

# APHRODISIACS, FERTILITY AND MEDICINE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND



Jennifer Evans

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APHRODISIACS, FERTILITY  
AND MEDICINE IN EARLY  
MODERN ENGLAND

*Jennifer Evans*



THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY  

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# *Contents*

List of illustrations	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Abbreviations	viii
Note on the text	viii
Glossary	ix
Introduction	1
1 Texts, readers and markets	29
2 The reproductive and the infertile body	51
3 Provoking lust and promoting conception	87
4 Enchanted privities and provokers of lust	131
5 Aphrodisiacs, miscarriage and menstruation	160
Conclusion	191
Bibliography	197
Index	213

## Illustrations

Cover illustration: Joachim Beuckelaer, 'Market scene' (1563)

[This depicts a man propositioning a young girl set amongst a scene of indulgence in erotic foods and aphrodisiacs including cockerels, game birds and eggs.]

1. Illustration of a womb and vagina from Helkiah Crooke, *Somatographia anthropine*, London 1616 54
2. Illustration of a woman masturbating in a kitchen from Samuel Cock, *A voyage to Lethe*, London 1741, unpaginated 122
3. Illustration of Marish dog stones from John Gerard, *The herball or generall historie of plantes*, London 1633 124

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Jennifer Evans  
December 2013



## Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
OED	Oxford English Dictionary Online ( <a href="http://www.oed.com">www.oed.com</a> )
WL	Wellcome Library, London

JFH	<i>Journal of Family History</i>
JHI	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
JSH	<i>Journal of Social History</i>
LPS	<i>Local Population Studies</i>
P&P	<i>Past &amp; Present</i>
RQ	<i>Renaissance Quarterly</i>
SHM	<i>Social History of Medicine</i>

## Note on the Text

All quotations from contemporary printed and manuscript works retain original spellings. However, the use of ‘i’ and ‘j’, and ‘u’ and ‘v’ has been modernised. Abbreviations within the text have been expanded within square brackets. Long titles have been shortened.

# Glossary

Abortifacient	A drug or other substance that induces an abortion or miscarriage.
Clyster/ Glyster	Medicines injected into the body through an orifice.
Cod	Scrotum.
Condited	To have been preserved with sugar, salt, spices, or the like. Pickled.
Confection	A substance mixed of various ingredients, or substances prepared with sugar or syrup.
Conserve	A medicinal or confectionary preparation of a plant's flowers, leaves, stalks or roots preserved with sugar.
Decoction/Apozem	A liquid in which an animal or vegetable substance has been boiled to extract the medicinal agent.
Emmenagogue	A substance that stimulates menstrual flow, and which has the power to increase or renew menstruation.
Fomentation	Flannels or cloths soaked in hot water, and often herbs, applied to the skin.
Julep	A sweet medicated drink.
Matrix	The womb.
Parturition	The act of giving birth.
Quickening	The moment at which a foetus could be felt moving inside the womb, usually around four months into pregnancy.
Recipe	A formula for the composition of a medicine or a culinary dish.
Seethed	Boiled.
Steep	To soak in water or another liquid, often milk during this period, to soften, cleanse or extract the virtues of a substance.
Suffumigation	The process of fumigating from below usually with fumes or vapours generated by burning herbs or incense.
Tansey/Tanzev	A pudding or omelette made with the juice of the tansy, a plant with a strong aromatic scent and bitter taste.
Tincture	A solution, usually in alcohol, of a principle used in medicine, chiefly vegetable but sometimes animal.

Venery	The practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure; indulgence in sexual desire.
Yard	Penis.

# Introduction

Miss Bland, *Wardour Street, Soho*.

'This is a gay volatile girl; very genteel in her person; and has an extraordinary titillation in all her members; which she is very fond of increasing, by making use of provocatives for that purpose such as pullets, pigs, veal, new-laid eggs, oysters, crabs, prawns, eringoes, electuaries, &c. &c. – She is reported to have a kind of savage joy in her embraces, and sometimes leaves the marks of her penetrating teeth on her paramour's cheeks.'

*Harris's list of Covent Garden ladies (1764)*<sup>1</sup>

'Wallington "made a covenant with my eyes that I would not look upon a maid." However, his imagination and appetite were a greater threat, and these he attempted to tame by collecting scriptural passages that condemned "adultery, fornication, uncleanness, wantonness" and the seductions of "strong women," by working hard at his calling, by fasting and arising "betimes in the morning," and by "abstaining from divers meats as eggs and oysters and wine and many other things which I loved very well".'

Paul Seaver, *Wallington's world (1985)*<sup>2</sup>

'When he came home She gave him Kisses,  
and Sack-Posset very good:  
Caudles too, she never misses,  
for they warm, and heat the Blood.  
Such things will Create desire,  
and new kindle *Cupid's* fire,  
These things made him kiss his Wife,  
And to call her Love and Life.' *The London cuckold (1685–8)*<sup>3</sup>

These diverse quotations exemplify the many surprising and socially complex ways in which aphrodisiacs were understood in early modern England. *Harris's list of Covent Garden ladies*, written by Samuel Derrick, claimed to describe actual women working as prostitutes in London in the eighteenth century. This particular listing for a 'volatile girl' immediately emphasises the great many foods that were described as sexually stimulating, and notes their connection to pleasurable sexual encounters. The substances, in this instance and in many others, were listed by the author without any expla-

<sup>1</sup> Hallie Rubenhold (ed.), *The harlot's handbook, Harris's list*, Stroud 2007, 155–6.

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's world: a Puritan artisan in seventeenth-century London*, Stanford 1985, 26–7.

<sup>3</sup> Anon., *The London cuckold*, London 1685–8.

nation, suggesting that the, predominantly male, audience was expected to know these foods by reputation and comprehend the effects that they would have upon the body. The ubiquitous understanding of the humoural medical system provided the most accessible means for interpreting the actions of these foods and, as this book will demonstrate, was the main way in which aphrodisiacs were categorised across the early modern era. Finally this advertisement implies that, as well as understanding the role of these substances in the promotion of sexual behaviour, men of a certain wealth may have been willing to pay for a sexual encounter that incorporated the stimulating properties that these foods were thought to provide.

Similarly the extract from the diary of the Puritan artisan Nehemiah Wallington (1598–1658) demonstrates that many aphrodisiacs were a common element of the everyday diet. As this book will go on to establish, many of the simples and compounds thought to increase lust and to enhance the generative body (the body as it relates to generation/reproduction) were ingredients common to herb gardens and hedgerows and in some cases were staples of the early modern diet. As an ordinary part of the early modern regimen, it could be argued that these substances were only understood to serve as sexual stimulants in particular contexts, such as the encounter with a prostitute described above. Yet Wallington's desire to remove them from his diet reflects a belief in their stimulating properties as inherent to the way in which they worked upon the body, regardless of specific need. Moreover, his inclusion of this group of foods with his other measures of restraint demonstrates the intimate relationship that existed between the consumption of foods, the constitution of the body, and one's moral and social character.

Finally, the extract from the ballad *The London cuckold* highlights that aphrodisiacs were most commonly understood within the framework of marriage and procreation. In this ballad the sexually unsatisfied wife, who is yet to be made a mother, feeds stimulating foods to her husband to try to encourage him to fulfil his marital duties. Although it is not made explicit here, part of this marital role was to produce offspring who would confirm the place of the husband and wife in their social roles. Aphrodisiacs were at this time almost ubiquitously understood as medicaments for infertility. Moreover, that ballads such as this one discussed and described aphrodisiacs demonstrates that they were widely understood in early modern society; ballads had to be accessible and reference ideas with which a wide cross-section of society would identify. Thus, from these extracts it is apparent that early modern men and women understood that a range of foods and medicines could be sexually stimulating and that they could potentially be used in a range of circumstances to regulate sexual desire, behaviour and fertility.

This book will chart the various ways in which aphrodisiacs were understood in this period and in particular how they were thought to affect the reproductive organs. It will be argued that aphrodisiacs were regarded as a treatment for barrenness and impotence across the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That they were believed to work in this way

accentuates the inextricable link between procreation and sexual pleasure that existed in early modern medical theory. Although this book will focus primarily on the theoretical discussion of the virtues of aphrodisiacs it will also show that, at least sometimes, men and women in early modern England used these substances in the ways described in medical and popular literature both to enhance their sexual experiences and also to improve their chances of conceiving. The familiarity and availability of some of these herbs, spices and foods makes this all the more likely. However, with the limited evidence presented in surviving early modern documents it is not possible to make any certain claims about the scale of the actual use of these substances.

### ‘Provokers of lust’, ‘Provokers of venery’ and ‘Aphrodisiacks’

Throughout this book sexual stimulants are referred to by a variety of terms which reflect the language use of early modern medical writers. Additionally for ease of reading they are described as aphrodisiacs. For much of the period medical and botanical writers defined stimulating substances as provokers of lust or provokers of venery: venery meaning the practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure and the indulgence of sexual desire.<sup>4</sup> These terms – ‘venereal’ and ‘venery’ – originated from the Latin and related to the Roman goddess of beauty and sensual love, Venus. This reflected the fact that Galenic and other Greek medical works were often translated into Latin at this time. In other areas of reproductive medicine the tendency to use Latinate terms was also true: the labels used for menstrual bleeding (*menstrua*) and abnormal vaginal discharge (*fluor albus*), for example, were both Latin terms. However, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century scholars discussing reproduction and generation started also to include or use Greek terms: *menstrua* became *catamena* and the *fluor albus* became *Leucorrhoea*.<sup>5</sup> Similarly the

<sup>4</sup> OED, s.v. ‘Venery’, accessed 13 Aug. 2013. ‘Aphrodisiac’ does not seem to have been recorded in any other seventeenth-century dictionary.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Read, *Menstruation and the female body in early modern England*, Basingstoke 2013, 28, 195 n. 29. R. W. McConchie has noted that many words of classical origin that had been naturalised into English were in the sixteenth century re-alienated and given new neoclassical forms. He argued that there was no difference in semantic clarity between the English and classical forms. The change was often motivated by the prestige of classical learning and to allow words to be protected from the corruption of popular use. Although occurring a century later, and between Latin and Greek rather than English, this interpretation may provide some explanation for the changes seen in the late seventeenth century: *Lexicography and physic: the record of sixteenth-century English medical terminology*, Oxford 1997, 66–71. The late adoption of Greek terms may also reflect that many Greek authors of note were only slowly translated over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and scholars: a guide to the transmission of Greek and Latin literature*, Oxford 1974, 148–52. Similarly there were only a handful of Greek medical texts available in printed form during the sixteenth century when modern anatomy was being developed: Vivian Nutton, “Prisci

language for sexual stimulants in some treatises also changed, adopting words that were derived from the Greek equivalent to Venus, Aphrodite, such as aphrodisiac(k). This change was not comprehensive; Latin terms were not suddenly or gradually superseded by Greek ones, nor did it reflect a fundamental shift in how these substances were understood or believed to work. It is also not clear what provoked the sudden appearance of Greek terminology in this field.<sup>6</sup> The earliest appearances of 'aphrodisiac' in English language treatises can be seen in the works of Theophile Bonet (1684), a Swiss physician, John Jones (1701), a lawyer and physician in Wales, John Marten (1709), a surgeon, and Thomas Fuller (1710), an extra-licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians.<sup>7</sup> Even in these texts the adoption of Greek terminology was not always consistent. Jean Astruc wrote in 1743 of '*Remedia Aphrodisiaca*', but throughout his treatise relied heavily on Latin terminology.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Astruc also clarified that these were not a new or distinct taxonomy of medicaments as he explained that they 'are met with almost in all medicinal Books'.<sup>9</sup> Bonet likewise suggested that there was no distinction between those things described as a provoker to venery and those described as an aphrodisiac: first, he provided a description of the characteristics of aphrodisiacs that correlates with the main categories of stimulant examined in this book – which were described throughout the period as provokers of venery.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, he used the word 'venery' throughout his discussion of

dissectionum professores": Greek texts and renaissance anatomists', in A. C. Dionisotti, Anthony Grafton and Jill Kraye (eds), *The uses of Greek and Latin: historical essays*, London 1988, 111–26 at p. 114.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Alexandra Walsham, Jonathan Barry and Sarah Toulalan for their thoughts on this issue.

<sup>7</sup> The OED erroneously dates the use of this term to 1710: OED s.v. 'Aphrodisiac', accessed 26 July 2010. See Theophile Bonet, *Mercurius compitalitius: or, A guide to the practical physician*, London [1682] 1684, 545, 694–5; John Jones, *The mysteries of opium reveal'd*, London 1701, 52; John Marten, *Gonosologium novum: or, a new system of all the secret infirmities and diseases, natural, accidental, and venereal in men and women*, London 1709, 49; and Thomas Fuller, *Pharmacopoeia extemporanea: or, A body of prescripts*, London 1710, 133. The sixteenth-century dictionary of Thomas Elyot included 'Aphrodisia' as days or sacrifices to Venus or venereal pastimes, 'Aphrodisium' as an image of Venus and 'Aphrodisius' as a prelate or disciple of St Peter, but made no reference to aphrodisiac: *Bibliotheca Eliotae*, London 1559, s.v. 'Aphrodisia', 'Aphrodisium' and 'Aphrodisius'. One Greek dictionary noted that feasts dedicated to Aphrodite were called *Aphrodisiana* but did not include the term aphrodisiac: Pierre Danet, *A complete dictionary of the Greek and Roman antiquities*, London 1700, s.v. 'Aphrodite'. Aphrodite appears in several dictionaries including *The great historical, geographical and poetical dictionary*, which states that she was born of the sea and that led some to think that moisture was a crucial part of generation: Louis Moreiri, *The great historical, geographical and poetical dictionary*, London 1694, s.v. 'Aphrodite'.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Astruc, *A treatise on all the diseases incident to women*, London 1743, 345.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Bonet, *Mercurius compitalitius*, 694.

these substances; in particular he noted that aphrodisiacks were ‘those things indeed that excite the Spirits stir up Venery’.<sup>11</sup>

The move towards this particular term may also have been related to the rise in printed materials discussing venereal disease. As is apparent from its name, much of the discussion of this disorder and the drugs (anti-venereals) that were used to cure it drew upon naturalised Latin terms. In one very rare example, Stephen Blankaart’s seventeenth-century *Physical dictionary* included the terms *Aphrodisius morbus* and *Lues venerea* (venereal disease) as synonymous.<sup>12</sup> A few eighteenth-century authors also connected this disease and ‘aphrodisiac’. In 1736 a version of Luigi Luisini’s *Aphrodisiacus* was published in English with a preface by the surgeon and physician Daniel Turner, who had already published several treatises on venereal disease.<sup>13</sup> It is not apparent what ‘aphrodisiacus’ meant, or how it was being used: the Oxford English Dictionary does not record this as a part of the English lexicon. However, this work was a collection of all the historical writers who had written about venereal disease. The 1755 edition of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary also explained that ‘APRHODISIACAL’ and ‘APRHODISIACK’ related to the venereal disease.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Johnson made no reference to sexual stimulation. It may be that the surge of interest in venereal disease in the seventeenth century encouraged the introduction of this term. Nonetheless, it is not clear what reasons would have motivated this. Moreover, the understanding that aphrodisiacks were specifically a treatment for venereal disease was not as widespread as the understanding that these substances were synonymous with provokers of venery.

The term aphrodisiac was thus a new one in the early modern period, one that was only gradually being adopted in the latter part of the period. Although it will be seen that aphrodisiacks were understood in a way that is recognisable to modern audience – they stimulated sexual desire – it is also important to emphasise at the outset that the early modern mind-set was not the same as our own. In modern society it is accepted that a person’s mental and emotional state can affect their physical well-being: stress, for example, is known to cause physical problems and symptoms. This was true in the early modern period as well. A person’s emotional and physiological states were thought to be closely connected. The various constitutions of the humoral body were thought to predispose people to certain emotions

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Blankaart, *A physical dictionary in which all the terms relating either to anatomy, chirurgery ... are very accurately explain’d*, London 1684, 23. I have not come across this terminology for the venereal disease anywhere else.

<sup>13</sup> Luigi Luisini, *Aphrodisiacus: containing a summary of the ancient writers on the venereal disease*, London 1736; ODNB, s.v. ‘Daniel Turner’, accessed 11 Apr. 2013. This word only appears in the title of the book.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language*, London 1755–6, s.v. ‘Aphrodisiacal’ and ‘Aphrodisiack’.



such as anger, desire or melancholy. Moreover, it was believed that a range of illnesses could result in altered emotional states, or that altered emotional states could lead to physical illness. However, it has been claimed that in the eighteenth century a 'modern' attitude towards sexuality developed, as a part of which sexual desire and pleasure became divorced from reproduction.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as will be shown in this book, between 1550 and 1780 descriptions of aphrodisiacs implicitly accepted and explicitly described lust as an integral part of conception and generation. This is not to say that in other areas the two did not start to separate, but that in medical and popular understandings aphrodisiacs were never only substances that stimulated lust. They were medicines that functioned as a remedy for infertility: the ways in which they were thought to stimulate lust made the generative body more fertile and were thought to improve the chances of conceiving. Consequently lust throughout this period was seen as central to reproductive sex, and sexual pleasure could not be separated from the generative nature of sexual intercourse.

### Options for treating infertility

When talking about barrenness, medical texts throughout the early modern period often cited the biblical tale of Rachel, who was unable to conceive, in order to emphasise the distressing nature of this medical problem. Jane Sharp, for example, cited Rachel's words to Jacob '*Give me Children or else I die*'.<sup>16</sup> Robert Johnson's treatise *The practice of physick* also included Rachel's lament alongside the observation that there were 'very few Women in a Marriage state but desire Children, yea some would give all they have in the world for a Child, and are very impatient if they do not Conceive'.<sup>17</sup> These descriptions offer a brief insight into the anguish, despair and longing that infertility (commonly termed barrenness or unfruitfulness in the early modern period) could cause women, and men. Infertility, as Daphna Oren-Magidor has highlighted, did not only refer to complete childlessness. Men and women who struggled to conceive, but eventually did have a child, were thought to be infertile up until the point of conception. Similarly those couples who had had children previously but subsequently struggled

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'Orgasm, generation, and the politics of reproductive biology', *Representations: The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* xiv (1986), 1–41 at p. 1; Faramarz Dabhoiwala, *The origins of sex: a history of the first sexual revolution*, Oxford 2012, 141–4.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Sharp, *The midwives book: or The whole art of midwifry discovered*, London 1671, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Johnson, *Praxis medicinae reformata: or, The practice of physick reformed*, London 1700, 245.

to conceive were also thought to be barren or infertile.<sup>18</sup> Anxieties about infertility resonated with cultural and social ideals about the social roles of men and women and with notions about the institutions of marriage and the family. Men and women who found themselves unable to conceive consequently undertook a variety of therapeutic regimes to remedy the problem. This book will focus on the understanding and consumption of aphrodisiacs, because they represent a consistent, ubiquitous and common approach to the disorder. However, this is not to suggest that they were the only means of curing infertility discussed in the period, nor even that they were the most popular. As with the majority of disorders in the early modern period, Galenic medicine suggested that to remedy any form of infertility the body's humours had to be rebalanced and any underlying distemper of the womb, testicles or genitalia had to be remedied. Culpeper, for example, included therapeutic regimes for a range of uterine distempers damaging to a woman's fertility.<sup>19</sup> Aphrodisiacs were only one element of this therapeutic response to infertility.

In addition to the internal medicines offered for the cure of infertility, many women, including Catherine of Braganza, utilised the healing properties of baths and spas to remedy their infertility (there is no evidence of men using baths for this purpose).<sup>20</sup> In the *Bath memoirs* of Robert Pierce it was recorded that

we come now to *Marry'd Women*, and we begin with those which never had a Child, till render'd fruitful by the *Bath*: And this is an Effect of *bathing*, so very well known already, and so generally assented to, that when any one comes hither that is Childless, they presently say that *She comes for the common Cause*.<sup>21</sup>

So potent did Pierce think the baths to be that he went on to suggest that several women had attended the baths for other ailments only to find themselves 'unexpectedly, prov'd fruitful afterwards'.<sup>22</sup> The baths appear to have been popular with the aristocracy, though the expense of travelling to the baths and lodgings during the treatment perhaps proved too much for those who were less well off. The baths themselves were thought to work in ways that reflected some of the aphrodisiac treatments, in particular in penetrating the reproductive organs and supplying them with heat. The author of *Dr Carr's medicinal epistles* (1714), John Quincy, did not believe that this heat

<sup>18</sup> Daphna Oren-Magidor, "'Make me a fruitfull vine': dealing with infertility in early modern England", unpubl. PhD diss. Brown 2012, introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper's directory for midwives: or, A guide for women*, London 1662.

<sup>20</sup> Oren-Magidor, "'Fruitfull vine'", ch. v.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Pierce, *Bath memoirs: or, Observations in three and forty years practice, at the bath, what cures have been there wrought*, Bristol 1697, 195.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 196.

stimulated sexual desire, but did argue that it was very conducive to opening obstructions that prevented conception.<sup>23</sup>

As this book will argue, medical writers advocated aphrodisiacs as a remedy for infertility because it was widely acknowledged that a loss of sexual desire inhibited conception. Yet medical practitioners also offered further advice on how to encourage sexual activity and stimulate lost libido. Philip Barrough suggested that men who suffered a loss of sex drive should sleep in a soft bed and should 'reade things that doe stirre up thinges carnal'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly the sixteenth-century surgeon Ambrose Paré declared that women could be stimulated by their husbands in a variety of ways:

When the husband commeth into his wives chamber hee must entertaine her with all kinde of dalliance, wanton behaviour, and allurements to venery: but if he perceiue her to be slow, and more cold, he must cherish, embrace, and tickle her, and shall not abruptly, the nerves being suddenly distended, breake into the field of nature, but rather shall creepe in by little and little, intermixing more wanton kisses with wanton words and speeches, handling her secret parts and dugs, that she may take fire and bee enflamed to venery.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of this discussion Paré included the use of aphrodisiacs for those women who were particularly disinclined to engage in intercourse.

Clearly aphrodisiacs were not the only means by which men and women could seek to improve their fertility. For those who suffered from an identifiable disease which happened to result in barrenness, such as the whites (an excessive flow of vaginal discharge that was frequently described as resulting in barrenness), treatment would most likely have followed the precepts designed to remove that particular distemper. Nonetheless, it is also clear that aphrodisiacs were an important part of the way in which early modern men and women conceptualised the treatment of infertility. They represent an important element of the sexual and reproductive health discourse of early modern England, one that to this point has been relatively neglected or glossed over as trivial or titillating.

### Aphrodisiacs in history

Although scholars have touched upon the subject of aphrodisiacs in early modern England, this has tended to be in the form of passing references to the use of particular substances, often with reference to certain people

<sup>23</sup> John Quincy, *Dr. Carr's medicinal epistles*, London 1714, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Barrough, *The methode of phisicke, conteyning the causes, signes, and cures of inward diseases in mans bodie from the head to the foote*, London 1583, 142.

<sup>25</sup> Ambrose Paré, *The works of that famous chirurgion Ambrose Parey*, London 1634, 889.

or the courts of certain monarchs.<sup>26</sup> There has been little analysis of these substances in detail or consideration of their wider role in reproduction. More commonly discussions of the early modern period have been included in works that consider a range of historical periods, which has limited the investigation of the peculiarities of early modern stimulants to a single chapter. Nevertheless, these works have drawn attention to the interest of past cultures in provoking lust and have raised interesting questions about their role in medicine and society.

Several early works that considered aphrodisiacs approached the topic from an antiquarian point of view. In 1930 Henri Stearns Denninger published 'A history of substances known as aphrodisiacs',<sup>27</sup> a brief article which traced the history of provocatives from the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans through to the Middle Ages and then the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Alan Hull Walton took a similar approach in his 1958 book *Aphrodisiacs: from legend to prescription* which also traced the history of these substances across several temporal boundaries. These works predominantly focused on the development of aphrodisiacs from their earliest roots in ancient societies. Furthermore, works such as these and Hull Walton's 1965 edition of John Davenport's *Aphrodisiacs* (1869) were written salaciously for a diverse contemporary audience.<sup>28</sup> They not only listed many substances that were previously considered to be aphrodisiacs but ones which could potentially still be employed. These authors did not seek to understand the medical functions of the substances that they discussed, but described aphrodisiacs only in terms of lust and desire as their intended audience expected. Denninger provided his readers with a concise, almost list-like, account of many substances considered to be aphrodisiacs in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>29</sup> However, at no point did he explain why these foods were considered to be stimulating. Instead, he only wrote that 'During the Renaissance the public was, to say the least, rather voluptuous, and aphrodisiacs were equally common in the household and in the apothecary shops.'<sup>30</sup> Walton also noted the variety and commonality of aphrodisiacs. Both of these authors represented the early modern period as being particularly lascivious

<sup>26</sup> Ivan Bloch, *Sexual life in England past and present*, London 1958, 301–7; Thomas Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge MA–London 1990, 102–3; Michael J. O'Dowd, *The history of medications for women: materia medica woman*, New York–London 2001, 23, 38, 58, 114, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Henri Stearns Denninger, 'A history of substances known as aphrodisiacs', *Annales of Medical History* ii/4 (1930), 383–93.

<sup>28</sup> John Davenport, *Aphrodisiacs and love stimulants with other chapters on the secrets of Venus*, ed. with intro. and notes Alan Hull Walton, London 1965.

<sup>29</sup> Stearns Denninger, 'A history of substances known as aphrodisiacs', 388. He includes discussions of eryngo, mandrake root, zedoary, ginger, pepper, cumin, clove, vanilla and sparrow's brains.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 389.

and aphrodisiacal. Nonetheless, Walton did attempt to understand the ways in which early modern substances worked. Unfortunately, his interpretation was based on the anachronistic imposition of contemporary categories on the foods that he was discussing. He explained that there were two main types of substance which would provoke sexual desire: ones which excited the senses and produced a physical capability or desire, and those which clouded the wits and banished self-control.<sup>31</sup> Such categories do not correlate with early modern descriptions of aphrodisiacs, even though many of the substances that medical writers described could be thought of in this way. The analysis presented in this book is only interested in the ways in which early modern men and women understood these substances, not in whether they would actually have worked or not. Although it may be possible to assess the effects some of these substances have on the body, as John Riddle has attempted to do for ancient contraceptives and abortifacients, this approach is problematic. First, it assumes that early modern reproductive bodies were the same as our own, which the differing nutritional standards of early modern diets would suggest is not always true. Moreover, even if modern science can identify the effects of some plants, we cannot always know whether they were consumed in quantities that would have meant that these effects were felt. Finally, we cannot always assume to know how in the past these substances were prepared, and consequently know whether this affected the efficacy of particular plants.<sup>32</sup> What matters therefore, is how these plants were perceived, described and recorded, as this tells us what people believed was effective, how these understandings tied in with their broader social and cultural beliefs and how they responded to particular medical issues.

The focus of these authors on excess is perhaps one of the ways in which they sought to titillate their readers. In some cases it seems that Davenport's interest was restricted to examples where consumption of a substance such as cantharides, chocolate and opium had such excessive and damaging effects.<sup>33</sup> Similarly the assertion that aphrodisiacs, particularly those influenced by ancient medicine, were relatively consistent across cultures and historical periods, suggests a form of common sexual understanding between all historic cultures and societies, which reflects both the salacious and antiquarian themes of these works. Although it will be argued here that aphrodisiacs were commonly understood and widely discussed, it is not being claimed, as these works do, that these substances were only consumed to

<sup>31</sup> Alan Hull Walton, *Aphrodisiacs from legend to prescription: a study of aphrodisiacs throughout the ages, with sections on suitable food, glandular extracts, hormone stimulation and rejuvenation*, Westport, CN 1958, 97.

<sup>32</sup> John Riddle, *Contraception and abortion from the ancient world to the Renaissance*, Cambridge, MA–London 1992, 32–6, and *Eve's herbs: a history of contraception and abortion in the West*, Cambridge MA–London 1997, 47–50. Further problems arise from the fact that the tests that Riddle cites were mostly conducted on rats.

<sup>33</sup> Davenport, *Aphrodisiacs and love stimulants*, 35, 40, 46.

excite excessive sexual appetites. Rather, that for many early modern men and women, using these substances to provoke sexual desire was considered to be a way of improving fertility.

Aphrodisiacs have also been discussed indirectly in broader studies such as Philippa Pullar's *Consuming passions* (1970). Pullar examined English foods and appetites and only included a brief discussion of aphrodisiacs as an appendix to the work.<sup>34</sup> However, although she started this description by imposing modern understandings of desire upon the past, she did note the inherent connection between fertility and sexual potency.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, when considering the past Pullar argued that ideas about erotic foods were based only on the doctrine of signatures and the foods 'newness' or exoticism.<sup>36</sup> Broader studies of the history of generation and the family have also touched upon the place of aphrodisiacs in early modern society. In *Obstetrics and gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England* (1982) Audrey Eccles discussed 'sexuality and conception', although she only recorded the use of windy foods to help male sexual incapacity.<sup>37</sup> Similarly Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster have examined the subject of infertility, particularly male, and have highlighted that there was a range of medicines designed to increase lust, and help conception.<sup>38</sup> Berry and Foyster, however, suggested that men's sexual techniques, rather than aphrodisiacs, were portrayed as central to their ability to give women pleasure, and so maximise their chances of having children.<sup>39</sup> Without disputing their argument, this book will also show that many aphrodisiacs were thought to be able to help men maintain tumescence and prevent premature ejaculation. These substances could also increase female pleasure substantially by invigorating the male seed with heat and vital spirits which titillated the female generative system upon contact. Thus aphrodisiacs were believed to help improve certain aspects of male sexual performance in order to enhance the chances of conception.

Perhaps the most important works that have addressed the topic of aphrodisiacs are those of Angus McLaren. He devoted a chapter in *Reproductive rituals* (1984) to the remedy of barrenness and the promotion of generation, outlining the link between procreation and pleasure and a basic frame-

<sup>34</sup> Philippa Pullar, *Consuming passions: a history of English food and appetites*, London 1970, 235–40.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 237.

<sup>37</sup> Audrey Eccles, *Obstetrics and gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England*, London–Canberra 1982, 33–42 at p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster, 'Childless men in early modern England', in Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster (eds), *The family in early modern England*, Cambridge 2007, 158–83 at p. 172.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 172.

work for the ways in which aphrodisiacs were understood.<sup>40</sup> Yet McLaren claimed that provoking lust was a mainly male concern and that remedies for female barrenness warmed and invigorated, but did not necessarily stir lust.<sup>41</sup> Although his work provides an invaluable introduction to this topic, much of his evidence was drawn from literary sources and so obscures the detailed medical understanding of these substances. Nonetheless, McLaren did show that understandings of sexual stimulation were widespread and existed beyond the realm of printed medical treatises. McLaren discussed aphrodisiacs as just one element of sexual practice alongside the timing of intercourse and issues to do with pregnancy. This situates aphrodisiacs well within the broader framework of obstetrics and gynaecology but did not allow for a detailed investigation of the peculiarities of these substances. In his 2007 work *Impotence* McLaren again utilised a range of sources to examine the ways in which ‘fumbling’ men in early modern England were mocked and ridiculed.<sup>42</sup> Again, although McLaren described the herbal aphrodisiacs recommended by Nicholas Culpeper, aphrodisiacs did not form the central theme of his analysis.<sup>43</sup> McLaren’s broad discussions did not provide specific details about the way in which the understandings of aphrodisiacs shifted and changed across the period, neither did he consider the sexed and gendered nature of these substances, although *Impotence* did consider the ways in which specifically male sexual failure was ridiculed and portrayed in early modern culture. Here I will consider how changing ideas about the sexed body interacted with the understanding of aphrodisiacs, and how aphrodisiacs were evaluated across the period in light of new anatomical understandings of the body.

In contrast to McLaren’s broad approach, Valeria Finucci’s 2008 article ‘There’s the rub: searching for sexual remedies in the New World’ specifically addressed the search for a sexual stimulant by Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua’s apothecary.<sup>44</sup> Finucci recorded numerous kinds of aphrodisiacs available in early modern Europe including those that operated through the doctrine of signatures, talismans and exotic foods.<sup>45</sup> Finucci did explain the medicinal value of some of these substances; however, most of the article merely recites the many things that could be purchased. Such case studies are valuable chiefly for revealing the interest with which certain early modern men and women could view aphrodisiacs, and for highlighting their relevance as a subject of enquiry.

<sup>40</sup> Angus McLaren, *Reproductive rituals: the perception of fertility in England from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century*, London–New York 1984, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, *Impotence: a cultural history*, Chicago–London 2007, ch. iii.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 57, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Valeria Finucci, “‘There’s the rub’: searching for sexual remedies in the new world”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* xxxviii/3 (2008), 523–57.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 529–31.