

# Gynecology: an Etymological Note

BY THELMA CHAREN

*Bibliographical Services Division  
National Library of Medicine  
Bethesda, Maryland*

## ABSTRACT

"Gynecology" is derived ultimately from the Indo-European root GEN-. Though this gives directly words like *progeny* and *generate*, by a less open path come the Latin cognates like *nature* and *native* and the English *queen* and *king*. "Woman" is explained, and English names like *Brewster* are explained with reference to the suffix *-ster*. Latin derivatives of the *female/feminine* class are traced to an old root DHE, cognate with the Greek derivatives involving *thel-*. Short stories are told for *virago*, *amazon*, *mamma*, *barbarian*, *abecedarian*, *elementary*, and for many Latin-derived words in *mol-* and English words in *mil-*, tying them to the Latin *mollis* (soft) as related to *mulier* (woman). These are tied, in turn, to an older root MAR-yielding *marasmus*, *mors*, *murder*, *milk*, etc. Derivatives from the Latin *domina* and finally the English *lady* are discussed.

GYNECOLOGY is the study (*lógos*) of woman (*gyné*). While, following the Greek words, this is the literal meaning of the word, popularly and medically it reaches the mind as the study of diseases in women. The disease element is suggested in the German word for gynecology, *Frauenheilkunde*, woman + heal + art. The *heil* is cognate with *hale* (as in hale and hearty), *heal*, *healthy*, and *whole*. When you are whole, you are hale and healthy, and when healthy and hale, whole.

Skinner (10), in the *Origin of Medical Terms*, says that the word *gynecology* first appeared in the early seventeenth century in a title, *Gynaecologia, Id Est De Nobilitate et Perfectione Sexus Feminini*. In 1730 (he further states) the word *gynaecologia* was used but did not appear again for another hundred years. The nineteenth century saw a more general use.

The Greek *gyne* (*γυνή*) goes back to an ancient root GEN or GN or GNA meaning "to beget" (genesis, genealogy, progenitor, progeny, generate, genus, etc.). A *gyne*, then, is a begetter. One sees the same root without the G in the Latin NA as in *natus* (born, be-

got), *nature*, *nation*, *native*. (The *g* appears in Latin *cognatus*.) The Greek *gyne* is cognate with the Old English *cwēn*, the word for woman, with the Danish for woman, *kvinde*, and likewise with the Swedish *kvinna*. The Modern English word *queen* is THE woman, or at least the woman of the king; but in Shakespeare's day, the word had also taken a downward turn, and the form "queen" meant a woman of loose morals.

In point of fact, the *king* himself is a disguised GEN, for the Anglo-Saxon form was *cyn*, pronounced "kin," (a tribe, that which begets or is begot) + the suffix *-ing*: *cyning*, pronounced "kinning." The *-ing* meant "son of," so the *cyning* or *king* was the son of the tribe. The same *-ing* appears in the name *Bruning*, for example, "son of Brown." This suffix also meant "the tribe of" or "the people of," as in Washington—Wassa's (Wash) peoples' (ing) farm (tun); Birmingham—Beorma's peoples' homestead (ham); and in many others. *Cyn* also yields *kin*, an obvious connection with GEN. The *cyning* of the Anglo-Saxon is the *König* of the Germans. One sees it often as the proper name *Koenig*.

Our word *woman* was originally the Old English *wif-man*, a wife-man, i.e., a female human being. *Wif-man* became *wimman* which is still today the correct pronunciation of the plural *women*. Some have said that *woman* is from *womb-man*. This is anatomically true but is also mere etymological fancy. *Womb* was originally a word for what we inelegantly call "belly"; most of the words for *womb* in the early languages are really the word for belly.

The Old English *wif* and its cognate German *Weib* originally meant "woman" or "wife." Partridge (8), in his *Origins*, connects the root with either an Indo-European word for the woman as a "vibrator" or with an ancient Germanic word for the woman as "the veiled

one." I can see the figure behind the latter but the fancy of the former is lost to me. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the word as of "origin obscure," which seems safer. The suggested connection of *wife* with the word *weave* is posed but rejected by most etymologists. I mention irrelevantly here that *weave* and *web* are related, and that the name *Weaver* refers to the male while *Webster* refers to the female. The feminine suffix *-ster* appears in *Baxter*, with her male counterpart as *Baker*. The man who spun was *Spinner*; the woman, the *spinster*. Similarly, the coexistence of *Brewer* and *Brewster* shows the original gender differentiation. Bloomfield (3), in *Language*, says that the feminine ending eventually lost its sex reference in words like *huckster* or *teamster*. Getting back to *wife*, *hussy* is from *huswif*, given by Webster's dictionary as "an alteration of housewife." Drop two letters and say *husi* fast three times.

The Latin derivatives *female* and *feminine* come from an Indo-European root DHE, meaning "to nurse" or "to suckle." The DHE appears as THE in Greek and FE in Latin. *Felare* in Latin means "to suck." You are familiar with the Greek as *thélys*, nipple, in the combining form *-thel-*, as in *epithelium*. I digress to tell you that Skinner (10) says the epithelium is "the surface layer of cells over the nipple and over other areas which had nipple-like papillae" when named in 1700. Edmund Andrews (2), in *A History of Scientific English*, states:

English has applied the term [thele] not only to flesh of the breast, but to all flesh (cf. endothelium, epithelium, mesothelium, etc.). However, the ancient Greek *thele* was frequently used in compounds and it always implied the female sex. Grimm's law states that this stem should turn up in Latin as *fel-*. It does, but it is not complimentary to the fair sex in that it means "cat" in that tongue (*felis*). However, in another form, *felix*, it means "happy", just as many Greek compounds use *thel-* in the same way.

Partridge (8) does not completely corroborate the woman/cat community. *Felix*, he agrees, "apparently derives from \**fela*, breast—compare FEMALE; originally, therefore, *felix* would have meant milk-giving or -supplying." *Feline* (from *feles* or *felis*), however, he gives as "of obscure origin." The Latin dictionary does connect *feles* with *felix* and relates both to the prehistoric root FE above, saying of the

cat, "properly, she that bears young." The reader may choose between interpretations. I was amused to remember while writing this, that a comic character of my childhood made a happy linguistic compromise as Felix the Cat.

The FE of *femina*, the suckler, is the same FE as in FEcund (being—so to speak—the ability to get into a state resulting in nursing) and in FETus (which is either the result of FEcundity or the product to be nursed). Another FE derivative in a modified form is FIIus, son (the daughter is *filia*), whom the FEmales nurses or suckles. It is pointless to list here the obvious filial derivatives. Here is a less obvious one from the Spanish. Commonly, the Latin *f* becomes the Spanish *h* under certain morphological conditions: *fabulari* (to speak) = *hablar*; *formosus* (beautiful) = *hermoso*; *ferum* (iron) = *hierro*, etc. Naturally, then, *filius* became *hijo*, and, most charming of all, *hidalgo* is literally the *hijo de algo*, i.e., the son of someone pretty special!

Another bypath leads to a maidenly woman as a *virgo*, related to *vir*, the Latin for "man"; a less maidenly woman, a man-like one is a stronger form, *virago*. We cannot refer to man-like women without discussing briefly amazons. Amazon, the Latin dictionary suggests, is in truth a Scythian word, but it goes on to tell the folk origins. It was the Greek *à* (without) and *mastós* (breast: as in mastitis, mastectomy, etc.), breastless. This derivative refers to the practice of a mythical tribe of women who removed the right breast in childhood, in order to make it easier to handle a bow. The Amazon River, says Partridge (8), was so named by the explorer because of the belligerent-looking women who were standing on its banks.

The Greek *mastós* and the Latin *mamma* for breast are obviously related. Partridge (8) says that *ma* "represents that most fundamental of all sounds, the cry or murmur of a babe for the breast." I read many years ago, but cannot document here, that the duplication of the *ma* sound as *mamma* (for breast and mother) was said to have originated in the *ma-ma-ma* sound gurgled by a primeval infant smacking his lips in satisfaction while nursing. With the proper infantile intonation, *mamma* or *mama* sounds reasonable. In the same onomatopoeic way, the Greeks created the word *bárbaros* to describe a foreigner. A foreigner was clearly any

unenlightened person who did not speak Greek. Whatever the language the foreign wretch spoke sounded to Greek ears as so much *babble*, only like *bar-bar-bar-bar*. Obviously anyone babbling *barbarbar* was a *barbarian*. As another obiter dictum I mention that in the same way anyone who limits his thought or speech to the simplicity of the ABC's is an ABeCeDarian. It has also been said that anyone similarly limited in thought or speech might have begun with the latter half of the alphabet, starting at L, M, N, in the casual reciting of the unordered alphabet before it was crystallized in the present order of the twenty-six letters. Anyone not getting beyond the first three letters was LMNtary or *elementary*. Indeed, one of the meanings of *elementum* in Latin was "the alphabet." The famous philologist Max Müller (7) says, "As *elementa* is used in Latin for ABC, it has been supposed, though I doubt whether in real earnest, that it was formed from the three letters, l, m, n."

A more physiological explanation of *mamma* lies in an early root MAD, meaning "to grow moist." This is in reference to the emission of fluid during the lactation process.

Another Latin word for woman is *mulier* (from this comes the Spanish *mujer*). This is said to be from the comparative form, *mollior*, of the word *mollis*, meaning "soft" or "tender" or "pliable" or "gentle." *Mollify* and *emollient* you already know. *Mollis* gives diverting offshoots. The root MOL or MEL prehistorically meant the grinding down by force, at first physically and literally, then later, figuratively. The literal concept of grinding is seen in *meal* (ground grain), *mill*, *millet*, *miliary*, *moulin* (as in Moulin Rouge—the Red Mill), *Miller* and its German counterparts *Müller* and *Mueller*, *molar* (the grinding tooth), *emolument* (originally the fee paid to the miller for grinding one's grain) and *immolate* (sacrifice, but originally, the meal sprinkled over the sacrificial victim). *Mollis* (soft) also gave *mollusk*, *mulch*, *modal* and *mild*. I recall reading once that the same MOL root appeared in the name of the formidable ancient Semitic god *Moloch*, but all the sources I have checked have related it instead to the word *melek* in variant Semitic spellings, meaning "king."

Müller (7) considers the MOL base to be a later derivative of an "Aryan root MAR, which means to crush, to pound, to destroy

by friction." Reminding us that "r and l are cognate and interchangeable" (for example, we pronounce *colonel* as if spelled *kurnul* and we know already that vowels are commonly interchangeable), he goes on to give us an array of original MAR words which show a more depressing and more violent destruction than that of *mollis* above, as softened by time. There are *moil* (of war), *marasmus* (an eating away), *mors* (the final eating away), *morbus* (illness), *mora* (delay, i.e., an eating away of time), *mordere* (to smart, as in mordant), Mars (the god of war), *murder* (the ultimate crushing), the Latin for milking, *mulgere*, and even *milk* itself, from the rubbing or stroking of the udder of the cow, he says. *Marcus* was "hammer" in Latin and became a familiar proper name together with *Marcellus*, "Little Hammer"; Charles Martel was Charles the Hammer. *Malleus*, also for hammer, shows the r/l conversion. The MAR root appears to run through Latin and, therefore, English. Müller (the same root!) devotes an entire chapter to it.

I can close with two more familiar forms for woman. *Domina* was the Latin feminine of *dominus*, the master of the house (*domus*). *Domina* yielded the Italian word for woman or lady, *donna*, with *madonna* as "my lady" and the *Madonna* as "Our Lady." The French counterpart from the same *domina* is *dame* with *ma dame* (my lady) becoming *madame*. The Spanish *doña* and *dueña* are both forms of *domina* too, and are merely the feminine of *don*, also from *dominus*. The original *dueña* was the chief lady-in-waiting.

*Lady* is from the Anglo-Saxon *hlæfdige*, *hlaf* (a loaf) + *dige* (a kneader of *dah* or dough, the substance shaped into a loaf). The Anglo-Saxon became the Middle English *lafdi*, then *ladi* and finally *lady*. Through folk religious reference the lady in ladybird and lady's slipper is Our Lady.

This etymological note has taken such a meandering course that a summary is impossible, but it matters not. The purpose was less to instruct than to divert. My excuse as I moved from word to word and derivative to derivative is, as Vergil said, "mutabile semper Femina."

#### REFERENCES

1. ANDREWS, E. A. A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary. Rev., enl., and in great part rewritten.

THELMA CHAREN

- ten by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1890.
2. ANDREWS, EDMUND. A History of Scientific English. New York, Richard R. Smith, 1947.
  3. BLOOMFIELD, LEONARD. Language. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1933.
  4. BUCK, CARL D. A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949.
  5. COPLEY, GORDON J. Names and Places, with a Short Dictionary of Common or Well-known Place-Names. London, Phoenix House Ltd., 1963.
  6. MATTHEWS, C. M. English Surnames. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
  7. MÜLLER, F. MAX. The Science of Language, Founded on Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in 1861 and 1863. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891. vol. 2.
  8. PARTRIDGE, ERIC. Origins, a Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English. 2d ed. New York, Macmillan Co., 1959.
  9. SKEAT, WALTER W. A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language. New and corrected impression. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1948.
  10. SKINNER, HENRY ALAN. The Origin of Medical Terms. Baltimore, Williams and Wilkins Company, 1949.
  11. Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged. Springfield, Mass., G. and C. Merriam Company, 1969.

The attempt, therefore, to adapt general purpose computers is an admirable example of what Abraham Kaplan calls "the law of the instrument." Simply stated this "law" holds that man tends to formulate his problems in such a way as to make it seem that the solutions to his problems demand precisely what he already happens to have at hand.

—Sera, Jesse H. What is a Book, that a Man may Know it? *Bull. Cleveland, Med. Libr.* 17: 39, April 1970.