

AN
INAUGURAL DISSERTATION

ON

*The influence of imagination
upon the foetus in utero.*

SUBMITTED TO THE

PRESIDENT, BOARD OF TRUSTEES, AND MEDICAL FACULTY

OF THE

University of Nashville,

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MEDICINE.

BY

L. Owen Parker.

OF

Alabama.

1857

W. T. BERRY & CO.,
BOOKSELLERS AND STATIONERS,
NASHVILLE, TENN.

It is with the greatest diffidence,
and a true sense of my own ineq-
- uality that I approach this subject
- Echoed as it is by the fair sex of all
nations and times - In defense of which,
hoary headed sticklers have with their
latest breath cried - "It is true?"

I am aware that one will not meet
the approbation of the profession gen-
- erally who attempts with his frail
pen to indite reasons against a the-
- ory, the advocates of which are almost
innumerable: yet I shall endeavor
and hope to show some good
reasons why I assume this
position. The origin of this belief
has been from time immemorial:
but its antiquity should not entitle
it to the least force when this

Argument alone is employed: for were we to make this a rule, there would be no end to error, however powerfully combated by reason, or opposed by facts!

There is no delusion of the mind during pregnancy, that renders the woman so truly wretched as the belief that the imagination can exert an injurious control over her child. Should she have been terrified by some frightful or disgusting object, she is at once apprehensive, that her unborn babe will receive a blemish, similar to that which had excited her aversion, or caused her alarm. Her mind is directed to the occurrence by night and by day: and nothing but the

Delivery of an unblemished child
can soothe her agitated feelings, or
remove her long cherished fears.
To remove these apprehensions alto-
gether from the minds of pregnant
women, is perhaps impossible;
for so fixed are their prejudices,
that it is no longer a matter of
reason — it is one almost exclusively
of feeling: and if the women were
all that entertained this notion we
would be more likely to upturn
the delusion; but we find some
of our most able Physicians who
entertain the same opinion.
Now we admit that Hippocrates
himself was of the opinion that
the imagination exerted an influ-
ence on the child in the womb,

but this was at a day when medical science was in its infancy. It is said that Hippocrates on one occasion saved by his testimony a noble woman, who had been charged because she had borne a coloured child, (she and her husband being white,) by alleging that the darkness of its colour was the effect of a picture of an Ethiopian, which hung in her chamber, and which was after the object of her contemplation.

The different modes in which the imagination is supposed by its stickless to affect the foetus are, 1. st by imposing upon its skin certain resemblances to things on which the fancy has been deeply concerned; such as fruits wines and animals.

end, by the production of additional parts, as two thumbs on the same hand and two great toes on the same foot, 3dly by the absence of certain parts, as a leg or arm, &c. The alleged effects of the imagination upon the foetus in utero manifest themselves in one of the three modes above named; we shall therefore say a few words upon each of these heads: But probably it will be best to consider the nature of the connexion which exists between the mother and child. Anatomy pretty well proves that the connexion between the mother and child is altogether indissect; and carried only through the medium of the circulation. It has also been shown that there

is no nervous filament of the
mother entering any portion of
the foetal system. Now if this arrange-
ment be true, we may ask, how
any condition of the arterial, or any
affection of the brain and nervous
system of the mother, can have an influence,
or exert a control over both these
systems of the foetus, which has no
direct connexion with the one, nor
even an indirect one with the other?
Now if this arrangement was better
understood, one of the most ag-
gravating conditions of the human
mind would be removed from
the list of evils attendant upon
pregnancy.

We will now proceed to consider
the first and most important

alleged effect of the imagination on
the foetus in utero viz the fruits
wines and animals upon which the
mind has been deeply engaged.

That children have been born with
peculiar marks on them resembling
fruits, wines, and animals &c, we
will not pretend to deny—But could
the fancy of the mother by dwelling on
a particular fruit leave the mark of
the same upon the child: why would
it not be equally easy for her imag-
ination to cunger-up some imp of
blackness and instead of a part, decolour-
ize it in toto? The proposition to our
mind seems self evident.

If the imagination or fancy of the
parent possessed the influence al-
leged, it might be destructive of one

of the most important ties in
society; for the sex might submit
to an intercourse with blacks,
and could easily conceal from
their unsuspecting relatives
the adulterous commerce, by the
easy expedient of continually
fixing their attention on their
husbands or on objects of a
bright colour.

If the imagination have the power
of producing colours, why should
not children be marked with
grapes and green, gooseberries,
as well as with cherries or red cur-
rants? since it may be presumed
that the mother will have as often
longed for the one as the other: or
why should we meet with deformities

Among the lower animals, and
in plants, even, where the fancy,
more especially in the latter, cannot
be concerned. In regard to the
second mode we admit that
supernumerary parts are frequently
added but are convinced that these
effects could not be produced by
the imagination, being merely
effects of peculiarity.

In regard to the third mode; where the
foetus is wanting in some of
its parts, but little need be said.
To refer the deficiency of any part
of the foetus, to the imaginative
powers of the mother is to our
minds absurdity in the ex-
treme: for were such influences
exerted in the loss of any part

the part lost would always appear with the child at delivery, which we know is never true but should the amputated parts really appear with the child at birth it could be referred to other causes.

We may here mention with much propriety the opinion of the late celebrated Dr William Hunter upon this subject: who experimented upon two thousand cases of labor in a lying-in hospital. His method was as follows. As soon as a woman was delivered he inquired of her whether she had been disappointed in any object of her longing, and what that object was if her answer were

yes. Whether she had been surprised
by any circumstance that had
given her an unusual shock;
and of what that consisted.

Whether she had been alarmed
by any object of an unsightly
kind and what was that object.

Then after making a note of
each of the declarations of the woman
either in the affirmative or neg-
ative, he carefully examined the
child; and he assures us that
he never in a single instance
of the two thousand met with
a coincidence. He met with
blemishes when no cause was
acknowledged; and found none
where it had been insisted
on.

With this very conclusive method
of Dr William Hunters we shall
leave the subject - yet it is not
exhausted - No. 1. Folios might be written
upon this truly interesting theme.
And did our time permit us we
would bring forward other argu-
ments to prove the firm basis of
our position. But we think it
were useless longer to reason, having
we, trust, proven all of our points.
We have shown that marks occur
as frequently in those who are not,
as those who are excited by an active
imagination. We have farther endeavored
to show that the fancy can have
no agency in this matter, from
the fact that the lower animals
are as frequently brought forth

in the same state - We shall now
close, hoping, that if our arguments
have not been as conclusive as some
might wish they will at least lead
to inquiry - and hope that happy
time will soon arrive when our
women will no longer be harassed
by illusory fears when they are
enclinte.