

**Jennifer Evans, *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England***

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When we think of aphrodisiacs, most modern readers have a tendency to dwell on their supposed powers of sexual awakening. But in her recent book *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England*, Jennifer Evans is keen to explain that, for early modern men and women, aphrodisiacs were tied not just to lust but, crucially, to fertility. As Evans notes, to date the study of aphrodisiacs has been ‘relatively neglected or glossed over as trivial or titillating’ (8). Evans’ monograph-length study does much to redress this balance.

Although it is common knowledge that early modern medical theory dictated that for conception to occur, sex must be accompanied by pleasure, Evans’ focus on aphrodisiacs provides new insights into this concept. For Evans, aphrodisiacs were ‘an integral part of early modern sexual health practices’ (13), one that was fundamentally linked to fertility and healthy childbearing. For Evans, this was not a theory that was only known to learned medical writers; instead, she believes that the supposed links between fertility and aphrodisiacs would have been common knowledge in early modern England. Although aphrodisiacs may appear at first glance relatively niche, Evans convincingly argues for their wider relevance, particularly in regards to two broad conceptual frameworks: demographic discussions of early modern fertility rates and the religious and familial context of infertility, including masculinity and sexuality.

The monograph is broken into five chapters. The first, ‘Texts, Readers and Markets,’ sets the scene and explores the impact of the early modern book trade on men and women’s understandings of the role of aphrodisiacs in fertility. By reiterating much recent scholarship on literacy and reading in early modern England, Evans argues that a large number of men and women would have had access to medical concepts of fertility, sexuality and aphrodisiacs. Evans focuses in particular on ideas circulating in medical treatises, medical advertisements, ballads, popular and ephemeral literature, herbals, botanical encyclopaedias and erotic literature – these constitute her main sources for the book. Evans is keen to stress that the availability of medical and sexual knowledge transcended gender and that women, as well as men, were expected to have some sexual knowledge. Evans then goes on to demonstrate how ingredients for aphrodisiacs, as described in text, were readily available around the home or could be easily purchased at a market place. All of this, Evans claims, means that we need to

think about medical and sexual knowledge, specifically in relation to aphrodisiacs as being more widespread than has previously been accepted in historical scholarship.

Much of the second chapter, 'The Reproductive and Infertile Body,' focuses on debates concerning the 'one-sex' or 'two-sex' model of conception. Evans links these debates with theories about the 'one-seed' or 'two-seed' model and demonstrates how, using a combination of the one-sex model and humoral theory, it was easy for early modern authors to write about infertility in non-gendered terms, as they believed they were essentially talking about one body. Although, as Evans demonstrates, this view started to change during the seventeenth century, it remained strong throughout the period. Evans argues that the supposed causes of infertility – lack of sexual pleasure, ineffective seed, and the wrong amount of heat – remained remarkably constant over the early modern period and, as such, so did medical writers' recommendations of aphrodisiacs to cure this disease. Chapter three, 'Provoking Lust and Promoting Conception,' continues this discussion by further developing the links between sexual pleasure and conception, particularly within medical thought. Different types of aphrodisiacs, such as hot foods, heating herbs, nourishing food, seed provokers, windy meats and flatulent foods are discussed in depth.

The penultimate chapter, 'Enchanted Privities and Provokers of Lust,' focuses on medical recommendations of natural remedies and aphrodisiacs for those who had been made infertile through bewitchment. Evans argues that not only were aphrodisiacs recommended for those suffering from natural afflictions, but that they were also effective cures for bewitchments and supernatural illnesses. By re-invigorating the libido, Evans argues, aphrodisiacs were believed to empower the body to overcome malefic enchantments both in terms of infertility and impotence.

The final chapter, 'Aphrodisiacs, Miscarriage and Menstruation,' provides fascinating new insights into the role of aphrodisiacs and emmenagogues in encouraging pregnancy. Evans pushes back against much scholarship that highlights the role of emmenagogues in causing early abortions and focuses on how these treatments could sometimes be aimed at stimulating fertility, a practice based in the belief in menstruation and menstrual blood as crucial for both conceiving and for nourishing a child *in utero*. She also explores whether or not aphrodisiacs were believed to be useful in sustaining a healthy pregnancy and concludes that, although this belief did seem to circulate, medical authorities were reluctant to encourage aphrodisiacs for pregnant women because of the increased risk that sexual stimulation and activity was believed to pose to a pregnancy. This chapter, in keeping with the book as a whole, demonstrates that aphrodisiacs fulfilled a far greater role in early modern sexuality, conception and pregnancy than as mere sexual stimulants.

The book is, of course, not entirely without flaws. One feels that the text could be shortened to avoid repetition and, perhaps, some of the intensive historiographical work could be placed into footnotes. However, this is still a fascinating work, one

which provides new insights into early modern sexuality and medical thought and, importantly, the intersections between the two. Evans' book will be of great interest to early modern cultural historians, historians of the family, of sexuality, of demographics, of medicine and of the supernatural.