The ancient medical sources in the chapters about sterility of Rodrigo de Castro’s *De Universa Mulierum Medicina*

Cristina Santos Pinheiro  
Center for Arts and Humanities  
University of Madeira  
Center of Classical Studies  
University of Lisbon  
polybios@uma.pt
Rodrigo de Castro Lusitano  
*Rodericus a Castro Lusitanus*

- Portuguese physician of Jewish origin (b. 1546-d.1627); later in his life adopted the Jewish name David Nahmias.
- Studied in Évora and Salamanca.
- Achieved some notoriety in Lisbon in the 1580’s.
  - He was invited to travel to India to study medicinal plants, but declined King Phillip’s invitation;
  - He worked as a physician with the soldiers of the Spanish Armada, before they set sail from Lisbon.
- In 1590 (?), he fled the persecutions of the Jews, establishing himself in Hamburg, where he edited his most important book, *De Universa Mulierum Medicina - The general medicine about women* - (Hamburg 1603; Hamburg 1617; Hamburg 1628; Venice 1644; Hamburg 1662; Cologne 1689).
De Morbis Mulierum

Roderici a Castro

Lusitani

De Morbis Mulierum

Liber Tertius

Sectio Prima

De Sterilibus.

Ne confusionis obscuritatem paveret melius harum affectionum distincta tractatio, easque ciuia conceptum aut parum accidunt superioribus libros conclusionem, reliquis quae vel praegnantes, vel puerperas exercere, in proximis relaturi.

De sterilitate naturali.

Cap. I.
RODERICI CASTROI LUSITANI, PHILOSOPHIE AC MEDICINAE DOCTO.
ris per Europam notissimi,
De universa mulierum.

MEDICINA, NOV ET ANTEHAC AN E.
MINE TENTATO ORDINE
OPUS ABSOLUTISSII-
MUM.
Et Studiorum amabilis studi. Medicis vero necessariums.

Pars prima Theorica.

QUATVOR COMPREHENSAM LIBRIS, IN QUI.
bus Dieu, qua administris naturam, anatomem, semen, menstruem, con-
ceptum, uteri generationem, fetus formationem, & hominis or-
tum attinet, abundantissime expli-
cantere.

Cum Triplici Indice.

Prima, Capitum totius Operis.
Secunda, Dubiorum, & Problematum, que praepulcherrima, utilissima
ac judicium patissim imperta sunt.
Tertia, Lorum que tot opera & situ dignorum habentur.

Coloniae,
Imprimatur Anno clst. III.
TRACTATUS BREVIS
DE NATURA,
ET CAUSIS PESTIS, QUAE HOC
ANNO M. D. XCVI. HAMBURGEN-
SEM CIVITATEM AFFLIGIT.

In quo succincte sed accuratè demonstratur, qua-
nam in presenti loci praedaendi & curan-
di ratio sit observanda.

Utrum universa urbs tum etiam unusquisque se solvit
ab exorsitum malo preservare, ac subinde
occupantem jam peregrinis facil-
lius propulsare.

Multa etiam in haec usque subobscura
obiter declarantur

Per
Rodericum a Castro, Philosophia & Med-
cinae Doctorem.
Ad Amplissimum splendissimum ejusdem
urbis Senatum.

HAMBURGI.
Excudebat Jacobus Lucius junior.
Anno M. D. XCVI.

RODERICI A CASTRO LUSITANI
Philos. ac Medic. Doct. per Euro-
panum nosterimi.

MEDICUS-POLITICUS:
SIVE
DE OFFICIIS MEDICO-POLITICIS TRA-
CATUS, QUATUOR DISTINCTUS LIBRIS:
IN QUIBUS NON SOLVM BONORVM MED-
CORUM MORA AC VIRTVS EXPRIMANTUR, MALORVM VERD SRAUDS & IMPOSTURE
DESEGGNATUR: VERUM ETIAM PLERQ., ABH CIAEA VIRORVM HOC ARGUMENTUM MULIE
A3J JACUMDA EXALISSIMA PROPOSTUM.

OPVS ADMODVM UTILE MEDICIS, AGROIS,
AGROTORVM ALISITIBUS, & CUNCTIS ALIS LITERARUM, ATQUE ADEO PO-
LITICA DISCIPLINA CULTIBUS.

CVM DUPLICI INDICE, VNO CAPITVM:
ABO VERVM PRACISVRVM.

Anno M. D. C. XTV.

HAMBURGI, EXBIBLIOPOLIO FROBENIANO.
Chapter “De sterilibus” (“On sterile women”)

Book 1 De morbis cunctis foeminis communibus, (Diseases that are common to all women)

Book 2 Liber secundus de affectibus, qui viduis, ac virginibus accident, (Diseases that affect virgins and widows)

Book 3 Liber tertius, Section 1 De sterilibus (On sterile women)

«In part 2, I will provide that no disease among those who often afflict poor women and have so far been treated by different writers in a dispersed way is omitted. I will examine the essence, the species, the differences, the causes, the symptoms and the prognosis of these, keeping this order, and if any issue requires a more wordy debate, I will relegate it to the scholia that are attached to almost every chapter, in order that you, reader, that hurry to the treatment, do not be late».

Castro, De Universa Mulierum Medicina I, praef., 352 (unless stated otherwise, translations of Latin or Greek texts are my own.)
De sterilibus (On sterile women)

Definition

Sterilitas est quaedam impotentia ac difficultas mulieris, viro utentis, ad concipiendum debito tempore.

(Castro, De Universa Mulierum Medicina Part II, l. 3, c. 1, 350)

«Sterility is some sort of inability or difficulty that a woman who sleeps with a man has in conceiving at the convenient time.»
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of Section 1, Book 3, Part 2: De Sterilibus (On Sterile Women)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I Sterilitas naturalis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II Sterilitas foeminae per collationem ad virum</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scholium (appended comment or note)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III Sterilitas morbosa, seu diversis affectionibus quae conceptum impedient</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV Sterilitas ad tempus</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. Sterilitas virorum</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fertility tests

(...) *allium expurgatum pessi forma dormituarae utero subdito, & si odor vel sapor postridie ad os pervenerit foecunda est, sin minus, sterilis.*

«Garlic used in a pessary put in the womb of a woman and left overnight. If in the next morning, she feels the taste and the odour of garlic in her mouth, she is fertile. Otherwise, she is not.»

*(Castro, *De Universa Mulierum Medicina* II, 3, 1, 352)*

«If a woman does not conceive, and you wish to know if she will conceive, cover her round with wraps and burn perfumes underneath. If the smell seems to pass through the body to the mouth and nostrils, be assured that the woman is not barren through her own physical fault.» *(Hippocrates, *Aphorismi* 5, 59 [transl. Jones (1923) 175])**
Women with weight problems

«Women with child who are unnaturally thin miscarry until they have grown stouter.»
Hipp. Aphorisms 5.44 [transl. Jones (1923) 159]

«If a pregnant woman aborts a month-old embryo and cannot carry it to full term, she is abnormally thin. Have her cleanse her uterus and use drugs to make her fat: for she cannot carry a child to full term until she is restored to health and her uterus is strong.»
Women with weight problems

«When unnaturally fat women cannot conceive, it is because the fat presses the mouth of the womb, and conception is impossible until they grow thinner.»

Hipp. *Aphorisms* 5. 46 [transl. Jones (1923) 171]

«If a woman is excessively fat, she does not conceive, for her omentum, lying thick and abundant, presses the mouth of her uterus closed so that it does not receive seed. You must make her thin with a downward purgative and uterine pessaries that cleanse and inflate.»

Hipp. *On sterile women* 229 [transl. in Hanson (2004) 295 (=identical text in *On female nature* 20)]
«Love reconciles seed»

Inviti coitus utriusque aut alterutrius, ut fieri solet inter eos qui invití matrimonium contrahunt, steriles censentur, amor enim ut inquit Aetius, conciliat genituram, quocirca amantes foeminae crebrius pariunt.

(Castro, *De Universa Mulierum Medicina* II, 3, 2, 360)

«Unwanted sex for one or the other, as usually happens between those who are married against their will, must be considered infertile. Love, indeed, as Aetius says, reconciles seed. Therefore, women who are in love have more children.»
Impotentia in Law:

**Frigidi**: those who are impotent by nature (includes all congenital physical pathologies that prevent coition)

vs.

**Maleficiati**: those who are impotent by accident (men and women under spells, eunuchs, *castrati*, etc.)
Abortion

Quaestio hic euenit, an medico liceat sterilitatem inducere, quae duas habet partes prima est, an conceptum impedire, secunda, an abortum prouocare liceat.

(Castro, De Universa Mulierum Medicina II, 3, sch, 366)

«In this place the question arises: is it legitimate for the doctor to induce sterility? This question has two parts: one being if it is legitimate to prohibit conception, the other is it legitimate to induce abortion.»
Abortion

(...) idem circumspectissimus senex, qui in iureiurando mulieri ad corrumpendum conceptum vel foetum, medicamentum non esse exhibendum, asseuerantissime confirmat.

(Castro, De Universa Mulierum Medicina II, 3, sch. 366)

«In the Oath the same old wise man earnestly establishes that no drug should be shown to a woman in order to prevent conception or destroy the foetus.»

(...) οὐδὲ γυναικὶ πεσσὸν φθόριον δώσω.
«I shall not give to a woman a pessary to cause abortion»
