

Baths, Scrubs and Cuddles: How to Bathe Young Infants According to Simon de Vallambert (1564) ¹

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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. The collective representation and conception 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 regarding the selected questions for this topic and the organization of the medical discourse, from Greek Medicine, West European Middle Ages and Renaissance, up to our modern online pages. As one example, on the page devoted to infant care, http://www.emedicinehealth.com/bathing_babies/article_em.htm, 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*

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*gouverner les enfants*². 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? and Health and safety) replicate the chapter titles found in de Vallembert's Renaissance pediatric treatise, itself inspired by, amongst others, Galen³, Soranus⁴, and Avicenna⁵. 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, 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.

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

² Vallambert, Simon de. *De la manière de nourrir et gouverner les enfants dès leur naissance*. Poitiers, 1565.

³ Amongst other titles, see: Galen. *Les facultés de l'âme*. Translated by V. Barras, T. Birchler et A.-F. Morand. Paris, 1995; Galen. *Selected Works*. Selected and translated by P. N. Singer. Oxford, 1997; Ps-Galen. "De Sanitate Tuenda." In *Galenus Pergameni (...) opera quæ ad nos extant omnia*. Ed. Janus Cornarius. Basel, 1549.

⁴ See: Soranus. *Gynecology*. Translated by Owsei Temkin and others. Baltimore, 1991. Hereafter cited as Soranus.

⁵ See: Avicenna. *A treatise on the Canon of medicine of Avicenna, incorporating a translation of the first book*. Translated by O. Cameron Gruner. New York, 1970.

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 documentation: we possess only late and partial testimonies from the actual players of the play (mothers and midwives). By carefully examining the discourse regarding infant bathing given in 1565 by Simon de Vallambert, I will compare sources and sequels, always attentive to maintaining contradictions and differences — in spite of our proclivity to recognize the same and forget the difficulties of paradox or controversy.

This paper 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 implicit connotations for a Christian culture where baptism is the first sacrament.

Commonplaces and controversies

In 1553, a publisher in Tours issued a re-edition of a lost treatise of pediatrics, entitled *Pedenemicon*, written in Latin by Gabriel Miron, the former Physician of Francis Ist⁶. This Latin treatise is the major source of Vallambert for writing the first treatise of

⁶ Miron, Gabriel. *Liber Pedenemicon*. Tours, 1553 (Liber secundus, Bibliothèque Mazarine 4391).

Hereafter cited as Miron. See: Berthier, Jeanne. “Un traité scolastique de médecine des enfants: Le *Pedenemicon* de Gabriel Miron.” Actes du 110e congrès national des sociétés savantes, Montpellier, 1985, Sec. d’Hist. med. et de Phil., 19-22. Paris, 1987.

pediatrics in French and the faithful adaptation of the former by the latter exemplifies the desire for continuity and tradition of the Renaissance medical discourse. 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 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 diseases⁷.

Whereas nature dictates necessity and unambiguous uses, the ambivalence of infant bathing, "neither natural nor against nature", is precisely the open door for variance (in places and times) and controversy. The bath can be seen both as the comfort of the infant's temperament or as the correction of its distemper. And the theory of infant bathing will then evolve with the conception of childhood. Beyond the apparent consensus on the necessity of bathing infants, the story can thus be heard of the hesitant and sometimes contradictory construction of our modern mental representations.

New baths?

The question asked by Miron is at the core of a silent debate between Ancient and

⁷ Miron, "De infantibus balneandis", p. 46: "[...] licet enim ei non occuramus necessario sed uoluntariæ uel quasi sola uoluntate moti, cum non sit res naturalis nec contra naturam et eius administratio est uel sanitatis conseruatia uel egritudinis curatiua". (My English translation for Miron, everywhere.)

Modern medicine in the XVth and XVIth centuries: the one upon the nature of the child. For pediatricians who engage in writing specific treatises on the diseases of children, age is clearly not only a matter of years; it also defines a particular balance of the organism, thus asking for distinct diagnosis and cures. Infant bathing, in its specificity, cannot be situated without consideration for the definition of the child it implies, and on which it is based.

The question was stated more explicitly, in 1564, by Simon de Vallambert, Physician to Marguerite de France, the daughter of Claude de France and Francis Ist. Writing at the request of his protector, he mitigates the affirmation of a universal consensus regarding infant bathing with the notation of new practices, deemed better than ancestral customs. While he states that all the doctors concur on the necessity of bathing the newborn, de Vallembert nonetheless offers a remark on recent trends in bathing, which he dates from the century preceding his own, namely from the commentaries to the *Canon* of Avicenna given by Jacques des Pars in the XVth century:

By common voice and consent of all the Doctors, the bath must be given for several days and for a long time: and "more than any other one, Galen thus advises because, says he in the first book of the *Healthy Diet*⁸, the child will keep his good habits if, during the first year, you feed him only with milk and bathe him in soft and tepid water; do that, by these means, his body, being kept soft and tender for a long time, can grow better and reach a taller and nicer appearance."⁹

⁸ Ps-Galen, *De Sanitate Tuenda*, in *Galenī Pergamenī (...) opera quæ ad nos extant omnia*, ed.

Janus Cornarius (Basel, 1549), vol. 2, col. 260-261.

⁹ Simon de Vallambert, *La Manière de nourrir et gouverner les enfans...* (Poitiers, 1565), p. 48: "Par commune voix et consentement de tous les Docteurs, le baing doyt continuer par plusieurs jours & long

More or less a translation from the Latin read in the eighth chapter of Gabriel Miron, "On Bathing Infants", the praise of baths is thus linked with early good habits that the infant diet should build. Controversy arises, though, regarding the time of the bath: right after birth, when the navel cord has been severed, or after cleansing rubs? And later, before or after feeding the young child? On this point, modern physicians of the French Renaissance dare to disagree with the Galenic and Soranic traditions and, moreover, they comment on their own liberty. Following the lead of Gabriel Miron, who advocates bathing the child before feeding¹⁰, Vallambert devotes two paragraphs to the topic of changes in infant bathing practices. He summarizes the revolution in one sentence, placed between a description of the old ways and advocacy for the new ways:

From this time on — roughly one hundred years before this year 1564 — we have adopted another way for so doing and followed another order, which was found to be more reasonable and practical, starting with the bath, as long as the child has neither imperfection nor default in his limbs¹¹.

temps: 'et sur tous autre Galien le conseille ainsi car, dit-il, au premier livre du Regime de santé, l'enfant conservera la bonté de son habitude, si la premiere année vous le nourrissez de lait seulement, & luy faites user de baing d'eau douce et tiede: afin que son corps, par ce moyen, estant longuement conservé mol et tendre, puisse mieux croistre & parvenir a plus grand', & plus belle habitude'." Hereafter cited as Vallambert. (My French translation for Vallambert, everywhere.)

¹⁰ Miron, p. 46: "Nam ut uidimus multi et fere omnes præcipiunt balneum ante primam lactationem, Galenus uero uult quod lactentur primo deinde balneantur." (Thus, although we can see that many — actually, nearly all — physicians advise bathing the child before the first nourishment, Galen wants the child to be first fed and then bathed.)

¹¹ Vallambert, p. 43: "Dépuis ce temps-là, il y ha environ cent ans, jusques a present, que lon compte Mil cinq cens soixante & quatre, on ha prins une autre maniere de faire, & suyvi un autre ordre: ce

Now, by reversing the order between cleansing, with salts, and bathing, Vallambert suggests that the function of the bath has actually evolved.

From Soranus' *Gynecology*¹² to the medieval pseudo-galenic treatise *De Sanitate Tuenda*, midwives had been advised to perform four vital acts after birth: severing the cord, cleansing the child, bathing the child and strengthening the bones. According to Des Pars¹³, Miron, and Vallambert, the bath is believed to act as a means of cleansing, of healing, and of strengthening. Thus, the bath replaces three of the traditional four gestures ministered by the midwife. Vallambert summarizes the newly accepted tradition:

Now it must be noted why we should begin with the bath: because the first thing that must be done to the child is the one by which we can best attain the cleansing of the skin, the healing of his tiredness and his wounds — if the child happens to

qui ha esté trouvé plus raisonnable et plus commode, commençant par le baing, encor' que l'enfant n'ayt aucune faute ne imperfection en ses membres."

¹² Soranus, p. 12: "The subject of rearing children is broad and manifold. For it comprises the consideration as to: which of the offspring is worth rearing, how one should sever the navel cord and swaddle and cleanse the infant which is to be reared, in what manner one should bathe it, how one should bed it and what kind of nurse one should select."

¹³ See: Jacquart, Danielle. "Le regard d'un médecin sur son temps: Jacques Despars." *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes*, 138, 35-86. Paris-Geneva, 1980. And also, more generally, Berriot-Salvadore, Évelyne. "L'enfant dans le discours médical de la Renaissance." In *Autour de l'enfance*, 93-104, 1999; Berthier, Jeanne. "La médecine des enfants à l'époque impériale." In *Aufstieg und Niedergang Der Roemischen Welt PT.2: Geschichte und Kulture Roms Im Spiegel Der neueren Forschung*, dir. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini, 226-227. Berlin, New York, 1996; Colon, A.R. and P. A. *Nurturing children: a History of Pediatrics*. Wesport, 1999; French, Roger. *Medicine Before Science: the Business of Medicine from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, 2003.

bear any on his body — and by which we can most easily fix the disfiguration of the limbs. Once these three intentions are accomplished, the fourth will be attained later in another, more practical, manner, which is the hardening of the skin and the defense of the body against exterior encounters. Now it happens that a bath, made of pure and tepid water, is the best of all things for cleansing the skin, removing the tiredness and sprain from the body and making the limbs easy to manipulate and bring back in their due form.¹⁴

In spite of the modesty of the style —which puts no emphasis on originality nor innovation—, the new order in the gestures of the midwife induces a revolution: it departs from the priority, that had been given to the correcting of childhood frailties, to establish the importance of comforting the newborn.

The first question addressed by the physicians obeys to the ancient order of exposition, illustrated by Soranus: when to bathe first, and for how long. If the first bath is a vital act, it must, according to Galen, Soranus, and our modern Renaissance physicians, be renewed during the first weeks and years, then less and less as the child grows and develops. A private practice, left to women, it pertains to the child up to the

¹⁴ Vallambert, p. 44: "Or faut noter que la raison pourquoy on doit commencer par le baing, est: que la premiere chose qui doit estre faite a l'endroit d'un enfant, est celle par laquelle se mieux la mundification du cuyr d'iceluy, & la cure de lasseté et meurdrisseure, si aucune est en son corps, & avec laquelle on racoustre plus aisement le desfigurement de ses membres. Lesquelles troys intentions accomplies, la quatriesme apres s'accomplit par autre moyen plus commodement, qui est l'endurcissement de la peau, & la deffense du corps a l'encontre des rencontres exterieures. Or est il ainsi que le baing d'eau pure et tiede sur toutes choses mundifie mieux le cuyr, oste la lasseté et foulure du corps, rend les membres maniables a redresser en leur forme deüe."

age of seven, while he still lives within the female circle of the house.

Vallambert addresses the question several times in his treatise, once in each of his three books, devoted to the different ages of the child (first days, suckling age, years after the weaning). Thus, in the second book, pertaining to the young suckling child, he devotes more than ten pages to the subject of bathing¹⁵, giving the medical justifications for the practice, but also warning of the danger of accidents and excesses. The daily bath, made of pure water, plays an essential role in the proper growth of the child.¹⁶ The third book dwells much less on the subject of bathing; exercise and locomotion have replaced the bath for as a means of strengthening and comforting. The book briefly refers to the second book for further details whereas the only question addressed is the proper time for the bath, before or after meals.¹⁷ The pediatrician is quick to refer to his own book, instead of exposing the subject: the topic belongs to infancy, not to late childhood.

The temperament of children

¹⁵ Vallambert, "Livre II Comme faut nourrir l'enfant durant qu'il tette," pp. 99-110.

¹⁶ Vallambert, p. 100: "Au livre precedant nous avons parlé du baing, qui est a faire seulement a l'heure de la naissance de l'enfant, & es deux ou trois ou quatre premiers jours, lequel estoit composé de certaines choses confortatives du cuir & des membres: icy nous parlerons du baing & du lavement d'eau simple, qu'il faut reiterer souvant jusques a sept ans."

¹⁷ Vallambert, p. 172: "Galien ordonne deux heures du jour commodes pour frotter et baigner les enfans détriez, & qui sont ja grandets : l'une est au matin, apres qu'ils sont levez, avant que jouer: l'autre apres qu'ils ont joué, devant que manger. Et ne veut Galien, que quand l'enfant se baigne apres avoir mangé, il luy soit permis de boire avant le baing, parce que la distribution de ce qui seroit contenu dans l'esthomas se feroit trop tost, ce qui est a éviter es corps qui sont sains. Parquoy il conseille que le repas voise tousjours apres le baing en une personne saine et temperee. Maintenant pour sçavoir de la qualité du baing et du frottement, faut recourir au livre precedant, en leur propre chapitre."

In fact, the relative brevity of the chapters concerning bathing for *older children* implies that the first bath, given after birth, summarizes all of its virtues and uses. The author of the treatise can therefore dispense with longer and repetitive explanations. But also, as the child grows, the bath becomes less and less necessary and does not, for instance, need to replace physical exercise when the child is big enough to move by himself. The newborn, then, appears to be the perfect case study regarding the private, early bath that should be administered to children.

At this point, the order of first ministrations to be given to the child, far from being a finicky controversy, reveals a historical change in the general conception of childhood¹⁸. Controversy concerning the time of the first bath tells, in fact, of another controversy: whether the child should be considered as a small adult or as a specific person. The notion of age, which was mostly developed during the Middle Ages, refers not to the number of years attained by an individual, but to specific balances and temperaments that are constitutive of a life cycle. Here, the apparent departure from ancient and medieval traditions of the Renaissance pediatricians is justified by the very vagueness of ancient models regarding childhood.

Hot and humid by nature, the newborn would be, according to Galen, the perfect example of a temperament defined by its age. Thus, in the treatise on the *Faculties of the*

¹⁸ See: Ariès, Philippe, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1960); Lazard, Madeleine. "Nourrices et nourrissons d'après le traité de Vallambert (1565) et la *Paedotrophia* de Scévole de Sainte-Marthe (1584)." In *Joyeusement vivre et honnêtement penser: mélanges offerts à Madeleine Lazard*, ed. M.-M. Fragonard et G. Schrenck, 187-204. Paris, 2000.

Soul,¹⁹ the Greek physician comments on a passage from Plato (*Laws*, 2, 666a), explaining the differences induced by the age of the patient: children should not be given wine, because their natural warmth would cause an excess of hotness and a bad inebriation, whereas older people need the solace of alcohol to live through the bitter times of bad health and despair. But, other than this short paragraph, Galen does not give (at least in the works that are now available to us) a systematic and precise definition of childhood. The door is then left open for continuations and extrapolations.

In the treatise on *Mixtures* attributed to Galen, the author evokes a temperament that is hot and humid²⁰ and establishes the possibility that such a temperament could be balanced, under certain conditions. Childhood could then be compared to spring, in that

¹⁹ Galen, *Les facultés de l'âme*, trans. V. Barras, T. Birchler, A.-F. Morand (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, La roue à livres, 1995), pp. 106-107: " 'Shall we begin by enacting that boys shall not taste wine at all until they are eighteen years of age; we will tell them that fire must not be poured upon fire, whether in the body or in the soul, until they begin to go to work [...]; afterwards they may taste wine in moderation up to the age of thirty[...]; when, at length, he has reached forty years, [...] he may invite not only the other Gods, but Dionysus above all, to the mystery and festivity of the elder men, making use of the wine which he has given men to lighten the sourness of old age [...]. ' With this excerpt, I invite these noble Platonists to mind not only what is said about the consumption of wine in general, but also what is said on the differences between ages. Thus, he says that the nature of boys is furious, whereas the elders' is sour, discouraged, and hard, which does not comes from the difference in years but from the particular mixture of the body, specific to each age. The mixture of youth is very hot and sanguine, when the mixture of elders is less sanguine and cold."¹⁹ Translation of Plato taken from *Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, found in <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laws.html> (accessed 1 October 2006).

²⁰ Galen, *Selected Works*, trans. P.N. Singer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), *Mixtures* 1, 516, p. 205: "One should not exclude the possibility of a mixture which is both hot and wet." Hereafter cited as *Mixtures*.

the balance of childhood is hot and wet.²¹

Thus, there is a paradoxically natural unbalance in childhood, characterized by excessive heat and wetness but seen as a natural and necessary stage towards maturity and balance. In a stunning symmetry, old age will then be seen as an excess of dryness and coldness, announcing the coming death.²²

The question of age is crucial for proper diagnosis and cures, as the existence of specific temperaments forbids applying the same model, based on one ideal well-tempered mixture, to all subjects. If the physician ignores the proper conditions of each age, he will err in its observation.²³ Childhood thus appears as a category for the diagnosis.

Now, except for a short aphorism of Hippocrates, transmitted with its commentary by Galen²⁴, there is no detailed description of first age in the ancient medical corpus and, as the author of the *Mixtures* sadly remarks: "On the subject of the stages of childhood

²¹ *Mixtures*, 1, 510, p. 209: "The opinion that spring is hot and wet, and simultaneously also well balanced, is a manifest conclusion. Spring is neither wet to same degree as winter, nor hot to the same degree as summer, and thus possesses neither quality in a disproportionate sense."

²² *Mixtures*, 2, 581, p. 235: "Old men are thus dry in the same sense that children are wet, that is to say, in the solid parts of the body: bone, ligament, membrane, artery, vein, nerve, casing, flesh. Aristotle's parallel between old age and the drying out of a plant is an apt one. Plants are to begin with soft and wet : they increase gradually in dryness as they grow older, until finally they lose their moisture altogether and die".

²³ *Mixtures*, 2, 643, p. 265: "All these are mistakes which the majority of doctors make by ignoring the proper, specific indications, and turning instead to incidental features."

²⁴ Galen, "*Commentaria in aphorismos Hippocratis*," in *Opera Omnia*..., Basel, 1549, vol. 1, col. 24. Hereafter cited as *Commentaria*.

and the prime of life, on the other hand, there is no agreement among doctors, nor is the dispute easy to resolve."²⁵ In this indetermination, in the contradiction between nature and unbalance, lay the foundations of the historical debate about childhood in the Renaissance: should the child's temperament be corrected as a lack of balance or should it be accepted as a natural stage?

Gabriel Miron enters this very debate in the first chapters of his treatise, reminding the reader of the nature of the child : hot and wet, he is prone to be hotter because of his humidity and wetter because of his hotness²⁶. Supplying consistent theories where Galen and Hippocrates had only mentioned specificity, the medieval physicians, who were readers of *Mixtures*, elaborate upon an alternative model for good health, where age intervenes as a factor for variance. Systematizing the qualities and their balances into fixed and recognizable temperaments, they allow childhood and its distempers to become a transitory balance: a mixture defined by age.

The first bath belongs, then, to the specific care of infants. But the specific order of gestures implies a position towards the specific treatment of different ages. Thus, if, following Galen, the physician advises the midwife to first cleanse without a bath, and then bathe the child in water, the conception implied is that the humidity of the child should be addressed first, and corrected. According to the Hippocratic principle that elements of an opposed quality will cure an excess, such as cooling baths to cure fevers²⁷, the bathing of children could reduce their natural but excessive hotness; but it would

²⁵ *Mixtures*, 2, 583, p. 239.

²⁶ Miron, p. 11: "quod eo quod in pueris humidum illud est maius, ita calor naturalis est maior."

²⁷ *Commentaria...*, 4, 17.

reinforce their natural wetness.

The cooling effect of baths, underlined by Avicenna in his *Canon*²⁸, could very well, then, be so contrary to the nature of the child that it would kill him. Considering the never questioned tenderness of newborn, the delicate art of bathing them requires a fine balance between contradicting and comforting their nature: in danger because of excessive heat, the child would also be in danger from excessive refrigeration. The same ambiguous treatment applies to the child's wetness: too much wetness suffocates the child by obstructing the pores and ducts, thus forbidding sweat and natural evaporation. But too much dryness would constrict the pores and dissipate the spirits. The practice of bathing must then always be moderate, and its commendation results, in fact, in the mitigation of two opposing functions: correcting and comforting. Soranus, referring to the practice of ancient Scythes of dipping their newborn in cold water, condemns it as Barbarian: the development exemplifies the ambivalence of the bath, considered both as a cure and as a danger²⁹. Vallambert, misquoting Galen and actually quoting this passage as it figures in the Pseudo-Galen's *De Sanitate Tuenda*, abounds in the same direction — cold water is dangerous for the newborn:

²⁸ Avicenna, *A treatise on the Canon of medicine of Avicenna, incorporating a translation of the first book*, trans. O. Cameron Gruner (New York, 1970), pp. 325-236: "The air of the bathroom has a warming action, the water of the bath has a moistening effect on the body. The first change in the body is to cool and to moisten ; the second is to warm and to moisten ; the third is to make the body warm and dry. It is useless to listen to those who assert that water taken internally does not moisten the internal tissues.."

²⁹ Soranus, 12 (81), p. 82: "After omphalotomy, the majority of the barbarians, such as the Germans and Scythians, and even some of the Hellenes, put the newborn into cold water in order to make it firm and to let die, as not worth rearing, one that cannot bear the chilling but becomes livid or convulsed."

For, to bathe children in cold water, as the Germans used to do before and during the time of Galen, is a barbarous and dangerous thing, as he himself says: for to cool too much the child, who is tender, is to extinguish his natural heat, and thus to kill him; and also to thicken the skin and constrict his pores will prevent the sweating of the body and, thus, make him susceptible to fevers and suffocation of the spirits.³⁰

Thus, the ambiguous nature of the child, both distempered because of excessive heat and humidity, and well-tempered because of the specific balance of his age, induces an ambiguous practice of bathing. On the one hand, the bath provides a corrective effect to the inner heat of the baby, and thus helps the newborn to grow. On the other hand, it maintains the child in its natural humidity, protecting him against the “external encounters” of cold air and wounding objects.

For this reason, the apparent continuity in discourses may deceive the modern reader. Expanding from the chapter “On cleansing” in Soranus’ *Gynecology* to the medieval compendium *De Sanitate Tuenda*, the Renaissance treatises of Miron and Vallambert adopt a fixed organization of the matters: first, the justification of the bathing practice, then the composition and temperature of the bath, the length of the stay in water, the frequency of bath, the appropriate period for bathing, the seasonal variations, the necessity of drying up the child, and the way to rub the limbs efficiently. But these

³⁰ Vallambert, pp. 46-47: “Car de baigner l’enfant d’eau froide, comme faisoient les Alemans au temps & devant le temps de Galien, est chose barbare & dangereuse, comme luy mesme le dit: d’autant que trop refroidir l’enfant, qui est delicat, est estaindre sa chaleur naturelle, & par ainsi le faire mourir: & aussi espoissir le cuir, & et resserrer ses pores, est empescher la transpiration du corps, & par consequant le rendre sujet a fievres, & a suffocation des esprits.”

similarities mask the deep discrepancies between ancient and modern practices. By defining childhood as a specific age, with specific needs and nature, the late medieval physicians bent the Ancients' theory towards an increasingly comforting conception of the first bath.

What is to be Done First: Drying or Bathing?

When Vallambert proposes to replace cleansing, exercising, and strengthening of the limbs by the sole act of bathing, and places the chapters on bathing before those pertaining to rubbing and swaddling, he breaks from the tradition of Soranus and medieval physicians: the priority is, then, to cleanse gently and in a warm way, rather than desiccating first.

This revolution is emphasized by the contrast established between the practices of “old midwives”, which reproduce the old order of cleansing with linen, oils, and herbs and then rubbing off the blood and other matter from birth, and the new practice of bathing before scrubbing and rubbing. In a long chapter³¹, the pediatrician describes the outdated practices, emphasizing the use of rough materials (for instance, the skin of a sheep or unsifted flour) and multiplying the examples to write up a vivid reddition of customs pictured as exotic and foreign. In spite of the implicit disagreement of the doctor, the midwives are credited with the intuitive knowledge of the right goal: gentleness. In their ignorance, they would thus perform the essential infant care.

In the past, midwives used to resort to other means, as writes Jacques des

³¹ Vallambert, p. 43-46 : "iiiij La maniere d'accomplir les mesmes intentions que dessus, desquelles usoyent anciennement les Sages-femmes de France."

Pars, for attaining the same goals as described above [i.e., to cleanse the skin and resolve wounds and deformations]. Thus, some would wrap the child first with the skin of a sheep or a lamb that had been recently scorched and still retained its warmth, intending to alleviate from him the labor he had to sustain when he exited the womb and to resolve the swelling on the surface of his body, and, with that, to deterge the skin and, finally, to fortify his limbs. Some, such as those who were called by commoners, used to put him immediately on warm straw and they would rub him gently with it, so as to cleanse him, reduce the patches of humidity, remove the tiredness and thicken the skin. Some used to spread unsifted flour on the whole body ; they would then rub him with a piece of rind, using the inside part, in order to deterge from the skin all the bad humid parts acquired in the mother's womb, and thus, to relieve him and strengthen his limbs. Those who saw that the child was healthy and had no need for that, without further ado, welcomed him to their bosom, putting him in receiving linens and swaddles made of hemp, wool, fur, scarlet or silk³².

³² Vallambert, *Opus Cit.*, p. 43 : "iiiij La maniere d'accomplir les mesmes intentions que dessus, desquelles usoyent anciennement les Sages-femmes de France.

Au temps passé, les Sages-femmes, comme escrit Iaques des Pars, avoyent autres manieres de faire, pour accomplir les mesmes intentions que dessus. Car aucunes enveloppoyent l'enfant tout premierement de peau de mouton ou d'aigneau, recentemente escorché & estant encor 'en sa chaleur, en intention de l'alleger du travail qu'il avoyt soustenu a l'issue du ventre de sa mere, & de resoudre les gourfouleures de la superficie de son cors, & avec ce, deterger le cuir & finalement fortifier ses membres. Aucunes, comme celles qui estoyent appellees du commun, le mettoient incontinant sur la paille chaude, & l'en frottoient doucement, a fin de le nettoyer, rosoudre les humiditez, oster les lassetez, & espoissir la peau. Aucunes respandoyent sur tout son corps de la farine non sasse, puis le frottoient d'une couanne de lard, avec le

The scientific text of Vallambert thus presents itself as the rational and revolutionary continuation of popular practices, which were not theorized and were performed by women (who were themselves excluded from the official spheres of knowledge). Opposing means and goals, the pediatrician recognizes the legitimacy and rightness of their intentions, though satirizing the use of animal parts and food products for infant care. Vallambert's next paragraph, stating that practices changed one hundred years before the publication of his book, 1564, goes on to advocate for the new order. Under the title "The way of doing in present times for attaining similar goals, and why we begin with the bath", Vallambert exposes the rationale for skipping the dry cleansing and providing the child with a bath. After reaffirming the virtues of the bath,³³ he demonstrates that the humidification attained by the immersion should not be corrected by the traditional addition of salts, brine, herbs, or powders that was advised by Soranus,³⁴ the *De Sanitate Tuenda*, or even Gabriel Miron. Although Vallambert cites elsewhere the practice of bathing the child in wine or salted water, as a positive trait when it pertains to unhealthy babies, to provide the child's skin with strengthening components and help the desiccation, he strongly recommends the use of pure tepid water, that is to say, of an element compatible with the inner nature of the child, with no

dedans, a fin de deterger le cuir des mauvaises humiditez acquises du ventre de la mere, & avec ce le soulager & renforcer ses membres. Celles qui regardoyent que l'enfant se portoit bien, & n'avoit point de besoin de tout cela, sans faire autre chose, le recevoient en elur giron preparé avec linges & langeots de lin, ou de laine, ou de pelisse, ou d'escarlade, ou de soye."

³³ Vallambert, pp. 43 and 46. See notes 10 and 11.

³⁴ Soranus, p.12: "And others wash it with wine mixed with brine, others with pure wine, others with the urine of an innocent child, while others sprinkle it with fine myrtle or with oak gall."

corrective effect on his constitution.³⁵

Relinquishing the traditional priority given to correction for the comfort of a warm and gentle bath, Vallambert makes way for another conception of birth. He insists repeatedly on the necessity of helping the child, relieving the child from pain, and sparing him any discomfort. The chapters devoted to the length of the bath reveal this new attention to the feelings of the child. In 1553, Gabriel Miron showed consideration in the midwife to make sure to take the child out of the bath as soon as he showed signs of discontent: "This is why one should always check the face and the mood of the child, while he is in his bath, if you believe me."³⁶ In 1565, Vallambert makes the mood of the child the first criterion for determining the length of his stay in water.³⁷

Enclosed protection and exercise

In order to avoid discomfort and to protect the fragile skin of the newborn, the tub must be dressed with swaddling linen or other pieces of soft material. This is constantly demanded by Renaissance physicians, who do not care about the form or the matter of the

³⁵ Vallambert, pp. 43-44: "Or est il ainsi que le baing d'eau pure et tiede sur toutes choses mundifie mieux le cuyr [...]. Car a la vérité, il n'y ha rien qui tant bien et doucement nettoye les ordures de dessus le corps[...]. Et par ainsi la conclusion est bonne, que lon doit commancer par le baing tost apres avoir couppé le nombril de l'enfant."

³⁶ Miron, p. 48: "ideo semper respiciatur facies infantis et modus eius, dum est in balneo meo dicto."

³⁷ Vallambert, p. 105: " As soon as the body of the child begins to warm up and redden, we must stop cleaning him, but we should not remove him from bath before this stage, except if he does not enjoy remaining so long in there [...]. And if he does not enjoy being in there, if you leave him, it makes him cry and brings anger into him and provokes disordered movements of his spirits and humours."

bath tub, but only about its height, the temperature of the water, and the gentleness of the contact. Miron's first instruction, after the tepid temperature of water, concerns the bath tub, which must not be "too big" nor "contain too much water". To ensure the child's comfort, "there should always be a delicate linen running around the interior of the vessel," which would prevent "the body of the small infant" to be touched by the "toughness" and "hardness" of the tub.³⁸ Vallambert is in agreement, making in his own treatise similar recommendations for the softness and the safety of the bathtub.³⁹

In conjunction with the rubbing and oiling of the skin, the bath thus appears as a comforting act, to protect the harmless baby against the outer world that he suddenly discovers suddenly. In contrast to the freshness of cold air, the bath is an enclosed and safe space, where the temperature is warm, and where every pointed object has been removed. Similarly, Vallembert describes precisely the manner in which the nurse must handle the child in order to avoid discomfort and prevent pain: she must take him with her right hand, not pressing on his stomach and making sure that the child does not fall head-on.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Miron, p. 46.

³⁹ Vallambert, pp. 47-48: "The vessel, or tub, where the child must be bathed can be anything we want, but it must not be too big nor contain too much water: it suffices that the child be in the water up to his shoulders and that the water does not reach the neck nor the head: and we must have a linen running all around the vessel or the tub, so that the roughness or hardness of the vessel not touch or offend the body of the child."

⁴⁰ Vallambert, p. 104: "Thus must the nurse handle him in the bath: first, she must take him with her right hand and rest his chest on her left arm, then she must clean him with the right hand. The reason why the child must lean on his chest, and not on his stomach, is that the chest is bony, hard and firm, bearing the leaning better: and, in contrast, the stomach is soft, tender and harmless, with the entrails inside: if he were

The ambivalence of the childhood temperament, though, is reflected in the ambivalence of the bathing gesture. Thus, the comfort provided during the first days must not preclude, the necessary toughening of the child. As soon as the trauma of the birth is passed, the nurse should exercise the child during the bath and take advantage of the loosening of the limbs to straighten them and make them supple. In the alternation between protection and formation, the desire to cuddle the newborn must not lead to overlooking the disciplinary function of the bath: it is an occasion to bring the soft limbs of the child, whose bones are still humid and tender, towards their “due form”, in the same manner as the swaddling will ensure the proper development, in straight lines, of the limbs and the spine. In several chapters, Vallambert insists on the moves that the nurse must imprint upon the child, while he stays in the water: even right after the recommendations for safety and gentleness, he emphasizes the usefulness of the relaxing effect in order to correct the appearance and feebleness of the limbs.⁴¹ Discipline and gentleness are here the two faces of one medal: infant care.

The original cleansing?

In addition to the functions of protection, loosening and moisturizing, the bath is, of course, primarily justified by its cleansing power. Coming out of the womb in blood, covered in wounds, the baby needs cleansing: what used to be attained by the rubbing of powders, piled flowers, straw or linen is, for Vallambert, best ensured by immersion in

to lean on them, then would arise two inconveniences: first, that the intestines, because of the pressure of the leaning weight, would be offended; second, that the parts of the upper body, because of their weight, could fall into the bath."

⁴¹ Vallambert, pp. 104-105.

water.

Translating the medieval Latin *mundificatio*, which literally means 'purification', the first scrubbing is described as the erasure of flesh from the body of the child. Here, the pictures of Nativities and holy births meet the everyday practice. Just as, according to miniatures and paintings, the child Jesus is laid on straw and the Virgin is bathed in a precious bathtub, the midwives of old France used to scrub babies with warm straw and the midwives of the XVIth century put them into a warm bath. And, in sacred representations, there is no doubt that the bathtub, placed in the foreground, evokes the first sacrament. Beyond the incidental coincidence of collective representations and without an explicit elaboration upon symbolism, the first bath is, for Miron and for Vallambert, considered in conjunction with baptism. Both physicians raise the question on the occasion of their exposition upon the appropriate temperature of the water, right after the justification of the bath as a means for cleansing. For Miron, the first bath should not be mistaken for a baptism and, moreover, the baptism should not endanger the life of the child. He gives several lines of argumentation for sparing the young child the trauma of an immersion in cold water:

We could reply with these two answers: first, that it is not forbidden to administer the baptism with a pure and tepid water, nor is it prescribed that the water be cold, but only that it be simple soft water, or that, for a baptism, it would not be proper to have an oily mixture nor herbs; then, a little water suffices that will be spread on the head and it is not necessary to have the whole body naked, as it is done in many places; finally, that children are usually not baptized before they have lived a few days, except if the evidence of a near death obliges one to baptize the child,

as it is the one sacrament, amongst the principal ones, that the divine power ordered for those who follow His precepts; last, keep in mind what Galen said about the long stay, and the qualities of baths taken in stagnant water or in rivers.⁴²

By distinguishing the first physical cleansing and the spiritual remittance of original sin, the physician evokes the right to judge a religious practice in medical terms and to discuss potentially harmful religious practices. This reversal of priorities —between religion and infant care— is justified by the infant's safety and comfort, a modern preoccupation of the medical discourse around 1550. Vallambert follows the same path in 1564: evoking the Barbarian practice of cold baths, attributed to early Germans, he turns against modern Christian practices with the same virulence:

Therefore, those who baptize Christian children would make a serious mistake and commit a greatly reprehensible act, if the baptized child were to be immersed naked in the baptismal font or if they had him stay for a long time in cold water;

⁴² Miron, p. 48: "Ad hoc respondent quod uel non est prohibitum baptizare cum aqua simplici tepida, nec preceptum sit quod sit frigida, dum tamen simplex dulcis aqua, uel quod in baptismo non est proprie aquæ embrocatio uel effusio, pusillum namque aquæ sufficit uel quod sufficit illam supra caput effundi et non est necessum corpus totum esse nudum sicut fit in multis locis, uel quod non baptizarentur nisi aliquibus diebus transactis ut fit in pluribus locis, nisi necessitas euidentiæ mortis baptizare cogat, uel quod cum baptisma sit unum et de præcipuis sacramentis a deo ordinatum diuina potentia iuuat illos, qui sua præcepta exequuntur, uel quod Galenus intellexit de longa mora, et balneo facto in stagno uel flumine et sunt de qualitate balnei."

and it would be worse if it happened during winter and cold weather.⁴³

Advocating specific infant care and the respect of the infantile temperament, Miron and Vallambert exemplify a new conception of childhood: although feeble and imperfect, the child needs and deserves protection and care. Whereas the official Catholic doctrine affirms that children who died before baptism, marked by original sin, could not enter Heaven, the doctors consider themselves entitled to prescribe the proper manners of baptizing babies without harming them. By reversing the order of rubbing and bathing, by emphasizing the needs of the baby and placing first comfort rather than correction, Vallambert and Miron represent the medical side of the newly developing attitude towards children, which Philippe Ariès analyzed in his classic book on childhood.⁴⁴

Anachronism is a temptation, whether for assimilating the Renaissance treatises with their self-claimed ancient models or for recognizing in their relative modernity the seeds of our own sensibility. Imitating the subtle balance between comfort and cure, this paper intended to show both the departure from and the obedience to the Galenic tradition of innovative practices for infant bathing. The explicit allegiance to ancient medicine of Renaissance pediatricians must not lead their readers to throwing out the baby with the bath water: the order of gestures, the priority given to the physician over the priest, the care of the nurse, all express a new conception of childhood, which announces our modern family sense.

⁴³ Vallambert, p. 47: "Parquoy ceux qui baptisent les enfans des Chrestiens, feroient une grand'faute, & chose qui seroit fort a reprendre, si l'enfant qu'on baptise estoit plongé tout nu es fons de baptesme: ou s'ils le faisoient demeurer longuement en eau froide: & pis seroit si c'estoit en hiver & en temps froid."

⁴⁴ See note 18.