonderfully") is an error, however, is shown by the variants for it in the other versions containing this question, HG sonderly, B sunderly ("separately"); readings which replace the amazement of L with the logic of the statement that the order in which children are born at a multiple birth corresponds to the order in which they were separately conceived. The readings in BHG are confirmed by those in the French manuscripts in the British Museum, e.g., this, from MS. Harley 4486 (question 64):

*com passe le temps del engendrure lun apres lautre si serra al nestre—taunt lun apres lautre.*

There is another oddity in the question asking how a child is born (*Med. Hist.*, 1967, 11: 178). The question in L (I, lij) reads:

 Hou may the child that ful of love is
Come out of the modres wombe, telle me this.

Why love should be mentioned is not apparent, unless it is the mother’s love for the child, which helps her to bear the pain of childbirth—yet the wording clearly indicates that it is the child who is “full of love”. This question appears in only two of the other English versions (B and G), but both, surprisingly enough, agree with L on this wording. A comparison with the French versions confirms, however, that the English versions are here in error: the wording in the earliest of the French printed editions in the British Museum (question 91) is: *Comment peult yssir lenfant de la femme quant il est plain de os,* i.e., “How may a child come out of a woman when it is full of bone” (this avoids the possible ambiguity of some of the French manuscripts, e.g., Harley 4486: *Coment puelt lenfaunt issir la ventre de la femme qi est plein de os,* in which the order of the words suggests that it is the mother who is “full of bone”, although the lack of feminine —e on plein makes this doubtful). It appears that the word love in the extant English versions is a scribal error for bone, and that this error occurred early enough in the transmission of the English manuscripts to be reproduced in both the verbose school of LH and the more succinct school of BTASG. It is an error that would easily have been made, considering that in the manuscripts of the period there was a strong similarity between b and l, and that n and u (as the medial v was usually written) were indistinguishable. At all events, it is evident from what follows concerning the hardening of the child’s bones after birth (in both the French and the English versions) that bone is the correct reading.

Moreover, on comparing the answer to this question in the English and French versions, one sees that the answer, in the English versions, has come down to us in almost as poor a state as the question. I give here the full text of the question and answer as it appears in B, with significant variants from G and from L (for the full text of the latter see *Med. Hist.*, 1967, 11: 178–179), followed by the text of the same question and answer in MS. Harley 4486:


289
"How may the chylde that full of love is
Come oute of the moderes wombe, telle me this."

"God that all hathe made of nought
Moo wondres hathe He wrought;
And also He hathe power therto
That oon body in that other to do,
As hathe He might hit oute to brynge,
For at his will is all thynge.
Whenne tyme comes that woman shall
Be delyvered of that she gothe withall,
All the joyntes of here body
Open and enlarges them kyndely,
All save oon the chine before;
And in that tyme the childe is bore,
As a lykenesse of dethe that ware;
But soone that body bare
The ayre hathe savoured that is here,
The bones that febely may stere
Begynne for-to drye a-non
And waxes harde and falles to bon;
And all the liththes that were upon
In the woman agayn are cropen.
Herkyn I shall telle the hough:
Yif a man his fynger drowe,
The joynt wolde opyn and undo
And sethen crepe ayen unto;
So fares woman after childyng
Thorow the grace of heven kynge."

[Significant variants: line 4 Moo: L And manye; 13 (whole line): L Echone saf the the chin bi-fore, G All one save the chyn before; 15 lykenes: L sykenesse (error); 20 and falles: G growyng.]

MS. HARLEY 4486 (QUESTION 63)
"Coment puet lenfaunt issir la ventre de la femme qi est plein de os?"
"Dieu est de mort grant poer et depuis qil puert mettre le corps lenfaunt deinz le corps la femme, dont puert il fere issir lun corps de lautre ou vif ou mort. La femme qant ele enfaunte toutes ses joyntes se largent sans la mentoun, par la grace Dieu; et lenfaunt ist, par la grace Dieu, com une tendre figure de past. Et si tost com il flert leir du siecle, le os lui endurissent, et la femme se reclost sanz nule blessure; auxi com hom meist soun doin en meel: devaunt le dole meel se oevre et deriere se reclost com rien ne fuist touche."

["How can the child, which is full of bone, come out of the woman’s womb?"] (For the slight possibility that “full of bone” may refer to the woman

For this sense of the verb creep, not recorded in O.E.D. or M.E.D., s.v. crepe, creip, v., 2.b. in D.O.S.T.

290
**Texts and Documents**

rather than the child, see above.) Answer: "God is very powerful, and just as He is able to put the child's body inside the woman's body, so He is able to make the one body come out of the other, alive or dead. When the woman gives birth, all the parts of her body, except the chin, expand by the grace of God; and the child comes out, by the grace of God, like a soft lump of dough. And as soon as it feels the air of this world, its bones harden, and the woman closes again with no wound left; just as when a man puts his finger in honey: the honey gives way in front of his finger, and closes again behind it as if nothing had been touched."

Several of the obscurities in the English versions are clarified by comparing them with the French: (1) the unintelligible line *All save oon the chine before* (which, as can be seen from the variants supplied, is equally unintelligible in L and G) is apparently a roundabout translation of *toutes ses ioyntes . . . sans la mentoun* ("all the parts of her body . . . except the chin"); (2) there is no mention of death in the French (cf. line 15 of the English): if this line has any origin in the French, it would appear to be the comparison of the new-born baby with a lump of dough (the placing of *lenfaunt ist . . . com une tendre figure de past* coincides with that of the English *as a lykenesse of dethe*—following the reference to the chin—and both are concerned with likenesses); (3) there appears to be a couplet missing in the English following *drowe* (line 24): the line makes barely any sense as its stands; there is no warrant for Nichols's translation of *drowe* (L *drowh*) as "cut"; it is clear from the French that the sense should be, "if a man drew his finger through honey" (or "through a bowl of honey", cf. the earliest French printed edition in the British Museum, *come se ung home tyrroit son doy parmy une escueille plaine de miel*)11), "the honey would open in front of the finger and close behind it"; it is not easy to see by what process the English could have come to read (line 25) "the joint would open".

In a few other places the transcriptions or translations offered by Nichols are misleading. In the question, whether a man can beget a child every time he has intercourse with his wife (L III, xv; *Med. Hist.*, 1967, 11: 175–176), lines 5–8 of the answer read (in L):

Ne so ofte may no womman
Conseyve of the seed of man
A childe forthe for-to bringe
As he might gete it in pleienge . . .

i.e., a woman cannot conceive and give birth to a child as often as a man can produce semen in amorous disport.12 Nichols transcribes *pleienge* as *plying* (i.e., "working hard"), which puts the emphasis on the man's industry rather than on his pleasure; but the sense of "playing" is confirmed by the readings in all the other English versions which have this question: H *playeng*, B *playyng*, G *pleyeng*. There is no equivalent for the phrase in the French versions in the British Museum.

A few lines further on in the same answer Sidrak explains that when a man is lecherous and over-indulges in sexual intercourse,

---

11 See note 9 above.
12 For this sense of *pleienge*, i.e., "playing", s.v. *play*, v., 10.c. in *O.E.D.:* "to sport amorously", euphemism for "to have sexual intercourse."

291
texts and documents

Of his reynes he leiseth the might;
Than is the seed feble and veyne
And to engendre hath no mayne...
i.e., his loins lose their potency; his semen becomes weak and has no power to beget offspring (cf. I, liij, above). Nichols translates reynes as "kidneys", the first of the meanings recorded in O.E.D.; clearly, however, the context requires the second meaning, "the region of the kidneys; the loins" (my italics).

In III, liij (Med. Hist., 1967, 11: 177-178), concerning the nourishment of the foetus in the womb, Sidrak explains that the child is supplied with pre-digested food:

For if the fode of suche thing wore
That it were not defyed ther bifoere,
Thanne bihoved the child nedly
Make digestiou[n] in hir body;
But that blood that it lyveth by
Is defi[e]d before redy...

Devyed (MS. deuyed) and defied are two forms of the same word (not related to modern English defy), with voiced and voiceless fricative respectively (though no forms with v for f have been previously recorded). Nichols transcribes MS. deuyed as denied, taking the two minims of the third letter as n rather than as u: this, of course, is perfectly possible; but the word denied cannot mean "digested", and with this reading the passage cannot make sense. Variants of deuyed in the other manuscripts containing this question are: H defied, A degestid, B disguised (the last makes no sense and is presumably an error for disgested, which is a possible form of digested).

The reasons for stillbirth are discussed in II, lxxviij (Med. Hist., 1967, 11: 180-181), the third reason beginning as follows:

Febleness of reynes is the thridde:
As whan a woman is so bitidde,
Some womman with childe may be
And feble of reynes eke may be she,
That she is not of the might
The peine of childeinge to suffre right...

Reines/reynes must here mean "loins" (as in III, xv, above), and the general sense of the passage is that some children are born dead because their mothers are too weak in the loins to suffer the pains of childbirth. The second line of the passage, however, is difficult: Nichols transcribes bitidde as betide, translating "betimes"; but this makes little sense. I would suggest that bitidde is the past participle of the verb bitiden in the sense "befall, afflict"; the passage could then be translated: "Weakness of the loins is the third [reason for stillbirth]: when a woman is afflicted in this way, she may be pregnant, but may also be weak in the loins, so that she does not have the strength to bear the pain of childbirth" (though this does not account for the rather awkward repetition a woman...some womman in lines two and three). In BTG the second line reads (T spelling): Als [BG As] in womman is betidde; here the meaning is apparently "as it happens/has happened in woman"; the last line reads (T spell-

13 S.v. bitiden v., 2(a) in M.E.D.
14 S.v. bitiden v., 1(a) in M.E.D.
Texts and Documents

ling): Of the childe to holde [B sofere, G suffer] the weight—i.e., the child is born dead because the mother is too weak in the loins to carry its weight—a reading which is supported by the French manuscripts, e.g., MS. Harley 4486, question 191: ... par les fiebles riens de la femme qi ne peu sustenir la charge del enfant (“... because of the weak loins of the woman, who cannot bear the weight of the child”). There is no equivalent for bitidde in the French manuscripts.

II

There are several other questions, besides those published by Nichols, concerned with reproduction or sexual love. I record these below, in the order in which they occur, giving the text from L with variants from the other versions where there are significant differences, or where these help to illuminate the meaning. Where several variants are given under one spelling, the spelling is that of the first manuscript named, unless otherwise stated.

LOVE (OR DESIRE) AT FIRST SIGHT

(III, vii)

“Hou may a man love a womman right,
Or she him, to-fore the sight?”
“Somtyme falleth a man to mete
A faire womman in the strete:
5 On hire his eighen he wole caste
   And biholdeth hir ful faste;
And the eyghen present anoon right
To the [hernis] that same sight;
The [hernis] sendith it the herte to,
10 And in delite he falleth so;
   And thanne contynueth that delite,
   And he bigynneth to love as tite.
The [hernis] sendith to the eighen ayein
   That of that sighte thei ben ful fein
15 And deliteth hem to biholde wel more,
   And so that the herte anoon therfore
   Falleth in-to foule likyng,
   And so bygynneth the love to spring.
   But and the herte were strong of might
20 To withstande that tempting sight,
   To seie, ‘Lord, I thanke thee,
The sighte that I yonder see,
   That thou woldest formen thi figure
   To make so faire a creature,’
25 Temptacioun shulde he noon be ynne,
   Ne falle in no delite of synne,

293
Ne his herte shulde have no meving [inclination]
Another time after suche thing;
No more shulde womman in hir syde

30 Desire man in any tide.
Therefore I rede bothe man and womman [advise]
In the best manere that thei can [know how]
To preie to God with al her herte [their]
To kepe hem bothe sounde and querte [healthy]

From al manere yvel of synne, [evil]
That thei be nevere founde ther-ynne;
And that thei may hem so governe,
Come to that joye that is eterne.”

[Significant variants: line 2 to-fore: GBTS for; 8 and 9 hernis: MS. eeris, H eeres, T harnys, B brayn, SG braynes; 9 the herte to: MS. to the herte to; 12 And he bigynneth: B Hym behoveth; 13 hernis: MS. eeris, H eeres, T harnys, B brayn, G brayne, S braynes; 17 likyng: B lokyng; 19-20: BTSG But the herte that were of might (G But and the herte were of might)/Stronge to holde hym in that sight; 30 (whole line): B For why she thanked God ech a tyde, T For whi she thanke God ilke a tyde, S For why she thanke God that tyde, G If she dyd thanke God every tyde; 31-38: these lines omitted in BTSG.]

There are several points worthy of comment here. To-fore (line 2) may be simply an error for for (as in BTSG); on the other hand it may be intended in the sense “in the presence of; in the sight or cognizance of”, hence “because of”. In lines 8, 9 and 13 I have substituted hernis “brains” for MS. eeris “ears”. This emendation is supported by the T reading (harnys), by the sense of the readings in BSG (brayn/es) and in the French manuscripts (e.g., MS. Harley 1121, question 221: . . . et lur queors rendent celes folies a la cervele, et la cervele respont as oiz de richief et folement les fet garder a cele creature . . . [“. . . their hearts convey this folly to the brain, and the brain replies to the eyes in return and makes them foolishly take notice of this creature . . .”]), and by plain common sense: the eyes do not present sights to the ears, but they could be said to do so to the brain. The transition from hernis to eeres in copying (presumably via heris) is easily understood, since n was frequently abbreviated to a stroke above the adjacent letter (easily omitted by a copyist), and ear was sometimes spelt with an initial h. The last eight moralizing lines, which have no equivalent in the French manuscripts and which do not appear in BTSG, are apparently an addition of the LH school.

THE BEST WOMEN FOR SEXUAL PLEASURE

(III, xxxii)

“Whiche bi the wymmen of moost profite
To man, to have with his delite?”

“To the soule profifeth noon
But a manis wyf aloon;

16 S.v. tofore, l.b. in O.E.D.
Texts and Documents

5 But for the body, I the seie, [say to you]
   In the yeere ben sesouns two [two]
   Aftir whiche a man loke shal
What womman he shal dele with-al. [have sexual intercourse]
   In the winter when the eyr is colde [air]
   [with]

10 And his colde yildeth many foldes, [breath]
   A yonge womman and browne also
   Profieth thanne man unto;
   For browne womman is of hote oonde
   And hote guttes hath, to understande,

15 And hir hete heith man also, [summer]
   And greet profite dooth him to.
   In somer when the eyr is hote [wet]
   And heteth bothe drie and woote,
   Thanne is a yonge white womman

20 Best to the profite of a man;
   For she is colde of kinde to fele [by nature]
   And of grete hethe she may kele [cool]
   A man that is of grete corage [sexual desire]
   And of nature have outrage. [has excessive sexual needs/impulses]

25 But olde womman doth no profite [neither]
   To man, nether broun ne white, [by nature]
   For greet oonde aboute she bereth [strong breath]
   And moiste guttes, that greetly dereth; [cause great harm]
   She maketh a man pure hevy

30 And greetly greveth al his body [harms]
   And maketh him chaunge his fair colour,
   Therfore in hir is no socour."

[Significant variants: line 5 I the; BTAG if thou; 10 (whole line): B To his bed-clothes behave many folde; 13-14: A For browne women be hote we ffynde/And hote guttes they have off kynde ("through nature"); 22 of: BTG man of, A A man off; 23-24: these lines omitted in BTAG; 25 doth: repeated in MS. in error; 27 greet oonde: B stynkyng breth, G yl onde; 28 greetly: B grefly ("grievously").]

In this question and the next quoted (III, liij) there is much reference to the four primary qualities of ancient physiology. Dryness (1. 18) and moistness (11. 18, 28) appear briefly, above; cold (11. 10, 21-22 above; 7-8, 21 below) and especially heat (11. 13-15, 17-18, 22 above; 6, 9, 11, 15, 17, 21, 23, 25 below) appear frequently in both passages. The ancient belief that the relative proportions of the four bodily humours changed according to the seasons is reflected in the advice (above) that in

16 This specific sense of nature ("sexual need") is not recorded in O.E.D., but cf. nature, sense 3, in D.O.S.T.: "The bodily constitution or requirements of a person or animal; one's physical constitution, ability, needs or desires", b. "with specific reference to the natural excretory or sexual functions, needs or desires of humans or animals". One of the illustrative quotations, from Dunbar's Tretis of the tua marit wemen and the wento (line 174), provides a close parallel to the use of the word here: "He has beene lychoir so lang quhill lost is his natur".

17 "Now the quantity of phlegm in the body increases in winter because it is that bodily substance
winter, when the quality of cold in a man’s body increases (through the seasonal predominance of phlegm) he should take a woman of a hot constitution (i.e., in whom the quality of heat predominates), since, through contact with her, the increasing coldness of his body will be offset (11. 9–16); similarly that in summer, when the quality of heat in his body increases (through the seasonal predominance of choler), he should take a woman who is of a cold constitution (colde of kinde), through contact with whom he may offset his increasing heat (11. 17–25). The suggestion that a man should avoid contact with an old woman because of her “moiste guttes” reflects the belief that the relative proportions of the four humours changed also according to one’s age, with phlegm, which is cold and moist, predominating in old age. It is noticeable that there is no distinction made in this passage between the different types of men (as there is between the different types of women). No attempt is made to pair off opposites, e.g., a “choleric” man with a “phlegmatic” woman, or a “sanguine” man with a “melancholic” woman (though this would be the logical conclusion of the argument): the advice given is apparently intended to apply to all men, irrespective of their constitution, temperament or age.

It is not entirely clear whether, in the passage above, the adjectives hot and cold are used purely to describe the constitution of the man or woman, as determined by the predominance of the qualities of heat or coldness in the body, or whether the words have also their sexual connotations of (respectively) “passionate, lustful” and “lacking in passion”. The wording of the question, which includes “delight” as well as “profit”, suggests that these sexual connotations are intended; yet the answer deals exclusively with man’s “profit” (i.e., with what is good for him), whilst “delight” is ignored. A connexion between heat and sexual desire is certainly implied in 11. 22–25 where excessive sexual desire in man is associated with great bodily heat; but it is not made clear whether the coldness of the woman who is said to be able to cool this heat is confined to her bodily constitution, or whether it includes sexual coldness. In the passage below, however, there is no such uncertainty: the relationship between bodily heat and sexual excitability becomes perfectly plain.

**MAN’S AND WOMAN’S SEXUAL CAPACITY COMPARED**

(III, liij)

“Whether of leccherie may more
Man or womman, and wherfore?”

“Womman may more of that play
Than any man hir fynde may,

5 And I shall telle the now why:
The **hatest** womman, **sikerly**,

[provide with]

[hottest] [assuredly]

most in keeping with the winter, seeing that it is the coldest . . . During the summer, the blood is still strong but the bile gradually increases . . .”, see John Chadwick and W. N. Mann, *The medical works of Hippocrates*, Oxford, Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1950, pp. 206–207 (The nature of man, chapter 7). For further references see Klibansky, op. cit., note 7 above, pp. 9–10.

For this and other theories as to which humour predominated in old age, see Klibansky, op. cit., note 7 above, pp. 10–11.
Texts and Documents

Is wel colder yit of kynde
Than the coldest man that men finde;
And for the grete hete of man

10 Wommen hath ofte wille to ham,
For of the mannes hete cometh her appetite
And maketh wymmen in greet delite.
But whanne he hath done as he hath ment
And his kinde be from him went,

15 His hete slaketh and goth away,
And at that tymne no more he may.
Wymmen ben not so sone hote
Whanne thei come to that note:
Whanne he hath wroght that he wolde do.

20 Thanne cometh delite hir unto;
And as with colde is slekned hete
Of watir that men therto may gete,
So is mannes hete nede
Slakinge whanne he hath done his dede.

25 Womman so sone enchaufed is noght
Whanne a man hath with hir wroght
Ne hir kynde passith not as tite;
Therfore the lenger is hir delite,
And therfore is she of more might

30 Than man that slaketh anoon right.”

[by nature]
[them]
[semen]
[abates]
[soon aroused]
[business]
[done what he wanted to do]
[cooled]
[by/with]
[necessarily]
[abating]
[warmed (aroused)]
[sexual fluid; quickly]
[longer]
[subsides immediately]

[Significant variants: line 6 hattest: B hastest; 10 (whole line): BA Hath he (A He hath) ofte wille to womman, T Hath he grete will to womman; 11–12: BTA For of hete cometh the appetite/And bringeth (A encresth, T cacches) hym unto delite.]

There is an important difference between the two schools of manuscripts here in the wording of lines 10–12: men’s “heat”, in BTA, causes them to desire women; in LH it incites the women to desire the men. There is no precise equivalent for these lines in the French manuscripts; indeed, the differences between the French and English versions of this whole question and answer are quite marked: the question, in MS. Harley 4486 (no. 275), asks, “Qi se puett plus suffrir de luxurie, lomme ou la femme?” (“Who is better able to abtain from lechery, man or woman?” [my italics]) and the answer explains that, though woman’s desire burns more fiercely and lasts longer than man’s once she is aroused, she is less easily corrupted than man, since her desire is not so easily provoked in the first instance. Thus, whereas the English (particularly of LH) is phrased more or less as an attack on women for their lechery, the French offers a more balanced account of the comparative corruptibility of men and women. The anti-feminist view of LH is certainly not without parallel in medieval literature: a very similar sentiment is expressed in the popular Latin bestiaries, as in the following passage, translated from Cambridge University Library MS. Ii.4.26 by T. H. White:

‘Femina’, a woman, comes from ‘femur’ the upper part of the thigh, where the appearance of sex is different from man’s. Others, by using a Greek derivation say that it is because of the
Fiery force with which a woman vehemently lusts, and that females are more longing than males, both in humans and in animals.18

In this question the words hot and cold are used to describe two different, though related, conditions. The first is (as before) the constitution of the man or woman, which is more or less constant (apart from variations brought about by the seasons or by advancing age, or those associated with illness): in this context the words will mean simply “filled with or dominated by the quality of heat or the quality of cold”—as in lines 6–8. The second is the much more transitory condition of sexual arousal, as in Wymmen ben not so sone hote (17) and Woman so sone enchaufed is noght (25), where hote and enchaufed clearly mean “sexually excited” rather than “filled with the quality of heat”, and where the transitoriness of the condition is emphasized by the word sone “quickly”. Though these two meanings for hot (and their opposites for cold) are both present, they are not, in fact, as distinctly separable as this analysis suggests, since there is an evident assumption that speed and slowness in sexual arousal are in direct proportion to the dominance of heat or cold in the body. Indeed, it was the very taking-for-granted of this relationship which allowed the word hot to develop the specialized senses of “full of physical desires; inflamed with sexual desire, lustful; lascivious”; 20 and, as the remainder of the answer shows, these senses are obviously understood in the word hattest (line 6), even though, ostensibly, it describes merely the physical constitution of the woman. Naturally, there was a parallel development for the word cold, to give it the specialized meaning “void of sensual passion”; 21 hence the use of “frigid” to denote the extreme of sexual unresponsiveness.

The notion that a woman’s constitution is colder than a man’s is of some antiquity. It is found (as well as the contrary opinion) in the Hippocratic collection, 22 and Galen remarks that “the female body as a whole is colder than the male”, 23 also that “the female sperm is more moist and cool, the male sperm warmer and dryer”. 24 Aristotle’s belief (which was the basis for this last comment) that the male’s heat enables him to produce semen, whilst the female’s coldness allow her to produce only catamenia, 25 is echoed in the introduction to a Middle English treatise on the diseases of women in Bodleian MS. Douce 37:

Ure Lorde God whan He stored the worde of all creaturs He made manne and woman and resonabull creaturs and bade hem wexe and multiply and ordende that of hem ij shulde cume the thurde and that of the man that is made of hote and drye mature [matter] shulde come the

20 S.v. hot adj., 3.(b) in M.E.D.
21 S.v. cold a., 7.c. in O.E.D. The earliest example in this sense is dated 1597, though the more general sense of “void of ardour, warmth, or intensity of feeling” is recorded as early as c.1175 (the same quotation is dated a1225 in M.E.D.). M.E.D. does not have a separate entry for sexual coldness (as it does for sexual heat), but in some of the quotations under cold adj., 4, “lacking warmth of feeling, devotion, desire, etc.”, this sense is implied—as in the passages from the Bestiary and from Genesis and Exodus quoted below (see notes 29 and 32).
22 For references see Margaret Tallmadge May, Galen on the usefulness of the parts of the body, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1968, vol. 1, p. 382, note 78; also Klibansky, op. cit., note 7 above, p. 105, note 122.
23 See May, op. cit., note 22 above.
25 For references see May, op. cit., note 22 above.
sede and the woman that is made of cold matyr [matter], and moyste, shulde receyve the sede so that the tempure [temper] of hote and colde moyste and dry the chylde shulde be engendyrde.**

William of Conches, to whose De philosophia mundi the author of Sidrak is indebted for the substance of several questions and answers,^7 expresses the comparative heat of man and woman in words of which lines 6–8 above are an almost verbatim translation: “Calidissima (mulier) frigidior est frigidissimo viro”.^8

Much evidence may be found in Middle English writings of the assumed connexion between bodily heat and sexual desire, particularly in writings about animals. The elephant’s alleged reluctance to mate is attributed, in the Bestiary, to the coldness of its nature:

... He arn so kolde of kinde
That no golsipe is hem minde,
Til he noten of a gres
The name is mandragores**

(“... they are so cold-natured that they have no thought of lasciviousness till they make use of a plant called mandrake”). The phrase kolde of kinde may be compared with colde of kinde and colder of kynde, lines 21 and 7 respectively in the two questions above. Bartholomew Anglicus remarks, of the lustfulness of the ass, that it is out of keeping with the coldness of its nature:

The ass... is a malencolik beste, that is colde and druye... and though the asse be ful cold and druye, yit he is ful lecherous.**

The emphatic use of thoughth... yit is a measure of the author’s surprise at finding lechery in a creature of a cold and dry constitution.** In Sidrak itself the reason offered for the tight conjunction of dogs when mating is their exceptional heat:

“Whi ben houndes fastned that doth her kynde
More than other bestis that men fynde?”

“Of alle bestes that I woot
Of nature there is noon so hoot

^10 S.v. cold adj., 7(d) in M.E.D.; quoted from John de Trevisa’s translation of Bartholomew de Glanville’s De proprietatibus rerum, Add. MS. 27944 (Br. Mus.), f.265v, column 2.
^11 The opposite viewpoint, namely, that “most melancholy persons are lustful”, is expressed in Problem XXX, 1 of the “Problems” attributed to Aristotle. This view is explained by the statement, in the same Problem, that black bile (the humour “melancholy”) “can... become both very hot and very cold”; that it determines the character in accordance as it is hot or cold, “for heat and cold are the factors in our bodies most important for determining our character”; and that it is when it is hot that the person in whom it predominates becomes “erotic”. (For a full text and translation of this Problem see Klibansky, op. cit., note 7 above, pp. 18–29, whence the quotations here are taken.) It appears, however, that by the Middle Ages the capacity of black bile to change its temperature had been forgotten and that it had become “fixed” as the cold, dry humour. Hence Bartholomew’s surprise that a “melancholic” creature should be lecherous.
As is an hounde in his nature;
And whanne he shal make engendrure, [mate]
Of her hete the grete glowing [their]
Maketh hem to-gidre fastnyng [together]
As two peces of yren doth fare [iron]

In the fire whanne thei welling are: [heating (till soft)]
Leie that oone that other upon [Lay one of them]
And yeve hem a strook anoon, [give; stroke (blow)]
Thorgh hete thei to-gidre bynde— [through their nature]
And so fareth houndes in her kynde.”

(Lansdowne I, xcv. There are no significant differences in the other manuscripts.)

As for humans, Joseph’s ability to withstand Potiphar’s advances is attributed, in Genesis and Exodus, to God’s granting him an ad hoc coldness in nature:

Putifar was wol riche man,
And he bogte Joseph al forthan
He wuld don is lechur-hed
With Joseph, for his faire-hed,
Oc he wrthed tho so kinde cold,
To don swilc dede adde he no wold;
Swilc selthe cam him fro a-buven,
God dede it al for Joseph luve[n].

(“Potiphar was a very rich man, and he bought Joseph solely because he wanted to perform his lechery with him, because of his [Joseph’s] beauty; but Joseph became so cold-natured that he had no power to do such a deed: such good fortune came to him from above—God did it all for the love of Joseph.” With kinde cold cf. kolde of kinde above.) Guy de Chauliac cites an “evil cold complexion” (i.e., constitution or temperament) as one of the causes of impotence in men:

It [lecherie] is forsothe fordone in men for evel colde complexioun the whiche taketh away the stondyng or st[tre]ychynge and for evel complexioun that cometh of rewme fordoynge the yerde and the prive stones.

(“Lechery, indeed, is prevented in men because of an evil cold constitution which prevents standing or stretching [i.e., erection of the penis], and because of an evil constitution which results from rheum and renders useless the penis and the testicles”). Rheum (mucus) is akin to, and perhaps here used synonymously with, the cold moist humour, phlegm. Chaucer’s Summoner, finally, with his “fyr-reed cherubynnes face” and his sinister power over the “yonge girles of the diocise” (which is generally taken as including young people of both sexes), is a fine example of a man with a constitution dominated by heat and a character given over to lust,

---


and of the capacity of the word hot to convey both these senses at the same time: 
"As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe".4

HOW THE SOUL OF AN UNBORN CHILD ESCAPES FROM THE WOMB OF ITS DEAD MOTHER

(III, lxxxij)

“A wif with childe that deth gooth to,
And the childe deie in hir also [if]
And out of hir noght ne may,
Where gooth the childes soule away?”

“If a wyf with childe to deie biginne
And the child deieth hir withynne [breath; at the front/
And the childes gooth out right thore; [there/then, afterwards]
For the onde of man as wel is south [breath; known]

Gooth out of the man at his mouth.
This maist thou preve faire and wel [prove; justly/safely]
By a woman that the deth it tel:
Firste hir feete bigynneth kele [to cool]
And aftir her legges faire and wele [see below]

And sithen also above the knees;
And evere, as a soule up flees,
Thenne draweth it to the breest, [breast]
And to the throte it gooth neest; [next]
And whan it to the mouth is broght,

It wendith forth and dwelleth noght. [goes]
And whan her soule is her gon fro,
The childes sone after bygynneth to goo, [soon]
And at her mouth it gooth out also—
Other weie is ther noon therto.” [none; for that purpose]

[Significant variants: lines 11–12: BDA This preve thou nought (D nought alone) by sawes ("old sayings")/But by a wif that to deth drawes; 13–14: B Firste thenne here fete do kele/And the legges after by skele ("in accordance with reason"), A First than kele off hir the ffete/And the legges also tite ("as quickly"), D Ferst thane kele here the fet/And the schankes after sket (" and afterwards quickly the legs"); 22 sone: MS. sone altered to soule (I have restored sone in accordance with HBDA soone); 24 weie: BDA issu ("way out")].

The phrase it tel (line 12) makes no apparent sense and there is no equivalent for it in the French. I would propose, tentatively, that tel (H tell) may be a form of till, preposition, "to" (forms with e for i are recorded in O.E.D.),35 and it an error for is.

See F. N. Robinson (ed.), The works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., London, Oxford University Press, 1957: The general prologue to the Canterbury Tales, 11. 624, 664 and 626. For other references to the traditional lecherousness of the sparrow see Robinson's note to 1. 626 (p. 666).

S.v. till, prep., conj., adv. in O.E.D.
Texts and Documents

A word-for-word translation of the line would then be, "By a woman that the death is to", i.e., "a woman whom death is upon/who has begun to die", which gives the same sense as BDA a wyt that to deth drawes. Problems are raised also by faire and wele (line 14). Several senses of the adverb faire would fit the context, e.g., "slowly", "completely", "plainly", but the approbation normally implied by words such as fair and well seems out of place in a description of dying, and the presence of the same phrase in the same (rhyming) position three lines earlier (line 11) is suspicious, suggesting that this second occurrence may be a scribal error through dittography. Again, there is no direct equivalent in the French manuscripts, and the unusual profusion of variant readings for the couplet (13–14) in the English manuscripts makes any judgement as to the best reading very difficult.

The emphasis on the progress of death in the mother, in the answer to a question ostensibly concerned only with the escape of the soul of the unborn child, is indicative of the widespread medieval interest in death and the stages of its conquest of the body. The progressive cooling of the body, from the feet upwards, will be familiar to many people, not otherwise interested in such physiological details, from Mistress Quickly's renowned description of the death of Falstaff in Henry V (2.iii.18ff.):

"How now, Sir John!" quoth I: "what man! be of good cheer." So a' cried out "God, God, God!" three or four times: now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God, I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a' bade me lay more clothes on his feet: I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and so upward, and upward, and all was as cold as any stone.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their assistance in dating the manuscripts in their care I am grateful to: Dr. R. W. Hunt (B), Mr. T. A. J. Burnett (L and H), Mr. Bruce Purvis (T) and Prof. N. R. Ker, who examined facsimiles of A and D at my request. I wish to thank also Dr. Christine Horton of the Department of French, University of Adelaide, for her meticulous help with some difficult readings in MS. Harley 4486, and for clarifying the meaning of a number of passages in the French; and Dr. R. F. Seamark, of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, for his comments on recent research into semen analysis.

S.v. fair(e) adv. 6.(a), 7.(b) and 7.(c) in M.E.D.

For other descriptions of the onset of death in Middle English writings, most of which are indebted ultimately to the Hippocratic Prognostikon, ch. 2 (see Chadwick and Mann, op. cit., note 17 above, pp. 112–113), s.v. Death—signs of in the indexes to Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, The index of Middle English verse, New York, Columbia University Press, 1943, and Rossell Hope Robbins and John L. Cutler, Supplement to the index of Middle English verse, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1965; also R. H. Robbins, 'Signs of death in Middle English', Mediaeval Studies, 1970, 32: 282–298.