PAEDIATRICS IN CLASSICAL ART*

BY

B. E. SCHLESINGER, M.D., F.R.C.P.

*Consulting Physician, University College
Hospital; Senior Physician, Hospital for
Sick Children, Great Ormond Street*

BIRTH OF CLEOPATRA'S CHILD

The subject of my lecture has come from an idea that has been maturing for a good many years. Its fascination lies not merely in the beauties of painting and sculpture, but also in the diverse fields to which this inquiry has led. Thus the history of medicine and mankind, mythology, religion, ancient customs, and superstitions are all relevant to this study.

Paediatrics has been interpreted in its widest sense so as to include birth, mothercraft, and normal child development. Minor and major ailments, disease, and malformations are naturally well represented, together with contemporary methods of treatment. Modern judgment may view some of the curious therapeutic measures with suspicion, but as many of the cures were by miracles anyone casting doubt might justly be accused of disbelief.

The works of art to be depicted cover many centuries, the earliest taking us back before the Christian era; thence we pass through the ages to modern times. Here the term "classical" has been somewhat stretched in order to include one or two appropriate examples executed by famous painters and sculptors of our time. In more than one instance the name of the artist is unknown, though the work can be approximately dated.

Birth

It seems right to begin at the beginning, and the obvious choice is Leonardo da Vinci's sixteenth-century "Child in Womb," now among the anatomical drawings in the Royal Library at Windsor (Fig. 1). This profound philosopher states his ideas on heredity and physiology in his commentary, in mirror writing, on the dissection:

"In the case of this child the heart does not beat and it does not breathe, because it lies continually in water. And if it were to breathe it would be drowned, and breathing is not necessary to it, because it receives life and is nourished from the life and food of the mother. . . . And a single soul governs these two bodies and the desires and fears and pains are common to this creature. . . . And from this proceeds that a thing desired by the mother is often found engraved upon those parts of the child which the mother keeps in herself at the time of such desire."

*Dawson Williams Lecture, 1961-2, B.M.A. Annual Meeting, Belfast.

How singularly near the mark are these ideas in some ways but how far wrong in others, the real truth about the circulation having to await William Harvey's pronouncements over a century later.

Caesarean section is undoubtedly a very ancient obstetric procedure. For ages it was practised only after the mother's death in late pregnancy, and this was supposed to be the manner of Julius Caesar's birth in 102 B.C., from which the name is derived. The operation may indeed be much older, and, according to legends, the Greek god of healing,

Asklepios, was born in this way. The scene is well reproduced on a Majolica plate by Giorgio in 1534 (Fig. 2). Here Coronis, a king's daughter and one of Apollo's many lady loves, lies on a richly decorated bier, slain out of jealousy by one of Artemis's arrows. The bier was about to become a funeral pyre when Apollo rescued his son by caesarean section. The wound can be seen still bleeding, the god's bow and arrow have been set aside, and Cupid looks on in tears.

Multiple births seem to have fascinated the old masters, a good example being the birth of Esau and Jacob shown (see first plate) in an etching by Etienne Delaune (1519-1583). Jacob appears to be helping his own delivery from Rebecca by hanging firmly on to his brother's foot. So we see that Jacob was always out for the main chance, even from the womb.

Quadruplets created as great a sensation in ancient times as they do now. They were obviously unexpected in the case of the lady in the mediaeval painting, who had only one crib prepared (see

first plate). A ligature is in readiness, but for aesthetic reasons the umbilical cord of the last born has been omitted. A holy man in the clouds is blessing the scene and the first three siblings are already tightly bound in swaddling clothes. I shall refer to this practice again later.

Before leaving the subject of birth it is interesting to note the recent correspondence that has been carried on in various medical journals as to whether the conduct of labour with the mother lying on her side is really the best method. Various other postures have been suggested as preferable, including the squatting or kneeling position, so that gravity may play a part. This would certainly take us back to the ancients, and we can see from an old Egyptian design how Cleopatra's child was born (see heading). From other pictures we can gather that this was the customary method for many centuries, and in fact still continues in certain

FIG. 1.—Leonardo da Vinci's "Child in Womb."

FIG. 2.—Majolica plate by Giorgio (1534) depicting the birth of Asklepios by caesarean section.

of the more primitive tribes. Whether or not we should return to it we must leave our obstetric colleagues to decide.

Mothercraft and Neonatal Procedures

Earlier I mentioned swaddling. It is an ancient practice, still favoured to-day in the more backward areas of certain countries such as Turkey. Galen (A.D. 130–200) sought to explain the value of swaddling clothes as a means of pressing the baby's limbs and body into good shape. Despite condemnation by more enlightened doctors as early as the sixteenth century (Felix Wurtz, 1518–1574) and much later in England (William Cadogan, 1748), it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the procedure was given up in this country. A scene of about the Stuart period is reproduced, showing swaddling bands being applied (see first plate). Swaddling is also shown in numerous works of art from many parts of the world, including the famous porcelain bambino of Della Robbia which serves as an anachronism in the crest of the Westminster Children's Hospital, reminding us of the errors of the past.

There are also other subjects of neonatal interest and aspects of mothercraft to be found in classical art. In Greek mythology the umbilicus was greatly venerated and the famous marble omphalos, highly decorated in criss-cross relief, is still to be seen at Delphi (Fig. 3). Holländer suggests that this form of ornamentation might have indicated how closely life and death were interwoven. There are many other theories. The navel is certainly the fountain of origin of our existence; so to the ancient Greeks the omphalos of Delphi might well have marked the most important and central point of the Earth.

In the National Museum of Athens there is a marble relief carved in A.D. 500 showing Asklepios seated rather uncomfortably on another large omphalos. He is engaged in oracular prophecy to a young man standing beside him, while Hygieia, the goddess of health, is giving her support. Here the umbilicus may possibly represent symbolically the divine intuition that Asklepios has inherited from his father Apollo.

"Then Zipporah Took a Stone . . ."

Ritual circumcision, according to the Old Testament, was first ordained by God through Abraham as a seal of a divine covenant. Reference to the operation appears again later, when it was performed by Moses's wife: "Then

FIG. 3.—Marble omphalos at Delphi decorated with criss-cross relief. It has been suggested that this form of ornamentation might have been intended to represent the close interweaving of life and death.

FIG. 4.—Bronze plaque attributed to Donatello of a Bacchante expressing breast milk into a cornucopia. The plaque can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Mediaeval portrayal of delivery of quadruplets. They are obviously unexpected as only one crib has been prepared.

An early illustration of the practice of swaddling—a practice not abandoned in Great Britain until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Circumcision of Jesus shown in a fifteenth-century German painting.

Raphael's "The Transfiguration" — an epileptic boy being healed.

Etching by Etienne Delaune showing birth of Esau and Jacob. Jacob appears to be helping his own delivery by hanging on to Esau's foot.

Miraculous plastic surgery. Altarpiece of St. Nicholas healing three little boys cut up by an inn-keeper for pickling.

Midgets, by Jan van Keller (1648-1698).

The Spanish Infanta with an achondroplasic attendant, by Velasquez.

St. Nicholas standing soon after his birth.

A shortsighted child? Painted by Balthus in 1942.

Zipporah took a stone and performed circumcision on her son" (Exodus iv. 25). Sharpened stone implements were probably used for the purpose throughout Biblical times, but the details in this picture by a fifteenth-century German artist are not clear enough to be sure (see first plate). It portrays the circumcision of the infant Jesus. From many other pictures on this subject I have selected this one because of the intimacy of the scene. Simeon, who is holding the child, had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Not long after this ceremony he spoke those famous lines we now recognize in the Nunc Dimittis: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. . . ."

Mothers of the past were certainly conscientious about their infants' nourishment and breast feeding was the rule, if only for the reason that artificial milk had not reached a reliable standard. Even the gods set a good example. The Victoria and Albert Museum displays a bronze plaque, attributed to Donatello, which shows a Bacchante expressing her liberal quota into a cornucopia, we might imagine for the local breast-milk bank (Fig. 4).

The value of smallpox vaccination is not questioned nowadays, and in the last year there was a run on immunization clinics when the infection reappeared in this country. The outcry and demonstrations against this treatment have long been forgotten. So it might be of interest to show you James Phipps, aged 8, receiving, under protest, the first vaccination, carried out by Edward Jenner on May 14, 1796, with cowpox lymph taken from the sore on an infected dairy-maid's hand (Fig. 5). This group is the work of Monteverdi of Genoa. Usually to-day vaccination is undertaken much earlier in life.

It is not long before an infant becomes a toddler and walking gives some degree of independence. Picasso has caught "The First Steps" in this oil painting of 1943 (Fig. 6). You may wonder whether the child is trying to escape from his curious-looking mother, or vice versa; in any case this will no doubt expedite the child's efforts.

Miracles

Miraculous healing, as it plays such an important part in the Gospels, has naturally caught the imagination of the great painters, who devoted so much of their work to religious subjects. In these miracles it is often difficult to distinguish between madness, hysteria, or true organic nervous

FIG. 5.—Jenner's first vaccination in 1796, by Monteverdi of Genoa.

FIG. 6.—Picasso's "The First Steps."

disease. It was the current belief in ancient times that people were possessed by devils which had to be exorcized. Cures of this nature have been reproduced in numerous pictures. Here, for instance, is a miniature from a manuscript in Bruges written and illustrated in 1462 by Hubert le Prouvost on the life of St. Hubert (Fig. 7). The saint has already expelled the demon, seen escaping out of the church window, from the kneeling figure with his hands still bound. In a second young boy the process is well under way. Two others hold him fast and manacles are at hand on the table, in case his mad writhings prove too much for his attendants.

There has been some dispute over Le Dominiquin's fresco, from a convent at Frascati, of St. Nilus healing an afflicted boy (Fig. 8). His body is in opisthotonos with spasticity of the legs. It has been suggested that the boy is suffering from tetanus; others believe that an epileptic fit is more likely or, alternatively, a hysterical convulsion. Whatever the diagnosis, the scene is so realistic that it seems likely the figures were taken from life.

In Raphael's famous picture of the Transfiguration in the Vatican (see first plate) the artist portrays the healing of an

FIG. 7.—Exorcizing devils, from a fifteenth-century manuscript by Hubert le Prouvost.

FIG. 8.—Fresco by Le Dominiquin of the healing of a hysteric or epileptic boy.

FIG. 12.—The god Phtah.

FIG. 9. — Unilateral leg and arm paralysis, by Ribera.

FIG. 10.—An idiot, by Velasquez (1599-1660).

FIG. 11.—Achondroplasia, by Velasquez.

epileptic boy—"Master I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit [the old idea again] and wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him and he foameth and gnasheth his teeth . . . oft time it hath cast him into the fire and into water . . ." (St. Mark ix. 17-29). This description is not that of hysteria, but much more like epilepsy, and in the *Revised Version* St. Matthew (xvii. 14-18) calls him an epileptic. Nevertheless, judging from the painting, it is doubtful whether Raphael had ever seen this disorder, or he has allowed himself much artistic licence.

Three Little Pickles

There are many legends about St. Nicholas (see second plate). Perhaps the most diverting is that of the innkeeper who, running short of bacon, had cut up three little boys and pickled them in his salting tub. Nicholas, hearing about this, went to the tavern and at his word the remains of the butchered children came together and the little pickles stood up alive—surely the most complete and perfect plastic operation in history. Gerard David's St. Anne altarpiece, now in the Edinburgh National Gallery, gives a good idea of the story. We should realize that St. Nicholas was rather an infant prodigy. Directly he was born he was put into a basin to be washed (see second plate), but to the astonishment of his nurses he stood up and remained for two hours in an ecstasy, his hands clasped and raised to heaven. It was thus argued that he was endowed with reason from the moment of birth. He was reputed to have fasted from his cradle, and on Wednesdays and Fridays he refused nourishment from his nurse's breasts, except in the evening after sundown, when he sucked vigorously.

As a final example of miraculous healing there is Eeckhout's lovely painting of the raising of Jairus's daughter. It is not reproduced here but is to be found in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin.

"And when He was come in, he saith unto them, why make ye this ado and weep? the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth, and they laughed him to scorn . . . and He took the damsel by the hand and said unto her, Damsel, I say unto thee arise, and straightaway the damsel arose and walked, for she was of the age of 12 years." (St. Mark v. 38-43.)

Begging for Alms

The Louvre contains a well-known painting by Ribera (1588-1656) of a boy with unilateral leg and arm deformities (Fig. 9). At first glance this could be a good representation of infantile hemiplegia, but when we examine the picture more carefully the boy seems to be aphasic, as in his left hand he is carrying a piece of paper begging for alms (*Da mihi eliminosiam propter amorem dei*). There is also a suspicion of a left facial weakness on the opposite side to the paralysed limbs. Neither of these physical signs is usually present in infantile hemiplegia and the location of the cerebral lesion is not so simple.

Dwarfs, Cripples, and Imbeciles

Velasquez (1599-1660) was court painter to Philip IV of Spain and was fond of portraying dwarfs, cripples, and imbeciles. There is not much difficulty in recognizing this boy (Fig. 10) as a harmless idiot.

The same artist was also responsible for the painting of achondroplasia (Fig. 11) in the Prado in Madrid. Another example of this type of dwarf is seen in the god Phtah, revered at Memphis, the capital of Egypt in remote times (Fig. 12). He comes into the paediatric orbit because, according to some authorities, he is supposed to represent a human foetus, an object of worship, but you will agree he is much more like an achondroplastic dwarf.

Later in the seventeenth century the Spanish Court was so intrigued by dwarfs that young boys and girls of good birth, thus affected, were chosen as pages and playmates for the royal family. And so again we see achondroplastic

FIG. 13.—St. Elizabeth delousing children, by Murillo (1618-1682). He painted two pictures on the same subject—an illuminating comment on contemporary standards of hygiene.

FIG. 14.—The infant model in this portrait of the Virgin and Child (1500) by Hans Bergmaier appears to be suffering from rickets.

FIG. 15

children in another painting by Velasquez in the Prado (see second plate) and two obvious midgets standing with a large dog in Jan van Keller's picture (1648-1698) in the Raczyński Balin Collection (see second plate).

General Medicine

Only a few representations of general medical diseases in children can be found in classical art, but they do throw an interesting light on medical history.

Hygiene did not reach a very high standard in the past. Murillo (1618-1682) must have been so struck by this that he produced two paintings of children having their lousy heads treated. One can be seen in the Academy of St. Ferdinand in Madrid, showing St. Elizabeth at work conducting a kind of out-patient dermatological clinic (Fig. 13).

Usually when hygiene is poor enlightened ideas on the nutrition of children are also lacking. Diets recommended in England for the growing infant were really astoundingly deficient until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Poverty and insufficient sunshine were additional factors, and the part played by vitamins had not yet been discovered. Rickets was therefore a common disease, and two of the Stuart kings, Charles I and James I, were badly affected in childhood. So it was ignorance rather than poverty which was responsible. Since conditions known to produce the disorder were not new in the seventeenth century, Foote sought evidence of rickets in paintings before this period and discovered it in the infant Christ in several earlier portraits of the Madonna and Child. Rickets was certainly not confined to England; it occurred in the Low Countries and North Germany. The infant who served as a model in 1500 for the Virgin and Child by Hans Bergmaier of Nuremberg was certainly affected (Fig. 14).

What was Wrong with the Duchess's Baby?

I have been unable to find any authentic examples of cretins in classical art, but I have often wondered whether cretinism was what was wrong with the Duchess's baby in *Alice in Wonderland*. You may remember John Tenniel's illustration of the terrifying Duchess nursing her baby in a large kitchen full of pepper and smoke (Fig. 15). Everyone was sneezing and the Duchess was singing a curious sort of lullaby:

Speak roughly to your little boy,
and beat him when he sneezes,
He only does it to annoy,
because he knows it teases.

Alice was then given the baby to nurse, and to her alarm its cry became a grunt and it gradually turned into a pig (Fig. 16). You may think this is stretching a point, but it is very reminiscent of the increasingly bestial appearance of the untreated cretin—and the Duchess's baby was only given pepper!

FIGS. 15 and 16.—Was the Duchess's baby in *Alice in Wonderland* a cretin? John Tenniel's illustrations show the Duchess nursing her howling infant in an atmosphere so filled with pepper and smoke that only the cat can manage to smile. When Alice holds the baby it gradually turns into a little pig.

FIG. 16

FIG. 17.—St. Vitus's martyrdom in boiling oil. Sufferers from rheumatic chorea made pilgrimages to his shrine.

FIG. 18.—Sick child. Epstein's sculpture of his daughter.

Before the discovery of specific antibiotic treatment, tuberculosis, with its prolonged downhill course, was favoured by composers and writers as an effective last scene for their heroines. It has not appeared often in art, but there is a rather beautiful painting by Edvard Munch (1906) at the Tate. It is not reproduced here, but it depicts a young girl very sick with this infection. The picture is supposed to have been inspired by the death of the artist's elder sister from the disease.

In these days of rock and roll, the twist, and other dance manias, it is interesting to recollect that rheumatic chorea was originally confused with a hysterical form of community dancing. It was called St. Vitus's dance, because it was to the shrine of this saint in Ulm that girls with this affliction were ordered to make a pilgrimage to be cured. In St. Michael's Church in Schwaz in the Austrian Tyrol there is an old painting on wood of the martyrdom of St. Vitus in boiling oil (Fig. 17). He is holding a hen or cock in his hand, possibly a symbol of the god of healing, or as an alarm in his capacity of protector against over-sleeping: *Heilige Veit Weck mich zur rechter Zeit*.

FIG. 19.—Sick child and mother, by Metsu.

FIG. 20.—Woodcut by Holbein of Death drawing a plague-stricken child away from its family.

Last year the Tate gave an exhibition of the John Hay Whitney Collection. It included one modern picture by Balthus, painted in 1942 (see second plate). I would like to show you this, because the artist was so clever at depicting a true scene in which the figures seem to stand still for a brief second, and one can imagine that at the next moment they will begin to move again. This snapshot effect is perhaps best seen in the cat, but the picture also has a special medical interest centred on the child on the floor, who is reading so close to her book that she must surely have been very shortsighted. I wonder if the painter was aware of this?

Two further works of art depicting illness in children should be included because of their beauty and dramatic representation. The nature of their trouble is uncertain, but Epstein has caught his daughter Peggy Jean at the height of her indisposition (Fig. 18), and Metsu's painting in the Hague is typical of a feverish child and a mother's natural anxiety (Fig. 19).

We began with birth. It would be fitting to end with death. The plague in the sixteenth century claimed many victims of all ages, and here in this woodcut by Holbein Death is drawing away an unwilling child from its family, who with fire are fruitlessly trying to prevent the fatal infection from spreading (Fig. 20). At their feet the sands of time are running out.

Plague is now a disease of the past and medicine has so far advanced that many of the examples I have given no longer exist or have their appropriate remedies. It is on this hopeful note that I end.

I would like to thank Professor Ernst Gombrich, director of the Warburg Institute, Mr. L. M. Payne, librarian of the Royal College of Physicians, London, Mr. Colin Thompson, of the Edinburgh National Gallery, and the Rev. Eric Whitworth for their help and information. I am also most grateful to Mr. Derek Martin, of the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, for reproducing the illustrations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Illness of Charles, Duke of Albany, by J. J. Keevil; *Medizin in der Klassischen Malerei*, by E. Holländer; *Plastik und Medizin*, by E. Holländer; *Wunderheilungen*, by O. Rosenthal; *L'Art et le Médecine*, by P. M. L. P. Richer; *Die Wochenstube in der Kunst*, by Robert Müllerheim; *The Englishman's Food*, by J. C. Drummond and Anne Wübraham.