CARNIVAL INCARNATE:
MATERNAL BODIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The female body has long been a contested site of conflict between the sexes, and it has been manipulated, unmade, and reformed many times since the earliest physicians first theorized a model of human anatomy. Common knowledge surrounding the female form, especially its role in reproduction, remained fairly consistent from the Classical period into the sixteenth century, when Early Modern anatomists started chipping away at Galen’s one-sex model. With new medical knowledge came new ways of looking at and understanding the female body and its experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, but the metaphors that depended upon the outdated model lingered on, despite and sometimes in opposition to medical advances. In this dissertation, I argue that the literature from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance responds to a variety of social changes by exaggerating, satirizing, and abstracting the female form as it was once believed to be. Specifically, I suggest that the printing press (controlled by men) roughly coincided with the "professionalization" of obstetrics (when male physicians overtook female midwives) and with the Protestant Reformation (when Christianity lost its matriarch in the absence of Marian idolatry) to produce a surge of masculine control over female bodies, which was itself fueled by the outdated Classical model that had established women as natural, naturally inferior monsters. Thus, the metaphors that surround women in the Early Modern period are often highly politicized and deliberately anachronistic.
DEDICATION

To Dresden, my son and my heart,
for giving me a maternal body of my own and teaching me about motherhood;
for reminding me that “Why?” is always a good question;
and for not caring about Mommy’s dissertation, not even a little bit.

You have made this worthwhile.
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CHAPTER 1

CARNIVAL INCARNATE:
FORMING AND REFORMING THE EARLY MODERN MATERNAL BODY

For a period that reveled in descriptive literature that beautifully and imaginatively rendered the physical realities of human experience, the Renaissance generated a surprisingly small number of texts that deal directly with the pregnant female body. Colorful idioms abound, to be sure, as in Thomas Middleton’s *The Chaste Maid of Cheapside* (c. 1613), in which it is said that Mistress Allwit’s “nose and belly [meet]”\(^1\) or in François Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), in which the giantess is encouraged to calm herself because she will “soon be bringing forth new feet.”\(^2\) These turns of phrase are interesting in their own way, but they caricature rather than illuminate the pregnant condition. Reproductive bodies, laboring bodies, and post-partum bodies are seldom discussed directly. Especially when compared to the abundant descriptions of beautiful maidens and crook’d-nose crones, descriptions of the mother’s body seem lost somewhere between the two extremes. Hers is a body in flux, neither young and fresh enough to be unabashedly idolized nor old and decrepit enough to be wholeheartedly ridiculed or condemned. This project will focus on finding, contextualizing, and understanding

Renaissance representations of the maternal body, hidden though not entirely lost in literature from the period.

In many ways, the “maternal body” is any body that was understood as female, though the bodies that registered as maternal take on a variety of forms within the Early Modern imagination. The maternal body encompasses all pregnant, laboring, post-partum, and lactating bodies, but it also refers to those that are fertile or menstruating (and therefore monstrous) and those that are capable of sexual power, knowledge, desire, and pleasure. It appears alternatively and sometimes simultaneously as a character, a body on stage, an image, and a specter. The extent to which these terms express the comingling hope in and terror of the maternal body varies, but they all share in the period’s understanding of women as potentially and primarily reproductive vessels, despite the fact that modern readers are far less likely to ascribe maternity to every female-bodied person. Throughout this project, I focus primarily on the maternal body, in all its forms, as an object conceptualized and represented by male authors who depict these bodies as monstrous or abnormal because of their imagined maternity, as Christine Battersby explores in her work, *The Phenomenal Woman*. Battersby is primarily focused on redefining the metaphysics of identity from a maternal perspective, in opposition to the traditional Western practice of basing identity on a masculine default. Her central question is relevant for this dissertation as well: “Indeed, philosophically speaking, what is it to think identity, personhood, essence, from the position of one who is normalized by the discourse of patriarchy as abnormal—with a body that bleeds with the potential of new selves?” As Battersby points out, the maternal body was often seen as deviant or deformed in part due to its leakiness and its relative inscrutability when compared to the masculine norm. Battersby refers to the maternal body as “a body that bleeds,”

but within the period, it was also understood as a body prone to incontinence of every kind. It was at once an open faucet—streaming with blood, tears, urine, breast milk, gossip, and desire—and a closed system, concealing within itself secrets of paramount importance to a culture that was obsessed with primogeniture and the legitimate continuation of legacies. Whereas a male body contains within itself information about the individual subject, a female body contained unseen and unknowable truths about itself and about future selves—about desire, fidelity, paternity, and pregnancy. Thus, the potential to disrupt established hierarchies was hidden within maternal bodies, and the long-standing tradition of midwives as primary caregivers only intensified this threat by creating communities of maternal bodies complicit in keeping secrets.

When these maternal bodies show up at all, they are often treated in ways that register as strangely exaggerated, grotesque, or fantastical to modern readers. For example, Rabelais’ satirical novels *Gargantua* (1534) and *Pantagruel* (1532-1564) are highly unusual in that they feature not one but two birthing scenes that offer a fair bit of detail about the labor, the laboring woman, the midwives who attend her, and the appearance of the newborn infant. Published in France and divided into five separate works, Rabelais’ novels are written extravagantly, in a lofty register that accentuates the baseness of their subject matter. The satirical novels follow the “heroic” exploits of two giants, the eponymous Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. Whole chapters of broken conversations and flyting between “folk people” interrupt the main heroic narrative. However, it is within this satirical, bawdy context that two of the very few Renaissance birthing scenes appear within literature.

Technically, Pantagruel’s birth was published first in 1532 and followed two years later by Gargantua’s installment. However, for clarity’s sake, it makes sense to discuss the father’s birth first and then move on to the son’s: thus, the first birthing scene describes the heroic
emergence of Gargantua. Rabelais sets the scene by describing Gargantua’s parents and their relationship. His father, Grangousier, is a “jolly good fellow” and a great lover of salt meat and booze, while his mother, Gargamelle, is a “fine filly with a goodly mug.” The only other detail Rabelais provides about the future hero’s parents is that they “played the two-backed beast together” and “happily strok[ed] their bacon,” so that Gargamelle inevitably becomes pregnant with a “fine son,” whom she carries for an extended eleven months. When Gargamelle is very great with child, a handful of neighboring communities joins together for a massive feast of “gaudebillaux,” fatty beef tripe, and promptly decides that everyone should eat the tripe as quickly as possible, before it can begin to stink. Despite Grangousier’s warning to eat this “not very commendable meat” sparingly, the giantess consumes “sixteen tuns, two gallons, and two pints of it.” Lest the reader misunderstand this absurd, obscene quantity of beef tripe, Rabelais continues: “Oh, what lovely faecal matter there must have been swilling about inside her!”

Despite the theatricality of this scatological aside, the reader understands that Gargamelle is in an uncomfortable and particularly dangerous situation, especially given the fact that Rabelais started the chapter by cursing any disbelieving readers that their “fundament” might “run loose.” This is precisely what happens to Gargamelle in the next chapter: her fundament loosens “because of the mollification of the rectum intestinum—which you call the arse-gut—resulting from her

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4 Rabelais, 216.
5 Ibid. What follows is a brief catalogue of similar stories from mythology and legend about women with gestations carrying great men. The correlation between extended gestation and the fetus’s future heroism is established through mythology and legend.
6 Ibid.,219.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid, 218.
eating that excess of tripe.”9 One need not know precisely what an arse-gut is to know that losing it would be uncomfortable.

The chapter digresses to record snippets of conversations amidst the gallivanting and dancing feasters, but Rabelais soon returns to Gargamelle and her ill-fated fundament. He writes that as the communities mingled, the giantess “began to feel pangs down below.”10 Grangousier realizes that she is going into labor and ushers his wife to the shade of a willow tree, where he tells her to “show fresh courage” and dispatch the boy quickly, despite the “rather irksome” pain, so that they might start the work of creating another.11 In her travail, Gargamelle remains unimpressed by her husband’s promise of immediate post-partum coitus and offers to castrate him instead. He seems to accept this proposal and calls for a knife, but she quickly recants, praying forgiveness from Grangousier, Jesus, and God.12

But another child is not in the couple’s future. After this jest, the soon-to-be father wanders off to have another drink, and a group of midwives joins the groaning woman. They find Gargamelle in a dangerous predicament; upon groping her lower parts, one of the midwives finds some mass escaping her, which she mistakes for the child’s head. However, another midwife soon decides to further investigate this protuberance and discovers that it possesses “rather bad taste.”13 This is in fact her “arse-gut,” her lower entrails that have slipped straight out of her rectum because she consumed such an excessive amount of tripe, violating much of the period’s prenatal care; most of the advice pregnant women received centered on their diets,

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9 Ibid., 225
10 Ibid., 224
11 Ibid., 225
12 Ibid., 225.
13 Ibid. Tasting the crowning head of a fetus is not documented as common practice anywhere in any of the research I’ve done and exists in this text solely as a source of scatological humor.
and moderation was always key.\textsuperscript{14} By consuming an excessive amount of poor-quality meat, Gargamelle goes against the received wisdom that urged pregnant women to abstain from too much or too heavy of foods lest they suffocate the fetus or bring on potentially life-threatening conditions like constipation, vomiting, terms (bloody discharge or catamenia),\textsuperscript{15} or fluxes (dysentery-like symptoms).\textsuperscript{16} In this sense, Gargamelle is at least partially responsible for her own dangerous travail; however, her labor is made even more difficult when one of the midwives present, known as a “dirty old crone” with a “reputation as a leech,”\textsuperscript{17} makes a powerful restrictive medicine for Gargamelle, effectively and unfortunately closing all of her lower orifices and passageways such that “you could only with great effort have forced them apart with your teeth.”\textsuperscript{18} The unborn hero, faced with a blocked passage, ascends through his mother’s body, traveling by a series of hitherto closed tunnels upward through her veins, over her diaphragm, above her shoulders, and out of her left ear.\textsuperscript{19} This “accouchement à l’envers” is

\textsuperscript{15}“term,” n. 7b. \textit{OED.}
\textsuperscript{16}“flux,” n. 1a. \textit{OED.}
\textsuperscript{17}When Sir Thomas Urquhart and Peter Molleux completed their English translation in 1653, they favored the title “expert she-physician” over “dirty old crone.” I further discuss the importance of this difference momentarily. The strength of Urquhart and Molleux’s translation is that it preserves the woman’s status as a midwife, which is important given Rabelais’s experience as a physician and the tense relationship between male and female caregivers during the period. Thomas Urquhart and Peter Molleux, \textit{The first book of the works of Mr. Francis Rabelais, Doctor in Physick, containing five books of the lives, heroic deeds, and sayings of Gargantua, and his sonne Pantagruel…} London: Thomas Ratcliffe and Edward Mottershead, 1653. London: British Library.
\textsuperscript{18}Rabelais, 226. Even Rabelais acknowledges that this is a horrifying thought, but it is an important allusion to a folk tale about a devil sent to record the prattle of two “young whores” and his impossible task of stretching the parchment to accommodate all of their impious prattle. See Susan E. Phillips’ chapter “‘Janglyne in cherche’: Pastoral Practice and Idle Talk” in \textit{Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England.} University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2007.
\textsuperscript{19}Rabelais goes on to insist that this is exactly as it happened, truthfully, and anyone who doubts it is no good Christian and no good humanist either, for couldn’t God cause all women to deliver
undoubtedly bizarre, but it was surprisingly consistent with the medical knowledge of the day, which held that the uterus was connected to the liver by various hollow “feeder vessels” that also worked their way up and down the vena cava, making the hero’s ascent up through his mother’s body wholly imaginable within the contemporary culture.20 Once the infant springs from Gargamelle’s ear, focus shifts to the newborn boy and his demands for drink. The laboring mother fades out of the narrative immediately, and Rabelais only briefly mentions her death later in Gargantua’s story.

This is, after all, the story of Gargantua, and the chapter that describes his birth is entitled accordingly: “How Gargantua was born in a manner most strange.” Readers will notice the understatement of “strange,” but they might easily gloss over the use of passive voice since it has become conventional, even now, but this was not always the case. In French, the tendency to refer to childbirth passively (“the child is born”) instead of actively (“the mother gives birth”) did not occur until the eighteenth century, well after the time Rabelais was writing his novels and practicing as a physician. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the French verb for “to give birth” was still s’accoucher, a reflexive verb that indicates that the laboring mother played an active role in childbirth.21 Although the passive construction has become the standard form of expression in both English and French (now most commonly accoucher or être accouchée), that was not the case when these scenes were first penned, opening up the possibility that Rabelais made a deliberate choice to depict the mother passively. When the phrase moves away from the active construction in literature and in everyday idiom, the hero, and indeed every infant, is seen

and discussed as simply being born; the mother does not actively give birth, at least not according to the grammatical logic of the phrase. Rabelais’ chapter concerning Gargamelle’s gestation is similarly passive: “How Gargantua was carried for eleven months in his mother’s womb.” The mother is treated as the conduit through which the hero enters the world and his first obstacle to greatness. In fact, the only chapter title that gives Gargamelle any agency at all is the one in which she disregards her husband’s warning, eats too much, and fatally complicates her own pregnancy: “How Gargamelle, when carrying Gargantua, took to eating [a great profusion of] tripe.” These scenes are meant to tell us more about the hero’s character, not to develop the life of his mother. She is, narratively speaking, just a means to his beginning, a way to let the readers know that this hero is extraordinary, strong, courageous, bold, and inventive. He is so magnificent, in fact, that he would not descend through his mother’s lower parts and instead climbed upward; even his trajectory through his mother’s body identifies him as the tale’s hero. As Stephen Greenblatt describes the birth in “Filthy Rights,” Gargantua’s unconventional entrance into the world celebrates “the transcendence of the human condition—inter urinas et faeces nascimur.” The reality of being born is imagined as something to be overcome rather than as an integral, and indeed inescapable, part of being in the world, which perfectly captures the Western tradition that Battersby challenges by redefining selfhood in terms of natality. Here, however, the hero’s mother is rendered unimportant by the narrative that Rabelais spins after precisely because the author is bound to the Western tradition of birth as a repugnant event that requires the hero’s transcendence. The mother disappears; she is written out of the story, just as the birth canal is written out of the Augustinian Latin phrase as that unnamed space between urine and feces.

Despite the focus on Gargantua and the satirical treatment of Gargamelle’s labor, this episode of Rabelais’ work reveals more about Early Modern attitudes towards women’s bodies and their reproductive potential than most modern readers likely realize. To any reader with an understanding of modern science, the description of Gargantua’s birth seems to be a humorous bit of satire, not meant to be believed or taken seriously, but far more goes on between the lines than just satire. The logic behind this birth is surprisingly consistent with what Rabelais’ culture believed about female anatomy. This is not to say that they would have taken this story as wholly true, but it reaffirms what they “knew” about anatomy and so fell within the realm of believability. The maternal body does in fact exist within Renaissance literature, but, as with Gargamelle’s body, it is easy for modern readers and scholars alike to gloss over the maternal body as a mere exaggeration, as a monstrosity so grotesque that it must be satirical, or as a simple plot device leading to bigger and better things. By placing these scenes back within their contemporary historical moment, we can better understand what is at stake in these depictions of pregnancy and childbirth. What may seem like mere exaggerations or flights of fancy to modern readers actually touch upon deeply rooted anxieties surrounding the reproductive process; in this case, those anxieties revolved around the threat of maternal mortality and the incompetence of those attending the birth.

Most people have some sense that childbirth was more dangerous in centuries past and that many pre-modern women died in labor, but the actual rate of medieval and early modern

23 Despite the scarcity of early modern birthing scenes in literature and the recent scholarly interest in Early Modern pregnancy and childbirth, Rabelais’s satirical treatment of maternal bodies in action has attracted very little scholarly attention. An MLA search for “Gargamelle” turns up precisely one article, from 1991, published in French. Broadening the search to take Rabelais’s focus on Gargantua into account, searching “Gargantua” and “birth” yields an additional two hits. While Gargamelle is often mentioned in passing in scholarly work, she has remained on the peripheries.
maternal mortality is difficult to reconstruct and so has remained largely unknown. Even scholars who write about reproductive issues in these periods frequently sidestep the problem by using vague language and providing little to no statistical support. For example, when Patricia Crawford first mentions deaths related to pregnancy in her introduction to *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, she says simply that “Maternal mortality rates were high, and many men, especially wealthier ones, married more than once.” She follows this statement with a footnote that focuses solely on remarriage, leaving the claim about “high” maternal mortality rates both unquantified and undefended. She eventually goes on to discuss the matter in more depth, but her initial statement is representative of the way many scholars treat the higher level of maternal mortality as common knowledge. To some extent, these scholars are not wrong. Everyone knows that deaths related to childbirth were more common before modern medicine made antibiotics and safe surgical interventions possible. However, there seems to be a large discrepancy between what scholars mean by “high maternal mortality rates” and how the average non-specialist imagines birth during the period. When I asked my colleagues to share their best guess on the percentage of women who died in childbirth during the Renaissance, answers covered an impressive range (from 5 to 80%) with a rough average of 50%. This is shockingly high compared to the number scholars quote when they provide statistical information to support their claims: the chance that a sixteenth-century woman would die in childbirth or within 60 days following childbirth is currently believed to be around 5 or 6%. Simply put, treating the higher maternal mortality rates of the past as common knowledge is not rhetorically sound when the

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real “common knowledge” is so far from what the research suggests and what the specialists intend.

The scholars who do provide a source concerning mortality rates most often cite Roger Schofield’s 1986 study of maternal mortality from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, and he posits a per-pregnancy mortality rate of less than 1% for sixteenth-century England, with an overall lifetime mortality rate of closer to 5 or 6% due to the fact that most women experienced multiple pregnancies. Schofield’s study relies, in part, upon recorded deaths in bills of mortality and vital registers compared to baptismal records to generate maternal mortality rates, but he takes into consideration many other factors (including the exclusion of stillbirths from parish records) and compares data from across Europe to gauge and adjust England’s numbers when necessary. Schofield concludes his study by acknowledging that the maternal mortality rates were undoubtedly higher in centuries past, but that “childbearing in ‘the world we have lost’ turns out to have been a rather less mortal occasion than we may have been inclined to believe.”

26 Why might that be? What is gained from overestimating the threat faced by childbearing women in the early modern period? Positioning Schofield’s work alongside one of Lawrence Stone’s statements from his 1977 monograph *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* might shed some light on the reasons behind this persistent misunderstanding. Stone writes, “For women, childbirth was a very dangerous experience, for midwives were ignorant and ill trained, and often horribly botched the job, while the lack of hygienic precautions meant that puerperal fever was a frequent sequel.”

27 Stone firmly places the blame for maternal mortality on midwives. Schofield also mentions the “inadequate obstetrical

\[\text{\footnotesize 26 Ibid., 260.}
\]
skill of those who attended” births, but his language is carefully neutral compared to Stone’s reference to “ignorant” and “ill trained” midwives—a title that focuses attention exclusively on the female birth attendants and excludes the male physicians (like Rabelais himself) who would eventually take over obstetrical care. Perhaps the modern overestimation of Early Modern maternal mortality rates has something to do with an inherited bias against midwives, who were often depicted, from the sixteenth century on, much as Gargamelle’s midwives appear: as blabbering gossips, bawds, and drunks who repeatedly prove incapable of helping, much less saving, a woman in travail. Perhaps it is this perception of midwives that led Sir Thomas Urquhart, and later Peter Molleux who completed the seventeenth-century translation after Urquhart’s death, to translate the title of the midwife who “assists” in Gargantua’s birth, not as “dirty old crone” as the modern edition favors, but as “expert she-physician.”

Indeed, the emphasis on the woman’s medical skill is original to the French: Rabelais describes her as having a “réputation d’être grande medicine,” a reputation of great medical skill that is only mentioned satirically and immediately undermined by her botched treatment of Gargamelle’s travail.

Similar representations of midwives in literature obscure the historical reality of the highly-skilled, highly-experienced women who successfully guided a shockingly high proportion of parturient women through their labors before contemporary medicine had developed even the vaguest notion of germ theory. Historians Jacques Gélis, David Cressy, and Adrian Wilson

28 Urquhart and Molleux.
29 François Rabelais. Œuvres de Rabelais, Volume 1. Dalibon, 1823.1.6:154.
30 Gélis, History of Childbirth.
have reconstructed a consistent image of childbirth in the period, and it hardly corresponds to literary representations. Most women of even moderate means did not give birth outdoors or in public, and many took to their scrupulously prepared birthing chambers (often bedrooms or parlours that had been specially converted for the occasion) well in advance of labor’s onset. When the time came, laboring women were attended by a small group of experienced family members and neighbors, as well as a midwife. It was not, in most cases, as crowded or as frenetically social as the literature represents, though even the small group of women was often viewed as too large, too inept, and too demanding by some men in the period. Robert Barret, a late seventeenth-century surgeon, cautioned against allowing attendants like Gargamelle’s into the chamber: a midwife should be assisted by “some sober wise women among her neighbors, such as have gone through the like hazard before; but above all, take care there be no frightful, whimsical, resolute, headstrong drunken, whispering, talkative, slutish women amongst them…One of such women may do more harm than three modest wise women can do good.”

Despite the tone of such injunctions, most records that bother to indicate the number of women in attendance do not often exceed five or six, midwife included.

However, the fact that the historical reality of childbirth and the literary representation created by Rabelais differ so dramatically does not diminish the visceral power of his scenes nor their importance in understanding contemporary attitudes towards childbirth. Despite the fact that maternal mortality was not as pervasive nor the conditions of birth as grim as we might think, evidence does suggest that women in the period were often filled with apprehension throughout their pregnancies. In fact, pregnancy was regarded as a sickness, *un mal de neuf mois*,

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34 Cressy, 58.
with both physical and mental symptoms, as Linda A. Pollock in her essay “Embarking on a Rough Passage.” Pollock acknowledges that the maternal mortality rate was likely much lower than once thought, but as she points out, this fact hardly mattered at all to the women who faced childbirth in the period: “Notwithstanding the relatively low maternal mortality rate, it is still possible that childbirth was imbued with dread…Their [pregnant women’s] attitude towards death in childbed was less likely to be shaped by the statistical risk of encountering problems and more by the knowledge that once a problem arose, death was almost certain.” Letters and diary entries clearly demonstrate that many women, and many women’s loved ones as well, approached childbirth with a considerable amount of helplessness and fear. Pregnant women made preparations for death, referring to their letters in those final days of pregnancy as their “last will[s].” Mothers wrote letters to their daughters as the time of delivery drew near, encouraging them to reconcile themselves to God’s will and prepare their souls for death. Whatever the historical reality was, the prospect of dying in childbed was clearly very real to Early Modern families, and the fact that Rabelais includes two highly atypical birthing scenes, both of which end in the mother’s death, touches upon this anxiety and strikes a nerve.

The impulse to oversimplify or ignore the literary representations of childbirth is understandable, especially when Rabelais employs a satirical birthing scene as a means to move his narrative forward, not once but twice. The births of both his heroes result in the death and disappearance of the laboring women, itself a statistical improbability. Although Gargantua’s birth remains essentially consistent with folk knowledge about women’s endlessly permeable

36 Pollock, 47-8.
37 Qtd. in Pollock, 47-8.
38 Ibid.
bodies, Pantagruel’s birth strains that knowledge considerably more, and both episodes deviate from what we know of birth’s historical reality within the period. Rabelais introduces Badebec, Pantagruel’s mother, as Gargantua’s wife and a princess of Utopia and immediately states that she dies in childbirth because the next in the line of giant heroes is “so wonderfully great and lumpish that he could not possibly come forth into the light of the world without thus suffocating his mother.” 39 To be “lumpish” means to be “of cumbersome weight or bulk” and “not apt to be moved easily,” which explains why Badebec’s death on the childbed is seen as inevitable from the moment she’s introduced. 40 The newborn hero is too great, too large, and too immovable to be born without destroying his mother. The description of lumpish Pantagruel (glossed by Rabelais as “all thirsty”) combined with Badebec’s untimely pregnancy during the height of a three-year drought that has sent men scurrying inside cow stomachs for shade all foreshadow the bizarre and deadly events that are about to transpire. Indeed, once Badebec is in labor, she first gives birth to a procession of merchants, pack animals, and goods:

…there first sallied forth from her belly sixty-eight muleteers, each leading by the halter a mule laden with salt; after which came nine dromedaries laden with smoked bacon and ox-tongues, seven camels with eels, and then five-and-twenty wagons with leeks, garlic, chibols, and onions. 41

Kirk Read’s comment regarding this scene is instructive: within the context of the tale, both within its literary genre and narrative structure, the provisions provided by Badebec’s emptying womb are meant to nourish a population sorely in need: “the breaking of Badebec’s waters, as it were, pours into the midst of a parched world.” 42 Once Badebec brings forth this fully-stocked marketplace (full of salt sellers and salty foods, as well as a herd of heavily burdened pack

39 Rabelais, 22.
40 “lumpish,” adj. 1. OED.
41 Rabelais, 24.
animals and the men to care for them), the midwives who have gathered to take care of the giantess sit together and chatter about what this sudden effluence might mean, deciding that it is ultimately fit provision for them and a good omen for all. Badebec gives birth to Pantagruel while they are thus distracted, and Rabelais again chooses to eschew the laboring woman’s agency in his presentation of the infant’s arrival: “Behold! out comes Pantagruel all hairy like a bear.” This time, Rabelais chooses active language but ascribes all of the activity to the newborn. He is not born; he “comes out.” His appearance prompts more prophesying from the midwives, who pronounce that Pantagruel is destined to be “a terrible fellow” who will do “wonderful things.” The next chapter moves on to tell the readers of Gargantua’s competing grief at his wife’s death and joy at his son’s birth: “When Pantagruel was born, there was none more astonished and perplexed than was his father Gargantua; for of the one side seeing his wife Badebec dead, and on the other side, his son Pantagruel born…” Even in death, as a giant corpse present within the scene, the maternal body remains peripheral to the narrative. The moment a father finds himself stranded between the loss of his wife and the joy at his newborn son’s safe arrival may seem powerful, but it shifts the focus away from the woman who perished and redirects the reader’s attention to the father. What could have been an emotionally poignant scene is cut short; in fact, Gargantua starts planning his second marriage within that very chapter.

The many ways in which these births reflect an imagined, sensationalized scene rather than a historical actuality are important, but so too is the literary context. Today, pregnancy and birth are not often associated with satire or bawdy language. Reproductive processes may not be dinner-table talk, but they are not exactly bar talk either. However, this is precisely the context in
which most birthing scenes are placed in Renaissance literature, and certainly the context within
which Rabelais works as an author. Pregnant bodies, laboring women, lactating breasts—all of
this was most often depicted in grotesque, satirical, and bawdy literature or apologetically
introduced in popular manuals, as if frank discussion of female anatomy might incite lustful or
sinful thoughts. When the surviving literature gives us any detail about women’s reproductive
bodies, it tends to do so in cheap and popular texts meant to be ephemeral and rarely praised for
their artistic quality or in satires such as Rabelais’s work. Cheap print literature is crude, but it is
often self-consciously so, just as satirical literature is often self-consciously absurd or playful;
and this, according to the Early Modern understanding of pregnancy, was the perfect context for
sneaking a peak at the maternal body. When these bodies appear in “higher” genres, they become
increasingly more abstracted and disembodied, as they are no longer within their appropriate,
accustomed context.

In part, the representation of maternal bodies changed because the Early Modern
understanding of anatomy was shifting, with the vast majority of the population still believing
the classical model established by Aristotle and Galen while the most educated, most highly-
trained scientists and physicians were discovering the errors of that old model. The examples
from Gargantua and Pantagruel take on a new level of meaning when set against this backdrop
because they perfectly capture the escalating tension between old and new ways of thinking
about the body. Because François Rabelais’ was a popular author and a respected physician, he
was uniquely qualified to comment on this shift, with his physician’s fingers on the pulse of the
population for which he was writing. The relationship between developing anatomical science,

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46 When I use the term “grotesque,” I do so to refer primarily to representations that revel in
bodily functions and fluids and emphasize the animality of human bodies. I discuss the
controversy surrounding the term’s definition and its relationship to “the carnivalesque” later in
this chapter.
long-standing vernacular knowledge, and imaginative literary texts appear as centrally important in these selections from Rabelais’ work and throughout many texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These texts responded to and developed this relationship, incorporating the tensions between traditional (i.e. Classical) understandings of the female body and emerging scientific, religious, and political revisions. One common reaction to these changes was to double down on representations of the female reproductive body as gluttonous, capricious, abject, lazy, and subversive; in other words, when early modern writers faced the challenge of female embodiment and destabilized knowledge bases related to female embodiment, they often called upon established carnivalesque and grotesque images as a kind of shorthand. These images were familiar and literary enough that the writers could effectively rely upon past ways of thinking to generate meaning without directly engaging in many of the contentious questions posed by the period’s shifting belief systems.47

In many ways, my argument bridges a gap between Gail Kern Paster’s thesis concerning the interrelatedness of the Early Modern female body, humoral theory, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s grotesque realism and Mary E. Fissell’s work on the historical and medical moment of the cheap vernacular print.48 The literary tendency that Paster explores in *The Body Embarrassed*, the depiction of women as “leaky vessels” and the reliance on their effusive, shameful, threatening bodies has much to do with Fissell’s more historical project in *Vernacular Bodies*. Fissell suggests that the Protestant Reformation, the early Scientific Revolution, and the English Civil

47 The literary use of archaic scientific models is common in literature from the period. Astronomical imagery and references to alchemy carried metaphorical weight long after the beliefs on which they depended had been disproven. For example, Milton includes allusions to the Ptolemaic universe in *Paradise Lost*, despite the fact that the model was no longer current. 48 See Gail Kern Paster. *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993; and Mary E. Fissell. *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Representation in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
War all profoundly shaped the way English people thought about reproduction and reproductive bodies, and, vice versa, that representations of bodies affected the way the political, social, and religious changes developed. Part of this recursive “shaping” included a proliferation of the very types of literary representations that Paster analyzes. The literary trend of grotesque realism in the Early Modern texts and the historical moment of multifaceted, foundational change are deeply enmeshed.

The conflict between Louise Bourgeois Boursier, a royal midwife, and Charles Guillemeau, the royal physician, in the French court following the death of the young Duchess of Montpensier illustrates just how interconnected social change and the rhetoric of grotesque realism really were. The public persona of Louise Boursier before Montpensier’s death was consciously modeled as a response to the satirical and comical midwives surrounding Gargantua’s birth, as Kirk Read suggests in his reading of Rabelais’ birthing scenes. Read argues that the birth narratives that Rabelais presents are a “‘staging’ of misogyny” in which “we find a…confluence of intertexts that, once brought to the discussion, may comment upon the larger debates of women’s participation in the telling of and attending to birth taking place in the early modern period.” Since Boursier was supposed to be a good midwife, she took pains to represent herself as the antithesis of the literary depictions offered in Rabelais’s text and the wider literary industry that “constantly parodied and maligned [midwives] in print.”

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49 See especially Fissell’s chapters “Reforming the Body” (14-52) and “The Womb Goes Bad” (53-89).
51 Read, 58.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
of Boursier fighting back against the carnivalesque representations of midwives\textsuperscript{54} appears again in Bridgette Sheridan’s essay “Whither Childbearing: Gender, Status, and the Professionalization of Medicine in Early Modern France,” in which she argues that Boursier’s fall from grace following Montpensier’s death in childbirth was a decisive moment in the break away from female praxis and toward male theory. As popular favor shifted from Boursier to Guillemeau, the male physician wrote against Boursier to publicize and sensationalize the ways in which her negligence led to the death of the noblewoman in \textit{Remonstrance a Madame Bourcier, touchant son Apologie, contre la Rapport que les Medecins ont faict, de ce qui a cause la mort deplorable de MADAME} (1627).\textsuperscript{55}

When Montpensier died and Guillemeau joined the number of male physicians who were publishing tracts that called into question the nature of midwives generally, and Boursier’s abilities and virtue specifically, the royal midwife was cast down to the same level with the very grotesque and incompetent women from literature from whom she had tried to distance herself. Wendy Perkins catalogues some of the ways these prejudices work themselves through medical manuals published by French physicians in the chapter “Midwife and Medical Men” in her book, \textit{Midwifery and Medicine in Early Modern France: Louise Bourgeois}. For example, Ambroise Paré’s \textit{Deux Livres de chirurgie} (1573) refers insistently to “l’imprudence des matrones,” and Jacques Guillemeau (Charles’ father) blames the death of many laboring women on the obstinacy of midwives: “l’opiniastrete des parents et des Sages-femmes.” Even more aggressive

\textsuperscript{54} Like “grotesque,” the meaning of “carnivalesque” has been contested and revised over the years, but I use it primarily as Bakhtin does: to refer to representations that privilege the lower body and it associations over the higher body. I further explore the two terms later in this chapter.

was the 1587 pamphlet penned by Gervais de la Touche, “Gentilhomme Poictevin,” which claimed that all midwives were incompetent and ignorant in obstetrical matters and labeled them “executioners and murderers of innocent blood” as well as a “race of senseless beasts.” The implications of this vocabulary would not have been lost on the French people; Guillemeau and the others were able to pull upon the familiarity of carnivalesque and grotesque images—note especially the dehumanization of the midwives—to plant suspicions that Boursier had never been qualified enough to serve the women of the French court. This is the line of thought Charles Guillemeau turned to after Montpensier’s death: whereas Bourgeois had invoked all of the scientific and medical training claimed by male physicians in her Apologie (1627), Guillemeau turned her claim to masculine knowledge on its head in order to mock the midwife. He acknowledged that the original autopsy report, which claimed that a piece of the placenta had been retained and turned gangrenous, could indeed be inaccurate, but he suggested a list of other possible causes—“too much pressure on the uterus to extract the placenta, rough treatment throughout the delivery, or binding the abdomen too tightly after the birth”—all of which emphasize the likelihood that the midwife was to blame. If even the most highly regarded midwife could make one of many possible deadly mistakes, then the increasingly popular idea that midwives were all superstitious hacks who sought to usurp man’s ancient authority might hold some truth. Applying the language of grotesque realism with its attendant destabilized hierarchies to his competition was a savvy rhetorical move on Guillemeau’s part, and it sounded

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57 Sheridan, 256.
58 Ibid., 257.
a death knell for Bourgeois’s career, specifically, and the age of the highly regarded royal midwife, more generally.  

Carnivalesque and grotesque descriptions were deployed at specific cultural moments and in specific political contexts such as these to achieve certain ends. In this case, that end was affirming men as the appropriate caregivers and custodians of female bodies. As Fissell explains, “Writers put together versions of female reproductive bodies that contained claims about maleness and femaleness that seemed useful or appropriate or simply true at that particular moment.” Where Marie de Bourbon was concerned, Guillemeau constructed her body, deceased as it was, to cast aspersions on the living and working body of Louise Boursier and to publish and popularize the fatal negligence of women caring for women. Fissell elaborates that such a move was not uncommon: “Women’s bodies were sites of contest, places that people argued about and through which they tried to construct themselves as authoritative.” This point is especially important, as it acknowledges that the patriarchy responded to women’s illegibility by rewriting and revising the maternal body, all in an effort to control it. Since it could not be

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59 As Sheridan points out, records of Bourgeois’ life between the 1627 publication of Guillemeau’s Remonstrance and her death in 1636 are almost nonexistent (257). However, this is not to imply that the court no longer maintained royal midwives or that midwives in France never again attained any prestige at all following Bourgeois’ departure, only that the halcyon of midwifery ended with Bourgeois’ career. Over a century later, Madame Angélique Marguerite Le Boursier de Coudray rose to prominence, appointed by King Louis XV in 1759 to travel throughout France on a mission to educate the country on midwifery practices and obstetrical care. See Nina Gilbart, “Midwife to a Nation: Mme. du Coudray serves France,” The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe. Ed. Hilary Marland. London: Routledge, 1993.

60 While “the grotesque” and “the carnivalesque” are certainly related, they are not necessarily synonymous. Within this project, I use “the grotesque” to refer primarily to physical descriptions that, as previously mentioned, revel in bodily functions/fluids while I use “the carnivalesque” to refer to more philosophically charged representations that privilege the body over the mind, the active life over the contemplative one. Grotesque representations are often deployed at carnivalesque moments and in carnivalesque ways, but they are not innately invested in power dynamics. I find this division useful, although it is not always maintained by other scholars.

61 Fissell, 6.

read, it became a canvas upon which the dominant culture’s fears and anxieties were represented and negotiated.

Paster’s writing explains why specifically grotesque or carnivalesque language should aid in the construction of authority through revisions of the female body. When Paster takes up Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, she focuses on the idea that female bodies were understood as untamed, out of control, or wayward. Concepts like “the hysterization of women” and “the civilizing process” play upon the humoral (and therefore grotesque) bodies she analyzes. She writes, “When [women] were required to master their bodies for the sake of ‘the civilizing process,’ the various disciplinary regimes Foucault has seen as characteristic of emergent modernity, the bodies to be mastered were humoral bodies.” While Paster does not establish causality—she does not say that bodies needed mastering *because* they were humoral—she does suggest a connection between how we control ourselves and how we understand our physiology. In the Early Modern period, understanding bodies hinged in part on understanding humoral theory, which carried with it a distinct gender hierarchy. Thus, in *Microcosmographia* (1615), Helkiah Crooke writes, “For the matter of mans body, it is soft, pliable and temperate, readie to follow the Workeman in every thing, and to every purpose.” In choosing to criticize Boursier in the language associated with carnival, Guillemeau is simultaneously rewriting the female body to assert its need for civilization, its inferiority to male bodies, and its debt to masculine “workemen” like himself who can bring the wayward female body safely back in balance.

The terms “carnivalesque” and “grotesque” are both central to my project, and they both

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63 Paster, 7.  
require more explanation. Both of these terms have been defined in many ways, and the relationship between the two concepts has not always been clearly articulated. While the definition of carnivalesque is generally agreed upon, its function within literature is not nearly as settled. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that carnivalesque elements (an emphasis on the lower bodily functions, a spirit of excess and revelry, as well as destabilized hierarchies) are positive and subversive, and many scholars have since taken this as a given.\(^{65}\) David Bergeron summarizes this critical work in his essay “*Richard II* and Carnival Politics” and identifies Robert Weimann’s *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, Michael D. Bristol’s *Carnival and Theater*, and Peter Burke’s *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* as among the most influential works to support this argument.\(^{66}\) However, the conversation is now more nuanced than it once was, conceding that carnivalesque elements may be ideologically malleable than previously believed. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, “it actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative” because they can be either radical or conservative, neither, or both simultaneously.\(^{67}\) Furthermore, Jennifer C. Vaught challenges the “more restrictive, binary understandings [of the carnivalesque] as either authoritative suppressions of popular, rebellious energies by those at the top of the social hierarchy or as grassroots movements tied to social protest and liberation of the folk and


disempowered groups” and establishes a middle ground between radicalism and conservatism where compromise is possible.\textsuperscript{68} Along these same lines, Jonathon Haynes argues that the function of these elements depends upon the socio-economic status of society and not on the elements themselves: “the festive moment is essentially conservative in a strong and stable society, potentially evolutionary in an unstable or sclerotic one.”\textsuperscript{69} Thus, my argument that carnivalesque and grotesque representations of maternal bodies do not consistently function in the subversive way Bakhtin claims they ought to is part of a larger conversation about Carnival’s polysemous nature and its variable effects; Haynes’ point is particularly important for my work as it gestures towards the importance of interpreting these literary texts according to their contemporary culture and historical moment. While Haynes focuses on the relative stability of society, I focus on the intellectual and political volatility within the medical and scientific communities and how changes in these spheres manifested in the literature of the day.

While the political valences of “the carnivalesque” have been revised to depend more upon context and intention, the definition and symbolic meaning of “the grotesque” still provoke some disagreement. From the origin of the grotesque to its constitution and function, everything seems up for debate, and the answers are almost always at odds. For example, the first two scholars who crafted theories of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser and Bakhtin, created two divergent and largely irreconcilable accounts—two versions of the grotesque that every subsequent critic has had to address. In \textit{The Grotesque in Art and Literature}, Kayser focuses his


definition on fusions of human and animal, or organic and inorganic, elements.\textsuperscript{70} He builds his theory on the premises that the grotesque is estranged from the “real” world. It is incomprehensible or inexplicable, absurd, and an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic. Furthermore, and in direct contrast to the theory Bakhtin would later develop, Kayser sees the experience of the grotesque as negative, alien, and threatening. Bakhtin’s definition, on the other hand, concerns itself less with fantastical figures and more with bodily orifices and exaggerations of bodily processes. Most importantly, Bakhtin sees the grotesque as essentially positive, eliciting the laughter of Carnival, which he describes as freeing, liberating, healing, and regenerative. Wilson Yates summarizes this view of the grotesque and highlights the positive characteristics Bakhtin describes: the grotesque body “turn[s] the hierarchically closed world upside down and provide[s] an experiment to participants of equality, democracy, and a sense of the social world and one’s full participation in it.”\textsuperscript{71} Yates describes the “leveling out” of value distinctions regarding class, age, gender, body, or status. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is one without private/public, good/bad, or repulsive/attractive elements; no part is better or worse than any other part because they are all ideally subsumed into the whole. Given that Kayser surveys art and literature from the Italian Renaissance through modern poetry and concludes that the grotesque is the ominous, uncanny, and unnatural amalgamation of animal and human and that Bakhtin defines the grotesque as an edifying exaggeration of the natural human body, it is not at all surprising that later critics have struggled to explain just what the grotesque

is. Although a few other theorists, particularly Ewa Kuryluk, have made important contributions to the study of grotesque imagery in art and literature. She revises Bakhtin’s and Kayser’s focus on anti-worlds—“a mental asylum, a theatre of stage, and a dream” for Bakhtin and “carnivalistic monstrosities” for Kayser—by considering an abundance of alternative, heretical, sacrilegious realms as additional, often ignored anti-worlds. One of the spaces Kuryluk identifies is femininity as opposed to masculinity, an idea that turns the female body into a carnivalesque world of its own. I adopt the language of Bakhtin’s definition because it is the most directly concerned with the natural human body, but Kayser’s and Kuryluk’s ideas of the carnivalesque as demonic and innately feminine also weave themselves throughout this dissertation. When I refer to a representation as grotesque, then, I am referring to its exaggeration or distortion of the natural body, its emphasis on orifices and permeable boundaries, its hypersexualization, or its effusiveness. The Early Modern texts that include such representations do so with a negativity that is more characteristic of Kayser and a focus that is more in line with Kuryluk, but the description itself Bakhtinian.

Pregnant bodies and the carnivalesque have a kind of natural alliance, a special affinity that emerges when a reader considers the language and literary scenes Bakhtin employs throughout his discussion. He describes the carnivalesque and grotesque realism as the privileging of the lower stratum (the life of the belly) over the higher stratum (the life of the mind) and explicitly associates the lower orders with women’s bodies and their reproductive potential. The degradation that goes along with grotesque realism starts off ungendered; it

73 The privileging of “the life of the mind” over “the life of the belly” was central to much of Western philosophy and Christian theology. Plato’s insistence that only internal, eternal truth matters and that the external, “real” world is to be treated as transitory later found expression in
relates, simply enough, to acts of defecation and copulation, activities that are both sexes have in common. However, as Bakhtin’s definition develops, exclusively female processes take over. He is not just concerned with defecation and copulation, after all, but with “conception, pregnancy, and birth.” He imagines grotesque realism as the womb itself, in fact: “Grotesque realism,” he writes, “knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb; it is always conceiving.”

The connection between the carnivalesque and the reproductive female body grows even stronger as Bakhtin goes on: the grotesque body “outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits,” as in pregnancy, and emphasizes “the apertures and convexities”—the open mouth, the genitals, the breasts, and the potbelly. Considering this definition, it is not surprising that many critics like Natalie Zemon Davis, Mary Russo, Gail Kern Paster, and Adrian Wilson discuss the cultural processes related to childbirth as grotesque and/or carnivalesque. However, the basis of the original connection and the ways and reasons this connection plays out in Early Modern literature have not, to my mind, been adequately explained.

Based on the contemporary understanding of female anatomy, the Early Modern connection between femininity and the carnivalesque/grotesque was a natural extension of thought, and to fully contextualize and encapsulate the ease with which this connection was made, I have turned to the phrase “carnival incarnate.” The root for both words comes from the Latin carne, meaning “flesh.” I am of course interested in the physical flesh of women and how that flesh is rendered verbal in literature, but I am also interested in the extent to which women were and were not considered merely flesh—when they were admitted or denied real subjectivity.

St. Augustine’s discussions of caritas versus cupiditas. Bakhtin rejects this hierarchy, and Battersby seeks to imagine a philosophy based on its inverse in The Phenomenal Woman.

74 Bakhtin, 21.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 26.
77 “carnival,” n. OED.
or personhood and the ways in which the shape and quality of their flesh affected the value of
said subjectivity. “Carnival incarnate” also suggests that women carried within their bodies the
very spirit of carnival and that they embodied all of the topsy-turvy instability and potential for
subversion associated with carnival. This, too, is supported in the Early Modern understanding of
anatomy. The male body was considered normative, and the female body was imagined, literally,
as an inversion of that norm; according to the Classical model of anatomy, the penis was turned
on its head and projected inward, becoming a vagina. In this way, women physically embody
carnivalesque tropes. Just as the political meaning of carnival is contested and largely dependent
upon context and intention, so too is the meaning of a woman’s body, especially when it is
treated as carnival incarnate. Sometimes writers chose to describe women in carnivalesque
language to process and affirm fundamentally conservative views; sometimes they chose the
same images and metaphors to challenge the status quo; sometimes they chose them precisely
because they could be interpreted as either conservative or radical or simultaneously both and
neither. The free play of signification provided by invoking Carnival could act as a shield, a
claim to plausible deniability in the face of potential backlash. My goal in writing this
dissertation is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of woman as carnival incarnate; to illustrate the
extent to which this was motivated by major cultural upheavals within the scientific, religious,
and political realms; and to highlight the reasons why this formulation was both rhetorically
effective and rhetorically unstable.
I: Overview of the Chapters

The sixteenth century was a time of tremendous upheaval; one need not argue that the Protestant Reformation profoundly changed life across Europe or that England’s first female monarchs unsettled the country’s political consciousness. These broader changes affected England’s image of the female reproductive body and caused English midwives to lose their status as respected members of their communities. However, in order to demonstrate the connection between the broader changes and those specifically centered on the female body, I must briefly document and explain the medical history leading up to the Renaissance and consider how these scientific ideas might have related to lived experiences as well as literary representations, a task I undertake in the second chapter. Large-scale changes to religion, politics, and science catalyzed smaller-scale changes in the social understanding of female bodies and the role midwives played within their communities, which in turn affected trends in the literature of the period, and so the sixteenth century represents a significant break away from the past in terms of understanding female anatomy and in terms of representing midwives and the reproductive bodies they attend. Medical tracts from Aristotle and Galen, as well as the obstetrical handbooks from Soranus, a Greek physician, laid the foundation for the European anatomical science through the Middle Ages and set the stage for the eventual conflict between midwives and male physicians. Two of the most influential medical manuscripts to deal with female bodies in the Middle Ages, *The Trotula* (c. twelfth century) and *De Secretis Mulierum* (c. late thirteenth-early fourteenth century), build upon this Classical foundation with a few small changes that foreshadow the major shifts in obstetrical writings and in the representation of maternal bodies that would come with the Renaissance.
This chapter ends with a consideration of how the printing press—which brought with it another tremendous cultural shift—affected obstetrical and gynecological knowledge. Monica Green78 and Helen King79 both suggest that the advent of print actually narrowed the public’s access to women’s knowledge by replacing a variety of manuscripts with more numerous, more readily available copies of the same few, core texts.80 In addition, Patricia Crawford affirms that the way sexual knowledge was transmitted shifted away from orally shared “women’s knowledge” to more textual forms.81 Together, these critics suggest that the printing press contributed to the devaluation of women’s understandings of and treatments for their own bodies in favor of printed texts, almost all of which were penned and published by men.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, where the previous chapter concludes, midwives were slowly being edged out of the medical profession, and women’s experiences with maternal bodies were being devalued at an accelerated rate due to the success of the printing press. Anatomical knowledge narrowed and stabilized, taking as its foundation the male voices that continued the trend started with The Trotula and De Secretis Mulierum; women’s knowledge about the female body—knowledge that had once been respected, recorded, and passed on from generation to generation—became fodder for satirical literature. The clearest, most sustained example of this trend in the sixteenth century can be found in The Gospelles of Dystaues, a 1507 translation of a French original and the focus of the third chapter. The French text has attracted

78 Monica Green has written many articles, chapters, and books on this subject. See especially “Traittié tout de mençonges’: The Secrés des dames, ‘Trotula,’ and Attitudes toward Women’s Medicine in Fourteenth- and Early-Fifteenth-Century France,” Christine de Pizan and
80 While printed materials tended to codify and stabilize reproductive knowledge, manuscripts were still created and circulated during this time, and they may have reflected a broader range of beliefs.
more scholarly attention than the English translation, but neither version is particularly well-known or oft-studied, despite the fact that both text engage with contemporary gender debates, religious rhetoric, and scientific developments. In my third chapter, I will analyze the representation of women, women’s bodies, and women’s knowledge in *The Gospelles* and connect the text to the ongoing conversations about the question of women, the status of midwives, the nascent religious panic surrounding witchcraft, and the textual authority of female, praxis-based knowledge. I will demonstrate the extent to which grotesque and carnivalesque language crept into this literary adaptation of the medical writings explored in the previous chapter. This language and the accompanying tropes were incorporated alongside authentic rural folklore and set within a satirical framework that depicted women, especially “wise women,” as bawdy, irreverent frauds.

The chapter begins with a discussion of midwifery’s longstanding association with superstition, an association which dates at least as far back as Soranus of Ephesus (first century CE), supported by Keith Thomas’s sustained treatment of the topic in *Religion and the Decline of Magic,* and concludes with a close-reading of several passages from Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger’s *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). This text, widely distributed and heralded as the de facto how-to guide for identifying and prosecuting witches, makes clear and explicit the demonizing trends Thomas identifies and lists the offenses and a series of anecdotes to illustrate the perniciousness of midwives and those who claim authority over the reproductive body: pernicious enough for the writers to assert unambiguously that midwives surpass all others in evil. However, despite the clarity and persistence with which late medieval and early renaissance

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texts connected midwifery and witchcraft, the reality of this connection in terms of the historical witch trials is unsettled. Some claim that many of the victims who lost their lives in the European witch hunt were merely practicing midwives and that burning them as witches contributed to the economic shift favoring male physicians, while others reject the idea that this connection had any bearing on real-life prosecutions. Ultimately, the historical reality of the midwife burning as a witch cannot be proven, but the prevalence of the rhetoric used to connect the two has very real implications for how women’s bodies and their attendants were imagined within the period.

Specifically, the midwife-witch serves within The Gospelles as something of a catch-all figure for women’s perceived shortcomings: she is bawdy, gossipy, promiscuous, superstitious, and manipulative, and because she is, so too are all women, and the sum of women’s knowledge therefore amounts to little more than a book of folly. The English work begins with an original introduction written by translator Henry Watson:

For to begyn than this werke it is clerely knowen to all good and true catholyke crysten men to the ende that there sholde be perpe-tuall memory of the holy wordes and vertu-ous operacyons of our redemptoure Ihesu cryst / and of his holy apostles and sayntes that there we-re foure rightwysmen electe amongeth them that were replete with vertue & verite for to make the holy mysteryes the whiche ben named by the scriptures the gospelles / by which the true and holy fayth catholyke is enlumyned and shall be unto the ende of the worlde. Assemble than for to verefye & put forth the wordes and auctorytees of the aun-cyent women. To the ende also that they shold not be lost / nor in such wyse banysshed but that the memory sholde remayne fresshe amonge the women of this present tyme / so there hath ben founde syxe matrons wyse & pru-dent for to recite & rede the sayd gospels of the dystaves in the maner the whiche hereafter shall be declared.84

This introduction invokes the composition of the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as a counterpart to the gospels that will follow, situating the four “wisemen” alongside the six female “doctouresses” who provide the substance of The Gospelles and argue that both gospels

84 The Gospelles of Distaues. London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1507. San Marino: Huntingdon Library, 13067. STC 12091. 3L.
are worthy of recording and preserving for all of time. However, the substance of the female gospels undermines the original claim: what follows is not holy wisdom but a series of bawdy jokes and superstitions. The author does not actually align women’s knowledge with Biblical knowledge, but rather adopts the language of theology to mock and criticize women’s work. Whereas men are serious authorities and entrusted with God’s Word, women are silly, raucous, and naughty gossips, and their collective wisdom is belittled and, in its treatment as an anti-Gospel, demonized. Thus, *The Gospelles of Distaves* engages in several important and ongoing debates about the nature of women, including not only the composition and function of their bodies, persistently imagined as carnivalesque, but also their supposed virtues and vices, their authority (both textual and religious), and their purported affinity for heresy.

The fourth chapter looks at two different types of Renaissance drama: city comedies and tragedies. City comedies are notoriously coarse, bawdy pieces of literature, and they engage with the question of female bodies in a way that is fairly consistent with the satire of the previous chapter. However, I argue that although the engagement with bodily ideology remains unchanged, the method of engagement undergoes a slight but important transformation. Whereas satirical street literature, like *The Gospelles*, usually stops short of describing the birthing chamber, Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* actually stages it, turning the closed and private gynocentric space into a spectacle fit for a live audience. In indulging this voyeuristic urge, Middleton rejects the relatively staid visual representations popularized by woodcuts in favor of dramatizing the few literary sources that criticized the ritual lying-in of post-partum women as excessive and sumptuous. Although there were far fewer texts to pull from for this representation, Middleton plays upon the spectacle of gossips and bawds as endlessly incontinent. He puts on a show by staging the worst possible representation of what his culture
imagined.

This chapter is organized according to the primary difference between the two dramatic genres I discuss: city comedies emphasize the pronounced corporeality of pregnant women while tragedies tend to treat the maternal body more obliquely, more like a specter than a spectacle. The second part of my fourth chapter will explore the effects of grotesque realism and carnivalesque imagery once the comedic potential of these bodies has been removed, or at least weakened. What happens when the laughter stops, when leaky women become threatening rather than humorous? These “higher” forms of literature deal with this anxiety by turning to metaphors and abstractions. The images employed retain their carnivalesque nature, but they become less embodied. They are reported onstage, as in *The Winter’s Tale* (c. 1623); discussed as hypothetical monstrosities, as in *Macbeth* (c. 1599-1606); or acted out in dehumanized forms, as in *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1607). I use the Nurse’s remembrance of breastfeeding Juliet as a bridge between the previous section and this one; the Nurse is a famously comedic figure, and her lines provide what little bit of humor functions within *Romeo and Juliet*. This contrasts with Lady Macbeth’s speech, in which she too recalls a past breastfeeding relationship, this time with a distinctly different tone. Once I have unpacked this reference to breastfeeding and what it means for setting up Lady Macbeth’s monstrosity, I turn to yet another figuration of lactation: Cleopatra and her suckling asp in *Antony and Cleopatra*. These disembodied uses of maternity fit within Bakhtin’s definition of grotesque realism and his view on the carnivalesque conversion of “the high” to “the low.” According to Bakhtin, this conversion was accomplished primarily through metaphors of pregnancy and birth; the processes of the lower body, specifically gendered female, are necessary for making spiritual or philosophical thoughts more legible, more accessible. My fourth chapter connects the specter of maternity that these metaphors represent
with the female characters who lay claim to more masculine—and therefore more threatening—forms of power.

My final chapter focuses on the loftiest of literature: the epic. Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) both reject the contemporary scientific progress of their culture and choose to rely on the Galenic and Aristotelian understanding of the female body and reproduction. Both authors incorporate details, metaphors, and images that invoke outdated knowledge. This suggests that the one sex model and the essentially carnivalesque understanding of women’s bodies remained evocative and influential well after its legitimacy was rejected or replaced by more accurate understandings of anatomy. For *The Faerie Queene*, I continue the discussion of breastfeeding mothers from the previous chapter and explore the differences between Errour’s appearance as a monstrous mother and Charissa’s supreme, but every bit as sensationalized and fictionalized, goodness. I then look at Duessa’s forms of embodiment within the text and highlight the difference between her “being” and “seeming,” and the connect the anxieties about “women’s secrets” to her dramatic unmasking. The section on *The Faerie Queene* will end with Britomart and her constantly delayed, intensely abstracted motherhood.

Once I have dissected a few of Spenser’s maternal bodies, I shift my attention to *Paradise Lost*. Like *The Faerie Queene*, the later epic features a monstrous mother (Sin) and a mother whose children are prophesied but suspended in potentiality/inevitability throughout the epic’s duration (Eve). *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* complete the process of abstraction, disembodiment, and dehumanization I have traced through the city comedies and tragedies by using maternal images to describe decidedly nonhuman or incorporeal figures: from Errour’s monstrous whelps and Duessa’s foul dugs in *The Faerie Queene* to Sin’s perpetually open womb.
and Death’s conception in *Paradise Lost*, distortions of maternity appear to intensify, define, or shape a female character’s development and the audience’s responses to her.

I conclude this dissertation by turning toward our modern political landscape. Although the contemporary effects of Early Modern grotesque representations of maternity are elusive, I believe we can understand some of the possibilities by looking at modern debates surrounding reproductive rights and the effects misinformation are having now. Arguably, one of the most notorious sound bytes from the 2012 elections came from then-representative Todd Akin, who claimed that rape was no justification for abortion because pregnancy rarely results from nonconsensual sex. He said, “If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.” While Akin received plenty of negative press following this statement, he is not, by any means, the only one to make such baseless arguments. In 1988, Representative Stephen Freind claimed that women secrete a spermicidal-like substance following traumatic sexual encounters; in 1995, Representative Henry Aldridge argued that women who are truly raped shut down: “their juices don’t flow, the body functions don’t work, and they don’t get pregnant.” I use these examples, and many others like them, to demonstrate the extent to which we are still immersed in the rhetoric of grotesque femininity.
CHAPTER 2

WHAT EVERYONE “KNEW” ABOUT THE FEMALE BODY: WOMEN’S SECRETS FROM THE CLASSICAL PERIOD TO THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Despite the fact that the medical model of the Classical world remained more or less consistent throughout the Middle Ages, the ways in which this model related to women and the forms of dissemination the model relied upon to continue from generation to generation changed over time, gradually becoming more negative and hostile to the female body itself and to female ways of knowing that body. This chapter focuses on the development of obstetrical knowledge, the manner in which those who possessed obstetrical knowledge were discussed from Aristotle until the early years of the printing age, and on the interactions between male physicians and female midwives, between science and folklore, between theory and praxis. As a rule, the tone of the texts I discuss gradually shifts from relatively unbiased medical tracts to politically charged antifeminist propaganda, with a few generically and tonally inconsistent works appearing in the Middle Ages.

I: Classical Anatomy and Sowing the Seeds of Suspicion

Aristotle’s writings enjoyed a renewed period of influence during the twelfth century when they were rediscovered and added to the curricula at the University of Paris, an influence
which lasted through the Renaissance.¹ In *The Generation of Animals*, Aristotle develops several ideas that would form the foundation of anatomy for over a thousand years and serve as justification for the established gender hierarchy, primarily by treating the male body as the natural and perfect baseline of both anatomy and human experience.² In addition, he argued that the female body contained the “prime matter” of procreation but that a man was necessary to provide the active element, the “moving agency” of semen.³ Women were thus equated with matter and presented as containers for conception and as “infertile males,” an equation which persisted through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance.⁴ For example, Lollards, who protested the intense Marian devotions of the Catholic church, often referred to the Virgin Mary as a “sack,” “a saffron bag,” or—most colorfully—a “pudding when the meat was taken out.”⁵ All of these epithets suggest an essentially Aristotelian approach to procreation in which the woman serves as a vessel for the man’s essence or spirit; even the Mother of God is not immune to this formulation or the attending implication that her role is passive and secondary. The analogy between Mary and a saffron bag is especially instructive. While saffron is valuable, the bag in which it was stored is not and takes on no future worth by having at one time stored the most luxurious and expensive spice, which is an important fact for the Lollards’ view of Mary. According to the Aristotelian model of pregnancy, carrying the Messiah would no more affect

³ Ibid., 39.
⁴ Ibid., 40.
⁵ Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 25. Fissell points out that the image of the Virgin Mary as an empty saffron bag must have had a particularly wide circulation since it was officially recognized and banned as heretical in 1536.
Mary’s post-partum worth than storing saffron affects a sack’s value once it has been emptied, and Lollards and later Protestants latched on to this fact in their rejection of Marian devotion, and created some scandalous analogies in the process.

Another facet to Aristotle’s argument about the male and female roles in procreation concerns the nature of menstrual fluid. Aristotle believed that menstrual blood was the female equivalent of semen, only impure or not “fully concocted” due to women’s insufficient heat and fully devoid of the spirit or soul conveyed through semen. This belief led to a sharply hierarchical formation of sexual difference that posited women with their impure secretions as deformed men:

Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e. it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul.⁶

Menstruation and menstrual blood thus have a persistent history as physical signs of women’s impurity and inferiority, confirmed throughout time by Judaic law, Classical physiology, and Christian theology. Aristotle was not by any means the first to argue that the blood was unclean, but he was the first to write about its properties as they related to male semen and the process of procreation and to make explicit that women menstruate because they are anatomically inferior to men.

Aristotle’s theories of anatomy and Herophilus of Alexandria’s dissection notes from the third century BCE combined to provide Galen of Pergamum with the material and evidence necessary to prompt a lifetime of anatomical inquiry nearly four centuries later. In Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, Thomas Laqueur describes Galen as “the most

⁶ Peck, 737a.
influential anatomist in the western tradition” and devotes his book to explaining the persistent, arguably pernicious, effects of Galen’s model of anatomy, what Laqueur calls the “one-sex model.” Although many scholars have since questioned the extent to which the one-sex model dominated the Western understanding of anatomy as exclusively as Laqueur claims—even banding together to publish a collection of essays in *The One-Sex Body on Trial*—the emphasis placed on Galen’s legacy is valid. His model may not have been the only model, but no one can deny that its influence was profound, widespread, and enduring.

In brief, Galen’s one-sex model postulates that there is but one anatomical form and that all of the organs and structures associated with a man’s reproductive system exist inside a woman, only inverted. The physician believed that this construction was obvious, something anyone with a logical mind could comprehend.

Think first, please, of the man’s [external and internal genitalia] turned in and extending inward between the rectum and the bladder. If this should happen, the scrotum would necessarily take the place of the uterus with the testes lying outside, next to it on either side. Think too, please, of… the uterus turned outward and projecting. Would not the testes [ovaries] then necessarily be inside it? Would it not contain them like a scrotum? Would not the neck [the cervix and vagina], hitherto concealed inside the perineum but now pendant, be made into the male member? 

This explanation of women’s anatomy as identical to men’s only turned inward shows up in countless scientific drawings from the Early Modern period, which demonstrates just how long Galen’s explanation endured and how far it spread. From Italy to Germany to England, materials pertaining to reproductive bodies presented female anatomy as nearly identical to male anatomy.

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9 Qtd. in Laqueur, 25-6.
The images below demonstrate this clearly. The first set of images, from George Bartisch’s 1575 text *Kunstbuche*, demonstrate most clearly what Galen’s model would look like if we could see a physical representation, as these illustrations look unmistakably like a penis, a scrotum, and testicles as internal organs, just as Galen’s theory describes. Indeed, the Galenic model of anatomy that appears in medical texts from across Europe into the 17th century. Figure 2, taken from the Italian anatomist Andreas Vesalius’s *De Humani Corporis Fabrica (On the Fabric of the Human Body)*, demonstrates how the same model results in a closer and more detailed representation of the vagina as nearly identical to the penis. The figure used in Vesalius’ 1543 text reappears, nearly unchanged, in the English translation of, arguably, the most influential gynecological tract published in the 16th century: Eucharius Rösslin’s *Der Swangern Frauwen und Hebammen Rosegarten (Rosegarden for Pregnant Women and Midwives)*. Rösslin’s book

![Figure 2.1: Georg Bartisch's Kunstbuche (1575).](image-url)
was an immediate and widespread success, and it defined female anatomy and female roles in conception in terms that were essentially consistent with Aristotle and Galen. As Monica Green

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 2.2: Andreas Vesalius' *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543).**

summarizes,

Few medical authors can unambiguously claim to have written one of the most important works in their field: most important not simply in one language but in half a dozen, and not simply for a few years but for over a century and a half. [The text] was first published in Strasbourg and Hagenau in 1513, went through at least sixteen editions in its original form, was revised into three different German versions (each of which went through multiple printings), and was translated into

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Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, Italian, Latin, and Spanish, with almost all of these translations then going through their own multiple editions.\textsuperscript{11}

As far as the English version of Rösslin’s work goes, Thomas Raynalde’s translation—entitled \textit{The Birth of Mankind}—was in print from its original 1540 publication until 1654.\textsuperscript{12} However, as Elaine Hobby amply documents in her critical edition of the 1560 printing, Raynalde’s translation was not entirely faithful to Rösslin’s original. The trappings of Galenic anatomy still underpin \textit{The Birth of Mankind}, as the illustrations demonstrate, but the changes made between the original 1513 document and the 1540 English translation highlight the extent to which received ideas concerning reproductive bodies were destabilized throughout the sixteenth century. Women were still represented as colder and less perfect males, humoral theory (also a fundamental aspect of Galen’s anatomy) was still medically influential, and menstruation was still interpreted as proof of women’s physiological inferiority, and all of these beliefs came from the Classical period.

Although there were many other physicians whose work influenced the understanding of female bodies throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the final figure from this period on whom I focus is Soranus of Ephesus. Little is known about Soranus’s life except that he lived during the first century CE and that he likely studied in Alexandria. Best estimates suggest that he wrote about 20 tracts and treatises on various forms of medicine, covering everything from ophthalmology to surgery, from medical history to pharmacology. However, the most enduring of his works is \textit{On Gynaecology}, for which Soranus became known as “the greatest obstetrician

of antiquity”\textsuperscript{13} and which was translated and cited regularly until the late seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the fact that midwives were already functioning well within Roman society, taking responsibility for women’s health as well as the general care of their communities, and despite the fact that several had gained lasting recognition as midwives and physicians, Soranus was the first to publish a complete handbook for these women, thus codifying their practice and providing a means to train new midwives—in theory if not in practice, as the difference between medical learning and medical experience would continue causing tensions and violence well throughout the early modern period.

Soranus contributed several important innovations to the practice of midwifery, some more positive than others, and he is the first to include his mistrust of midwives within his medical writings. In terms of positive contributions, he designed and popularized the first birthing chair, and he developed a nonsurgical procedure that repositioned a transverse fetus and thus dramatically improved birthing outcomes for both mother and child. He also created an assessment of newborn health that resembles today’s Apgar score with one major difference: Soranus wrote that the assessment should be carried out so the midwife might “recognize the newborn that is worth rearing.”\textsuperscript{15} However, many of Soranus’s contributions caused more trouble than they did good. The seeds of conflict between midwife and physician can be traced back at least as far as his description of the ideal midwife. According to Soranus,

\begin{quote}
a midwife must be able to read and write; she must have a thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of obstetrics and she must be experienced in all branches of medicine as to give dietetic as well as surgical and pharmacological prescriptions. Moreover, Soranus advises that the midwife’s nails should be trimmed and rounded ‘so that they will not wound the organs.’ She must be
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Laqueur, 51.
\textsuperscript{15} Qtd. in Karamanou et al, 227.
discreet as she often trusted family secrets and most importantly free of superstitions “the midwife should be no believer in spirits”. He also states that the ideal midwife should not be greedy for money and “to give an abortive greedily for payment”.16

Midwives were to be literate, educated, well-groomed, trustworthy, practical, and unmoved by monetary gain. The description sounds ideal, but as Valerie French suggests, it also highlights the fact that many practicing midwives were, in Soranus’s eyes, “simply unfit for their work.”17

To understand the extent to which the above description functions as criticism rather than praise, one must understand the nature of obstetrics at the time. In “Midwives and Maternity Care in the Roman World,” French analyzes the scant bits of evidence from Classical Rome to conclude that the state of obstetric care and the status of midwives were dependent upon region, with the East holding the profession in high enough regard for midwives to seek and attain formal training, compose gynecological tracts, and inform the work of male physicians. French’s image of the West, however, suggests a different story; in the thousands of funeral epitaphs she analyzed, only sixteen describe the commemorated as a midwife.18 French acknowledges in a footnote that this bit of evidence cannot reliably tell us how many women were practicing obstetrical care, but I believe it can tell us a good deal about how the profession was seen and how the midwives were regarded, especially when combined with the class standing and economic realities of the sixteen women labeled as midwives. Nine of the epitaphs come from the columbaria of the great family houses of Rome or are otherwise connected to the familia Caesaris. One of the midwives apparently died a slave, but the others seem to be freed women or

16 Ibid.
18 French defends the use of funeral epitaphs as valid historical evidence on the grounds that the epitaphs are one of precious few records that reach beyond the nobility. She acknowledges that the epitaphs do not reflect the entire story, but they are nonetheless valuable.
the daughters of freed women. According to French, this evidence suggests that “midwifery was not a profession to which freeborn women of families that had enjoyed free status for several generations were attracted; thus, it seems likely that most midwives were of servile origin.” The midwives’ names support this argument, as well: “Of the thirteen inscriptions in which the full name of the midwife is still extant, eight have Greek names; the Latinate names of the others—Secunda, Imerita, Hilara, Veneria—are also associated with slaves.”¹⁹

In this context, Soranus’s ideal midwife seems practical only for the eastern, more Hellenized portion of Rome and, given the cost of these midwives’ services, only attainable for those with abundant resources and established house connections. Those without the means relied on either female family members or sagae, local wise women. Thus, for the majority of women living in Rome, the role of midwife was fulfilled by sisters, cousins, neighbors, and friends, women who likely could not read tracts concerning proper obstetrical care, much less those regarding dietetics and pharmacology, even if these guides had been accessible. Even for the women who could afford a “real” midwife, the chances she would be as well-educated, fastidious, and altruistic as Soranus describes were slim, especially given the servile origins and modest means of the western midwives. In addition, Soranus’s warning against superstition likely disqualifies the sagae, as well as the experienced though untrained attendants and many of the recognized midwives from the ranks of acceptable care providers, as the folk knowledge passed on from generation to generation that formed the basis of these women’s obstetrical education was almost always treated as superstition. For example, when Soranus writes about tending to the newborn’s umbilical cord, he specifically warns against using the tools which would be handy at most births and insists that only a strong woolen thread should be used to

¹⁹ French, np.
sever the cord. A shard of glass, a potsherd, a reed, linen thread—everything but thick woolen thread is superstition, a single-minded insistence on wool which itself smacks of superstition and a pronounced sense of superiority.

The realities of maternal care in the Roman world coupled Soranus’s extraordinarily narrow definition of the proper midwife suggests to me that there is a good deal of latent regionalism, racism, and classism in the physician’s treatment of midwives. These prejudices against midwives and wise women are as enduring a legacy as his medical knowledge when we consider the Early Modern landscape of maternity and maternal care. The rhetoric Soranus employs extends through the ages, coloring medieval representations of and discussions surrounding midwifery and culminating in the witch hunts of Renaissance Europe. It is no coincidence, after all, that Soranus warns explicitly against superstitious women as caregivers, as contemporary medicine was often more symbolic than scientific. During the Middle Ages, the metaphorical and spiritual aspects of early medicine gained both traction and prominence when a vogue for folklore and so-called “women’s knowledge” led to the creation of several important manuscripts, including The Trotula and Secretis de Mulierum, to which we now turn.

II: Maternal Medicine in the Middle Ages: Folklore and Misogyny

The medical knowledge established in the Greco-Roman era reigned throughout the Middle Ages, with the works of Hippocrates, Galen, and Soranus forming the basis of anatomy well into the Renaissance. While there were certainly disagreements and scholastic disputations, the main medieval development centered upon the conflict between theoretical and applied knowledge, a division that manifested in the proliferation of manuscript folklore collections.
Although compendiums of gynecological medicine were not rare during the period, two gained status as particularly popular and influential: *The Trotula* and *Secretis de Mulierum*. The tenor of the two collections is vastly different, with the first presenting itself (rhetorically if not truthfully) as the work of a renowned female physician from Salerno and the second misrepresenting scholastic and Classical traditions to malign the female body. However, the two share a focus on gynecological folklore and hinge upon the division, and in some cases conflict, between theoretical and empirical knowledge. These characteristics combined with the texts’ enduring, widespread prominence make them centrally important for understanding the development of Early Modern women’s medicine and the emerging conflict between trained physician and experienced layperson.

The earlier of the two texts, *The Trotula*, comes from twelfth-century Salerno, an Italian city known throughout Europe and the growing international marketplace as the center of medical learning. In the introduction of her translation, Monica Green describes the city as an “entrepôt of Mediterranean cultures,” a place where the established Classical knowledge continued alongside and mingled with “new” ideas from recently translated Arabic writings.\(^{20}\) The infusion of unfamiliar philosophical, scientific, medical, and literary ideas reinvigorated intellectual inquiry, leading to what some have called “the twelfth-century Renaissance,” though Green correctly points out that this is a misnomer since the production of new hybrid Latin/Arabic texts actually started the century before.\(^{21}\) *The Trotula*, an ensemble of separate texts bound together and presented as the works of the renowned and mysterious female physician, Trota, was one of the most influential medical texts produced during this time. Not


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 2.
much is known about Trota’s person, background, or training, but she is the only Salernitan woman healer whose name is attached to any extant medical writings, and the reality or nature of her involvement with this particular collection is similarly unknown. Although many medical texts from the period and area reference the medical skill of Salernitan women in general, their skill seems to have been more empirical than scholarly. There are no references to the writings or theories of any women besides the shadowy Trota, whose authority and practices are referenced alongside the leading male physicians’ of the day in several manuscripts.  

Green acknowledges that the authorship of the *The Trotula* ensemble as it stands now is unknown and likely unknowable, but “it is in no way inappropriate to consider [Trota] the text’s principal source” for she is responsible for many of the therapies recorded in one section of the collection, *Treatments for Women.*  

Green thus posits Trota’s role in the composition of *The Trotula* as one of underlying authority rather than one of traditionally defined authorship.  

*The Trotula* is divided in to three distinct parts: *Conditions of Women, Treatments for Women,* and *Women’s Cosmetics.* Of the three, I am most interested in *Treatments for Women,* as it is the text most closely associated with Trota herself and with the wider community of Salernitan women lay healers. This portion of the text speaks with a collective “we” and favors a more practical approach to gynecological treatments rather than a learned discourse on diagnostics (as in *Conditions*). In her analysis of the two sections’ tones and sources, Green claims that *Treatments* likely comes from a “more local, perhaps marginally literate” source, such as experienced women without formal training as physicians.  

Comparing the introductions of the two sections demonstrates the distance between them.

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22 Ibid., 49.
23 Ibid., 50-1.
24 Ibid., 3.
Conditions, for example, opens up with a theological explanation of the nature and divinely-ordained function of male and female bodies:

When God the creator of the universe in the first establishment of the world differentiated the individual natures of things each according to its kind, He endowed human nature above all other things with a singular dignity, giving to it above the condition of all other animals freedom of reason and intellect. And wishing to sustain its generation in perpetuity, He created the male and the female with provident, dispensing deliberation, laying out in the separate sexes the foundation for the propagation of future offspring.25

This introduction, with its simultaneous emphasis on theology and metaphysics, places the section squarely within the bounds of the established, learned, scholastic, and exclusively male discourse community. The intellectual context within which the section was written becomes even clearer as the introduction goes on, invoking Aristotelian and Galenic theories of humoral difference and, ultimately, of the natural and right anatomical hierarchy God established between the sexes, with female bodies represented as the weaker, passive sex:

And so that from them there might emerge fertile offspring, [He] endowed their complexions with a certain pleasing commixtion, constituting the nature of the male hot and dry. But lest the male overflow with either one of these qualities, He wished by the opposing frigidity and humidity of the woman to rein him in from too much excess, so that the stronger qualities, that is the heat and the dryness, should rule the man, who is the stronger and more worthy person, while the weaker ones, that is to say the coldness and humidity, should rule the weaker [person], that is the woman. And [God did this] so that by his stronger quality the male might pour out his duty in the woman just as seed is sown in its designated field, and so that the woman by her weaker quality, as if made subject to the function of the man, might receive the seed poured forth in the lap of Nature. (71)

By combining God’s absolute authority, Nature’s explicit design, and classical theories of medicine, Conditions successfully places itself at the center of contemporary scientific knowledge. It reconciles three of the period’s most dominant discourses: the Christian religion,

25 Ibid., 71.
Greco-Roman philosophy, and Arabic metaphysics. Is it any wonder the texts’ modern editor claims that *The Trotula* ensemble “render[ed] [its] early medieval predecessors virtually obsolete within a century of [its] creation”? The first text demonstrates a keen awareness of how *auctoritas* functions and skillfully deploys relevant discourses to validate its existence as a complete gynecological handbook, while the second text (*Treatments*) builds upon this male-centric authority to offer practical, accessible, and reliable remedies from the Salernitan empiricists: lay women.

The change of tone and style between the two texts is immediately striking. *Treatments* foregoes the consciously philosophical invocation of divine providence and immediately presents a practical preliminary test that will determine whether an ailing woman has a hot or cold composition, which would help the healer determine what further treatments might be beneficial.

In order that we might make a concise summary of the treatment of women, it ought to be noted that certain women are hot, while some are cold. In order to determine which, one should perform this test. We anoint a piece of lint with oil of pennyroyal or laurel or another hot oil, and we insert a piece of it the size of the little finger into the vagina at night when she goes to bed, and it should be tied around the thighs with a strong string. And if it is drawn inside, this is an indication to us that she labors from frigidity. If, however, it is expelled, we know that she labors from heat.

There is no preliminary, formal disputation to introduce this text; rather, the narrating “we” immediately asserts itself and pushes forward with no apparent concern for the elevated discourses of *Conditions*. As Green writes, the fact that these two texts coexist within the same manuscript suggests an unusual “willingness…to take seriously the empirical practices and knowledge of local women.” Because both of the texts are anonymous, it is impossible to say

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26 Ibid., 51.
27 Ibid., 117.
28 Ibid., 14.
anything about the authors’ identities or sex with certainty; however, the differences between the two sections suggests to Green a closer alliance between *Treatments* and women’s knowledge, and I am persuaded to agree with this conclusion. We can deduce from the language and focus of the first text, *Conditions*, that the author or authors demonstrate a pronounced concern for aspects of discourse that are traditionally associated with male voices, while the author of the second text is more focused on clearly and quickly explaining the relevant treatments without regard to theology, philosophy, style, or formality. Rather than speculate about physiological or anatomical causes of disease, *Treatments* introduces many subsections with a simple formula that ignores medical philosophy in favor of practical experience: “Sometimes there are women who….”

29 The implication is that it doesn’t matter why some women experience certain problems, so long as the healer knows that they do and how to treat them.

The texts also deal with different types of ailments. *Conditions* describes the symptoms and signs of common complaints, many related to irregular menstruation and the dangers of uterine movement, a condition which Galen and Soranus had both rejected as anatomically impossible but which continued in popular imagination despite the physicians’ opinions. 30 *Treatments*, however, is comprised of brief descriptions of the problems many women face and pragmatic solutions for issues related to topics as varied as sunburns and freckles, lice, excessive menstruation, infertility, dysentery. For my present purposes, I am most interested in the implications of two sections within this “less bookish” text: those that relate to constricting the vagina and those that relate to ending amenorrhea. While the more formal *Conditions* includes a section regarding amenorrhea, the language, tone, and solutions of the section is distinctly different from its counterpart in *Treatments*, as we will see, and it does not touch upon the need

29 Ibid., 37.
30 Ibid., 23.
or desire for constrictives at all. This too supports Green’s supposition that Treatments is more closely aligned with women healers, women’s concerns, and women’s knowledge, as the stated intention of the section is to make women appear virginal and deceive men.31 For the most part, the suggestions are herbal or mineral in nature and involve soaking a cloth in pennyroyal, holm oak, natron, rainwater, or other similar substances before inserting it into the vagina. All of these treatments are treated as morally neutral; however, the passage takes a turn with the fourth remedy: “Likewise, there are some dirty and corrupt prostitutes who desire to seem to be more than virgins and they make a constrictive for this purpose, but they are ill counseled, for they render themselves bloody and they wound the penis of the man. They take powdered natron [a mineral salt] and place it in the vagina.”32 The authors do not originally condemn the idea of constricting vaginas to make women who are not virginal seem that way, and they start this particular section with “likewise” instead of “however,” so we can assume they saw some continuity between the first remedies and what these “dirty and corrupt prostitutes” do. The differences are implied: prostitutes might fake virginity for purely economic purposes, they desire to surpass natural virginity (“more than virgins”), they do so without proper counsel, and they injure rather than merely deceive the men they engage in intercourse. Although natron is mentioned in a previous remedy, it is ground and dissolved in water in that case; the implication here is that prostitutes take natron and put it in their vaginas without properly preparing it, thus causing themselves and their customers bloody genital abrasions.

The final remedy suggested under “A Good Constrictive” actually says nothing of tightening the vaginal canal but focuses solely on fooling a man into thinking his newlywed wife was virginal by spilling blood: “What is better is if the following is done one night before she is

31 Ibid., 103-4.
32 Ibid., 104.
married: let her place leeches in the vagina (but take care that they do not go in too far) so that blood comes out and is converted into a little clot. And thus the man will be deceived by the effusion of blood.”

Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the symbolic importance of this post-consummation virgin’s blood and the status afforded to a “bleeding bride” warranted a bit of deception and trickery, even to the point of planting leeches inside the vaginal walls. An underlying economic motive can be detected here, as well, and the language N. M. Heckel employs throughout *Sex, Society, and Medieval Women* illustrates this point. Virginity was regarded as both “spendable earthly coinage” and “ethereal heavenly treasure,” and “virginity’s monetary importance” drove the men who bartered in female bodies to develop various chastity tests to ensure the quality of their product.

Virginity is frequently treated in economic terms because it was imagined as a vendible and supposedly testable virtue, so being able to fake it convincingly had its appeal. As Karen Harris and Lori Caskey-Sigety write, “virginity was good (and a type of goods) until it was parlayed into an ideal marriage.” Thus, faking virginity was not just a matter of saving face or protecting the family name, though that was certainly at stake as well; a virgin’s blood had real monetary value, and a woman’s failure to bleed upon consummation could and sometimes did nullify marriage contracts. In addition, the practice of

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33 Ibid., 104.
36 The presence of blood upon consummation was an unreliable sign of virginity, as even women who were truly virginal did not always bleed for one reason or another. Some women are born without hymens, born with incomplete hymens, or born with thin and fragile hymens. Other women might rupture or break the hymen early through strenuous physical activity unrelated to sex. Nonetheless, a 2011 study by Monica Christianson and Carola Eriksson indicates that the hymen and its ability to signal virginity continues to be misunderstood, even among midwives.
displaying a bloodied sheet as proof of a newlywed bride’s virginity has been well-documented and amply explored by historians. The practice is often traced back as far as the Old Testament, to Deuteronomy 22:17: “And, lo, he hath given occasions of speech against her, saying, I found not thy daughter a maid; and yet these are the tokens of my daughter’s virginity. And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city.” Although Ariane Balizet argues against the prevalence of this practice in post-Reformation England, the ritual persisted in the public imagination for hundreds of years. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the period on which Balizet focuses in Blood and Home in Early Modern Drama, the practice of displaying a bloodied sheet as proof of a newlywed bride’s purity was treated as essentially foreign and barbaric, a public ritual aligned with Catholic idolatry, but the The Trotula predates Balizet’s focus considerably, and the looming threat of public humiliation and a broken marriage contract could explain the emphasis on faking the blood of a broken hymen. In some ways, whether or not the ritual was ever widely practiced in Europe is largely irrelevant, as Balizet acknowledges, because the idea of bloody sheets as emblems of womanly virtue persisted with such prevalence. As she writes, the image was “uncannily representative of English and Christian social prerogatives” regarding female bodies, virginity, and domesticity.37

Another primary concern for the author or authors of Treatments was ending amenorrhea, or provoking the menses. As I mentioned above, both Conditions and Treatments provide


suggestions for calling forth menstrual blood, but the way in which this ailment are handled varies dramatically between the two sections. In *Conditions*, for example, amenorrhea is most often mentioned with other ailments: pain, emaciation, headache, loss of appetite, and constipation, for example.\(^{38}\) Herbal remedies are suggested according to the secondary complaint and range from the everyday (like cumin, celery, mint, and parsley) to the more obscure (like mugwort, sermountain, and chickweed). *Treatments*, on the other hand, focuses solely on the absence of menstruation, with no mention of the duration of amenorrhea or the presence of other symptoms. The first suggested remedy begins with “There are some women who, when they come to their time of menstruation, have either no or very few menses,” and the second simply states “For provoking the menses…” and provides a recipe.\(^{39}\) These introductions are consistent with the overarching tone of *Treatments* in the absence of evaluative language, either in terms of underlying causes or in terms of the woman’s extenuating circumstances, moral or social. In addition, when compared to their counterparts in *Conditions*, the amenorrhea sections within *Treatments* focus much more narrowly on just five curatives: willow, madder, marsh mallow, vervain, and rue, all of which were known abortifacients, as documented in John Riddle’s *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*.\(^{40}\)

Classical physicians and medical specialists wrote openly about herbal contraceptives and abortifacients, and the knowledge they recorded was carried through the centuries in folk medicine and in medical tracts, like Dioscorides’ encyclopaedia from the first century AD, *De Materia Medica*. In fact, all of the herbs in *Treatments* were recorded and recommended by two key figures: Dioscorides and Soranus. Dioscorides, whom Riddle names “the foremost authority

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\(^{38}\) Green, 67-9.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 89 and 106.

on ancient pharmacy,” preceded Soranus by only a few decades. He recommended willow,\textsuperscript{41} birthwort of the madder family,\textsuperscript{42} and the chaste tree of the vervain family\textsuperscript{43} as contraceptives and abortifacients, while Soranus repeatedly describes recipes with marsh mallow\textsuperscript{44} and rue\textsuperscript{45} as impediments to successful conception. What is more, modern studies have shown that some of these recipes would have been at least marginally effective in controlling procreation. Willow contains trihydroxyoestrin, a hormone found in human women, and willow bark has been confirmed to disrupt ovulation.\textsuperscript{46} Rue, on the other hand, is widely used in Chinese medicine and Latin American husbandry to control fertility in humans and in domesticated animals. In a study published in 1986, a team of scientists found that “the substance is 100 percent successful in preventing pregnancies in rats when administered at two mg/kg body weight on pregnancy days 1-6. A single does at three mg/kg is 100 percent effective on the first day after coitus.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus, the herbs recommended in \textit{Treatments} are all specifically, and sometimes correctly, linked to the prevention or termination of unwanted pregnancies.

However, the fact that \textit{Treatments} provided information about abortive herbs may not have been as scandalous as it first seems. The meaning and causes of amenorrhea were understood surprisingly well in the middle ages, and the status of early pregnancies was far more relaxed. According to John Riddle’s \textit{Eve’s Herbs: A History of Abortion and Contraception in the West}, “pregnancy was not thought to have occurred until the woman so declared it or her

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{41} Riddle, \textit{Contraception}. 32.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 28-9.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 32-3.
\end{flushleft}
pregnancy was so visibly evident that it could not be denied.”

Christine McCann suggests in “Fertility Control and Society in Medieval Europe” that since poor nutrition and illness were common within the period, amenorrhea’s significance was not solely linked to pregnancy, and a woman seeking treatment for withheld menses would not have automatically aroused suspicion. In addition, the medieval view of conception was inexact; a woman was not thought to become pregnant immediately following intercourse but at some indeterminate time after the sex act. Church authorities of the thirteenth century defined this liminal period between conception and real pregnancy as roughly forty days, or whenever the fetus has assumed a human form and the soul has entered the body. Before this point, the fetus was considered an animal. Because of this, “there was an indefinite but fairly certain time…during which a woman could end what we call a pregnancy and neither she nor her contemporaries regarded the act as an abortion.” As McCann writes, “This type of understanding of pregnancy leaves a great deal more room for a woman to prevent unwanted progeny.”

Given the particular herbs prescribed in Treatments, their known effect on women’s fertility, and the lack of secondary symptoms connected with the patient’s amenorrhea, it seems certain that the women who treated withheld menses knew precisely what they were doing. What changed was not the availability of abortifacients but the perceived status of the fetus’s life. When the writers of Treatments

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50 Riddle, Eve’s Herbs, 30. Of course, the age of the fetus, its shape, and its health were all essentially unknowable during this time, at least until the abortion had already been performed and the woman had passed all of the contents of her pregnancy. It sometimes occurred that the woman and her medical aide both received past-partum punishments if the pregnancy had been further along than reported.
51 Ibid., 27-8.
52 McCann, 53.
compiled their text and included suggestions for ending an early term pregnancy, they often did so without violating conventions prescribed by the medieval church and the broader social body.

The second of the medieval medical tracts of particular interest is *De Secretis Mulierum* by the Pseudo-Albertus Magnus. This compendium of “certain hidden, secret things about the nature of women” was composed in late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century Germany in the name of Albertus Magnus, an eminent thirteenth-century philosopher, theologian, and scientist. When Margaret Schleissner wrote her dissertation about *De Secretis* in 1987, there were 83 manuscript copies of the compendium with more than 50 variants from the fifteenth century and more than 70 from the sixteenth century.53 Helen Rodnite Lemay edited and translated *De Secretis* in 1992 and selected from this assortment of variations and translations the Latin 1580 Lyons edition as her primary text. As Lemay argues, *De Secretis* is an important representative of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century ideas concerning the nature of women and science, and the number of manuscripts and editions spanning centuries suggests that the text was both popular and influential. Furthermore, Lemay suggests that this medieval text is “evidence of a widely circulating epitome of the sixteenth-century view of women that resulted in witch hunting.”54 I would add that in addition to demonstrating the geographical spread of these antifeminist ideas, *De Secretis* also shows how long-standing these ideas are, as many of the anecdotes and precepts set forth within the text can be traced back to the Classical period we have already discussed. This time, however, the tone in which these bits of knowledge are presented is distinctly different; *De Secretis* marks a turn away from straightforward medical compendiums with practical advice toward pseudo-scientific propaganda used to denigrate the female sex.

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To be clear, not every section of the work betrays the author’s or the period’s deeply ingrained misogyny, and there are many astrological and philosophical sections that concern reproduction and the development of the fetus that accurately reflect the contemporary conversations surrounding these topics. However, where the female body and its processes are concerned, the author’s knowledge of anatomy and medicine is laughably inadequate. As Lemay writes, “Pseudo-Albert’s command of medicine is also less than impressive; on more than one occasion we see him demonstrate his ignorance of basic medical facts.”

For example, the author writes that a man would generate kittens in his stomach if he consumed sage upon which a cat had ejaculated, that the female body purges all excess food through menstrual blood, that moonbeams cause colds, that an enwombed fetus’ first life is spent as a plant, that lightning bolts can incinerate fetuses without leaving any outward sign of harm. Although the medieval understanding of anatomy was often incomplete at best, most authors of medical and natural philosophy compendiums had a better grasp on their material.

The intended audience and purpose of *De Secretis Mulierum* is as unknown as the text’s true authorship. Much of the evidence suggests a monastic, possibly Dominican milieu, which explains both the almost academic curiosity and fear with which the text treats female bodies. In addition to referencing his *fratres* (“brothers”) and *socii* (“companions”), the author also dedicates his work to “my dear companion and friend in Christ” and prays “may you be granted a long life filled with increasing wisdom.” Based on these moments and other similar bits of internal textual evidence, Lemay concludes comfortably that the work likely had its origin in a

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55 Lemay, 4-5.  
56 Ibid., 69.  
57 Ibid., 90.  
58 Ibid., 101.  
59 Ibid., 104.  
60 Ibid., 59.  

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religious community of some kind.\textsuperscript{61} However, the purpose and intended use of the text is more contentious. Giovanni Romagnoli has argued that \textit{De Secretis} belongs to the genre of popular medicine designed for practical and applied use by midwives.\textsuperscript{62} While the connection between monastic learning and the preservation and dissemination of gynecological knowledge is not in dispute, both Lemay and Green have argued against \textit{De Secretis} as a practical guide for medical care.\textsuperscript{63} Green highlights the problems in describing the text’s popular use when she writes, “We cannot tell if ‘used’ means to satiate monkish curiosity about female nature or to serve as the basis of real medical practice” and leans more to the side of curiosity.\textsuperscript{64} The preface to the work supports Green’s claim.

Since you asked me to bring to light certain hidden, secret things about the nature of women, I have set myself to the task of composing this short and compendious treatise. I have done this despite the youthful frailty of my mind, which tends to be attracted to frivolous things. Its style is partly philosophical, partly medical, just as seems to fit the material. This is a serious work, therefore I beg you not to permit any child to peruse it, nor anyone of childlike disposition. If you keep this book to yourself, I promise to show you many things about different subjects as well as about the art of medicine which, God willing, I shall discuss at some length.\textsuperscript{65}

The preface sets up a few important facets of the work and might suggest something about the intended purpose of the text, as well. First of all, the preface immediately attempts to dissociate the author from the material by claiming he is acting at the behest of the “dear companion and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Lemay, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Green, \textit{Transmission}. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Lemay, 59.
\end{itemize}
friend in Christ” to whom De Secretis is dedicated. The author is responding dutifully and humbly to a task he finds himself ill-equipped to approach: he is too young, too frail of mind, and too easily distracted. The author goes on to describe his work as philosophical, medical, and serious. He is concerned with the nature of women, as he asserts, but also in what this nature means in an abstract, moral sense. Finally, he stresses that his work is serious, not suitable for children or for those with “childlike disposition[s].” This is explicitly mature content, not to be treated lightly or passed around as mere entertainment, but great knowledge awaits the reader who would guard the book’s secrets— or so the author would have his readers believe. However, it is unlikely this preface was ever taken seriously given the textual history of De Secretis, as Green discusses.

De Secretis’ genre is just as ambiguous as its audience and purpose, but the popularity of the text affected the tone and context in which gynecological material would be published for centuries after its original composition. In Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages, Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset argue that De Secretis is linked to the expanding political and economic importance of the clergy during the second half of the thirteenth century. Jacquart and Thomasset suggest that as church authorities gained power and took on additional social responsibilities, they sought to better understand the reality of human sexuality, which they did rather clumsily and fearfully in De Secretis. As Lemay concludes, whatever the authors imagined as their primary purpose, “a strong subtext of the Secrets...is the evil nature of women and the harm they can cause to their innocent victims: young children and their male consorts.”

66 Ibid.
67 Green, “From ‘Diseases.’”
69 Lemay, 16.
Given the link to religious origins and the underlying misogyny of the text, the compendium of women’s secrets seems to be an offshoot of Christian antifeminist literature extending back to the second century, and the text’s relationship to this well-established tradition allowed it to reshape earlier collections of women’s knowledge like The Trotula in subsequent editions and translations.

Although The Trotula was written before De Secretis, the later text’s publication and popularity marks a shift in the way the earlier work was treated in later translations, as Monica Green demonstrates amply in ““Traitié tout de mençonges”: The Secrés des dames, ‘Trotula,’ and Attitudes toward Women’s Medicine in Fourteenth- and Early-Fifteenth-Century France.” As her starting point, Green focuses on Christine de Pizan’s dismissal of books that purport to reveal women’s secrets as “treatise[s] of lies” and on Pizan’s curious omission of Trota of Salerno.70 As my discussions of the two texts have emphasized, the two come from different traditions and have different goals. The Trotula is by and large a medical text, concerned primarily with the anatomy, physiology, and pathologies of female patients; De Secretis claims to be both philosophical and medical, but it is clearly not as concerned with proper medicine as it is with natural philosophy and the question of how women’s bodies defined and impeded their morality. Although these two approaches to female bodies seem clearly separate, Green asserts that the fourteenth century saw the distinction between the two blur: “the practical, medical tradition of the Trotula texts and the theoretical, natural-philosophical tradition of Secreta mulierum/Secrés des dames began to move toward each other, ultimately becoming so closely

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allied as to be often indistinguishable.”71 By the time Christine de Pizan set about building her City of Ladies, Trota of Salerno would have been as heavily implicated in the “theoretical and downright misogynistic traditions” of texts like De Secretis as she was associated with the therapeutic remedies found within The Trotula ensemble. According to Green, “the way in which the Trotula texts themselves came to be used in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may have added further ‘real-life’ confirmation to Christine’s image of ‘Trotula’ as a traitor to her sex—and of gynecological writings as offering more occasion for slandering women than of aiding them.”72 Green then analyzes the Trotula texts’ provenance within manuscripts compiled during Pizan’s, ultimately concluding that the similarity in codicological contexts between the Trotula and the Secreta Mulierum texts could have led readers to assume the contents in the works were essentially consistent. Such a misinterpretation of the two texts’ different intentions eventually led to both Trota and the Trotula texts being compromised by and consumed into the more salacious, controversial, and popular “secrets of women” tradition.

The Trotula and De Secretis were two of the most widely published, translated, and preserved collections of gynecological writings of the European Middle Ages, and the two texts could not have treated women, their bodies, and their ailments more differently. That these two texts, with their approaches and intentions utterly at odds, eventually fell together in one genre of “women’s secrets” has important implications for how the Early Modern period handled the question of women and represented their bodies in popular literature.

71 Green, “Traittié.” 148.
72 Ibid., 163.
III: The Printing Press and the Transmission of Obstetrical Knowledge

The shift in tone from Classical medical writings to *The Trotula* and from *The Trotula* to *De Secretis Mulierum* is only part of the story, however. The movement from ancient medicine to antifeminist propaganda was aided by an unlikely innovation, the printing press, and by a shift in how obstetrical writing was discussed. When Fissell turns her attention to the spread of sexual knowledge, she implies that the printing press might commonly be imagined as a great democratizer and proliferator of knowledge, but that it actually functioned to limit the amount of information available and to reshape the source of that information’s authority: “the advent of print, rather than broadening medical discourse about women’s reproductive bodies, actually limited it. Far fewer texts (albeit in many more copies) were available in the first century of print than were available in manuscript a century before.” Fissell specifically cites Patricia Crawford’s essay, “Sexual Knowledge in England, 1500-1750,” and summarizes the argument that the printing press and the proliferation of early printed medical texts effected “a shift away from women’s orally shared sexual knowledge towards a privileging of textual forms of that knowledge.” However, Fissell excises from Crawford’s argument the intensely gendered nature of this shift. Allowing Crawford’s argument to speak in her own words highlights the political motives and effects masculine control over printing and, therefore, over gynecological and obstetric knowledge had on female ways of knowing. Crawford writes, “During the early modern period, there was a debate about the respective merits of medical ‘knowledge’ and popular, particularly female, ‘knowledge.’ Medical writers increasingly criticized and dismissed women’s knowledge during this period. Cotta [a male author of medical texts] warned his readers against

73 Fissell, 7.
74 Ibid., 7.
heeding women’s advice seeing “their authority in learned knowledge cannot be authentically.”

Jane Sharp, a contemporary midwife, pushed back against such an emphasis on official and masculine learning when she wrote that a university education, while a fine thing in itself, was not sufficient for delivering infants. She held that childbirth required more than a knowledge of ancient and authoritative texts: “It is not hard words that perform the work [of childbirth], as if none understood the Art that cannot understand Greek.” In this way, the printing press, controlled as it was by men, functioned more as a conduit for the brewing confrontation between the masculine physicians who claimed official theoretical knowledge and the midwives and lay women healers who claimed both oral knowledge and lived experience as the sources of their auctoritas. Words printed on a page and widely and cheaply distributed quickly overtook women’s oral tradition, literally lending weight to masculine authority by creating physical artifacts that promoted men’s control over the female body.

However, oral traditions are ephemeral and therefore notoriously difficult to study; they are part of the popular culture that Peter Brooke describes as “elusive quarry.” Because of this, the extent to which women’s sexual and medical knowledge continued to pass from one generation to the next cannot be accurately quantified. Recent scholarship on women’s life writing within the period sheds light on the persistent popularity of personal and coterie manuscripts like commonplace and receipt books, and these works undoubtedly preserved some of women’s folklore. Nonetheless, as time passed and printed materials became ever more numerous, even these traditionally female genres started privileging the printed sources compiled

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76 Ibid., 82.
and published by men. Women still kept old and created new manuscripts that dealt with sexual knowledge, but by the seventeenth century, the contents of those books could be traced more and more frequently to works like John Gerard’s *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597), Gervase Markham’s *The English Huswine* (1615), Richard Brathwaite’s *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), and Alexander Read’s *A Manuall of the Anatomy or Dissection of the Body of Man* (1638), among many other manuals written by men. Thus, both the printed texts and the manuscripts that have survived from the period demonstrate a pronounced turn away from female ways of knowing and toward masculine textual authority.

Green addresses the changing textual forms that people relied upon for “new” discussions of the female body and speaks of the shifts in tone that surrounded the production of these texts in “Obstetrical and Gynecological Texts in Middle English” and “From ‘Diseases of Women’ to ‘Secrets of Women.’” In the latter article, Green points out that calling the genre of obstetrical writings “secrets of women” had profound implications for readership, purpose, and tone:

> It is clear that the cooptation of gynecological literature served to buttress entrenched “structural misogyny” or authoritative traditions than to challenge them. The adoption of the title *secrets of women* [to refer to a whole genre of writing] did not enshroud women’s bodies with a protective barrier to the male gaze; rather, it rendered women’s bodies open for intellectual scrutiny in ways

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79 See Elaine Leong, “‘Herbals she peruseth’: Reading Medicine in Early Modern England.” *Renaissance Studes*. 28.4 (2014): 556-578. Leong addresses the importance of medical knowledge to English housewives and gentlewomen, but the fact that most of that knowledge came from masculine sources is beyond the scope of her study.

that, quite understandably, may have left certain observers with concern that medical discourse had more power to harm women than to help them.\textsuperscript{81}

However, the movement towards “women’s secrets” was more complex than simple scholarly inquiry, as Green notes. Originally, invoking this title may have been both an attempt to promote intellectual scrutiny surrounding the female body and an attempt to manipulate and control it: “to the extent that that knowledge [the knowledge of female anatomy] is a kind of power to control,”\textsuperscript{82} but on another level, emphasizing the “secret” nature of knowledge contained in late medieval and early early modern popular medical texts served to excite potential readers with the promise of forbidden knowledge.\textsuperscript{83} It was a rhetorical move that allowed an author to promise his readers innocent insight without taking personal responsibility for how that knowledge would be used. Thus, as the printing press gained ground in the sixteenth century, vernacular medical texts grabbed hold of these trends and dubious motivations and pushed the “unsavory, misogynist taint” of “writing publicly about women’s bodies” even further, proliferating and legitimizing antifeminist ideas more quickly and across more territory than had even been possible with handwritten manuscripts.\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{footnote1} Green, “From ‘Diseases,’” 7.
\bibitem{footnote2} Ibid., 15.
\bibitem{footnote3} Green writes: “There was in this usage undoubtedly an aspect of sheer titillation, the challenge to breach the impeding wall, to open the obstructing door. The label secrets served as a signal as much to arouse as to warn away the male reader.” Ibid., 18.
\bibitem{footnote4} Ibid., 28-9.
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CHAPTER 3
FROM BODIES TO BAWDS TO WITCHES: SATIRE IN THE GOSPELLES OF DISTAVES

Many of the texts printed in the early decades of England’s printing industry invoked or explored the female body with the same feigned coyness and prudery and with the familiar overt misogyny that Monica Green traces into the late Middle Ages.¹ These ways of talking about the female body gained momentum and eventually became the de facto norm, aided by the broader circulation and increased accessibility, affordability, stability, and fidelity made possible by the printing press. As these texts and this means of textual production spread, women’s knowledge and women’s ways of knowing came to be treated more and more regularly as the antithesis to both male authority and male authorship. The advent of the printing press, the Protestant Reformation, and the marginalization of midwives all shaped the ways in which bodies were understood, both ideologically and biologically. The new shape female bodies assumed in the popular imagination was decidedly carnivalesque, grotesque, and prone to physical and/or moral corruption. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the female body and the traditionally androcentric ways of treating female bodies became more aligned with superstition, heresy, and witchcraft; this led to literary texts that openly satirized midwives as bawds, gossips, witches, and drunks and that depicted a variety of the rituals surrounding childbirth as nothing more

important or dignified than a neighborhood block party. This chapter focuses on one primary text, *The Gospelles of Distaues* (1507), and explores the ways in which the devaluation of women’s knowledge continued into and accelerated during the sixteenth century.

I: When Satire and Ethnography Meet

An elderly woman with sagging, withered skin and red, hollow, rheumy eyes sits before a circle of neighborhood spinners. For hours now, she has shared seemingly random bits of knowledge, discussing the woes caused by spendthrift husbands at one moment and omens drawn from common weather patterns the next, all while her audience listens to her words and provides its own commentary. Although the subject matter of the speaker’s lecture is sometimes very serious, bawdy jokes and puns ripple around the room. Laughter abounds and makes the night, and the spinners’ domestic work, pass more quickly. Midnight approaches, however, and discussion turns to what the leader of the group knows about the female body: events that can befall it, ailments that can strike it, and how to treat it when it is sick. What should you do if a husband should “defyle” his pregnant wife with his feet? Have the wife drink from his shoe. What does it mean when a woman’s stockings won’t stay tied and she loses her garter in the middle of the street? Her lover is being unfaithful. And how should you treat sores of the breast? That’s easy enough, says the evening’s speaker. A man should simply take his “instrument naturall” and with it, make three circles around the afflicted area, and the breasts shall be cured. At this, one of the other spinners, apparently hoping for different advice

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3 *Gospelles*. 9R-10L.
concerning what to do with instruments natural, pipes up to clarify: “Let it be understood,“ she says, “that the circles ought to be made at the very end of the belly…just below the girdle.” The assembled women fall into fits of laughter, praising the wisdom of their leader for sharing her secrets “of great authority and importance.”

This scene and many others just like it make up The Gospelles of Distaues, an infrequently studied early print satire that conflates folklore, midwifery, magic, and bawdy humor. The Gospelles, a quirky little text that is part pseudo-ethnographic compilation of folklore and part anti-feminist satire, originated in fifteenth-century France and was translated several times throughout the sixteenth century, first making its way into English around 1507. The text is structured as a frame narrative in which a group of spinners commissions an elderly man to transcribe their discussions for what will become The Gospelles of Distaues. The spinners, christened “evangelistas” and “doctoresses” once The Gospelles is underway, agree to meet over the course of six nights to dictate their women’s knowledge in hopes that it might be passed on from generation to generation and might serve as a counterargument to contemporary works which treat the matter of women with derision and mockery. Each night, a new leader is chosen to provide the substance of “chapters” that the other women expound upon in “glosses.” These chapters and glosses form the heart of the gospels—some 250 popular folk beliefs covering nearly every aspect of Late Medieval and Early Modern domesticity.

The few scholars who have written about The Gospelles of Distaues agree on very little. The textual history, the genre, the meaning of the work’s satire: all of these issues have been called into question and left, in my opinion, largely unresolved. Although I have little to add to the discussion of the text’s genealogy, understanding The Gospelles’ complex history is

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4 Gospelles, 10L
important, as Gretchen Angelo argues, in any effort to understand the text’s genre, and, in turn, how the text’s genre is understood colors how the satire is interpreted, especially when it comes to the depiction of women and the unstable authority of women’s speech.\(^5\)

_The Gospelles of Distaues_ was translated into English by Henry Watson and published by Wynkyn de Worde, William Caxton’s journeyman, some time between 1507 and 1510. The original French text, _Les Evangiles des Quenoilles_, exists in two forms: an early version known as the Chantilly manuscript and a later adaptation known as the Paris manuscript. The Chantilly manuscript, attributed to French _maistres_ Cambray, du Val, and d’Arras, is a collection of folklore arranged into chapters, spoken by one individual, and glosses, spoken by a community of women. The Paris manuscript takes this raw material and turns it into a more literary product by adding a frame narrative about a scribe transcribing the oral wisdom of a group of spinners, by breaking the folklore into six nights of discussion, and by changing the tone from a detached curiosity to biting antifeminist satire. The differences between the two manuscripts have led Angelo to argue that the later version was adapted by an anonymous author who wanted to make Cambray, du Val, and d’Arras’s work more political, more controversial, and more “current” by twisting it to fit the _querelle des femmes_ model.\(^6\) If Angelo’s thesis is correct, the English work that we have inherited has an even more complicated history: it is an adaptation of the Chantilly manuscript, transcribed from the Paris manuscript and printed between 1478 and 1485, transcribed again for yet another printed edition, and then translated into English to be printed

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6 Ibid., 21.
between 1507 and 1510. For the purposes of this chapter, I work from my own transcription of Watson’s translation but incorporate commentary from Madeleine Jeay and Kathleen Garay’s English edition of the Mansion printing as well as scholarly criticism surrounding Les Evangiles, since criticism specifically focused on Watson’s sixteenth-century English translation is rare.

Although the history of the text is indeed labyrinthine, the question of genre is even more complicated. Jeay, Garay, and Kathleen Loysen all insist that the work is essentially a frame narrative modeled on Boccaccio’s Decameron and Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. Loysen and Angelo both argue that the work can also be read as a participant in the querelle des femmes, although Loysen makes it clear that she considers The Gospelles a rather low-brow incarnation of the debate since it lacks Christine de Pizan’s sophistication and intellectual rigor. Angelo, on

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7 The English translation is surprisingly faithful to the Paris manuscript and subsequent French editions, with only a few original episodes omitted from the translation and only one addition: the gossip’s feast.


10 Loysen, 22. In reality, the querelle des femmes is nearly impossible to isolate within one concrete period of time and even more difficult to pinpoint within a single literary register. Loysen discusses Christine de Pizan as a contributor to the debate, and for good reason, but other scholars have suggested that the querelle began in earnest around the year 1450, twenty years after de Pizan’s death. The matter is further complicated by Linda Woodbridge’s discussion of “the formal controversy,” another name for the debate about woman’s nature, and by Frances Utley’s annotated index of texts in The Crooked Rib, as both scholars suggest different timelines and different origins. Woodbridge argues that participants within the debate had serious humanist credentials and intended their works as displays of their rhetorical prowess, while Utley maintains that most of the texts were written by hack writers and meant as entertainment. The most reasonable conclusion we can draw from these opposing viewpoints is that many people were interested in the question of women for many different reasons and for many, many years. See Linda Woodbridge. Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1986; Frances Utley. The Crooked Rib: An Analytical Index to the Argument about Women in English and Scots Literature to the End of the Year 1568. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1944; and Anne E. B.
the other hand, argues that the lack of sophistication is intentional and furthers the anonymous author’s desire to belittle and mock women. Other critics have focused on still other genres: Susan Phillips focuses on The Gospelles’ appropriation of ecclesiastical forms and what she sees as a particularly English incarnation of the gossip’s feast. In “Distaff and Pen,” Laura Doyle Gates argues that mock scholasticism, and not mock liturgy as some have suggested, dominates The Gospel. But these are not the only labels critics have thrown about. Jeay and Garay suggest a number of alternatives: is it a marriage complaint? a chanson de mal-mariée? a demande d’amour? Or all of the above?

In fact, the only aspect of the texts critics seem to agree on is its satirical tone. Whatever else The Gospelles is, it is definitely satirical. But even this has been interpreted in contradictory ways. On one hand, Catherine Randall argues that the satire promotes female volubility as a legitimate kind of knowledge. On the other, Loysen and Angelo see the effects of the text’s satire as essentially antifeminist. Jeay and Garay take a more nuanced approach in their edition and argue that there are empowering moments for the women involved, even though the frame narrative is designed to criticize and ultimately silence them.

It seems to me that none of the genres can be settled any more easily than the issue of satire. They are all partially accurate, but none of them takes the work’s form and the scope of its


13 Jeay and Garay, 19-24.
15 Loysen, 15; and Angelo, 24.
16 Jeay and Garay, 22.
content into consideration. Yes, *The Gospelles* does feature a frame narrative: a scribe is
“constreyned” by a group of spinning women to record their wisdom over the course of six
nights between Christmas and Candelmas—interestingly the weeks between Mary’s delivery of
Jesus and her ritual purification, or “churching,” during which time even the Virgin Mary was
considered unclean.\(^\text{17}\) The work begins and ends with this scribe, and each night is similarly
framed by this figure of masculine authority. However, focusing solely on the frame ignores the
core of *The Gospelles*, the bits of folklore that make up the women’s speech. By ignoring this
structure, critics have dismissed the single most distinctive feature of the text, and there are
similar oversights with all of the other suggested genres. Although the women of *The Gospelles*
do imagine their project as a kind of defense against “balades dysfamous and bokes contaygious
in dyspraysing the honour of our sexe,”\(^\text{18}\) they never comment explicitly on the nature of women;
this seems a bit odd for a text deliberately modeled on the *querelle de femmes*, as Angelo
suggests it is, and even odder still for a precursor to “the question of women” pamphlet wars, as
Randall suggests. The question of women never actually comes up, and the pamphlet wars were
notoriously concrete about what was at stake in the debate.\(^\text{19}\) Philips’ insights about the
ecclesiastical forms in *The Gospelles* are interesting, but her focus on the gossip’s feast is
problematic, to say the least, since the episode in question is unique to the English translation
and takes up just a tiny portion of the broader story.\(^\text{20}\)

Of all of the approaches to the text’s genre, the one I find most persuasive is Laura Doyle
Gates’. In “Distaff and Pen,” she argues that *The Gospelles* figures the conflict between men and
women as a conflict between the mono-vocal pen and the poly-vocal distaff; the pen represents

\(^\text{17}\) *Gospelles*, 4L.
\(^\text{18}\) *Gospelles*, 5L.
\(^\text{19}\) See Utley; Woodbridge; and Coldiron.
\(^\text{20}\) *Gospelles*, 22L.
the sole, authoritative, final voice of “Truth” associated with scholastic inquiry, while the distaff represents a different kind of authority, one based on multiple perspectives and a proliferation of “truths” possible in a community setting.\textsuperscript{21} Gates suggests that the women copy the male scribe’s scholasticism by adopting his language—they call themselves “doctoresses” as they expound upon “themes” in their “chaptres” and “glosses”—but imitation, in this case, is not flattery. Gates argues that the parody serves to destabilize scholastic discourse and showcase alternative forms of authorship and authority.\textsuperscript{22} This assessment of The Gospelles touches on the satirical tone of the work, the rather odd mixture of high and low language, and ambivalent relationship between the male scribe and the female spinners. Yet, Gates does not connect her argument in any way to the form of the text. This is the weakest point of her article, and the weakest point of all the criticism concerning The Gospelles.

While the structure of the chapters/glosses is strange, it is not inexplicable or entirely anomalous. Nor is it irrelevant. I suggest that Gates’ theory of mock scholasticism and destabilizing points of authority and authorship would have benefited from a discussion of The Gospelles not as a frame narrative or an orphan of officially recognized literary forms, but as a descendant of the medieval catalogue or possibly as a florilegium. Comparing The Gospelles to Petrarch’s Remedies for Fortunes Fair and Foul (c. fourteenth century), for example, would have provided concrete examples of how much masculine scholasticism differs from more traditionally female ways of knowing. While both Remedies and The Gospelles are divided into problem/solution sections, the nature of the problems they discuss, the types of solutions they offer, and the way they are approached could not be more different, despite their similar forms. Petrarch addresses problems most likely to plague an upper class man (what to do to keep a

\textsuperscript{21} Gates, 18.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
beautiful daughter virtuous, how to market a less than beautiful daughter, what to do with a barren wife, etc.),\textsuperscript{23} while \emph{The Gospelles} deals with problems more likely to plague lower class women (how to tell if your husband is being unfaithful, how to keep your husband from knowing that you’ve been unfaithful, what to do if your husband beats you, etc.). While Petrarch attempts to aid his reader by offering philosophical solutions, the women of \emph{The Gospelles} more often turn to physical remedies, even if they do not make logical sense. Finally, another important difference between the masculine and feminine approaches to the scholastic catalogue is the manner in which the catalogues unfold. Petrarch pitches his remedies in a series of debates between personified forces like Hope, Suffering, and Luck. Although he plays at having multiple voices, Petrarch is always in control of his text: every voice is ultimately his own and every answer is ultimately consistent. In contrast, \emph{The Gospelles} is purportedly a transcription of an oral exchange between real, embodied women with differing experiences and opinions. Although the scribe mocks the women for being so chaotic, he intentionally preserves each individual voice.

Adding “catalogue” to the list of genres offers several new insights into \emph{The Gospelles} as a gender debate: women possibly satirize the scribe and his literary traditions—including scholastic catalogue of women’s vices—just as much as the scribe satirizes theirs. However, I am not suggesting that I have solved the problems of genre or settled the issues posed by satire within the text. In fact, I do not wish to offer such a definitive answer because I believe the motley assortment of genres is both intentional and effective. In \emph{Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe}, Peter Burke builds on Claude Levi-Strauss’s description of popular forms of

literature as an “intellectual bricolage,” a mélange of genres mashed together because folk culture had “no more appropriate form of its own.”

Burke agrees that this “sinking theory” fits the appropriation of official forms commonly seen in popular literature, but that we should not sell this literature short because of its formal failings. Popular forms of literature are not, Burke claims, insensitive to the subversive potential of imitation. This fits perfectly with how I imagine *The Gospelles:* it is a popular text meant for popular consumption, and as such, it is chocked full of genres—but every single one of them has been only partially represented, and all of them have been twisted into something else or otherwise subverted. I do believe *The Gospelles* is closer to a catalogue than it is the other genres that have been discussed, but I am willing to concede that the work might be a mock scholastic catalogue with a frame narrative, a few marriage complaints, and a gossip’s feast thrown in together, all glossed over with a veneer of antifeminist satire.

Conceptualizing the text as a polyvocal satirical catalogue of feminine folly, controlled by men on both the fictional and the historical levels, highlights the ideological work of the text. As the previous chapters have discussed, the standing of female healers, the transmission of sexual knowledge and the tone of discussions surrounding the female body had all slowly changed from the Classical period through the Middle Ages, turning away from women’s authority on every front. *The Gospelles* provides one of the clearest literary images of the discrediting of the oral knowledge shared by women across generations. The women’s remedies and advice, which would have been highly regarded once upon a time, are undermined by the text’s insistence on bawdiness and superstition. Although I disagree with some of Gates’ broader argument concerning the text’s genre, her figuration of the text’s conflict between the masculine pen as a single source of authority versus the feminine distaff as a communal source of

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knowledge is perhaps even more insightful than her article asserts. The pen/distaff model can easily be applied to the issue of medical authority, not just textual authority. University-trained physicians, who were exclusively men, laid claim to a single source of Truth; midwives and wise women, on the other hand, claimed generations of oral, communal knowledge. By undermining the female knowledge it supposedly preserves, The Gospelles associates women’s reproductive folklore with superstition, heresy, and witchcraft.

II: Turning Folklore into Witchcraft

The question of the text’s genre would be much simpler if the folklore contained within the frame were not authentic. Madeleine Jeay has demonstrated that the folk knowledge set down in The Gospelles is, on the whole, consistent with popular belief and especially similar to the folklore common in rural Flanders and Picardy.25 The satirical aspects of the work seem to destabilize the folklore’s legitimacy and call into question the women’s (and by extension all women’s) reputations. As Marina Warner writes, “Though it is indisputable that the book contains lore in circulation as seriously intended remedies and methods of redress, it passes it mockingly as lewdness and superstition and guys the purveyors as whores and bawds, beldames and trots.”26 The women who pass down this folklore would have traditionally been seen as “wise women” or “cunning folk,” unlettered peasants who provided the majority of medical care in medieval and early modern England, as Keith Thomas discusses in his Religion and the

Decline of Magic; however, because the women of The Gospelles are placed squarely within a satirical context, they are represented as archetypal bawds rather than as respected practitioners of folk medicine. While Warner’s statement rings true in that the women’s altered reputation partially hinges on their rowdy sexuality, her reading of The Gospelles erases an important identity beyond the wise woman and the whore. The Gospelles depicts the spinning women in such a way that they would have been immediately recognizable, not as wise women but as witches. The emphasis placed on their knowledge of women’s anatomy and their characterization as disorderly gossips aligns the women with the paradigmatic sorceress of The Malleus Maleficarum: the midwife-witch. The authors of The Gospelles use satire to turn the wise women into harmless, laughable “whores and bawds” only after they have first established the women as midwife-witches—the greatest threat according to the most popular authority on witchcraft in the period.

Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, two Dominican German clergymen, first published their manuscript of The Malleus Maleficarum (or The Hammer of Witches) in 1487, but it spread across Europe more quickly than they could have imagined, becoming “one of the best-known, most quoted, and, indeed, most infamous of all medieval texts.”

The work is a treatise and guidebook on the origin, identification, and prosecution of witches, and it was based on the specific experiences and perspectives of its authors. Perhaps the most experienced inquisitor in all of Germany, Heinrich Kramer had witnessed many witchcraft trials, and the threat of superstitious folklore loomed large in his mind. Assisted by James Sprenger, Kramer compiled

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the first witchcraft text with official religious and political authority, and it singlehandedly solidified and popularized the idea of a witch as a real danger within European communities. So doing, it emphasized the specific dangers of midwives and all those cunning women who would claim knowledge of and power over female sexuality. By 1500, just thirteen years after the text was completed, eight editions had been published throughout Europe, and five more were added by 1520. Although no new editions have survived from the fifty years that followed, the text enjoyed a resurgence of popularity between 1576 and 1670, when sixteen new editions were produced. All told, best estimates suggest that between thirty and forty thousand copies of *The Malleus Maleficarum* were distributed in these years, mostly in continental Europe and especially in Germany and France, *The Gospels’s* country of origin.

Recognizing that the authors, and later the translators, of *The Gospels* represent these women as midwife-witches before they depict them as satirical bawds is important for several reasons. In order for the characterization to work, readers of *The Gospels* would have had to recognize these women as something more than simply wise; they would have had to see the women as midwives, first, and then make the transition to seeing them as witches. In claiming that the early modern audience would have made this interpretive transition easily, I am challenging what Jane P. Davidson has suggested concerning the association of midwives with witches, specifically that there was no such association. 30 Many scholars, including Nancy Nenno in “Between Magic and Medicine” 31 and Bridgette Sheridan in “Whither Childbearing,” 32

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have argued that the unfortunate women accused of witchcraft during the Early Modern period were nothing more sinister than midwives and that labeling these women and putting them on trial as witches allowed the growing field of male physicians to assert dominance. Davidson, however, cites an absence of corroborating evidence as proof that midwives were not consistently accused of witchcraft, concluding that “the concept that midwives were witches…appears to be as reliable as the concept that witches flew to Sabbaths on the backs of goats.” By creating a parallel between the belief in midwife-witches and the more clearly ludicrous belief in witches actually flying through the night sky on farm animals, Davidson dismisses and mocks the widely accepted paradigm of the midwife-witch as mere modern fantasy.

However, Davidson does not acknowledge that early modern people, by and large, actually did believe that witches attended Sabbaths, that they did consort with demonic familiars, that they could transform themselves into animals, and that they could fly around on the backs of goats—beliefs that are clearly documented in works like *The Malleus Maleficarum* and that recurred in trial documents in the form of real accusations. The connection between midwifery and witchcraft was well established enough that ecclesiastical and secular authorities alike mentioned witchcraft and superstitions in their attempts to regulate midwifery. In sixteenth-century England, church representatives required all midwives to obtain official licenses before practicing their medicine, and while the language of the oaths the midwives had to swear in order to receive these licenses changed according to the official religion of the time, the references to witchcraft remained. In 1555, Bishop Edmund Bonner of London decreed that “A Mydwyfe (of

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33 Davidson, 116.
the diocese and jurisdiction of London) shal not use or exercise any Witchcraft, Charmes, Sorcerye, Invocations, or Praiers, other then suche as be allowable and may stand with the Lawes and Ordinances of the Catholike Church.”

By 1584, however, England was a Protestant country again, and the midwife oath changed accordingly: midwives were not to use “any witchcraft, charms, relics or invocation to any Saint in the time of travail.”

In both places, noncompliance with the official religion was treated as a type of witchcraft or superstition and as such, was strictly and explicitly forbidden. The oath remained more or less unchanged through the seventeenth century, although specific references to the Catholic Church and Catholic practices were expunged by 1649, when the oath banned the “use or exercise [of] any manner of witchcraft, charms, or sorcery, invocation or other prayers than may stand with God’s laws and the king’s.”

The fact that officials explicitly forbid witchcraft suggests that the Early Modern culture perceived a connection between midwives and witches; otherwise, there would be no point in including these references in the oaths. Laws are passed in response to problems, real or perceived. Where the facts surrounding the European witch trials are concerned, questions about whether or not the women actually performed the deeds they were accused of is something of a moot point. Hard facts, observable behavior, indeed, what we would consider reliable evidence of any kind, more often than not played a minor role in the trials, supplementing the true heart of

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34 Edmund Bonner, “Inunctions geuen in the visitatio[n] of the Reuerend father in god Edmunde, bishop of London begunne and continued in his cathederal churche and dioces of London, from the thyrd day of September the yere of oure Lorde god, a thousand fiue hundreth fifty and foure, vntill the. viii. daye of October, the yeare of our Lord a thousand fiue hundreth fifty and fiue then nexte ensuyng.” London: John Cawood, 1555. San Marino: Huntingdon Library, 10249. STC 341:30. B.5.
such accusations: popular belief, fear, and rumor. To focus exclusively on the “truthiness” of
accusations is to miss an important point about the power and process of public hysteria. What
these women actually did, actually were capable of doing, mattered little compared to what their
neighbors believed they had done or could do in the future. The church reproduced and affirmed
these fears by including statements against witchcraft in the official midwife oath.

Thus far, however, I have not explained how The Gospelles actually depicts the women
as midwife-witches or, indeed, how the satirical tone of the work affects this depiction. What
does The Gospelles have to do with witches? Or with midwives for that matter? To answer the
first question, let me return to Jeay and Garay, the preeminent scholars of the original French Les
Evangiles des Quenoilles. In the introduction to their English translation, the authors explain
how this satirical work represents a cultural turning point at the end of the fifteenth century and
provides…

...evidence of the increasing gap between town and country, between the culture
of the elite, and one which has been labeled as “popular.” Inheriting the centuries-
old legacy of antifeminist mockery and criticism, this is also the time of a
discourse against superstition and heterodox beliefs from theologians who are
developing the concept of demonology which will lead to the witch hunt. With all
of their suspect characteristics—from their knowledge of the secrets of life,
through their association with pregnancy and childbirth, to the creation of charms
and spells—the old women of The Distaff Gospels would not, in another context,
merely have been the target of mockery and literary parody; they would have
been burned at the stake.37

I quote this passage at length because it concisely explains a few ideas that are fundamental to
my understanding of The Gospelles’s women as midwife-witches and important in establishing
the audience’s perception of them as such. First: the tradition of popular, antifeminist satire
bleeds over into the conversations surrounding superstitions and heresy, a discourse that in time

37 Jeay and Garay ,19.
would provide the foundation for the witch trials. Second: the women of *The Gospelles* espouse, literally evangelize, a type of knowledge that would also come to be associated with witchcraft, especially their knowledge of women’s “privities.” Consider, for example, the similarities between the spinners’ chapters and the contents of medieval works like *De Secretis Mulierum* by Pseudo-Albertus Magnus and *The Trotula* (discussed at length in Chapter 2) that belong to the tradition of “the secrets of women,” a genre which Helen Rodnite Lemay claims directly influenced the composition of *Malleus Maleficarum*. Third: the women of *The Gospelles* are repeatedly depicted as midwives. Beyond the conclusions we can draw from their discussions of pregnancy, childbirth, and female anatomy (discussions inherently associated with midwifery), several of these women are explicitly referred to as midwives: for example, we are told that Isengrine du Glay “meddled in her old age to receive young children / but in her young age she received great children,” a description which associates midwifery with sexual incontinence. Another woman is introduced simply as “Paret Fatoys, mydwyf.” Still others are described in Henry Watson’s sixteenth-century translation as “auncient matrones,” which literalizes the original French phrase *anciennes matrones* that Jeay and Garay maintain as “midwife” in their translation.

The fourth point I take from the previous quote concerns the role of satire and the effect it has on a literary work’s context. As Jeay and Garay suggest, the fact that *The Gospelles* is clearly presented within the traditions of antifeminist satire changes the effect of the parallels between the spinners, midwives, and witches and turns them all into laughable archetypes of feminine

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39 *Gospelles*, 6L.
40 Ibid., 9R.
41 Ibid., 6R, 7L, 25R.
42 Jeay and Garay, 170-171.
folly rather than representatives of the threatening Other, as epitomized by the midwife-witch. Satire makes the midwife-witch laughable and—more importantly—completely harmless. In other words, I would like to revise the last portion of Jeay and Garay’s statement, in which they argue that the context of *The Gospelles* protects these women from serious persecution by making them targets of mockery and literary parody. My argument, on the other hand, is that literary parody is the context in which to read *The Gospelles* and not just an accidental byproduct of defending the midwife-witches. The parody exists because is makes the audience feel more safe. The text was never meant to protect these women; it was meant to calm the public.

The comfort provided by satirizing these women was welcome in large part because many contemporary witchcraft tracts were starting to blur the distinction between wise women and witches, investing the once respected role with a fearsome power. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, for example, explicitly links midwives (traditionally regarded as wise women) to witchcraft in the strongest of terms; according to the authors, midwives “surpass all others in wickedness.” Because Kramer and Sprenger see the essence of witchcraft as fundamentally and diabolically sexual, they also imagine the midwife, a women whose trade is human sexuality and the procreative potential, as the witch *par excellence*. Moreover, because the authors see sexuality as belonging to Satan, they also associate midwives’ knowledge of sexuality with knowledge of the demonic and satanic. If witches are defined as women who have a certain power regarding sexuality and reproduction, it follows that midwives would be the most common holders of such power. For example, the authors define seven of the most common acts of witchcraft, and because they define witchcraft in terms of sexuality, six of the seven relate directly to love, procreation, and the care of newborns: inducing a man to “irregular love,” impeding the

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43 Kramer and Sprenger, 41.
procreative force, spiriting away his genitals, causing infertility in women, causing miscarriages, and offering babies to demons as tribute.\textsuperscript{44} But the women of \textit{The Gospelles} have affinities with The \textit{Malleus’s} sorceress that extend beyond midwifery. Kramer and Sprenger also describe witches as loose-tongued, superstitious women who cannot conceal the things they know but must gad about town, telling all of their friends their secrets.

The original French version of \textit{The Gospelles} was probably composed within a decade or so of the \textit{Malleus Maleficarum}, both penned some time in the last twenty years of the fifteenth century. It is entirely possible that the French original predates \textit{Malleus Maleficarum}, but despite this, Jeay and Garay still associate the two and claim that the women of \textit{The Gospelles} resemble the descriptions of witches in \textit{The Malleus Maleficarum}.\textsuperscript{45} But even if the original French text predates \textit{The Malleus Maleficarum}, the Early Modern English translation certainly does not. Given the popularity of Kramer and Sprenger’s text, it is unlikely that Henry Watson and Wynkyn de Worde could have read of these gossips and not placed them within the context of witchcraft. After all, the whole spinning circle is superstitious, chatty, and—given the abundance of dirty jokes within \textit{The Gospelles}—more than a little lewd by contemporary standards. Add to that all of the talk about women’s secrets, and suddenly the sixteenth-century audience is confronted with a coven of witches masquerading as a gaggle of gossips.

Due to the widespread dissemination of popular folklore, the abundance of texts describing and defining witchcraft, and the popularity of anti-feminist satire, the audience of \textit{The Gospelles} would likely have registered each chapter at three different levels: as simultaneously authentic, magical (and therefore heretical), and comedic. Take, for example, what Ysengrine du Glay has to say about restrictions on a pregnant woman’s diet: “Ye sholde not gyve to yonge

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{45} Jeay and Garay, 15.
maydens to ete the heed of a hare to the ende that they sholde mary and in especyall to them that be with chylde for certaynly theyr children might have cloven lyppes.”

Eating rabbit while pregnant will cause your child to be born with a hare lip—a fairly simple bit of magical thinking supported by contemporary ideas concerning the female body’s permeability and its vulnerability to what Jacques Gélis calls “the virtue of imagination” in his *History of Childbirth.* Much of the folklore surrounding pregnancy suggests that anything a pregnant woman heard, saw, touched, or tasted could manifest itself in the appearance of her child. As James Frazer explains in his definition of sympathetic magic, this is a straightforward process, the most rudimentary form of magic: “like produces like…an effect resembles its cause.”

But it is also more than that. The reference to cloven lips is a rather curious example of this common belief, and one that I’ve not been able to find in other catalogues of old wives’ tales. Mary Chamberlain discusses the “virtue of imagination” in *Old Wives’ Tales* and explains that one accepted explanation for birthmarks was a prenatal diet too rich in strawberries, but this is only vaguely similar. The fact that *The Gospelles* is satirical, however, suggests another reading of this chapter in which the “cloven lips” caused by eating the rabbit’s head refer instead to lips of a different sort: the labia. This alternative reading is further reinforced by the gloss provided by one of the other spinners, Margaret of the Wheat: “even so it happened to one of my cosmyns / for bycause that she had eten of the heed of a hare her dough / ter that was in her wombe

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46 *Gospelles*, 7R.
brought forth foure lyppes.” Of course, this could just be a severe hare lip, but investing the chapter with bawdy undertones is, I think, justified since a later chapter relies on the same pun: “When that a woman grete with chylde strydeth over a / snale yf that it be a sone he shall have grete members and / harde and yf it be a doughter she shall have grete lyppes / and rede as well beneth as above.” In all of these examples, the women implicitly connect the prenatal care associated with midwives to the kind of magic denounced by *The Malleus Maleficarum* while simultaneously undermining their project’s goals by drawing an analogy between the biological facts of women’s anatomy and monstrous birth defects.

In fact, many of *The Gospelles*’ chapters can be read the same way. A later chapter explains that a man should never draw his sword in front of a pregnant woman without lying his sword “fyrst upon her / heed all softlye to the ende that she abyde stedfast & her / fruyte shall be the hardyer all his lyf.” Carl Lindahl and the other editors of *Medieval Folklore* include this practice in their discussion of rituals surrounding swords. Presumably, the logic is that the sword, as a powerful phallic symbol, will endow the woman with virility, which will be passed on to her child. Again, the chapter is at once an expression of legitimate, authentic folk belief regarding pregnancy and a superstition unmistakably grounded in the logic of magical thinking. And, again, the gloss goes on to make the undertone of the chapter more explicitly sexual, this time by picking up on the sword as phallus: “Peronne Be / uette sayd that bycause they dyde not so to her moder whan / she dyde bere her she was and is so ferde that she dare not / go to bedde

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50 *Gospelles*, 7R.
51 Ibid., 24R.
52 Ibid., 8R.
without the company of men.”54 Because her mother was not touched by the symbolic phallus and imbued with the masculine virtue it takes to be “steadfast,” the daughter must always have a male lover. Obstetrical folklore is once more invested with magical thinking and presented to the audience only to be turned into a bawdy joke that reinforces negative stereotypes about women, in this case justifying Bevette’s insatiable sexual appetite.

III: Satire and the Sociological Effects of Laughter

Again and again in The Gospelles, an authentic piece of women’s knowledge is presented, perhaps with a subtle difference from the traditional form, and then interpreted by the audience of spinning women who further modify—perhaps even misinterpret—the folklore by imposing a bawdy meaning upon it. The effect is clearly amusing to the circle of women; more than once the scribe notes that he must put his pen down because the women have fallen apart in peals of laughter and can no longer continue their work. Laughter, however, is as complex and multivalent as satire itself. As Albrecht Cassen writes in Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times, “laughter…can contribute to the establishment of…community, whether in mockery or approval of certain words, actions, or ideas.”55 For the women of The Gospelles, the laughter is clearly an expression of approval. They enjoy the camaraderie of their spinning circle, and the work of creating their gospel provides an opportunity for them to revel in their knowledge and poke fun at themselves, their lovers, their husbands, and their neighbors. For them, at least, the stakes are low.

54 Gospelles, 8R.
In *The Gospelles*, however, laughter does not just come from the women, and it is not solely a means of cementing the gossips’ friendships. As Cassen points out, building community through laughter can work through mockery as well as approval. This more negative humor was explored by Henri Bergson in his 1900 essay, “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,” in which he argued that laughter occurs when an individual is confronted by the incongruent, the nonnormative. When this laughter occurs, “two groups are immediately formed: those who laugh and those at whom the laughter is directed. Laughter is thus a form of social criticism or a force for social conformity, in which those who laugh see more or see differently than those who are laughed at.”

Cassen builds upon this theory of bifurcation by explaining that the audience of any given text is simultaneously invited to join in the laughter and to distance themselves from it, concluding that “laughter carries an infinitude of meaning and intentions,” solidifying social bonds in one instance and aligning aggressors against their victims the next.

In *The Gospelles of Distaues*, this “infinitude of meaning” plays itself out in one of the scribe’s regular asides. After the fourth night of recording the women’s chapters and glosses, the scribe complains,

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…It displeased me moche that I
myght not have the company of ony man for to laughe &
passe the tyme / for certainly the countenaunce and manere
of them was ryght savage and straunge / and to my thyn-
kynge it semed them that all the worlde sholde be gover-
ned by theyr constytycyons and words.
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In *Transforming Talk*, Phillips reads this moment as a reaction to the heretical talk of the night; the man craves the safer, more orthodox conversation of menfolk, a haven he may find in the

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57 Cassen, 66.
58 *Gospelles*, 21R
laughter of his audience—the contemporary readers of *The Gospelles*. The narrator laments the absence of male companionship and conversation following a rather tame chapter about love magic: Dame Sebylle suggests that any woman who wants her husband or paramour to love her well ought to “put in his shoo a lefe of / brekens that had ben gadred on saynt Johans even why / les that they rynge none so that it be in the lefte shoo and / without faute he shall love her mervaylously.” The narrator’s reaction to this statement emphasizes his Otherness within the group and his Oneness with the audience. These women are guilty of superstition and witchcraft: they manipulate masculine desire through supernatural means and thus commit one of the crimes Kramer describes in *The Malleus Maleficarum*. In this light, the narrator’s horrified vision of a world controlled by these women’s “constyttycions and words” makes more sense: he is afraid of a world ruled by witchcraft. Because what these women are discussing would have been recognized as love magic, the narrator must present himself as a passive observer, someone who witnesses the misdeeds of these women but does not participate in them, and although the narrator reports the laughter of the group, he never laughs with them. Rather, he thinks wistfully of a different company whose chatter he can enjoy and whose laughter he can join. The narrator invokes a safer, hypothetical camaraderie to distance himself from the women, which allows the author to align himself with the people for whom he is writing. It is as if he is saying, “We are not like these women. You and I could laugh together without offending God.” The desire for his own community is self-fulfilling. By setting the gossips’ laughter in opposition to the absent laughter of men, the narrator creates the community he desires.

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59 Phillips, 184.

60 *Gospelles*, 21R. I am unsure what type of flora “breken” is. Jeay and Garay translate the original French phrase of “une fueille de gauguiyer cueillie” as a “walnut-tree leaf,” but Watson seems to opt for a different plant. Perhaps “breken” is a variant spelling of “bracken,” which is another word for fern.
By utilizing satirical tropes as he presents folklore that implicitly connects midwifery with witchcraft (a connection which clearly exists in theological treatises like *The Malleus Maleficarum*, in government documents like the midwives’ oath, and in literary texts like *The Gospelles*), the author presents an enemy that can be neutralized through the communal, homogenizing laughter of the populace. The readers of *The Gospelles* may well have felt uneasy about this group of spinning, gossiping women and may have been a bit discomfited by all the talk of women’s secrets, but the author allays these fears by recasting the “secrets” in the language of antifeminist satire, transforming the women from objects of terror into nothing more than familiar bawds. In *The Gospelles*, satire functions as a coping mechanism, as a means of soothing a populace very much convinced that the midwife-witch was real.

IV. Away from Magic: Max Weber’s Theory of Disenchantment and a Micro-Moment of Demagification

In order for *The Gospelles*’ satire of the midwife-witch to be effective, society needed an alternative to the magical ways of thinking that had dominated women’s healthcare throughout history up to that point. I suggest that the conditions in sixteenth-century Europe that led to the fall of midwives and the demonization of their knowledge can be understood as a small moment of disenchantment, using Max Weber’s theory as outlined in “Science as a Vocation.” Weber briefly sketches out his theory of disenchantment as it relates to the perceived value of pursuing science as a career, but many critics have taken this model of disenchantment and expanded it well beyond its original contexts. In fact, it has developed it into a sociological fact nearly

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axiomatic in its simplicity. Rationalization and intellectualism have robbed us of our sense of wonder. Most people no longer believe in magic or participate in the abundance of religious rituals common in the past. “This,” Weber said, “means the world is disenchanted.”

Understandably, this theory has not gone uncontested. Jane Bennett argues against the totalizing and depressing effects of Weber’s theory of disenchanted in her book, The Enchantment of Modern Life. She asserts that our sense of wonder has not faded away and that one can be rational and intellectual without being “enchanted” by magic or religion, which Weber identifies as the most common sources of wonder. Bennett argues that the world is still, and should still be, enchanted; without enchantment, there can be no sense of community, and without community, there can be no ethical action. Bennett is not alone in her criticism of Weber’s theory. In Ritual in Early Modern Europe, Edward Muir concludes simply that “Weber’s theory is inadequate, if not just plain wrong.” Just like Bennett, Muir’s contention is that the quality of enchantment has changed, growing less religious in nature, but that the quantity remains the same. Jeffrey Green also adds his voice to the mix in “Two Meanings of Disenchantment.” Green’s attempts to recoup Weber’s theory demonstrate the extent to which it had been discredited and put aside in favor of newer sociological models: by fracturing Weber’s theory into two types of disenchantment—a sociological condition (the traditional type) and a philosophical act (Green’s invention)—Green tries to make disenchantment relevant again. However, Green does not make the point behind developing two types of disenchantment very

62 Ibid.
clear, and his article is primarily useful for showing how maligned Weber’s theory has been.

I see Weber’s theory as flawed, to be sure, but insightful in a more limited sense. After all, there have been moments throughout history where magic has seemed to grow less important, less central to human communities. Unfortunately, however, Weber focused on one large movement (the industrialization) instead of smaller moments, which would seem to suggest that modernity happened suddenly rather than gradually and in sporadic spurts. Weber suggests a big bang of modernity, if you will, rather than the slower evolution described by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. I suggest that Weber’s theory still holds water if we look at the cultural conditions surrounding the Industrial Revolution and consider how these conditions affected other time periods in smaller but influential ways. In particular, I am interested in looking at how the late fifteenth-and early sixteenth-century approaches to midwifery and magic follow Weber’s model of disenchantment and how literary satire played an important role in this movement. Throughout my discussion, I have opted to use the literal translation of Entzauberung (“demagicification”) both to differentiate between the broader, sweeping claims of “disenchantment” and what I see as smaller, related moments of “demagicification” and to extricate the grand idea of “disenchantment” from its detractors’ well-founded objections.

To prove my point, we must return to the earliest and most prominent of the witchcraft tracts: *The Malleus Maleficarum*. When Heinrich Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger wrote their tract sometime in the 1480s, they attempted to craft an image of the witch that reconciled popular beliefs with official theological discourse, and they were largely successful: *The Malleus* was reprinted in 37 different editions in the 75 years after its birth, and the demonological model of witchcraft that Institoris and Sprenger championed quickly spread throughout Europe, eventually
replacing the older models.\textsuperscript{66} As Hans Peter Broedel explains in \textit{The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft}, the fact that these authors saw witchcraft as essentially connected to human sexuality led them to define the most egregious forms of witchcraft as those impeding natural reproduction or encouraging unnatural romantic affiliations and, more importantly, to emphasize the midwife as the witch \textit{par excellence}.\textsuperscript{67}

Many critics have commented on the midwife’s fall from grace. In \textit{Religion and the Decline of Magic}, Thomas notes the conflation of the midwife with the witch, but he argues that the shifting status of the cunning woman (of whom the midwife was merely a type) was the direct result of the Reformation and the subsequent devaluing of all superstitions, liturgical or otherwise.\textsuperscript{68} Nenno offers yet another perspective on how the village midwife became the village witch in “Between Magic and Medicine”: she argues that the change from “cunning woman,” a label without pernicious connotation,\textsuperscript{69} to “witch” occurred at this particular time because a growing field of highly trained male physicians was seeking to suppress their competition by aligning midwives—and mothers, by extension—with the satanic. Although many critics (like Peggy McCracken, Adrian Wilson, and Louise Jackson\textsuperscript{70}) all agree with Nenno’s thesis, others

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\textsuperscript{66} Before \textit{Malleus Maleficarum}, witchcraft was not understood in such narrowly demonological terms and neither the centrality of the devil’s pact nor the emphasis on female sexuality was as clearly defined.

\textsuperscript{67} See Broedel for a more thorough explanation of witchcraft as a specifically sexual offense.

\textsuperscript{68} Thomas, 252-300.

\textsuperscript{69} Eventually, “cunning” developed a negative connotation, meaning crafty or conniving, “skillful in compassing one’s ends by covert means,” but that usage is not recorded until 1590, well before \textit{The Gospelles} was written (\textit{OED}, 5a.). Before that, “cunning” meant “possessing knowledge or learning” (\textit{OED}, 1a) or “possessing magical knowledge or skill” (\textit{OED}, 3).

have remained more skeptical. Christina Larner’s “Was Witch-Hunting Woman Hunting?”\textsuperscript{71} and Davidson’s “The Myth of the Persecuted Female Healer,” which I discussed earlier in this chapter, both dismiss the idea that midwives were ever really aligned with witches.

Despite the counterarguments, the evidence points to a power struggle between the trained physicians and the untrained midwives. Contemporary literary depictions of midwives reflect this agenda, and the reasons behind this agenda can be understood as moments of demagicification. Works like \textit{The Malleus Maleficarum} and \textit{The Gospelles of Distaues} clearly represent midwives as witches. In addition, \textit{The Boke of Mayd Emlyn}, a broadside published by Wynkyn de Worde a few years after he published Watson’s translation of \textit{The Gospelles} and the only surviving English work to reference \textit{The Gospelles}, takes the work of confounding midwifery and magic one step further by adding murder to the titular character’s list of dubious accomplishments.\textsuperscript{72} All of these works turn women’s knowledge of medical practice into negative traits and illustrate the imagined trajectory: midwife to witch to murderer.

Yet, to my knowledge, the debate about midwives being represented as witches has not included literary texts or made even the slightest reference to Weber. Although the theory of disenchantment was originally based on the Industrial Revolution and the period I am considering is much earlier, the model of increased rationalization, a destabilized labor market, greater reliance on machinery, and the emphasis on the individual rather than the community is perfectly consistent with the struggle between physician and midwife. Moreover, Weber’s model can help explain, I think, why the midwife became a witch at this particular time. First, as the practice of medicine was formalized and accessibility to universities increased, more and more

men could claim official theoretical training, which they argued was better than the practical hands-on experience common to midwives. This can be interpreted as rationalization and intellectualism putting pressure on the old ways of knowing, in this case obstetrical folklore shared by female lay healers. Second, the growing preference for these “educated” men forced the cunning women out of the birthing chambers of noble ladies and onto the streets to care for the less well-funded “bastard bearers.” This was, admittedly, not a labor market mix-up on the scale of the Industrial Revolution, but it was substantial enough to the women it affected. Third, the trained male physician brought tools with him that were unavailable to the midwife. Whereas the midwife relied on superstitions like forbidding all circles, rings, and girdles from the birthing chamber (they were thought to have a constricting influence on the womb), university physicians brought forceps into play—and while not “machines” as we might understand the term, forceps were certainly more mechanical than superstitious. Finally, I believe the shift from the community to the individual finds expression in the number of people present at each birth. As Adrian Wilson in “The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretations” and as Natalie Zemon Davis in “Woman on Tops” suggest, giving birth was a social event, presided over by six, seven, or even eight women—in addition to the woman in labor and her midwife. In contrast, a physician-led birth was more clinical; usually only the pregnant woman, the physician, and an assistant were present.

The midwife became associated with the witch and the sociological context of the Industrial Revolution was not so different from the historical moment I am discussing, and works

of literature like *The Gospelles* illustrate the convergence of these two trends. The moment when the female speakers turn a conventional piece of advice about dietary restrictions into a bawdy pun on lips/labia rewrites the existence of female anatomy into a birth defect. In this excerpt from the text, midwifery is invested with magic only to be divested of practical value. Ysengrine du Glay, one of the lead speakers of *The Gospelles*, reminds her listeners that they should avoid eating rabbit while they are pregnant, lest their children be born with four lips. Margaret of the Wheat responds by claiming that her cousin ignored this dictum and subsequently brought forth “a doughter with foure lyppes.” 75 Although the assembly of women find this sudden turn away from established obstetrical folklore rather funny, this example suggests that the knowledge associated with midwifery was often regarded as magical, that the magic itself had lost its status, and that midwifery was laughable. In the face of science, the magical wisdom professed by the women of *The Gospelles* looks about as serious and medically useful as a dirty joke. Satire enabled the male physicians of this period to differentiate what they did (which was rational, practical, and theoretically-sound medicine) from what midwives did (which was irrational, ridiculous, and superstitiously-motivated nonsense).

V: Why Carnivalesque?

The understanding of women’s anatomy during the period contributed to the easy, seemingly natural alignment of the carnivalesque with the entire female sex, not just in modern theory like Bakhtin’s but to medieval and early modern cultures as well, and this alignment contributed to allegations of witchcraft. As discussed in previous chapters, women were

75 *Gospelles*, 7R.
imagined as essentially carnivalesque on a basic, biological level throughout much of history: they were men, turned inside out and flipped upside down. A woman’s natural state was to be turned topsy-turvy, and pregnancy was seen as a particularly carnivalesque moment in a woman’s life precisely because it made women’s monstrous, internal anatomy into a highly visible spectacle. Finally, I conclude this chapter by examining the claims several critics have made concerning the positive social function of the topsy-turvy world specifically as it relates to pregnancy and to connect these points to representations of pregnant and post-partum bodies in sixteenth-century literature. Ultimately, my sense is that this literature does not support the claim that carnivalesque tropes effectively undermined the established hierarchy. The literature, if not the contemporary culture itself, consistently imagines women’s bodies as grotesque, but the literary representation of these ideas seems stripped of the countercultural potential Bakhtin and others have claimed for carnival. The trick is that it looks potentially subversive, but the threat of subversion is invoked time and again only to be shut down in favor of the status quo.

Literary representations of grotesque female bodies are particularly common in anti-feminist works from the sixteenth century, and there is a familiar litany of insults that are repeatedly directed at women and their reproductive bodies from the Middle Ages on. By looking at a single source and connecting a few important descriptions from a fourteenth-century text to a few well-known sixteenth-century descriptions, we can see how later writings parrot the earlier images. Giovanni Boccaccio’s satirical dream vision, *Il Corbaccio* (c. 1355), offers an unusually sustained, focused, and exhaustive catalogue of anti-feminist commonplaces; it was not by any means the first text to include these ideas—as noted earlier, the anti-feminist catalogue was nearly cliché by the Renaissance—but it is and was sufficiently well-known and well-regarded to function as an early self-contained example of the long-standing, recurrent
anxieties about female bodies that would color anti-feminist passages for many centuries after it was composed. As Anthony Cassell points out in his introduction to *Il Corbaccio*, Boccaccio’s purpose was not to say that which had never been said of any woman, as Dante attempted in *Vita Nuova*, but to collect “all the anti-feminist sayings with which one had always slandered every woman.” Speaking well of women was innovative; speaking ill was traditional, even during Boccaccio’s lifetime.

A few of the most recurrent grotesque descriptions of reproductive female bodies center on explicitly post-partum images: their withered breasts, their sagging skin, and their stretched external genitalia, descriptions that Boccaccio includes in abundance throughout *Il Corbaccio*. The target of this text has breasts that “are so beyond measure lengthened and dislocated from their natural position” that they reach her navel and are “empty and wrinkled like a deflated bladder.” Her stomach is “lined with thick, wide furrows like a young she-goat” and looks, again, like “an empty bag, sagging just like the empty skin that hangs from the chin to the chest of an ox,” so much so that it must be physically lifted out of the way in order for her to have sex or urinate. The woman’s vagina does not escape the narrator’s notice, either. He describes it as “foaming with foul grime and full of creatures of unusual species,” with “a mouth” so wide that a whole armada might sail through it. It is constantly streaming with “sanguine and yellow rivers” and is “the pigsty of Venus.” Then, as if these details were too much to believe, the narrator insists, “If perhaps someone would deny this [the terrible things he has to say about

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77 Ibid., 55.
78 Ibid., 56.
79 Ibid., 10.
women], let him consider their childbearing. Given the color of previous descriptions, the reader might expect a graphic scene to follow, but the narrator offers no description of the thing itself, as if pregnancy and childbirth are so grotesque that they either defy description or are so self-explanatory as to render that description unnecessary, which really is something, when he has no qualms about describing the “Village of Evilhole” with its rivers of blood and urine.

Of course, Boccaccio was not the first to think of such images, and he certainly was not the last to repeat them. The images recorded in *Il Corbaccio* recur in literature throughout the Renaissance, but three well-known examples should suffice: “The Tunning of Elynour Rumming” (1550), *The Faerie Queene* (1596), and, a little later, *King Lear* (c. 1605). Skelton picks up on the drooping and dripping description of women’s aging, post-partum bodies-as-bags when he introduces his alewife:

Her lothely lere  
Is nothynge clere,  
But ugly of chere,  
Droupy and drowsy,  
Scurvy and lousy.  
Her lewde lyppes twayne,  
They slaver, men sayne,  
Lyke a ropy rayne,  
A gummy glayre.  
[…]
Her skynne loose and slacke,  
Grained lyke a sacke.  

As in *Il Corbaccio*, “The Tunning” imagines post-partum bodies as sagging, leaking, furrowed sacks. Spenser, too, picks up on these currents when he writes of Duessa’s true form in Book I of

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80 Ibid., 24.
81 Ibid., 55.
82 Recall the analogy of the saffron bag and Mary’s devaluation by the Lollards and later the Protestants. The logic remains consistent across centuries.
The Faerie Queene. The whole description is grotesque, and I consider it at more length in my fifth chapter, but for the present purpose, the woman’s withered, leaking breasts are more relevant: “Her dried dugs, like bladders lacking wind, / Honge downe, and filthy matter from them weld.” Duessa’s body recalls the sagging, empty bags of the other two examples, and the reference to lactation (even “filthy” lactation) further connects her body to pregnancy. However, Spenser’s muse is more chaste than Boccaccio’s, so his readers do not get a description of Duessa’s “neather parts”—Spenser says only that she has a fox’s tail that is caked with dung, an eagle’s talon, and a bear’s paw. Finally, I mention briefly King Lear’s famous description of women’s bestial bodies:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above.
But to the girdle do the god’s inherit,
Beneath is all the fiend’s.
There’s hell, there’s darkness, there’s the sulphurous pit;
burning, scalding, stench, consumption…”

Lear’s outburst lacks the physical immediacy of the other examples, but he too imagines women’s bodies as monstrous, deformed, and hellish, anatomizing (or fetishizing?) the hidden parts as disgraceful. All of these descriptions—women as deflated bags, as a collection of leaking and fuming orifices, as dehumanized monsters, and as gaping, streaming, all-consuming vaginas—demonstrate the extent to which female bodies were regarded as grotesque during this period. Here is Bakhtin’s emphasis on the mouth, rendered as vagina by Boccaccio; the genitals, Elynour’s labia rendered as “slavering lips” by Skelton; the breasts, always sagging, sometimes

85 FQ, 1.8.49.
leaking; and the potbelly, stretched, furrowed, and grained by age and pregnancy. There can be little doubt that medieval and Renaissance cultures recognized the connection Bakhtin later described and codified.

Why did this connection form in the first place? The answer to that question lies in the contemporary understanding of women’s anatomy. Galen, the Roman physician whose work I discussed in the second chapter, claimed that women’s bodies were the same as men’s, only—to use a turkey thermometer as a metaphor—women were not fully cooked, so their parts never popped out.87 To summarize briefly, Thomas Laqueur discusses this understanding of sexual difference in Making Sex and refers to it as “the one-sex model.”88 Quoting Galen, again: “Think first, please, of the man’s [external genitalia] turned in and extending inward between the rectum and the bladder. If this should happen, the scrotum would necessarily take the place of the uterus with the testes [turned ovaries] lying outside, next to [the uterus] on either side.”89 Laquer puts it clearly: “Women…are inverted, and hence less perfect, men.”90 Women are men turned inside out; or if I may capitalize on the language of Carnival, women are men, only upside down and topsy-turvy. According to the period’s logic, then, women were carnival incarnate, their very bodies reflecting the chaos and disorder of the festival.

In this light, the connection between women and the grotesque or carnivalesque and the focus on pregnancy in particular becomes clearer. As Mary points out in “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” spectacle plays an important role in defining any given woman as a female grotesque. She writes, “Making a spectacle out of oneself seem[s] a specifically feminine

87 Thanks to Michel Aaij for gifting me this metaphor.
89 Ibid., 25.
90 Ibid., 26.
danger. The danger [is] one of exposure. Men…‘[expose] themselves,’ but that operation [is] quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself [has] more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries.” Russo writes in modern terms, so for her, becoming a spectacle might mean exposing dimpled thighs, laughing too loudly or too shrilly, or letting a bra strap slide, unnoticed, down an exposed shoulder. But to an Early Modern culture, pregnancy was almost certainly a spectacle, and a particularly fraught one at that. A pregnant body cannot help but make a spectacle of itself; it swells, it protrudes; it is woman’s inverted anatomy, pushing outward and making itself known. Pregnancy fills woman’s place of difference, her uterus, and makes her monstrous interiority impossible to ignore as the ever-expanding belly fills the world around it, inadvertently flaunting the interior space that men, as perfectly cooked turkeys, do not have. And, if early modern men understood their contribution to conception as semen/spirit, then pregnancy was imagined, again in Laqueur’s words, “as the male having an idea inside the female body,” and the exaggerated corporeality of pregnancy challenged the spiritual basis of that masculine contribution. The very nature of pregnancy turns the illusion of disembodied masculine power and control on its head by being, quite literally, full-bodied and female.

In addition to pregnancy as a spectacle of woman’s difference, the contemporary understanding of women’s bodies as “leaky vessels” also aligned them with the carnivalesque and with grotesque realism. According to Bakhtin, grotesque realism stresses those parts of the body that are “open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the

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92 Laqueur, 35.
Again, this formulation is not necessarily gendered, but recall, for a moment, of the descriptions from earlier in this chapter—how many of them hinged on some sort of specifically feminine leakage? The woman of *Il Corbaccio* streams menstrual blood, Elynour Rumming’s labia slaver, Duessa’s breasts ooze, King Lear’s imagined “sulphorous pit” releases poisonous fumes. As Gail Kern Paster argues in *The Body Embarrassed*, women were understood as especially porous: everyone leaks, but “the female body’s material expressiveness—its production of fluids” was imagined as excessive and uncontrollable, almost never deliberate. Grotesque realism focuses on orifices and the permeability of the body, and women leak. Pregnant women leak a lot. After all, incontinence is not an uncommon side effect of pregnancy, given the limited space an expanding uterus leaves a bladder, and not an uncommon post-partum ailment, either, due to overstretched or damaged pelvic floor muscles. From one perspective, childbirth is the leakiest moment in an already leaky woman’s life. There is the initial gush of amniotic fluid, there is blood, there is a human being, there is the afterbirth, and eventually there is breast milk. All of this demonstrates the extent to which pregnant bodies in particular were understood as carnivalesque according to Bakhtin’s definition: if the grotesque body stresses the parts “through which the body itself goes out to meet the world,” there is no more literal example than a birth canal, although this is perhaps not exactly or at least not only what Bakhtin had in mind.

However, it was not just the literal leakiness of pregnant bodies that made them seem carnivalesque to the medieval and early modern mind. According to obstetrical folklore,

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95 Bakhtin, 26.
pregnant bodies were permeable to ideas, images, and sounds as well, through the magical belief that Gélis describes this as “the virtue of imagination.” He writes, “the child saw what the mother saw, heard what the mother heard, and felt what she felt…Part screen, part filter, [the woman’s body] protected the child from excessive heat or cold; but it was also a conductor which transmitted to the child various influences, some of which were far from beneficial.”96 This belief most frequently affected the pregnant woman’s diet (don’t eat too many strawberries, or your child will be born with large red birthmarks), but it also affected what the pregnant woman was allowed to look upon or do. For example, if a pregnant woman saw a frightening figure, the baby she brought forth would likely be disfigured. The boundaries between the body and the outside world were thus furthered blurred during pregnancy, as much of the folklore in the Gospelles suggests.

Women’s bodies were imagined as carnivalesque by the dominant culture of the period, and pregnant bodies were particularly so, and the biological explanations for why such a connection was thought to exist support the literary alignment of female bodies with the grotesque. The historical and theoretical scholarship concerning pregnancy within the Early Modern period depicts the culture of pregnancy, not just the ways in which it was embodied or imagined to be embodied, as carnivalesque in its disruption of the established hierarchy and in its privileging of the lower stratum. According to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, this disruption is supposed to be productive; it is supposed to be a site of resistance. As Mary Russo paraphrases the Bakhtinian approach: “Seen as a productive category, affirmative and celebratory…, the discourse of carnival moves away from modes of critique…”97 Natalie Zemon Davis and Adrian Wilson both argue that the Early Modern treatment of pregnancy fulfills this

96 Gélis, 53.
97 Russo, 319.
function of the carnivalesque. Davis writes,

Rather than expending itself primarily during the privileged duration of the joke, the story, the comedy, or the carnival, topsy-turvy play had much spillover into ‘everyday’ serious life, and the effects there were sometimes disturbing and even novel...[the] inversion could prompt new ways of thinking about the [established] system and reacting to it. 98

She only applies this to pregnancy-specific subject matter in one sentence of her whole essay—she writes, the usual subjection of wives “might be reversed temporarily during the lying-in period, when the new mother could boss her husband around with impunity.” 99 However, based on the suggestion of this sentence and backed by her own extensive research, Adrian Wilson argues that the ceremony of childbirth effectively challenged the status quo, that it was “constructed and maintained by women because it was in the interests of women, and it represented a successful form of women’s resistance to patriarchal authority.” 100 While much of what Wilson argues is persuasive, especially in terms of ritual psychology, the literature from the sixteenth century that references pregnant and post-partum bodies does not incorporate the elements of carnival in any recognizably positive, productive, or celebratory way. The elements of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque are there, certainly, but the carnivalesque descriptions from The Gospelles of Distaues and from Boccaccio, Skelton, Spenser, and Shakespeare cannot be interpreted as either celebratory or even as countercultural. They seem, instead, to reassert the dominant view that women were deformed, and hence inferior, and that the maternal body was especially disgusting, superstitious, magical, and bawdy.

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98 Davis, 143.
99 Ibid., 145.
100 Wilson, 88.
CHAPTER 4
MOTHERHOOD AS A SPECTACLE/SPECTER OF DIFFERENCE:
STAGING THE MATERNAL BODY IN CITY COMEDIES AND IN TRAGEDIES

When Early Modern people spoke of pregnancy, they often resorted to patterns of speech that focused exclusively on the obvious visual difference represented by the gravid female body. Rarely were women referred to as “pregnant,” and while the modern circumlocution “with child” was used on occasion, the more common descriptions relied on specifically visual signs of pregnancy: pregnant women were “full-bellied,” “great-bellied,” or “big-bellied.”¹ Although modern readers cannot know for certain how pregnant bodies were staged for the dramas of the period, the lines spoken onstage suggest that productions similarly emphasized the ocular proof of pregnancy, as it were. For example, in Thomas Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, Master Allwit says of his Lady, “she’s a tumbler, o’ faith; / The nose and belly meets.”² The emphasis on the physical condition of pregnancy is consistent across Shakespeare’s canon, as

¹ Kathryn M. Moncrief discusses the appearance of pregnancy in more length and includes thorough analyses of portraiture from the period in her essay “‘Show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to’: Pregnancy, Paternity, and the Problem of Evidence in All’s Well That Ends Well,” Performing Maternity in Early Modern England. Ed. Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson. Burlington: Ashgate, 2007. Ultimately, Moncrief focuses more on the lack of proof in early pregnancy as it relates to Helena’s “victory” at the end of All’s Well, but her discussion of even the most gravid of pregnant bodies is instructive.
² 1.2:67-68. All quotations from A Chaste Maid in Cheapside come from Thomas Middleton. A Chaste Maid in Cheapside. Ed. R. B. Parker. The Revels Plays. London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1969. This particular expression, “the nose and belly meets,” was a common idiom in the period, and literalizes Bakhtin’s description of pregnancy as the inversion of the lower bodily functions rising to overtake the higher.
well. In *The Winter’s Tale*, one of the Hermione’s ladies declares that the queen has “spread of late / Into a goodly bulk.” In *Measure for Measure*, Lucio refers to Juliet’s gravid state by declaring that “her plenteous womb / Expresseth [Claudio’s] full tilth and husbandry.” When Claudio describes his own part in contributing to Juliet’s plight, he laments that “the stealth of our most mutual entertainment / With character too gross is writ on Juliet,” punning on “gross” as an adjective that can mean both full of vice or error and bulky, thick, or massive and foregrounding the legibility of their sin and her pregnancy by using the verb “writ.” References to swollen pregnant bodies abound in Early Modern drama, and heavily pregnant characters—played by male actors with stuffed or prosthetic paunches—appear onstage with regularity, most often when the women are in the late stages of gestation and their pregnancies can be signified by their mere physical presences.

The reasons why Early Modern culture in general and Early Modern dramas more specifically relied upon visual metaphors for describing pregnancy are numerous, but they ultimately grow from the same problem: those within the community and those within the audience could not know for certain if any given woman, whether their neighbor or a character onstage, was truly pregnant until her belly was enormously swollen. Midwifery manuals and gynecological guides from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries caution repeatedly against accepting anything short of hugely protruding bellies as proof positive of pregnancy. In *Childbirth or the Happy Deliverie of Women* (1612), James Guillemeau explains that any number of

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5 1.2: 151-152.
6 “gross,” adj. A.4.a. *OED*
7 “gross,” adj. A.1.a. *OED*
conditions might contribute to changes in the size and shape of a woman’s abdomen, and the best medical attendants should save themselves the shame of misdiagnosis by exercising extreme caution:

…ther is nothing more ridiculous, then to assure a woman that shee is with childe; and afterward, that her natural sicknesses, or store of water should come from her: and instead of a childe, some windie matter should break from her, as so her belly fall, and grow flat again: which hath hapned unto many men, that have been well esteemed, both for their learning, and experience.  

Guillemeau goes on to describe a woman who was dismayed when she discovered that she had been carrying “gallons of water, when she thought assuredly that she had beene with childe.” He and many other physicians, midwives, and surgeons all emphasize the importance of noting other symptoms, including retained menses; vomiting; hollow, sunken eyes with bluish-tinged sclera; fatigue; soreness; spitting; body tremors; and fluttering in the abdomen. While the whole host of symptoms might provide more evidence to support the existence of a pregnancy, each of these conditions or feelings is much harder to stage than a gigantically swollen belly. Thus, the female body was most often understood as pregnant when it was conspicuously enlarged, both in everyday life and in fictional renderings.

Because of this focus on the most obvious physical sign of pregnancy, women’s maternal bodies were often treated as public spectacles, in the sense that they were sights to behold as well as objects that attracted attention and piqued a variety of emotions ranging from admiration or curiosity to shame and even horror. Feminist theories on embodiment have thoroughly established the connection between the spectacle of female presence and the carnivalesque. The key to this connection is difference. Western understandings of the body traditionally define

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9 Ibid., 2.
health, the normative state, in masculine terms: to be healthy is to be unchanging, and a woman’s body is constantly going through cycles.\textsuperscript{10} Rosi Braidotti’s chapter from \textit{Writing on the Body}, “Mothers, Monsters, and Machines,” picks up this thread and connects it to literary representations of female bodies. Here, Braidotti claims that the association of women with difference and, therefore, with inferiority has directly produced “a style of misogynistic literature” that she identifies as “the horror of the female body.”\textsuperscript{11} Braidotti argues that the interconnection of women as monsters in the literary text is particularly prominent in satires, for example. “In a sense, the satirical text is implicitly monstrous,” she argues. “It is a deviant, an aberration in itself. Eminently transgressive, it can afford to express a degree of misogyny that might shock in other literary genres.”\textsuperscript{12} Sixteenth-century texts like \textit{The Gospelles of Distaves} demonstrate satire’s natural affinity for antifeminist rhetoric of feminine monstrosity, but it is worth noting that the female form as the antithesis to the masculine form does not in every case elicit horror. \textit{The Gospelles}’ satire treats feminine bodily difference with humor and occasional revulsion, but rarely with horror, and city comedies take a similar approach by relying on the physical difference of pregnant bodies to generate laughter, even if that laughter depends upon latent misogyny. According to Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism, discussed at more length in the first chapter, the heterogeneity between sexed bodies places the female way of being, which is grotesque, in opposition to masculine existence, which is traditional or even Classical. The carnivalesque understanding of feminine embodiment sets the mutability and unbounded

\textsuperscript{12} Braidotti, 64.
dynamism of the female body against the static, monumental stability of the male body, just as Mary Russo explains in “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory.” 13 When it comes to early modern dramas, the spectacle of embodied difference functions just as the discussions in feminist theory describe: female embodiment alternatively divides, entertains, amuses, shocks, and repulses.

Because dramas were witnessed and heard rather than read, the visibility of maternal bodies functions differently than in traditional written texts. Kathryn M. Moncrief highlights the complexity of this spectacle as it relates to theater: “The legibility—and potential illegibility—of the pregnant female body, both what it reveals and what it might hide…lies at the heart of plays dealing with maternity and paternity.” 14 The idea that women, all women but especially pregnant women, could disguise their rotten or guilty interiors with a pleasant outward show was and still is a commonplace of anti-feminist writings. 15 The ideological inconsistencies that surrounded pregnant women as highly visible but ominously obscure entities is perhaps nowhere more clear than in Early Modern dramas, as Moncrief, Kathryn R. McPherson, and Mary Beth Rose all suggest. 16 The theater played upon the deliberate physical display of maternal bodies in order to

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14 Moncrief, 34
15 According to Roland du Jardin, a seventeenth-century author, the idea that women may conceal their faults and secrets underneath their external beauty inspired a common marriage ritual: “Sometimes at marriages Walnuts are scattered vp and downe; which sheweth, that a woman is like vnto a Walnut that hath a great shell, but a little kernell, faire without, but rotten within.” A discourse of the married and single life Wherein, by discovering the misery of the one, is plainly declared the felicity of the other. London: Ionas Man, 1621. Oxford: Bodleian Library, STC 1446:11. 96. This image recalls Edmund Spenser’s description of “the maple, seldom inward sound” (1.1.9: 9). I discuss the disconnection between seeming and being at more length in the next chapter.
16 See Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. Moncrief’s introduction to Performing Maternity in Early Modern England and Mary Beth Rose, “Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options
present an object that could then be used to discuss, negotiate, recreate, and reflect the abundance of conflicting anxieties and desires that swirled around all maternal functions. In contrast to nonfiction works like advice books, sermons, and medical manuals, dramatic discourse depended on visual action and narrative tension, and it used fake pregnant bodies onstage and spoken references to maternity as a means of providing cheap laughs in comedic productions and provoking tension or horror in the more tragic or problematic plays.

In this chapter, I reframe the question Carol Chillington Rutter asks in her preface to *Enter the Body* in order to encompass non-Shakespearean dramas and differences across genre. Instead of asking “How does the body play on Shakespeare’s stage? What work does it do?,” I explore the ways in which the maternal body both appears and cannot appear on stage, what work that body does in its presence and in its absence, and how the playwright’s approach to maternity is shaped by the genre in which he is working and by his own limited knowledge of pregnancy and childbirth. I begin with the genre of city comedies, which often incorporated pregnancy as an essential plot point and staged pregnant characters as carnivalesque spectacles that align more or less neatly with the representations in satirical street literature. However, Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid* goes one step further by staging Lady Allwit’s lying-in and

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18 *A Chaste Maid* is just one of many city comedies that revolve around fertility and maternal bodies. Ben Jonson’s popular *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) is propelled by Win Littlewit’s pregnant cravings and incontinence, and his *The Magnetic Lady, or Humors Reconciled* (1632) includes a subplot in which a 14-year-old unmarried heiress, unfortunately named Placentia, hides her pregnancy, labor, and child aided by a household of female attendants. Samuel Rowley’s *When You See Me You Know Me* (1605) stages Henry VIII as the anxious and largely ignored father-to-be, pacing back and forth while Jane Seymour’s labor happens offstage. In addition, the happy dénouement of Middleton’s *A Mad World, My Masters* (1605) depends upon a courtesan’s counterfeit maternity, offering a rare example of deceptive pregnant bodies functioning to reconcile communities rather than divide them.
displaying the strictly gynocentric space of a birthing chamber, and that scene provides
foundation for my discussion of city comedies. In these plays, maternal figures embody the anti-
feminist traditions I have described in previous chapters and enable a whole slew of jokes built
upon women’s multifaceted leakiness. In tragedies, however, the narrative shifts and grows more
abstracted and more metaphorical, a movement up the literary register and away from the
realistic, fully physical maternal figures of medical tracts, street literature, satire, and comedy.
For this part of the discussion, I focus on William Shakespeare’s representation of breastfeeding
in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

I: The Maternal Body as Spectacle: *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

City comedies differ from traditional comedies in their focus on the everyday hustle and
bustle of urban life. Literary critic Brian Gibbons first identified city comedy as a distinct
dramatic genre in 1968, when he published *Jacobean City Comedy: A Study of the Satiric Plays
by Jonson, Marston, and Middleton*. Since then, critics have wholeheartedly adopted the term
and moved many Early Modern dramas into this camp. However, it seems that playgoers of the
time were not as explicitly aware that they were watching something new, something distinct
from what had been done in the past, as they did not develop a distinct vocabulary to discuss
these performances. The idea of a “city comedy,” then, is something of a productive
anachronism along the lines of Shakespeare’s so-called “problem plays.” Modern readers may
think about this collection of comedies as a subgenre unified by similar focal points, settings,
characters, themes, and modes of representation, but the extent to which contemporary audiences

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19 Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy: A Study of the Satiric Plays by Jonson, Marston and
regarded them as anything other than comedies remains unclear. What we do know is that this collection of plays represents a decisive departure from New Comedy, as Robert Bell describes: city comedies “responded to the influences of the city in early modern England, revealing how New Comedy’s traditional familial and community relationships were challenged and increasingly destabilized by ‘the urban swirls of competing individuals.’” In particular, modern critics have defined city comedies as responses to the destabilization of England’s traditional social, economic, and gender hierarchies brought about by urban growth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although Bell writes specifically about *A Mad World, My Masters*, all city comedies feature “a host of marginalized characters [who employ] different forms of deception and trickery to negotiate the social architecture of their domestic and urban communities.” The characters accomplish this deception through “alterations in identity and appearance” that allow characters “a means of subverting economic and gender barriers that restrict their independence.” Pregnant characters and communities of gossips fit perfectly within this setting because they revel in the changed physical appearance and shifting identity of the mother-to-be and celebrate an inverted gender hierarchy by emphasizing female community. A pregnant woman’s growing body marks her progress toward her new identity as a mother and toward her lying-in, during which time her husband would take over domestic duties and she would be surrounded by her female friends, family, and neighbors.

Because pregnancy and childbirth are consistent with the focus of city comedy, many of these plays feature more numerous and more direct representations of maternity than the other dramatic forms tend to include. Couple the thematic consistencies between the standards of city

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comedy as a genre and the contemporary perceptions of maternity with the estimated fertility rates of the period, and the abundance of pregnant figures, maternal plotlines, and references to childbirth in city comedies seems more natural. Historians of the period suggest that the average woman bore between eight and ten children during her reproductive years, obviously far more than the modern average, so the sight of pregnant bodies and their attendants must have been familiar. City comedies took place on the streets of London, and London was teeming with teeming women.

However, as common as pregnancy was and as visible as pregnant women were in urban sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London, most men knew little about the physical experience of pregnancy and next to nothing about the process of childbirth and post-partum recovery. The birthing chamber was a closed, protectively and insistently gynocentric social space. If a male physician acted as the primary obstetrician during labor, as was becoming more common, he left shortly after the birth; the rituals that followed pregnancy (the lying-in, the infant’s christening, and the mother’s churching) were dominated by women. The work, activities, and conversations that took place within that darkened room were a mystery to most men, and that mystery inspired several authors to write narratives that purportedly shed light on the secrets of the birthing chamber. These narratives are overwhelmingly negative and depict the community of women who attend births and lyings-in as thoroughly incontinent: the gossips who surround laboring women and new mothers drink too much, talk too much, spill their bodily fluids too freely, and discuss their sexualities too openly. Middleton’s representation of this space onstage during A Chaste Maid violates its closed, private nature by turning it into a spectacle for his audience to

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21 Cressy describes a range of preparations for the birthing chamber according to the wealth and status of the parturient woman in Birth, Marriage, and Death, 50-54. Gélis offers even more detail in The History of Childbirth and mentions the superstitious plugging up of holes, foors, and windows, creating a womb-like atmosphere to protect the mother, 96-98.
behold. His treatment of Lady Allwit’s lying-in builds upon the same voyeuristic image
developed and popularized in printed fictions, texts like the *Fyftene Joyes of Maryage* (1507)\(^{22}\)
to which I compare *A Chaste Maid*. All of these works treat the birthing chamber and the
delivered woman’s lying-in through a satirical and distinctly antifeminist lens, and Middleton
appropriated that lens when he decided to write Lady Allwit’s bed on to the stage at the Swan
Theater.

The scene in question is an anomaly as the sole known staging of a birthing chamber or a
lying-in on the Early Modern stage.\(^{23}\) The scene begins with the entrance of an unspecified
number of gossips. The introductory note says simply “Enter all the Gossips,” and we can
surmise that there must have been at least four, since much of the dialogue within the scene
bounces back and forth between Lady Allwit, Maudline, Lady Kix, a nurse, the Puritans (all
assigned feminine pronouns over the course of the scene), and four separate gossips. The first
gossip opens the scene by inquiring after Lady Allwit’s wellbeing and announcing that they have
returned with her freshly christened daughter. Once all of the women onstage are provided
stools, the gossips start praising the infant for being a strong copy of her father:

> 2 Goss. Is’t not a chopping girl? So like the father.
> 3 Goss. As if it had been spit out of his mouth!\(^{24}\)

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\(^{23}\) Janelle Jenstad mentions briefly that there is only one other surviving play that features a

\(^{24}\) Female genitalia have long been symbolically associated with mouths, so the saying that an
infant is so like the father that he could have spit it out of his mouth references the possibility of
Ey’d, nos’d, and brow’d as like a girl can be,
Only indeed it has the mother’s mouth.
2 Goss. The mother’s mouth up and down, up and down!²⁵

On the surface, these lines seem straightforward and commonplace. However, given the paternity of Lady Allwit’s child and the cultural anxieties about what women in the birthing chamber knew, these lines grow more nuanced and richly meaningful. Within the confines of the play, the Allwits’ arrangement with Sir Walter Whorehound is a running joke, made innocuous and therefore laughable by the glee Master Allwit feels surrounding his status as a well-kept and complicit cuckhold. Sir Walter has fathered many children upon Lady Allwit and in return for exclusive rights to her reproductive body, pays the husband and wife handsomely. The fact that the gossips go on and on about how like the infant is to her father could, in this light, have several meanings depending on how the delivery of these lines and the body language of the gossips on stage. If the gossips treat this dialogue sincerely and deliver the lines while doting upon the infant, they seem oblivious to her true parentage, and the contemporary culture’s fear that gossips might conceal some secret knowledge about an impure or illegitimate bloodline loses some of its sting. Real-life gossips do not know anything husbands do not. If, however, Middleton’s gossips adopt a wry or sarcastic tone and exchange knowing looks, the meaning of the lines changes dramatically, and the play confirms rather than allays the fears of its audience. Gossips and the whole community of childbed attendants know secrets that men do not.

Since there are no stage directions for knowing glances or waggling eyebrows, it is impossible to say for sure which possibility was staged in 1613. However, given the affinity between satirical street literature and city comedies, I am inclined to believe that the actors went

with the second approach. The previous chapter discussed the *Gospelles*’ use of lips and mouths to pun upon the shape of female genitalia, and here the third gossip’s insistence that the infant girl has her mother’s mouth followed by the second gossip’s exclamation could play upon that same equivocation. “The mother’s mouth up and down, up and down!” could be enthusiastic agreement about the physical likeness of their mouths, but I argue that it can be read as a reference to both mouths of the female form: the oral mouth up top and the vaginal mouth down below. If this is the case, the tone of the passage becomes bawdier, and the lines about the daughter’s resemblance to her father seem more like gossips’ jokes about a cuckolded husband. Middleton offers up a vision of gossips as all-knowing in matters of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth.

Consider this scene alongside an excerpt from the *Fyftene Joyes of Maryage*. Like the *Gospelles of Distaves*, this text is an English translation of a French original and was published by Wynkyn de Worde in the first decade of the sixteenth century.\(^{26}\) Many of de Worde’s publications featured antifeminist and satirical representations of gossips, and the *Fiftyene Joyes* fits that mold well. Parodying the Seven Joys of Mary, *Fiftyene Joyes* is structured around 15 comical moments or situations that replace the joy the Virgin Mary felt throughout Jesus’ life and death with the sorrow men feel as the women in their lives mistreat and manipulate them.\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) The original French text, *Les Quinze Joyes de Mariage*, dates from c. 1400. English translations of French texts were in vogue during the period, and both *Gospelles* and *Lez Quinze* had been popular in their native land, going to print a combined ten times between 1480 and 1507. See Phillips, 151.

In the third section, the narrator focuses on pregnancy and the behavior of gossips who attend births and lyings-in. The section opens with a composite woodcut made of two separate prints: on the left is a female figure standing with her hand raised in benediction and on the right is a birthing chamber with a new mother lying in bed while another woman walks away with her

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28 *Fyftene*, 34.

29 While many of the sections do not have a special relationship with the Virgin Mary’s specific joys, it is worth noting that this section does. The third section of *Fyftene Joyes* and the third joy of Mary share some similarities. The gathering of gossips around the newly delivered mother parallels the arrival of the wisemen in the Adoration of the Magi, but the tone of these gatherings is pointedly different; the antifeminist religious parody of the two texts depends upon the notion that women cannot participate in religious traditions or serve in religious roles without ruining them. Thus, the women who write the *Gospelles* profane sacred writings by attempting to position themselves as Apostles to Womankind, and the gossips in this episode parody the Magi, who are somber and reverent and offer presents to the newborn and his parents with gifts. The gossips cannot function in such a sacred role because they are boisterous and bawdy. They threaten to eat the husband out of house and home without. They are consumers, not givers.
swaddled infant.\textsuperscript{30} The image belies the text, however: while the scene is composed and calm, the text quickly asserts its satirical and misogynistic nature. The first ten lines that follow the woodcut introduce the sexual coupling of a newlywed husband and wife and quickly shift focus to issues of maternity/paternity:

\begin{quote}
Soone after this her bely doth aryse  
And waxeth grete as is the comyn gyse  
Wherof the husbande alwaye hath the name  
And perauento he nothynge to blame  
Is of the dede for so it happeth ofte  
As some men saye in preuy counseylls ofte  
And therat meryly wyll laughe or hum  
But this is de secretes mulierum.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Men may laugh about a cuckolded husband and the bastard who carries his name but not his genes, but only women know the truth of the matter. By appropriating the phrase “de secretes mulierum” to refer to women’s knowledge of true paternity, the narrative parodies the genre of writing that I discussed in the second chapter and casts the wisdom of midwives and childbed attendants as specifically sexual knowledge that ridicules men. Although this translation predates \textit{A Chaste Maid} by over 100 years, it was adapted and reprinted as \textit{The Bachelor’s Banquet}\textsuperscript{32} in 1603, so Middleton may have been familiar with the later version and he had almost certainly seen similar woodcuts, given the “promiscuity” of many woodblocks.\textsuperscript{33} In any case, the idea that


\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Fyftiene}, 35.


\textsuperscript{33} Simone Chess offers a solid introduction to the creation and lifespan of woodblocks in her essay “Woodcuts: Methods and Meanings of Ballad Illustration.” \textit{English Broadside Ballad Archive}. University of California Santa Barbara. Samuel Pepys described certain woodcuts as “promiscuous,” and that term has been maintained by modern critics to refer to woodcuts that
women knew secrets about men based on their experiences within birthing chambers manifests in other literary texts from the period, and Middleton may have been counting on this familiarity when he staged the gossips around Lady Allwit’s bed. The possibility that the gossips know the identity of the child’s true father is enables more comedic stagecraft, as all of the characters in the scene know the truth but attempt to conceal it from each other. The characters onstage think they have a juicy secret, but not one of them does. Only the audience is fully “in the know.”

In many ways, the lying-in scene in A Chaste Maid is not as remarkable as one might expect. It is anomalous amongst Early Modern theater productions, but in terms of tone, images, and character treatment, the scene repeats the existing literary representations of a lying-in and transplants the stereotypical gossips from the page to the stage with minimal translation. As a strictly textual product set alongside other textual products, A Chaste Maid presents no new material and offers no new perspective; however, as a spectacle meant to be seen, the play makes visible its complete rejection of the only other visual representations of birthing chambers: contemporary woodcuts. Whereas literary descriptions of lying-in scenes feature an abundance of women sitting about, eating, drinking, and gossiping, the visual representations tend to be more sedate and somber. In Figure 4.1, the birthing chamber contains few rhetorical flourishes. The women involved appear dutiful and reverent, and the infant occupies a central position within the scene. In Figure 4.2, the chamber is considerably more crowded, but the overall tone remains subdued. In the foreground, one woman prepares to bathe the newborn infant in a wooden tub. To the side, two other women stand close and converse while a small child plays alongside a cradle. The new mother appears in the background, lying in bed, while another

appear frequently in printed works from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often with little or very limited connection to the content of the printed text.

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woman offers her a plate of food. The table is scattered with utensils and plates, but even this possible reference to the gossips’ stereotypical appetite is downplayed by the absence of food or drink—except for what is offered to the mother. None of the gossips hold cups, and there is no pitcher of beer or wine being passed around from gossip to gossip. As the frontispiece for Jakob

**Figure 4.2: Jakob Rüff’s *De conceptu et generatione hominis* (1554).**

Rüff’s *De conceptu et generatione hominis* (1554), this image of maternity announces the communal, female space of birthing chambers as active but calm spaces.

These images of the birthing chamber and the mother’s lying-in contrast sharply with the scene Middleton writes. As the bed is thrust into sight, female characters overtake the stage and the action, outnumbering the men ten to two. Master Allwit provides commentary as the gossips pass around pitchers of wine and plates of comfits. At first, he seems to encourage the womenfolk’s wining and dining, but his asides quickly change tone as the victuals start flowing more freely.

*Allw.* About, about with them amongst the gossips!—

[Aside] Now out comes all the tassell’d handkerchers,
They are spread abroad between their knees already;
Now in goes the long fingers that are wash’d
Some thrice a day in urine; my wife uses it.
Now we shall have such pocketing: see how
They lurch at the lower end!35

When addressing the other characters onstage, Allwit presents a supportive front, as custom dictates; he maintains the appearance of a generous and grateful husband. In his asides, however, he complains about the gossips’ appetites and poor hygiene. In these lines, Allwit describes the gossips “pocketing” or squirreling away extra food in their handkerchiefs, which they use as makeshift plates by spreading them across their knees. He calls into question their cleanliness by referencing the dog’s urine that many cosmetics recipes called for to cure warts. The same fingers that are washed in urine three times a day are picking up his food, seeing to his daughter (by name, at least), and tending to his wife’s privities, and he is clearly as disgusted by this thought as he is by the women’s gluttony, jumping as he does from their urine-soaked fingers to their “lurching” towards the food downstage.

35 *A Chaste Maid*, 3.2: 49-54.
Allwit’s complaints carry bawdy undertones, as well, and he connects the gossips’ appetites to their sexual incontinence. When he says “Now out comes all the tassell’d handkerchers, / They are spread between their knees already,” he is describing the physical action onstage—one can easily picture the women daintily covering their laps in elaborate kerchiefs—but he could also be referring to the women themselves. The pronoun “they” in the second line could refer to the women just as easily as it refers to their napkins, and the implication that these are bawdy, sexually promiscuous women crops up elsewhere in his asides. Furthermore, the sexual implication here is reinforced when he concludes the selection with “see how / They lurch at the lower end!” They are going after the food with gusto, and Allwit aligns that appetite with their sexual wantonness, alluding to the contemporary belief that women’s genitalia could respond to sweet smells with physical motion. Even the squeamish reference to urine fits within this secondary reading, as women’s perceived incontinence included their appetite for food, their verbal volubility, their sexual insatiability, and their urinary excess, as Gail Kern Paster amply demonstrates throughout her chapter on the women of city comedies. In addition, the dog’s urine foreshadows the suspicious puddles Allwit later sees underneath the

36 A Chaste Maid, 3.2.: 50-51.
37 Ibid., 3.2: 53-54.
38 In Timeaus (c. 360 BC), Plato described the womb as capable of sucking in the male seed and of performing “voluntary motion” when tempted by sweet smells. Qtd. in Audrey Eccles. Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1982. 28.
gossips’ stools. Davy suggests that the puddles are spilt wine, but Allwit is wary: “Is’t no worse, think’st thou?”

Over the course of this scene, Middleton includes stage directions for the women to eat or drink no fewer than eight times and alludes to more drinking and eating besides, including the exit of one particular gossip who refills her glass just before rushing offstage. Allwit grows more irritable as the scene wears on and eventually stalks off stage with Sir Walter Whorehound at his heels:

*Allw.* [Aside] Now the cups troll about  
To wet the gossips’ whistles. It pours down I’faith;  
They never think of payment.  
*I Pur.* Fill again, nurse.  
*Allw.* [Aside] Now, bless thee, two at one! I’ll stay no longer;  
It would kill me and if I paid for’t.

These lines echo the description of the husband’s plight in the *Fytiene Joyes*: in both cases, the husband watches as his wife and her gossips eat and drink their fill, consuming all of his goods without any sign of gratitude. Both men are depicted as outsiders—they never partake in the eating and drinking—who are so severely put upon that they face mortal danger. The same scene from the *Fytiene Joyes* reads:

and now on euery syde  
The gossyppes come and this good man must gete  
Suche vytayles as they may well drynke and ete  
So that they may in suche a wyse be eased  
As they shall holde them well content & pleased  
This done the wyfe and gossyppes talke togyder  
And fast they carye in for drede of weder  
All be it soo this good man hath the payne  
That trauayle must in wynde snowe hayle or rayne

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41 *A Chaste Maid*, 3.2: 77-80.
In both cases, the fathers are depicted as helpless victims of the gossips’ desires. Allwit hyperbolically references the horror of paying for his own death, and the translator of Fytiene Joyes describes the husband’s plight in the same terms used to describe childbirth. The “trauayle” the man faces as he tries to keep the gossips happy is linguistically paralleled with the birthing “travail” of his wife, but while the woman’s labor in childbirth only lasts a day or two, the man’s labor lasts for the duration of her lying-in, which typically went on for six weeks postpartum. This stretch of time was known as the “gander month,” as the husband took on all of his wife’s domestic duties and acted as hostess to the neighborhood gossips. For this reason, Natalie Zemon Davis identifies childbirth and the period of confinement that follows it as one of the temporary but authentic moments of Early Modern female empowerment in her essay “Woman on Top.”

Although Middleton and the men in his audience were unlikely to know what occurs within birthing chambers, they would have seen visual representations of these spaces from woodcuts like the ones included here—which are representative of a larger collection that is, for the most part, thematically consistent—and they would have encountered many similar bawdy birthing scenes in cheap print literature. When Middleton chose to create his own vision of a lying-in, he chose to exaggerate and distort the existing visual sources in favor of the more scandalous and salacious textual precedents. I believe his primary motivation was to create a spectacle, to reward his audience’s voyeuristic streak with sexual innuendo and riotous women.

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42 “travail,” n. 2 and 4. OED.
This streak forms the central conceit in a popular French text *Les Caquets de l’accouchée* (1622), which records the observations of a young man who has hidden himself in a birthing chamber to record the gossips’ behavior and conversation. *Le Caquets* was published after Lady Elizabeth’s Men first performed *A Chaste Maid* in 1613, and if it was ever translated into English, that translation has been lost. However, *Les Caquets* may shed light on Middleton’s choice to present a lying-in more like the contemporary textual descriptions than the visual representations: the whole text focuses on revealing the birthing chamber as a center of women’s debauchery. The scribe who hides in a cabinet is a spy with a mission: he infiltrates the gynocentric space and records with simultaneous amusement and disgust the spectacle of female gatherings. The same cultural impulses that led Middleton to present Lady Allwit’s lying-in led to this text, as well. The extent to which spying on women in these moments is worthwhile depends entirely upon what is seen. If nothing were afoot in the birthing chamber, if it was as calm as the woodcuts would have it, there would be no reason to stage it—especially not in a city comedy. As it is, however, Middleton’s scene plays well because the audience sees exactly what it expects to see and experiences the comforting humor of witnessing a lying-in that mirrors back to them what they have always suspected. Where maternity is concerned, the spectacle justifies the voyeurism and the voyeurs are rewarded with a spectacle.

II: The Maternal Body as Specter: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*

The physical humor made possible by comedy’s generic conventions—the spectacle of boy actors dressed as women and heavily burdened with prosthetic pregnancies, and the boisterously debauched communities of gossips—is largely inaccessible to playwrights working
within the tragic genre. Whereas pregnant bodies appear with some frequency in Early Modern comedies, they are far more rare in tragedies from the same period, with the notable exception of John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. In the absence of physical maternal bodies paraded before the audience’s eyes, maternity tends to assert its presence and importance through metaphors, allusions, and visual parallels or echoes. Maternity still accomplishes important narrative and symbolic work within tragedies, but it is largely disembodied or abstracted. Maternal actions are reported onstage, as in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter’s Tale*; discussed as hypothetical monstrosities, as in *Macbeth*; or acted out in dehumanized forms, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*. For the purposes of this section, I focus on the disembodied references to and abstractions of breastfeeding relationships within tragic dramas and consider the possible reasons why the specter of maternity appears more regularly in tragedies than in comedies.

These disembodied uses of maternity are all the more interesting when considered in light of Bakhtin’s definition of grotesque realism. When Bakhtin discusses the conversion of “the high” to “the low,” he usually writes of a mental process being represented by a physical act. In a highly typical move, he interprets a *commedia dell’arte* character stumbling over his words—a fool straining, gasping for breath, choking—as a degradation from “a highly spiritual act” to the “material bodily level of childbirth.” As Margaret Miles points out, Bakhtin again ignores issues of gender: “The ‘highly spiritual act’ is that of a man, while its conversion to the comic occurs—must occur?—in the body of a woman…” For Bakhtinian understandings of the grotesque, then, the female body is a catalyst of debasement, and indeed the primary figure. In

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other words, the female body and its bodily processes are the necessary matrix that makes intellectual (male) processes that belong to the highest order, to “the life of the mind,” more legible.

So what happens when maternity forms the metaphor? What does it mean when women turn their own bodily experiences into abstractions, flipping Bakhtin’s formation on its head? And why do these moments tend to be tragic, or come from the mouths of monstrous mothers? Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra both use these tropes to express what are traditionally thought of as masculine drives. In order to accomplish their goals as powerful women in male-dominated societies, they must distance themselves from their female bodies, not by disclaiming them (which would be impossible, given their positions as wives; which would be pointless, given the role sexuality plays in their quests for power), but by using metaphor to elevate them from the bodily, feminine level to the more philosophical, masculine sphere.

The Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) effectively bridges the gap between the comedies I discuss in the first section of this chapter and the tragedies that are to come, as she is a distinctly comedic figure set within a distinctly tragic story. She is a kindred spirit to the gossips that fill the pages of street literature and occupy the stage in city comedies: she is bawdy, overly fond, homely in the domestic sense, and full of women’s secrets—especially Juliet’s. Her references to breastfeeding appear within a nostalgic rumination over Juliet’s age and include a bawdy joke her late husband made after the toddler Juliet had injured her head in a fall. The whole scene is dominated by the Nurse’s meandering speech and her lack of narrative control. The starts and stops of her thought process, punctuated as it is by digressions and irrelevant details, are highlighted by the overwhelming length of her speeches set alongside the Lady Capulet’s terse reminders to focus on Juliet’s proposed marriage, by the irregular meter of her lines, and by the
numerous dashes that signal breaks in thought.

On Lammas-eve at night shall she be fourteen,
That shall she, marry, I remember it well.
’Tis since the earthquake now aleven years,
And she was wean’d—I never shall forget it—
Of all the days of the year, upon that day;
For I had then laid wormwood to my dug,
Sitting in the sun under the dove-house wall.
My lord and you were then at Mantua—
Nay, I do bear a brain—but as I said,
When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple
Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,
To see it tetchy and fall out wi’ th’ dug!
Shake, quoth the dove-house; ’twas no need, I trow,
To bid me trudge.
And since that time it is aleven years,
For then she could stand high-lone; nay, by th’ rood,
She could have run and waddled all about;
For even the day before, she broke her brow,
And then my husband—God be with his soul!
’A was a merry man—took up the child.
“Yea,,” quoth he, “dost thou fall upon thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit,
Wilt thou not, Jule?” and by my holidam,
The pretty wretch left crying and said, “Ay.”
To see now how a jest shall come about!
I warrant, and I should live a thousand years,
I never should forget it: “Wilt thou not, Jule?” quoth he;
And, pretty fool, it stinted and said, “Ay.”

The Nurse is doggedly garrulous and merry, perhaps nowhere more so than in this particular scene, and she repeats her husband’s jest twice more in an attempt to get the Lady Capulet to laugh with her. The Lady does not laugh, however, and many literary critics seem similarly unimpressed, referring to the Nurse’s speech as “a vast irrelevance” and somewhat more gently

as “a picture of robust indelicacy combined with supremely confident simplemindedness.”\textsuperscript{49} The scene functions primarily as comic relief, but there is more at work than simpleminded humor, as William B. Toole and Paster demonstrate in their analyses of this speech. The Nurse’s description of Juliet’s nearly simultaneous “falling out” with the dug and her innocently precocious “Ay” as an acceptance of the falling she will do once sexually mature blur together in this scene, and the wormwood used to force Juliet off the breast and into independence foreshadows the poison she will later attempt to draw from Romeo’s lips.\textsuperscript{50} The image conjured by the Nurse’s remembrance is one of lost maternity, and the moment Juliet finds that her nurse’s breasts have turned bitter is presaged by her acceptance of an eventual sexuality and followed by the shaking of the earth, a coincidence of events that gives her weaning cosmic importance. Thematically, then, the story of Juliet’s weaning encapsulates the structure of the whole tragedy: sexual maturity is followed by nearly simultaneous possession and loss then underscored by trauma that registers as geological violence. Upon finding the two lovers dead, the first watchman observes sadly, “Pitiful sight! Here lies the county slain.”\textsuperscript{51} The ground shakes at the rupture of Juliet’s breastfeeding relationship with her nurse, and the whole country is killed when her romance ends tragically. The maternal specter the Nurse calls to mind actually has much to say about the shape of the play’s coming tragedy, but these hints are hidden beneath a veneer of bawdry and thus frequently dismissed.

The Nurse’s seemingly merry references to breastfeeding contrast sharply with the allusions to nursing found within \textit{Macbeth}. Whereas the Nurse recalls Juliet’s weaning fondly and with laughter, Lady Macbeth uses the maternal metaphor of breastfeeding to chide her

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, 5.3: 164-166.
\textsuperscript{51} 5.3: 174.
husband and emphasize her determination to pursue with bloody intent King Duncan’s murder.

As Macbeth hesitates and attempts to back out of the plot, Lady Macbeth reminds him:

I have given suck, and know
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.\(^{52}\)

The image of a mother murdering her infant child in an abrupt turn continues to startle readers, even today, and it has attracted significant critical attention from many scholars who attempt to place the moment within Lady Macbeth’s broader narrative. The use of such a tender metaphor as breastfeeding to express the annihilating rage of Lady Macbeth’s frustrated ambition is powerful as an isolated reference to destructive rather than creative maternity, but the significance of these lines is much deeper and reaches far beyond the violence imposed upon a hypothetical infant. As Deborah Willis points out, the baby that Lady Macbeth refers to is a symbolic stand-in for her husband, whom she has infantilized throughout in the scenes leading up to this point.\(^{53}\) By demanding he “put / This night’s great business into [her] dispatch” and “Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom” to her, she places him within a subordinate position and demands that he “Only look up clear; / To alter favour ever is to fear. / Leave all the rest to me.”\(^{54}\) In the absence of real children, Macbeth bears the burden of her rage as her symbolic dependent.

The maternity Lady Macbeth invokes in this passage is doubly disembodied: her reference to breastfeeding is an unstaged pseudo-remembrance, and her body as it exists within

\(^{52}\) Macbeth, 1.7: 54-549


\(^{54}\) 1.5: 67-73.
the play is only nominally maternal. In this way, she is the maternal specter *par excellence*, a maternal force who is physically present onstage but not physically a mother within the scope of the play’s action. The question of whether or not Lady Macbeth ever actually bore the children she claims to remember nursing has led to an abundance of critical dissent, with some claiming that she is a monstrous murdering mother akin to those found in sensational broadsides, while others claim that the existence of her children is utterly irrelevant to understandings of the play and indicative of larger problems within literary criticism. Stephanie Chamberlain calls Lady Macbeth’s reference to her (non)existent children “one of the more enigmatic moments in all of Shakespeare’s drama,” and Victor Calef addresses Lady Macbeth’s questionable maternity in his Freudian analysis of the plays’ underlying fantasies, concluding that the contemporary audience would have been familiar with Shakespeare’s source and understood this reference as a nod to her first marriage.55 L.C. Knights’ 1933 essay “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” stands as the foundation for those critics who reject the question as not only unanswerable by utterly picayune, and Carol Chillington Rutter has recently resurrected that question as a pointed criticism of Shakespearean criticism, claiming that scholars have again jumped the track by focusing too much on internal consistency and historical accuracy.56 The question, whether it is fundamentally unanswerable or unaskable, typically hinges upon whether or not Lady Macbeth ever had children and depends upon the conspicuous absence of those children within the play itself coupled with her clear assertion that she has nursed a child.

While the discussion of Lady Macbeth’s children, their existence and their fate, is interesting and the criticism leveled against critics who fixate on rescuing the character from the inconsistencies of this statement may be justified, more interesting is the work this image of maternal malevolence does within the scene and the broader implications of a woman who presents herself as a mother even in the absence of children. On one level, Lady Macbeth’s expression of her murderous intent by invoking a maternal image only to subvert it efficiently demonstrates the character’s complete rejection of decency and feminine nurture. This is the first level of disembodiment: in just a few lines, she goes from a grasping and ambitious wife to an abstracted murdering mother, manifesting and embracing all of the patriarchy’s anxieties surrounding maternal power.\(^{57}\) On another level, however, Lady Macbeth’s self-fashioning as a mother without any biological children “alludes to the anxieties produced by” Queen Elizabeth’s presentation of herself as simultaneously the Mother of England and the Virgin Queen, as Gloria Olchowy has argued.\(^{58}\) This is the second level of disembodiment: Lady Macbeth claims bodily memories she may or may not possess, and the perverse specter of her maternity functions symbolically rather than concretely.

The disembodiment and abstraction represented by Lady Macbeth’s mysterious breastfeeding intensifies in Cleopatra’s death scene. The Egyptian queen orchestrates her own suicide in *Antony and Cleopatra* and renders the specter of maternity in ways that contour and complicate the preceding examples. The ways in Cleopatra stages her own death are deliberately and explicitly maternal on two levels. First, she approaches her suicide as a kind of

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immortalizing rebirth in which she is simultaneously monument, mother, and infant: a breastfeeding marble ouroboros, the ancient and mystic symbol of a serpent eating its own tail. Second, she adopts the posture of a mother with her nursling—despite the absence of this pose in Shakespeare’s sources—and thus crafts an image of herself that reads as demonically and magically powerful: a witch-mother whose biological children have been replaced by an animal familiar.

The scene takes place in Alexandria, after Cleopatra’s beloved Antony has died. Proculeius attempts to calm the Egyptian queen, but she steadfastly refuses his advice and promises instead to destroy her “mortal house” in order to thwart Caesar’s plans of parading her as a spectacle of his political triumph. When the clown delivers the famed asp that will secure her suicide and thus preserve her dignity, Cleopatra remarks “My resolution’s placed, and I have nothing / Of woman in me: now from head to foot / I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon / No planet is of mine.” In this moment, she is as “unsexed” as Lady Macbeth would be, her womanly fluids stopped up by the force of her resolve. When Cleopatra asks the Clown if he has brought “the pretty worm of Nilus / That kills and pains not,” he seems to misspeak and

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59 Peter Stallybrass. “Transvestism and the ‘body beneath’: Speculating on the boy actor.” Erotic Politics: The Dynamics of Desire. Ed. Susan Zimmerman. New York: Routledge, 2005. 50-64. Stallybrass ultimately suggests that Shakespeare’s take on Cleopatra’s death scene and the site of her snakebite (and other similar scenes within his corpus, notably in Cymbeline) is consistent with choices the playwright made elsewhere that dictated exposing his boy actors’ prosthetic breasts. I prefer a reading that invests the scene with more meaning than mere voyeuristic delight, and the possibilities opened up by Cleopatra’s breastfeeding as intentional rather than spectacular are undeniable.

60 The historical Cleopatra had multiple children; however, her offspring are absent within the play and are referenced only obliquely.


62 Antony and Cleopatra, 5.2: 3690-3693.

63 Macbeth, 1.5: 30-40.
declares that the snake’s “biting is immortal.” 64 Malapropisms are a hallmark of dramatic clowns, and this one rings especially true: he means that the snakebite will kill her, but what he says is that it will make her immortal, and such is her intention. By turning into “marble-constant” and denying Caesar’s right to turn her into a spectacle during his triumphal march, Cleopatra reclaims her own mortality by controlling the way in which she will be remembered, immortally. James L. Calderwood suggests an additional layer of meaning to the Clown’s malapropism:

The effect is to render unto the historical dimension of the play the mortality of its unrecoverable pastness and unto the theatrical dimension of the play its immortal presence. In the most practical of senses, the Clown—whose provenance is exclusively the theater; there was none such in Plutarch—tells the truth. For the biting of stage snakes is theatrically immortal in the sense of not being mortal in the least, as Cleopatra’s reappearance tomorrow will prove. 65

While Calderwood’s point is astute, one need not limit the moment to metatheater: the Clown’s malapropism functions within the scope of the scene as well, since the memorialization and monumentalization of Cleopatra is at stake. By pursuing her own mortality, she guarantees the success of her “immortal longings.” 66

Before the Clown leaves Cleopatra, the captive queen asks simply, “Will it eat me?,” and the Clown responds: “You must not think I am so simply but I know the devil himself will not eat a woman.” 67 He follows the statement up with a suggestive joke about dishes fit for gods and male/female genitalia—he is a Clown, after all—but the idea that the snake will not eat a woman is more important than the lines that follow would suggest. Not only does it reassert Cleopatra’s

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64 *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2: 3698-3701.
66 5.2: 3739.
67 5.2: 3727-3728.
claim that she is no longer a woman but a piece of marble, it also points to the fact the Cleopatra was previously described as the “serpent of the Nile” by both an adoring Antony and a derisive Lepidus. Thus, the image that Charmian and those in the audience see as Cleopatra holds the asp to her breast is, on one level, the image of a motherly serpent nursing her infant asp: “Peace, peace!” she says when Charmian mourns too loudly. “Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?” The last line is important as it simultaneously adopts and subverts the language of maternal nurture, offering the image of an infant asleep at its mother’s breast and of a murderous infant who drains its mother of life. In this moment, Cleopatra is dehumanized as a serpent, disembodied as marble, and maternal as a breastfeeding mother. She is, I argue, a symbolic ouroboros: the snake who creates a circle by eating its own tail. She is a constant stone serpent and emphatically not a woman, and yet the ersatz infant who consumes her maternal body simultaneously destroys it and guarantees its immortality. As Chris Laoutaris concisely asserts, “It is because she dies as a mother, that she will be remembered as a queen.” Or as Paster would have it, Cleopatra’s death scene turns the stage into a symbolic birthing chamber: “in this anomalous imitation Cleopatra takes on both roles in the birthing drama. She is both the passive subject of the physical drama and the midwife, both the surrogate mother offering her breast and the woman who will die and leave her ‘real’ children behind.”

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68 1.5: 550; 2.7: 1402-1403.
69 5.2: 3772-4.
70 I return to the image of a serpentine mother being consumed by her snake-like whelps in the next chapter when I discuss Edmund Spenser’s allegorical representation of Errour. Whereas the image Shakespeare creates here is one of nearly mystical power, Spenser’s take on the same conceit registers more as disgusting than as powerful, in part because Errour is not reborn through her children’s matricidal cannibalism.
72 Paster, 239.
In addition, she is both the mother who gives birth and, in the form of the immortal monument she creates as herself and for herself, the infant who is born.

However, in this scene the specter of maternity functions in yet another way: as the specter of witchcraft. Cleopatra’s breastfeeding relationship with the asp recalls the belief that witches nursed their animal familiars and stages a visual echo of the demonically dehumanized breastfeeding relationship. Over the course of the play, Antony attempts to explain the power Cleopatra exerts over him, twice calling her a witch, and Pompey characterizes her power as witchcraft joined with beauty and lust. Cleopatra’s magnetic, unchanging, and insatiable sexual appetite imparts those characteristics to her lovers who find themselves unable to resist her and stuck in a constant cycle of desiring, possessing, and wanting still. Domitius Enobarus explains that Antony cannot leave Cleopatra because she possesses an almost magical combination of dynamic variety and static stability:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety: other women clot
The appetites they feed: but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies; for vilest things
Become themselves in her: that the holy priests
Bless her when she is riggish.

In addition to her ability to inspire in men inordinate and emasculating desire, Cleopatra enacts and embodies castration anxieties as foreplay, reveling in the loss of gender boundaries and appropriating the phallic symbol of Antony’s “sword Phillippan” while draping him in her own “tires and mantles.” Susan Darraj argues persuasively that this scene encompasses and dramatizes Cleopatra’s roles as a feminized mother, an eroticized lover, and a masculinized

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73 Antony and Cleopatra. 4.2: 37, 4.12: 47, and 2.1:22.
74 2.2: 963-968. “Riggish” means “sexually immodest, promiscuous; wanton.” Adj. 1. OED.
75 2.5: 1071-1076.
ruler,\textsuperscript{76} and—I would add—a demonized witch. As discussed in the third chapter, \textit{The Malleus Maleficarum} was the standard for identifying and trying witches throughout the Early Modern period, and the authors listed seven of the most common signs of witchcraft, which included inciting “irregular love” in men and spiriting away their genitals.\textsuperscript{77} The references to Cleopatra as a “witch” and the descriptions of her mysterious power as “witchcraft” find their complement in these scenes, as she clearly inspires excessive and inordinate passion in Antony and claims possession of his phallic power by wielding the sword Phillippan.

The anxieties that surround Cleopatra as a witch reach their fullest expression in the final death scene, when Cleopatra is seen onstage nursing a serpent. Although the most common familiars were dogs, an asp makes symbolic sense as a phallic symbol directly connected to Satan and women’s susceptibility to temptation. The scene that Cleopatra creates seems to affirm the power others have ascribed to her and to provide evidence of her demonic pact; however, even in death, her body refuses to submit to Caesar’s authority. English witchcraft persecutions differed from the continental forms in they were almost obsessively insistent on discovering “bigges,” which were believed to be the extra teats through which a witch would nurse her familiar in the signature economy of witchcraft: blood for power. Despite the fact that many skeptics objected to the process of condemning women based on the presence of an unusual mark or growth, the surveillance of an accused witch’s body was an integral step in early modern trials.\textsuperscript{78} Thus, when Octavius Caesar enters the monument in which he had imprisoned Cleopatra

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{3} Matthew Hopkins pointed out that the existence of so-called bigges had led to the condemnation of many innocent lives: “Many poore People are condemned for having a Pap, or
\end{thebibliography}
and surveys his captive’s body, the audience may well have expected him to announce the presence of some distinguishing mark that could finally and decisively prove that Cleopatra was a witch. The audience knows this to be true: they have seen her sexual magnetism bring great men down, they have heard her talk of possessing the phallic sword, and they have seen her nurse an asp. How, then, is there no physical proof? As Paster writes, Cleopatra’s body remains opaque and very nearly illegible to the forensic/male gaze. Caesar reports that there is no swelling that would indicate poison, and Dolabella confirms that the only unusual signs are “a vent of blood” on her breast and another on her arm. Caesar concludes “Most probably / That so she died.” As Paster writes, “For Caesar, her death is a signifier of limit, and a discursive turn to probability is his only recourse.” Despite what the audience has seen, hard evidence of the queen’s cause of death is elusive and Caesar’s appropriation of her body as a spectacle of his political success is made impossible. Cleopatra’s spectrally, symbolically, perversely, and eternally maternal body remains inscrutable, even in death, even to the highest authority.

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Teat about them, whereas many People (especially antient People) are, and have been a long time troubled with natural wretts on several parts of their bodies, and other natural excressencies, as Hemerodes, Piles, Childbearing, &c.” *The Discovery of Witches*. London: R. Royston, 1647. London: British Library, Wing H2751. 3.

79 *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2: 830-832
80 *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2: 836-837.
81 Paster, 246.
The problems and possibilities for playwrights who wanted to stage maternity disappeared for writers of epic literature, but new challenges and opportunities arose to take their place. The bawdy jokes of city comedies were clearly inappropriate for the lofty subject matter and register of epics, and the easy humor of dressing boy actors as hugely pregnant women was inaccessible in this genre. The previous chapter explored the differences between comedy’s and tragedy’s treatment of maternal bodies, concluding that female embodiment grew more and more obscured and referential as the genre of writing and performance shifted toward more highly regarded modes of writing. Whereas the depiction of mothers in comedies like Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* share many characteristics with the women in *The Gospelles of Distaves*, the mothers in tragedies are less on display and less concrete. The great Renaissance epics continue this trend. When maternal bodies are represented in *The Faerie Queene* or *Paradise Lost* at all, they are most often abstracted, illusory, and dehumanized. They tend to elicit fear, awe, and revulsion rather than laughter, admiration, or affection.

In this chapter, I will focus on the representation of maternal bodies in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, published in its entirety in 1596, and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, restructured and republished in 1674. Although there is nearly a century between the two works,
Milton respected Spenser as his “original,”¹ and the ways in which both authors conceptualize the reproductive female body are strikingly similar, which suggests that the literary basis—namely, the epic tradition—and the artistic impulses behind their representations were not tied to the contemporary scientific understanding of female bodies. By the time Milton finished writing his epic, the ideas that had dictated what images were available and imaginable to late Medieval and early Early Modern writers and audiences were technically outdated. Seventeenth-century writers knew more about anatomy, about the circulatory system, about medicine, and about female genitalia than previous writers; this suggests that the grotesque images these authors incorporated were evocative in different ways, useful because they carried meaning that extended beyond an accurate reflection of the world as people knew it. The images were archaic, evoking a time before the present day (a time that suited the setting of both epics), but they were also familiar enough to function as a kind of metaphorical shorthand signifying female difference. In epics, representations of maternal and post-partum bodies veered more and more to abstracted metaphors that took the old standards of anti-feminist descriptions and exaggerated them, turning these characteristics into signposts of monstrosity and corruption.

¹ I return to the question of Spenser’s influence on Milton later in this chapter.
Redcrosse and readers alike; in both cases, learning to read responsibly is the goal. Redcrosse must learn to read his surroundings and the female body, and it takes him most of the book to learn these lessons, while the reader must learn how to read Spenser’s epic by grappling with its open-ended, seemingly irreconcilable layers of allegory.

The description Spenser gives does not disappoint, offering an abundance of sensory detail full of symbolism and significance that stretches through Redcrosse’s entire arc, if not the entire arc of the epic as we have it inherited it. Redcrosse and Una seek shelter from a sudden storm in a dense, dark wood. Una realizes too late that they have strayed unto dangerous territory and warns Redcrosse about Error’s den just one stanza before the brave and foolish knight goes searching for the beast. He ventures forth into a darkened hole,

…his glistening armor made
A little glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the vgly monster plaine,
Halfe like a serpent horribly displeade,
But th’other halfe did womans shape retaine,
Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.

Readers and critics alike have made much of the “glooming light” cast like a shadow from Redcrosse’s armor, but few have spent much time discussing these lines as an introduction to Error, in part because the heart of her description is still to come. However, I believe the order of

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2 Spenser makes the didactic purpose of his allegorical epic clear in his “Letter to Raleigh,” which was published at the end of Book III in the 1590 edition but omitted in subsequent editions until 1611. Given that Spenser is concerned with his audience’s ability to read properly and diligently in order to better themselves, the fact that Errour spews forth book-filled vomit in 1.1.20 is especially evocative. The writing that spills forth from Errour’s maw is aligned with Archimago’s texts, his “magick books” (1.1.36: 8), and more generally with the heretical or false learning that had been “promulgated by the new print technology,” as A.C. Hamilton notes in his gloss (36). By including Errour as the first obstacle within *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser quickly sets up his book in opposition to these texts, described as “poyson horrible and blacke” (I.i.20: 2).

these lines is important and meaningful and that their order deliberately complicates their meaning and renders them productively ambiguous.

Spenser was not bound by the constraints of prosody to order the last two lines as he did. He could have easily reversed “disdaine” and “retaine” without disturbing the rhyme scheme, and his hallmark closing line of hexameter could have been maintained, as well, simply by cutting “filthie” from the final line and adding “comely,” an adjective he favors elsewhere, to precede “woman’s shape.” Had he made these changes, the lines would read “Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, / Most loathsome, foule, and full of vile disdaine, / But th’other halfe did comely woman’s shape retain,” which would be straightforward in establishing the correlation between the serpent’s shape and the negative adjectives that follow.

But Spenser did not make these choices, and the lines he has given us support a much different reading. By splitting the description of the serpent’s fearsome shape with an interjection about the human portion of Error, Spenser leaves open the possibility that what is “lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine” is the womanly half of the preceding line. Readers cannot be certain whether this ambiguity was intentional or if it betrays an unconscious but pervasive fear of the maternal body on display, both for Spenser himself and for much of the contemporary culture, but when a female body is described throughout *The Faerie Queene*, it is most often described with maternal images that read as both negative and grotesque.

The maternal imagery and the characterization of Error as a hyperfertile female monstrosity continues into the next stanza and grows more explicit and unambiguous when Spenser introduces Error’s whole brood of misshapen progeny:

…of her there bred,
A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed,
Suckling vpon her poisnous dugs, eachone
Of sundrie shapes, yet all ill-favored:
Soone as that vncouth light vpon them shone,
Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.⁴

And thus the monstrosity of Error intensifies quickly and hinges upon her perverse relationship with her young: specifically, she is surrounded by a swarm of misshapen offspring who suckle at her “poisnous” breasts and take refuge within her post-partum body. The nourishing, life-giving breast milk of fully human mothers and the safe, sacred space of the womb are both corrupted in the figure of Error. In his edition of *The Faerie Queene*, A. C. Hamilton provides a gloss linking this particular image with Error’s “mortall sting” and the locusts of Revelation 9:10 who “infect and kill with their venomous doctrine,”⁵ a connection that is consistent with the Early Modern logic of breastfeeding. Spenser’s contemporary culture believed that a woman’s moral essence or character was passed on to her nursling or nurslings through the breast milk.⁶ So while Error’s “poisnous dugs” may literally supply venom to her whelps, is it also possible that she is a metaphorical imagining of a woman who uses her role as a mother to spread her malevolent nature and heretical teachings, like the Whore of Babylon to whom she is symbolically linked; the nature and extent of the influence mothers had on their children was a familiar anxiety to the Early Modern culture, and the image of Error plays upon those fears.

In addition, the image of serpentine breastfeeding should call to mind the final moments of Cleopatra’s life from William Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. Like the relationship

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⁴ 1.1.15.4-9.
⁵ Hamilton, 35.
⁶ The fear of the female maternal body’s corruptive influence was often centered on the breast and the potential breastfeeding relationship between an infant and its mother. Leontes alludes to the belief that a mother’s vices and virtues could be passed on to her children when he removes Mamillius, their son, from Hermione’s presence and says, “Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him. / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him” (*The Winter’s Tale*, 2.1:57-59). For a more thorough discussion of the idea of parental corruption through bodily fluids, see Sara D. Luttfring, “(De)Formative Parental Influence in Early Modern Monstrous Birth Pamphlets and *The Winter’s Tale,*** Bodies, Speech, and Reproductive Knowledge in Early Modern England.” London: Routledge, 2015. 165-208.
between Cleopatra and her ersatz infant asp, the bond between Errour and breastfeeding brood is ultimately destructive. When Redcrosse shows a moment of weakness, Errour responds by “pour[ing] forth out of her hellish sinke / Her fruitfull cursed spawne of serpents small, / Deformed monsters, fowle, and black as inke.”7 Crawling with these “cumbrous gnats”8 and inflamed with rage, Redcrosse is able to strike the death blow, severing Errour’s head from her grotesque body. At this point, however, Spenser describes her as still “dying,” not yet as “dead.”

Her scattered brood, soone as their Parent deare
They saw so rudely falling to the ground,
Groning full deadly, all with troublous feare,
Gathered themselves about her body round,
Weening their wonted entrance to have found
At her wide mouth: but being there withstood
They flocked all about her bleeding wound,
And sucked vp their dying mothers bloud,9
Making her death their life, and ere her hurt their good.10

Ultimately, Spenser suggests that Errour’s death comes from her brood of monstrous nurslings, who gorge themselves on their mother’s lifeblood.11 Once sated with her blood, Errour’s orphans swell to bursting and explode in a thousands pops of blood and excrement. Spenser treats this

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7 1.1.22: 5-7.
8 1.1.23: 5.
9 According to the Early Modern understanding of bodily fluids, blood and breast milk were essentially of the same composition, but breast milk had been purified into a more refined product. As Gail Kern Paster notes, “Both popular and medical discourse…conceptualized all [bodily] fluids as related forms of the same essential substance” (39-40). Blood, tears, urine, breast milk, and menstrual discharge were all seen as more or less equivalent, and one substance could be drained or allowed to siphon off to lessen the flow of other liquids, as colorfully demonstrated by the Early Modern proverb “Let her cry, she’ll piss the less.” See Gail Kern Paster. The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
11 Hamilton suggests that this image of Errour spewing forth her spawn who then gorge themselves on her blood conflates Classical monsters like Hesiod’s Echidna with Pliny’s description of spawning adders in his Natural History (10.82). Pliny believed that adders mated through their mouths, and the female adder would gnaw the male’s head off during her passion.
scene and the murderous children with horror: he observes their death and notes that it is a “well
worthy end / Of such as drunke her life, the which had them nurst.”

Their behavior is meant to be shocking, even for monsters, and the narrator interjects to highlight the perverse and extreme justice of the exploding blood-filled children’s fate.

Interestingly, there is some ambiguity about what the brood’s “wonted entrance” was, perhaps because John Milton adapts some of the imagery from this episode in his description of Sin in *Paradise Lost*, which I will discuss at more length later in this chapter. In Milton’s version of the scene, however, Sin’s hellhounds crawl back into her womb, and their entrance is as unambiguous as possible. Some details suggest that Spenser intends a similarly graphic scene, as he is punning on “mouth” to refer to the oral mouth or the genital mouth. This symbolic conflation of orifices was fairly commonplace during the Early Modern period and well into the nineteenth century, when medical drawings still depicted the throat’s anatomy as visually reminiscent of female genitalia (Figure 5.1). The first time Spenser describes the children returning into their mother’s body, her writes “into her mouth they crept.”

Hamilton provides a gloss that connects this image to the popular belief that adders swallow their young when disturbed or agitated, but the choice of “crept” as a verb seems oddly ill-suited to the image of Errour’s serpentine progeny flying into their anthropomorphic mother’s mouth. A few stanzas later, Spenser references Errour spewing “a floud of poyson horrible and blacke” from her

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12 1.1.26: 6-7.
13 As Paster writes, “The dramatic fungibility of mouth and vagina had a precise physiological equivalence for members of a late sixteenth-century audience, who conceptualized their own blood as moving within a vascular system of linked canals” (98). Elsewhere, Paster also discusses the rough equivalence of linguistic and sexual incontinence, a correlation that relied upon the punning between the oral mouth and the vaginal mouth-like opening (46-7).
14 1.1.15: 9.
“filthie maw.” Since “maw” can refer to the stomach,\textsuperscript{15} the throat,\textsuperscript{16} or the womb,\textsuperscript{17} this reference fails to clarify the image, although references to “vomit” and “parbreake” certainly gesture toward the oral mouth. A couple stanzas later, Errour “pour[s] forth out of her hellish sinke / Her fruitfull cursed spawne of serpents small” (1.1.22: 5-6). Here, Hamilton connects her “hellish sinke” to the womb, which lends credence to the idea that Errour’s children creep back into her body through the “mouth” of her vagina.

Spenser presents the first real obstacle and lesson within his epic as both a monstrous mother and as the matrix through which readers and Redcrosse are introduced to the allegorical landscape and logic of faery land. Understanding Errour and being able to accurately read her presence and unravel the ambiguities of her appearance are interpretive processes that demand attention to detail, patience, and critical thinking—skills that Redcrosse lacks at the beginning of his book but picks up along the way. Errour is simultaneously an abomination; an allegorical representation of error’s constrictive grip on mankind; a mother; and a victim of matricide. Spenser never loses sight of her purpose within the narrative moment, and it is important that the reader and the protagonist follow his lead. The good, moral, Christian reader Spenser writes of in his letters to Sir Walter Raleigh must remain vigilant and in control in the face of grotesque threats and false knowledge, but there is always room for mercy and compassion for foes who meet grisly ends. However, Spenser makes it clear in his letter that the “darke conceit” of his allegory does not expect to find readers thus well-prepared or fully formed, but rather that “the generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and

\textsuperscript{15} OED, 1a
\textsuperscript{16} 3a
\textsuperscript{17} 2d
gentle discipline.” Spenser explicitly presents his epic as an exercise that will train his audience in holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, courtesy, and constancy through the process of reading through and struggling with the allegory. As Jonathan Goldberg writes, “meaning lies in the dance, the fluidity and the suggestiveness…We enter into the world of Spenser’s images to find that the images enter and emerge from us.” Thus, the fact that Errour functions as Redcrosse’s first antagonist and the first test of Spenser’s readers suggests that encountering, understanding, and conquering maternity are the first movements toward “virtuous and gentle discipline.” Error’s role as a mother is emphasized again and again, and although she is the complete perversion of Spenser’s ideal mother, later represented by Charissa, she is a mother still. Spenser’s condemnation of her gluttonous children suggests that all mothers, even monstrous ones, deserve better than to be devoured by their children, only for their children to immediately perish in such a violent and gruesome manner. This is Spenser’s gentility in action.

Although there are 3,939 lines of poetry between Errour’s demise at the thirsty mouths of her nursing swarm and Charissa’s introduction in the House of Holinesse, the two figures work together to develop Spenser’s ideas of maternity and maternal bodies. “Charissa” comes from the Greek word *charis*, meaning “grace,” and as the personification of grace, she is the perfect

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20 In English, “grace” is etymologically bound to the Latin word *gratia*, so Charissa is sometimes associated more with “charity” (itself from the Latin word *caritas*) and less often associated with “grace.” Whether Spenser intended Charissa to represent Grace or Charity may seem irrelevant now, as the two concepts are nearly interchangeable within Christian theology. However, the fact that Charissa’s sisters, Fidelia and Sperenza, are nominally associated with Faith and Hope establishes the triad as personifications of the theological virtues discussed in 1 Corinthians 13:13—“And now abideth faith, hope, and love, even these three: but the chiefest of these is love.” The translation of this particular chapter was actually quite contentious for Early Modern Christians, as Protestant translations like Tyndale’s version (1525) and the Geneva Bible (quoted above, 1560) opted to translate the final virtue as “love” while Catholic vernacular translations
Christian antidote to Errour’s wandering ways. Within the theological framework of the allegorical epic, Charissa is the ultimate corrective to the problems Errour represents within and introduces into the narrative. Although the two figures are rarely if ever put in conversation with each other, I believe there is much to be said about these two mothers, the only breastfeeding women within Spenser’s tale. While Errour is monstrous and maintains a perversely open intimacy with her young, Charissa is depicted as the inverse, as a mother who literally and metaphorically lives in holiness. She too has a brood of babies that she nurses freely and openly, but the breastfeeding relationship is wholesome and pointedly short-lived. Whereas Redcrosse could wander into Errour’s den by chance, he must progress through the chain of command within the House of Holinesse before he can approach this fair mother. Fidelia (“faith”) instructs him in the ways of obedience and submission to the Gospel\textsuperscript{21}, and Sperenza (“hope”) comforts him and acts as a balm against Despaire,\textsuperscript{22} whom Redcrosse nearly succumbs to in the preceding canto. After Redcrosse is counseled by these two sisters, he must learn the hard lessons of Patience and Penance\textsuperscript{23} before he is allowed in the presence of Spenser’s personified grace. Even then, it is important to note that Redcrosse does not actively find Charissa or successfully seek her out. Once his Christian education in the House of Holinesse is complete, Redcrosse is rejoined by Una, who then leads Redcrosse to Charissa.\textsuperscript{24} It is a small detail, presented without

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like the Douay-Rheims’ (1582) chose “charity” instead, perhaps because “charity” is a more active word that better supports the Catholic doctrine of works. Interestingly, the King James Version (1611) maintains the Catholic association by translating the word as “charity,” while later Protestant translations continue to include “love,” even today.

\textsuperscript{21} 1.10.17-21.
\textsuperscript{22} 1.10.22: 1-9.
\textsuperscript{23} 1.10.23-28.
\textsuperscript{24} 1.10.29
emphasis, but the allegorical point is clear: humankind can stumble into error and lose its way easily, but finding God’s grace is no accident.\(^{25}\)

While Spenser describes both Errour and Charissa as bare-chested mothers who constantly nurse their throngs of young, the similarities between the two figures end there. Whereas Errour’s breasts are “poisnous dugs,” Charissa’s are simply called “brests”: “Her neck and brests were ever open bare / That ay thereof her babes might suck their fill.”\(^{26}\) According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “dug” is defined as “the pap or udder of female mammalia; also the teat or nipple, usually in reference to suckling. As applied to a woman’s breast, now contemptuous.”\(^{27}\) The OED goes on to offer examples of the term used in a few positive or neutral passages, but for Spenser, the term had already developed its contemptuous connotation. He uses the word three times, and two of the instances are decidedly negative: once to describe Errour’s malignant breasts and once to describe Duessa’s sagging, leaking breasts after Redcrosse unveils her true form in canto 8. In both of these instances, “dug” is connected to the inhuman, animalistic aspect of the OED’s definition. Both Errour and Duessa possess assorted animal parts, and Spenser further dehumanizes the figures by labeling their mammae as “dugs” rather than “brests.”

The third instance of breasts being described as “dugs” within The Faerie Queene can best be described as connotatively ambiguous. In Book 2, Canto 4, Guyon encounters Furor and his harridan mother, Occasion, as they torment and attack a young squire, named Phaon. Once Guyon has restrained Furor and Occasion, Phaon tells the protagonist his story, describing the

\(^{25}\) Allegorically, the fact that Redcrosse cannot seek after grace or find her by himself recalls Romans 3:11, “There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.” Although he is the active, questing hero of Book I, his passivity in the face of Christian grace is a scriptural imperative.

\(^{26}\) 1.10.30: 7-8.

\(^{27}\) “dug,” n.1. a. OED.
misfortune that befell him and his nursemate, Philemon: “With whom from tender dug of commune nourse / Attonce I was upbrought.” Phaon references the breasts the two shared to establish that Philemon and he were bosom buddies, as it were. Perhaps the term “dug” is used casually here, conversationally and without condemnation. However, given the fact that Philemon betrays Phaon, thus violating the bond established by the breasts that nourished them both, it is also possible to read this as another negative instance of “dug.” In his anger at Philemon, Phaon may curse the once nourishing “breasts” into false, traitorous “dugs.”

In addition to the stark difference conjured by the term’s strikingly different connotations, there is also a difference in the way Errour and Charissa treat their nurslings. Whereas Errour’s breastfeeding and intimate giving of herself knows no bounds or boundaries, Charissa’s maternal giving is well-defined and explicitly finite:

A multitude of babes about her hong,  
Playing their sportes, that ioyd her to behold,  
Whom still she fed, whiles they were weake and young,  
But thrust them forth still, as they wexed old.

Errour is a mother who hoards her children, welcoming them to her and into her in a grotesque image of maternal consumption and/or inverted birth, depending on how one interprets her “mouth.” As we have seen, this unhealthy relationship ends with the destruction of the mother and the children, which makes it an unfit model for Charissa and an inappropriate metaphor for grace. As the personification of grace and the first fully present, fully human maternal figure within the epic, Charissa must not make such a mistake. She nourishes her children and makes herself available to them, taking great joy in their “sportes,” but she reverses Errour’s

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28 2.4.18.
29 1.10.31: 1-4.
internalization of the monstrous children by pushing her own babes away, “thrust[ing] them forth,” as soon as possible.

Although Spenser includes this detail in his description of Charissa, the abundantly and unambiguously good mother, his readers would have likely recognized it as a fictional and allegorical point rather than as a representation of reality. Early Modern children were breastfed for much longer than modern children, at least in the United States, and a noble woman like Charissa would have been unlikely to nurse her own children. Although moralists and medical authorities both wrote extensively about the importance of mothers breastfeeding their own children, this advice was “consistently ignored by most noble and gentry families.”

David Cressy writes that upper class families disregarded medical advice in favor of fashion and cultural inhibitions: “Despite this stream of advice, women of fashion were reluctant to nurse their babies themselves.” The aristocracy had concerns beyond mere fashion, however; for many women, breastfeeding functions as a natural birth control by preventing ovulation, and while that fact worked in favor of poorer families, upper class women were expected to produce as many heirs as possible, so the desire for more children overshadowed the medical and moral advice. In addition, most Early Modern infants were breastfed until they cut their teeth, but teething—and many other developmental milestones—was often delayed well into toddlerhood due to malnutrition and the negligence of overworked wet nurses who were responsible for

completing domestic work as well as feeding multiple children.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, the image of Charissa layers social unreality upon biological unreality. Spenser’s readers would have understood the abundantly fertile noblewoman who nurses her infants by herself while continuing to conceive and give birth to ever more children—all of whom grow strong and healthy despite sharing a limited supply of nutrition—as a fictional distortion.\textsuperscript{34}

However, Spenser could not rely on reality for his allegorical representation of Charissa: as the personification of Christian grace, she must have healthy, strong, and well-fed children whom she nurses herself or the personification would fail. The image of maternity that Spenser creates with Charissa perfectly represents the abundant, inexhaustible, and personal nature of God’s grace, so although neither Errour nor Charissa are realistic representations of maternity, they both deviate from contemporary practice and contemporary medical knowledge in ways that heighten Spenser’s allegorical purpose. The maternal body is manipulated and abstracted in the service of a grander narrative, and Joanne Craig argues that this perversion of women’s procreative powers pervades \textit{The Faerie Queene} and sets up the central conflict as the “ominous power” of maternal women versus the “alternative masculine order of origins: the humanist creativity by which men produce the enduring progeny of works of art, like \textit{The Faerie Queene}


itself.” The maternal body is subject to the masculine author’s ability to make and unmake it according to his authorial intentions.

Although Duessa is never mentioned as a mother, her body serves as the primary canvas upon which Spenser projects his psychological phantasies and anxieties surrounding the female body and its secrets, a literary move that Rachel Zlatkin explores at more length in her psychoanalytically-driven dissertation, “Remembering Mothers: Representations of Maternity in Early Modern English Literature.” Zlatkin focuses on the elision of female characters in favor of the male imaginary’s relationship to the often hyperbolically sexed bodies those female characters inhabit within the texts. Duessa’s body and her dramatic defrocking in Canto VIII illustrate the extent to which these masculine anxieties and insecurities shape the appearance of female forms in The Faerie Queene and the ways in which seeing and interpreting maternal forms determine the success of Redcrosse’s journey and the audience’s reading. Furthermore, Duessa’s description is strikingly similar to the anti-feminist descriptions of post-partum bodies found in medieval and early Early Modern texts like Il Corbaccio and “The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyng,” so despite the fact that she may not have children, she belongs in any discussion of maternal bodies within The Faerie Queene.

When Spenser first introduces Duessa into the narrative, he focuses almost exclusively on

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36 Male authors in the period often used the language of pregnancy and childbirth to describe their experiences as writers, as when Philip Sidney describes his writer’s block as a kind of labor in the first sonnet of his series Astrophil and Stella (c. 1580s): “Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes.” See Emma Clark, “Metaphors of Motherhood: Claiming Back the Female Body in the Poems of Mary Sidney and Mary Wroth,” Women’s Writings. 8.2 (2001): 263-273; and Margaret Helen Dupuis, “Birthing the Text: Authorship and Childbirth in Early Modern England.” Dissertation. University of Oregon. 1998.
her appearance and lets his readers interpret the underlying truth suggested by her external trappings. She appears as the antithesis to Una, and the differences between the two figures highlight the error of Redcrosse’ rejection of Una and his subsequent acceptance of Sans Foy’s companion, Fidessa, who is later revealed to be Duessa. Una is dressed simply and modestly, her beauty and fairness fully wimpled and concealed from view, whereas Duessa presents herself extravagantly: “Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay, / and like a Persian mitre on her hed / Shee wore, with crowns and owches garnished.”

Spenser often uses straightforward “to be” verbs in describing Una, allegorically representative of the one true church, but he tends to shift toward words like “appear,” “seem,” and “like” when he describes Duessa. For example, when Spenser writes of Una, “So pure and innocent, as that same lambe, / She was in life and euery vertuous lore,” he speaks directly of her internal worth and chooses simple, concrete language.

When he writes of Duessa, however, his approach shifts dramatically toward describing Duessa’s physical presence, enacting the same loss of focus Redcrosse experiences in the woman’s presence. Like Redcrosse, Spenser gets caught up in Duessa’s “seeming glorious show,” and the author deliberately leads his readers away from the important truths hidden beneath the witch’s extravagant and contrived surface. The narrator remains silent and offers no omniscient observations while Duessa spins a yarn about her life that could justify her apparent companionship with a character like Sans Foy. Spenser devotes four whole stanzas this tall tale and concludes with a description of Redcrosse’s state of mind: “He in greate passion al this while did dwell, / More busying his quicke eies, her face to view, / Then to his dull eares, to

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38 1.2.13: 3-5.
39 1.1.5:1-2.
40 1.2.21: 5.
heare what shee did tell.” Redcrosse is too distracted by the woman’s appearance to heed her words mindfully and ask the important questions, and the narrator-author does not correct this error for his readers’ sake. This too is a lesson both protagonist and reader must learn.

As Fidessa/Duessa’s story continues through the narrative, the “seeming” words that begin in Canto I start cropping up more regularly and fully take control during Fradubio’s tale. When Redcrosse and Fidessa seek shelter in the wood, Redcrosse breaks off a branch from a tree and is shocked when the broken limb starts bleeding and crying out in pain. The tree reveals that he was once a human named Fradubio, but that a jealous witch had cursed him by turning him into a tree. As he explains,

So doubly lou’d of Ladies vnlike faire,  
Th’one seeming such, the other such indeede,  
One day in doubt I cast for to compare,  
Whether in beauties glori excluded  
A Rosy girlond was the victors meede:  
Both seemed to win, and both seemed won to bee,  
So hard the discord was to be agreed.  
Fraelissa was as faire, as faire mote bee,  
And ever false Duessa seemed as faire as shee.  

As a human, Fradubio failed to distinguish between being and seeming, just as Redcrosse had failed by rejecting Una, who is fair, and embracing Duessa, who only seems to be fair. In addition, Spenser plays upon the homophones “won” and “one” in the sixth line, emphasizing the problems posed by misinterpreting the female form. Because Fradubio cannot distinguish between the two women, because they both seem “won/one” to him, he loses his true love, *Fraelissa*, and has to confront the abject monstrosity of his remaining lover before he realizes that the two women are not in fact fungible, that they are not “one.”

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41 1.2.26: 5-7.
42 1.2.37: 1-9, emphasis mine.
Fradubio’s description of the monstrosity he discovers when he stumbles upon Duessa bathing foreshadows what Redcrosse will eventually discover for himself, six cantos later, but the language of seeming and uncertainty still lingers in Fradubio’s telling:

Her neather partes misshapen, monstrous,
Were hidd in water, that I could not see,
But they did seeme more foule and hideous,
Then womans shape man would beleue to bee.
Thensforth from her most beastly companie
I gan refraine, in minde to slip away,
Soone as appeard safe opportunitie:
For danger great, if not assur’d decay
I saw before mine eyes, if I were knowne to stray.43

Fradubio does not actually see Duessa’s true form, as made clear in the second line’s insistence that her “neather partes” were “hidd in water” and that he “could not see,” but he recounts the horror of this unseen sight just the same. According to the logic of this passage, what is hid must be hideous. At this point, Duessa’s true form is still a phantasy, something that an uninitiated or immature man has imagined and projected upon her, an externalized proof of internal struggles. Melanie Klein defines “phantasy” as something that comes from within and imagines what is outside of the self, offering an unconscious means of interpreting personal instinct and simultaneously linking emotions to objects, creating in the process the world of the imagination.44 In response to losing Fraelissa, Fradubio imagines Duessa’s body to be misshapen, and his absolute belief in the reality of that image supersedes actual sight.

However, the fact that no one had yet laid eyes upon Duessa’s “neather partes” is irrelevant, as Fradubio, the Redcrosse Knight, the narrator-author, and a portion of the contemporary culture all shared in the phantasy of monstrous maternal bodies. Spenser

43 1.2.41: 1-9.
eventually confirms Fradubio’s fearful imagination and satisfies the phantasy by returning to Duessa’s underlying form with more concrete detail in the eighth canto. At Una’s bidding, Redcrosse strips Duessa and prepares to release her because it would “shame t’auenge so weake an enimy,” but she is not to be freed until her grotesque body is displayed, surveyed, and preserved in a parodic blazon that subverts the traditional Petrarch similes:

Then when they had despoyled her tire and call,  
Such as she was, their eyes might her behold,  
That her misshaped parts did them appall,  
A loathly, wrinckled hag, ill-fauoured, old,  
Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told.

Her crafty head was altogether bald,  
As as in hate of honorable eld,  
Was ouergrowne with scurfe and filthy scald;  
Her teeth out of her rotten gummies were feld,  
And her sowre breath abominably smeld;  
Her dried dugs, lyke bladders lacking wind,  
Hong downe, and filthy matter from them weld;  
Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind,  
So scabby was, that would have loathd all womankind.

Her neather parts, the shame of all her kind,  
My chaster Muse for shame doth blush to write;  
But at her rompe she growing had behind  
A foxes taile, with dong all fowly dight;  
And eke her feete most monstrous were in sight;  
For one of them was like an Eagles claw,  
With griping talaunts armed to greedy fight,  
The other like a beares vneuen paw:  
More vgly shape yet neuer liuing creature saw.

The statement from the second line of this description, “such as she was,” may seem at first like a throwaway statement, line-filler to make the meter fit Spenser’s prosody, but it serves a far

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45 1.8.45: 8  
46 1.8.46-48.
more important purpose. For the first time since her introduction into the narrative, Redcrosse and the readers are seeing Duessa as she really is, not as she appears to be, and “such as she was” signals the end of her seeming game. Spenser emphasizes the impending reality of Duessa’s body by insisting that Redcrosse and his attendants will finally see her body firsthand, “their eies might her behold,” without the distortion and obfuscation provided by the murky water in Fradubio’s tale. Spenser’s description of Duessa’s “wrizled skin” as a rough “rind” holds the key to understanding the importance of this moment in the broader narrative arc of Book I. As Dashini Ann Jeyathurai points out, “On one level, this very tactile image connotes the roughness of her skin but it also suggests that Duessa’s body is to be peeled apart like a fruit. Indeed, Spenser mirrors this visual peeling in his deconstruction of her body.”

Once Redcrosse learns how to peel away the extraneous trappings, the rind, can he access the truth of people. Stripping away Duessa’s clothing and gazing upon her exposed form demonstrates that he has learned to see through the distractions of what people or places “seem” to be; he has learned what the narrator meant when he described the seemingly beautiful maple tree as “seldom inward sound” back in Canto I.

In many ways, Duessa’s body is marked as grotesquely post-partum. The description of her “secret filthe,” “dried dugs,” “wrizled skin,” and her “neather parts” that defy Spenser’s “chaster Muse” all echo the earlier descriptions from Il Corbaccio and “The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyng.” Like the women of these works, Duessa’s body is saggy, deflated, lined with wrinkles and stretch marks, and incontinent. Although Jeyathurai argues that Spenser renders Duessa as a distinctly and emphatically un-maternal body, she misses the underlying

48 1.1.9:9.
implications of this catalogue’s similarities to established anti-feminist literature. For example, while Jeyathurai correctly focuses on the description of Duessa’s misshapen genitalia, she misinterprets the meaning of “misshapen” and argues that Duessa’s anatomy prevents her from bearing children and functioning as the archetypal mother:

While Errour's reproductiveness is made hideous by her fecundity, Duessa's is made monstrous by its absence. This ‘biological flaw’ is enhanced by Fradubio's unambiguous description of her genitalia as both “misshapen” and “monstruous.” Spenser's choice of the word “misshapen” connotes the external deformities of her genitalia that do not obey the laws of nature. To build on that image, Spenser concretizes it with “monstruous”. This suggests that beyond the physical deformity, her genitalia is inherently hideous because of Duessa's own poisonous nature.

Rather than seeing Duessa’s sterility as the opposite of Errour’s hyperfertility, I argue that Duessa is presented as a post-partum woman, a maternal figure who has lost even the minimal power and status afforded to fertile women, and Spenser compounds her maternal monstrosity by representing the horror of her playing the seductress while occupying a body marked as post-partum. Her position as a potential mother is indeed “perverted” as Jeyathurai claims, but it is not because that potential is negated or denied. Rather, Duessa has been exceptionally fertile within the allegory. Like Errour spewing books of false doctrine and heretical knowledge, Duessa has given birth to deceit, sin, and confusion for the preceding five cantos.

Jeyathurai’s misreading of this detail stems from the misinterpretation or an incomplete understanding of the adjective “misshapen.” Jeyathurai argues that Duessa’s genitals are actually monstrous and so biologically incapable of reproduction. However, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, Spenser establishes that Duessa’s genitalia are no more misshapen than any other woman’s in the preceding canto. After escaping from the House of Pride, Redcrosse reclines with Duessa beside a cursed fountain that drains him of his “manly forces” once he drinks his
fill. In this weakened state, he “goodly court” makes “to his Dame, “Pourd out in loosnesse on
the grassy grownd, / Both carelesse of his health, and of his fame.” Hamilton explains in his
gloss that Spenser is pulling upon the Latin term *effuses*, which means spread or stretched out,
and indicates his dissipation: he is “sexually expended and exhausted.” The reference is brief
and obscure, but it suggests that Redcrosse and Duessa had sex in the canto just before she is
fully exposed. Duessa’s “neather partes” are not so misshapen or monstrous as to prevent sexual
union with Redcrosse, so perhaps Spenser is not using these terms as we might understand them
as modern readers. The Galenic model of anatomy still shaped medical knowledge within
Spenser’s contemporary culture, and under its influence, normal female genitalia was often
considered “misshapen” and even “monstrous” simply because it was not the same as male
genitalia. Thus, saying that Duessa’s genitalia is misshapen and monstrous may be functionally
equivalent to saying that Duessa’s genitalia is female, and that certainly fits with what
Redcrosse’s suggested physical intimacy establishes in canto vii. Read in this light, the moment
recalls Spenser’s ambiguous description of Errour: “Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, / But
th’other halfe did womans shape retaine, / Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.”
Once again, Spenser leaves the question of woman’s monstrosity unanswered or at the very least
ambiguous. Is Duessa actually deformed in her privy parts or is she just a woman? Which half of
Errour are we supposed to read as “lothsom”? He may not intend to align physical monstrosity so
closely with female embodiment, but he leaves that interpretation open. As Jeyathurai argues,
“Demystifying Duessa becomes a hallmark of male power. Her physical deconstruction takes
place through the actual unmasking of her body which is followed by the crucial act of gazing
upon it. However, this exorcizing of her power is incomplete unless it is supplemented by the

49 1.7.7:1-2.
50 Hamilton, 92.
linguistic perversion of the reproductive norms of her body.” Spenser accomplishes this abstract perversion in part by playing upon his contemporaries’ beliefs surrounding the real, natural female body.

Finally, the maternal role of Britomart deserves consideration, as her prophesied fertility remains the most abstracted instance of maternity within *The Faerie Queene*. Britomart’s importance within the work hinges upon her status as the future matriarch of a great English dynasty, and as Andrew King suggests, that role connects her to the epic tradition’s focus on genealogy and lines of authority. Her future maternity leads directly to Queen Elizabeth, and scholars have recently paid more attention to the constant deferral of Britomart’s marriage and pregnancy as it relates to Elizabeth’s self-fashioning as the Mother of England. The relationship between Spenser’s allegorical representation of Chastity and the Virgin Queen is indeed worth consideration, as both of figures rely upon maternal metaphors that never achieve full embodiment. However, references to pregnancy and childbirth punctuate Britomart’s story as she searches for Arthegall, and not just in reference to her literal pregnancy or her status as a future matriarch. For example, Spenser uses the language of pregnancy as a metaphor to describe Britomart’s happiness upon learning of Arthegall’s glorious reputation from Redcrosse.

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The royall Maid woxe inly wondrous glad,
To heare her Loue so highly magnifyde,
And ioyd that euer she affixed had,
Her hart on knight to goodly glorifyde,
How euer finely she it faind to hyde:
The louing mother, that nine monethes did beare,
In the deare closet of her painefull side,
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52 The description of Britomart’s joy is reminiscent of the Biblical Elizabeth’s baby leaping in her womb when the pregnant Virgin Mary draws near (Luke 1:41) and of Mary’s reaction upon finding young Jesus teaching in the temple (Luke 2:51).
Her tender babe, it seeing safe appeare,
Doth not so much rejoyme, as she rejoyned theare.\(^{53}\)

Although Stevie Davies writes that this simile is strikingly beautiful and “conveys Spenser’s sympathy…and identification…with experiences peculiar to womankind,”\(^{54}\) This maternal image is consistent with Spenser’s use of maternal images elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*, which is to say that he continues to deploy maternal imagery in a way that betrays anxiety about the reproductive female body. I do not see this moment as particularly sympathetic, and I do not think this passage, much less *The Faerie Queene* as a whole, supports the idea that Spenser identifies with womankind. In fact, motherhood must be abstracted, dehumanized, or distanced from reality in order to function within Spenser’s epic, just as it is with Errour, Duessa, and Charissa.

In this stanza, the narrator seems to flip the established pattern by using a concrete, highly physical image to describe Britomart’s abstract emotional state—she experiences the abstract (relief, happiness, and pride) as the physical (as a woman safely delivered of a healthy child). Britomart’s state of mind is connected to her future maternity; the abstract is made comprehensible through concrete language. This rhetorical move is itself grotesque, and Mikhail Bakhtin discusses a similar literary moment in *Rabelais and His World*. In the Italian commedia dell’arte,

a stutterer talking with Harlequin cannot pronounce a difficult word; he makes a great effort, loses his breath, keeping the word down in his throat, sweats and gapes, trembles, chokes. His face is swollen, his eyes pop; “it looks as if he were in the throes of childbirth.” Finally, Harlequin, weary of waiting, relieves the

\(^{53}\) 3.2.11: 1-9

stutterer by surprise; the difficult word is “born” at last.\textsuperscript{55}

In this instance, a tongue-tied male character is described as a pregnant woman, and his relief at getting the word out corresponds to the relief a woman feels upon delivering her infant. The logic behind Spenser’s simile is the same: Britomart feels intellectually and emotionally burdened by not knowing anything about Arthegall, and she is relieved and unburdened when she learns that he is a knight of great renown. As Bakhtin explains,

\begin{quote}
a highly spiritual act is degraded and uncrowned by the transfer to the material bodily level of childbirth, realistically represented…The gaping mouth, the protruding eyes, sweat, trembling, suffocation, the swollen face—all these are typical symptoms of the grotesque life of the body; here they have the meaning of the act of birth.
\end{quote}

Although Spenser’s use of childbirth as a metaphor lacks the precise physical details from Bakhtin’s example, the idea remains; something that is abstract and psychological is rendered in bodily terms connected with the “life of the belly” rather than the “life of the mind.” As Margaret Miles points out, the grotesque conversion of abstract to concrete occurs—perhaps must occur—through the female body: “The association of the female body with materiality, sex, and reproduction…makes it an essential—not an accidental—aspect of the grotesque.”\textsuperscript{56} By choosing a reproductive image to describe Britomart’s emotional state, Spenser participates in the literary tradition of the grotesque and sets up the female body as the cipher through which abstract thoughts and internal struggles become physical realities.

In addition, the way this stanza represents childbirth can be read as an abstraction in itself. As Jonathan Goldberg suggests, the displacement of birth from the womb to the side, “and


thus to the heart and breast,” turns childbirth into a “spiritual idea rather than [a] physical fact.” Goldberg goes on to claim that the side wound is “in token of a maternity that ultimately transcends the he and she” and that the “transference of the source of life to the breast bears a phallic suggestion,” supposedly due to its upward thrust away from the female genitalia.\(^\text{57}\)

Goldberg’s discussion of this image recalls Greenblatt’s commentary on Gargantua’s birth, which I discussed in the first chapter. Greenblatt describes Gargantua’s birth as representative of “the transcendence of the human condition,”\(^\text{58}\) just as Goldberg here describes the Spenser’s simile as transcendent of “the he and she,” and that logic makes sense in terms of connotative symbolism. In this particular stanza and in the story of Gargantua’s nativity, birth is displaced away from the birthing canal through a phallic motion that overrides and negates the yonic reality, as if this pregnancy and this birth are too pure and heroic to come from the lower body; Britomart’s complex range of emotions are more befitting of her noble side than of her privy parts. Her joy cannot enter the world \textit{inter urinas et faeces}, and the displaced birth signals the nobility of her emotions just as Gargantua’s escape from the ear canal symbolizes his triumphant entrance as the narrative’s hero.

However, this strain of scholarship emphasizes the elision of the maternal body by reenacting its erasure, which produces readings that are incomplete at best. Where Britomart’s joy is concerned, the feminine nature of childbirth is important, as is the passive language Spenser uses, and Goldberg omits these details just as Greenblatt omits them in his reading of Rabelais. This is neither necessary nor beneficial. If we attend to the language Spenser gives us, this stanza says nothing of a displaced birth; it speaks only of the discomforts of pregnancy “in the deare closett of her painefull syde,” The pain associated with pregnancy often does manifest

\(^{57}\) Goldberg, 8.
in the sides and along the ribcage as a result of stretched ligaments, muscles, and skin, and the
pain of contractions during labor often concentrates along the sides. One could argue that there is
no displacement here at all, but there is an important bit of distortion. Notice the complete and
utter passivity of the metaphorical mother who represents Britomart’s state of mind. She does not
labor, push, or strain. She is pregnant until her infant suddenly “appeare[s],” and then she is
happy. Obviously, this is not how giving birth usually works, but it is exactly how Britomart’s
moment of joy is described by the narrator. It is important to note that this metaphor does not
come from Britomart’s character and that it is not Britomart who reports feeling like a pregnant
woman recently unburdened. It is the narrator’s voice that cuts in, declaring that Britomart’s joy
and relief (characteristic of “the high”) are really like pregnancy and childbirth (characteristic of
“the low”), thus slyly reasserting the primacy of her maternal destiny. In the absence of
remembered bodily experience, the female body is still functioning as the grotesque matrix
through which readers can understand abstract ideas. Britomart does not imagine herself as a
mother; the narrator assigns that image to her, just as Merlin’s prophecy assigns her that fate.
Rather than transcending the human condition or unsexing Britomart’s emotions, Spenser’s
simile accomplishes just the opposite: it reinforces the female body’s status as the human
grotesque by using the reproductive body to process abstract ideas into physical realities and it
emphasizes Britomart’s role as a passive mother, completely subject to the power of prophecy.

For Spenser, then, the reproductive female body is most often presented as an allegorical
monster, a metaphorical abstraction made flesh within his fictional faery land, or as body whose
potential maternity is constantly deferred and never lived. Within his epic, the maternal body
functions both as a monstrous sight and as a monstrous site, to borrow a pun from M.K. Foster.\textsuperscript{59} Maternal bodies are on display, often anatomized in great detail, and Spenser spends many lines making sure his readers see the figures and understand them as a locus of fear and anxiety within his allegorical landscape. Maternal bodies are presented as embodied paradoxes: Erreur is beautiful and monstrous, both antagonist and victim. Duessa’s entire existence within the narrative can be summarized by Foster’s pithy and insightful turn of phrase: “you are as you appear, or you err as you seem.” According to \textit{The Faerie Queene}, maternal bodies like Duessa’s conceal and lie, hiding their “misshapen” horrors beneath a veneer of “seeming glorious show.”\textsuperscript{60} Even the maternal figures that Spenser presents as positive are distinctly abstracted for the sake of his allegorical epic. In Charissa’s case, the very thing that makes her so virtuous highlights her unreality: noble women in Spenser’s time often relied on wet nurses to care for their young, and infants were often nursed until they were two or three years old. Britomart, on the other hand, is simultaneously maiden, mother, and widow. As Anne Marie Strohman points out, by virtue of Merlin’s prophecy, “Britomart is all…yet none;”\textsuperscript{61} she is suspended in perpetual potential, but she never embodies her role as future matriarch within the scope of the poem as Spenser left it.

II: Motherhood in Hell

That John Milton knew and admired Spenser’s work is beyond doubt. Milton himself referred to Spenser as “his original,” and John Dryden recorded that now oft-cited acknowledgment in his

\textsuperscript{60} 1.2.21: 5.
\textsuperscript{61} Strohman, 46.
Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern (1700). However, literary critics have debated the nature and complexity of Milton’s indebtedness to Spenser for well over a century, some arguing that Milton viewed Spenser as a talented poet and no more, others arguing that Milton saw Spenser as a source or at least as a profound influence over his own poetic enterprise. In 1900, Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh mused that Milton’s affinity for Spenser can best be understood as nothing more than early admiration for the author who first won him to poetry. Raleigh goes on to dismiss Milton’s claim that Spenser is “a better teacher than Aquinas” as a hyperbolic and bold paradox rather than as a sincerely held belief. Seventeen years later, Edwin Greenlaw surveyed the field of Milton studies and concluded that Raleigh led the group of critics “who, perhaps unfortunately, do not recognize Spenser as a source” and came down squarely in the opposing camp. Milton’s intention behind claiming Spenser as “his original” continues to baffle critics as much now as it did at the turn of the century, and the debate surrounding Milton’s literary relationship to Spenser continues. In 2016, this debate has already manifested itself in a variety of scholarly voices within Imagining Death in Spenser and Milton. The essays collected within this anthology alternatively promote an awareness of the self-professed “poetic filiation” of Milton with Spenser, an insistence that readers of Paradise Lost “listen to the echoes of The Faerie Queene throughout Milton’s epic,” an admission that Milton’s claim may “seem a red

herring,” and a challenge to reject the vision of Spenser as Milton’s “original” given the fact that *Paradise Lost* “scornfully dismiss[es]” the narrative techniques of *The Faerie Queene*.

The nature and extent of Spenser’s influence on Milton has been thoroughly debated, but most scholars agree that Spenser’s Errour is one of the sources for Milton’s Sin. The textual similarities and deviations between these two figures contribute to the Early Modern literary representation of monstrous maternity. Sin’s physical presence within the narrative is, of course, introduced in terms that are strikingly similar to Spenser’s treatment of Errour, but Sin’s experience as a mother modifies Errour’s considerably. Sin is one of the final and arguably most extreme abstractions of maternal bodies and maternal bonds to be found within the Early Modern canon. Almost everything about Sin is abstracted: her grotesque body, her origin, her monstrous labor and delivery, her offspring, and her relationship to the other figures within Milton’s Unholy Trinity all highlight the tendency of epic writing to distort and dehumanize maternal figures. Milton’s treatment of motherhood intensifies the abstractions and paradoxes Spenser weaves around the maternal bodies presented throughout *The Faerie Queene*.

The similarities between Errour and Sin are immediately apparent once she is introduced in Milton’s epic. Towards the end of Book 2, Satan encounters two figures guarding the locked gates of Hell. The first,


This is Sin, though Milton reveals information about his characters far more slowly than does Spenser. He waits over one hundred lines before naming Sin and thus revealing her nature, while Spenser names Errour before she appears; in general, the readers of *Paradise Lost* know what the characters know and Satan does not learn of Sin’s identity until she tells him, whereas the readers of *The Faerie Queene* usually share in the narrator’s omniscience. In shape and allegorical nature, however, Errour and Sin are identical. They are both half woman, half serpent with a stinger at the end of their serpentine tail. There are verbal echoes, as well. The phrase “mortal sting” repeats Spenser’s description precisely, and words like “foul” and “fold” appear in both passages. Both figures have creatures that swarm around them and invade their bodies if disturbed. In terms of material existence, the similarities between Sin and Errour overwhelm the differences.

However, Errour remains a distinctly flat character within *The Faerie Queene*. She has no voice, no origin story, no family beyond her brood, no motivation beyond self-defense, and no

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68 Spenser describes Errour’s “mortall sting” in 1.1.15: 4. References to Errour’s “foul” nature are frequent but appear first in 1.1.14: 9, and her “folds” are referenced in 1.1.16: 3. For a more complete list of textual similarities and differences, see Catherine Gimelli Martin, “The Sources of Milton’s Sin Reconsidered,” *Milton Quarterly*. 35.1 (2001): 1-8; Teskey “From Allegory to Dialectic.”
relationship to or prior knowledge of the Redcrosse Knight. Milton fleshes out all of these facets for Sin and, in the process, crafts an image of maternity more complete in its monstrosity than anything found within *The Faerie Queene*. Errour’s children are described briefly as “ill fauored,” “fowle, and black as inke.” They are “serpents small” and “deformed monsters,” and they appear in “sundrie shapes.” In contrast, Sin’s offspring are far more interesting. Once Milton describes Sin and her Hell Hounds, he turns to the other figure at Hell’s gate.

…The other shape,  
If shape it might be call’d that shape had none  
Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,  
Or substance might be call’d that shadow seem’d,  
For each seem’d either; black it stood as Night,  
Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,  
And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem’d his head  
The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on.  

Like Sin, Death is not immediately named, and so this figure remains as anonymous as he is amorphous, but once Sin reveals her child’s identity, his shifting, shadowy shapelessness makes sense. At this point in the narrative, Death does not have a physical reality because death has not occurred. Adam and Eve are still unfallen, and God has not pronounced the fatal curse. The threat of death exists because Sin exists, but it is not yet fully embodied. Sin has a real corporeal form because, as she explains a few lines after these descriptions, Satan sinned by rebelling against his Heavenly Father, thus giving her a fixed form.

Satan responds to these two figures aggressively, as they are blocking his entrance into the outside world and preventing him from reaching Eden to carry out his revenge. Death and Satan square off, and all of Hell grows darker still and shakes at their matched fury. Sin places herself between the two and begins unraveling their convoluted family history, naming Satan her

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70 *PL*, 2: 666-673.
Father and Death his Son. Satan balks at this revelation and insists that he does not know her and that he has never before seen a more detestable sight than her or her companion. Sin responds, incredulous:

Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem
Now in thine eye so foul, once deem’d so fair
In Heav’n, when at th’ Assembly, and in sight
Of all the Seraphim with thee combin’d
In bold conspiracy against Heav’n’s King,
All on a sudden miserable pain
Surpris’d thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side op’ning wide,
Likest to thee in shape and count’nance bright,
Then shining heav’nly fair, a Goddess arm’d
Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seiz’d
All th’ Host of Heav’n: back they recoil’d afraid
At first, and call’d me Sin...  

Sin springs from Satan’s head when he first considers rebelling against God, and she appears in the midst of all the Heavenly Host, resplendent and armed like a goddess. As many scholars have notes, Milton is undoubtedly pulling from the most famous instance of cephalogenesis in mythology—the birth of Athena—but he quickly develops the relationship between Satan and his daughter and veers away from classical tradition. Satan narcissistically grows enamored of his own reflection in the figure of Sin, an image which foreshadows Eve’s self-discovery in Book 4, and soon “[Sin’s] womb conceiv’d / a growing burden.” As Death matures within Sin, Satan mounts and eventually loses the war in Heaven, and his daughter is cast down with the

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72 *PL,* 4: 460-466. Soon after she is created in Eden, Eve finds herself gazing into a glassy pond, enamored and frustrated by her own reflection. She is saved from the tragic fate of such narcissistic love by the voice of God.
73 *PL,* 2: 766-767.
rest of Satan’s cohort. She is left to give birth to the fruits of her incestuous union with Satan, alone and apparently forgotten.

Up to this point in her story, Sin has retained her angelic, comely shape. Her monstrosity has not yet manifested itself in her physical form; her lower half only grows into the labyrinthine folds of a serpent when she gives birth to Death:

At last this odious offspring whom thou seest
Thine own begotten, breaking violent way
Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain
Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew
Transform’d: but he my inbred enemy
Forth issu’d, brandishing his fatal Dart
Made to destroy: I fled, and cri’d out Death. (2.781-787)

Scholars have long noted the Biblical precedence for the familial relationship between Sin and Death by citing James 1:15, which states “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.” However, the physical details of this birth belong to Milton alone. Sin brings forth Death with violence, fear, pain, and tearing, and her “nether shape” is transformed. Milton dramatizes this process by stretching Sin’s lower half into a serpent’s tail, but the description may betray the lingering anxieties men (and women) have long felt regarding the damage done to women’s sexual organs through the stretching, tearing, and bloody process of giving birth.

Although Milton has already established the incestuous triangle of Satan, Sin, and Death by this point, he doubles down by continuing the narrative and incorporating the Hell Hounds

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that throng around Sin into the perverse family tree. Once Death is brought forth, he chases after his sister-mother, inflamed with lust that seems more like rage. He quickly overtakes her,

And in embraces forcible and foul
Ingend’ring with me, of that rape begot
These yelling Monsters that with ceaseless cry
Surround me, as thou saw’st, hourly conceiv’d
And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
To me, for when they list, into the womb
That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw
My Bowels, thir repast; the bursting forth
Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round,
That rest or intermission none I find.\(^{75}\)

This passage solidifies the complete and utter depravity of Hell’s royal family and further distances Sin’s maternal experiences from Errour’s, whose children seem almost well-behaved by comparison. Although Errour has thousands of serpents who suckle at her dugs, creep back into her body, and eventually drain her lifeblood, she is consumed only once: Sin’s children, on the other hand, are constantly gnawing at her bowels and forcing her to live in a painful and endless cycle of birth, rape, and rebirth, all while her firstborn son gazes upon her tormented existence hungrily. Whether or not we can speak of Spenser as a true “source” for *Paradise Lost*, it is clear that Milton knew Spenser well enough to surpass his “original,” at least where depictions of monstrous mothers are concerned.

In terms of descriptive detail, there are many similarities and differences between the monstrous mothers Errour and Sin, but these passages also mark a distinct shift in Milton’s style of writing. In an epic that seems bereft of allegory, especially when compared to Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Sin and Death stand out as isolated instances of allegorical personification, a fact that is made all the more remarkable when one considers the existence of Milton’s surviving

\(^{75}\) *PL*, 2: 790-802.
draft material for what would become his great epic. In the Trinity manuscript, Milton sketches out an allegorical drama of the Fall in which the standard figures of medieval allegory all appear: Heavenly Love, Conscience, Death, Faith, Hope, Charity, Justice, Mercy, and Wisdome. Of these figures, only Death remains, and he is joined by his hellish mother, Sin. The reasons for Milton’s shift to allegory within *Paradise Lost* as we know it and his eventual rejection of allegory as a mode of writing suitable for the Fall are diverse and complicated, and Stephen Fallon explores them adeptly in his article “Milton’s Sin and Death: The Ontology of Allegory in *Paradise Lost*.” In brief, Milton turns to allegory for his descriptions of their presence and their origin within his epic in order to distinguish between the ontological truth of Adam and Eve from the relative unreality of Sin and Death. Fallon explains that allegory as a mode of writing had declined in popularity by the seventeenth century because it had “ceased to answer to the ontological assumptions of the educated elite.” He connects allegory’s failing status as an apt vehicle for truth with Spenser’s decaying reputation as a great poet and characterizes those few writers who continued to pursue allegory in the seventeenth century as writing for the “philosophically illiterate.” Fallon ultimately suggests that Milton uses allegory, knowing full well its limitations as a fallen rhetorical device, to comment upon the ontological insufficiency and inadequacy of evil within an Augustinian framework. If Fallon’s theory about Milton’s use of allegory is correct, and I believe it is, *Paradise Lost* represents an intricately complex vision of monstrous maternity that is abstracted and ideologically fraught on every level: from physical detail and character development all the way down to literary form.

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77 Ibid., 332.
78 Ibid., 337-338.
79 Ibid., 350.
Finally, Sin and her complicated familial relations represent another level of abstraction and perversion that has as its foundation Sin’s monstrous maternity. For over a hundred years, criticism has acknowledged the influence of James 1:15 on the formation of Milton’s demonic first family: “When lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.”\(^8\) Merritt Y. Hughes seems to have been the first scholar to characterize the relationship between Satan, Sin, and Death as a hellish parody of the Holy Trinity, and the comparison has endured since Hughes first made that observation in 1957.\(^8\) In fact, it is now a critical commonplace to refer to Satan, Sin, and Death as the Unholy Trinity, even though the full import of that title and the means by which Milton accomplishes this literary subversion of the Trinity often go unacknowledged and unexplored. However, the Unholy Trinity represents the culmination of the abstractly and perversely maternal in that is “a grotesque parody in which all values have been inverted.”\(^8\) Imagining Sin as a maternal figure that replaces the Son allows Milton to accomplish this grotesque inversion by negating the thoroughly patriarchal Holy Trinity. The presence of a maternal figure is part of the perversion that leads to or facilitates the total corruption of the Unholy Trinity.

Sin’s body and her relationship with her father and lover, Satan, as well as her relationship with her child and rapist, Death, are all clearly monstrous, but the extent of that monstrosity grows even more pronounced when compared to the theological understanding of the Holy Trinity as Milton must have known it. Saints Augustine and Aquinas both held that the Holy Trinity came into being as the Father’s self-knowledge led to the Son, and then the Father

and Son’s mutual love manifested in the form of the Holy Spirit. In order to accomplish the perfect and complete parody represented by Unholy Trinity, Milton had to turn God’s knowledge into Satan’s ignorance and the Father and Son’s love into Satan and Sin’s combination of lust and loathing. It is no coincidence that Milton uses Sin’s maternal body as the catalyst for and the locus of this demonic inversion. The scientific and literary traditions that Milton had studied with so much devotion provided him with centuries upon centuries of material that insisted the maternal body was innately perverse and perverting, naturally inverted and subversive, and contagiously grotesque.

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83 White, Jr., 339. White thoroughly explains how this theology wove its way through the Protestant Reformation and explains how Milton, a man who was “widely read and deeply involved in the religious disputes of his time,” must have been familiar with this formulation of the Holy Trinity.
CODA

“SHUTTING THAT WHOLE THING DOWN:”
PREMODERN RHETORIC AND MODERN REPRO RIGHTS

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, combine de tolerance
    Que je ne veux icy ramentevoir!
Il me suffit aux hommes faire voir
Combien leurs loix nous font de violence."

["My God, my God, how much suffering
    I don’t care to remember here!
It is enough if I can make men see
How much their laws do violence to us."]

—Madeleine des Roches, lines 54-56, “Ode 1”\(^1\)

When Madeleine des Roches wrote these lines in sixteenth-century Poitiers, she could not have foreseen how relevant they would remain across centuries and oceans. Her collection of poetry and epistles focuses primarily on the challenges of holding on to literary and intellectual aspirations as a woman in Early Modern France, but the frustrations she feels and the obstacles she faces are familiar even now. In the poem that contains these lines, des Roches\(^2\) laments the


\(^{2}\) When I refer to des Roches, I am referring exclusively to Madeleine des Roches, not to her daughter Catherine. Many of Madeleine’s poems are addressed to Catherine and encourage her to pursue an intellectual, “virtuous” life and to avoid marriage and motherhood for as long as
fact that her poetry will never be as highly regarded as the classically inspired poetry of her male peers. She is constrained to write about her experiences, not about heroes from mythology, and because her life was shaped by a patriarchal culture that dictates marriage and motherhood as the necessary byproducts of being born female, she writes about the domestic sphere and replaces martial metaphors with maternal images. Her collected works contain the voice of a woman who had intellectual aspirations but was compelled to set them aside in order to carry and care for her children, and her poetry strikes a balance between the ferocity of her maternal love and the frustration at her “failure” to occupy a more intellectual role. Madeleine recognized the ways in which her body, and by extension her life, was defined by and subjected to the laws and customs of men, and she knew that the authorities did not and could not understand the violence that their expectations placed upon women. The fact that these lines resonate suggests that our own laws and customs still do violence to women. Especially when it comes to the rhetoric of modern reproductive rights, the policies that concern women’s bodies and the ways in which politicians and policymakers discuss women’s bodies are strikingly and frighteningly similar to the Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance beliefs I have traced throughout this dissertation.

The editors who put together des Roches’ works in the most recently published edition introduce the collection by claiming that the greater gender equality of modern times stems from the voices that spoke out against structural misogyny in the medieval and early modern periods. While I agree that much is owed to the social commentators of the past, I suggest that there is even more to learn by looking at the similarities between our time and theirs. It is undoubtedly true that Western women have more freedoms and opportunities than the women of des Roches’ period enjoyed, just as the editors claim, but the truth is that women’s private lives are still possible. Catherine took her mother’s advice to heart, and she is noteworthy in her own right. However, I am here focusing on Madeleine’s work.
subject to public debate in a way that men’s lives are not. Female bodies are still regulated by authorities who would dictate their reproductive lives in a number of harmful and occasionally violent ways, and the majority of these authorities and policymakers are still men. When Texas Senator Wendy Davis delivered her now famous 11-hour filibuster in opposition of SB5, a bill that limited access to abortion services by closing all but five clinics in the state and outlawing all abortion after 20-weeks gestation even in cases of rape or incest, was she not speaking in concert with des Roches’ voice, however unconsciously? Was she not attempting to “make men see / How much their laws do violence” to women? Misunderstanding the female body has continued to hinder true gender equality before the law, especially in the debates surrounding reproductive rights. It is no coincidence that many of the politicians who oppose reproductive rights do not understand—or pretend to not understand—how the female body works. Many of the inaccurate and occasionally bizarre statements modern politicians have made are caught up in the archaic “science” of our predecessors.

There are two major lines of illogic, both fairly common in political rhetoric and both related to outdated beliefs surrounding pregnancy. The first concerns the complex connections that were once thought to exist between rape, female pleasure, and conception; the second depends upon an understanding of the female genitalia as somehow sentient and capable of

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3 The bill that prompted Wendy Davis’s filibuster was later passed by both the House and the Senate in a second special session the following month. Rick Perry, then Texas governor, proclaimed this a success for his party and made a highly inappropriate statement about the opposition by claiming “the louder they scream, the more we know we’re getting something done.” See The Republican Rape Advisory Chart, Vol. VII with accompanying links.

4 All of the quotations I use from politicians can be found, amongst many others of a similar nature, on the Republican Rape Advisory Chart (RRAC) at goprapeadvisorychart.com, which includes full citations and links to source material. The website features an open-source collection of quotations from politicians, covering the last thirty years and including the most recent presidential campaigns, and includes only those statements that have been corroborated by assorted news articles, interviews, and televised appearances.
willful and autonomous action. To be clear, I am not arguing that modern politicians actually believe that these ancient anatomical models are accurate: I am arguing only that the long and established history of misconceptions about conception continues to affect our political conversations in unusual and often unacknowledged ways.

The female orgasm has long been a source of confusion and anxiety, and modern scientists are still trying to understand its origins, its sociological and biological functions, and its relative frequency/infrequency when compared to the male orgasm. For 1,500 years, medical consensus held that both male and female orgasms (and male and female seed) were necessary for conception—this despite the fact that the clitoris, by far the most common source of female orgasm, was not officially “discovered” until 1545 and not identified as a locus of pleasure until 1559. The Galenic model of anatomy insisted upon the mutual necessity of male and female orgasm, most likely because the male and female genitalia were understood as roughly analogous. If the physical parts were understood to be essentially the same, it would make sense that they experienced pleasure in similar ways. Because of this misinformation, infertility was occasionally blamed upon the would-be father’s sexual shortcomings. For example, consider Lord Paget’s letter to his steward’s wife, in which he mentions her continued infertility and playfully offers his services in remedying the matter: “I am sorry to heare no newes of your being with childe; I am afraide Roger Jones [his steward] is worthy the blame, for I thinke you very fruitful were you well handled. I intend to bee att my house by Michaelmas where if I find

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7 Galen and both seeds
you still barren, I will take some paines with you myselfe.” Lord Paget was writing in jest, most likely, but the belief that pregnancy only occurs if the woman experiences pleasure during the act is clearly implied. The underlying belief creeps into other personal letters from the period, including Arthur Stanhope’s 1672 letter to his nephew, Theophilus. The full context of that conversation has been lost to us, but it seems that Theophilus had written his uncle for advice after struggling to consummate his marriage for two months. Arthur’s response is remarkable and unusual in its detailed description of foreplay and in its surprising focus on turning the bride’s pain into pleasure. He commiserates with his nephew but states clearly that he worries more about the woman’s role in sexual intercourse, combining avuncular affection with vulgar idiom in his assertion that he is “most concerned for my poor lady when she comes to push a pike with you.”

Throughout the letter, Arthur focuses on comforting and pleasing the woman. Given the fact that the Early Modern culture was not known for being especially sex-positive for women, the period’s emphasis on female pleasure may seem odd to modern readers, but it was seen primarily as a necessary precursor to the reproduction of heirs, not as a worthy end in itself.

At first blush, the insistence on women’s pleasure as a necessary component of conception does not seem related to our nation’s rape debate, but the anecdote Thomas Laqueur uses to open Making Sex may help bridge the gap between this belief and modern political discussions of rape and abortion. Laqueur discusses the story of an eighteenth-century aristocrat turned monk who is asked to watch over the believed-to-be-deceased body of a young woman. In a real life scene reminiscent of Sleeping Beauty, the monk is overcome with desire, rapes the lifeless body, and departs hastily before the scheduled burial. The woman was not dead at all,

9 Ibid., 41-2.
however, and she wakes up just before being buried alive. Her parents’ joy at their daughter’s apparent resurrection is cut short when she is found to be pregnant and incapable of providing a satisfactory account of how that came to pass. Some time later, after the aristocrat has come into his inheritance and renounced his holy orders, he returns to the scene of his crime and finds “the object of his necrophilic desire more beautiful alive than dead” and marries her, thus legitimizing the mystery bastard. Noted surgeon Antoine Louis analyzed this case in 1752 and concluded that everyone involved must have known the girl to be alive and consenting as evidenced by her pregnancy and that “the inkeepers’ daughter and the monk simply conspired…to escape culpability” for their sexual impropriety.¹⁰ In this story and in its subsequent interpretations, rape is not really rape if it leads to pregnancy because pregnancy can only occur if the woman experiences an orgasm, which can only happen if she consents to the sexual encounter in the first place. Thus, pregnancy was seen as evidence that no real rape had occurred.

While modern politicians would likely acknowledge the absurdity of this set of beliefs if they were asked directly, more than a few of them have said things concerning rape and pregnancy that rest upon this very foundation and that perpetuate the connection between rape—that’s-not-really-rape, pleasure, and pregnancy. As recently as January 2015, representatives from the Republican party expressed their confusion surrounding the definition of rape and betrayed their ignorance about the nature of conception, but the problem goes back further than that. In 1986, then Senator John McCain (R-AZ) faced some backlash after making a joke about

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¹⁰ For the full discussion of this anecdote, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. 1-3. Antoine Louis’ conclusion does not track for many reasons, the most obvious being that the monk and the girl would have conspired to aggravate their problem rather than alleviate it. It is difficult to imagine that a monk breaking his vow of chastity and raping the body of a girl everyone believed to be dead would be more socially acceptable than two conscious adults engaging in premarital sex. Laqueur does not address this issue.
rape in front of the National League of Citizens and Towns in Washington, D.C.: “Did you hear the one about the woman who is attacked on the street by a gorilla, beaten senseless, raped repeatedly and left to die? When she finally regains consciousness and tries to speak, her doctor leans over her to hear her sigh contently and to feebly ask, ‘Where is that marvelous ape?’” (For the record, McCain has since said that he “does not recall” making such a joke.)

The belief latent in McCain’s “joke” is that women secretly love forced sexual encounters and enjoy being physically overcome. This punch line is ancient, in fact, and it recalls Ovid’s advice to men who face rejection from their prospective lovers:

> …Even if she doesn’t kiss back,  
> Still force on regardless! She may struggle, cry ‘Naughty!’,  
> Yet she wants to be overcome…  
> It’s all right to use force—force of *that* sort goes down well with  
> The girls: what in fact they love to yield  
> They’d often rather have stolen. Rough seduction  
> Delights them, the audacity of near-rape  
> Is a compliment—so the girl who *could* have been forced, yet somehow  
> Got away unscathed, may feign delight, but in fact  
> Feels sadly let down.12

The logic in both instances is that while a sexual encounter might start as rape or look like rape to those on the outside, there is always a chance that the woman might secretly end up enjoying herself, in which case the rape becomes not-rape and the woman is heard to sigh contently.

Coupled with these examples, Representative Roger Rivard’s (R-WI) statement that “Some girls, they rape so easy”13 makes more sense, although it is still an inexcusable contribution to the

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11 RRAC, Vol. IV.  
political conversations surrounding consent and, especially for a politician, an inadvisable thing to say.

These issues come up more regularly in debates surrounding abortion laws, specifically when it comes to pro-life exceptions for cases of rape and/or incest. The clearest example of the outdated belief colliding with modern politics comes from 1995, when Republican State Representative Henry Aldridge (NC) said, “The facts show that people who are raped—who are truly raped—the juices don’t flow, the body functions don’t work, and they don’t get pregnant. Medical authorities agree that this is a rarity, if ever.”

The facts show no such thing. The most commonly cited study of pregnancy resulting from rape suggests that there is a 6.4% incidence of conception following any single incidence of rape. Generating such a statistic is complicated by many factors, and that rate has been modified in both directions, but most reports settle on a number somewhere between 3.1% and 6.4%. The 1996 study extrapolated these numbers to cover the entire US population over the course of one year and concluded that there are roughly 32,000 rape-related pregnancies each year. This figure has not been challenged or corroborated by more recent studies, so its accuracy may be questioned. However, what the study does make clear, and what has most certainly remained unchanged, is that women can and do conceive as a result of rape and that their “juices” are largely irrelevant when it comes to fertilization. Despite this fact, many other politicians have argued against allowing abortion in cases of rape on the grounds that rape-related pregnancies are incredibly rare. The language Todd Akin used in his

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14 RRAC, Vol. III.
15 See also Celeste Greig’s statement that “The percentage of pregnancies due to rape is small because it’s an act of violence, because the body is traumatized. I don’t know what percentage of pregnancies are due to the violence of rape. Because of the trauma the body goes through, I don’t know what percentage of pregnancy results from the act.” She was the president of the California Republican Assembly in 2013, when she made this claim. (RRAC, Vol. V) Other politicians have made similar errors in recent years. Republican Congressman Trent Franks (AZ) said
famous (and poorly received) locution from the 2012 election cycle is revealing: “If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.” The implication is that if the female body does not “shut that whole thing down,” then the rape was not actually a rape. Again, the onus of proving that a rape occurred and was “legitimate” or “truly rape” falls on the female victims, who can be betrayed by bodily processes that they simply cannot control. When rape victims do get pregnant, this logic holds that they must not have been raped at all. Their juices must have flowed. If they didn’t like it, their bodies would have shut it down. Rape becomes not-rape.

This transitions into a related and similarly outdated belief about the supposed agency of female genitalia and reproductive organs. From Plato through the eighteenth century, medical authorities held that the female body was capable of independent activity and movement, and this logic is implicit in Shakespeare’s references to earth as “a swallowing womb” in Titus Andronicus and his description of madness as the upward swelling of a womb in King Lear. The wandering womb is the most well-known manifestation of this belief, but it appeared in many different forms. For the present purpose, we should consider the belief that the vagina had its own appetite and could act as a straw to suck up sperm when it so desired. In Timeaus (c. 360 BC), Plato portrayed the womb as capable of sucking in the male seed and of performing “voluntary motion,” including responding to sweet or repulsive smells by drawing near or recoiling. This belief lingered for longer than you might imagine. In 1597, Ludovic Mercatus

“Because, you know, the incidence of rape resulting in pregnancy are very low” in 2013 (RRAC, Vol. VII), and Fay Boozman claimed that rape-related pregnancies are statistically uncommon because of "God's little protective shield" back in 1998 (RRAC, Vol. IV).

16 RRAC, Vol. I.
17 Titus Andronicus, 2.3:239; King Lear, 2.4:56-57.
described this sucking in of sperm as the womb’s appetite: “The whole substance of the womb has the natural appetite of taking in semen…the whole neck of the uterus and most strongly its mouth, have the power to copulate and derive pleasure.”19 When the French physician Jacques Guillemeau published his treatise Childbirth, or the Happy Delivery of Women: Wherein is Set Down the Government of Women in 1635, he wrote that the womb might “come down to meet nature, sucking, and snatching the same.”20 In 1662, the English physician Nicholas Culpeper depicted conception as the womb sucking in the penis: “If she keeps the seed, it is a sign she hath conceived, and a man may know that the seed is kept, if he find in Copulation that his Yard is sucked and drawn by the womb.”21 In 1725, Jane Sharp confirmed this model of conception and described the role the vagina’s mouths had on drawing in the male seed and conceiving: “The womb is always shut but in time of generation, and then the bottom [mouth] draws in the seed, and it presently shuts so close that no needle, as I saith, can find entrance.”22 For more than two thousand years, people believed that women's reproductive organs initiated conception by actively sucking in semen through the vagina-as-straw and then snapping shut to trap the seed inside, all through the organs' own “voluntary motion.”

Again, I am not suggesting that the Republican representatives who have said some unfortunate and uninformed statements regarding the female body actually still believe this; however, the idea that women’s bodies can shut down conception if they want to or that their

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20 Qtd. in Eccles, 29.
22 Jane Sharp. The Compleat Midwife’s Companion: or the art of midwifery improv’d, directing child-bearing women how to order themselves in their conception, breeding, bearing, and nursing of children. London: John Marshall, 1725. 56.
bodies can “secrete a certain secretion that tends to kill sperm”—as Representative Stephen Friend claimed in 2008—seems to depend upon a similar vein of thought by seeing agency where there is none. The vagina cannot suck in (or spit out, for that matter) semen, and a woman cannot will her body to reject conception. Whether or not a rape victim gets pregnant after the assault is completely beyond her control, unless she has access to an emergency contraceptive like Plan B. Suggesting, even unwittingly, that the woman ultimately has control over her body “shutting down” or “secreting” substances and basing the legitimacy of her rape on the absence of conception leads to more victim blaming. Although modern science has progressed well beyond Plato and Galen (and Guillemeau, Culpeper, and Sharp for that matter), the beliefs these authorities once held have rippled through time and can still be detected in the speech of our policymakers, especially when they are making arguments that surround the female body. Mary E. Fissell is speaking of the Early Modern period when she writes that “Women’s bodies were sites of contest, places that people argued about and through which they tried to construct themselves as authoritative,” but there is no need to limit such a statement to past tense. So it is still.

23 RRAC, Vol. IV.
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