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Literary Gestations: Giving Birth to Writing, 1722-1831

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by

Elizabeth Ruth Raisanen

2013
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Literary Gestations:
Giving Birth to Writing, 1722-1831

by

Elizabeth Ruth Raisanen
Doctor of Philosophy in English
University of California, Los Angeles, 2013
Professor Anne K. Mellor, Chair

This study employs a feminist theoretical lens in order to correct the commonplace critical notion that male Romantic poets embraced the metaphors of gestation and birth for their literary productions. By tracing the development of obstetric medicine and copyright law in eighteenth-century England, I demonstrate the ways in which eighteenth-century and Romantic male authors (including Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Shelley) denied autonomy and speech to their pregnant characters and rejected maternal metaphors for writing because they wished to posit a transcendent male mind that was fundamentally different from—and superior to—women’s gross embodiment. I also examine Eliza Haywood, an eighteenth-century novelist who wrote extensively about pregnancy but who nevertheless resisted a maternal authorial
identity. By contrast, the female Romantic authors I examine in this study—most notably Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Eliza Fenwick, Amelia Opie, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Isabella Kelly, Jane Cave, and Mary Shelley—celebrated both maternity and maternal metaphors for authorship because motherhood and authorship, embodiment and intellect, were not mutually exclusive for them. In short, mothering and writing were congruent activities for female, but not for male, Romantic writers.
The dissertation of Elizabeth Ruth Raisanen is approved.

Helen Deutsch

Mary Terrall

Anne K. Mellor, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013
For my mother, Christine (Ahlskog) Raisanen,

whose hard work, sharp intellect, and unfailing kindness

I have always endeavored to emulate
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VITA

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PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS


INTRODUCTION

Cultural Constructions of the Pregnant Body in Eighteenth-Century England

I

This study corrects the commonplace critical notion that male Romantic writers embraced the metaphors of gestation and birth for their literary productions. Terry Castle’s claim that the childbirth trope for writing was “utterly celebrational in import” for the major male Romantic poets has become axiomatic in Romantic criticism. I argue, however, that it was actually the female authors of the Romantic period who embraced maternal metaphors for literary creation and found motherhood and authorship to be compatible endeavors that reinforced women’s authority as both mothers and authors. I argue that male Romantic authors’ profound distrust of metaphors for authorship rooted in female reproductive physiology is linked to their denigration of pregnant and parturient women in their poetry. In this way, they resemble their eighteenth-century male predecessors far more than has yet been recognized. Conversely, I argue that because female Romantic authors do not disparage the pregnant body in their literature, they are more accepting of birth as a trope for authorship. In short, mothering and writing were congruent activities for female, but not for male, Romantic writers.

One might think that there is nothing left to say about motherhood in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature. With the outpouring of feminist literary criticism on women’s bodies and writings since the 1970s, the role of the mother in English literature and culture has been subjected to intense scrutiny by both literary and cultural critics. However, even

amongst some of the most important studies of motherhood in English literature, culture, and medicine, there is an as-yet unbridged chasm between studies of maternity in the eighteenth century and Romantic literary historical periods. Though Clare Hanson’s *A Cultural History of Pregnancy* (2004) is an exception to this tendency, her book only briefly surveys a number of novelistic representations of pregnancies from 1750 to 2000.\(^2\) Most in-depth studies of literary maternity tend to remain rooted in a single literary historical period. In *The Politics of Motherhood* (1996), for instance, Toni Bowers explores how eighteenth-century novels, plays, and other cultural artifacts helped to establish the ideal of the virtuous, domestic mother who, because of her relegation to the private sphere, loses her personhood; because Bowers’ study extends only to 1760, however, she does not trace her arguments into the Romantic era.\(^3\) Conversely, Ruth Perry, Felicity Nussbaum, and Lisa Forman Cody have all argued that literary and cultural representations of motherhood served public as well as strictly private functions—particularly in establishing English national identity and developing the gendered ideologies underpinning British imperial expansion—but these studies are also largely rooted in the eighteenth century. \(^4\)

Similarly, studies of motherhood in British Romantic literature tend to exclude discussions of eighteenth-century authors. For instance, important studies by Anne Mellor and Julie Kipp pick up, both chronologically and ideologically, where Bowers’ and Nussbaum’s


books leave off. Though Mellor and Kipp both argue that mothers and motherhood (especially as they are represented by women writers) played a significant role in English public life and discourse at the turn of the nineteenth century, they examine few (if any) primary texts published prior to 1780. While Susan Greenfield suggests that Romantic novels that focus on the mother-daughter relationship reaffirm the mother’s importance to the family and the larger social order, her explorations of maternity are wide-ranging, covering topics like child custody laws, absent mothers, and discourses about maternity in relation to colonialism and abolition as well as physical processes like pregnancy and childbirth. Book-length studies of canonical male Romantic poets’ representations of maternity are not in short supply, but they mostly are comprised of psychoanalytic studies of the poets’ ambiguously gendered selves and/or their relationships to their own mothers rather than explorations of how their literary representations of mothers might compare or contrast with their female contemporaries, or with their male predecessors. By contrast, my project reads across eighteenth-century and Romantic literary treatments of maternity by both male and female authors in order to link these previously disconnected lines of inquiry.


6 Susan C. Greenfield, Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance, Frances Burney to Jane Austen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002). Margaret Homans and Marianne Hirsch also explore the mother’s role in the production of language and culture, as well as the mother-daughter relationship, but their studies focus primarily on nineteenth-century literature by women writers. See Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and Marianne Hirsch, Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

Just as most explorations of motherhood are starkly demarcated along the dividing lines between literary historical periods, so too are studies of mothers in Romantic literature frequently divided from discussions of maternity as a metaphor for literary production. There is perhaps no better example of this critical tendency than Terry Castle’s “Lab’ring Bards: Birth Topoi and English Poetics 1660-1820” (1979), a foundational essay on the history of gestational metaphors for writing that asserts that male Romantic authors embraced pregnancy and childbirth as metaphors for literary production because these tropes aptly convey the originality, creativity, organicism, and spontaneity of the Romantic aesthetic (203-5).[^8] Castle does not, however, ground her argument about Romantic poets’ enthusiasm for female birth tropes in these authors’ treatments of pregnant and birthing characters in their literature, a tendency followed by subsequent critics who have built upon her argument. Susan Stanford Friedman, for instance, accepts Castle’s assessment of Romantic writers who “transformed the birth metaphor into something positive,” but she does not provide any readings of pregnancy or childbirth in male-authored Romantic texts that would suggest these authors were interested in and enthusiastic about parturition as a physical process as well as a metaphor.[^9] Though Alan Richardson has explored how male Romantic authors like Wordsworth have “absorb[ed] feminine qualities” that allow them to “celebrate […] the essential maternity of the fully imaginative man,” his arguments are founded on what I believe are inaccurate readings of key passages that invoke

[^8]: Castle’s conclusion that Romantic authors were enthusiastic about birth tropes as metaphors for literary creation grew out of M. H. Abrams’ argument that, for Romantic authors, the creation of art is “a spontaneous process independent of intention, precept, or even consciousness.” See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 187. I should like to point out, however, that Abrams’ discussions of the organicism and spontaneity of Romantic aesthetic theory are grounded in the propagation of vegetation rather than in human procreation.

maternity. Building on Richardson’s claims about male Romantics’ “colonization” of feminine sensibility, Anne Mellor’s influential *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) defines “masculine Romanticism” in terms of male Romantic poets’ usurpation of the cultural authority that female functions like childbearing bestowed on women; by styling themselves as mothers to their poetry, male Romantic authors “could claim to speak with ultimate moral as well as intellectual authority” (23-4). However, Mellor’s discussion of male poets’ interest in biological maternity is limited to their fascination with breastfeeding (83) and does not extend to their interest in pregnancy and childbirth. Even Hanson’s *Cultural History of Pregnancy*, which bridges the divide between literary historical periods in its explorations of pregnancy, does not delve into pregnancy as a metaphor for writing.

Readings of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) constitute one major exception to the tendency in Romantic criticism to separate discussions of physical and metaphysical maternity, as a large number of readers have pointed out that Shelley’s trepidation about giving birth and becoming an author were both embodied in Victor Frankenstein’s creature. However, most arguments about the equivalence between book and baby in *Frankenstein* have appeared in article form or in book-length studies that are limited in scope to one or only a few Romantic writers, limitations that prevent these critics from connecting their readings of *Frankenstein* to a longer history of authors for whom maternity and maternal metaphors for authorship were

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10 Alan Richardson, “Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine,” *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 15-16. In order to support his point that the ideal Wordsworthian poet has maternal attributes, Richardson cites the following passage from *The Prelude*: “his heart / Be tender as a nursing mother’s heart” (qtd. in Richardson 16). I would argue, however, that because of the word “as,” these lines actually indicate an inexact equivalence between (male) poets and (female) mothers. (I discuss this passage in greater detail in Chapter 5.) Furthermore, Richardson’s reading of Lord Byron’s nursing images in *Childe Harold* identifies the poet as a son nurtured by a mother rather than as the nursing mother herself (see Richardson 17).
interrelated. The tendency toward severely limited discussions of childbirth’s relationship to language and literature can be found in readings of other Romantic authors as well. Barbara Gelpi’s *Shelley’s Goddess* (1992) explores Percy Shelley’s representation of the mother’s role in an infant’s language acquisition in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), but Gelpi limits her study to one (albeit significant) poem by Percy Shelley. Likewise, while Tristanne Connolly and Kiran Toor both interrogate the intersection of gestation and gestational metaphors for authorship, their studies are also limited to only one author apiece (William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, respectively). Nina Auerbach and Christopher Ricks have studied Jane Austen’s feelings about children and a maternal authorial identity, although they come to antithetical conclusions about the matter. However, such studies on single authors do not allow critics to apply their conclusions about the connections between maternity and maternal metaphors more broadly to the Romantic movement. My project, by contrast, juxtaposes readings of birthing bodies with examinations of gestational tropes for writing in order to uncover the ways in which a number of

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13 According to Auerbach, Jane Austen’s distaste for childbearing influenced her conviction that authorship and motherhood were mutually exclusive; Auerbach suggests that Austen’s few usages of the book-as-baby metaphor were either carelessly cliché or deeply ironic. See Nina Auerbach, “Artists and Mothers: A False Alliance,” *Women & Literature* 6.1 (1978), 6-7. In an essay that responds to Auerbach’s assertion, Ricks maintains that despite Austen’s refusal to accord primary importance to children, books and children were parallel (if not exactly analogous) for her. See Christopher Ricks, “Jane Austen and the Business of Mothering,” *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 103.
authors’ feelings about female reproductive physiology influenced their willingness—or reluctance—to apply birth metaphors to their own creative processes.

With a wider survey of authors and literary historical periods, as well as attention to maternity as both physical process and metaphor for literary production, I complicate the standard reading of male Romantic authors’ celebration of pregnancy and childbirth as tropes for writing. By analyzing texts by both eighteenth-century and Romantic authors in this study, I reveal the similarities between male authors’ attitudes toward birth and writing in both periods, as well as the reasons that underpin female authors’ embrace of pregnancy and birth as metaphors for writing during the Romantic era. Before providing additional details about how my project’s scope allows me to trace the development of literary representations of pregnancy (and pregnant metaphors for writing) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, it is necessary for me to map out the two cultural histories that frame my project. The next two sections provide historical context for parturition’s transformation into a male province in two areas of cultural reproduction—the medical sub-specialty of obstetrics, and the literary and legal development of a parental metaphor for copyright.

II

Because the story of women’s alienation from the birth process has been told by numerous historians of medicine and by literary and cultural critics, it is not necessary to fully

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recount this history here. What most of these scholars generally agree upon is that while, prior to the eighteenth century, male physicians were called only to assist with difficult deliveries, male physicians of the eighteenth century began to intervene more regularly in childbirth, a process that was once mainly handled by women. Most important for the purpose of this project is pinpointing some of the significant textual ways in which women, ostensibly the subjects of eighteenth-century obstetric literature, were excluded from it. There were three noteworthy developments in the ways in which women were addressed (or, more to the point, not addressed) and presented in midwifery manuals from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, developments that served to treat women as objects rather than subjects.


First, women were no longer the intended audience for midwifery manuals, which were increasingly often being written by medical men for other medical men rather than for female midwives and pregnant women. Prior to the eighteenth century, midwifery manuals and medical books concerning pregnancy and childbirth were frequently directed toward a female audience. For instance, John Sadler’s *The Sick Womans Private Looking-Glasse* (1636) taught women how to diagnose and cure their own gynecological and obstetric ailments, including dropsy of the womb, barrenness, moles (false conceptions), and premature births. The title page to the work indicates that the book’s purpose was to help “women to informe the Physician about the cause of their grief,” phrasing indicative of Sadler’s belief that women were capable of diagnosing their own illnesses and informing their physicians about what was wrong with them. In his dedicatory epistle, Sadler emphasizes that his text was meant for women, explaining that he wrote the book in plain language, “avoiding hard words and Rhetorical [sic] phrases, desiring rather to informe your judgements with the truth, through a plain manner, than to confound your understandings with a more Rhetorical discourse.” Furthermore, the frontispiece to the book reinforces women’s important role in diagnosing their own illnesses. In the frontispiece, a man (presumably the author) presents the book to a visibly pregnant woman, a picture that illustrates the direct relationship between author and (pregnant female) reader (see Figure 1).

In addition, authors of midwifery manuals from the seventeenth century assumed that their readership was comprised mostly of female midwives. In *The Midwives Book* (1671), the

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18 Eve Keller points out that even a text like Sadler’s, which treats women as agential beings, nevertheless tends to reduce women to the functioning of their wombs (and thus never truly treats women as fully human) (72-4). While I acknowledge the validity of Keller’s argument, which exposes the fundamental misogyny underlying many early midwifery texts, I posit that there are also striking differences in the ways in which Sadler addresses and represents women from the ways in which later authors, like William Hunter, do.
midwife Jane Sharp not only dedicates her manual to the “sisters” who share her profession, but she also makes a case for female midwives’ fitness for their task, despite the aspersions often cast upon them.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Court Midwife} (1690), a text by the German midwife Justine Siegemund, delivers its counsel via conversations between the midwife Justina and her female pupil Christina, dialogues that imply that Siegemund was writing to an audience of female midwives.\textsuperscript{20} A number of eighteenth-century authors also addressed their midwifery texts to mothers, midwives, and nurses, as well as advocated on behalf of female midwives. John Douglas, for instance, defended female midwives from accusations of incompetence (often leveled against them by their male peers) by arguing that “[t]he ignorance of the Midwoman […] is certainly owing to their want of a proper education, and not to their want of capacity.”\textsuperscript{21} On the title page of her \textit{Complete Practice of Midwifery} (1737), Sarah Stone indicates that her manual is “Recommended to All Female Practitioners,” and in her introductory remarks she expresses confidence in female midwives’ aptitude, provided that they are properly educated.\textsuperscript{22} Elizabeth Nihell, another passionate advocate for female midwives, roundly denounced “the delicate fist of a great-horse-godmother of a he-midwife” and (like Stone, Douglas, and Sharp) made a strong case for female midwives’ competence.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{21} John Douglas, \textit{A Short Account of the State of Midwifery} (London, 1736), 68.

\textsuperscript{22} Sarah Stone, \textit{A Complete Practice of Midwifery} (London: T. Cooper, 1737), x-xi.

\textsuperscript{23} Elizabeth Nihell, \textit{A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery} (London: A. Morley, 1760), 325, 468-9.
By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the increasing number (not to mention size) of midwifery manuals by male medical practitioners (along with the widespread use of instruments such as the forceps) marked not only the decline of the female midwives’ practice, but also the waning agency of the expectant mother herself. Unlike the midwifery manuals of previous centuries, which were often addressed to laywomen as well as to midwives, eighteenth-century midwifery manuals were most frequently written by physicians, whose usage of medical jargon indicated that they were writing for other male medical practitioners while apparently failing to acknowledge that women should have access to the body of knowledge pertaining to their own bodies.24

Second, medical manuals and midwifery texts published prior to the eighteenth century frequently depicted pregnant women in engravings as whole, agential beings, a convention that would also change drastically by the middle of the eighteenth century. While pre-eighteenth-century midwifery texts often contain engravings of abstract, disembodied wombs inhabited by preternaturally acrobatic fetuses that, as Karen Newman (29-33) and Eve Keller (73, 136) note, erase the mother’s role in pregnancy (as in Figure 2), the same texts from this time period also present other engravings that reveal the pregnant woman’s entire body, which is frequently engaged in some kind of action. For instance, the earliest midwifery manual printed in English, *The Byrth of Mankynde* (which was Richard Jonas’ 1540 English-language translation of

24 Some examples of male-authored midwifery manuals from the eighteenth century include John Maubray, *The Female Physician* (London: James Holland, 1724); William Smellie, *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery*, 3 vols. (London: D. Wilson, 1752-64); and Thomas Denman, *Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1788). Rebecca Kukla points out that while midwifery texts of the eighteenth century were “[w]ritten for physicians and from a physician’s point of view,” there was an entirely separate body of literature directed to women to advise them on how to manage their bodies during pregnancy, childbirth, and her child’s infancy (78-9). However, I should like to underscore the differences between such eighteenth-century maternal advice manuals (which do not include technical details about pregnancy and birth) and earlier gynecological texts addressed to mothers and female midwives alike, which, like Sadler’s *Private Looking-Glasse*, often went into a great deal of detail (though presented in colloquial language) about pregnant women’s ailments so that women could diagnose and perhaps even treat themselves.
Eucharius Rösslin’s 1513 *Der Swangern Frauwren und hebammen Rosengarten [The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives]*) includes illustrations of disembodied pregnant wombs such as those that appear in Figure 2, but its front matter also portrays the whole body of a visibly pregnant woman accepting a book from the hands of a man (presumably the author) (see Figure 3).\(^{25}\) Similarly, the frontispiece for John Sadler’s *The Sick Womans Private Looking-Glasse* (already discussed above) depicts another visibly pregnant woman consulting a book that the author presents to her.

Even midwifery manuals that included more graphic images of pregnant women’s bodies often represented these anatomical subjects as whole, living humans. For instance, an image that appears in Rösslin’s *Rosengarten* pictures a woman in labor who is being aided by two women (see Figure 4). The laboring woman is fully clothed, and she looks as if she is assisting the midwife by bracing her hand on the seat of the birthing stool; though she looks a bit tired, she nevertheless makes eye contact with the viewer outside of the frame, which suggests that she is not merely a spectacle or an object to be observed, but an observing subject herself. Similarly, in an image that appears in Jane Sharp’s *Midwives Book* (1671), the pregnant woman pictured refuses objectification by the viewer’s gaze by making eye contact with the viewer, despite the fact that her abdomen has been cut open to display the fetus within (see Figure 5). Most of her body is pictured, and she appears to be an individual with a facial expression (and even a hairstyle). Though she is naked and the skin has been flayed from her stomach to reveal the fetus, the image has been drawn with attention to aesthetics—the layers of skin have been pulled

back from the abdomen in a symmetrical fashion, and the fetus looks as if it is nestled within a flower that is blooming from the woman’s belly. As Laura Gowing argues, this image underscores both the fetus’ dependence on the mother and the mother’s central role in the process of pregnancy.\(^\text{26}\)

By contrast, the images that began appearing in obstetric texts in the mid-eighteenth century objectified their subjects by abstracting the pregnant womb from the rest of the woman’s body without including mitigating images of whole women. For instance, William Smellie’s *Sett of Anatomical Tables* (1754) depicts fetuses at every stage of gestation and labor, but the wombs in which they are pictured are completely separated from the rest of the woman’s body (see Figure 6). The same can be said for William Hunter’s *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774), which became the standard obstetric text as soon as it was published. Hunter’s *Anatomy*, however, far surpassed Smellie’s *Tables* in the graphic nature of the wombs pictured in them. Rather than showing fairly schematic cross-sections of the pregnant uterus and the mother’s internal bone structure, as Smellie’s illustrations did, Hunter’s images strive for a realism that borders on the grotesque. In the sixth plate of his *Gravid Uterus* (see Figure 7), the artist (Jan van Rymsdyk, the same illustrator employed by Smellie) delineates in meticulous detail the layers of skin, fat, and muscle that have been cut away to reveal the fetus. Unlike the flower-like image of the dissected womb in Sharp’s book, the skin, fat, and muscle of the pregnant cadaver’s abdomen have been unceremoniously peeled back and piled on top of one other in Hunter’s image. Rymsdyk also adds some gratuitous details of his own, including the woman’s mutilated

genitalia (which have been cut away completely, leaving a gaping hole behind) and legs, which have been hacked off, quite unnecesssarily, at the thighs.\textsuperscript{27}

If women had been disappearing from midwifery texts as both reading audience and as the subjects that appeared in these texts, their participation was also diminished in the processes of pregnancy and childbirth themselves. While medical books published even as late as the 1720s and 1730s took the direct connection between mother and fetus for granted, by the second half of the eighteenth century, the connection between mother and fetus during pregnancy was being questioned in medical discourses that privileged the roles of fetus, physician, and Nature over that of the mother during childbirth. As stated above, midwifery manuals prior to the eighteenth century published images of disembodied wombs (Figure 2 appeared in the Rosengarten and The Byrth of Mankynde as well as in Sharp’s Midwives Book), but it was in the eighteenth century that the obstetrician’s presence became frequently visible in images of wombs, a presence that further undermined the increasingly questionable connection between mother and fetus.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the direct connection between a pregnant woman and her unborn child was taken for granted, particularly in theories about the influence of the maternal imagination. Physicians, midwives, and the general population alike accepted as common knowledge the mother’s power to imprint mental impressions (either purposely or accidentally) on the body of her fetus. Precedents for such beliefs could be found in the authors of antiquity, and Renaissance writers had helped to popularize them (Huet 13-16). Commonly circulated stories included those of the “hairy virgin,” a girl who was born completely covered with hair...

\textsuperscript{27} Jordanova, Youngquist, and Cody have discussed Hunter’s engravings in some depth. See Ludmilla Jordanova, “Gender, Generation, and Science,” 385-412; Youngquist, Monstrosities, 134-40; and Cody, Birthing the Nation, 169, 260-1.
because her mother had spent too much time contemplating a picture of St. John dressed in animal skins (Huet 19), and of the pregnant woman who, after witnessing the execution of a criminal, gave birth to a baby whose limbs were broken in the same places as the unfortunate criminal’s had been.\textsuperscript{28} During the early decades of the eighteenth century, medical practitioners made important contributions to maternal impression theory by attempting to explain how the transference from the mother’s mind to the baby’s body took place. In his 1724 treatise \textit{The Female Physician}, the French physician John Maubray described the steps he believed to be involved in this process:

if the \textit{Woman} be \textit{surprised} at any sudden Evil, or \textit{frighted} at any unseemly sight, the \textit{Humours} and \textit{Spirits} presently retire downwards and (as it were) abscond themselves in the \textit{Recess} of the WOMB: From whence immediately a strong \textit{IMAGINATION} of the disagreeable \textit{Thing} [...] seizes her \textit{Mind}; and the \textit{Forming Faculty} (going on in the \textit{Interim}) quickly impresses the \textit{Imaginary Idea of That thing heard off} [sic] [...] upon the \textit{Foetus}. (62)

Maubray’s explanation of the cause of fetal deformity became the most popular rationale for monstrous births in the early eighteenth century (Todd 45), a fact that made the case of Mary Toft, an Englishwoman from Godalming who supposedly gave birth to seventeen rabbits, as plausible to medical men as to a lay audience.\textsuperscript{29} Thomas Morgan’s \textit{The Mechanical Practice of}  

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{29} In the summer of 1726, Mary Toft suffered a miscarriage several months into pregnancy, the result of which was a large, formless chunk of flesh. This is apparently what gave the members of the Toft family, who were in desperate need of money, the idea to pretend that Mary continued to give birth to monstrous beings. By hiding hacked-up pieces of animals within her vagina, Toft first “gave birth” to the remnants of a cat, and then later, to the body parts of several dead rabbits. Amazingly, the physician who was first called in to examine Toft never doubted the veracity of her story. Although later physicians had their doubts about the case (doubts that eventually contributed to Toft’s exposure as a fraud in November 1726), they could also not simply dismiss Toft’s story out of hand because of the strong sway that imaginationist theories held over the medical establishment. Toft had explained
\end{itemize}
Physic (1735) includes a chapter on the illnesses of pregnant women in which he argues that
“The Mother gives the first Impression or Impulse to the Child, from whence it is returned with
greater Force, by the natural mutual Sympathy and Communication between two equal
Sufferers.” Both Maubray’s and Morgan’s assertions echo those of Malebranche, who had argued that “Blood and Spirits are common to both” mother and fetus (113).

Beginning during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, however, the power of the
maternal imagination was called into question in large part because the connection between
mother and fetus was also being questioned. One of the first and most vocal critics of
imaginationist theory was the physician James Augustus Blondel, who, in a series of vehement
print debates with the pro-imaginationist Daniel Turner (debates that were sparked by the Mary
Toft affair), denied that the mother and fetus were connected during pregnancy. In The Strength
of Imagination in Pregnant Women Examin’d (1727), Blondel states that, during all stages of
pregnancy, the fetus is “an individuum Distinct, and separate from the Mother’s Body, and
consequently that her Imagination can have no Effect upon the Child.” Though Blondel
acknowledges that the unborn child “does strongly adhere to the Uterus, by the Help of the
Placenta, and the umbilical Vessels” (75), he qualifies his statement by arguing that the fetus is
nevertheless an individual who is united to its mother by “Contiguity” only (76). Blondel also
denied that the mother and fetus shared blood or spirits, which had hitherto been the standard
explanation for maternal-fetal influence (85).

that her monstrous rabbit births were the result of being startled by rabbits in a field, and then becoming obsessed
with catching and eating them, while in her first trimester of pregnancy. For detailed accounts of the Mary Toft
affair, see Lisa Forman Cody, “‘The Doctor’s in Labour; or a New Whim Wham from Guildford,’” Gender &
History 4.2 (1992) and Dennis Todd, Imagining Monsters, 1-63.

31 James Augustus Blondel, The Strength of Imagination in Pregnant Women Examin’d (London: J. Peele,
1727), 72.
The discovery of the placenta’s function further undermined earlier beliefs in the shared blood and spirits between the mother and her unborn child. Although the placenta had been identified and named in anatomical texts that had been published as early as 1638, the surgeon and anatomist John Hunter took credit in his *Observations of Certain Parts of the Animal Oeconomy* (1786) for discovering how the organ connects mother and fetus. Hunter’s description of the placenta’s formation emphasizes the separation between mother and child. He explains that while the mother’s body produces the *decidua reflexa* (a membrane attached to the outside of the placenta, discovered and named by John’s brother William Hunter), the fetus produces the placenta (J. Hunter 98). According to Hunter, the placenta acts as a mediator between mother and fetus, providing, as Paul Youngquist puts it, “communication with no direct connection” between them (Youngquist 146). Interestingly, Hunter even likens the circulation of blood in the placenta to that of “the blood’s motion through the cavernous substance of the penis” (J. Hunter 135). By likening the placenta to a penis, Hunter not only accords the fetus the status of a “free agent” who belongs to itself (or perhaps to its father) (Youngquist, *Monstrosities* 147), but he also emphasizes the primacy of men’s intervention in the pregnant body because the divisive, masculine placenta/penis is similar to the medical instruments that Hunter and his colleagues used to open cadavers’ wombs to inject the placenta with the colored waxes that would allow the viewer to differentiate the organ’s veins and arteries.

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33 While Youngquist’s reading of the Hunter brothers’ work on the placenta emphasizes the ways in which mother and fetus are alienated from one another, Jordanova’s interpretation of William Hunter’s obstetrical atlas suggests the possibility of “two lives being portrayed as a single interconnected system” (“Gender” 407). My readings of William Hunter’s atlas and John Hunter’s work on the placenta align with Youngquist’s sense of the separation between mother and fetus.

34 In *Animal Oeconomy*, John Hunter describes a procedure in which he uses a pipe to inject wax into the placenta (95).
While the study of anatomy had redefined the body as “a series of parts to be manipulated” (Newman 51), this new construction of the body was nowhere more apparent than in the burgeoning field of obstetrics, which was increasingly defining childbirth as a medical event that required the intervention of the man-midwife and his tools. This more frequent manipulation of the parturient body in medical practice is typified in the sudden appearance of hands and instruments in the wombs pictured in the teaching apparatuses and medical texts of the period. Illustrations of the pregnant womb prior to the eighteenth century had depicted the fetus in a variety of positions, but these engravings had never included the practitioner’s hands in the uterus. From the 1740s onward, however, the physical presence of the man-midwife in the womb was regularly announced pictorially in the seminal midwifery manuals and teaching tools of the period, which were also increasingly authored by men for an audience of male students.

Though one of the earliest visual examples of a midwife’s manual intervention in the uterus can be found in Justine Siegemund’s 1690 The Court Midwife, illustrations of hands and instruments in the womb did not become commonplace in Europe until the mid-eighteenth century. Once these kinds of engravings began appearing in obstetric texts, it would appear that the sex of the practitioner pictured shifted from potentially female to almost certainly male. For instance, in a collection of over 130 wax and terra cotta sculptures of pregnant wombs, crafted during the 1740s and used for the instruction of female midwives and male doctors at the Istituto delle Scienze in Bologna, several anatomical models include the hands of what appears (due to the size of the hands the style of the shirt sleeves) to be a male practitioner reaching into the wombs. In several sculptures, the practitioner is attempting to deliver the afterbirth manually, and in another, he has punctured the uterus and is reaching through the wound with his fingers.35

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35 For pictures of the anatomical sculptures that I have described, see Karen Newman, Fetal Positions, 44-62.
Although the sex of this practitioner cannot be definitively determined, later medical texts indicate that the practitioner whose interventions are pictured is unambiguously male.

Smellie’s *Sett of Anatomical Tables* is one of the first English midwifery manuals to show the male practitioner’s manipulation of the fetus. Eight illustrations in Smellie’s text show the proper application of his forceps in the delivery of fetuses in a variety of positions (see, for example, Figure 8), while a ninth shows the practitioner’s hand and a crochet in the womb extracting the head of a dead fetus (Figure 9). In Smellie’s *Anatomical Tables*, there is more than the size of the practitioner’s hands to suggest that the midwife working upon the womb in these engravings is a man. Smellie was a renowned instructor of male midwives; he boasted of training more than 900 practitioners over the course of 280 courses on midwifery—“exclusive of female students,” he is quick to add (Smellie, *Treatise* vii-viii). Furthermore, Smellie directs his *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* to a male reader when he “inform[s] him” in the preface of his own qualifications as a practitioner and teacher of midwifery (vii). It can thus be inferred that the instruments infiltrating the wombs in the *Anatomical Tables* are wielded by a male practitioner’s hands.36

Smellie had also fashioned a mechanical birth machine that formed an integral, hands-on part of his lectures. According to Smellie, “almost every observation [in his lectures] has a reference to the working of those machines which I have contrived to resemble and represent real women and children” (*Treatise* v). In *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery*, Elizabeth Nihell, who was vehemently opposed to Smellie’s instrument-based approach to midwifery, graphically and critically described Smellie’s mechanical teaching device:

36 As Andrea Henderson notes, “men-midwives initially distinguished themselves by their use of instruments” (“Doll Machines and Butcher-Shop Meat: Models of Childbirth in the Early Stages of Industrial Capitalism,” *Genders* 12 [1991], 102). As such, the connection between male practitioners and obstetric instruments was fairly well established by the middle decades of the eighteenth century.
This was a wooden statue, representing a woman with child, whose belly was of leather, in which a bladder full, perhaps, of small beer, represented the uterus. This bladder was stopped with a cork, to which was fastened a string of packthread to tap it, occasionally, and demonstrate in a palpable manner the flowing of the red-colored waters. In short, in the middle of the bladder was a wax-doll, to which were given various positions. (Nihell 50)

Smellie explains that during his midwifery lectures, “all the kinds of different labours are demonstrated, and even performed, by every individual student” (Treatise v); his labor machine was constructed to be manipulated by hundreds of male students, many of whom were, as Nihell suggests, less than attentive to or respectful of the artificial mother they were delivering. Thus, Smellie’s instrument-oriented midwifery practice and his didactic texts and techniques for teaching midwives all depended upon visual representations of the male practitioner’s hands and tools infiltrating the uterus and manipulating the fetus.

The male practitioner is also visible in William Hunter’s Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus. Hunter has typically been read as an example of the turn away from instrument-based deliveries that became popular during the last decades of the eighteenth century (Henderson 108, Mosucci 48), but while Hunter’s Anatomy does not, as Henderson points out, show or mention

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37 Nihell laments that many of Smellie’s students had adopted the “bad habit” of “drawing the small-beer out of their wooden-woman” (52), an action implying that careless students had punctured the labor machine’s womb and then proceeded to drink its contents. Bonnie Blackwell speculates that such classroom displays were viewed by students as entertaining dramatic gestures rather than as the serious medical emergencies that would have been caused by the actual puncturing of women’s wombs. See Bonnie Blackwell, Tristram Shandy and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother,” ELH 68.1 (2001), 92. See also Figure 11 for a nineteenth-century example of the kind of leather fetus that Smellie might have used in his labor machine demonstrations.

38 It is important to note that a few female midwives also used instruments when assisting during childbirths. The most notable of these is Sarah Stone, a midwife who practiced first in Taunton and then in Bristol in the early decades of the eighteenth century. She occasionally resorted to the use of instruments, but very infrequently. “I never found Instruments requisite above four times in my life;” Stone wrote, “so I am certain, where twenty Women are deliver’d with Instruments (which is now become a common practice) that nineteen of them might be deliver’d without, if not the twentieth” (xiii-iv).
obstetric tools being used for delivery (108), the traces of male intervention are nevertheless everywhere visible in Hunter’s plates. In his captions, Hunter frequently describes his methods of preparing his anatomical specimens for illustration, which (like Smellie’s) involved the injection of wax into the veins and arteries of the uterus. In fact, the third figure depicted in Hunter’s twenty-sixth plate (Figure 10) shows a catheter separating the peritoneum from the uterus. Furthermore, Hunter’s supposed opposition to the tools that were used in the service of live births is undermined by the fact that his instrumental interventions in the uterus are applied to cadavers that are as helpless as the laboring women whose wombs are being manipulated by the male practitioner in Smellie’s Treatise. Though Hunter may not have favored the use of instruments in the delivery of laboring women, his collection of specimens for his Anatomy indicates that he still believed that the pregnant body was open to the probing of medical men.

Pictures of instrumental or manual manipulation of the fetus continued to be a standard feature of the obstetric literature published in the nineteenth century and beyond. For instance, the seventh plate from J. P. Maygrier’s Nouvelles demonstrations d’accouchemens (1822) shows a large, presumably male hand reaching into a uterus and grasping the leg of the fetus in order to turn it. Francis Ramsbotham’s The Principles and Practice of Obstetrics, Medicine, and Surgery (1841) also includes a plate that demonstrates the delivery of the fetus’s head during a feet-first delivery—both of the (again, apparently male) hands brace the child’s neck and pull its chin forward as they guide it out of the uterus.40 By the mid-nineteenth century, then, engravings of

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39 Adrian Wilson argues that William Hunter’s ‘anti-interventionism was by no means as total or as doctrinaire as has sometimes been supposed.’ See Adrian Wilson, “William Hunter and the varieties of man-midwifery,” William Hunter and the eighteenth-century medical world, ed. W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 361.

cross-sections of the pregnant uterus with the hands and instruments of the obstetrician
manipulating the fetus had become commonplace in medical texts.

In all of these ways, the presence of the practitioner in the womb becomes more visible in
medical literature and practice as the eighteenth century advances. These developments register
in the imaginative literature of the century in significant ways, particularly in women writers’
resistance to male intervention in the birth process. As I explore in a number of this project’s
chapters, authors like Eliza Haywood, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Mary
Shelley demonstrate the disastrous consequences that befall pregnant women when men interfere
with them.

III

The second cultural history that I trace in my project involves the repercussions of the
establishment of copyright law in England with the 1710 Statute of Anne. According to this law,
authors’ ownership of their books was based on the assumption that authors were the parents—
or, more specifically, fathers—of their publications.41 The idea that a book is the child of its
author was not a new one in the eighteenth century, as the book-as-baby trope has its origins in
antiquity. In his Symposium, Plato (via Diotima) remarks that both parents and authors gain
immortality through their progeny (which are, respectively, children and “[w]isdom and virtue”),
but that children of the soul are superior to “ordinary human ones.”42 Not surprisingly, then,
there also was not an exact equivalence between writing books and giving birth during the
eighteenth century. Despite language that would seem to indicate that eighteenth-century male

41 See Mark Rose, Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright (Cambridge and London: Harvard
University Press, 1993), 58.

authors were enthusiastic about using the trope of pregnancy to describe their writing process, I argue that their usage of female metaphors for writing was actually negatively inflected—an attitude that was emulated by the male authors of the Romantic era.

As Raymond Stephanson has demonstrated, eighteenth-century male authors described the best books as the offspring of the author’s mind rather than body, and less desirable literary creations as the product of strenuous bodily processes like female reproductive labor. Authors who used paternal metaphors for authorship did so not only to make claims for the superiority of their literary productions, but also to emphasize the naturalness of their ownership over their books. In a 1710 Review article, for instance, Daniel Defoe insisted that “A Book is the Author’s Property, ’tis the Child of his Inventions, the Brat of his Brain,” a passage that conspicuously genders the author as male and takes for granted the naturalness of the father’s ownership of his progeny, whether literary or human. Likewise, Samuel Richardson trooped his relationship to Pamela (1740) as that of a father to a daughter when he expressed concern that, if another author wrote a sequel to the novel before he did, “my Plan should be Ravished out of my Hands, and, probably my Characters depreciated and debased, by those who knew nothing of the Story.” In Tom Jones (1749), Henry Fielding’s narrator suggests that the male author impregnates his Muse, who then “bears about her Burden” and gives birth with “painful Labour” to the author-father’s book. Although Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding all use variations of a reproductive metaphor to describe the production of their books, they all identify as fathers in the process.

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Eighteenth-century authors who used a maternal rather than a paternal metaphor for literary creation, on the other hand, did so primarily in order to describe the difficulties involved with the writing process and to convey the sense that they were not entirely in control of it.\(^\text{47}\)

Alexander Pope, for instance, likened his preparations to translate the second volume of the *Iliad* to a woman making preparations for a long and arduous confinement in childbirth, writing in a letter to Martha Blount, “Pitty me, Madam, who am to lye in of a Poetical Child for at least two Months.”\(^\text{48}\) Similarly, Laurence Sterne described his composition of *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) as a pregnancy gone awry:

> I miscarried of my tenth Volume by the violence of a fever, I have just got thro’—
> I have however gone on to my reckoning with the ninth, of wch I am all this week in Labour pains; & if to Day’s Advertiser is to be depended upon shall be safely deliver’d by tuesday.\(^\text{49}\)

For Pope, the pregnant creative process was fraught with pain and dread, while for Sterne it was inextricably linked to uncertainty, miscarriage, and loss. Furthermore, the male authors of this era did not actually wish to identify fully with the female process of reproduction, as they “only temporarily appropriated” such feminine poses in order “to appeal to the community of other male writers for inclusion, approval, and authentication” (Stephanson 16-7). 

\(^{47}\) In *The Yard of Wit*, Raymond Stephanson overstates the enabling aspects of the maternal birth metaphor for eighteenth-century male authors when he claims that the language of female birth, though ranking below the immaculate male brain-birth, could nevertheless emphasize “the rigorous temporal dimension of creative process, aesthetic growth, and finally, entry and status within a literary public” (98). For instance, at least one of the examples that Stephanson cites as evidence that the language of birth was enabling for men is actually an example of an author identifying as a father to his text. In the passage from *Tom Jones* cited above, Stephanson suggests that Henry Fielding “employed a notion of male creativity as birth-travail” (106). Stephanson does not acknowledge, however, that it is Fielding’s muse, not the author himself, who is preparing to give birth.


Despite the ubiquity of reproductive metaphors for literary creation, it would appear that many prominent eighteenth-century female authors avoided this trope when describing the writing process. For instance, despite her intense novelistic interest in reproductive issues, Eliza Haywood never likens her literary productions to her children (an issue that I explore in more depth in Chapter 1). Hester Thrale Piozzi, who wrote extensively about her pregnancies in her private journals, also never uses the tropes of pregnancy or motherhood to discuss her private or professional literary productions, although she does use other organic metaphors for writing, including a blooming flower and a hatching egg.\(^{50}\) Even authors like Anne Bradstreet and Mary Leapor, who both wrote poems that treated their literary productions as children, only identify as literary mothers in order to explain why they are failures as authors.\(^{51}\) While men could get away with temporarily identifying with pregnant women when discussing authorship, women apparently could not make this same identification without jeopardizing the seriousness of their literary ambitions.

For a number of critics—most notably Castle and Friedman—the Romantic era constituted a turning point for male authors who, perhaps for the first time since the Renaissance,\(^{52}\) embraced pregnancy and childbirth as positive metaphors for writing. I argue,


\(^{51}\) In “The Author to Her Book,” Anne Bradstreet calls her book the “ill-formed offspring” of her “feeble brain” (line 1), a line that suggests not only that the book is the product of her brain rather than her body, but also that it is a poor mental production. In “Upon her Play being returned to Her Stain’d with Claret” (1751), Mary Leapor chastises a play she had sent to London for returning to her stained with wine and shame like a prodigal son. Though Leapor does not specify if the son is a product of her womb or of her brain, she does suggest that he is an idiot (and therefore an inferior production) (line 24). See Anne Bradstreet, “The Author to Her Book,” *Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge: Belknap, 1967), 221 and Mary Leapor, “Upon her Play being returned to Her Stain’d with Claret,” 1751, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 211-2.

\(^{52}\) While Mark Rose claims that male authors of the Renaissance frequently used the paternal metaphor for authorship, Patricia Parker and Katherine Eisaman Maus contend that a number of male Renaissance authors used female reproductive metaphors for writing. See Mark Rose, “Copyright and Its Metaphors,” *UCLA Law Review* 50
however, that the devaluation of gestational tropes for writing, so prevalent during the eighteenth century, does not disappear in the Romantic period, as so many critics have assumed. My study demonstrates the continuities between male Romantic authors and their eighteenth-century male predecessors in terms of their employment of gestation and birth as negative metaphors for writing—negative usages that were influenced by their disdain in their literature for actual pregnancy and childbirth. For instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s description of his “omni-pregnant, nihil-parturient genius” in his contributions to Robert Southey’s Omniana (1812) is ultimately a metaphor for his lack of productivity. Coleridge’s appropriation of the language of pregnancy to describe the unproductive functions of his imagination is similar to Sterne’s use of the language of gestation while discussing the tenth volume of Tristram Shandy (a volume that never came to be published). For both authors (as well as for Sterne’s character Walter Shandy, the would-be author who is infamously unable to complete any literary project), the trope of pregnancy describes endlessly dilating narratives with no promise of a successful delivery of a finished book. Similarly, Percy Shelley disparages metaphors for writing based on female reproductive physiology while celebrating men’s fleeting physical role in sexual reproduction as a more reliable model for poetic production.

By contrast, Romantic women writers used the metaphor of maternity in a positive fashion when describing the process of literary creation. Specifically, female Romantic authors found mothering and writing to be complementary and mutually enabling activities rather than oppositional projects. In remarks that serve as an introduction to her unfinished, posthumously-
published novel *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft critiques (presumably male) authors whose “immaculate” heroines leap fully-formed from their authors’ brains, just as Minerva “come[s] forth highly finished […] from the head of Jove.”

Furthermore, authors like Anna Letitia Barbauld and Mary Shelley also expressed concern for their literary offsprings’ continued well-being, a position that contrasts starkly with male authors like Percy Shelley, whose preferred masculine reproductive metaphors involve only the initial moment of literary creation. Just as female Romantic authors objected to men’s interventions in the birth process, so too did they object to male authors’ erasure and/or denigration of women’s bodies when using gestational metaphors for writing.

It is notable that a second metaphor for authorship also gained popularity during the eighteenth century—the real estate metaphor. According to Mark Rose, the real estate metaphor for copyright developed alongside the paternal metaphor for authorship in the wake of the passage of the Statute of Anne because both metaphors were mutually reinforcing. While the paternal trope for authorship justified an author’s original ownership of his book’s copyright (because the author created his book out of nothing, just as a father creates his child), the real estate metaphor for copyright helped to justify an author’s ongoing ownership—and commodification—of his book without the difficulties posed by continuing to adhere to the book-as-baby metaphor (Rose, “Copyright” 6-9). Though Rose makes an important distinction between the two major metaphors that underwrite eighteenth-century English copyright law—metaphors that Western courts of law continue to invoke in the twenty-first century—I argue that the paternity and real estate tropes are nevertheless more similar than Rose acknowledges. Like the paternity metaphor, the real estate metaphor for authorship is inextricably intertwined with

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patriarchal inheritance laws; at their core, both metaphors exclude women from fully participating in them. Thus, female Romantic authors’ embrace of specifically maternal metaphors for authorship amounted to a rejection of the patriarchal underpinnings of copyright law.

IV

The temporal and thematic parameters of this study are determined not only by the fact that scholars have not yet adequately explored the connections in literary treatments of pregnancy and birth between the eighteenth century and Romantic periods, but also because the eighteenth century witnessed a significant shift toward male control in obstetric medicine, as well as a codification of male control of reproductive metaphors for writing in the development of English copyright law. Because literary critics usually limit their studies of parturition to either medicine or metaphor in either the eighteenth century or the Romantic era, no coherent picture of both issues in both literary historical periods has yet emerged. I aim to correct this critical tendency by synthesizing the cultural discourses of medicine and law in the literature of the eighteenth-century and Romantic periods in order to make a feminist, interdisciplinary intervention in the scholarship on literary maternity in both eras.

The specific dates in my dissertation’s title mark the earliest (Eliza Haywood’s *The British Recluse*, 1722) and latest (Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Bentley’s Standard Novels edition, 1831) texts that I examine, but the historical scope of my project could well be expanded in both directions. While my dissertation begins with Eliza Haywood because her many novels about pregnancy and birth are coterminous with the development of obstetric medicine in the eighteenth century, it would be enlightening to consider additional authors like Daniel Defoe,
Delarivier Manley, Aphra Behn, and even John Bunyan; in all of these authors’ fictional narratives, the physical processes and metaphorical resonances associated with maternity were simultaneously fascinating and vexing. Likewise, though I have chosen to end my study with a reading of *Frankenstein* because it functions as a culminating critique of the male Romantic appropriation of maternity, the terminal boundary of my project could also be pushed further forward into the nineteenth century in order to trace the legacies of Romantic literary maternity and paternity for Victorian authors. Finally, a word must be said concerning the genre of the texts under consideration in this study. I have limited the generic boundaries of this project to novels and poetry not only because few pregnant characters figured in the drama of the eras that I have chosen to study, but also because additional critical methodologies not relevant to fiction and poetry would be required.55

My first chapter examines the novels and prose fiction of Eliza Haywood, perhaps the most prolific eighteenth-century author of pregnancy narratives, who was writing at a significant juncture in the history of obstetric science. Haywood’s interest in pregnancy and childbirth spanned her entire career as a professional author (from the early 1720s until her death in 1756), which was the very time during which male obstetricians and midwives began to replace female midwives in large numbers, as well as the period during which the cultural ramifications of the paternal metaphor for copyright established by the Statute of Anne were beginning to be felt. Though a number of critics have argued that Haywood’s literary career underwent a drastic shift from her early, scandalous amatory fiction to her later, serious, moral domestic fiction, I argue that Haywood’s long writing career coheres around the theme of parturition, as she repeatedly insists upon women’s need for agency in pregnancy and childbirth, as well as upon the harm that

55 Such methodologies include considerations of eighteenth-century and Romantic actors, stagecraft, and performance history.
comes from men’s interference in these processes. At least one of her novels subtly asserts women’s influence over their pregnancies via the influence of the maternal imagination, an ancient belief that was fast fading in Haywood’s time due to new eighteenth-century medical theories that denied the connection between mother and fetus.

Despite Haywood’s intense interest in pregnancy in her fiction, however, she did not use the metaphors of gestation or birth to describe the composition and publication of her books, a fact that is even more curious when considered in light of the parental metaphor’s popularity amongst her male contemporaries (and it prevalence in interpretations of the era’s new copyright laws). I argue that Haywood tactically avoids the rhetoric of authorial parturition in response to her male contemporaries’ devaluation of motherhood as both bodily process and metaphor. I open this project with Haywood, then, not only because she wrote a copious amount of imaginative literature about pregnancy at a critical juncture in obstetric history, but also because her rejection of maternal metaphors for authorship suggests that not every woman who wrote about maternity identified as a literary mother.

My second chapter analyzes four male-authored novels about pregnancy and birth published during the mid-eighteenth century that dramatize repressive contemporary obstetric theories and contribute to the cultural devaluation of the language associated with women’s reproductive processes: Samuel Richardson’s sequel to Pamela (1741) and Sir Charles Grandison (1753), Tobias Smollett’s Peregrine Pickle (1751), and Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy (1759-67). Though written in different narrative styles, these novels nevertheless deny autonomy to their pregnant characters and insistently alienate them from the contents of their wombs while preventing them from speaking publically about the experiences of pregnancy and birth. These authors’ scorn for the female reproductive body is further borne out by their
preference for paternal metaphors to describe their relationships with their novels, as well as by their usage of maternal metaphors to discuss the production of inferior writing.

My third chapter completes my argumentative arc concerning fiction published during the eighteenth century, as I posit that the startling number of Romantic novels about pregnancy penned by women beginning in the late 1780s (and continuing through the 1790s and into the early decades of the nineteenth century) shared similar concerns with one another regarding men’s medical interventions in and legal controls over the pregnant body. I briefly survey a handful of novels, including Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline* (1788), Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy* (1795), and Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1804), which portray the social and legal restraints that patriarchal social systems forced upon pregnant women. I then perform an extended reading of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), a novel rife with pregnant characters. Like those penned by her contemporaries, Wollstonecraft’s novel suggests that the oppressive circumstances of pregnancy and motherhood are socially rather than biologically determined. In order to combat this social oppression, the most developed of the unfinished novel’s endings favors an older model of childbirth that is grounded in a community of women. Because Wollstonecraft does not denigrate pregnancy or childbirth in *Maria*, as she blames the problems that pregnant women face on men’s interference, she is far more comfortable than her male contemporaries with using maternal tropes for writing in a positive way, and she critiques the male brain-child trope that supplants more embodied metaphors for writing.

In the second half of my project, I turn from prose to poetry in order to continue my analysis of the radical shift, beginning in the 1780s, in women’s literature about pregnancy and birth. I contrast some examples of earlier women’s pregnancy poetry (which usually appealed to God as the ultimate arbiter over the outcome of pregnancy) with the Romantic-era pregnancy
poems of Jane Cave, Isabella Kelly, and Anna Letitia Barbauld, which reimagine the “mother’s legacy” genre of writing by foregrounding the subjectivity of the pregnant mother and emphasizing the importance of her role in managing gestation and the birth process. These poets also insisted that motherhood and authorship are compatible, as their writing helps them to raise their children as well as to preserve their own legacies. Like the female novelists discussed in Chapter 3, Cave, Kelly, and Barbauld also accepted the tropes of pregnancy and motherhood for writing because they did not view these embodied female processes as degrading. As I explore in the next chapter, however, these poets’ male peers felt very differently.

Chapter 5 advances my study of pregnancy into the Romantic period, but from male poets’ perspectives. Critics have long argued that male Romantic poets whole-heartedly embraced birth as a trope for writing because it is an apt metaphor for the originality, creativity, spontaneity, and organicism of the Romantic aesthetic; however, I analyze a number of poems by William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in order to argue that these authors resemble their eighteenth-century male forebears in their disdain for the pregnant body and in their denigration of the tropes of gestation and birth for writing. While it may seem unorthodox to compare male Romantic poets’ views of parturition with those of eighteenth-century male novelists rather than poets, I have several reasons for doing so. Male poets and novelists of the eighteenth century share similar views regarding parturition, but eighteenth-century poets’ disgust toward female bodies and disdain for the birth metaphor for writing has already been well established, particularly in criticism on Augustan satirists like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope.56 Because less work has been done to connect birth as process and

metaphor in eighteenth-century male-authored novels (except in the case of *Tristram Shandy*, a book that, like *Frankenstein*, invites analysis of birth in both contexts), I have chosen to focus my critical attention in this area. In addition, an expanded version of this study could certainly include a consideration of male Romantic novelists, but because it is widely supposed that male Romantic poets embraced birth *topoi* for writing, it is necessary to dismantle this significant misconception first.

This project’s final chapter examines Percy and Mary Shelley and their contrasting views of pregnancy as physical process and as metaphor. My reading of *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), in which the pregnant woman ultimately has nothing to do with the birth that takes place, reveals Percy Shelley’s reluctance to engage with female reproductive physiology in his poetry, a reluctance that extends to his usage of gestational metaphors for writing. Close examinations of “Ode to the West Wind” (1820) and *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) reveal that Percy Shelley, like the first-generation Romantic poets who preceded him, disingenuously appropriates the language of pregnancy and childbirth to describe his writing process. I then turn to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), which culminates women’s literary resistance to men’s interventions in the physical and metaphorical aspects of pregnancy and childbirth. Mary Shelley portrays Victor Frankenstein simultaneously as a parturient mother desperately seeking a safe place to give birth; as a male obstetrician who harms pregnant women with his interference; and as a male poet (like Percy Shelley) whose employment of birth *topoi* for writing is actually rooted in masculine reproductive physiology. While literary paternity for male Romantic authors involves only the initial conception of a text, Mary Shelley sides with the other female Romantic authors that I

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examine in this project, authors for whom being a mother to a book means fostering an ongoing relationship with it as well as attending to the conditions of that book’s creation.

While much of my project is split along gender lines, it is not a piece of essentialist feminist criticism. I share with a number of social-construction feminist theorists the notion that, though pregnancy and birth may be natural processes, the ways in which they are represented—in medical as well as literary discourse—are not.⁵⁷ Although I find a correlation between many female Romantic authors’ respect for parturient bodies and interest in establishing a maternal authorial identity, I do not wish to suggest that this was true for all women writers—and, indeed, not even for all Romantic women writers. Jane Austen, for instance, wrote next to nothing about pregnancy and childbirth in her novels, which are primarily stories about courtship rather than married life,⁵⁸ yet, as Christopher Ricks points out, she identified as a mother to her novels on more than one occasion (109-11). In a letter to her sister dated 25 April 1811, Austen wrote regarding the proofs for Sense and Sensibility, “I am never too busy to think of S & S. I can no

⁵⁷ See Jordanova, “Gender, Generation, and Science,” 394; Ann Oakley, The Captured Womb: A history of the medical care of pregnant women (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 1-7; Zillah R. Eisenstein, The Female Body and the Law (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 3; Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 17, 56-7; Barbara Duden, Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn, trans. Lee Hoinacki (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4; Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 13-24; Newman, Fetal Positions, 1-6; Keller, Generating Bodies, 71-155; and Gowing, Common Bodies, 122-7. Though Rebecca Kukla claims in Mass Hysteria that she is “not concerned with […] whether fetal or maternal bodies are ‘socially constructed’ or not” (5), I would argue that her study is very much rooted in the social construction of the pregnant body, as she explains that she is interested in “the social rituals and practices that make up pregnancy and motherhood, along with the representations and knowledge techniques that expectant and new mothers use to understand their own identities and boundaries” (5).

more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child.”\textsuperscript{59} Again, in a letter about \textit{Pride and Prejudice} dated 29 January 1813, Austen reports, “I want to tell you that I have got my own darling child from London” (297). Conversely, as my first chapter demonstrates, a woman writer like Eliza Haywood, who betrays intense interest in pregnancy and birth as physical processes, nevertheless does not identify as a literary mother. Moreover, I believe it is possible for male authors (in the eighteenth century as well as the present day) to identify with literary maternity in a more genuine fashion. Steve Clark, for instance, suggests that Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) dramatizes a male poetic maternity when the speaker suggests that a dead man (who could have been a poet) might have had a “heart once pregnant with celestial fire.”\textsuperscript{60}

Ultimately, much of the literature about pregnancy and birth by male authors of the eighteenth-century and Romantic eras puts men at its center. The male obstetrician, the fetus, the male novelist or poet—all were treated, in various medical and literary discourses, as more significant than the mother herself, who all too frequently disappears into the family and the larger community whose interests she serves. In my dissertation, I put the focus back on the pregnant and birthing mother (just as the female authors of the Romantic era did) in order to reveal the ways in which male eighteenth-century and Romantic authors marginalized women because of women’s reproductive capabilities. My study’s focus on the pregnant body enables us


\textsuperscript{60} See Steve Clark, “‘Some Heart Once Pregnant with Celestial Fire’: Maternal Elegy in Gray and Barbauld,” \textit{Liberating Medicine, 1720-1835}, ed. Tristanne Connolly and Steve Clark (London and Brookfield, VT: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 225-6, 239.
to see how female Romantic authors constructed a model for maternal subjectivity that was inextricably linked to a community and yet profoundly individual at the same time.  

\[61\] Zillah Eisenstein theorizes the pregnant body as a body that is not singular, but multiple (4-5). I am troubled, however, by Eisenstein’s reluctance to posit the pregnant body as an individual body. I argue that female Romantic authors envision a model for the pregnant body that is simultaneously multiple and individual.
CHAPTER 1

“Two babes of love close clinging to her waste”: The Perils of Pregnancy and Maternal Authorship in Eliza Haywood’s Fiction

I

Eliza Haywood’s professional career as an author is situated at an unusual juncture in English literary and cultural history. A transitional figure whose work is indebted, on one hand, to Restoration and early-eighteenth-century writers like Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Daniel Defoe, and to eighteenth-century novelists like Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding on the other, Haywood straddles these two markedly different prose traditions.¹ Indeed, literary critics have long pointed out that while Haywood’s early romances are heirs to the amatory fiction of the Restoration and early eighteenth century, her later moral fiction indicates a change of heart—whether sincere or for profit—influenced by the domestic fiction that became popular at mid-century.² More recently, however, critics have begun to argue that the tendency to divide Haywood’s career into early (scandalous) and late (conservative) eras is misleading and

¹ Scholars have also recently begun to recognize mid-eighteenth-century fiction’s debts to Haywood’s amatory fiction. See, for instance, Aleksandra Hultquist, “Haywood’s Re-Appropriation of the Amatory Heroine in Betsy Thoughtless,” Philological Quarterly 85.1/2 (2006).

somewhat reductive, since there are many thematic and formal continuities between her early and late works.3

Just as Haywood’s oeuvre is rather awkwardly situated in literary history, so too is it interestingly placed in the cultural histories of midwifery and copyright. Haywood’s professional writing career began with the publication of her first novel, *Love in Excess* (1719-20), barely ten years after the Statute of Anne established England’s first copyright law. During the 1720s, the decade during which most of her early fiction was published, many heated public debates raged about pregnant women’s agency and female midwives’ aptitude; by the end of Haywood’s life in the mid-1750s, male physicians’ interventions in the birth process were occurring with greater frequency. With increasing patriarchal influences in both the development of the medical field of obstetrics and the widespread acceptance of the paternal metaphors underwriting the newly-established English copyright laws over the course of Haywood’s lifetime, it can hardly be surprising that both cultural histories register in her fiction.

I argue that Haywood’s body of work coheres around the topics of pregnancy and childbirth and the bearing that these processes have on female autonomy and public authority. Haywood is widely recognized as the pre-eminent woman writer of the first half of the eighteenth century, but she also must be recognized as the most prolific eighteenth-century author of pregnancy fiction. Haywood’s interest in procreation spanned her entire career as a

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professional author, as she published at least fifteen pieces of fiction (short stories as well as novel-length narratives) in which pregnant and parturient characters appear. Though other critics have pointed out that Haywood’s handling of pregnancy and childbirth is frequently concerned with issues of individualism, autonomy, and personal desire, most of these critics have built their arguments on examinations of only a few texts. ⁴ While Jennifer Thorn is a notable exception because she points out Haywood’s “career-long interest in the implications of reproductive sexuality for individual autonomy,” her two articles on Haywood read only three narratives that focus on pregnancy. ⁵ Furthermore, critics who have explored Haywood’s negotiations of her role as a successful female author in the early eighteenth century tend either to focus on Alexander Pope’s scurrilous conflation of her authorial and maternal identities or on Haywood’s savvy in using her feminized (and sexualized) public image to her advantage. ⁶ However, such readings do not investigate Haywood’s response—or resistance—to the maternal identity for authorship that her male literary peers tried to foist on her. ⁷

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⁷ Miranda Burgess is perhaps the sole exception, as she points out that “Haywood treats the production and provision of goods from babies to novels as the varied forms of labor, and labor as an activity feminized and foreshortened by its encounters with the law and the public press.” However, while Burgess builds her reading on
In this chapter, I survey twelve narratives about pregnancy from across Haywood’s body of work in order to argue that even though her early and late novels about gestation and birth are superficially different from one another, they nevertheless return again and again to the same themes: the harm caused by men’s interference and irresponsibility when confronted with pregnant women; the need for women’s agency during pregnancy and birth; and the desirability (though sometimes impossibility) of establishing female communities to make certain that pregnant women’s rights are protected. Although Haywood’s amatory fiction centers more frequently on illegitimately pregnant women than her later fiction does, her work from both periods indicates that childbearing is a dangerous proposition for women regardless of their marital status. Perhaps because (as so many of her novels demonstrate) pregnant women are exceedingly vulnerable in a patriarchal world, Haywood did not identify herself as a mother to her books despite her intense interest in pregnancy and childbirth. Rather, I should like to suggest that Haywood’s choice to publish her later novels anonymously and to set up (albeit briefly) as a bookseller indicate her desire to shed an excessively feminine authorial identity as the “Great Arbitress of Passion” and to grasp the cultural authority associated with male authors and publishers.

II

During the mid-1720s, Mist’s Weekly Journal was filled on a regular basis with lurid accounts of murderous motherhood.\(^8\) On 25 June 1726, the newspaper reported that a servant girl

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\(^8\) According to Toni Bowers’ tally, *Mist’s Weekly Journal* reported that fifteen infanticidal mothers were put to death between May 1725 and December 1727 (*Politics* 5).
in Herefordshire “was brought to Bed of a Bastard Child” and then “murder’d the Infant, by breaking its Neck, and afterwards hid it in a Parcel of Feathers.” A year later, on 19 August 1727, the journal reported two infanticides committed by mothers. Elizabeth Archer was condemned to death for “murdering her Bastard Child as soon as ‘was born, by cutting his Throat with a Penknife,” while it was reported that Elizabeth Ash “thrust into the Chamber-Pot and strangled” her illegitimate child. Paternal failure, on the other hand, appeared to be less conceivable—and far less culpable—in newspaper accounts of infanticide. Stories of murderous fathers appeared in the pages of Mist’s Weekly Journal as well, although a number of these men’s trials resulted in acquittals. As just one example, Mist’s reports on 25 March 1727 that a “pious clerk” was “indicted for the Murder of six of his bastard Children,” though he was acquitted of “every Indictment.” Infanticide was most often defined as a “woman’s crime” during the eighteenth century, even though a considerable number of fathers were involved in the murders of their children. As Toni Bowers succinctly puts it, “Augustan representations of maternity are most often representations of failed authority and abdicated responsibility”—that is, representations of “maternal failure” (15-6).

Haywood’s fiction published in the 1720s differs from popular accounts of failed, monstrous motherhood in newspapers and broadsides because her stories place the blame for disastrous lyings-in and illegitimate births on men’s interference in or indifference to women’s reproductive processes. In choosing to tell stories of illegitimate pregnancies in which women

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are the victims of male greed and injustice (particularly in cases that involve patriarchal inheritance laws), Haywood vindicates rather than blames mothers. In the first several stories I examine, men who are overly worried about female virtue try to exert control over pregnant women when they are at their most vulnerable—during childbirth. In two other stories, *The Mercenary Lover* (1726) and *The Life of Madam De Villesache* (1727), scheming men try to separate the fetus from the mother by any means necessary in order to retain their own families’ property rights.

Published in 1727, *The Fruitless Enquiry* is a collection of anecdotes framed by the central narrative of Miramillia. Though only two tales in this collection directly involve pregnancy, both stories present men who are cruel toward their pregnant wives and daughters. In the “History of Anziana, Signior Lorenzo, and Count Caprera,” Anziana is in love with Lorenzo, but her father compels her to marry Count Caprera while Lorenzo is away and unable to aid her. Anziana’s secret (though chaste) correspondence with Lorenzo is discovered by her husband and her father, who kill Lorenzo but keep the fact hidden because of Anziana’s pregnancy. When Anziana goes into labor, both Caprera and Anziana’s father enter the lying-in chamber along with a priest, demanding to know if the father of Anziana’s child is Caprera or Lorenzo. The men frighten Anziana with the very real possibility of her death in childbirth to compel her to confess the true paternity of her child, and they even withhold any female assistance (presumably from the midwife and gossips) to Anziana until she does so. Anziana is furious, but she swears that her husband is the father, at which time, as she relates, “the women were permitted to come in; but I was so disordered with the late treatment I had received, that it very much increased the danger of my condition, and my life was despaired of by every body in the room” (42). Anziana gives birth to a son and recovers, but she is greeted by “frowns” and “sullen discontent” from her

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husband and father (43). The count then reveals Lorenzo’s fate and shows his skeleton to Anziana. Although Lorenzo is the character who suffers the most shocking physical violence in this story, the parturient Anziana is nevertheless subjected to psychological torture as well as to physical discomfort when her birth attendants are withheld from her. Since the task of asking an unmarried woman about the paternity of her child at the height of her labor was usually relegated to the midwife during the eighteenth century, it is significant that Haywood reverses the usual order of things by making Anziana’s husband, father, and priest perform this duty instead, a narrative strategy that places the blame squarely on the men.

“The History of Violathia, and the Counts Berosi and Charmillo” is also a story from The Fruitless Enquiry in which the jealousy of a husband leads to a mother’s misery. Although Violathia is a loving, faithful wife, her husband, Count Berosi, is pathologically jealous and convinced that she has been unfaithful to him. The birth of their first son and heir does not, however, abate his jealousy but in fact heightens it:

scarce was that dreadful rack of nature over, which draws pity from even the most obdurate hearts, when he came into the chamber, and ordering the woman who attended me to withdraw, accused me of having brought a spurious heir into his family, talked to me in a fashion which even the meanest man, if honest, would be ashamed of, branded me with the foulest names that tongue ever uttered, or the malicious heart of man had baseness to invent; […] all I could say or swear was vain, and he flung from me with unheard-of curses. (180)

Like Caprera, Berosi attacks his wife when she is at her most vulnerable point during pregnancy—her lying-in period—and he removes all female assistance from her in order to weaken her further. Violathia is also, like Anziana, plunged into “fits, which by all about me
were judged to be fatal” (181). She recovers but lives to see her son shunned from her house, and then later to see similar treatment befall her second son. Both Violathia’s and Anziana’s narratives display the socially-sanctioned violence that men are able to exert over their laboring wives and daughters with no consequences for themselves—undoubtedly because patriarchal inheritances are at stake.

In *The Fair Hebrew* (1729), a pregnant woman is again subjected to violence by male family members who are concerned about the family’s honor.14 Within the story of Kesiah (the “fair Hebrew” of the novel’s title) is the interpolated story of Miriam, a woman who is impregnated by the aptly-named Captain Conquest. Miriam successfully conceals her burgeoning belly from her family until the eighth month of her pregnancy, when she discovers that Captain Conquest has abandoned her. Her mother and sister find Miriam in a frenzy and quickly cut her stays; without the tight lacing of her clothing, Miriam’s condition is revealed. Her father reviles her and then gives her over to her uncle when she goes into labor. Miriam’s uncle, a stern Levite, conducts her to an empty house, where it at first seems that all female assistance will be denied to her, much as it had been in the stories of Violathia and Anziana. The uncle severely rebukes her, and when the midwife arrives, he allows her (but no other women) to assist with the birth. After the child is delivered, Miriam relates that her uncle,

> instead of caressing, or cherishing it as expected, threw it immediately into a great Fire […] Oh! Never, never, shall I forget the Skrieks [sic] of the poor Babe, whose Face I had not seen, but which was endear’d to me by the Pains I had suffered for it. […] my cruel Uncle bad me turn my Eyes on the Flames, in which I saw the Limbs of that dear Innocent not yet consumed—Horrid Idea! Never to be forgotten shock! (42-3)

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Like so many of Haywood’s other ill-fated pregnant heroines, Miriam is forced to endure psychological torture as well as the physical pain of childbirth (which may have been heightened because of the inconveniences created by the lack of a proper number of birth attendants). Miriam only escapes the same fate as her baby because her uncle’s accomplice Abimelech (Kesiah’s brother) is horrified by the proceedings and helps her to escape. The two travel to Holland, but it is not clear if they ever marry, or if they find any lasting stability or happiness.

If violence to the laboring female body is only threatened in *The Fruitless Enquiry* and *The Fair Hebrew*, it manifests horribly in two other Haywood novels published during the 1720s. In *The Mercenary Lover* (1726), Clitander is a tradesman who marries the young heiress Miranda for her money, but he also becomes obsessed with gaining the fortune of his elder unmarried sister-in-law, Althea. After wooing the unsuspecting Althea, Clitander rapes her, an action that is the prelude to a consensual, illicit affair between the two. Although Althea grows to love Clitander, he only desires her money. When Althea becomes pregnant, an outcome that threatens to foil Clitander’s plans by providing Althea with an heir to her share of the estate, Clitander tells her stories about women who have died in childbirth in order to scare her into miscarrying her child. When that fails, he attempts to trick her into signing a gift of deed that would leave all of her property to him. Althea figures out what he is trying to do, however, and leaves town for her country estate without signing the papers.

Clitander’s next tactic involves writing to Althea to woo her into a better humor toward him. He convinces Althea to return to the city for her sister’s birthday party, where he poisons her. Althea begins to feel ill on the journey home, and, knowing that “there were many Months between that, and the Time in which she must expect those Agonies which all, in becoming

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Mothers, feel” (156), she stops at an apothecary’s residence. The apothecary immediate perceives that Althea has been poisoned, and he informs her that she will soon die. Althea’s death throes, which last through the night and into the next morning, are horrific and comprise a grotesque parody of pregnancy: she “swell’d to that prodigious Degree, that her Laceings burst, her Eyes seem’d to start out of her Head, and every Feature was distorted” (156). Her death left “that once lovely and Desire-creating Form, the most terrible and ghastly Spectacle, that ever made the View of Death a Horror” (158). An autopsy confirms poisoning as the cause of her death and also reveals that she had been pregnant: “to prove the Truth of what they told her [Miranda], they presented her with an Embrio of at least six Months Growth” (158). Clitander’s treachery toward Althea ultimately causes her fetus to be ripped from her womb, and her body, which had once bred life, breeds death.

To add insult to injury, Clitander refuses to take responsibility for his actions (even though Althea confessed her affair with Clitander and identified him as her murderer before she died) by claiming that Althea may have died because of a botched abortion. *The Mercenary Lover* thus ends with two different versions of Althea’s story, but despite the fact that Clitander is the “barbarous Author” of Althea’s wrongs (135), it would appear that, because of the partiality of the male-authored laws, his will be the publically-recognized version of events (Burgess 414-5). Althea’s sister Miranda, however, refuses to be fooled again by her husband, and she keeps “the Letters found in the dead Althea’s Pocket-Book” to “preserve in Memory his Offences” (162). These letters—the very ones that lured Althea to her death—enable Clitander’s own words to testify against him. Clitander may have the last word in the larger world, since he “made an Impression in the Minds” of those that he addressed (162), but Althea has the final word in the private realm occupied by her sister, the knowledge of which is “a perpetual Rack
upon his [Clitander’s] Spirits” (162). Althea’s private vindication, however, does not alter the
fact that Clitander attains what he had set out to win at the very beginning—control of both
sisters’ estates. In this story, the pregnant woman is merely a nuisance whose fetus stands
between a greedy man and the property that he covets.

There is an even more shocking post-mortem Caesarian section performed in The Life of
Madam De Villesache (1727), a novel that contains Haywood’s most appalling depiction of
violence against a pregnant body. Henrietta is the illegitimate daughter of a Duke who is raised
in the country in ignorance of her true identity. She falls in love with Clermont, the son of a
farmer, and the two marry secretly just as they are about to be separated by Henrietta’s father,
who summons her back to Paris to enter society (although he gives her the pseudonym “Madam
De Villesache” so he does not have to acknowledge her as his daughter). Once in town, Henrietta
is dazzled by her new life and regrets “having so hastily dispos’d of herself” to Clermont (13).
Not knowing anything about her prior marriage, the Duke compels Henrietta to marry the
Marquis De Ab—Ile, but shortly after the wedding, Clermont comes to town to claim his wife.
He talks Henrietta into having sexual relations with him, which he claims she owes him since he
is her real husband. They carry on their affair for several months until the suspicious Marquis
catches them in one of their clandestine meetings. Henrietta is far gone with child at this point,
and she and Clermont try to justify their actions by revealing their prior marriage. At their
adultery trial, however, both Clermont and Henrietta deny their marriage, and Henrietta’s

16 Because Miranda is married, she has undergone a “legal death” according to which her identity was
subsumed into Clitander’s, so she cannot hold her own property herself (Burgess 409). Susan Paterson Glover
argues that Althea’s property rights are connected to her womb, and that Clitander has only to gain access to
Althea’s womb in order to be “assured” of acquiring her share of the estate, presumably because Althea’s share
would pass to her nearest living relative (either her child or her sister Miranda) after her death. Either way, Clitander
would stand to inherit Althea’s share of the estate. See Susan Paterson Glover, Engendering Legitimacy: Law,

marriage to the Marquis is ruled to be legal. Although Henrietta is found guilty of having
adulterous relations with Clermont, the court nevertheless decides that her child, if a son, will be
the heir of the Ab—lle title and estate, and that Henrietta will be able to retain her title as the
Marchioness of Ab—lle.

Outraged by the possibility that Clermont’s child could inherit his estate, the Marquis
murders his wife and unborn child. Disguised as a highwayman, the Marquis abducts Henrietta
and rides deep into the woods with her. After throwing her violently from his horse,

He stabbed her to the Heart, with many Wounds; and as if her Death was not
sufficient to satiate his Rage, or still fear’d a living Heir wou’d arise from that
Body to the Title of Ab—lle; he rip’d her open with an unmanly Brutality, and
taking thence the Innocent unborn, stuck it on the point of his remorseless Sword,
then threw it down in Scorn by the bleeding Parent; crying, There! let the Fowls
of the Air, or the wild Beasts which haunt this desart [sic] Forest, devour the base
begotten Brat, and the vile Wretch, who aim’d to impose Dishonour on the House
of Ab—lle. (59)

In The Mercenary Lover, the removal of Althea’s fetus was part of an autopsy performed by a
surgeon; in The Life of Madam De Villesache, the mutilation of the pregnant woman is
performed by her husband, at sword-point, in order to destroy both her and her unborn child.
Like Clitander, the Marquis is villainous because he puts his own financial and social well-being
above the well-being of a pregnant woman and her unborn child. Haywood’s novels about
violence against pregnant bodies thus suggest that, for a variety of reasons, the law compels
men—whether husbands, lovers, or even medical practitioners—to separate unborn children
from their mothers. The Marquis and Clitander are preoccupied with issues surrounding
legitimacy and inheritance laws, while the surgeon who conducts Althea’s autopsy and post-mortem Caesarian section is legally obligated to find out what happened to her, even if his discovery of the fetus only ends up making Clitander’s story of a botched abortion attempt more plausible.

The Marquis uses his physical strength as well as his sword (which, as a phallic object, can also represent the whole patriarchal power structure of his society) to eradicate the specter of illegitimacy from his family, but in so doing, he also destroys any possibility of passing his estate on to any heirs whatsoever. The end of the novel emphasizes that it would have been better for the Marquis to have accepted the possibility of an illegitimate heir rather than to have killed the child and its mother. In his ravings before his death, the Marquis indicates that he regrets killing Henrietta, but that he especially regrets killing the fetus:

Oh, Henrietta! (would he cry) base as thou wert, I ought not to have murder’d thee!—And at others, What though the Child were not mine, had it not a right to Life?—How could my impious Hands tear thee from the Womb, poor Innocent, before thy Time, and send my Sword, yet reeking with thy Mother’s Blood, through thy scarce panting Heart!—Monstrous Barbarity!—Too dire Revenge!—O never, never can I hope forgiveness, who knew not how to forgive! (62)

The Marquis’ remorse, ill-timed though it is, nevertheless allows Haywood to vindicate the rights of a “fallen” woman like Henrietta and her illegitimately-begotten child.

Though men’s violence against pregnant women in these stories is extreme, I argue that these extraordinarily dramatic scenarios act as a counterweight to all of the sensationalized stories about murderous mothers that were ubiquitous during the 1720s. Significantly, there are no child-murders committed by mothers in Haywood’s narratives about pregnancy, but examples
of abusive fathers and husbands abound. Furthermore, what all of the stories discussed in this section have in common are male characters who, for selfish reasons, try to take control of pregnant bodies and the birth process. Haywood’s pregnancy narratives thus reveal men’s attempts to interfere with and destroy women’s autonomy in gestation and birth. From denying a woman proper assistance during her labor to violent interventions in the pregnant body with sharp instruments, the male characters in these stories also very closely resemble the male obstetricians who were taking the place of female midwives at this time.\(^{18}\) Though she symbolically displaces her critique of man-midwifery onto other characters, Haywood nevertheless critiques men who seek to manage pregnant women’s bodies without women’s best interests in mind. In Reading the Romance (1984), Janice Radway suggests that “the romance’s preoccupation with male brutality is an attempt to understand the meaning of an event that has become almost unavoidable in the real world.”\(^ {19}\) Haywood’s early amatory fiction attempts to do just that—to understand, and deal with, men’s brutality toward pregnant women.

III

If men’s physical violence against pregnant women is a major concern in Haywood’s early pregnancy narratives, other novels from this period examine the opposite problem—when men refuse to take responsibility for impregnating their lovers, a situation that usually results in social disgrace for the abandoned woman. However, in most of these novels about abandonment, Haywood’s recently-delivered female characters take revenge upon their faithless lovers, often

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by banding together with other women. Toni Bowers has suggested that in at least several narratives, Haywood rejects heterosexual relationships in favor of communities of women that empower maternal authority (125). While Bowers’ argument is compelling, it is based on readings of only three tales: *The Rash Resolve* (1724), *The Force of Nature* (1725), and “The Triumph of Fortitude” from the *Female Spectator* (1744-6). I should like to extend Bowers’ claims to several additional Haywood texts from both her early and late periods in order to demonstrate the continuity in Haywood’s *oeuvre* as it pertains to female solidarity.

In *The British Recluse* (1722), one of Haywood’s earliest novels in which pregnancy is a central part of the narrative, the recluse of the novel’s title is Cleomira, who had been impregnated and subsequently abandoned by a rake named Lysander.20 After going into labor prematurely and giving birth to a dead son, Cleomira retires to an inn where a woman named Belinda is staying. Belinda had also been jilted by a faithless lover (although she was not impregnated by him), and after comparing their experiences, the women realize that they have both been wronged by the same man (Bellamy/Courtal/Lysander). Rather than ending in disgrace or tragedy for the women, however, *The British Recluse* ends with the creation of a female community, as Cleomira and Belinda set up housekeeping together in London, “where they still live in a perfect Tranquility, happy in the real Friendship of each other” (138). Happy endings for illegitimately pregnant women are a standard feature of Haywood’s early eighteenth-century amatory fiction. Aleksondra Hultquist points out that while pregnancy and childbirth are often punishment for sexual transgression in domestic fiction, in amatory fiction the pains of pregnancy and labor are reminders of the lover’s faithlessness as well as “personality-altering” events rather than tokens of “the mother’s extraordinary sin” (147). In *The British Recluse*, Cleomira undergoes character developments after she gives birth that allow her to move past her

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jilting; though she first broods over her lost lover and dead baby, she eventually chooses to prioritize her friendship with Belinda.

*The City Jilt* (1726) also pairs two women together in friendship after one of them is impregnated and then spurned, but the friends in this tale band together to seek revenge on the man who wronged the pregnant woman.\(^{21}\) Glicera is the daughter of a successful tradesman who is being courted by Melladore, a family friend and neighbor. When Glicera’s father dies on the day of her wedding and it is revealed that he had so many debts that Glicera will no longer be an heiress, Melladore loses interest in marrying her and schemes to make her his mistress instead. He succeeds in seducing her, and soon after Glicera discovers that she is pregnant. She writes twice to Melladore, begging him to honor his promises and assist her in her time of need, but he refuses to do so. Glicera is infuriated to such a degree that she becomes severely ill with a fever and miscarry her child; meanwhile, Melladore marries another woman, Helena, who is supposedly a rich heiress. After many months’ convalescence, Glicera regains her health and swears revenge on all men, although her main object of vengeance is Melladore.

With the help of her companion Laphelia, Glicera gains possession of the mortgage for Melladore’s estate. In the interim, Melladore has become destitute because his wife proved to be illegitimate and thus not an heiress. Glicera finally has her revenge on Melladore when he is forced to beg her to buy a commission for him in the army (in whose service he shortly thereafter dies). Now wealthy, Glicera and Laphelia happily retire to a “fine House, which formerly belong’d to *Melladore*” (119), where they live together until Laphelia’s marriage. The story ends with a justification of Glicera’s actions, which “cannot but admit of some Excuse, when one considers the Necessities she was under, and the Provocations she receved [sic] from that

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ungrateful Sex” (119). Although Glicera’s pregnancy caused her to suffer from the loss of her health and reputation, she is still able to forge a close bond with another woman, gain wealth and social stature, exact revenge on Melladore, and finally, to regain her reputation. Perhaps even more significantly, however, *The City Jilt* teaches its female readers exactly how to enact Glicera’s revenge, “providing specific advice that can be used in actual personal interactions” (Ingrassia 95). This quasi-didactic strain will reemerge in other Haywood novels as well, which suggests that teaching women how to manage their bodies and finances in a patriarchal world is a cornerstone of Haywood’s pregnancy literature.

If *The City Jilt* is a story of the revenge of an illegitimately pregnant woman who refuses to identify as a fallen woman, *Fantomina* (1725) is a more lighthearted take on the abandoned woman’s revenge motif. Fantomina is the story of a woman (whose true identity is never revealed) who assumes a series of disguises in order to keep the interest of her fickle lover, Beauplaisir. After conducting affairs with Beauplaisir while assuming no fewer than four vastly different personas (prostitute, provincial housemaid, widow, and mysterious woman of the town), Fantomina becomes pregnant. As several critics have pointed out, Fantomina’s amorous dalliances might not have been prohibited by her pregnancy, for she is able to successfully hide her condition by tightly lacing her stays, but her mother’s sudden appearance in town prevents her from reassuming her multiple identities. Forced to appear publicly without any of her disguises, the woman sometimes known as Fantomina finally reveals her condition when she goes into labor at a ball. When she names Beauplaisir as the father of her child, no one is more


shocked than Beauplaisir himself, who, having never discovered Fantomina’s true identity, is left “more confus’d than ever he had known in his whole Life” (71).

Despite the fact that the protagonist formerly known as Fantomina is left in a difficult situation with a child and no husband, she is supported by two different communities of women—the community formed by Fantomina, her infant daughter, and her mother, as well as the community of the convent to which Fantomina is sent by her mother. The fact that Fantomina is forced to enter a convent is not the punishment that it would at first appear to be, for, as Margaret Case Croskery points out, “in Haywood’s works, banishment to convent or monastery was no guarantee of moral transformation, nor was it an effective stopgap to erotic pleasure” (92). 24 Perhaps even more fascinating, however, is the way in which Haywood hints that Fantomina plays a role in augmenting the female communities that support her. I argue that Haywood refers obliquely to the power of the maternal imagination in Fantomina in order to suggest that even though women might not be able to resist being impregnated, they can nevertheless bolster female resistance against fickle men by having female children.

Numerous doctors, midwives, pamphlets, and popular anecdotes from the early eighteenth century warned expectant mothers about the fearsome power that a pregnant woman could exert over her unborn child. Belief in the power of the maternal imagination did not originate in the eighteenth century, but intense public debates took place during the 1720s between James Augustus Blondel and Daniel Turner about whether or not pregnant women could imprint their fears, cravings, and desires on their developing fetuses. 25 Declining belief in the maternal imagination was also tied to the rapidly spreading belief that women played a far

24 For additional readings of the ways in which an amatory heroine’s banishment to a French convent was not necessarily a celibate life sentence, see Ballaster, Seductive Forms, 100-3 and Potter, “The Language,” 182.

25 See page 16 of the Introduction to this project for more on the Blondel-Turner debates.
less significant role in their pregnancies than had been previously assumed. Though the burgeoning medical establishment was growing increasingly suspicious of maternal impressions, such theories still persisted as folk beliefs that circulated both verbally and in print. One advice manual published in 1718 instructed women on how to avoid monstrous births: “Ye Pregnant Wives, whose Wish it is, and Care, / To bring your Issue, and to breed it Fair, / On what you look, on what you think, beware.” By alluding to a mother’s self-regulation, this passage implies that a woman has the power to choose the things that she would like to be influenced by, which would supposedly have the same effect on her fetus as those impressions that take her unawares. The mother’s desires and obsessions were thus supposed to play a significant role in the traits that she passes on to her fetus, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Another aspect of maternal influence that has received somewhat less attention in discussions of the pregnant woman’s imagination is her supposed influence on the fetus’ biological sex. Although not always invoked in discussions of maternal impressions, a number of theories about what caused fetuses to develop into male or female babies also concerned the circumstances of a baby’s conception and gestation. The sixteenth-century physician Paracelsus had popularized the idea that “[t]he superior strength of imagination of one partner as compared with the other decides the sex of the child begotten,” a theory that Jane Sharp repeats in her

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26 Alan Bewell makes a similar argument about eighteenth-century attempts to discredit the maternal imagination: “the rejection of this obstetric theory by the end of the eighteenth century may have been an advance for science, but it also significantly diminished the sexual power of women.” See Alan Bewell, “An Issue of Monstrous Desire: Frankenstein and Obstetrics,” in Yale Journal of Criticism 2.1 (1988), 116.

27 Claude Quillet, *Callipaediae; or, an art how to have handsome children*, 2nd ed (London: J. Peele, 1718), 49.

28 The corollary to the belief that the imagination could produce a monstrous child is “that stimulating the mother’s imagination with a beautiful object would produce a beautiful child” (Todd, *Imagining Monsters* 46).

29 Huet discusses the sexing of the fetus as one aspect of the maternal imagination (13, 24, 39), but most other critical discussions of the maternal imagination tend to focus on the impression of birthmarks on the child’s skin and/or on the creation of “monsters.”
midwifery manual when she states that “Boys or Girls are begotten as the seed is that prevails stronger or weaker.” The placement of the fetus in the womb was also supposed to influence the sex of the child. Folk beliefs expressed in popular manuals like *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* (1684) claimed that a mother could influence the sex of her child by lying on either her right or her left side (because boys were supposed to develop in the womb’s right chamber, and girls in the left) and by drinking certain concoctions for a week after conception takes place. The many constellations of beliefs concerning the determining factors in the unborn child’s sex suggest that a fetus’ sex could be established even after its initial conception.

At the end of Haywood’s novel, Fantomina gives birth to a girl, an event that is not particularly surprising given some significant textual clues that tie in to eighteenth-century beliefs about how the sex of a child develops *in utero*. Fantomina employs the mental techniques that a mother could use to influence the sex of her fetus, thus demonstrating the irrelevance of the father in family formation while emphasizing maternal autonomy. The most basic principles underlying maternal impressions theory were that a mother’s unregulated desires could shape the child in her womb, and that the baby’s sex was determined by whichever parent’s imagination was the stronger at the moment of conception. Fantomina’s impregnation is certainly indebted both to her refusal to regulate her desires and to the inventions of her imagination, factors that make the birth of a daughter very likely according to popular beliefs

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32 I am indebted to Helen Thompson’s argument that the conclusion of Fantomina raises “the specter of matrilineality” because, according to “the logic of whole bodies,” Beauplaisir cannot truly be the father of Fantomina’s child (“Plotting Materialism” 208). While Thompson suggests the possibility of an empowering matrilineal outcome, however, she does not pursue the implications of such a reading of Fantomina’s motherhood.
about the maternal imagination. Though it is Fantomina’s desire for Beauplaisir that initially leads her to pursue him, she soon becomes even more obsessed with her multiple identities. After her first enjoyment of Beauplaisir in the guise of the lovely courtesan Fantomina, the protagonist’s focus shifts to the various kinds of disguises she can assume to keep the affair alive. After posing as the prostitute Fantomina, she becomes the country servant-girl Celia, and then the widow Bloomer, and still later the mysterious, aristocratic Incognita. Amazingly, by the end of her affair, she manages to play three of these roles simultaneously, dallying with Beauplaisir in the guise of Fantomina, the widow, and Incognita on alternating days: “She kept the House, and her Gentlemen-Equipage for about a Fortnight, in which Time she continu’d to write to him as Fantomina and the Widow Bloomer, and received the Visits he sometimes made to each” (67-8). It is also important to note that, as Fantomina’s affairs become more complex, she begins to lose interest in Beauplaisir:

she began to grow as weary of receiving his now insipid Caresses as he was of offering them: She was beginning to think in what Manner she should drop these two Characters when the sudden Arrival of her Mother […] put an immediate Stop to the Course of her whimsical Adventures. (68)

Fantomina’s obsessive management of her various identities, as well as the strength of her imagination at the conception of her child (given the fact that she would have been in disguise at the time), should thus, according to the logic of maternal impressions, be sufficient cause to imprint the female sex upon the fetus that she is carrying.

Maternal impressions in Fantomina would also seem to include the impression of a gender role onto the fetus as well as her biological sex. When Fantomina discovers her pregnancy, she realizes that nothing short of a “Miracle” can prevent her condition from being
exposed (68), although she valiantly tries to hide her pregnant body for as long as possible. Although the narrator only identifies four different personas that the heroine inhabits (Fantomina, Celia, Bloomer, and Incognita), Fantomina’s performance of the innocent virgin at the climax of the tale would seem to constitute a fifth disguise. What is interesting about this final persona, however, is that it amounts to an impeccable performance of socially-acceptable eighteenth-century femininity for an unmarried woman. She is able to conceal her swelling abdomen “By eating little, lacing prodigious straight, and the Advantage of a great Hoop-Petticoat” that allowed her “Bigness” to pass unnoticed (68). Fantomina’s final persona adopts the markers of the ideal woman whose appetites are suppressed and whose body is carefully regulated according to the latest fashions. With such a masquerade of femininity occupying the thoughts of the mother, it can be little wonder that the result of her pregnancy is not only female, but a “new-born Lady” (71). Fantomina’s adoption of her final adult female role has thus imprinted an oddly adult-sounding social role (that of “Lady”) on her infant daughter.

While Fantomina never explicitly states that she intends to produce a daughter, the novel may nevertheless exhibit the power that a woman is capable of wielding over her unborn child should she choose to do so. However, the most potentially progressive narrative strategy in the text is the fact that Fantomina and her mother refuse to give the “new-born Lady” to Beauplaisir, even though he offers to “discharge it faithfully” (71). In a moment of solidarity, Fantomina, her mother, and her daughter are all on the same side, ranged against Beauplaisir in a show of maternal autonomy and authority. One way that pregnant women may be able to get revenge on men is by creating more women to oppose them—or at the very least, by not giving girls to men as either wives or daughters.
Though it was published somewhat later than her amatory fiction of the 1720s, Haywood’s *Anti-Pamela* (1741), as a novel full of real, abortive, and even fake pregnancies, shares much in common with her earlier stories of women’s search for economic and social stability.33 Though these numerous pregnancies are only on the periphery of the narrative, they demonstrate some of the ways in which women can take control of their bodies and outsmart philandering men (though they sometimes need other women’s help in order to do so). Syrena Tricksey, the “anti-Pamela” character, is “train’d up” by her mother “to deceive and betray all those whom her Beauty should allure” (54) so that she can eventually “liv[e] grand, either by Marriage, or a Settlement from some Man of Condition” (56). Syrena has the misfortune to become pregnant early in her search for a suitable man; she is, in fact, impregnated by her very first lover, Vardine, an army lieutenant who abandons her when her demands for financial support become too pressing. When Syrena’s mother notices the “Alteration” (83) in her daughter’s figure, she helps her to end the unwanted pregnancy:

all that could be done, was to endeavor to alleviate the Misfortune as much as possible: To that end, she prepared a strong Potion, which the Girl very willingly drank, and being so timely given, had the desired Effect, and caused an Abortion, to the great Joy of both Mother and Daughter. (84)

The abortifacient herbs (ergot of rye, pennyroyal, and/or savin) that Mrs. Tricksey mostly likely administered to Syrena might have rendered her sterile, as Syrena never becomes pregnant again over the course of the novel despite her numerous subsequent sexual encounters.34 In Syrena’s case, sterility is not really such a bad outcome, as her potential social role will be as a mistress,


34 Ingrassia suggests this in a footnote to the abortion passage in the Broadview edition of *Anti-Pamela* (84).
not a wife who must beget heirs to inherit her husband’s name and estate. Sterility is, in fact, actually better for Syrena’s business, as she will never again have to remove her body from the sexual circulation that is necessary for her livelihood in order to have a baby or recover from another abortion. Even though she eventually fails in securing her long-sought-after settlement, Haywood’s most promiscuous heroine nevertheless goes to her exile in Wales unencumbered by any illegitimate children. If pregnancy in Haywood’s novels is, as Jennifer Thorn argues, something that restricts the development of the individual (122), then Syrena is spared from such additional constraints on her character.

Syrena does fake a pregnancy at one point in the narrative in order to force Mr. D to support her financially. Syrena appears at Mr. D’s door in a frenzy, threatening to drown herself in the Thames because she believes she is with child. She eventually “found many Excuses besides her pretended Pregnancy to drain Money from him” (137), but her scheme ultimately fails because she concurrently carries on an affair with Captain H. Real pregnancies might be hindrances for women, but Syrena’s pretended pregnancy gives her, for a time, all sorts of financial advantages with none of the inconveniences of a real pregnancy. Syrena’s situation thus suggests the great amount of power that women can wield by pleading their bellies. Though the novel is supposedly “a necessary Caution to all Young Gentlemen” (51), and while this episode could certainly function as a warning to men that women can easily gull them by pretending to be pregnant, it could simultaneously teach women exactly how to play such tricks upon men.35 Men may need to be warned about these techniques, but it is because novels like Haywood’s

35 Indeed, Catherine Ingrassia argues that Haywood’s novels frequently provide practical advice for women on how to handle their sexuality and their finances (which are, more often than not, intertwined). She posits that Anti-Pamela actually offers three different kinds of instruction: “a sexual model for women,” “an educational text for men to help them avoid the snares of unsavory women,” and, above all, “a more inclusive economic model designed to help all readers avoid the pitfalls of immediate gratification and capitalize on the opportunities of paper credit and other kinds of imaginative, intangible property” (Ingrassia 115).
have taught them to women. In a number of Haywood’s amatory novels, then, women are often each other’s best resources for reproductive and economic autonomy.  

IV  

While most of the pregnant women in Haywood’s amatory literature are unmarried, most of the pregnant women who appear in Haywood’s later novels are married. Though this might at first seem to signal a major break between Haywood’s early and late fiction, I would argue that the change in marital status of Haywood’s pregnant characters actually indicates continuity within her oeuvre, at least where her representations of reproduction are concerned. Although more of the mothers in Haywood’s later novels are married than unmarried, their stories nevertheless indicate that legitimate pregnancies can be just as dangerous as illegitimate pregnancies. If pregnant mistresses are imperiled by their scheming lovers in Haywood’s amatory fiction, a brief survey of Haywood’s later fiction will reveal that a husband’s legitimating presence does not necessarily reward the virtuous pregnant wife with a safe delivery.

There are a total of seven stories that involve pregnancy in the four volumes of The Female Spectator (1744-6), and of these stories, five concern pregnancies that occur within the confines of marriage, though with widely variable outcomes. While in the stories of Alithea,  

36 Several of Haywood’s novels also suggest that women can be detrimental to each other’s well-being. Stories like Lasselia, The Rash Resolve, The Masqueraders, and Cleomelia all include examples of women who publically reveal other women’s pregnancies for malicious reasons. Thus, although Haywood’s fiction is full of women who assist one another, her novels also displays an awareness that women’s mutual support is not a natural inevitability but rather the result of a choice that they must make.  

37 Jennifer Thorn argues that while “illegitimate pregnancies abound” in the eighteenth-century novel, legitimately pregnant women are all but invisible at this time (“Althea” 95-6). The latter half of Thorn’s claim is not true when it comes to Haywood’s body of work, however.

Constantia, and Jemima, pregnancies end up righting the wrongs imposed on these women by their husbands, the other two anecdotes demonstrate how marriages are torn apart by the arrival of children. In Christabella’s story in Book 5, Christabella escapes from her oppressive father by eloping with a man who turns out to be an adventurer who is only after her fortune. The man who “rescues” Christabella compels her to marry him, which she reluctantly does. Christabella becomes more reconciled to her lot when she discovers that she is pregnant, and she even begins to love her rakish husband. Her husband, however, only views the pregnancy as a way to make him “Master of her Heart” (1: 284) so that he can go forward unchallenged with his suit for Christabella’s property, ill treatment that ultimately renders Christabella miserable. In this story, the binding of husband and wife by a pregnancy has negative consequences because the husband uses his wife’s pregnancy to forward his own selfish designs, which lead Christabella to her final undoing. She loses her estate to her husband and becomes economically dependent upon him.

Another story about a marriage torn apart by a pregnancy occurs in Book 16 of the Female Spectator. In this tale, a man and a woman marry despite the contrary advice of their friends, but “no open Disagreement happened between them till after she had lain in of her first Child” (3: 251). All of their friends expected that the couple’s bond would be “cemented” by the birth of a son, but “that Pledge of Conjugal Love […] proved the Bane of all their Peace and Satisfaction” (3: 252) because the parents could not agree on how the child should be baptized. The father, a high-church Anglican, expected that his son would be christened into his church by his bishop kinsman, while the mother, a Presbyterian, insisted on having her congregation’s minister do the honors. The father asserts his right as head of the household and schedules the baptism, but the mother circumvents his plans and has the baby secretly christened the night before the official baptism. The father is so outraged that he sends his son away with a new nurse.
to a distant family member in the country, and the couple never knows peace again. They bicker for years over the terms of their separation, and in the meantime, the child dies, “perhaps, for want of a Mother’s watchful care” (3: 258). In this story, as well as in Christabella’s story, the birth of legitimate offspring cannot guarantee happiness for mothers.

Like the anecdotes about pregnancy in The Female Spectator, the stories about the four women who become pregnant in The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless (1751) represent different situations for pregnant women, as both married and unmarried characters deal with the effects of pregnancy. As in The Female Spectator, however, more married than unmarried women are impregnated, which is a further indication of Haywood’s shift in focus from the illegitimate pregnancies of her earlier period to legitimate pregnancies in her later period (which are nevertheless just as dangerous as the pregnancies from her earlier fiction). Miss Forward is the only unmarried woman who becomes pregnant in the novel. In some ways, this character is a hold-over from Haywood’s earlier stories involving unmarried pregnant heroines—in typical amatory-fiction style, she is seduced and abandoned by a young rake and is forced to take refuge at the house of an unscrupulous London midwife, where her infant dies only hours after its birth. Miss Forward eventually becomes a prostitute and ends up in debtors’ prison, but after appealing to Betsy for help and expressing contrition for her actions, as well as promising to toil to make her wages honestly in the future, Betsy pays her bail. Like a number of the fallen women in Haywood’s earlier novels (Fantomina, Glicera, and Cleomira, in particular), Miss Forward is given an opportunity to rise again.


40 Aleksandra Hultquist argues that it is the possibility of the fallen woman’s redemption that sets amatory fiction apart from domestic fiction (142-3), but she ultimately interprets Miss Forward as “the worst possible example for a young, vain girl” because she, unlike Betsy, refuses to learn from her mistakes (151-2). For this reason, Hultquist does not seem confident that Miss Forward will perform her promise to reform her lifestyle upon
The three other pregnant women in *Betsy Thoughtless* are married and impregnated by their husbands, and all of them suffer ill consequences from their pregnancies: two die, and the third suffers a miscarriage before finally producing a son and heir with no harm to herself. Betsy’s washerwoman, Mrs. Jinks, was impregnated and then deserted by her husband; she gives birth to a daughter and then dies “before the expiration of her month” (248-9). Despite the fact that Mrs. Jinks is an admirable, hardworking woman with a husband, she nevertheless succumbs to what is presumably a post-partum infection. In a show of female solidarity that resembles the female community established at the end of *Fantomina*, Betsy and her close friend Mabel, who had “stood god-mothers” to Mrs. Jinks’ daughter, decide “to join equally in the maintenance of this innocent forlorn” (248-9).

Mrs. Jinks is not the only married childbearing woman in *Betsy Thoughtless* who dies suddenly. Mr. Trueworth’s first wife, Harriot, also dies of an illness while supposedly pregnant. In fact, it is because she is “supposed to be pregnant” that “her complaint at first was taken no other notice of than to occasion some pleasantries which new-married women must expect to bear” (565). She becomes progressively more ill, however, and dies shortly thereafter of smallpox. The narrator never confirms whether or not Harriot was actually pregnant, but even if she were, the legitimacy of that pregnancy could not save her life. Several months later, Harriot’s pregnant sister-in-law, Mabel (now Lady Loveit) suffers a miscarriage after falling into a river while fishing. As Lady Loveit explains to Betsy, “‘the fright had so great an effect upon me, that it caused an abortion, which as I was then in the fifth month of my pregnancy, had like to have proved fatal to me’” (566). She survives her miscarriage, however, and eventually becomes release from debtors’ prison. I would argue, however, that Miss Forward’s ambiguous fate opens up the possibility of a second chance for her at least as much as it suggests that she may return, in the end, to her former precarious lifestyle.
pregnant again and is “safely delivered of a son and heir” (628). Lady Loveit is one of the most consistently moral characters in the novel, and both of her pregnancies occur within wedlock, yet not even she can escape the dangers attendant upon pregnancy and birth. Her two pregnancies (one failed and one successful) serve as a reminder that even in ideal circumstances, chance has a larger hand than virtue in determining the outcome of a pregnancy, a lesson that reverses one of the major expectations of the mid-century domestic novel—that virtue will consistently be rewarded. Haywood’s later novels, like her earlier ones, teach women that pregnancy is a dangerous undertaking for all women, and that maternal suffering is not linked to a woman’s virtue.

V

Despite Haywood’s career-long interest in pregnancy and childbirth, she apparently did not embrace parturition or motherhood as metaphors for literary creation, even though many of her male contemporaries styled themselves as parents to their own books. Rather than representing herself as an abandoned mother who wrote out of necessity to support her children (as Charlotte Smith would do later in the century), Haywood apparently refused to publically portray herself as a mother, either to real children or her books. The eagerness with which her male contemporaries tried to push a questionable maternal authorial image onto her is an indication of how identifying as a mother to her texts would have disenfranchised her as an author at this time, even as her male colleagues could identify as parents to their texts with impunity.

Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding both mounted attacks on Haywood’s personal life and professional career by conflating her roles of mother and author in order to remove both
maternal and authorial power from her. Pope’s oft-cited satiric portrait of Haywood in *The Dunciad* (1728) and *The Dunciad Variorum* (1729) fuses the productions of Haywood’s mind with those of her body:

> See in the circle next, Eliza plac’d
> Two babes of love close clinging to her waste;
> Fair as before her works she stands confess’d.
> In flowr’s and pearls by bounteous Kirkall dress’d.
> The Goddess then: ‘Who best can send on high
> The salient spout, far-streaming to the sky;
> His be yon Juno of majestic size,
> With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes.**41**

As has been noted by critics since the fictional “Scriblerus,” whose commentary appears in the footnotes of the 1729 *Dunciad Variorum*, the “Two babes of love” can refer to Haywood’s two children and/or to her two political novels, *Memoirs of a Certain Island Adjacent to the Kingdom of Utopia* (1725) and *The Secret History of the Present Intrigues of the Court of Carimania* (1726).**42** While twentieth-century literary critics have debated about whether Pope meant for the “babes of love” to be read literally or figuratively (Koon 43-44, Ballaster 160-161, King 723-4),

**41** Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad Variorum* (London: A. Dod [John Wright], 1729), 35-6. I have cited these lines from *The Dunciad Variorum* because I discuss “Scriblerus’s” annotations below.

**42** Scriblerus’s footnote to this passage in *The Dunciad Variorum* explains that Haywood is the “authoress of those most scandalous books, call’d *The Court of Carimania*, and *The new Utopia*,” and that Edmund Curll’s *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad* should be consulted for a gloss of “the two *Babes of Love*” (36). The connection between books and babies is bolstered by Curll’s *Key*, which famously identifies the children as “the Offspring of a *Poet and a Bookseller*,” a line that interprets the babes both literally (as children) and figuratively (as books). See Edmund Curll, *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad* (London: A. Dodd, 1728), 12. Pope’s own marginal comment in his manuscript version of the poem, which notes that “She had 2 Bas: / tards, others say three,” indicates that Pope himself intended this line from his poem to be read literally, even alongside the more figurative reading of it in the *Variorum* footnote. See Alexander Pope, *The Last and Greatest Art: Some Unpublished Poetical Manuscripts of Alexander Pope*, ed. Maynard Mack (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 141.
Christine Blouch posits that Pope enables both the literal and figurative readings of this line in order to portray Haywood’s children and books as “interchangeable metaphors” for each other: “Pope’s rhetorical strategies were designed to collapse the binary terms of personal and aesthetic judgments,” thereby “effecting both a social and aesthetic marginalization of the female subject” (“Romance” 540).

Henry Fielding, whose professional relationship and quarrels with Haywood have been well documented, also attempted to conflate Haywood’s literary career with her maternal role in order to diminish her in both capacities. In the play-within-a-play in Fielding’s pantomime The Author’s Farce (1730), the “literarily and sexually avaricious character Mrs. Novel depended on audience recognition of the literary type—woman writer—if not the specific model—Eliza Haywood” (Ingrassia 106). In the play, Mrs. Novel declares that “I dy’d for Love, for I dy’d in Child-bed.”43 This line conflates Haywood’s life and work in several crucial ways. Mrs. Novel’s death in childbirth not only warns of what could happen to Haywood should she continue to give birth to real children, but it also makes a mockery of Haywood’s amatory heroines who die violently and prematurely in childbirth. Furthermore, Mrs. Novel is also a stereotype of the kinds of plots and characters that Haywood wrote, which hints at a lack of creativity on her part. Ultimately, Mrs. Novel’s death suggests that she has failed as both an author (allegorically, she could represent the death of the female-authored amatory novel) and a mother (because she does not survive to raise her child). The implication is, of course, that Haywood is also a maternal and literary failure.

In both Pope’s and Fielding’s lampoons, Haywood’s failure as an author is linked to her status as a mother, but neither of these authors (nor other prominent male authors of the period) seemed to feel that identifying as parents to their books was a liability to their own literary

43 Henry Fielding, The Author’s Farce; and The Pleasures of the Town (London: J. Roberts, 1730), 42.
careers. As I discussed in the dissertation’s introduction, Pope and Fielding both employed various parental metaphors for authorship to their creative processes. When they wished to establish the naturalness of their ownership over their literary productions, they used the metaphor of paternity; conversely, when they wished to convey the difficulties involved with writing, they temporarily appropriated metaphors for writing rooted in female reproductive physiology. Whether they identified primarily as fathers or mothers to their books, however, the fact remains that neither Pope nor Fielding felt that using a parental metaphor to describe their relationship to their books was a particular liability to their craft. Both authors, however, publically shamed Haywood for her “two babes of love”/books, forcing upon her a maternal identity that made it difficult for her to be taken seriously as a professional author at a time when the notion of professional authorship—not to mention professional authorship for women—was relatively new. Glover argues that, “[l]ike all women writers of the period, Haywood had to overcome the negative attributions the label implied and assert a capacity to create, to produce, to own, to claim legitimately the title of author” (154). While at first it might appear that finding positive associations between a woman’s reproductive capacity and her production of books would be an easy way to legitimize female authorship, it does not appear that Haywood took this risk. Pregnancy is all too often a limitation for the women in her stories, and if the achievement of individualism for her characters requires their avoidance of pregnancy (Thorn 122-23), then it seems likely that, denounced as she was by Pope and Fielding, Haywood would have preferred to abnegate her maternal identity in order to establish a legitimate authorial identity.

There is only one letter from Haywood’s surviving correspondence in which she identifies herself as a mother. In this letter to a prospective patron, Haywood mentions the “melancholly [sic] necessity of depending on my Pen for the support of myself and two Children,
the eldest of whom is no more than 7 years of age” (Haywood, qtd. in King, “Eliza Haywood” 724). Critics argue that this letter can be dated to either 1729 (King, “Eliza Haywood” 724) or 1730 (Blouch, “Romance” 549), which means that Haywood’s only known reference to her children either precedes or is very nearly contemporaneous with Pope’s *Dunciad Variorum* (1729) and Fielding’s *The Author’s Farce* (1730). Although much of Haywood’s personal and professional correspondence has been lost, it is significant that, at least in her surviving correspondence, she never refers to herself as a mother again after 1730. As far as I can discern, she also never refers to her literary productions as her children. I should like to suggest that Pope’s and Fielding’s lampoons of Haywood as a failed author/mother discouraged her from identifying as a mother to her books and encouraged her subsequent silence on the subject of her children.

Given the precarious positions of many of her abandoned pregnant characters, Haywood may also have wished to avoid being interpreted by the reading public (and other authors) as an unfortunate, abandoned mother. It is worth noting that Haywood only ever published one book by subscription (her 1721 translation of *Letters from a Lady of Quality to a Chevalier*), despite her success in collecting over 300 subscribers to underwrite the book’s publication. Ingrassia argues that Haywood avoiding publishing via subscription for most of her career because the “nature of that enterprise was not consistent with Haywood’s abilities or interests” (81), but I would add that subscription-based publication also frequently required an author to reveal (usually heart-wrenching) details about her life in order to gain the sympathy and money of potential subscribers. Avoiding subscription-based publications would have enabled Haywood to avoid the necessity of revealing details about her personal life to hundreds of readers.44

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44 While Haywood did seek out individual patrons for her subsequent books, I would argue that publishing in the open market with the blessing of a single patron was a different experience from personally seeking out
Furthermore, after the 1742 publication of her translation titled *The Virtuous Villager*, Haywood never again published a work of fiction with her name attached to it,\(^{45}\) a tactic that further distanced her personal (sexed) identity from her textual productions. Patrick Spedding points out that “there has been no extended consideration” of Haywood’s sudden decision to publish her books anonymously, though he suggests that suppressing her name might have helped “to dissociate herself from her works, either because there was a danger that the public would tire of so prolific an author or because her name had become a liability as a result of the attack on her in Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad*” (759). The particular liability that would have resulted from Pope’s and Fielding’s lampoons was the maternal identity that anonymous publication would have helped to mask.

Anonymous publication was not the only tactic that Haywood employed to resist the mother/author identity that Pope and Fielding had foisted on her. I argue that Haywood’s brief stint as a bookseller from 1741 to 1742 at the Sign of Fame in Covent Garden suggests not only that she wished to have a more proprietary (and pecuniary) interest in her books, but also that she wished to identify with the men in her field. According to Spedding, “Haywood was trying to overcome some of the limitations imposed on her by sex, class and tradition and that she achieved a certain independence within the book trade as a publisher and mercury” (15). Though, the book trade’s increasing feminization in the public imagination was a source of anxiety for eighteenth-century authors (Ingrassia 1-4), the literary marketplace, whatever its perception by disgruntled authors like Pope, was still overwhelmingly male. Though C. J. Mitchell speculates

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that about half of the workers in the eighteenth-century book trade were women, only six to eleven percent actually owned businesses related to the book trade. Furthermore, only a few women were major copyright owners, a fact that would have negatively impacted most women’s ability to make a comfortable living as publishers. While male authors on the literary scene during the eighteenth century might have been feminized in jibes by Pope and others, women were severely underrepresented in the book trade in terms of copyright and business ownership.

Haywood printed and/or sold at least ten texts (ranging from novels to pamphlets) during the 1740s, but it is highly likely that she sold other items from her shop as well. Paula McDowell notes that “almost all booksellers retailed a wide variety of non-print items as well as books” (52); these items often included stationery, tobacco, candy, and patent medicines (Mitchell 37). Ingrassia surmises that “printed material was probably only one facet of [Haywood’s] venture” (110), and Spedding goes as far as to suggest that, due to Haywood’s location in Covent Garden, it is likely that she sold a wide variety of pornographic prints as well as contraceptive devices (374). Although it is only a surmise, Haywood’s potential sale of contraceptives alongside her books would nevertheless have been an evocative gesture toward her refusal of motherhood as an authorial identity. If Haywood’s entire body of work on pregnancy and birth teaches women about the frequently disastrous physical consequences of pregnancy and childbirth, regardless of marital status, then her novels, with their complex

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48 Kathryn R. King, “Eliza Haywood at the Sign of Fame in Covent Garden (1742-1744),” Notes and Queries 57.1 (2010), 84.
renderings of pregnancy and childbirth, could themselves function as contraceptives to protect
women readers from the physical consequences of relationships with abusive men. For
Haywood, books and birth control were perhaps more analogous to one another than books and
children.
CHAPTER 2

“[T]he man-midwife by all means”: Reproductive Authority and Authorship in the Novels of Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, and Laurence Sterne

I

The previous chapter explored how Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding attempted to align Eliza Haywood’s authorship with motherhood in order to declare her a failure on both accounts. It can be little surprise, then, that a number of male novelists at mid-century also denied that pregnancy was an enabling metaphor for literary creation. I argue that although there are superficial differences in the ways that pregnant characters were presented in sentimental and comic fiction, both novelistic modes as deployed by mid-eighteenth-century male authors denied authority to pregnant women in strikingly similar ways. Pregnant characters in satiric novels by authors like Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Laurence Sterne are admittedly more comic, unsavory, and grotesquely embodied than their counterparts in Samuel Richardson’s domestic fiction. However, in their invisibility at crucial moments, their incapacity to physically influence their offspring, and their inability to speak (accurately or at all) about their pregnancies, these pregnant characters are very similar to one another, even if their authors use different means to attain their common goal of silencing women. If sentimental novels often function as conduct books that show pregnant women the proper ways to behave, satiric novels frequently employ negative examples to show the dangerous extremes to which pregnant women will go if unchecked by men.

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Critics who have discussed pregnancy and childbirth in mid-eighteenth-century fiction have typically focused either on the pregnant characters in the work of only a single author (usually *Pamela* or *Tristram Shandy*) or in only one novelistic tradition. However, these narrow critical approaches obscure the elements that a number of male-authored mid-eighteenth-century pregnancy novels share in common. Both serious and comic novels of this era devalue pregnant women’s minds and agency, subjecting them instead to patriarchal control. In this chapter, I analyze the pregnant characters in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Part 2 (1741) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), as well as the pregnant characters who appear in two comic novels, Tobias Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67). I argue that a number of mid-century male novelists who wrote about gestation—whether in sentimental or satirical styles—denied agency to pregnant women by allowing male medical practitioners access to the laboring woman, by substituting paternal impressions for maternal impressions (or at very least by denying maternal impressions), and by denying parturient women the power to speak about their bodily experiences.

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3 See, for instance, Malone’s “Near Confinement.” The eighteenth-century novels that Malone mentions briefly, including *Tom Jones* and *Peregrine Pickle*, are of the comic, satiric variety.
In Samuel Richardson’s 1741 sequel to *Pamela*, Mr. B. informs his pregnant wife of his reasons for refusing to let her breastfeed their first child, despite her pleas to the contrary:

“Ladies in your Way are often like incroaching Subjects: They are apt to extend what they call their Privileges, on the Indulgence shewed them; and the Husband never again recovers the Ascendant he had before” (4: 26). “I had no intention to invade your Province,” Pamela protests, “Yet I thought I had a Right to a little Free-will, a very little; especially on some greater Occasions” (4: 26). Although Mr. B. appears to agree with her when he replies, “Why so you have, my Dear” (4: 26), he ends their conversation by stating, “I must have your whole Will with me, if possible” (4: 27), and in violation of her wishes, forbids Pamela from breastfeeding her child. In this exchange, Richardson denies his pregnant character the right to assert any individual will that is not in keeping with the will of her husband, even in matters intimately related to her own body.

Richardson meant for his readers to construe Pamela’s compliance with her husband’s wishes as virtuous and worthy of imitation. Even though Pamela’s retort to Mr. B. is peppered with facetiousness—“if Wives in my Circumstances are apt to grow upon Indulgence, I am very happy, that your kind and watchful Care will hinder me from falling into that Error” (4: 26)—she nevertheless learns to submit to her husband, even when she disagrees with him, a lesson that Richardson undoubtedly hoped that his female readers would also heed. That Richardson’s novels (and the collection of familiar letters that preceded *Pamela*) were meant to be read as

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4 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, 1740-1, 4 vols (Stratford-Upon-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1929). All in-citations refer to the volume and page number from this edition.
conduct literature in fictional form is more than a twentieth-century critical assumption,\(^5\) as Richardson himself admitted to the didactic purposes of his novels, and of the sequel to *Pamela* in particular. Of *Pamela*, Part 2, Richardson wrote to his friend George Cheyne several months before the novel’s publication that in it he was “‘endeavoring to […] catch young airy Minds’” and to “‘mingle Instruction with Entertainment, so as to make the latter seemingly the View, while the former is *really* the End.’”\(^6\) About a month after the publication of *Pamela*, Part 2, Richardson echoed these sentiments in another letter to Cheyne: “‘I always had it in View […] to make the Story rather *useful*, than *diverting*’” (Richardson, qtd. in Eaves and Kimpel 144).

The general consensus of critics who have examined the breastfeeding disagreement is that Mr. B.’s peremptory refusal to let Pamela nurse her child reveals Richardson’s own desire to limit post-natal maternal authority.\(^7\) The critical conversation surrounding the breastfeeding incident and what it means for Pamela’s authority over her body speaks to larger issues about the ideological work of domestic, sentimental fiction in its portrayal of women’s agency (or lack thereof) in eighteenth-century culture more generally. Feminist literary criticism of the eighteenth-century domestic novel splits along two lines—some critics have argued that domestic fiction was disabling for women because, in reinforcing the doctrine of gendered separate spheres, the genre kept women from being portrayed as autonomous and politically efficacious individuals, while other critics have made the case that domestic fiction (or at least its

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eighteenth-century variety) is filled with examples of women who exercise influence (invisible or otherwise) over the public sphere.\(^8\) I should like to align myself with the former strain of criticism by proposing that mid-century domestic fiction was especially disabling for pregnant characters, who (like Pamela in the novel’s sequel) were delineated by male authors as silent vessels for the creation of patriarchal families. I also wish to complicate the claims of critics who have argued that Richardson’s adoption of first-person female voices in \textit{Pamela} was a sympathetic gesture toward his female readers because he, as an unaristocratic (and thus classically uneducated) man, was in a similar social position to the women he wrote about (and for).\(^9\) Rather, I am more inclined to agree with critics who have argued that male authors like Richardson attempted to gain the trust and sympathy of his female readers through his narrative cross-dressing only to make the oppressive tenets of a patriarchal social system more palatable to them.\(^10\) Richardson’s representations of pregnancy in his novels thus reveal the limits of his identification with women and reinforce his conservative view of the female body as a male-controlled instrument designed for the perpetuation of the patriarchal family.


\(^{10}\) See, for instance, Chaber, “This Affecting Subject,” 235. Ellen Pollak also reminds us that the “artifice of narrative authenticity by which women in the novel became writing and speaking ‘subjects’ did help readers to lose consciousness of the ideological impositions of plot” (7), which suggests that male-authored female characters might convey patriarchal mores less obviously and thus more effectively than male authors speaking in their own voices. See Ellen Pollak, \textit{The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope} (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
In this section, I argue that at the heart of Richardson’s desire to manage gestation, childbirth, and child-rearing is the desire to establish boundaries between mother and child, boundaries that are dangerously absent (or at least invisible) during the physiological unity of pregnancy. Without these boundaries, men are less able to convincingly exert ownership over the invisible fetus located within the mother’s body. Rather than exploring the intimate connection between mother and fetus, which could perpetuate the mother’s sense of ownership of or responsibility for the contents of her womb, Richardson emphasizes the separation between them in order to define Pamela’s pregnant body as a mere receptacle for Mr. B.’s (separate) property that is always under his control. Richardson does this in three distinct ways: by having Mr. B. arrange the circumstances of Pamela’s lying-in so they involve a man-midwife (a figure that Mr. B. himself also resembles); by denying Pamela the power of the maternal imagination, which might otherwise suggest that her mind has dispensing power over her body, which would of necessity include the contents of her womb; and by increasingly making maternity and authorship mutually exclusive so that Pamela is unable to write about the most significant experience of her married life. I close my comments on Richardson by briefly considering Sir Charles Grandison, a novel in which Richardson reaffirms his commitment to male management of the maternal body.

Bonnie Blackwell posits that in the original two volumes of Pamela (1740), Mr. B. functions as a metaphorical doctor or male obstetrician who monitors his wife’s sexuality (“Soften” para. 52). I argue that in the sequel to Pamela, Richardson makes this correlation much more apparent, as Mr. B.’s man-midwife-like prescriptions and secrecy enact the encroachment of male medical science into the formerly female-run birth process. Mr. B.’s secretive actions are typical of the behavior of men-midwives who engaged in what Philip Thicknesse called as late at
Without Pamela’s knowledge, Mr. B. assembles the personnel of the lying-in chamber, hiring a live-in female midwife (who enters the house in the guise of Mrs. Harris) as well as a male physician to attend in case of any emergencies. Lois Chaber notes the oddness of this situation and concludes that Richardson wished to reduce women’s control over the birth process by removing their authority from the decision-making process (198). Because Richardson has Pamela abdicate all responsibility for her lying-in—she refuses to speak (or even think) about it unless pressed—she becomes a silent accomplice in this shift as her husband’s covert actions are presented as necessary and just (indeed, Polly Darnford and Pamela’s mother both approve of Mr. B.’s actions).

In addition to functioning in the novel as a man-midwife, Mr. B. is also, of course, the husband to whom the contents of Pamela’s womb belong. By claiming that women in Pamela’s pregnant condition become like “incroaching Subjects” when their husbands indulge them (4:26), Mr. B. suggests that any special privileges that a pregnant woman does have are granted by her husband and are not originally her own. By dictating his wishes to his wife while she is pregnant, Mr. B. can remind Pamela of his ultimate authority over her and the contents of her womb, which he already owns despite the unborn baby’s location inside her body. Thus, Mr. B. performs an “organizing function” that separates mother and child not only when he forbids Pamela to breastfeed (Castle, *Masquerade* 156), but even before the child is born.

Richardson also works to separate mother from fetus by replacing maternal impressions with paternal impressions in the novel. The validity of maternal impression theory had, by the time of *Pamela*’s publication, been hotly debated by a number of physicians; though the theory persisted in some books of practical physic until the end of the eighteenth century, it would never

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again be as universally accepted by the medical community as it had once been. Richardson displays an awareness of maternal impression theory in his sequel to *Pamela*, but his handling of the supposed phenomenon holds fathers rather than mothers responsible for shaping the child, a move that creates a theory of paternal impressions that allows him to deny maternal impression theory while still clinging to the possibility that the father could influence the child while it is in the mother’s body. In *Pamela’s* third volume, Sir Simon Darnford grumbles in a letter to Mr. B. about his daughter Polly’s (as well as Pamela’s) impertinence. He complains that the two women have apparently forgotten that they are living impressions of their fathers:

> As if our daughters Eyes were not our own Eyes, their brazen Faces our brazen Faces; at least till we can find somebody to take them, and all the rest of the Trumpery, off of our Hands.—Saucy Baggage! who have neither Souls nor Senses, but what they have borrowed from us; and whose very Bones, and the Skin that covers them, so much their Pride and their Ornament, are so many Parts of our own undervalued Skin and Bones. (3: 128)

In claiming ownership of his daughter’s eyes, face, and skin, Sir Simon reasserts his parental rights over her (alluding, as he does, to the control he has over her marital destiny), but in this passage he also implies that his possession of Polly is warranted by her physical resemblance to him. Daughters’ eyes and faces resemble their fathers’ eyes and faces to the point of being indistinguishable, for Sir Simon does not differentiate between them and instead claims that there is an exact correspondence between his daughter’s features and his own. A daughter’s soul and senses are “borrowed” from the father, and her skin and bones are actually “Parts” of the father’s own flesh. Sir Simon’s language emphasizes the father’s role in molding his daughter’s physical traits and personality, making no mention at all of Polly’s mother’s role in shaping her
daughter’s body or mind. Furthermore, his inclusion of Mr. B. in his diatribe suggests that Mr. B. will have such shaping powers over his own female issue. Although Sir Simon is meant to be a comically grotesque and irascible character (not even Mr. B. takes him entirely seriously in his reply), Mr. B. never contradicts Sir Simon on this point—he only teases Sir Simon about his former rakish behavior. Richardson therefore allows Sir Simon’s assertion of exclusive paternal influence over his daughter’s body and mind to stand.

In the novel’s fourth volume, Lady Davers (Mr. B.’s sister) also raises the specter of maternal impression theory only to dismiss it. As Pamela’s due date draws near, Lady Davers writes to Pamela of a gift that she hopes will be useful to the expectant mother. She sends it, however,

> with a Hope annex’d, That altho’ both Sexes are thought of in it, yet that you will not put us off with a Girl: No, Child, we will not permit, may we have our Wills, that you shall think of giving us a Girl, till you have presented us with half a dozen fine Boys. For our Line is gone so low, that we expect that human Security from you in your first Seven Years, or we shall be disappointed, I can tell you that. (4: 30)

Despite the gender-neutral nature of the gift that Lady Davers has sent, she forbids Pamela to think (with “think” conspicuously italicized) of producing anything other than a boy. Lady Davers’ fear that Pamela’s thoughts will influence the sex of her fetus implies that maternal impression theory still held enough cultural currency to make her uneasy about the outcome of

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12 Because Pamela is one of the targets for Sir Simon’s derision, his comments also indirectly include her. She was the brazen daughter of her own father until Mr. B. took her “off [his] hands” (to use Sir Simon’s phraseology). Such transference of a daughter’s resemblance from her father to her husband implies that once a woman marries, she becomes an extension of her husband’s flesh, just as she had once been an extension of her father’s.
Pamela’s pregnancy should Pamela meditate on having a girl. However, the fact that Lady Davers feels that forbidding Pamela to think of having a girl is enough to ensure the birth of a boy implies that Lady Davers, as the mouthpiece of the patriarchal family (indicated by her concern for “our Line”), has ultimate control over the course that fetal impressions might take—that is, she is confident that a patriarchal impression will supersede any potential maternal impressions.

Moreover, Lady Davers not only demands that Pamela produce a son during her first pregnancy, but she also takes it upon herself to order the sexes—and even the names—of the seven children that she hopes Pamela will have (4: 30). Pamela eventually fulfills Lady Davers’ mandate almost to the letter; by the end of the novel, she has four boys and one girl, all with the names specified by Lady Davers in her earlier letter (4: 436-8). While it may once again seem that Pamela has exercised her maternal influence while pregnant in order to begin producing the requisite number of boys and girls, this is not in fact the case, since Lady Davers’ preemptive commands ultimately subordinate the maternal will to the will of the paternal family. Like the breastfeeding conversation, whose timing emphasizes a woman’s inability to exercise her will either before or after childbirth, Lady Davers’ letters to Pamela reinforce Pamela’s lack of independent agency during pregnancy. In this episode, then, Richardson redefines the pregnant woman as physically and mentally subordinate to the patriarchal family rather than as an unruly subject who can assert her own will over the fetus.

Richardson again stresses a father’s ability to impress his likeness on his child (which was first alluded to by Sir Simon in the case of daughters) after the birth of Mr. B.’s and Pamela’s son Billy. When Polly Darnford writes to Sir Simon about the newborn, she reports that Lady Davers “reads in the Child all the great Qualities she forms to herself in him” (4: 123).
Once again functioning as the spokesperson for the paternal family, Lady Davers impresses upon the child the resemblances to Mr. B. that she wishes to see in him. Polly herself concurs with Lady Davers’ opinion, however, which suggests that Lady Davers’ assessment of the baby is accurate: “‘Tis, indeed, a charming Boy, and has a great deal (if one may judge of a Child so very young) of his Father’s manly Aspect” (4: 123). Like Lady Davers, Polly sees Mr. B.’s influence in the child’s face as well as bearing (“aspect” can refer both to the physical features of one’s face as well as to one’s demeanor or attitude [OED]). Billy’s resemblance to his father reinforces and in fact complements Sir Simon Darnford’s claim about daughters—children of both sexes ultimately bear the stamp of their fathers on their bodies and minds.

*Pamela*, Part 2 denies the maternal imagination and foregrounds instead the power of paternal impressions not only to posit that Mr. B. has the power to shape his children during Pamela’s pregnancy, but also to deny that Pamela has any kind of physical connection to her fetus, a connection that would otherwise suggest that she has a subjectivity and physical integrity that is separate from her object status in the patriarchal family. The mother’s connection (or lack of connection) to her fetus was a contested issue during the early decades of the eighteenth century. By insisting upon the divisibility of mother and fetus in order to emphasize the father’s ownership of the child and the mother’s womb, Richardson’s novel supports the burgeoning new theory of maternal-fetal disconnection. Terry Castle argues that Mr. B., in refusing to allow Pamela to breastfeed, performs an organizing function that enables him to “assert the propriety of orderly separations” between mother and child (*Masquerade* 156). According to Ruth Perry, Mr. B. is also against breastfeeding because it prevents his wife from being sexually available to him (“Colonizing” 201). Mr. B. forbids breastfeeding, then, lest it prolong the period of
troublesome unity between mother and child, a unity that threatens the father’s ownership of both his wife and his child.

Perhaps the most effective technique that Richardson uses to alienate Pamela from her pregnancy and birth experience is his refusal to allow her to narrate the events of her lying-in, a refusal that indicates his desire to separate maternity and authorship. Nancy Armstrong argues of the first two volumes of *Pamela* that the struggle between Mr. B. and Pamela is ultimately over “the very terms in which political conflict will be understood and mediation accomplished”—in other words, over the writing that Pamela has produced (122). This struggle continues into the third and fourth volumes of the novel, as a number of characters in addition to Mr. B. solicit Pamela to write various kinds of texts for them. Polly Darnford and Lady Davers frequently ask Pamela to write letters to them. Lady Davers importunes Pamela to write her remarks on the theatre, opera, and the other diversions of which she partakes in London. Mr. B. asks Pamela to write her own observations on Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. However, there is a significant event about which Pamela cannot (and is not asked to) write—she cannot report on the birth of her first child (or, indeed, on the births of any of her subsequent children), so Polly Darnford must write about the experience for her.

Certainly, Polly’s brief epistolary report of the birth of Pamela’s son is a pragmatic way for Richardson to allow his characters to “write to the moment” without expecting that Pamela will record her experiences while she is in labor. Furthermore, Janet Aikins suggests that Polly’s “eloquently brief” description of Pamela’s pain (“Mrs. B. had a very sharp Time” [4: 120]) allows readers to infer the extent of Pamela’s “extreme physical trauma” (Aikins 171). However practical these considerations, I should like to point out that certain physical limitations did not prevent Pamela from recording other difficult experiences earlier in the narrative. In *Pamela*,
Part 1, Pamela writes about Mr. B.’s attempts to rape her, and, against all odds, even about her appearance while she is unconscious. While it is likely that few readers would have expected Pamela to write about the birth of her first child while she was in labor, it is certainly surprising that Richardson does not have her say anything about the experience at all.

In fact, Polly not only announces the birth of the child immediately after it occurs, but she also continues to write about the events following Pamela’s lying-in month in two additional epistles. In these letters, Polly reports that Pamela has been able to receive visits from “Tenants and Friends” (4: 121); to demand the return of the letter with the black seal (the letter she had written to Mr. B. in case she should die in childbed) (4: 123); to attend to little Billy in the nursery (4: 126); to study French and Italian with Mr. B. (4: 126-7); to attend plays and the opera and write remarks on them (4: 128); and to accompany Polly as far as Bedford (4: 126, 130). Pamela does not write one personal letter or journal entry during this period, however, which certainly extends beyond her month-long lying-in. Even Polly frets that Pamela “has so much Delight in her Nursery, that I fear it will take her off from her Pen; which will be a great Loss to all whom she used to oblige with her Correspondence” (4: 126). The first post-partum letter that Pamela writes is a report to Lady Davers of her return from Bedford, which indicates that she must have written it some time after her “late Lying-in” (4: 130) when she was well enough to travel. Thus, Richardson prevents Pamela from writing about her labor, her pains, or any other particulars of the experience.

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13 In the early days of Mr. B.’s attempted seduction of her, the harassed Pamela writes, “I just remember I got into the Room; for I knew nothing further of the Matter till afterwards; for I fell into a Fit with my Fright and Terror, and there I lay, till he, as I suppose, looking through the Keyhole, spy’d me lying all along the Floor, stretch’d out at my Length” (1: 31-2). Tassie Gwilliam points out that Pamela is somehow able to represent how she appeared to Mr. B. through the keyhole, even though she was unconscious at the time. See Tassie Gwilliam, *Samuel Richardson’s Fictions of Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 37-8.
Richardson does not allow Pamela to write or speak about the transition to motherhood that is facilitated by her experience of childbirth, but he makes her body far more eloquent on the subject. Pamela’s body first expresses her joy in being a mother when Mr. B. allows her to bring Miss Goodwin (Mr. B.’s illegitimate daughter from his affair with Sally Godfrey) into their household. Pamela writes of their conversation,

Indeed I could not find Words to express my Joy, and so was obliged to Silence in my Turn […] He saw my grateful Transport, and kindly said, Struggle not, my beloved Pamela, for Words to express Sentiments which your Eyes, and your Countenance, much more significantly express, than any Words can do. (3: 430)

Pamela’s elation at her first foray into motherhood prevents her from speaking, and Mr. B. is only too willing to encourage her silence as he insists upon his preference for her body’s natural expressions of happiness rather than any verbal declaration of joy, which are presumably less significant because of words’ artifice.

After Billy’s birth, Mr. B. again suggests that Pamela’s body communicates her happiness far more directly than the medium of speech. As Mr. B. observes Pamela and her parents with the infant in the nursery, he asks of Polly Darnford, “Do you often […] see Scenes wrought up by the Poets to this moving Height?—Here we behold and admire that noble Simplicity, in which nature always triumphs over her Hand-maid Art!” (4: 132). Although Mr. B. at first suggests that most authors are unable to render such moving scenes effectively, one must remember that Pamela is the one writing the letter that describes the nursery scene, so his detrimental comments about the inefficacy of writing such scenes apply specifically to her. Mr. B. implies that Pamela’s pen is ultimately not up to the task of representing the emotional “Height” of the nursery scene because “Nature” (presumably the power of natural feelings)
always triumphs over “Art” (that is, the artifice of literary creation). This is not the only potential meaning of Mr. B.’s claim, however. Aikins argues that “the creative power of birth” allows Richardson to “depict the human body as the most noble work of art in nature” (173). If this is the case, then Pamela’s body creates a better product than her mind (through writing) could do. Mr. B.’s assertion downplays the significance and effectiveness of Pamela’s written depiction of the nursery scene while simultaneously devaluing any of her written work in favor of the productions of her procreative body.

Pamela’s transition to motherhood thus effects the division between her identities as a mother and a writer, just as Mr. B.’s actions had already divided her from her baby before it was even born. Pamela does not stop writing after she gives birth to her son—indeed, she continues to write letters as well as poems and an educational treatise—but Richardson makes it clear that she does not liken her writing process to pregnancy, a possibility that would have suggested that a woman’s literary creation is as significant as her physical creation of children, as well as that women are authorized to write about experiences related to maternity. Richardson’s refusal to authorize Pamela’s maternal writing is further reinforced when Billy is ill with smallpox, and Pamela retires to her room to write a poem about her feelings. As she reports in the letter that introduces the poem, “the Reflections which I made, on supposing the worst, gave Birth to the following serious Lines, (for I cannot live without a Pen in my Hand) written, as by a third Person, suppose a good Minister” (4: 238). Although Pamela uses the metaphor of birth to describe her writing process, her “Reflections” are what precipitated that birth. Such language brings to mind the cerebral nature of Pamela’s poetic birth, which is more akin to the favored masculine model of writing as the production of brain children.14 Further, Pamela writes her

14 According to Raymond Stephanson’s formulation of the eighteenth-century hierarchy of birth metaphors, “[i]n the position of first importance was an immaculate patriarchal birth whose motherless, bodiless head-birthing
poem, which chides parents for fearing that their child will die, in the voice of a male authority figure (“a good Minister”, as she suggests) rather than from the point of view of a fretful mother whose child is ill. Both the male sex of the speaker and the male-gendered physiological process used to describe the poem’s composition deny the possibility that this poetic “birth” is gendered female (or, even if the poem is given birth to, it is created by the presumably male speaker.) By distancing Pamela’s maternal identity from the poem that she wrote about her own child’s illness, Richardson separates the functions of mother and author. Just as Pamela is unable to write the experience of childbirth, so too is she unable to write as a mother about her later maternal experiences, or to use the feminine metaphor of pregnancy to describe her writing process.

Pamela’s inability to write from a mother’s point of view and her subsequent recourse to a male voice for her poem suggests that, in order for her writing to be legitimate, it must issue (or at least appear to issue) from a male pen—which, in fact, Pamela itself does. Pamela’s desire to silence her own voice in order to allow a male voice to speak for her is a strangely meta-textual gesture that reminds readers of the novel’s true (male) author, because Pamela’s voice has really been a man’s voice in disguise all along. I have already argued that Richardson wrote from a woman’s point of view in order to gain female interest in and sympathy for what was ultimately a patriarchal agenda; indeed, Richardson’s didactic intentions for the novel, including his desire to guide women in their reading and interpretation of his work, suggests that he related to his readers in a paternalistic fashion.

If Richardson acted as a kind of father-figure to his readers, it can be little surprise that he also spoke about himself as a father to Pamela. In a letter to James Leake dated August 1741,

was the supreme act of male genius: instantaneous, already completely formed, springing into life out of the sheer creative will of the male mind.” See Raymond Stephanson, *The Yard of Wit* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 98.
Richardson declared that he would write the sequel to the novel himself, lest “my Plan should be Ravished out of my Hands, and, probably my Characters depreciated and debased, by those who knew nothing of the Story.” Richardson’s paternalistic language of loss and ravishment could just as easily refer to a daughter as to a book; in fact, he echoes Sir Simon Darnford who, in the third volume of Pamela, worries about arranging a proper marriage for his daughter Polly. Just as Sir Simon grumbles to Mr. B. that he fears Polly may wish to take part in her own lying-in before he has found a suitable partner for her to marry (3: 139), so too does Richardson assert a paternal prerogative over his novel and claim the right to provide a legitimate sequel for it, a sequel that would model the proper behavior for his infantilized women readers.

In his sequel to Pamela, Richardson attempted to divide the mother from her child both during and after pregnancy in order to establish patriarchal control over the processes of gestation, childbirth, and child-rearing. I close my remarks on Richardson by briefly turning to his last novel, Sir Charles Grandison (1753), because it would at first appear in this novel that Richardson had changed his position toward mothers’ connection to their children. Near the end of Grandison, Charlotte’s husband catches sight of her breastfeeding their infant in the nursery and is lavish in his praises of her physical expression of maternity—an opinion quite different from Mr. B.’s horror at the thought of his wife’s lowering herself to such a menial task. Critics have argued that Richardson himself had always been in favor of breastfeeding, despite the fact that, in Pamela, Part 2, he chose to celebrate Pamela’s obedience to her husband by not allowing

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16 One of the objections to Pamela’s breastfeeding that Mr. B. expresses is that (as he remarks), “I shan’t care, when I want to hear my Pamela read her French and Latin Lessons […] to seek my Beloved in the Nursery; or to permit her to be ingross’d by those Baby Offices, which will better befit weaker Minds” (4: 14). According to Toni Bowers, “motherhood is the lowest form of physical labor” for Richardson, and in Pamela, Part 2, it is “actually bestial” (223).
her to breastfeed. Setting aside for a moment the moral reasons that Perry outlines (“Colonizing” 226) and the compelling medical explanations that Chaber identifies (204-6), I would like to argue that a much more basic issue underpins Richardson’s support of breastfeeding. While breastfeeding facilitates the necessary bond between mother and child that induces women to become “ardent mothers” (to echo Perry’s phrase [“Colonizing” 201]), on the other hand, because the infant is outside of the womb and a visible and discrete entity, the father is able to dictate whether the mother and child are together or apart. Far from celebrating the intimate connection between mother and child in Sir Charles Grandison, Richardson continues to maintain the mother’s alienation from her child, both before and after birth, an alienation that is necessary in order to reassure men of their ultimate control over the female body and its products.

When Charlotte (formerly Grandison, but Lady G. since her marriage) becomes pregnant, her alienation from her child begins, like Pamela’s, before she gives birth. First and foremost, she is unhappy about her pregnancy—and very vocal about it. Charlotte speaks out in “aggressive rebellion against female suffering and a cynical critique of women’s prescribed conjugal role” (Chaber 232). Most memorably, she remarks in a letter to her female friends that wives are like sacrificial animals, and she closes the letter by complaining: “And to this is your Charlotte reduced! Aunt Selby, Lucy, come early, that I may shew you my baby-things! O dear! and that you may be able to testify that I had no design to overlay the little Marmouset” (3: 358). Critics who have discussed this passage usually focus on the specter of infanticide that Charlotte’s comments raise, an action that is “the logical culmination of the rebellion against maternity that the prenatal Charlotte (verbally) engages in” (Chaber 234). 17 Whatever the degree

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17 According to English law, gathering linens in preparation for childbirth was compelling evidence in infant murder investigations that a woman had not intended to commit infanticide. See Lisa Zunshine, “The Gender
of seriousness with which Charlotte jokes about infanticide in this passage, her comments suggest that, in the event of the baby’s death, she would be more concerned about her own safety (hence her collection of witnesses) than her child’s. In a veiled way, then, Charlotte pits her own well-being against that of her fetus. Furthermore, it would appear that Charlotte has a difficult time acknowledging that her fetus is even a nascent human. In this passage, she calls it a “Marmouset,” which is a species of monkey. Though it can also be used as a term of endearment (and Charlotte does in fact apply the term to her daughter in a more affectionate manner after she is born), her prenatal usage of the word underscores the strangeness of the fetus, which does not even seem to her to be of her species.

Charlotte’s transformation into a loving mother is completed only after she gives birth to and breastfeeds her daughter. While breastfeeding would seem to unify mother and baby in Sir Charles Grandison in a way that Pamela was not ready to accept (disturbing, as nursing does, the “propriety of orderly separations” that Mr. B. was anxious to maintain [Castle, Masquerade 156]), I would argue that mother and baby are not really unified in the Grandison breastfeeding passage either because their bodies are discrete entities that can be separated at any time by the child’s father. When Lord G. bursts in upon his nursing wife, she is horrified at his breech of her privacy. Lord G. forces her to continue feeding the infant, however, and he constantly manipulates the positions of both mother and child in this scene. As Charlotte reports,

He threw himself at my feet, clasping me and the little varlet together in his arms.

[...] Let me, let me, let me (every emphatic word repeated three times at least)

Dynamics of the Infanticide Prevention Campaign in Eighteenth-Century England and Richardson’s History of Sir Charles Grandison,” Writing British Infanticide, ed. Jennifer Thorn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 160. Charlotte’s request that her female relatives “testify” on her behalf that she had no design to “overlay” (that is, smother) her infant nevertheless raises the specter of infanticide, even as she tries to argue that the procuring of linens testifies against such a possibility.
behold again the dear sight. Let me see you clasp the precious gift [...] to that lovely bosom. The wretch (trembling however) pulled aside my handkerchief. I try’d to scold; but was forced to press the little thing to me, to supply the place of the handkerchief. [...] He arose, took the little thing from me, kissed its forehead, its cheeks, its lips, its little pudsey hands, first one, then the other; gave it again to my arms; took it again; and again resigned it to me. Take away the pug, said I, to the attendants—Take it away, while any of it is left. (3: 403)

In this scene, Lord G. both unites and separates mother and child at his pleasure. Not only does he first clasp them together in his arm and uncover Charlotte’s breast to compel her to continue feeding their daughter, but he then takes the child away from her on two different occasions to dote on her himself. Seemingly uncomfortable with the situation, Charlotte finally feels obliged to send the child away with her servants. Though this scene celebrates a husband and wife whose relationship is finally “cemented” by their baby (3: 404), it also demonstrates that Lord G. has ultimate control over whether his wife and child are to be united or separated at any given moment. Moreover, breastfeeding in this novel must ultimately be sanctioned by Charlotte’s husband in order for her to continue with it. For these reasons, I disagree with Perry’s claim that it is breastfeeding, rather than the husband, that “brings the lively woman to heel” (“Colonizing” 204). Rather, Richardson (via Sir Charles) maintains the “orderly separations” between mother and child that consolidate patriarchal power even as he appears to celebrate their natural indivisibility.18

18 Richardson’s stance on fathers’ management of women’s breastfeeding and childcare in Sir Charles Grandison is consistent with the dictates of William Cadogan’s 1748 pamphlet on nursing, which urges fathers “to have his Child nursed under his own Eye, to make use of his own Reason and Sense in superintending and directing the Management of it.” See William Cadogan, An Essay upon Nursing, and the Management of Children, from their Birth to Three Years of Age (London: J. Roberts, 1748), 24. It is important to note, however, that Cadogan’s insistence that men play a more prominent role in the day-to-day management of their families did not mean that he was advocating for shared domestic tasks between men and women in the home or for equality between husband
III

The sentimental, domestic novel was not the only type of fiction that explored pregnancy in the middle years of the eighteenth century. Comic, satiric novels also portray pregnancy, often more conspicuously than domestic novels, because they can poke bawdy fun at the parturient body in ways that more serious, moralizing novels avoid.¹⁹ The frequently “raucous eighteenth-century comic figures of pregnancy” are perhaps more embodied and thereby more visible than their sentimental counterparts (Malone 370), but they are not as disruptive to their narratives (and the status quo) as they at first appear to be; in fact, they are no less constrained and silenced by their pregnant circumstances than characters like Pamela and Charlotte are.

In this section, I discuss Tobias Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), two mid-century novels in which pregnant characters are represented as both utterly ridiculous and powerless.²⁰ Despite their surface appearance of manipulative control, the pregnant characters in these novels are devoid of any real agency. Though different kinds of comic novels from one another (*Peregrine Pickle* is written in a picaresque style, while *Tristram Shandy* is a more experimental novel that satirizes learned wit and wife. As Ludmilla Jordanova explains, Cadogan “never suggested that men should take over the daily care of children” because “it was not that female functions had been abolished and co-opted, but that a hierarchy had been established where women acted under the supervision of men.” See Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 31. Pamphlets like Cadogan’s, which place demands on the husband to play a supervisory role in the household, further undermine Perry’s claim that Charlotte G. was brought “to heel” not by her husband, but by breastfeeding.

¹⁹ Though Pamela’s pregnant body is, according to Castle, an embodiment of carnivalesque confusion and thus the subject of humor (*Masquerade* 157-61), Pamela’s disapproval of the masquerade make a light-hearted interpretation of this episode difficult.

²⁰ Dolores Peters argues that Smollett’s Mrs. Pickle and Sterne’s Mrs. Shandy were satiric portraits meant to ridicule demanding pregnant women: “[t]he figure of the ‘imperious woman,’ with its corollary of ulterior motives, is put to great comic effect by [Smollett and Sterne] in their portraits of pregnant women” (441).
as well as a host of people, institutions, and beliefs), both can be classified as “anti-romance” or “comic romance” novels. Despite their puncturing of romantic ideals and undoing of certain novelistic conventions, these novels do not, in the end, express anything different about pregnancy from novels in the more serious, domestic tradition. While *Peregrine Pickle* pokes fun at the absurdity of maternal impressions and punishes women for speaking publically about pregnancy, *Tristram Shandy*, like *Pamela*, Part 2, posits a theory of paternal impressions that leaves mothers with little to no control over the processes of conception and gestation. Sterne’s novel, like Smollett’s and Richardson’s, prevents women from speaking about pregnancy; unsurprisingly, Sterne himself identifies as a mother when he wishes to discuss a literary failure.

Pregnancy in Smollett’s *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* would seem, at least superficially, to empower women. The two characters who profess to be pregnant in the novel—Mrs. Pickle in actuality, and Mrs. Trunnion (formerly Mrs. Grizzle) in fantasy—take advantage of their conditions by making strange requests, buying expensive items, and generally issuing orders that their family members are afraid to refuse. Mrs. Pickle, for instance, sends her sister-in-law, Mrs. Grizzle, on errands to procure items as various as pineapples, a fricassee of frogs, her neighbor’s chamber pot, and even three black hairs from Commodore Trunnion’s beard (hairs that Mrs. Pickle insists on plucking herself). Mrs. Grizzle, terrified lest Mrs. Pickle’s unsatisfied longings create a malformed child, is assiduous in her attempts to please her sister-in-law. When Mrs. Grizzle (Mrs. Trunnion after her marriage to the commodore) suspects she is pregnant shortly after her marriage, she behaves in a similarly ostentatious manner, knowing that “this was the proper season for vindicating her own sovereignty” (47). Much to Commodore

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Trunnion’s helpless chagrin, she buys furniture, a coach, horses, and livery, as well as “the most expensive preparations for her lying-in” (48). In order to satisfy their own selfish desires, both Mrs. Pickle and Mrs. Trunnion knowingly exploit the still fairly commonplace folk (if no longer medical) belief that balking a pregnant woman’s longings would make her produce a physically monstrous child. Indeed, Smollett’s pregnant characters in *Peregrine Pickle* represent the extreme lengths to which men like Mr. B. (and Richardson) feared that pregnant women would go if they were indulged too much by their husbands.

While Mrs. Pickle’s and Mrs. Trunnion’s actions seem to suggest that pregnant women wield a formidable amount of influence, I argue that because their exploitation of their circumstances is intentional, it actually undermines their maternal power in the novel. Smollett slyly suggests that the extent of pregnant women’s power may very well lie in their ability to frighten others into doing their bidding, without having any real power to influence their unborn children through the strength of their desires. Indeed, several critics have argued that it is unlikely that Smollett believed in maternal impression theory. G. S. Rousseau, who first explored the issue, argues that Smollett’s exploration of the pregnant woman’s imagination was inspired by William Smellie’s skeptical treatment of the supposed phenomenon in his *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* (1751), which Smollett had edited and annotated during the year he composed *Peregrine Pickle*.\(^{23}\) (82). Rousseau argues that Mrs. Pickle’s craving for pineapples (a rare fruit that her overly-assiduous sister-in-law Mrs. Grizzle goes to great lengths to procure, lest Mrs. Pickle imprint the image of a pineapple on her unborn child) was an extended joke at the expense of the increasingly-questionable theory of maternal impressions, a theory that Smollett himself quite likely ridiculed (93, 108). Dennis Todd concurs that Smollett

must have found the doctrine of maternal impressions absurd because the pineapple episode “explodes what he takes to be [maternal impression theory’s] ludicrous conflation of religion and physiology.” If Smollett means to satirize maternal impression theory, then the behavior of his pregnant characters must also be viewed as reprehensible and ridiculous and worthy of satire. Smollett further undermines the strength of maternal desire when his omniscient narrator wryly remarks that, after Mr. Pickle lost a considerable sum of money due to one of Mrs. Pickle’s whims, Mrs. Pickle was “alarmed” at her husband’s anger and “for the future kept her fancy within bounds” (27). The narrator implies that Mrs. Pickle had it in her power all along to keep her desires in check, because maternal longings (and their adverse consequences if thwarted) do not actually exist.

The first ten chapters of the novel suggest that women use their pregnancies as an excuse to exercise their will; however, these chapters also imply that, because pregnant women lack any real power to affect their children, they are actually deluded and weak. Although both Mrs. Pickle and Mrs. Trunnion get away with making exacting demands on their friends and family members, Smollett makes a point of pulling the rug out from under each of them—albeit in different ways—in order to emphasize the pregnant woman’s true lack of agency. In Mrs. Pickle’s case, Smollett builds into her request for pineapples—which is, on the surface, simply a humorous story that pokes fun at maternal impression theory—another, more desperate grasp at agency, an attempt in which she eventually fails. R. G. Collins argues that, far from being a mere joke, “the pineapple quest initiated by Mrs. Pickle is a purposeful one, suggesting either an active or a subconscious desire to terminate her pregnancy” (96), which he goes on to suggest is in all

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likelihood an illegitimate one (99-102). If Mrs. Pickle indeed tries to terminate her pregnancy by eating pineapples, she is ultimately unsuccessful, as she eventually bears a “fine boy” (27) who is healthy enough to survive her subsequent attempts to weaken, if not kill, him by plunging him head-first into cold water every day (28-9). Successful in the short term by manipulating her sister-in-law into procuring pineapples for her, Mrs. Pickle is thwarted in the end by not being able to assert control over her own fertility, which may very well have been the larger issue at stake in her request.

Smollett also frustrates Mrs. Trunnion’s hopes for her pregnancy by denying her a real pregnancy altogether, thus making it clear that if women cannot be trusted to interpret the signs and symptoms of their own bodies, they should not speak publically about their reproductive processes. After four months of marriage, Mrs. Trunnion “was seized with frequent qualms and reachings, her breasts began to harden, and her stomach to be remarkably prominent: in a word, she congratulated herself on the symptoms of her own fertility” (47). The passage in which Mrs. Trunnion connects her physical symptoms to pregnancy is immediately followed by passages in which she speaks about her situation—she “congratulated” herself, and she communicates the information to her husband, who “was transported with joy, at the prospect of an heir of his own begetting” (47). Mrs. Trunnion speaks even more publically about her condition as her pregnancy advances:

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25 R. G. Collins, “The Hidden Bastard: A Question of Illegitimacy in Smollett’s Peregrine Pickle,” in PMLA 94.1 (1979), 96, 99-102. G. S. Rousseau was the first to comment on the pineapple’s supposed abortifacient qualities (which were well known thanks to medical texts like Culpepper’s Directory for Midwives) in relation to the novel. Rousseau quickly dispels the specter of a potential miscarriage for Mrs. Pickle, however, by arguing that Smollett was merely “using medical and scientific learning” concerning both maternal impression theory and pineapples “for pure levity and genial farce” (108). Collins, on the other hand, interprets Mrs. Pickle’s consumption of pineapples as a far more serious attempt to induce a miscarriage.

26 Collins argues of the cold baths that “Mrs. Pickle, having failed in a miscarriage, employs a different tactic toward a similar objective” (97).
In all her visits and parties she seized every opportunity of declaring her present condition, observing that she was forbid by her physicians to taste such a pickle, and that such a dish was poison to a woman in her way: nay, where she was on a footing of familiarity, she affected to make wry faces, and complained that the young rogue began to be very unruly, writhing herself into divers contortions, as if she had been grievously incommode by the mettle of this future Trunnion. (48)

It is apparent from this passage that Mrs. Trunnion spreads her news far and wide, to close friends as well as to less intimate acquaintances. With her closer friends, she even goes so far as to speak about the physical sensations associated with pregnancy (specifically, she discusses the discomfort that the movements of the fetus cause her). As we soon discover, however, it is her public discussions of her pregnancy that will prove to be her undoing.

When Mrs. Trunnion finally reaches what she believes to be the final stage of her pregnancy, she is awakened in the middle of the night “by certain warnings that seemed to bespeak the approach of the critical moment” (49). Mr. Trunnion gathers the midwife and gossips together, “but the symptoms of labour gradually vanished, and, as the matrons sagely observed, this was no more than a false alarm” (49). Mrs. Trunnion is subsequently seized by three additional false alarms in the course of the ensuing week, but she never goes into real labor. Furthermore, after the fourth episode, her stomach shrinks noticeably. At the request of the midwife and gossips, Mr. Trunnion consults a male practitioner, “who boldly affirmed that the patient had never been with child” (50), a second opinion that Mr. Trunnion, Mrs. Trunnion, and the midwife refuse to accept. They keep the midwife in attendance for three additional weeks, until it is all too obvious that Mrs. Trunnion is not pregnant; by this time, however, she and her husband had become “the standing joke of the parish” (50). Mrs. Trunnion’s phantom pregnancy
leads to a degree of public humiliation that causes her to withdraw from company for three months (51), which suggests that Smollett is punishing her for having spoken so publicly and confidently about her pregnancy in the first place.

Smollett also uses Mrs. Trunnion’s situation as an opportunity to criticize the incompetence of female midwives, who he feels are no better qualified to speak about pregnancy and birth than the pregnant woman herself. The narrator ironically refers to Mrs. Trunnion’s midwife as an “experienced proficient in the obstetric art,” a label that is clearly contradicted by her “insinuations” that “she had been concerned in many a case of the same nature, where a fine child was found, even after all signs of the mother’s pregnancy had disappeared” (50). Smollett’s point, of course, is that the midwife is anything but an “experienced proficient” if she cannot tell the difference between a real and a false pregnancy.

The male surgeon who is summoned, however, is quickly able to ascertain the real state of affairs, a narrative strategy that confirms Smollett’s own preference for men in the practice of midwifery as well as in the business of writing midwifery manuals. Indeed, nine years after the publication of *Peregrine Pickle*, Smollett would write a scathing review of the midwife Elizabeth Nihell’s *Treatise on the Art of Midwifery* (1760) in the *Critical Review.* Nihell’s treatise attacks men-midwives (and Smollett’s friend William Smellie, in particular) for their questionable morals, lack of compassion, and dependence on obstetric instruments; in his review, Smollett in turn calls Nihell’s own credibility into question, claiming that “one would be tempted to believe the book written by some person broke loose from Bedlam.” Throughout his review, Smollett continually casts doubt on Nihell’s authorship of the *Treatise*, asking with scorn, “Would a grave

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27 The review is unsigned, but it has since been attributed to Smollett. See Pam Lieske, Introduction to review of Nihell’s treatise, *Eighteenth-Century British Midwifery*, vol. 6 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), 505.

matron have thrown out such a ludicrous hint of gross obscenity?” and exclaiming “Fie, for shame! a woman, that is a sober woman, could never have talked in this manner” (509). Near the end of the review, he even suggests that the Treatise might have been inspired by “the crude notions of some conceited novice, who shelters himself under her name” (517). Smollett’s comments on the text’s authorship all converge on one premise—that because proper women (identifiable in the “grave matron” and “sober woman”) would never speak publicly about pregnancy in the first place, Nihell is either a lunatic or an incompetent male practitioner writing under a pseudonym (or perhaps both). Smollett’s denunciation of Nihell goes far beyond his difference of opinion with her on the best way to practice midwifery—he personally attacks her (just as he humiliates his fictional character Mrs. Trunnion) for speaking publicly, as a woman, about pregnancy and childbirth.

In Peregrine Pickle, pregnant women are ridiculed for taking advantage of their pregnancies (over which they have no real control), and, in Mrs. Trunnion’s case, for speaking publically about gestation. Pregnant women are similarly helpless in Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. It is hardly surprising that much critical ink has been spilled over the issue of parturition in Tristram Shandy, as birth is the novel’s central event as well as most prominent motif. Tristram’s birth is “the most protracted birth in literature,”29 and the manner of that long and arduous delivery shapes not only Tristram’s body and mind, but also the narrative of his life that he is writing (which is, of course, the first-person narrative of the novel itself). Critics who have approached the novel from an obstetric angle focus on many of the same issues. While some have tried to identify the historical analogues for Dr. Slop, the less-than-skilled man-midwife who delivers Tristram (but not before crushing his nose with his

forceps),

30 others have tried to determine Sterne’s own sympathies in the man-midwife debates that had been raging for over half a century by the time he began writing the novel (with most recent critics agreeing that the male *accoucheur* was much more the object of Sterne’s satire and contempt than the female midwife). 31 Still others have debated whether Tristram holds his mother or father more accountable for the unfortunate circumstances of his conception, or if Tristram is really his father’s biological son at all. 32 Because Sterne figures Tristram’s composition of his life story as a literary birth, critics have also commented at length on how maternity does (or does not) inform Tristram’s (or Sterne’s) discussions of his writing process. 33

While Sterne’s novel is different from Smollett’s (and Richardson’s) in that he seems to be acutely aware of and sympathetic to the problems that pregnant women and female midwives

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30 Arthur H. Cash maintains that Dr. Burton is the model for Dr. Slop (198), but later critics have pointed out that Dr. Slop is a parody of man-midwifery in general. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean argue that “Slop’s character contains too many differing clues to be a simple allusion to anybody.” Bonnie Blackwell agrees, arguing that Dr. Slop is a satirical embodiment of the entire profession of men-midwives. See Arthur H. Cash, “The birth of *Tristram Shandy*: Sterne and Dr. Burton,” *Sexuality in eighteenth-century Britain*, ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Manchester: Manchester University Press; Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1982), 198; Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, “Of Forceps, Patents, and Paternity: *Tristram Shandy,*” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23.4 (1990), 537; and Bonnie Blackwell, “*Tristram Shandy* and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother,” *ELH* 68.1 (2001), 115-6.

31 For examples of critics who have argued that *Tristram Shandy* tells a story of obstetric progress as male midwives took the profession over from incompetent male midwives, see Cash, “The birth of Tristram Shandy,” 198, 207, 218 and Robert A. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in the Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne)* (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 228-9. More recently, however, critics have argued that Sterne’s critique of Dr. Slop is not just a critique of one bungling practitioner, but rather a critique of the entire profession of man-midwifery. See Blackwell, “Tristram Shandy,” 115-6; Wonkyung Yang, “Childbirth and Female Midwifery in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy,*” *English Language and Literature* 44.4 (1998), 800; and Landry and MacLean, “Of Forceps,” 535.


33 I review the literature on this issue in footnotes 42 and 43 in this chapter.
faced during the mid-eighteenth century, his narrative techniques are nevertheless complicit in silencing and marginalizing the women with whom he sympathizes. Even in the episodes during which he seems to be allied most closely with women, when it comes to discourse about pregnancy and childbirth, he refuses to allow them to defend themselves in any other than stereotypically feminine—that is, silent and passive—ways. While Sterne might simply have been reflecting women’s social circumstances at his historical moment, his novel does not suggest any different possibilities for women. I argue that Sterne denies the influence of the maternal imagination by substituting for it a theory of paternal impressions; silences the pregnant Elizabeth Shandy on two significant occasions related to the circumstances of her lying-in; and uses—only to reject—pregnancy as a productive metaphor for his (as well as Tristram’s) composition of the novel.

Tristram famously describes his own conception in the first volume of Tristram Shandy using the language of animalculist preformation theory, which foregrounds the father’s role in conception at the expense of the mother’s. According to the doctrine of preformation, “no being is created through the interaction of male and female parts; rather, the beings are always in some sense already there, virtually embedded in a single parent’s germ.” Ovist preformation theory held that the miniature person who existed even before conception was originally housed in the woman’s ovum, while animalculist theory claimed the same, but for the man’s sperm instead (Keller 139). It is clear from Tristram’s description that the “Homunculus,” or nascent being, is just such a miniature person, as he is “circumscribed with rights” and

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consists, as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilege, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;—
is a Being of as much activity,—and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England. (1.2.6-7)

Furthermore, this miniature man clearly originates in the father’s body, as the father’s “animal spirits” were supposed “to have escorted and gone hand-in-hand with the HOMUNCULUS, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception” (1.2.6). From the very beginning of the novel, then, Tristram wishes to assert that he sprang, already fully-formed, from his father’s loins, even though his mother’s untimely question prevents his miniature self from arriving at his destination in an unruffled state. Sterne posits the primacy of paternal influence on the fetus (which is similar to the theory of paternal-fetal impressions that Richardson presents in Pamela, Part 2) that entirely displaces any suggestion of maternal impression theory.  

The critics who have discussed the animalculist theory underpinning Tristram’s birth agree that Tristram’s father, Walter Shandy, adheres to this belief, but they disagree about whether Tristram and Sterne also align themselves with such a male-centered account of conception. Louis Landa was the first critic to identify Walter’s views as animalculist, but more recently, critics have assumed that, whether or not Tristram agrees with Walter’s animalculist view of conception, Sterne’s opinions on the subject could not possibly have been consonant

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36 According to Louis Landa, if maternal impression theory “had been valid, Tristram might well have been born with the image of a clock clearly defined on his body” (49). Although Landa is quick to link maternal impression theory to Mrs. Shandy’s ill-timed question about the clock at the beginning of the novel, there is no textual evidence in the novel itself that suggests Sterne was thinking about the danger of Mrs. Shandy’s mental impressions on the embryological Tristram. Indeed, the problem is with Walter Shandy’s mind, whose distraction resulted in the dispersal of his animal spirits. Tristram thus gives Mrs. Shandy, as J. Paul Hunter asserts, “no credit,” or only “negative credit” for the circumstances of his birth (“Clocks” 177-8).
with such a misogynistic theory.\textsuperscript{37} I should like to suggest, however, that arguments in favor of Sterne’s supposed ovism (both in the conception of children and the conception of his novel) overstate the importance of his mention of Mrs. Shandy at the moment of Tristram’s conception. McMaster argues that mutuality is implied by Tristram’s claim that both of his parents were “in duty both equally bound” (1.1.5) to attend more closely to the circumstances of his conception, as “this surely argues for equal responsibility between the sexes in the act of procreation” (McMaster 202). There is, however, nothing in the opening sentence of the novel, nor in the phrase “in duty both equally bound” (1.1.5), that suggests Mrs. Shandy’s ovum is actually the source of the homunculus (a necessary precondition for ovist preformationism). While this phrase might gesture toward an epigenetic or metamorphic theory of conception (because such theories assume that the father’s and mother’s seeds are both necessary for the conception and development of the fetus), the animalculist discussion that follows it clearly indicates that this is not what Tristram has in mind. The problem that arises during Tristram’s conception is not that Mrs. Shandy did not provide her share of the seed or energy that is necessary for a successful conception; rather, the problem is that her “unseasonable question” distracted Mr. Shandy, whose animal spirits were thus scattered and rendered unable to accompany the homunculus on his perilous journey from the male body to the female womb, “the place destined for his reception” (1.2.6). In other words, the task that Mrs. Shandy failed to perform during procreative sexual intercourse was remaining silent. What Tristram believes are the ideal conditions for conception (male activity and female passivity and silence) may require what McMaster calls “equal responsibility,” but these conditions do not imply equality between the sexes.

Of course, even if Tristram shares his father’s misogynist, animalculist attitudes toward conception, one may still object that Sterne is merely satirizing, not agreeing with, theories of conception that require the active agency of the father and the silent passivity of the mother. Indeed, later in the novel when Sterne satirizes the notion that “the mother is not of kin to her child” (4.29.295), it would appear that he wishes to dismiss as absurd the “learned” men who refuse to acknowledge women’s kinship with their children. While it is possible—even likely—that Sterne wished to distance himself from these misogynist, animalculist attitudes, his novel nevertheless silences women in matters related to procreation. I contend that Tristram’s anger at his mother’s speech at the critical moment of his conception is not an isolated, aberrant instance of his desire to silence her. Further explorations of Sterne’s representations of pregnancy and childbirth in the novel (and in the novel’s creation) reveal that his views become more and more closely aligned with Tristram’s on the issue of women’s silence, even as he attempted, superficially, to side with women. As Elizabeth Harries points out, it may ultimately not be possible “to disentangle Sterne’s ideas about women from Tristram’s.”

Due to the well-known terms of her marriage contract, the pregnant Elizabeth Shandy is forced to lie-in at Shandy Hall rather than in London. Her husband, Walter, far from attempting to soften this blow by giving into his wife’s wishes in other matters concerning the upcoming

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38 During the course of Walter’s conversation with a group of learned men about whether or not Tristram’s name could be changed after his baptism, Kysarcius declares that “the best lawyers and civilians in this land” have determined that “the mother is not of kin to her child” (4.29.294-5). He then cites a legal case concerning the Duchess of Suffolk, who was not permitted to inherit her dead son’s property because the courts declared that “the mother was not of kin to her child” (4.29.296). Because Uncle Toby is frequently the moral center of the novel, his objection to this legal argument (he dismisses what “the learned” say and insists that “there must certainly [...] have been some sort of consanguinity betwixt the duchess of Suffolk and her son” [4.30.297]) necessarily encourages readers to interpret Kysarcius’ claim as ridiculous.

birth, instead fights (much like Mr. B.) to control the rest of the circumstances of her lying-in as well. As Tristram reports,

my father was for having the man-midwife by all means,---my mother by no means. My father begg’d and intreated, she would for once recede from her prerogative in this matter, and suffer him to choose for her;—my mother, on the contrary, insisted upon her privilege in this matter, to choose for herself,—and have no mortal’s help but the old woman’s.—What could my father do? He was almost at his wit’s end;—talked it over with her in all moods;—placed his arguments in all lights;—argued the matter with her like a christian,—like a heathen,—like a husband,—like a father,—like a patriot,—like a man:—My mother answered every thing only like a woman; which was a little hard upon her;—for as she could not assume and fight it out behind such a variety of character,—‘twas no fair match;—‘twas seven to one.—What could my mother do?------She had the advantage […] of a small reinforcement of chagrine [sic] personal at the bottom which bore her up, and enabled her to dispute the affair with my father with so equal an advantage,---that both sides sung Te Deum. In a word, my mother was to have the old woman,—and the operator was to have licence [sic] to drink a bottle of wine with my father and my uncle Toby Shandy in the back parlour,—for which he was to be paid five guineas. (1.18.45).

Feminist critics of the novel have read this compromise between Mr. and Mrs. Shandy as a great obstetric victory for Mrs. Shandy, who successfully advocates for her wishes despite her
husband’s coercive measures against her.\textsuperscript{40} Such readings attempt to establish Mrs. Shandy’s power over reproductive and household matters despite her frequent disparagement by Walter and Tristram throughout the novel. I contend, however, that the passage from the novel cited above exemplifies Mrs. Shandy’s recurring lack of narrative power when it comes to speaking about the conditions of gestation and childbirth. In the episode concerning the selection of a midwife (as well as in the conversation in which Mr. Shandy broaches the subject of Caesarian section, which I will discuss below), Sterne silences Mrs. Shandy and distances her from discourse about pregnancy and thus from control over the processes of gestation and childbirth. Most obviously, Tristram’s remark that his father was able to argue the midwifery matter from numerous points of view while his mother could only argue “like a woman” reminds readers that Mr. Shandy’s access to formal education gives him an intellectual and rhetorical advantage over his wife, whose only resource is the “chagrine […] that bore her up.” Although Sterne claims that Mrs. Shandy argues her case “with so equal an advantage” that she forces Mr. Shandy to a compromise, later events will indicate that this compromise is not a victory for her after all, as Dr. Slop and his forceps eventually deliver her child. Even as Sterne attempts to show a woman’s victory over her husband, the best she can achieve is a compromise that amounts to a loss in the end.

What is even more troubling in this episode, however, is that in a passage purporting to champion Mrs. Shandy’s matching of wits with her husband, Tristram never directly quotes any of her words. In “Mrs. Shandy Observed,” Ruth Marie Faurot explains that the novel presents Mrs. Shandy to the reader at three different narrative levels. On the first two levels, Mrs. Shandy appears “as actor in company,” either with or without Tristram’s mediating commentary on her

\textsuperscript{40} See Ruth Marie Faurot, “Mrs. Shandy Observed,” \textit{Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900} 10.3 (1970), 586 and McMaster, “Walter Shandy,” 200-1. Although Ehlers does not examine this particular passage, she makes a case for Mrs. Shandy’s “restorative powers” and necessary maternal role in the Shandy household (66).
behavior; the third level of Mrs. Shandy’s representation is when “Tristram as narrator reports facts about her remembered from Uncle Toby’s accounts, or stated about her from that omniscient point of view that merges with what purports to be Tristram’s memorial reconstruction” (Faurot 580). It is essential to note that all of the conversations between Mr. and Mrs. Shandy on the issues of birth and midwives occur on the third level of representation that Faurot identifies, through the filter of Tristram’s at times omniscient narration, a distancing device that prevents Mrs. Shandy from ever commenting directly on the conditions of her pregnancy. While the indirect speech from the beginning of the passage ("my mother, on the contrary, insisted upon her privilege in this matter, to choose for herself,—and have no mortal’s help but the old woman’s") suggests that these are some of the very phrases that Mrs. Shandy might have used in her arguments, it is significant that Sterne places no quotation marks around those words and phrases, thereby keeping Tristram’s narration in the third person. The result of these narrative techniques is that Tristram’s voice, not Mrs. Shandy’s, is the voice that emerges in the passage. Tristram quotes Mrs. Shandy’s exact words at other points in the narrative (most notably at the end of the first chapter when she inquires about the clock), so his refusal to do so here is all the more striking. Furthermore, even though Tristram does not directly quote Mr. Shandy’s voice in this passage either, he gives him much more forceful (and more numerous) signal words to describe his speech ("begg’d," “intreated,” “talked,” and “argued,” as opposed to Mrs. Shandy’s “insisted” and “answered”).

Tristram refuses to allow his mother’s voice to be heard at another crucial moment involving childbirth in the narrative—when Walter Shandy broaches the possibility of a Caesarian section for his wife. Walter is worried about the intense pressure ("470 pounds" [2.19.133] according to his source’s questionable calculations) that would supposedly be exerted
on the fetus’s cranium during a vaginal birth, so he casually suggests to Elizabeth, “merely as a matter of fact,” that “the belly of the mother might be opened extremely well to give a passage to the child […] but seeing her turn as pale as ashes at the very mention of it, as much as the operation flattered his hopes,—he thought of it as well to say no more of it” (2.19.135). As critics have noted, a Caesarian operation at this historical moment would have been excruciatingly painful and almost certainly fatal for the mother, so Mrs. Shandy’s horrified reaction to her husband’s proposal is justified.41 While this scene suggests that, as Bonnie Blackwell maintains, “the novel is in sympathy with its nearly silent, central object, Elizabeth Shandy” (Blackwell, “Tristram” 114), I disagree with Blackwell that Mrs. Shandy is the “central” figure in it. In this passage, Tristram does not allow Mrs. Shandy to speak her mind aloud; like Pamela, her body conveys her thoughts more eloquently than speech (in this case, when her face turns ashen at the mention of the operation). Since gestation and childbirth are issues that men discuss at length, and the novel privileges wit and verbal play, Elizabeth Shandy’s silence inevitably de-centers her.

Perhaps most troubling, however, is that, like the other male authors examined in this chapter, Sterne does not actually allow his readers into the birth room, in effect “shuttling” his pregnant character “offstage, leaving her silent about the nature of her symptoms” (Blackwell, “Tristram” 114). Mrs. Shandy’s silence is most conspicuous in the protracted birthing sequence, which tells us more about what Walter and Toby are doing in the study than about what is happening to the laboring mother in the lying-in chamber. Aside from one groan that the male characters hear downstairs (3.10.151), Mrs. Shandy is, narratively speaking, completely silent during and absent from descriptions of Tristram’s birth. The events of the labor—from the

midwife’s inability to deliver Mrs. Shandy’s baby to Dr. Slop’s intervention in the birth and his subsequent crushing of Tristram’s nose with the forceps—are communicated to Walter and Toby by Susannah, Mrs. Shandy’s maid. While Tristram’s almost complete refusal to represent his mother in the narrative is perhaps his way of punishing her for speaking at the moment of his conception (Hunter, “Clocks” 177), I would argue that Tristram makes Mrs. Shandy least vocal during her pregnancy and lying-in, since he does allow her to speak at other moments later in the novel. Even if Tristram’s grudges are supposed to be laughable, Sterne still pokes fun at Tristram at Mrs. Shandy’s expense. It would appear that, at least as far as parturition is concerned, it may not be possible to differentiate between Tristram and Sterne.

Of course, to discuss only the literal childbirth that occurs in *Tristram Shandy* is to examine only half of the novel’s handling of parturition. As numerous critics have pointed out, sexuality and birth are significant metaphors for Tristram’s—and Sterne’s—writing process. Readings of the metaphors for writing in the novel tend to diverge into explorations of either male impotence or female fecundity. Critics who have read Sterne’s/Tristram’s composition of the novel through the lens of male impotence have focused on the non-procreative aspects of Tristram’s masculine sexuality. More frequently, critics have explored how the metaphor of maternity, rather than male impotence, informs the novel’s structure. However, critics who have argued that the novel takes the parturient female body as the informing metaphor for the

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novel’s structure have granted too much credence to Tristram’s claim that he begins his narrative “ab Ovo” (1.4.8)—that is, “from the egg”—a claim that is disingenuous in light of the actual starting point of the novel. Because the egg was commonly understood to be the germ of life originating in the female body, one would assume that a narrative beginning “from the egg” would have a female point of origin. This not the case in *Tristram Shandy*, however, which begins not in the mother’s body but in the father’s. Tristram takes great pains to describe the arduous journey that he, as a homunculus (or “little man” [OED]), undertakes, unaided as he is by his father’s animal spirits, from his father’s body to his mother’s womb, “the place destined for his reception” (1.2.6). More properly, Tristram’s narration begins not from the egg, but from the sperm.

Furthermore, Sterne demonstrates that when physical gestation is linked to cogitation, the miscarriage of ideas is the result. Though McMaster has suggested that the mental conception of Walter Shandy’s book is parallel to his wife’s conception of a fetus (203), I argue that this is the case only because Sterne wants to show the futility of all gestations that are equated with female birth. On the day of Tristram’s birth, Walter formulates a “dissertation” on the right and wrong ends of a woman, but when Dr. Slop knocks loudly at the door, Tristram reports that “the head of as notable and curious a dissertation as ever was engendered in the womb of speculation” is “crushed,” and “it was some months before my father could get an opportunity to be safely deliver’d of it” (2.7.91). Sterne’s use of the book-as-baby metaphor for Walter’s dissertation demonstrates that it is as vulnerable as the fetus whose nose is crushed by Dr. Slop. It would

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44 From its earliest usage, the word “egg” has referred to “the (more or less) spheroidal body produced by the female of birds and other animal species, and containing the germ of a new individual, enclosed within a shell or firm membrane” (OED).

45 McMaster points out that Dr. Slop crushes the head of Walter’s idea just as he crushes the nose of Walter’s son (204), but she argues that the book-as-baby metaphor is enabling for Walter, who is “a fecund generator through language” (205).
appear that ideas gestated in the “womb of speculation” are just as vulnerable as the fetuses that are gestated in women’s wombs.

Walter Shandy has another mental gestation after Tristram is born—this time in the form of his *Tristra-paededia*—but rather than being delivered prematurely, this idea continually gestates without ever coming to fruition. Walter meant for his *Tristra-paededia* to be a “system of education” for the “government” of Tristram’s “childhood and adolescence,” but after writing for three years, he had only gotten “into the middle of his work” (5.16.336). During this time Tristram was outgrowing the book at such a pace that “the first part of the work […] was rendered entirely useless,----every day a page or two became of no consequence” (5.16.338). Walter’s never-ending composition of the *Tristra-paededia* can be read as analogous to Tristram’s (and Sterne’s) ongoing composition of *Tristram Shandy*, which also does not have an end in sight. Just as he outgrows Walter’s educational treatise, Tristram also outgrows his own narration of his life, as he realizes in the fourth volume. When he reaches the middle of this volume, he has been writing for a year and has gotten “no farther than to my first day’s life,” which means that he now has an additional year to account for in his narrative along with the rest of his life. In exasperation, he laments, “instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work […] on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back […] the more I write, the more I shall have to write” (4.13.256-7). It would appear that for Tristram as for Walter, “every thesis and hypothesis have an offspring of propositions” (6.2.370). Since neither Tristram’s nor Walter’s manuscripts are ever finished, however, their mental conceptions are like pregnancies that endlessly dilate but never terminate.

Critics who have investigated the writing-pregnancy connection in *Tristram Shandy* usually read the parturient structure of the novel as enabling to Tristram’s (and Sterne’s) literary
creation. Bonnie Blackwell posits that the novel is “sympathetic to the female body whose symptoms it embraces” (83), while Patricia Meyer Spacks maintains that the “offspring of propositions” that Walter produces are “far more controllable than the human offspring produced by sexual activity” in the novel (144). I contend, however, that Sterne demonstrates (with Walter’s and Tristram’s writing as well as with his own) that endlessly gestating narratives are not in fact helpful models for literary production, as the pregnancy metaphor for literary production actually causes authors to lose control of their narratives altogether. Tristram, after all, estimates that he will have to write every day for the rest of his life to keep up with his narrative, and Walter only stops writing his incomplete *Tristra-pedia* when (not coincidentally) Dr. Slop again appears on the scene to tend to the injured Tristram, who had been accidentally circumcised by the defective window-pane (5.38.360). Tristram’s narrative is never fully created, stuck as it is in the limbo of pregnancy, and Walter’s *Tristra-pedia*, just like his “noble dissertation” on the right and wrong ends of women, is miscarried when the male midwife comes to call. In a similar manner, Sterne describes his writing of *Tristram Shandy* as a pregnancy gone awry in a 1767 letter to William Combe. Sterne writes of the novel:

> I miscarried of my tenth Volume by the violence of a fever, I have just got thro’—I have however gone on to my reckoning with the ninth, <in> of wch [sic] I am all this week in Labour pains; & if to Day’s Advertiser is to be depended upon shall be safely deliver’d by tuesday.

Madeleine Descargues reads this letter as evidence that Sterne related to his novel as “father/mother to child” (401), but I disagree with her assumption that the novel was safely

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46 It is also significant that Dr. Slop’s appearance interrupts Walter as he is reading aloud from his *Tristra-pedia*, just as he had interrupted Walter’s dissertation on the right and wrong ends of a woman on the day that Tristram was born.

delivered (402). I argue that because his tenth volume was “miscarried,” Sterne’s authorial self-construction as a parturient woman demonstrates, once again, that the metaphor of birth always has the potential to be inextricably linked to uncertainty, miscarriage, and loss, an association made more poignant by the fact that Sterne himself was ailing at the time that he wrote this letter. Sterne may very well have sympathized with the plight of pregnant women, who are frequently silenced and subjected to the uncertainties of their bodily processes, as well as with the female midwives who were being displaced by bungling country accoucheurs like Dr. Slop, but he nevertheless participates in the silencing of pregnant women in his novel and in the usurpation of the discourse of pregnancy for his own authorial purposes. As Hunter reminds us, “however important other characters may be, Tristram is the focus; it is his book, about his life, and the attention is on his attempt to explain himself” (“Clocks” 193), a limited focus that means there is little room in it for a detailed exploration of women’s subjectivity and concerns. In the end, it does not seem to matter whether authors of pregnancy narratives favored male physicians and disparaged pregnant women (like Smollett) or sympathized with female midwives and pregnant women (like Sterne)—neither author imagines that pregnant women, and the women who care for them, could have any agency or voices independent of men.

I have argued that both sentimental and satiric strains of fiction in the eighteenth century reinforced the propriety of women’s silence on the subjects of pregnancy and childbirth. Richardson’s sentimental fiction presented exemplary female characters who were, in conduct-book fashion, meant to be emulated by female readers, while Smollett’s comic fiction undermined and ridiculed the unruly pregnant women who dared to speak publically about their conditions. Though Sterne handles pregnancy in a more complex manner by ridiculing the
incompetent men who make women’s experience of childbirth more traumatic than necessary, in the end he nevertheless suggests that the endpoint of pregnancy and birth is still the creation of a male subject, whose creation (in body as well as in narrative) is spoiled when it is subjected to the vicissitudes of (real or metaphorical) pregnancy. The pregnant woman in Sterne’s novel ultimately can be spoken of with sympathy, but she cannot speak for herself. All of these novels ultimately assert male control not only over pregnancy and birth, but also over female personhood and subjectivity more generally because they cannot reconcile women’s reproductive processes with language.
CHAPTER 3

“The imagination bodies forth its conceptions”: Motherhood, Authorship, and Female Romantic Novelists

I

During the 1790s, a number of female novelists including Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith, Eliza Fenwick, and Amelia Alderson Opie turned away from the conventions of sentimental fiction, which had dominated the literary marketplace from mid-century through the 1780s, toward a novelistic style that actively and often aggressively challenged the norms and values of the patriarchal society in which they lived.¹ In creating a so-called “feminist counter-public sphere,” these radical, female-authored novels shared many similarities with one another in theme and content, tending to discard more traditional marriage plots in favor of narratives in which the female protagonist is often left with a child but without her husband or male lover at the end of the novel.² In these novels, marriage and maternity are often oppressive and lethal—

¹ Anne Mellor has done much to correct the once-pervasive critical notion that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women’s novels were preoccupied with, and even trapped within, the so-called “private sphere.” Rather, Mellor contends that female novelists throughout the Romantic period participated in very public political debates through the medium of their novels. See Anne K. Mellor, “A Novel of Their Own: Romantic Women’s Fiction, 1790-1830,” The Columbia History of the British Novel, ed. John Richetti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780-1830 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). See also Jennifer Golightly, The Family, Marriage, and Radicalism in British Women’s Novels of the 1790s (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012).

² Rita Felski defines a feminist counter-public sphere as “a critique of cultural values from the standpoint of women as a marginalized group within society.” Mellor suggests that radical women novelists at the end of the eighteenth century constitute such a sphere. See Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 167 and Mellor, “A Novel of Their Own,” 331. Roxanne Eberle notes that a number of female-authored novels from the 1790s challenged the fallen woman plot as well as the traditional marriage plot in their creation of a feminist counter-public sphere. See Roxanne Eberle, Chastity and Transgression in Women’s Writings, 1792-1897: Interrupting the Harlot’s Progress (Basingstoke: Pulgrave, 2002), 3-5, 54, 134. Jennifer Golightly helpfully lays out many of the plot-related similarities in novels by these women (including the tendency to leave female protagonists with children but without male lovers) (94).
hardly the refuges that the sentimental novel had represented them to be. Critics argue that biological maternity was a particular sticking point for many of these novelists, who believed that there were too many problems with pregnancy and childbirth for biological maternity to be empowering and instead favored networks of women who engage in communal childrearing.

While I concur with these assessments of the radical female-authored fictions of the 1790s and early 1800s, I contend that despite the fact that these novels acknowledge many of the problems associated with pregnancy and childbirth (problems that usually have a social, patriarchal source), they nonetheless represent biological reproduction as a potential locus of strength for women. In Of Woman Born (1976), Adrienne Rich laments that childbirth is rarely “viewed as one way of knowing and coming to terms with [women’s] bodies, of discovering [women’s] physical and psychic resources.” However, Rich overlooked the novels I discuss in this chapter, which view childbirth in just this way. Charlotte Smith’s Emmeline (1788), Desmond (1792), and The Young Philosopher (1798), Eliza Fenwick’s Secresy (1795), Mary Wollstonecraft’s The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria (1798), and Amelia Alderson Opie’s Adeline Mowbray (1804) all emphasize female strength during pregnancy and childbirth, provided that

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these processes take place within a supportive community of women. In this way, I use the distinction that Rich makes between motherhood as an “experience” (that is, the “potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction”) and motherhood as an “institution” (“which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control”) (13). Furthermore, just as the novelists in this chapter stress that a woman’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are constructed by the social situation in which she finds herself, so too do they emphasize the constructed nature of maternal identity itself; pregnancy does not automatically make a woman choose to adopt a maternal identity, and as these novelists suggest over and over again, female families of choice are often more ideal than kinship networks cemented by blood ties.

Although the second section of this chapter will focus primarily on Wollstonecraft’s *Maria* because it portrays more pregnant women than all of the other novels in this chapter

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6 Fletcher, Ledoux, Burke, and Eberle have argued for pregnant women’s strength in novels like Smith’s *Emmeline* and *The Young Philosopher*, Fenwick’s *Secresy*, and Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray*, though none have suggested that pregnancy is the specific source of strength for these characters. See Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith*, 274; Ellen Malenas Ledoux, “Defiant Damsels: Gothic Space and Female Agency in *Emmeline*, The Mysteries of Udolpho, and Secresy,” *Women’s Writing* 18.3 (2011), 332-6, 339; Meghan Burke, “Making Mother Obsolete: Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy* and the Masculine Appropriation of Maternity,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 21.3 (2009), 379; and Eberle, *Chastity and Transgression*, 124. While Mercy Cannon suggests that a significant portion of Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy* is devoted to showing “the ways in which women’s bodies can become healthy incubators for children,” she argues that Sibella ultimately fails to become a “healthy incubator.” See Mercy Cannon, “Hygienic Motherhood: Domestic Medicine and Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20.4 (2008), 540, 557-8. Ledoux posits that Eliza Fenwick’s Sibella display remarkable physical strength and fortitude in spite of (but not necessarily because of) her pregnant condition (“Defiant Damsels,” 332-3, 339). While Eberle argues that Adeline’s mother’s cruelty was a factor that contributed to the illness that ended in Adeline’s miscarriage, she does not suggest that Adeline’s pregnancy was a marker of good health. See Eberle, *Chastity and Transgression*, 124.

7 Like Rich, I operate under the assumption that motherhood as an experience and motherhood as an institution are both social constructions (though vastly different from one another) rather than “natural” inevitabilities.

8 This is consistent with Ruth Perry’s argument that the structure of kinship during the eighteenth-century shifted from consanguineous ties to affinal ties based on chosen marital partners. See Ruth Perry, “Women in Families: The Great Disinheritance,” *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111-31. It is telling, however, that many female novelists at the end of the eighteenth century tended to reject marital ties in favor of female friendships and families of choice (though, in some cases, marriage could be considered a family of choice).
combined, in the chapter’s first section I will briefly survey the other novels mentioned above, whose depictions of pregnancy all emphasize women’s strength and fortitude rather than weakness and thereby establish a literary context in which Wollstonecraft wrote her final, unfinished novel. Finally, the third section will argue that most of the late-eighteenth-century female authors who asserted the strength of pregnant and laboring women also used maternal metaphors for authorship in a positive fashion, unlike their male forebears from the mid-eighteenth century. What a number of the authors that I examine in this chapter emphasize is that because motherhood is a learned and (at least sometimes) chosen occupation, it can be connected to another vocation—authorship—that women often chose to support themselves and their families.

II

Thanks to increasing medical and social pressures, by the end of the eighteenth century, maternal breastfeeding had been largely normalized, and the distinctions between gender roles (particularly relating to parenthood) had become deeply entrenched as the mother’s “natural” physical maternal functions were culturally fetishized. According to Valerie Fildes, “by the late 18th century the climate of opinion was much more in favour of maternal suckling than had been

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9 I discuss Adeline Mowbray in this chapter even though it was published seven years after the posthumous publication of Wollstonecraft’s final novel because Opie’s handling of pregnancy in her novel is indebted to the pregnancy novels of the 1790s, including Wollstonecraft’s.

10 For explorations of the ways in which motherhood was socially elevated during the Romantic period because of the mother’s role in breastfeeding, as well as in the infant’s language acquisition and subject formation (respectively), see Ruth Perry, “Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and maternity in Eighteenth-Century England,” Eighteenth-Century Life 16 (1992) and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, Shelley’s Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
the case just two or three generations earlier.”\textsuperscript{11} This new cultural climate regarding breastfeeding had been helped along, no doubt, by medical writers such as William Cadogan, William Buchan, and William Hunter (among others), who all encouraged maternal breastfeeding for a number of health-related reasons for mother and child.\textsuperscript{12} It was, however, Rousseau’s call for compulsory maternal breastfeeding in \textit{Émile} (1762) that helped to popularize a natural, ahistorical vision of motherhood that connected maternal breastfeeding with a larger moral and social purpose. Rousseau had encouraged mothers to breastfeed after the birth of each child because the moral health of both child and nation were supposedly at stake:

\begin{quote}
But when mothers deign to nurse their own children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart; there will be no lack of citizens for the state; this first step by itself will restore mutual affection. […] When women become good mothers, men will be good husbands and fathers.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Simple breast milk was not the point of Rousseau’s disquisition, however—the mother must breastfeed her own child for the reformation of the family (and the state) to occur. Because Rousseau believed that maternal nursing would cause “natural feeling” to “revive,” he clearly believed that his recommendations would return humankind to a natural (and thus better) state of being from which eighteenth-century culture, with its wet- and dry-nursing, had unwisely turned away.


Despite the picture of robust maternal health that eighteenth-century treatises on breastfeeding conjure, male midwives and obstetricians nevertheless persisted in treating the pregnant and birthing body as naturally passive and weak, susceptible to injury, and in need of male medical professionals’ advice and assistance. Though the uterus was believed to be a strong organ whose muscular contractions could expel the fetus, the woman herself was discouraged from pushing or otherwise assisting in the birth in any way.\textsuperscript{14} Until well into the twentieth century, in fact, medical science had assumed that women’s lot in life was to “suffer passively” in childbirth and that others, whether Nature, midwife, obstetrician, or surgeon, “would do to her what had to be done” (Rich 128-9). Thus, whether a mother was nursing or giving birth, she was expected to succumb to these “natural” bodily processes over which she had no control (and which were supposedly more dangerous if she attempted to participate actively in them).

I argue, however, that late-eighteenth-century feminist novelists resisted these aggressive campaigns to convince women that motherhood, and the physical weakness associated with it, was “natural.” In this section, I survey several female-authored end-of-century novels that focus on the ways in which women’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are constructed by social circumstances more than they are by the biological rhythms of the maternal body.\textsuperscript{15} I argue that all of the novelists discussed in this section consistently minimize the deadliness and physical rigors of childbirth, or if they evoke the physical hardships of pregnancy and birth, it is to show women’s strength and fortitude in dealing with such difficulties, and/or to demonstrate the ways in which patriarchal norms and customs exacerbate these hardships. I turn first to Charlotte Smith, who, like Wollstonecraft, returns to the topic of pregnancy again and again in her novels.

\textsuperscript{14} See Thomas Denman, \textit{Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery}, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1788), 348.

\textsuperscript{15} In this way, my argument is indebted to Adrienne Rich’s \textit{Of Woman Born}, which argues that motherhood is a socially constructed rather than a natural institution.
If Wollstonecraft wrote the greatest number of pregnant characters into a single novel by a Romantic woman author, Charlotte Smith wrote perhaps the most Romantic novels with major plotlines concerning pregnant women. From her first novel, *Emmeline* (1788), to her final novel, *The Young Philosopher* (1798), Smith creates pregnant characters that are remarkably robust and resilient despite the many traumas that patriarchal laws inflict upon them.

Lady Adelina Trelawny’s trials and tribulations, caused by an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, comprise a significant secondary storyline in *Emmeline*.¹⁶ When the novel’s heroine, Emmeline, and her friend Mrs. Stafford happen upon Lady Adelina, she has retired to a cottage in an attempt to conceal her pregnancy, the result of her adulterous liaison with George Fitz-Eduard. One of the most radically innovative and progressive aspects of Smith’s novel is the fact that she does not allow Lady Adelina, her fallen woman, to die; rather, she allows her to live with her child, and even to reunite with her lover after her boorish husband’s timely death.¹⁷ Although Lady Adelina displays the fainting fits and hysterical weakness that typically characterize the sentimentally distressed woman, Smith makes it clear that Lady Adelina’s physical weakness, and even her temporary insanity after giving birth, are brought on by the pressures of a patriarchal social system that threatens to punish “fallen” women and their illegitimate children.

Lady Adelina informs Emmeline and Mrs. Stafford that after she realized she was pregnant, she “hastened to fly into obscurity, in the hope, that if my error is concealed till I am myself in the grave, my brothers may forgive me” (231). In taking for granted that she will not survive


childbirth, Lady Adelina assumes that the patriarchal narrative for the fallen woman is the universal narrative for all illegitimately pregnant women. It is her fear of being discovered before her expected death in childbirth that gives her such fearful starts, and which leads Emmeline and Mrs. Stafford—just as concerned about Adelina’s health and safety as Adelina herself—to assist her when her time draws near to procure a secret location for her lying-in.18

Despite her expectation that she will follow the fallen woman’s narrative trajectory, however, Adelina survives childbirth:

Lady Adelina had, till then, wished to die. She saw her child—and wished to live.—The physical people who attended her, gave hopes that she might.—Supported by the tender friendship of Emmeline, and animated by maternal fondness, she determined to attempt it. (262)

Even though Smith omits the details of the birth, the simple fact that the delicate sentimental heroine can survive childbirth and go on to raise her child is in itself a significant shift in narrative possibilities for the illegitimately pregnant woman.19 Although Lady Adelina’s sufferings do not end with the birth of her child—she becomes mad from shame when her brother finds her after her lying-in—she eventually regains her sanity, is freed from her odious husband by his death, and will finally, after a suitable period of separation, be reunited with her lover, Fitz-Eduard.

18 Adelina’s mother also suffered during her pregnancy as a result of patriarchal customs, as her father-in-law decided to cut her husband out of his will. As a result of the financial hardships that the family was subjected to because of this privation, Adelina’s mother, who was “far advanced in her pregnancy,” died of “a slow fever, the effect of sorrow” (217).

19 Though she does not read any novels by Smith in her study, Roxanne Eberle argues that a number of women novelists in the 1790s similarly rejected the “harlot’s progress” narrative (3-5).
Smith continues to write pregnant characters who are oppressed by patriarchal privilege in *Desmond* (1792), her most politically radical (as well as her only epistolary) novel. Lionel Desmond is in love with the unimpeachable Geraldine Verney who, like Lady Adelina (and indeed, like Smith herself), is trapped in a loveless marriage to an abusive husband. As she does with Lady Adelina’s childbirth, Smith glosses over the details of Geraldine’s lying-in; the little that we do find out about it (first in a letter that Desmond writes to his mentor, and later in a letter that Geraldine writes to her sister) is that the lying-in was uneventful until several days after the child’s birth, when Geraldine finds out about her husband’s dire financial straits due to his profligacy. As Desmond writes to Mr. Bethel of Geraldine, “She had lain-in only ten days, when her sister wrote to me.—There are two executions in the house, one for sixteen hundred, the other for two thousand three hundred pounds” (166). Geraldine later confirms the shock that she received after her lying-in in a letter to her sister in which she expresses concern about her newborn son’s health:

> I have, perhaps, done wrong to continue nourishing at my breast, especially as I think he has never recovered the first shock he received, when, at his birth, I first knew so much, and so suddenly, of the disarranged state of Mr Verney’s circumstances. (234)

While acknowledging her anxiety, which she fears she has passed on to her newborn infant via her breast milk, Geraldine nevertheless attributes her anxiety and her son’s precarious health to her husband’s “disarranged […] circumstances” rather than to any constitutional weakness in herself. In fact, Geraldine’s report to her sister in an earlier letter written during her pregnancy that she had not slept in thirty-six hours (161) indicates the fortitude of her maternal body, strength that is compromised only by her husband’s mismanagement of the family’s affairs.

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In Smith’s final novel, *The Young Philosopher* (1798), a pregnant woman’s story takes up a significant portion of the novel’s second volume.\(^{21}\) In an interpolated narrative, Laura Glenmorris relates to George Delamere, her daughter’s suitor, the story of the early years of her marriage. After her husband’s kidnapping and supposed murder by a band of pirates, a pregnant Laura is forcibly removed to the house of her husband’s conniving great-aunt, the Ladie of Kilbrodie, who hopes to induce her to miscarry her child so that her own son (Mr. Glenmorris’ uncle) would inherit what was left of the Glenmorris estate. As several critics have pointed out, Laura Glenmorris’ story enables Smith to represent the social wrongs that women are subjected to by patriarchal inheritance laws.\(^{22}\) Though Laura is certainly a victim of the Ladie of Kilbrodie and the villainous “howdy” (or midwife) she has employed—she finally gives birth prematurely after being told horrible stories of captivity by the Ladie and her son, the Laird of Kilbrodie, despite her awareness of what they are trying to do to her—she is nevertheless a model of almost unbelievable fortitude when she gives birth. Fearful that Ladie Kilbrodie and her midwife intend to murder her child, Laura gives birth without making a sound, attended only by her faithful lady’s maid.\(^{23}\) According to Laura, “I determined to bear my sufferings, if possible, in silence. […] I had resolution enough to persevere in the concealment of my pangs” (115). Laura’s determination and resolution lead her to give birth successfully, though the novel clearly shows that Laura’s premature lying-in and weak baby (who dies of natural causes after several days) is

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\(^{23}\) Fletcher has also commented on the remarkable fortitude that Laura displays while giving birth (274).
due to the cruelty of those, like the Ladie of Kilbrodie, her son, and the midwife, who are overly invested in the laws of patriarchal inheritance.  

Smith’s heroines, who are strong and stoic in the face of childbirth, are undoubtedly based to some extent on the author herself. Smith’s correspondence, as well as several biographical sketches of her (at least one of which was composed by her sister), all testify to the physical stamina and mental fortitude of a woman who endured twelve pregnancies during the course of a loveless and sometimes abusive marriage. Smith’s twelfth and final lying-in was particularly remarkable for its ease, especially given the fact that Smith had convinced herself in the weeks leading up to the birth that she would not survive her lying-in; however, according to a biographical piece in Public Characters of 1800-1801, “Mrs. Smith recovered more speedily from her confinement than in the days of her prosperity and indulgence.” Smith herself also reports on the robust nature of her health when, pregnant with her last child, she traveled with her children to Dieppe to join her husband, who had suddenly and rather inconveniently decided to settle in France. Of the sea crossing, Smith wrote, “In the situation I then was, it was little short of a miracle that my constitution resisted, nor merely the fatigues of the journey, with so many little beings clinging about me (the youngest, whom I bore in my arms, scarce two years old).” Smith also attributes strength to her favorite daughter Augusta, who had been alarmingly ill during her own pregnancy. Although Augusta eventually loses her baby soon after its birth,

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24 Mark Fulk points out that patriarchal identity in Smith’s novel is fluid, and that Ladie Kilbrodie stands in for a negative model of motherhood that reinforces patriarchal authority. See Mark K. Fulk, “Mismanaging Mothers: Matriarchy and Romantic Education in Charlotte Smith’s The Young Philosopher,” Women’s Writing 16.1 (2009), 95-6, 102.

25 See Lorraine Fletcher’s biography of Smith for detailed discussions of the many autobiographical elements in Smith’s novels.


Smith chose, in a letter to Thomas Cadell, to applaud Augusta’s fortitude throughout the process: not only was she “out of danger” as far as her physical health was concerned, but “[s]he bore the intelligence [of her newborn’s death] with more fortitude than we expected & is this morning calm & reasonable” (qtd. in Fletcher 216). In her work as in her life, Smith views the maternal body as a locus of physical and emotional strength; external patriarchal forces are to blame for most of the problems that mothers confront.

Eliza Fenwick’s only novel, *Secresy* (1795), also displays a pregnant woman’s remarkable physical strength despite the fact that the novel ends tragically for her. The epistolary narrative begins with Sibella Valmont, the novel’s heroine, gaining permission from her formidable uncle, Valmont, to correspond with Caroline Ashburn. Valmont has just compelled Clement Montgomery, Sibella’s lifelong companion and playfellow, to leave the ruinous family castle in order to travel abroad. Valmont also forbids Sibella and Clement to marry each other, despite the mutual love that has developed between them over the years. As the narrative unfolds through letters between the various characters, readers learn of Sibella’s burgeoning romantic relationship with Clement, with whom she has been meeting secretly, as she is a proponent of free love unfettered by marriage. Sibella becomes pregnant as a result of their clandestine relationship, and she makes two attempts (one failed and the other successful) to escape from Valmont’s castle to rejoin Clement. When she finally confronts Clement and

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28 Smith’s letters from the time of Augusta’s pregnancy through her death are filled with Smith’s concerns about paying for her daughter’s doctors and convalescent care. As always, Smith attributed her financial woes to the paternal inheritance that the English courts refused to settle on her children in a timely fashion. In a letter written only nine days after Augusta’s death, Smith bemoaned the fact that “[t]he Trustees [of the estate] have refus’d me not only assistance for my daughter while she lived, but wherewithal to bury her.” See Charlotte Smith, “To Thomas Cadell, Jr., and William Davies,” [2 May 1795], *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Judith Phillips Stanton (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 194.

discovers that he has been unfaithful to her by marrying a rich widow, Sibella is thrown into despair, miscarries, and then dies soon after.

The pregnant Sibella’s physical strength and mental fortitude are nothing short of heroic and have been commented upon by a number of the novel’s readers. As Lord Filmar relates the circumstances surrounding Sibella’s first escape, he describes her as “a girl of spirit” who ran away from Mr. Valmont after being hit by him: “she rushed from his presence into the park […] and flew to the other side […] where the wall not being very perfect she climbed it rapidly, and in sight of her pursuers threw herself headlong into the moat. She was taken up unhurt” (281). Fenwick emphasizes Sibella’s agility and speed in this passage to such a degree (“flew,” “rushed,” “threw”) that one nearly forgets that Sibella’s pregnancy is already advanced enough to be visible to Mr. Valmont. Her acrobatic escape attempts, which include running, climbing walls, and jumping into a moat and swimming, are connected, as Meghan Burke argues, to Sibella’s “right to a continued independent existence,” just as her pregnancy itself “provides visual, irrefutable evidence of her assertion of agency” (379). Though her first escape attempt proved unsuccessful, Sibella finally manages to leave the castle secretly with the help of her friends Caroline Ashburn and Arthur Murden, and she then undertakes a long and fatiguing journey to find Clement.

When Sibella finally confronts Clement at the novel’s climax, it is only to learn of his marriage to another woman, news that causes her to miscarry almost immediately: “Other dreadful agonies followed, but under the suffering of those she was patience itself. She was conveyed to her friend’s chamber; and in three hours delivered of a dead child” (347). Sibella

herself then dies shortly afterward. Ellen Malenas Ledoux argues that “the narrative calls Sibella’s bluff regarding her professed physical prowess” not only because her more athletic escape attempt fails, but also because she eventually goes mad and dies “like a proper fallen woman” (343); this assessment of the novel does not, however, take into account the strength and stamina necessary for the pregnant Sibella even to attempt such physically taxing methods of escape, nor her fortitude during childbirth. In keeping with this line of argumentation regarding the pregnant Sibella’s dauntlessness, Tilottama Rajan suggests that Sibella’s miscarriage is perhaps a “willed infanticide” that functions as a protest against patriarchal power (“Dis-Figuring” 228), and Isobel Grundy describes Sibella’s “physical toughness and her icy stoicism in the face of emotional loss” (29). Sibella insists upon beholding her dead infant before its burial and remains “perfectly or rather horridly calm” during the ordeal, and then “she delivered up the infant without shedding one tear” (353). Her rapid decline toward death is not the result of her own physical weakness overcoming her in the end, but rather the result of a patriarchal society that scripts such narratives for the “fallen” woman. Not only does Valmont cast his niece off as a disgrace to the family (310, 342), but Clement also induces Sibella to pledge herself to him secretly, knowing full well that he is not legally liable to uphold their clandestine betrothal. Sibella herself attests to Valmont and Clement’s cruelty to her in one of her last deathbed utterances: “My uncle’s secrets could have done me but a temporary harm, it was mine own secrets destroyed me—Oh that fatal contract!” (358). Though she blames herself, the narrative makes it clear that her uncle’s secrets, as well as the secret pledge that Clement induced her to make to him, are at fault for her demise.

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Another notable miscarriage takes place in Amelia Alderson Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1804), a novel in which the eponymous heroine miscarry her first pregnancy because of her anxiety about having an illegitimate child.\(^{32}\) Raised by a vain mother who delights in philosophical inquiry (though theory is more appealing to her than practice), Adeline cultivates the acquaintance of Glenmurray, a noted philosopher in the Godwinian mold who scorns marriage in favor of a free love between enlightened individuals. Glenmurray and Adeline live together as husband and wife without marrying, an action that drives a wedge between Adeline and her hypocritical mother (as well as the rest of respectable society). Though Glenmurray proves willing to eschew his radical beliefs when he begs Adeline to marry him after she becomes pregnant, Adeline adheres stalwartly to her own radical principles and refuses to marry her lover, at least until she meets a little boy who has been rejected by his peers for being illegitimate. Adeline is so affected by the child’s bleak life that she resolves to marry Glenmurray, but the stress of the encounter is too much for her and she miscarries: “Anxiety and agitation had had a fatal effect on the health of Adeline; and the day after her encounter on the terrace she brought forth a dead child” (135). Adeline’s miscarriage is due to the “anxiety and agitation” brought about by the social and legal pressures that patriarchal society exerts on unmarried pregnant women and their children.\(^{33}\) Adeline’s body is not habitually weak, however, for she remains healthy throughout her second pregnancy, so much so that her cruel husband


\(^{33}\) Roxanne Eberle notes that the illness that leads to Adeline’s miscarriage is caused in large part by Mrs. Mowbray’s cruelty to her daughter, and that Adeline herself interprets her miscarriage as an indictment of her relationship with Glenmurray (124); however, Eberle does not point out that the narrative blames the source of Adeline’s anxiety on patriarchal norms. Eleanor Ty has convincingly argued that *Adeline Mowbray* depicts the slow and steady decline, and eventual defeat, of a strong and able woman by the cultural constraints placed on women by a patriarchal society, but Ty does not identify Adeline’s miscarriage as an example of Adeline’s physical decline in the face of patriarchal oppression. See Eleanor Ty, *Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 156.
Berrendale (whom she marries after the death of Glenmurray) chastises her for eating too much, although he himself is a glutton. When Adeline tries to placate her husband’s anger at their high household bills, she offers to subsist on plainer fare to help lower their expenses. Berrendale jealously responds, “Still, I think I have seen you eat with a most excellent appetite.” Adeline protests that her appetite was “a proof of my being in health,” to which Berrendale callously retorts, “less robust health would suit our finances better” (183). In *Adeline Mowbray*, as well as in the other novels discussed above, pregnant women’s bodies display a vigorous health that is consistently undermined by men who, like Berrendale, expect—and even prefer—pregnant women to be weak and sickly so that they are more easily managed.

Female community, which often sustains female strength, is another central element of 1790s pregnancy narratives. In Fenwick’s *Secresy*, Sibella gives birth in her friend Caroline’s room and is presumably assisted by her (347); in fact, Meghan Burke suggests that Caroline attends to Sibella very much like a midwife (382). Nearly every lying-in in Smith’s novels involves women helping women, even if the narratives are silent on the details of the birth experience. Emmeline and Mrs. Stafford, for example, assist Lady Adelina with finding a suitable, secluded place for her to lie-in, and the two women then attend to her during the birth (240-63). In *Desmond*, Geraldine Verney expresses to her sister Fanny the wish that Fanny could attend her during the last stages of her pregnancy (160); it is perhaps the same spirit of sisterly camaraderie that prompts Geraldine to assist Josephine de Boisbelle, Desmond’s lover, during her lying-in, even though in doing so, Geraldine puts her own reputation in jeopardy, as the talk of the town was that she was the one having Desmond’s child.\(^{34}\) In *The Young Philosopher*,

\(^{34}\) Diana Bowstead notes that contemporary critics were confused as to the purpose of the Josephine subplot, and several pronounced that the novel would have been better off without this episode; Bowstead reads the episode as Smith’s attempt to “ironically undercut” Desmond’s devotion to Geraldine as well as to express Geraldine’s sexuality by proxy (247-8). Although modern critics have noted the similarities between Geraldine’s
Smith demonstrates that female community is helpful for childbirth, but that women cannot necessarily be counted upon to be helpful in every circumstance. Laura Glenmorris is attended by Menie, her faithful lady’s maid, but the Ladie of Kilbrodie and the midwife she employed actively try to harm Laura and her unborn child, which suggests that women are not naturally inclined to help each other, particularly in a society in which primogeniture determines the inheritance of fortunes and estates.

Amelia Opie similarly depicts the dangers that ensue when female communities fail to support women during pregnancy and childbirth. Because the actual lyings-in are passed silently over in *Adeline Mowbray*, it is impossible to know who attended Adeline during her two confinements, although Opie is careful to show that Adeline spends her two pregnancies mostly in the company of men (first Glenmurray, and later Berrendale); after giving birth to her daughter, she delivers it into Berrendale’s hands, who “received his child in his arms” (185). These circumstances suggest that women did not play a large role in assisting with Adeline’s pregnancies and lyings-in (if Adeline’s friend had Savanna assisted her, Opie does not mention it); perhaps as a result, neither gestation has a particularly happy outcome—Adeline miscarry her child with Glenmurray, and then she is betrayed by Berrendale after the birth of their daughter (whom her husband eventually attempts to disinherit). Even more troubling than the male-centered circumstances of her parturitions, however, is the fact that Adeline is repeatedly rebuffed by her mother and other women because of her sexual past. She is rejected first by her own mother once her pregnancy is visible, and then by other maternal surrogates, including Mrs. Pemberton and Mrs. Beauclerc. In fact, one of Adeline’s primary motivations for marrying

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and Josephine’s situations in the novels, as well as the differences in the ways in which their respective nationalities (English and French) would have signified sexually for an eighteenth-century English readership, no critic has yet commented on the significance of the fact that Geraldine and Josephine form a female community, however temporarily, during Josephine’s lying-in.
Berrendale after Glenmurray’s death had been to become respectable so that she could be accepted into the community of women that had shunned her when she was Glenmurray’s mistress (185). Women constantly betray women in the novel, although the one exception to this pattern is Savanna, the former West Indian slave who acts as yet another maternal surrogate for Adeline, but one who repeatedly defends her conduct.\(^{35}\) As Mellor (Mothers of the Nation 145) and Eberle (133-5) have shown, Opie also represents as ideal the all-female community established at Rosevalley at the end of the novel (a female family of choice that includes Mrs. Mowbray, Mrs. Pemberton, and Savanna) that will raise the dying Adeline’s daughter.\(^{36}\) In Adeline Mowbray, as in The Young Philosopher, women must choose to support one another, because such supportive actions do not come naturally to women who live in patriarchal social systems.

These novels also bolster the female communities that appear in them by contrasting them with remarkably fragile biological families, a contrast that helps to explain a number of female novelists’ marked preference for families of choice. Anne Mellor, Claudia Johnson, and Jennifer Golightly have discussed how a number of female-authored Romantic novels demonstrate happy adoptions of children (such as in Desmond, when Geraldine adopts Josephine’s illegitimate child), and/or the establishment of female couples or communities that will bear the burdens of childbearing and childrearing together, such as when Emmeline and Mrs. Stafford assist Adeline during her lying-in, and when Caroline Ashburn assists Sibella.

\(^{35}\) For this reason, Mellor argues that Savanna is in fact that superior mother figure in the novel (Mothers of the Nation 105).

\(^{36}\) Since Savanna is accepted into the female community at Rosevalley as a dependent because of her “inferior” class and racial status, however, this community— radical though it may be from a gendered standpoint—nevertheless implicitly endorses classist and racist ideologies that are far from ideal, a fact that Eberle (129), Felicity Nussbaum (Torrid Zones [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995], 45-6), and Carol Howard (“The Story of the Pineapple”: Sentimental Abolitionism and Moral Motherhood in Amelia Opie’s Adeline Mowbray,” Studies in the Novel 30.3 [1998], 359, 366) have all commented upon.
during her birth in *Secresy*. If a number of radical 1790s novelists rejected heterosexual marriage because it was dangerous for women (Johnson, “Mary Wollstonecraft” 164 and Golightly 113), many of them also posited an elastic definition of maternity that is divorced from biological ties. While characters like Geraldine are capable of adopting children that are not their own, other women who become pregnant in these narratives do not experience maternal feelings and in fact reject maternity entirely. In *Secresy*, for example, Sibella’s miscarriage has been interpreted as a willed rejection of maternity—or at least, of the compliant, male-regulated maternity favored by a patriarchal society (Rajan, “Dis-Figuring” 228 and Burke 538, 554, 557-8). In a similar vein, Adeline Mowbray’s miscarriage can be read, like Sibella’s, as a rejection of maternity on patriarchal terms. After all, the distress that Adeline experiences at the time of her miscarriage is due entirely to her fears for the future of her illegitimate child, but it is only after she agrees to become Glenmurray’s wife—ostensibly the solution to her problem—that she miscarries. For Adeline, marrying Glenmurray would have been a capitulation to the unjust laws and customs that make marriage necessary for pregnant women.

By contrast, in *Emmeline*, Lady Adelina’s desire to live for her child after giving birth—a sentiment that Wollstonecraft echoes in *The Wrongs of Woman* when Maria decides to live for her child—suggests that identifying as a mother is ultimately a choice that each woman must make for herself, regardless of the blood ties that may or may not exist between mother and child. In a supportive female-regulated context, pregnancy can be a viable path to motherhood for women, but pregnancy and childbirth are not prerequisite experiences that women must undergo in order to assume maternal identities. What these novels, when considered as a body of

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work, emphasize above all else is that each woman’s situation (and feelings about maternity) is unique—a sentiment that flies in the face of authors, like Rousseau, who treat motherhood as natural and ahistorical and thus carrying the same cultural meaning for women from age to age. It was to this literary tradition of writing about motherhood that Mary Wollstonecraft contributed her own philosophical novel about pregnancy, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, a novel that is startling not only for its excessive number of pregnant characters, but also for its assertion of biological maternity as a marker of women’s physical equality with men.

III

Mary Wollstonecraft’s two novels, *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798) have long perplexed feminist critics who have tried to reconcile Wollstonecraft’s interest in the female feelings and embodied experiences that she seems to want to repudiate in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a text in which she makes a powerful case for women to exercise their reason rather than succumbing to sensibility.³⁸ *Maria*, in particular, has been troubling for critics who disagree as to whether the novel is an ironic text that is meant to illustrate the dangers of sensibility, or whether Wollstonecraft’s novel vindicates women’s sensibility and sexual passion, turning away from the rationality she had called upon women to cultivate in *The Rights of Woman*.³⁹ Whether critics believe that *Maria* is a continuation (or even

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³⁹ In this chapter, I refer to Wollstonecraft’s final novel as *Maria* rather than *The Wrongs of Woman*, which is easy to confuse visually with *The Rights of Woman*. Critics who read *Maria* as an ironic text that critiques sensibility include Janet Todd, “Reason and Sensibility in Mary Wollstonecraft’s The Wrongs of Woman,” *Frontiers*
novelization) of *The Rights of Woman*, or whether they argue that it moves away from the *Vindication*’s call for reason in favor of passion, however, most readers seem to agree that Wollstonecraft approaches the female body in her final novel in a more essentializing way than she had done in *The Rights of Woman* (see, for instance, Johnson, “Mary Wollstonecraft” 162; Johnson, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 199; and B. Taylor 243). In *Maria*, after all, women’s bodies take center stage as they are physically entrapped and tortured by sexual slavery, pregnancy, and motherhood; even the redemptive bonds of friendship that are forged amongst the women in the novel are based on sensibility and common bodily experiences. It would thus seem that one of the founders of equality feminism, a thinker who had once called upon women to renounce the body in favor of the mind in order to establish women’s equality with men, in *Maria* acknowledges that the sexed particularity of the female body cannot help but to obtrude itself on women’s lived experiences.

I argue, however, that Wollstonecraft’s aims in *Maria* were not so very different from those that she had had in mind when composing *The Rights of Woman*. Just as Wollstonecraft based her call for women’s rights in her manifesto on the tenets of what we would today identify as social construction or equality feminism, so too did she demonstrate in her final novel that the female body—and the maternal body, in particular—is constructed by social and cultural

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circumstances. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft takes on the most significant marker of difference between the sexes—women’s ability to conceive and bear children—in order to emphasize that, while pregnancy might be a physical circumstance that is difficult for women to avoid, a woman’s lived experience of pregnancy is a direct result of the circumstances in which she finds herself. Wollstonecraft demonstrates this by exploring two possible outcomes of pregnancy and childbirth—one that is dangerous and oppressive because it is controlled by men, and one that is life-affirming and redemptive because it is managed by women. Furthermore, I argue that Wollstonecraft minimizes the physical differences between the sexes in *Maria*, just as she had in *The Rights of Woman*, and that she paradoxically uses the pregnant body in order to do so. While Wollstonecraft does not deny the fact that pregnancy and childbirth are unique processes that only women can undergo, she suggests in *Maria* that under the right circumstances, the pregnant body is a strong, able body—a marker of female strength and ability rather than pathology and weakness, but only if men refrain from interfering and making maternal bodies passive.

Critics frequently argue that in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft displays what Diane Long Hoeveler suggests is a horror of the female body’s procreative abilities. Colleen Shea concurs with Hoeveler that *Maria* demonstrates how motherhood, and Maria’s maternal body, are prisons; Thomas Ford even goes so far as to suggest that Wollstonecraft actively denigrates the female reproductive body and motherhood in the novel, claiming that when Maria speaks as a

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40 Though Lisa Shawn Maurer also argues that in *Maria* motherhood is socially constructed, she bases her argument on Wollstonecraft’s presentation of the social aspects of mothering rather than on Wollstonecraft’s treatment of the biological aspects of motherhood (the latter is a topic that Maurer believes Wollstonecraft had no interest in). See Lisa Shawn Maurer, “The Female (As) Reader: Sex, Sensibility, and the Maternal in Wollstonecraft’s Fictions,” *Essays in Literature* 19.1 (1992), 37.

mother, she cannot be a feminist agent.\footnote{Colleen Shea, “Women Born/Bearing Slaves: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Maria,” \textit{Postscript} 5.1 (1999), 59, 61 and Ford, “Mary Wollstonecraft” 192, 201, 202.} While many of the pregnant women in the novel certainly suffer horribly—sufferings that Wollstonecraft herself would experience shortly thereafter—we must not make the mistake of reading Wollstonecraft’s own death in childbirth backward into \textit{Maria}, assuming that the novel’s events provide a dire premonition of the author’s own fate, of which she could not have been aware at the time when she was writing the novel. Through its depictions of nine different pregnant women and ten distinct pregnancies, \textit{Maria} critiques pregnant women’s social powerlessness, but not (as Hoeveler, Shea, and Ford maintain) pregnancy or motherhood themselves.

As the novel’s title character, Maria has the dubious distinction of experiencing the most pregnancies in the narrative (two, as opposed to the single pregnancies of the other characters I will discuss in this section).\footnote{Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria}, 1798, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the Wrongs of Woman, or Maria}, ed. Anne K. Mellor and Noelle Chao (New York: Longman, 2007).} Maria’s plight, representative as it is of the wrongs of womankind, is horrifying and quickly told. After deluding herself into marrying a cruel and abusive man, George Venables, whom she soon comes to despise, Maria becomes pregnant and attempts to escape several times after her husband tries to prostitute her to his friend to pay his debts (a plot point reminiscent of Smith’s \textit{Desmond}, in which Geraldine’s husband attempts to sell her to his friend for similar reasons). Venables finally manages to hunt Maria from her hiding places and imprisons her in a madhouse after taking their newborn daughter away from her. As an unjustly imprisoned Maria reflects on her unhappy marriage and writes an account of her life for her daughter, she realizes that her marriage—and her pregnancy, in particular—had restricted her freedom long before she was actually confined within the asylum. In fact, it is Maria’s first...
discussion of her pregnancy as she relates her life story that prompts her to discover that “Marriage had bastilled me for life” (316-7). Indeed, Maria’s circumstances as an abused wife make it abundantly clear that “women’s entitlements—as citizens, mothers, and sexual beings—are incompatible with a patriarchal marriage system” (B. Taylor 235-6). Maria herself acknowledges this fact when she proclaims that a wife is “as much a man’s property as his horse, or his ass” (320), a sentiment that echoes Geraldine Verney’s assertion in Smith’s Desmond that her father “hardly allowed women any pretensions to souls, or thought them worth more care than he bestowed on his horses, which were to look sleek, and do their paces well” (327).

The long series of confinements that Maria undergoes during her pregnancy function as an ironic reminder of the euphemistic “confinement” that pregnant women routinely underwent in preparation for childbirth. She confines herself first at home, and then in apartments belonging to various acquaintances before being apprehended by her husband and imprisoned shortly after giving birth. Unlike the confinement of childbirth, however, Maria’s pre- and post-birth confinements, which have been forced upon her by men, leave her isolated and without a supportive network of women to aid her. Wollstonecraft employs the language of the lying-in chamber in her novel in order to emphasize that pregnancy and birth had become embodied metaphors for the institutionalized oppression of women by England’s social, legal, and medical systems, though they are not inherently oppressive physical processes when managed by women.

44 Mitzi Myers (“Unfinished Business” 112) argues that confinement and entombment are central themes in Maria, although she does not connect any of Maria’s numerous confinements to the confinement of childbirth. Laurie Langbauer and Colleen Shea have both pointed out that Maria’s confinement in the madhouse echoes the confinement of lying-in. See Laurie Langbauer, “An Early Romance: Motherhood and Women’s Writing in Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels,” Romanticism and Feminism, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 213-4 and Shea, “Women Born,” 65.

45 My argument thus dovetails with that of Eleanor Ty, who argues that Maria represents “one of the clearest instances of [...] literalization by a woman writer” (Unsex’d 31)—that is, Wollstonecraft uses metaphorical
Perhaps in order to demonstrate the potential solidarity amongst women in confinement of any kind, Wollstonecraft has Maria meet her closest friend and ally while both are confined (though in different ways) in the madhouse. Jemima is the asylum’s warden—in effect, Maria’s keeper—but as the two talk with one another, they develop a warm friendship. As Jemima unfolds her life story to Maria, we discover that it is rife with pregnant women who meet with ill treatment in their patriarchal social system, and who then mete out ill treatment to other women in turn. Jemima begins her tale with the story of her mother, a servant who was seduced and impregnated by a fellow-servant who refused to marry her when he learned of her pregnancy. Jemima’s mother, knowing that she was “ruined” (274), first resolved to starve herself to death, but when this failed, she worked so hard during her pregnancy that she eventually died in the wretched garret, where her virtuous mistress had forced her to take refuge in the very pangs of labour […] the mother of six children, who, scarcely permitting a footstep to be heard, during her month’s indulgence, felt no sympathy for the poor wretch, denied every comfort required by her situation. (274)

Wollstonecraft takes care to point out that Jemima’s mother’s mistress, although denying proper care to her laboring servant, hypocritically requires complete silence during her own lying-in and the “month’s indulgence” following it. Jemima’s mother perishes nine days after giving birth to her daughter, and the infant Jemima is given over to a careless wet-nurse until she is taken back language to discuss real, embodied oppressions. Ty posits that Wollstonecraft literalizes patriarchal oppression by making the metaphor of imprisonment concrete (Unsex’d 33); I built on Ty’s argument that Wollstonecraft also literalizes oppression by making pregnancy yet another concrete instance of confinement (as Maria is confined both in childbirth and in prison), a literalization that connects women’s bodily oppression directly to their social circumstances.

46 Adrian Wilson explains that the traditional ceremony of childbirth included the month following the birth, when the midwife and nurse kept the mother secluded from the rest of the household so that she could recover. See Adrian Wilson, The Making of Man-Midwifery (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 30.
into her father’s house some years later as a young girl. In the interim, her father had married another fellow-servant who soon after becomes pregnant with a child of her own. The young Jemima soon learns that she has been accepted back into her father’s family in the capacity of a servant, not a daughter, and that her stepmother despises her while lavishing care on her own spoiled daughter (275). What Jemima learns from her situation is that women are all too often desensitized to helping one another as they emulate the heartlessness of their husbands and other men.

With such a family history, it can be little wonder that Jemima herself is doomed to emulate the worst aspects of the lives of both her birth mother and her stepmother. After going into domestic service, Jemima is raped repeatedly by her employer and, like her mother, becomes pregnant out of wedlock. When the mistress of the household discovers her husband raping Jemima, she beats Jemima and then throws her out of the house; Jemima’s master procures an abortifacient drug for her and, when Jemima hesitates to make use of it, offers to “get a nurse for the brat,” but nothing more (279-80). In a rage, Jemima drinks the abortifacient, hoping for her own death as well as for that of her fetus, but despite the acute illness that follows her abortion, she survives (280). She eventually recovers her health, but she soon discovers that even if women are willing to work, they are not guaranteed the gainful employment that their male counterparts are, especially if they are “fallen” women (284). In desperate circumstances, barely eking out a living as a washerwoman, Jemima becomes a “wolf” (286) not unlike her stepmother, her former employer’s wife, and her mother’s mistress—when she meets a tradesman who expresses interest in her, Jemima advises him to throw his pregnant paramour into the streets. As Jemima relates to Maria, “Poor wretch! she fell upon her knees, reminded him that he had promised to marry her, that her parents were honest!—What did it avail?—She
was turned out” (286). In desperation, the woman drowns herself in a horse trough, and when Jemima learns of the event, she is sickened “both in body and mind” by her own cruelty (286).

Anne Mellor points out that “the Wrongs of Woman” in the novel’s title refer both to the wrongs that women do unto one another as well as to the wrongs done to women by men (“Righting” 415); indeed, one of the horrors of a patriarchal society is that it leads women to oppress one another in order to survive.

Eleanor Ty has noted that Wollstonecraft’s narrative tactic of weaving other women’s tales into Maria’s narrative helps to demonstrate that Maria’s story is not unique, but rather is the story of womankind (Unsex’d 40), a point that is apparent even in the minor female characters, whom Mitzi Myers identifies as “case stud[ies] of oppression” (“Unfinished” 110). As with the novel’s central characters, several minor female characters experience pregnancies that make them dependent upon men. One woman is a “poor maniac” in the madhouse whom Maria hears singing, talking, and laughing to herself (260-1). Maria learns from Jemima that the woman “had been married, against her inclination, to a rich old man, extremely jealous” and that “she had, during her first lying-in, lost her senses” (261). The second character, to whom the reader is fleetingly introduced during Maria’s narrative, is “an artful kind of upper servant” who attracts the attention of Maria’s father after the death of Maria’s mother (303). After becoming pregnant, the servant tyrannizes over the rest of the family, even going so far as attempting to seduce her stepson. Because Maria’s father dotes upon his new mistress, however, he implicitly condones her behavior. Maria sadly observes that because women are allowed “but one way of rising in the world […] society makes monsters of them” (304). In her monstrosity, Maria’s father’s mistress bears striking similarities to Jemima’s stepmother, to Jemima’s employer’s wife, and to Jemima herself, although they, as individuals, are undoubtedly less monstrous than
the patriarchal social system that compels them to adopt such reprehensible behavior. The stories of the “artful upper servant” and the “poor maniac” also remind readers that men are ultimately in control of heterosexual relationships, whether they dote upon or rule over their women. Near the novel’s conclusion, we learn of yet another child born in oppressive circumstances. In the statement she makes to the court in order to establish her husband’s cruelty during her lover’s adultery trial, Maria asserts that “I at present maintain the child of a maid servant, sworn to him [George Venables], and born after our marriage” (351). The servant’s story, though not developed beyond this one sentence, nevertheless is yet another reminder that men carelessly beget children that they have no intention of helping their lovers (or others) to support.

Though a survey of the pregnant women in Maria may seem to suggest that Wollstonecraft’s aim in the novel was to declaim against the procreative female body, it is important to remember that pregnancy and motherhood are potentially redemptive in Wollstonecraft’s worldview as well—even in Maria. For instance, in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, despite the discomfort that she displays regarding bodies and sexuality, Wollstonecraft elevates men’s and women’s bodies by emphasizing sexuality’s role in bringing children into being (Johnson, Equivocal 42 and Poston 90-1). Along similar lines, Mary Beth Tegan has argued that in Maria, Wollstonecraft regards motherhood as a positive social role that enables women to feel sympathy for others.47 To these arguments, I should like to add, however, that the physical aspects of motherhood—pregnancy and birth—were also acceptable to Wollstonecraft, provided that they occurred in the right context, an example of which I discuss below.

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Wollstonecraft died before she could finish *The Wrongs of Woman*, but her notes for possible conclusions to the novel indicate that pregnancy would play an important, and even redemptive, role in the narrative’s dénouement. Four of her five brief outlines for the continuation of the novel include a second pregnancy for Maria, and three of these scenarios end in miscarriage or attempted abortion, which at first suggests that Wollstonecraft imagined concluding her novel with the male oppression with which it had begun. The most developed of these scenarios, however, suggests redemptive possibilities for the parturient body when women are enabled to come together to help each other manage their births and their children. According to Wollstonecraft’s notes for this ending, a pregnant Maria attempts suicide by ingesting an overdose of laudanum, but she is rescued at the last moment by the appearance of her friend Jemima, who restores Maria’s supposedly dead daughter to her. Unlike the other potential endings for the novel, this scenario excludes men entirely, and Maria, her daughter, and Jemima will ostensibly create their own gynocentric family of choice. This family may even include Maria’s unborn child; although the fragmentary notes for this ending make no mention of its fate following Marie’s suicide attempt, Wollstonecraft hints that the deadly effects of the drug will be avoided for both fetus and mother, as “Violent vomiting followed” Maria’s overdose (356). Given this possible outcome, it is to be expected that Maria will give birth to her second child in a supportive community of women—a far different “confinement” from those forced upon her earlier in the novel. The happiest potential solution to *The Wrongs of Woman*, then, appears to be the establishment of a family of the mother’s choosing, an outcome that, as discussed in the previous section, was particularly popular in radical, female-authored novels of the 1790s.48

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48 Mellor also argues that Wollstonecraft championed a family of choice in *Maria* (“A Novel” 331). See footnote 2 in this chapter for additional critics who have argued that radical 1790s novels by women promoted alternative families over biological families.
While childbirth that takes place within a supportive female community of choice is an ideal ending for Maria, I would like to suggest that Wollstonecraft’s novel also recuperates pregnancy and parturition as physically enabling processes for women by paradoxically minimizing women’s physical differences from men. Just as Wollstonecraft sought to minimize the physical differences between men and women in *The Rights of Woman*, in *Maria* she suggests that pregnancy and childbirth could be read as proof of women’s strength and endurance rather than as markers of their weakness and inferiority to men. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft at first seems to accept that women are weaker than men “in point of strength” (24), although she goes on to minimize those physical differences at every opportunity. For instance, she grants men only “a degree of physical superiority” over women (24) and then claims that women’s “inferiority with respect to bodily strength” is only “apparent” (27)—that is, women are weaker than men only as far as appearances are concerned. Wollstonecraft even suggests that the physical differences that do exist between men and women are the result of socialization rather than nature; she points out that while boys are allowed to exert themselves physically (“frolic in the open air”), girls’ “limbs and faculties are cramped” as they are “condemned to sit for hours together” (61). Wollstonecraft thus proposes, “Let us then, by being allowed to take the same exercise as boys, not only during infancy, but youth, arrive at perfection of body, that we may know how far the natural superiority of man extends” (111). Adriana Craciun sums up this argument by explaining that Wollstonecraft’s acknowledgement of men’s superior physical strength is placed in “conditional terms” and that Wollstonecraft implies that “women may continue to push the limits of corporeal distinctions” between the sexes (128).

That Wollstonecraft sought to minimize the physical differences between men and women in *The Rights of Woman* is well known, but many critics have nevertheless assumed that
her purpose in *Maria* was to highlight the weak and oppressed state of women’s (and especially mothers’) bodies and minds in a male-dominated society. While women are certainly oppressed in *Maria* because they live in social circumstances that allow men to abuse them, I argue that the novel does not attempt to show that women’s bodies are inherently weak and powerless. Rather, Wollstonecraft demonstrates in *The Wrongs of Woman* (as well as in some of her personal letters) that pregnancy and childbirth could be read as signifiers of women’s strength and endurance rather than as markers of weakness.

Despite the startling number of pregnant women who come to unfortunate ends in *Maria*, it is important to note that no woman dies in childbirth or as a direct result of giving birth. The pregnant women in Wollstonecraft’s novel are surprisingly robust; they suffer and die because of the socially-sanctioned cruelty of others. Jemima’s mother, who dies nine days after giving birth, perishes from the harsh conditions of her lying-in rather than from the birth process itself. According to Jemima’s report, her mother had attempted to starve herself to death, and when that failed, she attempted to hide her pregnancy while continuing to work as a maid, which “had such an effect on her constitution that she died in the wretched garret, where her virtuous mistress had forced her to take refuge in the very pangs of labor,” a garret in which she was “denied every comfort required by her situation” (274). Jemima blames her mother’s death on the weakness caused by her hard pre-partum domestic labor and her mistress’ cruelty, not on the birth process itself (274). Similarly, the pregnant mistress who drowns herself in a horse trough dies not from the physical effects of pregnancy or childbirth, but as a result of her lover’s abandonment of her (instigated by Jemima’s own desperate cruelty). The “poor maniac” in the asylum went mad during her first lying-in because of the mental horror either of her husband’s ill treatment of her
or because of “something which hung on her mind” (261), but not because of the physical exertion involved with giving birth.

Both Jemima and Maria also suffer horribly during their pregnancies, but their physical torments are caused by the ways in which the unjust men in their lives force them to manage their bodies; their worst physical illnesses are caused not by pregnancy, but by the abortifacient medications they take. As discussed above, Jemima’s master procures an abortifacient medication for her and gives her little choice aside from taking it; when she does drink it, she becomes violently ill:

My head turned round, my heart grew sick, and in the horrors of approaching dissolution, mental anguish was swallowed up. The effect of the medicine was violent, and I was confined to my bed several days; but youth and a strong constitution prevailing, I once more crawled out, to ask myself the cruel question, ‘Whither should I go?’ (280)

Though Jemima’s abortion sickens her almost to the point of death, it was the action of the medication that came close to killing her rather than either her pregnancy or miscarriage. What is even more remarkable, however, is the fact that Jemima survives her ordeal because of her “youth” and “strong constitution,” factors that attest to her fortitude—and that also foreshadow Maria’s similar resilience at the end of the novel.

Most of the problems that Maria experiences during her first pregnancy are caused by the fact that she was “hunted, like an infected beast” from a number of different apartments as she attempted to flee from her husband (337). When she finally finds a suitable apartment for her lying-in, Maria reports that she “was permitted to lie-in tranquilly” (338), although she experiences much anxiety before giving birth because she had become so accustomed to being
harassed by her husband (338). The birth event itself was undoubtedly uneventful, for Maria provides no details concerning it (though she does refer to the “pains of child-bed” [339] later on), but like both Geraldine Verney and Lady Adelina Trelawny in Smith’s novels, she becomes anxious and ill as a result of the patriarchal pressures that assail her soon after her confinement. Only three days after giving birth, Maria’s brother visits her and unceremoniously informs her of the death of her uncle, a benevolent man who had left his fortune to Maria’s daughter (338-9). The abrupt manner in which she learns of her beloved uncle’s death makes Maria ill with a fever, which, as she reports, she nevertheless “struggled to conquer with all the energy of my mind” (339). Though Maria acknowledges that childbirth is indeed painful, her post-partum illness stems from social rather than physical causes.

Maria’s projected second pregnancy, a result of her relationship with her lover Darnford, is dangerous to her not because it makes her ill, but because of the lack of social standing that would prevent her and her illegitimate child from living honorably. When Maria speaks out at Darnford’s trial for adultery and seduction, a suit that George Venables had brought against him, she defends her (and her lover’s) conduct (350-4); her arguments fall upon deaf ears, however, as the judge, attempting to uphold “the sanctity of marriage,” refuses to allow Maria a divorce (354). Without the ability to marry Darnford, Maria’s child will be illegitimate, without any of the legal protections or property rights afforded legitimate offspring. These issues are undoubtedly on Maria’s mind in the final scenario for the end of the novel when she fervently wishes to “find a father where I am going!” as she swallows the laudanum that she hopes will kill her and her unborn child (356). What Maria finds, however, is not a father in the next world, but a female family in this one; Jemima rushes in at the last moment with the missing daughter that Maria had been told was dead: “‘Behold your child!’ exclaimed Jemima. Maria started off the
bed, and fainted.—Violent vomiting followed” (356). Though Maria, like Jemima after she had taken the abortifacient, becomes ill as a result of her ingestion of the laudanum, she (like her friend) is also “restored to life” afterward (356). In a novel set during an era when women were not encouraged to cultivate or display their physical strength (a circumstance that Wollstonecraft deplores in The Rights of Woman), the very fact that Jemima and Maria could continue to survive—and even thrive—despite stressful pregnancies, abuse, abortions, and suicide attempts is nothing short of remarkable and must therefore be read as examples of women’s resilience and strength in the face of almost insurmountable social obstacles.

Wollstonecraft’s belief in the robustness of the maternal body can also be observed in her personal correspondence as she describes the indispositions from which she suffered during both of her pregnancies. Her frank acknowledgements of her suffering in her letters allowed her to establish her own strength and fortitude throughout her gestations. During her first pregnancy in 1793-4, Wollstonecraft mentioned suffering from low spirits, as well as from physical ailments in her “bowels.”49 She also complained that she felt indisposed by what was most likely morning sickness (or what she called the “inelegant complaint”) in a letter that she wrote to Godwin roughly two months into her final pregnancy.50 During her first pregnancy, she had remonstrated with Gilbert Imlay for staying away from her by contrasting women’s experience of parenthood with men’s:


While Ellen Moers identifies Wollstonecraft’s “inelegant complaint” with pregnancy more generally, Anna Battigelli surmises that Wollstonecraft was suffering from morning sickness. See Moers, Literary Women, 150; and Anna Battigelli, “‘The Inelegant Complaint’: The Problem of Motherhood in Mary Wollstonecraft’s Maria; Or, the Wrongs of Woman,” Biography and Source Studies 6 (2001), 65.
Considering the care and anxiety a woman must have about a child before it comes into the world, it seems to me, by a natural right, to belong to her. When men get immersed in the world, they seem to lose all sensations, excepting those necessary to continue or produce life!\(^1\)

During her second pregnancy, she wrote in a similar vein to Godwin: “You do not, I think make sufficient allowance for the peculiarity of my situation. But women are born to suffer.”\(^2\) During both of her pregnancies, Wollstonecraft asserted that men do not appreciate or recognize the amount of suffering that women endure when bringing children into the world. Expressing her anxiety and physical pain to her lovers allowed her to educate them on the extent of pregnant women’s emotional and physical labor, as well as to demonstrate, though obliquely, her own strength in enduring such hardships.

It is telling, however, that in Wollstonecraft’s complaint to Godwin about being an “invalid” because of her pregnancy, she also makes light of her situation. In a letter dated 24 January 1797, Wollstonecraft had written to Godwin, “I am still an invalid—Still have the inelegant complaint, which no novelist has yet ventured to mention as one of the consequences of sentimental distress” (393–4). Though by referring to herself as an “invalid” Wollstonecraft hints at the physical discomfort that may prevent her from going out that morning, it is interesting that she chooses to describe her condition as merely “inelegant” rather than, as it must have been, uncomfortable or even painfully debilitating. Moreover, her wry comment that novelists never deigned to show the grossly embodied realities of pregnancy is at once a

\(^1\) Mary Wollstonecraft, “To Gilbert Imlay,” [1 Jan. 1794], Letter 136 of The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft, 239.

humorous critique of these novelists’ squeamishness and an affirmation of her own superior knowledge of pregnant women’s condition. Indeed, Wollstonecraft displays a reluctance to accept the physical infirmities of pregnancy at many points in her correspondence with Godwin, as she often attributes her illnesses and indispositions to depression or to the physical exertions she undertook rather than to her pregnant condition. On 28 December 1796—by which time she must have suspected, if not known for certain, that she was pregnant—Wollstonecraft complains of not being well, though she attributes her malaise to “A lowness of spirits” that, as she reports, “leaves me at the mercy of my imagination.”\(^53\) Several days later, on 1 January 1797, Wollstonecraft complains again to Godwin of being unwell:

> I have a fever on my spirits that has tormented me these two nights past. You do not, I think make sufficient allowance for the peculiarity of my situation. But women are born to suffer. […] My depression of spirits is certainly increased by indisposition. (389-90)

Though her particularly female suffering and “indisposition” are almost certainly veiled references to her pregnancy, she also opens this letter with a complaint about walking in the “unfavorable” weather the day before: “I was splashed up to my knees yesterday, and to sit several hours in that state is intolerable” (389). On January 5, she reports having been “unwell—and out of spirits” the previous night,\(^54\) and then a week later, on January 12, she informs Godwin that the heavy snow may prevent her from going out because she may get wet again: “But you have no petticoats to dangle in the snow. Poor Women how they are beset with


plagues—within—and without.” 55 On January 15, she reports to Godwin that “I am not quite so well to day, owing to my very uncomfortable walk, Last night.” 56

Although Wollstonecraft’s growing physical discomfort due to her pregnancy is apparent in many of these letters (“indisposition,” “the peculiarity of my situation,” “beset with plagues—within,” etc.), she always attributes her illnesses either to a mental cause (such as depression or her imagination) or to an exterior physical cause (exposure to the elements while walking in the wet winter weather). On December 28, she was “at the mercy of [her] imagination” (387); on January 1, her “fever” is of her “spirits,” presumably a “depression” as well as a physical indisposition, all of which were no doubt exacerbated by the walk she had taken during which she was “splashed to the knees” and forced to endure her wet garments for hours afterward (389-90). On January 5 she reports that her unwell condition had existed alongside a depression (being “out of spirits”) (390), and her reluctance to go out on January 12 is due as much to the external “plague” of the violent weather as to the internal “plague” of her pregnancy (391). And again, she blames her ill health on January 15 to the “very uncomfortable walk” she had taken the night before (392). While Wollstonecraft does not deny the physical inconveniences of pregnancy, she avoids blaming all of her discomfort on her condition.

Wollstonecraft may express frustration with the illnesses attendant on pregnancy, but she also boasts about the strength of her maternal body. After giving birth to her first daughter Fanny, Wollstonecraft had written to Ruth Barlow that “nothing could be more natural or easy than my labour” and that her French midwife had remarked that, since she treated childbirth so


“slightly,” she should produce more children for the French Republic. In fact, as she reported to her sister Everina, Wollstonecraft stayed in bed only one day after giving birth and was “out a walking” on the eighth. She was also proud of her “abundance” of milk and her ability to nurse successfully, writing to Barlow on 8 July 1794 that her daughter was “uncommonly healthy” and “sagacious” as a result of exclusive breast-feeding. Remembering how easy Fanny’s birth had been, Wollstonecraft confidently informed Godwin before her second lying-in three years later that she would join him at dinner the day following the birth. In making light of the labor of childbirth by boasting about its ease and participating in other kinds of activities such as nursing and walking almost immediately after giving birth, Wollstonecraft proudly demonstrates women’s strength and intrepidity in the face of enormous physical obstacles.

Wollstonecraft’s description of her lying-in as “natural” should not, however, be read as an indication that she had abandoned her equality feminist views in favor of an essentialist feminism rooted in the physical differences between men and women. Rather, Wollstonecraft’s usage of the descriptor “natural” in her letter to Barlow refers not only to women’s innate physical fitness for the task (because they, rather than men, can give birth), but also to the ordinary nature of the event. Furthermore, when Wollstonecraft had informed Gilbert Imlay that “Considering the care and anxiety a woman must have about a child before it comes into the


61 See the OED for these two senses of the word “natural.”
world, it seems to me, by a *natural right*, to belong to her” (239), she founds women’s “*natural right*” to their children on the emotional work (“care and anxiety”) that women perform, rather than solely attributing their ownership to the mother’s physical proximity to the child during pregnancy. Wollstonecraft’s belief that a woman’s ownership of her child is “natural” is thus founded on John Locke’s labor theory of property, according to which individual property rights are “natural rights” that are rooted in the owner’s labor. A mother’s ownership of her child is “natural” because of the labor that she invests in it—her emotional work during pregnancy and her physical labor during childbirth. Wollstonecraft also suggests that motherhood is an identity constructed through emotional and physical labor when she points out that maternal feelings must develop as a result of habit. Wollstonecraft wrote to Imlay on 19 August 1794 that her affection for their three-month-old daughter “was at first very reasonable—more the effect of reason, a sense of duty, than feeling—now, she has got into my heart and imagination,” a sentiment that echoes her earlier argument about the affections in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Both in theory and in practice, Wollstonecraft acknowledged that becoming a mother takes work, work that includes the emotional and physical labor of pregnancy and childbirth, and the post-natal emotional labor that women must undertake in order to identify as mothers with maternal feelings. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft even suggests that maternal identity is elastic

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63 Mary Wollstonecraft, “To Gilbert Imlay,” 19 August [1794], Letter 152 of *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 258.


65 It would appear that Wollstonecraft’s friend Eliza Fenwick, author of *Secresy*, shared the same assumption that pregnancy and maternal feelings were not necessarily correlated. As Mercy Cannon points out, in *Secresy*, Sibella “does not recognize herself as a mother, or even a potential mother” during her pregnancy (557).
enough to encompass paternity when Maria writes to her daughter that “I wished to be a father, as well as a mother; and the double duty appeared to me to produce a proportionate increase of affection” (339). The constructed nature of maternal identities in Wollstonecraft’s novel is a direct rebuttal of philosophers like Rousseau, who wished to posit the natural differences between the sexes and their social roles.

IV

Because women’s reproductive capacities did not render them helpless in Wollstonecraft’s work (at least, not in supportive circumstances), it is hardly surprising that Wollstonecraft does not treat pregnancy and birth as pejorative metaphors for writing. Wollstonecraft shares this characteristic with a number of her female contemporaries, who rehabilitate the pregnancy and childbirth tropes for writing that had been stripped of dignity by their male forebears. They do so in several different ways: by showing that negative examples of maternal authorship have been tainted in some way by patriarchal influence (Wollstonecraft, Fenwick, and Opie); by having their female characters identify motherhood as an enabling subject position from which to write (Wollstonecraft, Fenwick, Opie, and Smith); and/or by identifying themselves as mothers to their texts (Wollstonecraft and Smith).

As in her negative depictions of pregnancy when it is controlled by men, Wollstonecraft shows that pregnant women are unable to assert their own property rights and even individual subjectivity when they are under men’s dominion. Early on in her pregnancy, Maria reports that her husband had violated her personal space by breaking into her writing-desk:

But a wife being as much a man’s property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing she can call her own. He may use any means to get at what the law
considers as his, the moment his wife is in possession of it, even to the forcing of a lock, as Mr. Venables did, to search for notes in my writing-desk. (320-1)

Although the notes that Venables was searching for were undoubtedly bank notes (as this passage appears in the middle of Maria’s disquisition on the impossibility of a married woman retaining separate property from her husband), it is symbolically appropriate that it was his wife’s writing-desk that Venables broke into. Maria, as a wife, has no personal space or property that is beyond her husband’s grasp, and her own personal subjectivity, which she otherwise might be able to express via writing, is therefore compromised. This episode, which happens early in Maria’s pregnancy, also foreshadows the fact that another seemingly personal space—Maria’s womb—will be similarly open to Venable’s penetration and appropriation.

In making the materials within Maria’s writing-desk akin to the child that she carries within her womb, Wollstonecraft portrays the negative effects of such a correlation when men have access to women’s property and bodies; she also suggests these similarities, however, in order to embrace the childbirth trope as an empowering motivation—and even metaphor—for women’s writing. Just as Wollstonecraft’s novel demonstrates that, under the right circumstances, a woman could control the contents of her womb, so too does the novel suggest that using a maternal metaphor for writing could also help her to establish the legitimacy of female authorship while rejecting the male authors whose metaphors for writing excluded women altogether. It is, after all, the very fact of Maria’s motherhood that induces her to write her memoirs in the first place: “Addressing these memoirs to you, my child […] many observations will probably flow from my heart, which only a mother—a mother schooled in misery, could make” (293). As several critics have noted, Maria’s maternal identity takes shape as she writes the memoir intended for her daughter; through her memoirs, she hopes to shape her
daughter’s life as well (Moers 229; Langbauer 212; Maurer 37). Motherhood is thus deeply connected to writing in Maria; Laurie Langbauer even suggests that Maria is only a mother when she writes (212).

Wollstonecraft adds another layer to her conflation of motherhood and authorship; not only does Maria’s identification with motherhood allow her to become a writer in the novel, but Wollstonecraft herself also identifies as a mother to Maria. Just as she had connected violations of women’s writing with the violations of pregnant women’s bodies in the writing-desk incident in Maria, Wollstonecraft again acknowledges the parallelism between fetus and book manuscript in her fragmentary preface to the novel, in which she insists that her “sketches are not the abortion of a distempered fancy” (247). Maria is not the abortion of her fancy (that is, of her mind), but rather an embodied entity born of Wollstonecraft’s body. Though she does not posit what the sketches for her unfinished novel do comprise, her reference to “The sentiments I have embodied” (247) suggests that she looked upon her book as a child at some stage of embodiment, even if it was not fully embodied at the time when she wrote these musings. This metaphorical formulation of writing was not new to Wollstonecraft when she wrote Maria, however, as she had used similar language regarding embodying thoughts in her Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (1796).66 In describing “the origin of many poetical fictions,” Wollstonecraft had written that “In solitude, the imagination bodies forth its conceptions unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation” (54). Although Wollstonecraft is talking about the productions of the imagination in this passage, her usage of words like “bodies” and “conceptions” indicates that she cannot help but describe even the productions of her mind in embodied terms. It is telling that in a narrative in which

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motherhood had been very much on Wollstonecraft’s mind, she also “adore[s]” the “beings” that her imagination has created, as if they were her children.\footnote{Wollstonecraft’s first daughter Fanny was barely a year old when she undertook her Scandinavian travels. Jacqueline Labbe argues that Wollstonecraft presents herself primarily as a mother in the Letters. See Jacqueline M. Labbe, “The Romance of Motherhood,” Romanticism on the Net 26 (2002), para. 15.}

Wollstonecraft not only imagines giving an embodied birth to the products of her imagination, however; she also critiques the eighteenth-century paradigm of the brain-birth, an authorial metaphor that is disconnected from the female bodily processes normally associated with birth.\footnote{See the second chapter of this project for an extended discussion of novelists who elevated brain-birth metaphors for writing while disparaging metaphors for creativity based on female reproductive physiology.} In criticizing in the preface to Maria the typical variety of female heroine, who is too perfect to be mortal, Wollstonecraft simultaneously critiques the way in which their authors imagined these female characters coming into being: “heroines […] are to be born immaculate; and to act like goddesses of wisdom, just come forth highly finished Minervas from the head of Jove” (247). Wollstonecraft particularly objects to the idea that female characters are usually “highly finished” (that is, born as fully-formed adults who will not grow or develop as real daughters would), but her analogy of Minerva leaping from Jove’s head also implies that the authors she has in mind are male, and that they have no interest in acting as real parents—and certainly not as mothers—to their novels.\footnote{Laurie Langbauer suggests that Wollstonecraft was thinking specifically of authors like Rousseau and Richardson (214-5).} In a letter to Godwin that is presumably about her manuscript for The Wrongs of Woman, Wollstonecraft had also defended her novel as “more valuable” than the work of other writers admired by Godwin because it consisted of “the effusions of my own feelings and passions [rather] than the cold workings of the brain on the materials produced by the sense and imagination of other writers” (Letters 358). In rejecting the novelistic brain-births imagined by her eighteenth-century male predecessors as both passionless
and unrealistic, Wollstonecraft can assert that her novel is born of women’s suffering bodies, a fact that dignifies—and in fact justifies—her writing.\(^70\)

George Venables’ intrusion into Maria’s writing-desk (and this action’s implied violation of Maria’s discourse) has a counterpart in Fenwick’s *Secresy*, which depicts male characters who intentionally prevent a pregnant woman from writing. The pregnant Sibella is forbidden to write, first by her uncle Valmont, and then by Arthur Murden, her devoted though disappointed admirer. Before Sibella becomes pregnant, she uses the childbirth metaphor as a wildly productive metaphor for writing. “Oh dear, dear Miss Ashburn, I am writing a letter to you!” Sibella writes early in her correspondence with her friend, “And what was it but my power of thought, which gave birth to that affection which would impel me on with a rapidity that my pen cannot follow?” (44). When Sibella actually becomes pregnant, however, she stops writing the letters that constitute her side of the epistolary narrative not because of physical infirmity, but because of men’s interference. Although Sibella remarks that she can only “write at intervals” due to the bouts of “giddiness” that first herald her pregnancy (250), she is nevertheless able to pen lengthy letters to Caroline. After Sibella’s first unsuccessful escape attempt reveals her pregnancy to her uncle, however, Valmont confines her within his castle and refuses to allow her to continue her correspondence with Caroline (303). From this point on, Sibella never writes another letter. On the road during her second, successful escape attempt, Sibella wishes to write a letter to Caroline, but she is prevented from doing so by Arthur Murden, who selfishly decides to

\(^70\) In this way, I differ from critics like Laurie Langbauer and Dustin Friedman, who assume that Wollstonecraft wished to separate women’s physical and mental processes from one another. Though Langbauer argues that Wollstonecraft’s novel is “the product of a woman” (214-5), she goes on to posit that, for Wollstonecraft, the body is a metaphor for “something else”—the mind that produces thought rather than the womb that produces children (217). Friedman suggests that Wollstonecraft sets up a dichotomy between sexual reproduction on one hand and artistic creation on the other. See Dustin Friedman, “‘Parents of the Mind’: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Aesthetics of Productive Masculinity,” *Studies in Romanticism* 48.3 (2009), 435. By contrast, my argument dovetails with that of Mary Beth Tegan, who posits that in *Maria* Wollstonecraft reconsiders motherhood as a viable metaphor for creativity (359).
write the letter to Caroline himself so that he does not have to look at Sibella’s pregnant body (320). While other characters report Sibella’s words at various points in the narrative, particularly during the climactic scene with Clement and in the aftermath of her miscarriage, Sibella herself lapses, as far as the epistolary narrative is concerned, into silence—a silence that prefigures her death at the end of the novel. Sibella’s pregnancy never physically debilitates her until her miscarriage, which is brought on by the shock of learning about Clement’s marriage; she is thus not prevented from corresponding with her friend because of physical infirmities, but rather because of the patriarchal power—regardless of whether it is malevolent or benevolent—that Valmont and Murden successively exercise over her.

In *Adeline Mowbray*, Opie demonstrates that motherhood and authorship are compatible identities for women by contrasting Mrs. Mowbray, a negative example of maternal authorship, with her daughter Adeline, a positive example of the mother-author. Mrs. Mowbray is introduced to the reader as an intellectual woman who is too preoccupied with philosophy to attend to the day-to-day matters associated with running her household. That most daily household matters are unimportant to Adeline’s mother can be seen in the following passage: “She was often heard to interrupt two grave matrons in an interesting discussion of an accouchement, by asking them if they had read a new theological tract, or a pamphlet against the minister?” (145). Significantly, Mrs. Mowbray interrupts other women’s discussions of a lying-in (“accouchement”) in order to discuss philosophical issues, as if matters relating to the female body are inferior to theology or local politics and therefore not worth discussing. Furthermore, for Mrs. Mowbray, mothering and writing are nowhere more distinct occupations than when she writes, much like Walter Shandy, an ever-expanding educational treatise for the supposed benefit of her daughter. It quickly becomes clear that this treatise is meant to flatter Mrs. Mowbray’s self-importance rather than to
educate Adeline—as such, the work is never finished, and Adeline is instead given a practical education by her grandmother. Mrs. Mowbray’s error is that she treats motherhood and authorship as two separate enterprises—as if her literary labors are antithetical to the work that is required to raise her child. When Mrs. Mowbray tries to defend her conduct to Mrs. Pemberton by invoking “the voluminous manuscript on the subject [of Adeline’s education], which I wrote for her improvement,” Mrs. Pemberton gently rebukes her by asking, “But where was thy daughter; and how was she employed during the time that thou wert writing a book by which to educate her?” (257).

If Mrs. Mowbray assumes that intellectual work is superior to the work of mothering, Adeline’s own example proves that her mother is mistaken in this belief. Unlike Mrs. Mowbray, Adeline finds that motherhood and authorship complement one another. Soon after her daughter Editha’s birth, Adeline becomes an author in order to supplement her family’s income, which is under severe strain given her husband’s voracious appetites and eventual abandonment and disavowal of their marriage. Adeline finds the time and inclination to write even when her daughter is a mere infant, spending “all day in nursing and working for it, and every evening in writing stories and hymns to publish, which would, she hoped, one day be useful to her own child as well as to the children of others” (187). Despite her hardships, Adeline finds that “from a mother’s employments, from writing, and, above all, from the idea that by suffering she was making some atonement for her past sins, she derived consolation” (197). It is significant that, in both of these passages, Opie discusses Adeline’s maternal tasks alongside her character’s literary labors (“nursing and working […] and writing”) because these tasks are complementary and mutually reinforcing, particularly because both occupations involve caring for and educating children (Adeline’s daughter, as well as the other children who will read her stories and hymns).
Perhaps the best-known eighteenth-century author for whom motherhood and writing were compatible enterprises was Charlotte Smith, who built her entire literary career and reputation on her maternal identity. It is well known that Smith publicized her family’s hardships (including her husband’s abandonment of the family, her struggles in chancery court to secure her children’s estate, and her favorite daughter’s death) in order to establish a rationale for embarking upon a literary career; it is also widely recognized that Smith wrote her biographical circumstances—including her own maternal hardships—into a number of her poems and novels.\(^1\) What has not yet been remarked upon, however, is the fact that Smith’s maternal authorial identity also extended to her treatment of her literary texts themselves.\(^2\) In her prefaces to *Emmeline* and *Desmond*, as well as in her personal correspondence, Smith treats her novelistic productions like children, as well as the means by which she will provide for her other children. Such rhetorical maneuvers align Smith’s novel-mothering with Wollstonecraft’s insistence that *Maria*, as an embodied entity born of her body and her passions, is yet another one of her daughters.

Smith’s preface to her first novel, *Emmeline*, is a poem titled “To My Children,” in which she establishes her authorial persona as an unfortunate mother who writes in the hopes that her

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\(^1\) For in-depth discussions of Smith’s construction and deployment of a maternal authorial identity, see Jacqueline Labbe, “Selling One’s Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry,” *Wordsworth Circle* 25 (1994), 68; Richard C. Taylor, “‘The Evils I was Born to Bear’: Two Letters from Charlotte Smith to Thomas Cadell,” *Modern Philology* 91.3 (1994), 313; and Diane E. Boyd, “‘Professing Drudge’: Charlotte Smith’s Negotiation of a Mother-writer Author Function,” *South Atlantic Review* 66.1 (2001), 145-66. Boyd argues that after Smith created her mother-writer identity, she tried (in vain) to distance herself from that identity because she felt limited by it (149); I, on the other hand, argue that Smith did not feel trapped or limited by her maternal authorial identity because motherhood and authorship were mutually reinforcing occupations. For discussions of the autobiographical elements in Smith’s novels, see Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith*, 3-4, 100.

\(^2\) In “The Romance of Motherhood,” Jacqueline Labbe discusses the ways in which Smith’s sonnets about her dead daughter reconstitute that daughter via poetry (para. 14). Though Labbe has studied the ways in which Smith writes herself as a mother to her dead daughter in her poems, she does not extend her argument to Smith’s treatment of maternal tropes for writing.
children will meet a “happier fate” (line 27) than hers. Though Smith is “O’er whelm’d with sorrow” (line 1), she insists that “Maternal love, the fiend Despair withstand, / Still animate the heart and guide the hand” (lines 9-10) that strums the “plaintive lyre” (line 8)—that is, Smith’s love for her children will enable her continued literary productivity, which she undertakes on their behalf despite her own despair. In a letter to her friend and patron William Hayley dated shortly after the novel’s publication, however, Smith turns her maternal attentions to the novel itself by writing a humorous dialogue in which she relates an encounter she had had earlier that day with the bookseller William Lane, who had paid her a visit in order to buy the copyright to the wildly successful *Emmeline* and any future books she might write.

The conversation opens with Lane’s attempts to have Smith promise her next novel to his publishing house, the Minerva Press, to which Smith responds that “‘Whatever may be my intention Sir, as to disposing of it, I am and have been long engaged to Mr Cadell’” (505). Though in this initial exchange, she positions herself as a lady being courted by an inelegant and unworthy suitor (the Minerva Press had a reputation for publishing sensationalist and subpar fiction), as the scene develops, Smith transitions from being the object wooed to the mother who defends her daughter from a disgraceful match. On two occasions, Smith takes care to emphasize that the copyright of *Emmeline* belongs to her (506). Since the passage of the Statute of Anne in 1710, the reasoning behind copyright ownership was based upon the assumption that an author is like a parent (most commonly, a father) to his literary text. It is telling that in her reconstruction of this exchange, Smith refers to her novel by its subtitle, *The Orphan of the Castle*, which further underscores the childlike, helpless nature of the text and her protective feelings toward it as William Lane attempts to have her sell him the rights to print it. Lane’s desire to put the novel

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into “extensive circulation” (506) sounds very much like he intends (at least from Smith’s point of view) to prostitute *Emmeline* to the public. Along with the fact that Smith dedicated her first novel to her children, her refusal to entertain Lane’s proposals for *Emmeline* suggests not only her belief that maternal love enables her literary production, but also that her novel is, in a sense, a child who must be protected from the questionable motives of bookseller-suitors like William Lane. In her final word on her conversation with Lane, Smith triumphantly reports to Hayley that “I think I have done right in repulsing forever his pert advances” (506), a comment that once again highlights Smith’s construction of the sexual and exploitative nature of Lane’s offers (“pert advances”) whether they are directed at the author-mother or novel-daughter.

Smith continues to discuss her novels as children in her preface to *Desmond*, which opens with the following declaration: “In sending into the world a work so unlike those of my former writings, which have been honoured by its approbation, I feel some degree of that apprehension which an Author is sensible of on a first publication” (45). Two paragraphs later, Smith bolsters the analogy of her book being like one of her offspring being sent into the world when she explains that *Desmond* is the story of “a young man, nourishing an ardent but concealed passion for a married woman” (45). If Smith had discussed *Emmeline* as a daughter who needed her mother to protect her from unsavory bookseller-suitors, she now treats *Desmond* as a son whose misguided adulterous passion cannot be condoned, though his feelings turn out to be “generous and disinterested” (45). In a familiar move, Smith then offers her maternity as the main justification for becoming an author herself: “I however, may safely say, that it was in the observance, not in the breach of duty, I became an Author” (46). Smith’s attentive mothering to her numerous, needy children is, as always, her primary impetus for writing, but her maternal concern extends to her novelistic productions as well. These books are children who must grow
and learn—they are far from perfect Minervas. This realization suggests that mothering books (like mothering children) takes work—work that male authors didn’t acknowledge that they were putting in to the creation of their literary productions (particularly those about female subjects).

If the female novelists discussed in this chapter were willing to use tropes associated with motherhood to describe their relationships to their literary productions, it was because they did not feel that the processes that bring children into the world—pregnancy and childbirth—are grotesque bodily processes to which women passively submit. Late-eighteenth-century novelists like Smith, Fenwick, Wollstonecraft, and Opie proudly assert the female reproductive body’s strength, as well as the choices that women have to identify (or not) as mothers and to construct their own families, provided that patriarchal laws don’t interfere. What enables women to identify as both mothers and authors is the realization that both are roles that can be adopted or discarded. In closing, I should like to consider the case of Eliza Fenwick, who briefly toyed with pregnancy’s possibilities as a productive trope for writing in Secresy, but who nevertheless repeatedly demonstrates in the novel the ways in which motherhood and authorship are incompatible in a patriarchal culture that actively works to separate these two roles. If Fenwick is the only author I consider in this chapter who did not refer to her novel as her child, it is perhaps because she found herself less productive as an author when she had the duties of a mother to attend to. Little is known about Fenwick’s life during the time that she wrote Secresy, but in the years that followed the novel’s publication, Fenwick wrote numerous children’s books, though fewer and fewer as time went by and the demands of motherhood consumed her (due in large part to her husband’s frequent absences from the family). Fenwick’s struggles to balance her writing and mothering are a reminder of the constant challenges that female authors faced—and

74 Fenwick wrote on numerous occasions that “[m]y children are my life” (qtd. in Grundy, Introduction 16).
of the repeated justifications that they needed—in order to make authorship and motherhood compatible with one another. Fenwick’s case also serves as a warning that mother-authors are always in danger of being silenced because, as Rich reminds us, “the ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity” beyond motherhood (22). Just as the novelists in this chapter found ways of extending their maternal identities into the public sphere as authors, so too did the female Romantic poets, whom I shall explore in the next chapter, resist the expectation that motherhood and authorship were incompatible, despite the self-abnegating nature of eighteenth-century maternity as it had been constructed by male writers.

75 Rich recalls that when she became pregnant for the first time, she stopped writing poetry—indeed, she stopped thinking of herself as a poet at all (26).
CHAPTER 4

“Say I liv’d to give thee being”: Re-writing the Mother’s Legacy in the Pregnancy Poetry of Jane Cave, Isabella Kelly, and Anna Letitia Barbauld

I

The first three chapters of this project have focused on novels about pregnancy by both men and women from the early decades of the eighteenth century through the early years of the nineteenth century. I have argued that Eliza Haywood’s astonishingly prolific output of novels and short fiction concerning pregnant women’s agency became increasingly anomalous during the middle decades of the eighteenth-century, as the publication of Samuel Richardson’s sequel to Pamela ushered in a new era of male novelistic authority in writing about pregnancy and childbirth that culminated in Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, a novel in which pregnancy and birth are not just disabling for women’s bodies and speech, but for any writer who uses the tropes of gestation and childbirth for literary creation. As the eighteenth century drew to a close, women resumed writing novels that dealt with the subjects of pregnancy and birth in order to authorize women’s speech on these subjects.

The novel was not the only genre of imaginative literature that engaged with pregnancy at this time, however. Though there were fewer poems than novels about pregnancy and childbirth published during the eighteenth century, as Isobel Grundy points out, “some of the most speaking accounts of the developing foetus and of birth itself come from poetry,” although her extensive research for the Orlando Project suggests that, in general, women wrote less about pregnancy and childbirth than they did about other topics related to motherhood and physical
health.¹ Tristanne Connolly concurs with Grundy when she states that “British women poets of [Anna Letitia] Barbauld’s time much preferred to focus on the relationships between mothers and children already born.”² Anne Mellor also alludes to the dearth of women writing about the physical experience of pregnancy when she suggests that women Romantic authors tended to engage with motherhood on a social rather than a biological level, focusing on the mother’s role in the physical and mental development of the child after its birth.³

Though poems about pregnancy by women are relatively rare during the British Romantic period, they are nevertheless significant objects of study because they differ markedly from pregnancy poems written by women in earlier eras. While poems about pregnancy and childbirth published prior to the late eighteenth century focused almost exclusively on the fetus or newborn, Romantic poems about gestation and parturition focus primarily on the pregnant mother and her thoughts, feelings, and fears about these physical processes. Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible” (c. 1799) is a frequently anthologized and discussed Romantic poem about maternity (and, certainly, about gestation); for this reason alone it is necessary to understand better the literary context of the poetry of pregnancy. In recent years, critics have paid a significant amount of attention to the biographical and medical-historical circumstances surrounding Barbauld’s composition of “Invisible Being,” but they have paid very little attention to the poem’s relationship to the

¹ Grundy’s paper reports on some preliminary findings of the Orlando Project, an online database of women writers and literary history sponsored by the University of Alberta. After running keyword searches on pregnancy and childbirth, Grundy concludes that “there is less a description of, and comment on, pregnancy and childbirth than on other health issues, or on death” which might be due to “a reticence on the part of women writers about the female body, whether their own or somebody else’s.” See Isobel Grundy, “Delivering Childbirth: Orlando Project Encoding,” The Orlando Project (2001), para. 33, 68.


pregnancy poetry of her female peers and forebears. Roger Lonsdale, in the subject index to his *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* anthology, was perhaps the first scholar to note that Barbauld’s poem bears a striking resemblance to two other late-eighteenth-century poems about unborn children: Jane Cave’s “Written a few Hours Before the Birth of a Child” (1786) and Isabella Kelly’s “To an Unborn Infant” (1794). Andrea Henderson and Tristanne Connolly are the only critics who have so far attempted to put two or three of these pregnancy poems into conversation with one another, although both critics tend to amplify the differences amongst the poets’ points of view regarding obstetric medicine. Henderson argues that Kelly’s poem offers a more positive reading of the birth experience than Barbauld’s. Connolly, by contrast, argues that Barbauld is “at odds with her fellow women writers” (214) because her poem creates a rosy vision of gestation and childbirth influenced by Darwinian biological principles, while Cave’s and Kelly’s poems paint much darker pictures of the pain, suffering, and probable death of the laboring woman, and perhaps of her child as well (211-3). When all three poems are studied together, however, it becomes clear that they convey all of these meanings simultaneously. Although Cave’s and Kelly’s poems do have dark sides, they also suggest that the mother is a source of wisdom, and that her body is able to protect her child. Furthermore, even though Barbauld celebrates pregnant women’s reproductive capacities, she also acknowledges the patriarchal control that is lurking at the threshold of the lying-in chamber, waiting to reassert itself over mother and child.

By providing extended readings of the pregnancy poems of all three authors, I demonstrate that Cave, Kelly, and Barbauld are responsible for three significant innovations in the poetry of parturition that set their pregnancy poems apart from those that were written by

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their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century forebears. First, they altered the focus of women’s pregnancy poetry from a concern for male figures and the fetus to a focus on women’s agency in the processes of pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. While these poetic renderings of pregnancy owe some of their imagery and language to contemporary obstetric science, they nonetheless reject obstetric medicine’s tendency to disavow the mother’s central role in childbearing; however, the poems also acknowledge that the mother will ultimately lose control over her baby due to patriarchal social norms that defined children as the father’s property.

Secondly, these Romantic poems about gestation drastically revised the “mother’s legacy” genre (in which a mother who is dying addresses a piece of writing to her child in order to guide its future conduct) by emphasizing not the child’s future life and conduct, but rather the mother’s concern for the preservation of her own legacy in her poetry. Finally, Cave, Kelly, and Barbauld were invested in representing the birth of their literary productions as well as the birth of children, which suggests that they viewed as compatible their roles as both mothers and authors.

II

Seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century poems about birth can be classified into two general categories—those that were composed after the death of a newly born or miscarried child and, less commonly, those in which the speaker is pregnant and nervously anticipating possible death in childbirth. Prominent examples of these two types of poems are Mary Carey’s “Upon ye Sight of my abortive Birth ye 31th: of December 1657” and Anne Bradstreet’s “Before the Birth of one of her Children” (published posthumously in 1678), respectively. In both poems, the mother (whether pregnant or newly delivered) lives in a world that is managed by men—

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The greater number of poems composed on the death of infants bolsters Grundy’s claim that death seemed to be more of an impetus than birth for the composition of occasional poetry.
specifically, by husbands, sons, and a male divinity who wields ultimate control over the outcome of pregnancy. For instance, although the blame that the speaker in Carey’s poem (who is presumably Carey herself) takes upon herself for her “abortive Birth” might appear to suggest that she could have done something to influence the outcome of her pregnancy, her comments reveal that only total submission to divine will could have saved her child, which means that God (not the speaker) was actually in control of her pregnancy. After Carey asks God “why he took in hand his rodd” against her, she imagines God’s response to her: “Thou often dost present me wth dead frute; / why should not my returns, they presents sute: / Dead dutys; prayers; praises thou dost bring, / affections dead; dead hart in every thinge” (lines 34, 39-42).\(^6\) Carey assumes that her failure to perform her religious duties sincerely has invited God to punish her in kind by presenting her with “dead frute” from her womb as a symbol of her own lifeless spiritual offerings. The more troubling miscarriage for Carey, however, is the miscarriage of her “hart” (73), for, as she professes, God’s “will’s more dear to me; then any Child” (14). It is only through total submission and obedience to God—whose masculinity is further emphasized by his power to impregnate (“Quicken”) the speaker with his “word” and “Spirit” (78-9, 83-4)—that the speaker can hope to achieve “Love; Joy; peace” and other desirable qualities (87-89). Her abortive fetus is a metaphor for her lifeless words (which in turn represent her spiritual life), all of which need the quickening power of a male divinity to bring them to life.\(^7\)


\(^7\) Donna Long points out that certain elegiac conventions tend to “deny subjectivity” to the speaker, including “submission to God’s will.” Overall, however, Long reads Carey’s poem as empowering for the speaker because she negotiates with God and creates tension (though unintentionally) between her anger at and acceptance of divine will. See Donna J. Long, “‘It is a lovely bonne I make to thee’: Mary Carey’s ‘abortive Birth’ as Recuperative Religious Lyric,” *Discovering and (Re)Covering the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Eugene
The speaker in Bradstreet’s poem “Before the Birth of one of her Children” similarly assumes that a male god (as well as her earthly husband) has the authority to control the outcome of her pregnancy and the future course of her children’s lives. Bradstreet (who is presumably the speaker) addresses the poem to her husband, bidding him farewell in the event that she dies in childbirth. She acknowledges that death is a “sentence most irrevocable” passed by a god who has the power to “grant” the number of days that each person lives (lines 5, 14). Bradstreet’s impending childbirth makes her especially concerned that she may “see not half my dayes that’s due” (13), so she implores her husband to make certain that the children she leaves behind are not abused by a new stepmother, should he remarry (20-24). Bradstreet’s speaker thus depends upon two male figures; she must rely upon God to carry her safely through childbirth, and upon her husband to care for her children if God fails to protect her. Critics who have written about the physical aspects of maternity in Bradstreet’s poetry have argued that the empowering (and even transgressive) potential of the female body and its metaphors in many of Bradstreet’s poems should not be underestimated. Jean Marie Lutes argues that Bradstreet’s writings “confronted and transformed definitions of female physical nature, using reproductive discourse as a metaphor for power and constructing a female body that could legitimately produce not only children but ideas as well.” Kimberly Latta similarly contends that Bradstreet, as an “artist-

R. Cunnar and Jeffry Johnson (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 256, 257-8. I would argue, however, that this is one of the main differences between Carey’s maternal elegy, which does not overtly intend to question God’s will where the fate of children are concerned, and later pregnancy poetry, whose authors create such tension intentionally.

8 In a poem written on the occasion of her month-old grandson’s death in November 1669, Bradstreet claims that the child was “Cropt by th’Almighties hand” because “Such was his will” (lines 4, 6). It is likely, then, that the God who has the power to grant a long or a short life in “Before the Birth of one of her Children” is also male. See Anne Bradstreet, “On my dear Grand-child Simon Bradstreet, Who dyed on 16. Novemb. 1669. being but a moneth, and one day old,” *Kissing the Rod*, ed. Germaine Greer, Susan Hastings, Jeslyn Medoff, and Melinda Sansone (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux Press, 1989): 138.

mother,” validates the worldly worth of her children and her poetry (which she figures as her children). While Lutes and Latta both mount compelling cases that Bradstreet’s understanding of her sex’s capabilities went far beyond that allotted to her by seventeenth-century Puritan culture, both critics also acknowledge that Bradstreet claimed power through her maternal body in her more secular poems. Because Bradstreet’s “Before the Birth” is firmly embedded in Christian ideology, however, it does not contain the disruptive elements that Lutes and Latta argue can be found in her other, more secular poems about motherhood (most of which are set after the birth of children).

If these seventeenth-century examples of pregnancy and childbirth poetry tended to place the most emphasis on the mother’s indebtedness to God and to husband, early-eighteenth-century poems written about children’s births instead treated the newborn child as centrally important, and the mother, when not entirely obscured, as of secondary importance. Mehetabel Wright’s “To an Infant Expiring the Second Day of its Birth” and Elizabeth Boyd’s “On the Death of an Infant of five Days old, being a beautiful but abortive Birth,” both published in 1733, are two examples of this kind of poem. Although both poems’ titles indicate that the babies are dead at the time of each poem’s composition, they are set during the newly born infants’ dying moments. The speaker in Wright’s poem to her dying infant expresses her anguish only indirectly by filtering it through the newborn’s perception, a rhetorical maneuver that assumes that the baby’s perspective is of primary importance: “Oh! regard a mother’s moan [...] Ere your orbs

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11 Lutes notes, for instance, that Bradstreet does not associate the pains of pregnancy and childbirth with sin or the state of her soul, as she does with other kinds of bodily suffering (323). Latta similarly posits that Bradstreet’s affirmation of her children’s (and poetry’s) earthly value gestures toward secular values (59).
extinguished be, / Bend their trembling beams on me” (9, 13-14).12 Wright’s speaker also places herself in an inferior position to her god-like infant when she begs it to “Hear a suppliant! Let me be / Partner in thy destiny!” (19-20).

Boyd’s poem is even more specific than Wright’s about the dying infant’s superior social position to the mother-speaker, as the male infant—who is a surrogate for his father—is oblivious to the mother-speaker’s grief.13 According to Isobel Grundy’s reading of the poem, “[e]motional response to miscarriage, or premature birth, is presented as an exclusively female experience, no matter how Boyd may regret male inability to feel it” (Grundy, “Delivering” para. 69). It would appear, in fact, that all males, even the very youngest boys, share the same indifference to female woe. In the poem, Boyd is in the process of losing her “first-born son” (4), an infant that is so like his father that he has “The father’s form all o’er, the father’s face” (12). Although the speaker experiences profound anguish at the death of her child, she closes the poem by wishing that “the stern-souled sex” (19) could sympathize with her grief. The dying infant’s “cherub smile” (13), as well as his many other similarities to his father, however, suggest that father and son are alike in their obliviousness to the mother’s pain and suffering on their behalf. Boyd’s poem values the mother’s feelings about her miscarriage, but the men in the poem do not.

Boyd wrote several other poems about gestation and birth, and though they do not fit the mold of either maternal lament or hymn of praise to a divine being, both focus on fetal growth and development rather than on the mother’s experiences during pregnancy and parturition. In Variety, a lengthy and eccentric poem on the subject of changefulness published in 1727, Boyd


uses the “Embrio” (23) as a prototypical example of variety.\textsuperscript{14} Her description of the developing fetus suggests its unlimited potential for epigenetic growth:

- Observe the Mass, whiles yet a Chaos’d Ball,
- See the nice Texture of the fluid Caul;
- See how the lumpous Matter, Substance gets
- See how the purplous Life each Minute knits;
- See how the Limbs, are fashion’d, how the Heart,
- See how meer Nature treads on curious Art;
- See how the growing Feature aims to Charm,
- See how the Lungs, the Vocal Organ’s Arm,
- Ask the brisk Eye, Why ’twill such Glances give,
- Ask the young Minuture why it will live;
- See Active Spirits, how they Reinstate;
- See the Lip cherryed, see the Pulses beat…
- Look, how the Sinew ties the supple Joint,
- How Intellects are Bodied, next depaint;
- Tell how the Soul receives the first Impress,
- Tell how it feels a Joy, how a Distress. (23-4)

Boyd’s description of fetal growth suggests that the embryo (as a force of “Nature”), rather than the mother and her “curious Art,” is responsible for shaping itself into being; this description is hardly surprising given the questioning of maternal imagination theory that was taking place during the 1720s. In giving her readers a view into a pregnant womb, however, Boyd does not

\textsuperscript{14} Elizabeth Boyd, \textit{Variety: A Poem} (Westminster: T. Warner and B. Creake, 1727): 1-72. Because the lines are not numbered in this edition, the page numbers from this poem are cited in text.
mention the pregnant woman at all, an omission that implies that the child is the most 
significant—and perhaps even the only—agent in the gestational process. Furthermore, only 
seven lines after her description of the developing embryo, Boyd introduces her readers to a fond 
mother who is tormented by her “only Boy” who “Spurns her Advice, and tramples on her 
Threats” (24). Although Boyd does not specify if the wayward boy in question is an older 
version of the active embryo described only a few lines earlier, their close proximity to each 
other suggests that the embryo could also be gendered male. It would seem, then, that the 
children in Boyd’s poems about maternity are always male, and that the mother and her feelings 
are always ignored both during and after pregnancy.

Boyd’s poem “Macareus to Aeolus,” printed in the same volume as Variety, similarly 
suggests that the activity of the (probably male) fetus is capable of completely overwhelming, 
and even destroying, its mother.15 As Boyd informs her reader in the poem’s preface, she had 
often read John Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s “Canace and Macareus” from The Heroides, but 
she had “often wondred” why Macareus had never responded to Canace’s epistle to him, so her 
poem imagines what Macareus might have said to his father, Aeolus, after learning of Canace’s 
suicide.16 As Canace had done in her own poetic epistle, Macareus recounts the events 
surrounding the birth of their child:

Whilom, the striving Babe forces its way,

15 Elizabeth Boyd, “Marcus to Aeolus,” Variety: A Poem (Westminster: T. Warner and B. Creake, 1727): 77-86. All in-text citations from this poem refer to page numbers from this volume.

16 Elizabeth Boyd, “To the Reader,” Preface, “Marcus to Aeolus,” Variety: A Poem (Westminster: T. Warner and B. Creake, 1727), [76]. According to Ovid’s version of the mythological story, as translated by Dryden, Canace and Macareus were twin siblings (the children of Aeolus, God of the wind) who fell in love with each other. They carried on a clandestine, incestuous sexual relationship that resulted in Canace’s pregnancy. Canace gave birth to a son in secret, but Aeolus discovered the child when it cried out as the nurse was trying to sneak it out of the house. As a result, Aeolus ordered that the child should be left to die in the wilderness; to Canace, he sent a sword with the message that “her Crimes would instruct her how to use it.” Before committing suicide, Canace sent an epistle (which is Ovid’s poem) to Macareus. See John Dryden, “Canace to Macareus,” The Poems of John Dryden, ed. John Sargeaunt (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1925): 512-4.
And with new Heavings bursts to open Day […]
Th’ ill-fated Infant, born to be our Shame;
Swift, as descending Gods in Whirlwinds came;
Th’ unartful Babe, no studied Art foreknows:

Pungent’s Birth-pains, more feeling After-throws. (82)

As Grundy observes, these lines articulate “contemporary medical opinion” that “the baby was responsible for fighting its way out” of the womb (“Delivering” para. 72). I should like to add that the “striving” child’s activity in giving birth to itself implies that it is gendered male, even though Boyd does not specify the infant’s sex, as contemporary medical wisdom held that male fetuses were more active than female fetuses. The manner of the baby’s birth, which is as “Swift” as “descending Gods in Whirlwinds,” also links the child to its grandfather Aeolus, the God of wind, a likeness suggesting that the infant has inherited Aeolus’s godlike powers, if not his sex. Perhaps the most compelling evidence that the child of Canace and Macareus is a boy, however, is that it is gendered male in Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s poem: “The Babe, as if he heard what thou hadst sworn, / With hasty Joy Sprung forward to be born” (lines 71-2).

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17 The earliest midwifery manuals penned in English held that a male fetus would be more physically active than a female fetus, a belief that persisted into the eighteenth century. In The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives (1513), Eucharius Rösslin had argued that boys were easier to deliver than girls, presumably because they had greater strength. Jane Sharp had also noted in The Midwives Book (1671) that “a Boy is sooner and easier brought forth than a Girle,” in large part because “women are lustier [healthier] that are with Child with Boys.” Cordelia Fine notes that such gendered assumptions about fetal activity have even persisted into the twenty-first century, as studies have shown that women who know they are pregnant with male fetuses tend to describe the unborn child’s activity in more vigorous terms than do women who know they are pregnant with females. See Eucharius Rösslin, The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives, 1513, When Midwifery Became the Male Physician’s Province, trans. Wendy Arons (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1994), 47; Jane Sharp, The Midwives Book, 1671, ed. Elaine Hobby (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 130; and Cordelia Fine, Delusions of Gender (New York: Norton, 2010), 192-3.

18 The fetus in “Macareus to Aeolus” would appear, as is the fetus in Variety, to be a force of nature that the mother’s body is powerless to contain.

19 The infant in Dryden’s poem is also responsible for his own birth.
other Boyd poems, the ill-fated male infant born in “Macareus to Aeolus” is oblivious to the pain and anguish he has caused his mother. Although Canace does not die as a result of the physiological effects of childbirth in any version of the story, the birth of her child leads to her death just the same.

Most of these early examples of pregnancy poems are not “mothers’ legacies” because they are addressed to dead or dying infants. Furthermore, most early modern mothers’ legacies were written in prose forms like letters, family histories, and dialogues. Nevertheless, both prose mothers’ legacies (which I do not examine here) and pre-Romantic pregnancy poems are similar in that they focus on God, family members, and/or the child’s future moral and spiritual conduct rather than on the mother herself. I argue in the following sections (on Cave, Kelly, and Barbauld, respectively) that Romantic-era pregnancy poems differed from their predecessors in that they combined and modified aspects of both early modern pregnancy poetry and prose mothers’ legacies. As pregnancy poems, they shifted their focus from a reliance on God, husbands, and children to an interest in the mother, her feelings, and her agency. Rather than writing poems set during the post-partum period, or discussing birth from a physically or temporally removed viewpoint, these authors wrote poems about pregnancy and birth from the mother’s point of view. Indeed, the mother’s primary importance for these authors is demonstrable in the very fact that they wrote about pregnancy in the first place, as writing about pregnancy inevitably focuses on the visible mother rather than on the invisible fetus. This shift in focus created a new kind of mother’s legacy, one that is as much about the mother’s preservation of her own legacy in her writings as it is about the child’s future life and conduct.

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20 “Th’ unartful Babe” does not have the art to “foreknow” the “Birth-pains” and “After-throws” he causes his mother to experience (Boyd, “Macareus to Aeolus” 82).

III

Jane Cave’s poetry about pregnancy, published in all but the first edition of her *Poems on Various Subjects*, marks an important transition between poems that reveal the pregnant woman’s resignation to a male deity and those that begin to question the justice of such a deity’s pronouncements. *Poems on Various Subjects* (the first edition of which was published in 1783 just before the author’s marriage) reads like a kind of poetic record of Cave’s life, as well as of many political events in England and abroad. To each new edition of *Poems*, published in 1786, 1789, 1794, and 1795, she added new poems about events in her life, including often substantially revised versions of many of her earlier poems. Cave is mostly remembered in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary criticism for her religious poems emphasizing her devotion to her Welsh Calvinist Methodist beliefs and her reverence for male spiritual leaders such as George Whitefield and Howel Harris. However, her poems about pregnancy (as well as another poem written not long after the birth of her second child) complicate the pious submission that is evident in her more overtly religious verse, as Cave takes it upon herself time and again to advise God on how to manage her family. A series of four poems about pregnancy appear beginning in the 1786 edition of Cave’s *Poems*: “Written a few Hours Before the Birth of a Child,” “To My Dear Child,” “To My Child, If a Son,” and “To My Child, If a Daughter.” The first poem in the series is different from the others because Cave addresses it to God, whereas

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22 Although Cave was married and would have been known by her married name of Winscom when most of the later editions of her poetry were published, I call her by her birth name (Cave) because all of the subsequent title pages of *Poems* continue to identify the author as “Miss Cave, now Mrs. W—” (1786, 1789) or “Miss Cave, now Mrs. Winscom” (1794, 1795). Unless otherwise noted, all of the Cave poems that I cite in this chapter are the versions printed in the 1795 edition of *Poems on Various Subjects*.

she addresses the following three poems to her unborn child. Although ostensibly a plea for resignation to divine will whatever the outcome of childbirth, “Written a few Hours” actively intervenes in the process, something that her subsequent poems addressed to the unborn child do as well. Rather than accepting God’s will, Cave repeatedly attempts to shape the future course of her child’s life in unexpected and often self-interested ways—in “Written” by hoping for the baby’s death if she should die, and in the other poems by using her own experiences to educate her child. This is an important step away from earlier childbirth poems, whose authors more frequently relinquished control over the birth process and its outcome. For late-eighteenth-century poets like Cave, the tension between the spiritual and the secular in matters related to maternity is more fully realized than it is in Bradstreet’s poetry about motherhood.  

“Written a few Hours before the Birth of a Child” at first seems to suggest that the pregnant speaker is, much like the speaker in Mary Carey’s poem, passive and dependent upon God, as Cave’s poem is also a prayer whose first three stanzas suggest that the speaker has relinquished any hopes of controlling the situation and has put herself in God’s hands. Cave entreats God to “prepare” her for and “uphold” her during “that hour / When most thy aid I want” (1-3). As if anticipating that she may at some point wish to fight for control or rebel against God’s will for her, she asks for “patience to submit / To what shall best thy goodness please” (6-7). Not only does the speaker appear to trust that God knows what is best for her, but she even anticipates joyful acceptance of a potentially horrifying death in childbirth:

Come pain, or agony, or death,

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24 Though Latta makes a compelling argument that Anne Bradstreet’s poetry about motherhood evinces a tension between her religious beliefs and an investment in the worldly value of her children, she concedes that Bradstreet communicates this tension indirectly and without fully articulating its implications (70).

If such the will divine;
With joy shall I give up my breath,
If resignation’s mine. (9-12)

Cave’s faith in the wisdom and justice of God allows her to extol calmly the hardships that she may have to endure (“pain, or agony, or death”) as a result of entrusting herself to him. In these early stanzas of the poem, Cave’s resignation to “the will divine” also echoes Bradstreet’s acknowledgment that God’s “sentence [...] is most irrevocable” (“Before” 5).

Despite her resignation to “the will divine,” Cave nevertheless displays a desire to subvert God’s plans for her by interfering in the outcome of her birth experience in an unexpected way. Rather than praying to survive childbirth, she asks instead that, “[i]f death thy pleasure be / O may the harmless babe I bear / Haply expire with me” (14-16). The poem’s startling turn in its final lines suggests that Cave does not want to be excluded from the family circle by her death—rather than having her child live on without her (and perhaps with a stepsister if her husband remarries), she prefers to keep the mother-child bond intact, even if it is in the grave. This stanza also demonstrates Cave’s conviction that she has the right to advise God on how life-and-death matters relating to her family ought to be handled.

Though such subversion would appear to be unlikely for a devout Christian like Cave, such unorthodox moments are not at all unusual in Cave’s body of poetry on religious subjects. “An Invocation to Death,” for instance, is a poem in which Cave prays to death rather than to God to release her from the pain caused by her excruciating headaches. Similarly, in “To Solitude,” Cave addresses the “hallow’d influence / Of Solitude” (26-7), the “gentle nurse of pleasing woe” (1) to whom she unburdens her “conscious heart” (13) and “tender sorrows”
The female-gendered solitude of her poem “can time and space controul, / And swift transport my fleeing soul, / To all it holds most dear!” (22-4), God-like powers that are not entirely erased by the speaker’s more conventional turn toward the Judeo-Christian God in the final stanzas. Furthermore, in “Love, The Essence of Religion,” Cave moves beyond doctrinal Christianity to declare that those who follow organized religion are empty if they do not personally feel love:

What! If with Calvin I agree,

Or to Arminian doctrines flee,

I still remain a child of sin,

If love does not preside within. (9-12)

In much of her poetry, then, Cave moves beyond conventional Christian ideas in order to address her concept of God on her own terms. In this context, then, Cave’s transgressive prayer in “Written a few Hours Before the Birth of a Child” is much less surprising than it otherwise might be. The poem’s surprising turn in its final lines indicates Cave’s conviction that, because she is a mother, she knows best—even better than God—what her child needs. As Cave’s other pregnancy poems will reinforce, the world is a treacherous place in which it would be unadvisable for a child to survive without the protection and guidance of its mother. Cave’s desire to have her newborn join her in death is also subtly yet significantly different from


28 In her comments on this poem, Connolly argues that Cave is specifically thinking of the necessity of the mother’s breast milk for her child, as contemporary treatises on nursing held that the biological mother’s milk was the healthiest (both physically and morally) for her infant, a fact that rendered the mother’s post-natal role indispensable (“Anna Barbauld,” 212). Furthermore, because Cave’s poetry is centrally concerned with her connections to other women, as well as with issues that are intimately related to women’s lives (Messem 6), it is not unlikely that Cave would consider pregnancy and birth as domains that are best understood and managed by women.
Mehetabel Wright’s wish to follow her infant into the grave; while Wright’s desire to follow her baby into death suggests passive acceptance of her fate, Cave’s wish implies that the mother has the power to choose her fate and can guide her child into death, just as she might have guided it into life. Cave thus invests herself with the agency to protect her own and her child’s best interests simultaneously.

Three additional poems addressed to the speaker’s unborn child also reveal Cave’s desire to shape and guide it in the event that the baby survives. These poems emphasize the importance of the mother’s influence on her children even more forcefully than does “Written a few Hours before the Birth of a Child.” In “To My Dear Child,” Cave once again attempts to submit to divine will, only to continue to assert her own will despite her best intentions.29 She repeats her wish (first expressed in “Written a few Hours”) that the newborn would die with her rather than live without her, although in this poem, she elaborates upon her reasons for desiring the child’s death. Not only will the infant “ne’er […] know a mother’s care” (18) if she dies, but, as she informs the unborn child,

Perhaps some rude ungentle hand
Thy infant footsteps may command;
Who void of tenderness and thought,
Too harshly menaces each fault.
Oh; thought too poignant! may’st thou die,
And breathless with thy mother lie. (19-24)

Cave somewhat paradoxically prefers to have her child die than to experience cruel treatment from a future guardian. Indeed, she acknowledges the transgressive nature of these lines, for she

immediately endeavors to defuse her wish by demurring from interfering in “Heavn’s designs” (23) and asking instead for “resignation” (24). However, immediately after ostensibly accepting “the Almighty will” (25), she begins the following stanza with lines that indicate she has not entirely accepted “Heavn’s designs” after all: “Perhaps I yet may live to see / My child grow up, and comfort me” (26-27). In fact, the speaker goes on to imagine a scenario according to which she could keep watch over her child even if the worst should happen: “And if I die---perhaps my shade / Thy infant footsteps may pervade” (28-29). If Cave is able to linger on earth after her death, she will be able to, as she informs her child, “guard thee whilst in soft repose” (34).

Cave clearly does not intend to disappear from her child’s memory after her death; indeed, according to the logic of the poem this would be absurd because the mother is crucial to the child’s development both during pregnancy and after its birth. Cave begins the poem with a direct address to the “Dear sinless babe, whose peaceful room / Centers within thy mother’s womb” (1-2). In these deceptively simple lines, the speaker’s imaginative representation of the fetus in her uterus is actually quite complex. The fetus’s “peaceful room” is one of the first poetic renderings of the physiological structures inside the womb, specifically the amniotic sac; by using this metaphor, Cave interacts with contemporary obstetric medicine’s interest in structures like the placenta, with its vascular system and enveloping membranes like the chorion, that mark the separation between mother and child. In The Strength of Imagination in Pregnant Women Examin’d (1727), James Augustus Blondel had argued that, at all stages of pregnancy, the fetus is “an individuum Distinct, and separate from the Mother’s Body, and consequently that her Imagination can have no Effect upon the Child.”

Though Blondel acknowledged that the fetus “does strongly adhere to the Uterus, by the Help of the Placenta, and the umbilical Vessels”

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(75), he qualified his statement by arguing that the fetus is still an individual who is linked to its mother’s body by “Contiguity” only (76, 85). Later in the century, John Hunter’s description of the structure and function of the placenta only slightly revised this earlier understanding of the organ by explaining that it allows communication between mother and fetus, who are otherwise still completely separated from one another.\footnote{John Hunter, \textit{Observations of Certain Parts of the Animal Oeconomy} (London, 1786), 129-130, 132-133.} The “peaceful room” created by the amniotic sac in Cave’s poem, however, does not suggest a division between the mother and the fetus that needs to be bridged by an organ like the placenta—rather, it “centers” the fetus “within” the womb, wording that emphasizes that the embryonic child is engulfed by the mother rather than separated from her.

Not only is the mother’s body needed to nourish and sustain the fetus, but her knowledge is also essential to the education of the child after its birth. Cave highlights the differences in mental functions between the unborn child, whose mind is “unspotted” (3), and the mother, who is troubled by “thought after thought” (13) and “strange forebodings” (14) about her baby’s future. Cave intimates that because she knows so much, and the infant so little, the mother must be present from birth onward in order to educate her child with her own wisdom and hard-won life experience. The mother’s crucial function as preceptor explains not only why Cave is so fearful of leaving her infant behind should she die in childbirth, but also why she desires that her “shade” will “pervade” her “infant’s footsteps” (33) and suffuse its life with her ghostly presence in case of its survival. The language that Cave uses to describe her spiritual attendance on her child echoes her metaphorical formulation of the protective amniotic sac that encompasses the fetus within it and allows the mother to be ever-present with the developing infant. The most tangible legacy that Cave anticipates leaving her child in the event of her death, however, is her poetry:
And when your judgment comprehends
What now your anxious mother pen’s,
These lines shall to your view impart,
The genuine transcript of her heart. (35-8)

The speaker then goes on to offer advice (drawn from her heart’s “genuine transcript”) that she hopes will shape her child’s life and morals: she advises him or her to “grasp at knowledge” (47), to be honest and just (52), to be a good neighbor (64-83), to be kind to animals and children (88-97), and to obey God (98-102). Rather than entrusting her children to the care of either an earthly or a heavenly father (as earlier poems like Bradstreet’s did), Cave instead insists upon providing for her children’s future education herself, from her own store of knowledge.

The gender-specific poems that follow “To My Dear Child” also provide motherly advice and guidance to the unborn infant relating to what was, for Cave, the rather sore subject of marriage. In “To My Child, If a Son,” Cave advises her prospective son to choose his wife carefully and not to dally with her feelings or her virtue: “court her heart, with honour court, / Nor dare to make a nymph thy sport” (10-11). Cave warns of the grief that she would feel if her son were to act dishonorably toward a woman; she makes her sympathies in such a case clear when she states that if she were alive, she would side with the abandoned woman (26-9). In “To My Child, If a Daughter,” Cave offers even more detailed advice for her potential daughter on how to avoid an unhappy marriage. Cave’s own marital frustrations surface as she cautions her daughter against “the deep deceits of men” (14) and warns her to avoid marrying a man “Who


wants politeness, grace, or sense” (24) because “He knows no love” (29). Cave reinforces her maternal counsel with a short letter appended to the end of her pregnancy poems in which she reminds her child that, had she lived, her “daily study […] would be to inculcate those sentiments into your infant mind as soon as she found you capable of receiving them.”

Interestingly, it is the uncertainty of her pregnant state that gives Cave the authority to influence the course of her child’s life in the first place. While she is pregnant, she knows that she will eventually produce a baby, but she does not know if she will survive its birth; this uncertain situation nevertheless allows her to expect that the poetic utterances she makes in the present will influence her child’s future conduct. As Tristanne Connolly puts it, “Cave makes provisions to influence the formation of her child from beyond the grave, beginning its socialization, starting it on a track toward domestic virtue before it is born” (“Anna Barbauld 212”). Cave uses the possibility of being an absent mother to her advantage, turning it into a position of potential power, but she never imagines herself as totally absent.

The verse forms that Cave utilizes in her pregnancy poetry—which include rhyming couplets and hymn meter—also gesture toward her desire to shape her children’s circumstances. The rhyming couplet was one of Cave’s favorite and most frequently employed verse forms, a conservative stylistic tendency that, as Messem points out, is somewhat surprising given Cave’s proto-feminist impulses in poems dealing with women’s issues. Messem suggests that Cave’s usage of couplets betrays “unconscious urges” to impose “patriarchal structure” on her more radical ideas by circumscribing them with outwardly conservative dress (7). If Cave’s usage of

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35 Jennifer Heller also points out that the mother’s vulnerability and expectation of her death is what invests her with the authority to direct her child’s future conduct (5). However, as I argued earlier in this chapter, it is essential to keep in mind that the mother’s primary concern in early modern mother’s legacies is the child, not herself.
couplets can be read as an attempt to exert patriarchal control over her transgressive subject matter, however, then it could also represent an attempt at another kind of control—specifically, Cave’s desire to exert maternal control over the children to whom the poem is addressed. The variety of couplets that Cave uses also hints that the control exerted in the poem is less oppressively patriarchal than it first appears to be. In three of her pre-natal poems, she employs iambic tetrameter couplets, which were often used to comic or satiric effect during the eighteenth century, in marked contrast to their more dignified counterpart, the heroic couplet. Cave’s iambic tetrameter poems about pregnancy, however, are far from comic; they express heart-felt sentiments and are entirely serious in tone, a rhetorical maneuver that lends gravity to a verse form from which seriousness was typically not expected. Given that serious and dignified expression were also not expected from women (especially those who wrote about domestic life), it is significant that Cave elevates a personal and quotidian subject like pregnancy by similarly elevating a frivolous type of poetry.

The same impulse to elevate humble subject matter (but this time with an equally humble verse form) can also be found in the metrical structure of Cave’s “Written a few Hours before the Birth of a Child,” which, unlike her other poems about gestation, is written in the cross-rhymed

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37 Antony Easthope has discussed what he calls the ideological “begemony” of iambic pentameter in English poetry. According to Easthope, pentameter “becomes a sign which includes and excludes, sanctions and denigrates, for it discriminates the ‘properly’ poetic from the ‘improperly’ poetic, Poetry from verse.” See Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 65-6. Margaret Anne Doody’s argument about the differences between “long” pentameter and “short” tetrameter couplets bolsters Easthope’s point about the high seriousness of iambic pentameter lines. Doody contends that “[t]he heroic measure was associated with matter thought foreign to women—classical learning, rule over the world,” while tetrameter couplets were “the perfect medium for comic rhyme.” While Doody does acknowledge that serious topics were sometimes treated in short couplets, she points out that serious tetrameter verses are rare; indeed, the only example of a serious short couplet poem that she cites is by Thomas Parnell—the tetrameter couplet verses by women that she discusses are all comic in tone. See Margaret Anne Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 239-244. The rarity of serious tetrameter poems composed by women in the eighteenth century further emphasizes the innovative nature of Cave’s pregnancy poetry.
common meter quatrains that are the hallmark of ballad meter (that is, lines rhymed \textit{abab} with alternating stresses of four and three beats). Quatrains, as a less formal style of versification, very often focus on domestic and personal topics in playful, “off-duty” ways (Hunter, “Couplets” 23). Just as she did with her usage of tetrameter couplets, then, Cave elevates ballad meter in “Written a few Hours” by using it to address a matter of life and death, and even to query the limits of human and divine agency.

The metrical structure of “Written” also links it to another poetic form that was burgeoning during the eighteenth century—the hymn.\footnote{Doody contends that eighteenth-century British hymns “deserve to be called (in the honourable sense) experimental” (\textit{Daring} 76). J. R. Watson, one of the twentieth century’s foremost authorities on the hymn form, concurs that the hymn should not be considered a “second-rate poetic form,” but rather one that is “complicated […] both in terms of technique and text.” Paula R. Backscheider seconds both Watson’s and Doody’s claims when she laments the traditional distinction that modern literary critics have drawn between eighteenth-century secular and religious poetry (which includes hymns); she contends that religious poetry is “a major type of eighteenth-century poetry.” See J. R. Watson, \textit{The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1, 4 and Paula R. Backscheider, \textit{Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 124.} Although this poem is written in ballad meter (which hymn writers frequently used), its religious content and first-person point of view ally it more closely with the hymn than the ballad.\footnote{The subject matter of hymns underwent a significant shift at the beginning of the eighteenth century; while earlier hymnists had written hymns whose voice was “God’s word to humankind,” Isaac Watts and other turn of the century authors of hymns began to write the voices of individual humans speaking to God (Doody, \textit{Daring} 75 and Backscheider, \textit{Eighteenth-Century} 143). The ballad of the 1780s, by contrast, usually narrated a somewhat lengthy story, and very often in the third person narrative voice; it was not until the magazine fiction of the late 1780s and, most famously, the publication of \textit{Lyrical Ballads} in 1798 that the ballad form became increasingly associated with the internal reflections and feelings of a first-person speaker. See Robert Mayo, “The Contemporaneity of the \textit{Lyrical Ballads},” \textit{PMLA} 69.3 (1954), 510-11. Given that Cave’s “Written a few Hours” (a short poem in which a particular woman directly addresses God with her hopes and fears) predates these magazine poems and \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, it would have been recognized as a hymn at the time of its publication.} Reading Cave’s poem according to the conventions of the eighteenth-century hymn further emphasizes its individual, subjective, and subversive qualities. Paula Backscheider’s significant study of eighteenth-century women’s poetry corrects the notion that hymns were safe, acceptable, and apolitical forms of expression for female authors by positing that hymns by women often contained powerful, political, and
distinctly unfeminine language.\textsuperscript{40} Cave’s hymn-like pregnancy poem, whose speaker praises God even as she makes a religiously and socially subversive request, pushes the boundaries of acceptable subject matter for hymns even as it elevates pregnancy and childbirth as important female processes that are worthy of serious attention in the most sacred of poetic genres. Additionally, Cave published “Written a few Hours Before the Birth of a Child” at a time when the congregational singing of hymns in protestant denominations was becoming increasingly widespread (Watson 8 and Backscheider, \textit{Eighteenth-Century} 137). If hymn singing was, as Watson argues, “an expression of a universal right to understand and interpret the gospel” (8), then it is likely that Cave may also have been invested in poetic forms that gave a voice to congregants—women as well as men—who otherwise would have remained silent during worship services.

One additional poem in Cave’s \textit{oeuvre} is important to consider in light of her pregnancy poems, even though it is not a pregnancy poem itself. “Written About a Month after the Birth of the Author’s Second Child” is similar to the poems discussed above by Carey, Boyd, and Wright because it is part of the tradition of mothers writing poems about their very young infants.\textsuperscript{41} “Second Child” may or may not be about the same child that Cave’s previous four pregnancy poems anticipated (indeed, Cave never informs her reader if that pregnancy was her first), but it nevertheless reinforces her desire to influence her child, which her previous pregnancy poems also had expressed. In this later poem, Cave expresses a deep and abiding love for her infant Thomas, a sentiment that echoes her pre-natal feelings about the fetus in her pregnancy poems. As in “To My Dear Child” when she declares that she would gladly care for her child even after

\footnote{40} Backscheider goes so far as to claim that “some of the most adventurous poetry in content and style written by women is religious” (\textit{Eighteenth-Century} 122, 146).

\footnote{41} Jane Cave, “Written About a Month after the Birth of the Author’s Second Child,” “To My Dear Child,” \textit{Poems on Various Subjects, Entertaining, Elegiac, and Religious} (Bristol: N. Biggs, 1795): 135-41.
her death by following its footsteps and watching sleeplessly over its rest, in “Second Child” she similarly proclaims that the physical pain concomitant with presiding over her sleeping baby is well worth the discomfort:

With pleasure I brave all my pain,
While smiling you bask at my breast,
And sleepless myself will remain,
To lull my dear infant to rest. (5-8)

Cave also contemplates wishing for the death of her son in “Second Child,” but for even more transgressive reasons than she does in her earlier poems. In “Written a few Hours” and “To My Dear Child,” Cave hopes that if she dies during childbirth, her baby will die as well so that he or she will not grow up without the guidance of its mother. In “Second Child,” however, Cave states that it would be better for Thomas to die as an innocent infant than to live to disgrace her in the future:

Shall e’er this sweet innocent face,
Where beauty and loveliness reign,
Be flush’d with an act of disgrace,
And fill my sad bosom with pain?

Ah! dear as I love thee, my son,
And gaze on thy form with delight,
Let death rather now cut thee down,
And tear thee thus early from sight. (9-16)
While Cave may be worried about her son’s morality and spiritual well-being in these stanzas, she is perhaps even more concerned about her own feelings than about Thomas because she would rather have him die than “fill” her “sad bosom with pain” (12). Cave added lines 5 to 24 (which include the stanzas about death cited above) to the revised 1794 version of the poem, lines that she retained in the 1795 edition. These additional stanzas link this postnatal poem to her earlier prenatal poems, which similarly contend that the speaker, as the child’s mother, knows what is best for the child, even if it is death.

Like “To My Dear Child” and the two gender-specific poems that follow it, Cave’s poem to the infant Thomas also contains general advice about life (including matters related to courtship and marriage) that are meant to protect both Thomas and the women that he may one day woo. Cave encourages her son to “Be open, and clear as the day” (49) and to associate only “With the prudent and good of the age” (58). As in “To My Child, If a Son,” she also urges him to court his future wife honorably and to “prove not her worst of all foes, / To leave her deceiv’d or undone” (71-2). The poem’s final stanza neatly encapsulates all of Cave’s previous advice to Thomas:

Thus enter with honour on life,
Be provident, peaceful and brave,
Shun profligates, wantons, and strife,
And nobly go down to thy grave. (89-92)

As previously noted, Cave substantially revised “Written about a Month after the Birth of the Author’s Second Child” between the first version of the poem published in 1789 and the second (and final) version, which was published for the first time in 1794. In the final stanzas of the 1789 version of the poem, Cave’s advice is far less specific than what she offers in the amended
1794 version. While in the first version of the poem, Cave only asks that her son’s “heart” and “conduct” remain “clear” (69-70), in the revised version published in 1794 and in later editions, she specifies the qualities that she wants her son to embody as well as the kinds of conduct that he should avoid: “Be provident, peaceful and brave, / Shun profligates, wantons, and strife” (90-1). The speaker’s advice to Thomas on sexual matters is two-fold—not only should he avoid prostitutes (“wantons”), but he also must not cause a more innocent woman’s fall from virtue by (presumably) impregnating and abandoning her (“leave her deceiv’d and undone”). Cave’s admonitions thus not only aim to protect her son, but also the women with whom he will one day interact.

Although Cave’s moral dictates for Thomas aim to prevent him from impregnating women (at least unlawfully), they nevertheless encourage him to impregnate his mind with knowledge:

If knowledge you wish to attain,
Let Phoebus not find you in bed;
With vigour impregnate each vein,
With wisdom impregnate your head. (53-6)

The logic behind the peculiar word choice “impregnate,” which appears two times in as many lines, suggests that wisdom is inextricably bound to pregnancy, and thus the female body, even if a man is the one acquiring knowledge. “Impregnate your head” hearkens back to the wisdom of

42 The final stanza of the first (1789) edition of the poem reads as follows:

Thus with a countenance clear as the sun,
And a heart and a conduct the same,
Let your progress in life be begun,
And conclude with as noble a flame. (lines 69-72)

the pregnant mother who, in Cave’s prenatal poems, had so much advice to impart to her unborn child. Cave suggests that she may even have had a hand in Thomas’s mental impregnation when she informs him earlier in “Second Child” that “I’ll deeply impress on thy mind / Thy duty to God and to man” (30-1). With these rhetorical maneuvers, which link pregnancy to mental as well as physical processes, Cave unambiguously genders knowledge female.

Because of their educative function, Cave’s poems about pregnancy are examples of the “mother’s legacy” genre, but it is essential to note that they were not written solely for her child’s welfare. In early modern mothers’ legacies, the typical mother-speaker’s advice, often given as a death-bed command, eschewed earthly matters in order to make provisions for her children’s souls (Heller 2, 5, 55). According to Jennifer Heller, one of the hallmarks of the early modern mother’s legacy is the mother-speaker’s “privileging care for the soul over the nurture of the body,” a rhetorical strategy which “rarefies maternal influence, extending it across time” (55, 57). While Cave’s legacies certainly instruct her nascent child to live a moral and Christian life, they also betray a preoccupation with the mother’s experiences and feelings, as well as a concern for her own legacy that extends beyond the provisions she makes for her child’s future. Cave’s advice throughout her poems is informed by her own bitter life experiences, which authorize her to possess and pass on this knowledge. Her poems subtly shift the focus of the mother’s legacy from spiritual to earthly matters, and from God and the child to the author-mother herself. While her writings allow her to continue to influence her child, they also inscribe her own life circumstances for posterity. Cave thus writes a new kind of mother’s legacy in which the particular circumstances of her life will never be forgotten.

IV

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Isabella Kelly wrote poetry about pregnancy and motherhood that echoes many of the concerns that Cave raised in her maternity poems. Kelly was a poet and novelist whose first and only volume of poems, *A Collection of Poems and Fables*, was published in 1794 and again (with almost no revisions) in 1807. It is in this collection that her pregnancy poem, “To an Unborn Infant,” appears. The poem at first seems to be a fairly typical mother’s legacy, as the speaker (who is presumably Kelly) assumes that her death in childbirth is inevitable; as such, her poem offers guidance to her unborn child. Like Cave’s poem, however, Kelly’s also creates a rather different sort of legacy from those penned for children by earlier women writers. Even though Kelly believes that she will die in childbirth, she suggests (like Cave) that she is perfectly capable of protecting and shaping the fetus during pregnancy and of providing for its future wellbeing. While Kelly appears to encourage her child to serve its father by taking on the mother’s duties within the family, she also unobtrusively instructs the child to memorialize the mother so that she will not be forgotten after her death. The poem prepares the child to serve its mother rather than its father because the mother is the one who is responsible for safeguarding the child during its fetal development, birth, and infancy.

In “To an Unborn Infant,” Kelly speaks to her unborn baby about a quickly approaching future in which she does not expect to partake; she imagines what life might be like for her child if it lives as well as what that could mean for her own maternal legacy. Kelly explicitly states that an inevitable part of childbirth is the mother’s death and the baby’s replacement of her, since the “Babe of fondest expectation” will, according to the speaker’s own instructions, “supply my vacant place” (33, 36), a mandate that leads both Henderson and Connolly to surmise that the fetus is gendered female (Henderson 114 and Connolly 213). In fact, Henderson uses the

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potential female sex of the fetus to argue that “[t]here is no hint here [in the poem] that parturition represents a liminal moment of catastrophic change” because Kelly placidly imagines that her female baby will naturally transition into her mother’s role (Henderson 114). Although Kelly’s domestic instructions for her infant could indicate that she expects the child to be a girl, she never ascribes a name or gendered pronoun to the child, thus leaving open the possibility that it could also be a boy. This possibility becomes even more apparent in the poem’s penultimate line, in which the speaker tells her child to “Say, I liv’d to give thee being” (39), which suggests that Kelly views herself as an expendable vessel through which her children are created and that her only purpose is, in fact, to bear children who will then replace her. If the child she bears is a boy, her own lack of social standing will be further emphasized because, according to the laws of coverture, male children were born free citizens, but the mothers who bore them were not considered citizens themselves. As Carole Pateman explains in The Sexual Contract, while “sons […] withdraw their consent to the father’s power and claim their natural liberty,” “women, unlike sons, never emerge from their ‘nonage.’” Thus, an infant boy would have more rights (though deferred until adulthood) than his adult mother. In fact, Kelly opens her Collection of Poems and Fables with “To the Memory of the Lamented Mr. Robert Hawke K—y,” a poem that addresses her dead infant son with an adult title, a formal mark of respect that gestures toward the great social importance of even the youngest male children. Whatever the sex of the fetus in “To an Unborn Infant,” however, the speaker is troubled, rather than comforted, by the fact that she is expendable and easily replaced by it.

Although in “To an Unborn Infant,” Kelly acknowledges both the impending dangers of childbirth and her expendable role in a patriarchal social system that values male children more than their mothers, she also manipulates the poem’s rhythm in order to subtly assert the mother’s

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crucial role in protecting the fetus during pregnancy. In the poem’s opening stanza, Kelly encourages her “sweet babe” to “Be still” (1) because she will not let any harm come to it. Although the poem’s meter eventually settles into a steady trochaic tetrameter, most of the first stanza is plagued by metrical irregularities that echo the disruption and danger caused by the “beating storm”:

Be still, sweet babe, no harm shall reach thee,
Nor hurt thy yet unfinished form;
Thy mother’s frame shall safely guard thee,
From this bleak, this beating storm. (1-4)

The first three lines of the poem offer a dizzying and somewhat chaotic array of rhythms, including iambic (“no harm shall reach”), trochaic (“yet unfinished” and “frame shall safely guard thee”), and dactylic patterns (“Nor hurt thy” and “Thy mother’s”). Kelly finally establishes a smooth trochaic rhythm near the end of the third line of the stanza that continues into the quatrain’s fourth line (“frame shall safely guard thee, / From this bleak, this beating storm”), the lines in which the speaker states that her “frame”—presumably the metrical framework of the poem as well as her own physical frame—is capable of protecting her unborn child from the ferocity of the elements. The metrical regularity of these lines thus evokes the protection and comfort that the mother’s body provides for the fetus. Even before giving birth, then, Kelly’s speaker takes her maternal responsibilities seriously.

The poem’s second stanza illustrates how the mother will continue to protect her newborn should she survive giving birth. Kelly looks forward to holding her baby; though her arms may be “Feeble,” she assures the fetus that “they’ll fondly clasp thee, / Shield thee from the least alarms” (7-8). Once again, the smooth meter in this stanza mirrors the calm that the
mother’s body will allow the infant to experience in spite of worldly troubles. All four lines of the second stanza are in perfectly regular trochaic meter (with the first and third lines of the stanza in trochaic tetrameter and the second and fourth lines in a trochaic tetrameter that omits the final, unstressed syllable), the rhythm that will underpin the rest of the poem. Despite the sad circumstances that the speaker will go on to narrate (the imprisonment of the baby’s father, the possible death of the mother), no further metrical disruptions occur because the poem (as a representation of the mother’s body) has already resolved that tension in the first stanza, when the mother first promises to protect the unborn child.

Kelly also suggests that she has the power to shape the fetus through the power of her maternal imagination. Although obstetric science had more or less dismissed this belief by the end of the eighteenth century, prominent physicians had still been seriously debating as late as 1745 about whether or not, for instance, a pregnant woman who obsesses about a food item or some other object could cause her baby to be born with a birthmark in the shape of that item (Huet 13-78 and D. Todd 45-63). When Kelly tells her unborn child in the third stanza that “Fancy forms thee sweet and lovely, / Emblem of the rose unblown” (11-2), she alludes to the possibility of shaping the fetus’s body according to her imaginative rendering of it as a budding flower (Connolly 212-3). Kelly’s use of the word “emblem” in this context is rather unusual, however. One might expect that Kelly would use the unblown rose as a symbol for the fetus, yet “Emblem of the rose unblown” states that the opposite is the case—in this line, the fetus is instead a symbol for (or “emblem” of) the rosebud. Thus, for Kelly, the fetus itself is a symbol, an imaginative construct that her mind has the power to mold, rather than a concrete object (like the rosebud) whose physical properties are immutable.
Kelly takes special care to assert her ability to protect and shape her children because, as she implies in “To an Unborn Child” and in two other poems on childloss, she is the only person able to aid them, as the men in her life all consistently fall short of Kelly’s (and her children’s) needs. In “Unborn Child,” because the speaker’s husband is “imprison’d, / Wrong’d, forgotten, robb’d of right” (13-4), Kelly steels herself to care for the fetus for the duration of her pregnancy and during the birth process, knowing that she will be doing so without his assistance. “Though thy father is imprison’d” she assures the unborn baby, “I’ll repress the rising anguish / Till thine eyes behold the light” (13, 15-6). Kelly’s husband is not the only male figure who fails her, however; the clergy also refuse to aid her. In “To the Memory of the Lamented Mr. Robert Hawke K---y,” she laments the indignity of not being able to bury her dead son immediately because, as she remarks in a footnote to the poem, “Neither clergyman nor sexton were in the church-yard—and the corps obliged to be carried back till next day.”

If God’s agents have disappointed the author by giving her son an “unhallow’d” burial (“To the Memory” 45), God himself has also disillusioned her as well. In “Retired Thoughts to A Departed Infant,” Kelly struggles with conflicted feelings about her dead infant, who is an “angel” (7) in heaven, but whom she nevertheless wishes were still alive: “Spite of religious aid my wishes rise, / Ah! me! how weak to wish thee from the skies!” (9-10). She ends the poem by asking that heaven save her from questioning divine will: “Save me from murmurs at thy high decree, / And teach my heart, that’s best that pleases thee” (33-4). Kelly’s desire to please God, however, sounds very much like her need to anticipate and acquiesce to her husband’s wishes (which she also encourages her unborn child to do in “To an Unborn Infant”), a parallelism that

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suggests that God, like her husband, is a selfish, capricious man.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, the fact that she feels she must be saved from murmuring against heaven’s “high decree” means that she has already protested against it. Although Kelly tries to make sense of her infant’s death through a Christian framework in the poem, she is ultimately unable to avoid imagining what her child might have become and then questioning the wisdom and benevolence of a God who would take an infant from its devoted mother, who suffers so much misery on account of her child’s death. The fact that Kelly does not appeal to God at all in “To an Unborn Infant” is an omission that further implies that divine will is irrelevant because the mother’s role in the processes of bearing and raising children is of primary importance.

Since Kelly, like Cave, questions the wisdom and authority of men (including God) when it comes to the care of her children, both living and unborn, it can be little surprise that Kelly also assumes that these male figures will have little to no investment in preserving her own memory after she is dead. As such, “To an Unborn Infant” teaches the mother’s life story to the child so that he or she will eventually be able to speak on Kelly’s behalf after her death. A first reading of the poem might suggest that the mother will be silenced by death and that the speech of her child will ultimately be privileged. The child will, after all, inhabit the void left by the mother, and it is his or her voice that will be heard. However, while supplying his or her mother’s “vacant place” (36), the child will actually be able to memorialize Kelly, who gives the child the information he or she will need in order to do so. Her poem urges the infant, when he or she is older, to “softly lisp her name” (27) and to “Learn […] the mournful story […]/ Of thy suffering mother’s life” (29-30). “Let thy father not forget her,” she further instructs the child, “In a future, happier wife” (31-2). In the last stanza of the poem, Kelly again counsels her child

\textsuperscript{47} In “Written in Very Deep Affliction,” Kelly genders God male: “For thy great Parent’s arm will guide / Each daughter of his care” (lines 43-4). Read autobiographically, Kelly’s poems hint at great marital unhappiness and possible desertion by her first husband (Lonsdale 481).
to speak about the details of her life, and she ends the poem by supplying her child with the very words that he or she should use when telling her story:

Whisper all the anguish’d moments
That have wrung this anxious breast,
Say, I liv’d to give thee being,
And retir’d to endless rest. (37-40)

Although her story will be told by the child, the words that the child will recite are the mother’s, which means that Kelly has constructed her own legacy in the poem. If the child follows Kelly’s poetic injunctions, he or she will not simply replace the dead mother but will protect and perpetuate her memory, just as she had protected the child before its birth. Far from accepting the seemingly inevitable fate of expendability, Kelly strives in her poem to be remembered.

V

Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible,” a poem that she composed for a pregnant friend in 1799, is perhaps the most frequently anthologized and cited Romantic-era poem about pregnancy. “To a Little Invisible Being” is significant not only because it treats many of the same issues concerning gestation raised by Cave and Kelly, but also because it was written by an author who had never (at least to present knowledge) experienced pregnancy herself, a biographical detail that has profoundly influenced twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical inquiry into the poem.48 Many readers of the poem have traditionally interpreted the speaker as the expectant mother, who is speaking about herself.

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48 Barbauld adopted her nephew, Charles, from her brother’s family and raised him as her own son.
in the third person. The implication to be drawn from such a reading is that the mother-speaker is alienated from the physical processes of pregnancy and birth because she uses the third-person point of view to discuss these experiences (a sense of alienation that would not be unexpected from an author who had never personally experienced pregnancy). More recently, enabled by the discovery of an alternative manuscript version of the poem inscribed by Barbauld to her friend Frances Carr, critics have corrected earlier readings of Barbauld’s poem as an alienated third-person rendering of pregnancy. William McCarthy and Tristanne Connolly have both made biographically-based arguments about the poem that distinguish between the pregnant woman (Carr) and the speaker-author (Barbauld), who could not, of necessity, be the pregnant woman because of her lack of biological children. In either case, readers of “Invisible Being” have so far assumed that, no matter the identity of the speaker, the women in the poem are disconnected from knowledge about the physical processes associated with motherhood.

However, when Barbauld’s poem is examined in context with the other pregnancy poems of her era by Cave and Kelly—poems that put the pregnant woman at the center rather than the margins of the experience—we find that “To a Little Invisible Being” also explores the thoughts, feelings, and fears of the pregnant woman who gives birth in a male-dominated society. Like Kelly, Barbauld evinces concern for the mother’s ability to shape and educate her child; like

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50 Kipp uses Barbauld’s poem as an example of the “sense of self-alienation [that] marks many women writers’ accounts of the experience of motherhood during the Romantic period” (7). Kipp’s argument would appear to be somewhat indebted to Mellor’s suggestion that Romantic women’s texts about maternity do not engage with the biological processes associated with motherhood as much as texts by male Romantic authors do (see Mellor, *Romanticism* 83.)

51 Connolly argues that Barbauld’s poem stresses the unknowable and mysterious nature of the fetus from the point of view of the mother (who is Barbauld’s friend) (“Anna Barbauld” 221, see also 209, 224), while McCarthy suggests that the poem functions as a spell that a worried Barbauld superstitiously cast in order to bring on Carr’s dangerously overdue baby. See William McCarthy, *Anna Laetitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 390.
Cave, she engages frankly with eighteenth-century obstetric science, a tactic that indicates her acute awareness of women’s embodied experiences rather than an investment in the interests of obstetric medicine. In “Invisible Being,” Barbauld fashions herself as a female midwife who could influence the outcome of her friend’s childbirth in order to confront the oppressive social and medical circumstances surrounding pregnancy and childbirth practices in late-eighteenth-century England. Her poem opposes these hegemonic medical discourses and recuperates female authority, both for the midwife and the mother, by locating them within a community of women who will deliver and nurture the child. While Barbauld intimates that such an ideal gynocentric community is not sustainable in the social context of the patriarchal family (indeed, the female-centered model for childbirth was already nearing obsolescence for middle- and upper-class women by 1799), she nevertheless suggests that the female imagination can counter such oppressive authority with the almost supernatural power to imprint itself on the fetus (and later on the child via a maternal education), even if male medical science did not give credence to such beliefs regarding women’s influence.

Before examining “To a Little Invisible Being,” it will be useful to contrast it with Barbauld’s earlier poems about reproduction, a comparative exercise that illustrates the evolution of Barbauld’s pregnancy poetry from eighteenth-century to Romantic literary conventions. William McCarthy points out that Barbauld’s early poems, published in 1773, “evince a sporadic but intense interest in childbirth,”52 though the poems that McCarthy has in mind include mostly euphemistic discussions of birth. In “To Mrs. P—, with some Drawings of Birds and Insects,”

for instance, Barbauld likens the birth of “full-form’d brood[s]” (line 79) of insects to a scene from Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* in which trees give birth to beautiful young women:

So when Rinaldo struck the conscious rind

He found a nymph in every trunk confin’d;

The forest labours with convulsive throes,

The bursting trees the lovely births disclose,

And a gay troop of damsels round him stood,

Where late was rugged bark and lifeless wood. (85-90)  

The births that take place in this section of Barbauld’s poem are displaced from human birth, both in the literary allusion to Tasso, which describes the fantastical births of full-grown nymphs, and in the zoological phenomenon that Barbauld uses Tasso’s story to represent—the birth of insect life that these trees would actually harbor. In another poem, this one to a pregnant or recently delivered Mary Holland Enfield (her neighbor at Warrington), Barbauld again displaces the language of human reproduction onto nature (and, once again, onto trees). Mary Enfield is “Heavy at once with fruit” (3), and her “Two smiling infants” (6) are like “twin apples blushing on a bough” (9). While Barbauld’s poem may, as McCarthy concludes, imagine the “childbearing woman as luxuriantly sensual” (“We Hoped” 129), it also resists imagining the pregnant woman as a realistically embodied human being. Furthermore, I posit that Barbauld’s use of the tree as a symbol for pregnant and laboring women in both poems links sexual reproduction to the patriarchal concept of the family tree, which is created by women’s

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reproductive labor, yet identified by the name of the father. Though Barbauld’s gendering of these procreative family trees as female could be read as an empowering gesture toward the creation of a matriarchal lineage, the end of the poem nevertheless reinstates the patriarchal order when the speaker expresses hope that Mary’s children will “spread” their family name, a name that is shared by the “mother,” the “sire,” and the children (17-20).

Detailed descriptions of the pregnant and laboring body were simply not widely expected or accepted in women’s literature of the 1770s; by the end of the 1790s when Barbauld penned “Invisible Being,” however, the cultural climate had changed somewhat, perhaps due to the publications of poetry about pregnancy by authors like Cave and Kelly. Although Barbauld still uses a variety of metaphors (including natural ones) for the fetus in “To a Little Invisible Being,” the pregnant woman in the poem is now unambiguously human. Though literature by women about pregnancy and childbirth was common in the literary marketplace by 1799, Barbauld may have circulated her poem in manuscript form precisely because she deals with human reproduction more explicitly, without the discreet euphemisms for gestation and birth that can be found in her earlier poems. Since “To a Little Invisible Being” is a female-authored poem that speaks to women about the subject of parturition, Barbauld perhaps did not feel the need to cloak her language in euphemisms. Her poem engages frankly with much contemporary obstetric knowledge, a move that indicates her acute awareness of women’s embodied experiences more than it does an investment in the interests of obstetric medicine.

A well-educated member of a progressive, Dissenting family, Barbauld was no stranger to the scientific community. Not only did she number amongst her closest friends the eminent

55 If Barbauld indeed wrote more explicitly about pregnancy only because she did not intend to publish her poem, this could be an indication of the extent to which the notion that birth was an improper subject for women writers to address had infiltrated eighteenth-century English culture from mid-century onward.
natural philosopher Joseph Priestley, but she also undertook scientific study herself, which she encouraged other young women to do as well.56 Because Barbauld was neither opposed to nor uninterested in scientific research and advances, it is possible to trace within “To a Little Invisible Being” moments of active engagement with and even acceptance of contemporary obstetrical knowledge. Tristanne Connolly, for instance, argues that Barbauld patterns her description of the fetus’s development on the evolutionary model of Erasmus Darwin’s botanical system, suggesting that Barbauld perceived unbroken continuities between the vegetative, animal, and human worlds. Connolly concludes that the role of Barbauld’s speaker in the poem is that of mediator between the scientific and female communities, to help translate the language of science into the language of sentiment, leading to a birth experience that is joyful rather than terrifying for the mother (“Anna Barbauld” 214-222). However, I disagree with Connolly’s argument that Barbauld endorses the language of obstetrics in the poem and seeks to vindicate the ways of male medical science to women (see Connolly, “Anna Barbauld” 222). I argue that the poem’s speaker, far from accepting obstetric knowledge, on the contrary reveals its oppressive and frightening implications, particularly those concerning the mother’s experience of and participation in the labor of pregnancy and childbirth.57

56 In “On Female Studies,” an essay that appeared in a posthumously-published collection of her writings on women’s education, Barbauld encourages her young female readers to study a range of scientific topics: “[t]he great laws of the universe, the nature and properties of those objects which surround us, it is unpardonable not to know […] Under this head are comprehended natural history, astronomy, botany, experimental philosophy, chemistry, physics.” See Anna Letitia Barbauld, “On Female Studies,” A Legacy for Young Ladies, consisting of Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Verse (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1826), 51.

57 “To a Little Invisible Being” is not the only poem in which Barbauld contests the hegemony of male scientific endeavors. In “The Mouse’s Petition,” Barbauld takes up the cause of a mouse who asks Dr. Priestley (who had captured it for scientific experimentation) for its freedom using the rhetoric of the rights of man. Mitzi Myers observes that this poem indicates that Barbauld was not “unproblematically aligned with bourgeois scientism and progress,” even though some of her closest friends were proponents of it. Penny Bradshaw also contends that Barbauld’s poetic engagement with Enlightenment values elsewhere in her oeuvre was far more complicated than most critics have acknowledged. Bradshaw argues that Barbauld genders as female a theory of the Enlightenment that offers freedom to women, and genders as male “a darker, oppressive version” of the Enlightenment that, in practice, excludes women. According to Bradshaw, Barbauld’s poetry expressed frustration that her “feminine
According to Connolly’s reading of Barbauld’s poem, the pain of childbirth is simply part of a natural process and therefore not an evil to be feared, but such a reading belies the manifest dread of labor pains that the speaker expresses. Barbauld’s speaker displays an acute awareness of the physical discomforts attendant on pregnancy and birth, emphasizing the “tedious moons” (24) through which the mother has had to carry her “burden” (a word that she uses twice in describing the child in lines 17 and 18), as well as the “anxious” state of both herself and the expectant mother (15, 35). She also twice mentions labor pains (which she calls “nature’s sharpest pangs” [19]), pains that she can only hope the safe delivery of her friend’s child will “o’er-pay” (36). The fact that the fetus needs to be “free[d]” from its “living tomb” (20) does not augur well for the mother, however, whose crypt-like body could very well die after giving life to another being. Pain in Barbauld’s poem, then, does not appear to be natural and acceptable, but rather a frightening, potentially deadly trial to be passed through as quickly as possible.

Another almost universally accepted premise of eighteenth-century obstetric science was the passivity of the mother during both pregnancy and parturition, a premise that Barbauld at first seems to accept by ascribing agency to the fetus. According to Dr. Thomas Denman, one of the foremost obstetricians of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, women must remain passive during childbirth, lest their exertions impede the involuntary actions of the uterus: “It is therefore requisite that we should do away this voluntary force [of the mother] by convincing that patient agenda of freedom” was unlikely to be realized as long as men used Enlightenment learning to oppress women, particularly through scientific pursuits that sought “to control nature and to consolidate the positions of Western middle-class men.” See Mitzi Myers, “Of Mice and Mothers: Mrs. Barbauld’s ‘New Walk’ and Gendered Codes in Children’s Literature,” Feminine Principles and Women’s Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric, ed. Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Janet Emig (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 276 and Penny Bradshaw, “Gendering the Enlightenment: conflicting images of progress in the poetry of Anna Laetitia Barbauld,” Women’s Writing 5.3 (1998), 353-4.

of its impropriety, and dissuading her from exerting herself.” 59 The active words that Barbauld applies to the unborn child—“haste” (3, 12, 29), “reap” (25), “burst” (29), “[l]aunch” (29), and “spring” (30)—indicate that it is the fetus, not the mother, who will instigate and then execute the maneuvers that facilitate the birth process. It is also the fetus, rather than the mother, that has great “powers […] folded in [its] curious frame” (5). However, Barbauld deemphasizes the mother’s role in childbirth not in order to agree with contemporary obstetricians like Dr. Denman on the propriety of the mother’s passivity, but rather to foreshadow the mother’s similarly passive social role after her baby is born. The child, “[f]ed with her life through many a tedious moon” (24), drains its mother’s life while in the “living tomb” of the womb, and it may very well leave her for dead and replace her in the world (a fear that, as Kelly’s poem makes clear, was not unjustified). Paul Youngquist notes that, according to eighteenth-century political theory, the mother’s body ultimately amounts to nothing but “abject matter” (138) once it has served its purpose in creating free male citizens because “the generative body by definition cannot possess either itself or its productions” (142). 60 A woman’s male child will eventually grow up to establish his birthright of political and social power over his mother, who is not herself a citizen (Youngquist, Monstrosities 140-2, Pateman 94). Barbauld alludes to such maternal disenfranchisement when her speaker foresees the time when the mother will “salute the stranger guest” (23), since “salute” means to “pay respect to a superior” as well as to greet (OED). As far as her social and political rights are concerned, the mother may as well be dead once her reproductive function has been served. As Andrea Henderson puts it, the world in Barbauld’s


60 Paul Youngquist, Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
poem is one of “maternal love and care that can’t be kept distinct from the world of inheritance, ownership, and power” (115).

Rather than submitting to such patriarchal definitions of the mother’s functions during and after childbirth, however, Barbauld creates an alternative environment in which the baby in her poem is to be born, one that is much closer to the kind of lying-in space that was, until the mid-eighteenth century, standard for births in England. This old-fashioned form of lying-in is part of “the ceremony of childbirth,” which includes all the preparations and customs leading up to birth, the physical act of giving birth, and the four weeks that follow, when the mother remains separated from her husband, family, and household duties in order to recover. In addition to the female midwife, these ceremonies included the services of a monthly nurse, who performed some of the more menial tasks during labor and would then nurse the mother and baby for the month or so after the birth, and at least four or five “gossips,” female friends and relatives of the expectant mother whose function was to provide moral support and to serve as witnesses and perhaps godmothers. Together, these women exercised supreme authority over the ceremony of childbirth, and by so doing were able to maintain “women’s collective control” over the experience (Wilson 38). In her poem, Barbauld reconstructs this old-fashioned ceremony of childbirth and thereby reassigns control over the management of the birth process to the women in the birth room, as there are no men present in “To a Little Invisible Being,” nor does the speaker make any mention of the unborn baby’s father, or of any male physicians. The lying-in

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63 Although Wilson argues that many elements of the traditional ceremony of childbirth remained unchanged even after the man midwife had become a fixture in the lying-in chamber, he nevertheless acknowledges
space is inhabited instead by “eager matrons” (14)—undoubtedly the mother’s gossips—and by a nurse preparing “lulling songs” (13), who in all probability is the monthly nurse. The only character who appears to be missing from this domestic scene is the midwife, but I argue that Barbauld positions her speaker as the midwife in this lying-in room. She is an unusual practitioner not only because she is the sole birth attendant at a time when male physicians were frequently employed to assist with routine childbirths, but also because she refuses to employ the latest scientific knowledge in her practice.

While the speaker-midwife’s parthenogenetic notions of fetal development are in line with some of the newer scientific developments of her age (Connolly, “Anna Barbauld” 214-5), there are nevertheless aspects of her actual practice that would have been considered far from scientific in 1799. What sets Barbauld’s speaker-midwife apart from the typical modern practitioner are her repeated injunctions to the fetus to make “haste” into the world. The knowledgeable midwife or accoucheur of the late eighteenth century, whether man or woman, would have known to wait patiently for the birth of the child, no matter how long it took (see, for instance, Denman 1: 348), but Barbauld’s entire poem functions as a plea to the child to hurry (and it is probably this sense of urgency that has led many readers to assume that the speaker and the mother are the same person). The midwife’s commands to the baby to hasten its entrance into the world also testify to the chief female birth attendant’s authority; she apparently believes that she need only speak in order to make her words materialize into flesh. Indeed, at least since the publication of the Malleus Maleficarum in 1486, midwifery and witchcraft had been associated with one another, and Barbauld’s speaker mentions using “charmed verse” (33) and “favoring spells” (34) to deliver the child if such methods might prove fruitful. William McCarthy goes so

that the presence of a male practitioner did change some aspects of the ceremony (for instance, in the manner in which the caudle, a traditional drink, was served to the laboring woman) (181).
far as to suggest that Barbauld’s speaker is meant to be construed as a benevolent witch who is casting a spell for the child’s safe delivery (Anna 90). It is, in fact, the speaker’s invocation of such decidedly non-scientific techniques that aligns her not with the cutting-edge obstetric knowledge of her day, but rather with many of the superstitions and rituals of the traditional ceremony of childbirth, from which men had largely been excluded. To be sure, Barbauld’s poem also contains several troubling indications that even if such a collective, authoritative culture of women could be achieved once again, this gynocentric community could not easily remain in existence outside the context of the ceremony of childbirth. Once the lying-in period comes to an end, the mother will have to resume her subordinate role within the patriarchal household in which the child assumes the name of the father and the mother will have to “salute” her little “stranger guest.”

“To a Little Invisible Being” not only demonstrates that female birth attendants are capable of delivering children safely, but also that, despite the limitations placed on women within the patriarchal family, a mother can still make an impression on her child both before and after its birth via the power of the maternal mind. Barbauld invokes the potency of the female imagination most directly in an alternate stanza that appears in a manuscript version of the poem:

Oft have her conscious looks her joy betray’d,
When thy life-throbs the sudden start reveal’d;
And busy fancy oft the form portray’d
So long beneath those sacred veils conceal’d.

This stanza appears after line 16 in the alternative manuscript version of the poem, in effect replacing lines 25-28 (which are absent in this version), a substitution that gives additional power
to the mother’s “busy fancy.” Barbauld’s allusion to the rather outdated belief that a pregnant woman’s imagination had the power to imprint itself on her fetus (which Isabella Kelly’s “To an Unborn Infant” also evokes) suggests that the mother’s imaginings of her baby might play a key role in forming it. Since the eighth stanza (in which the mother is silenced by her baby’s “eloquence”) is absent from the alternative version of the poem, the mother’s (rather the baby’s) mind is elevated even further.

If Barbauld’s speaker hints that an expectant mother might have the ability to impress her thoughts on the body of her baby before it is born, she strongly asserts that the mother will play an essential role in shaping the child’s mind through education after it comes into the world. Early in the poem, the speaker calls attention to the ignorance of the fetus, whose “[s]enses [are] from objects locked and mind from thought!” (6). “How little canst thou guess thy lofty claim,” she marvels, “To grasp at all the worlds the Almighty wrought!” (7-8). The baby’s “rich inheritance of love” (25), which includes both natural and religious instruction, will be provided by Barbauld’s imaginative female community of nurse, matrons, midwife, mother, and a Nature that is gendered female. Furthermore, despite a passing mention of the “Almighty’s” creation, Barbauld’s poem is not addressed to God. Rather, in coming full circle from the earliest examples of women’s pregnancy poetry examined in this chapter, in which women relied upon God to dispose of their children as he saw fit, in Barbauld’s “Invisible Being,” the mother and her fellow female educators will shape the developing child in a God-like manner themselves.

64 William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft reprint the alternate stanza in a footnote to the original published version of “To a Little Invisible Being” in Anna Letitia Barbauld: Selected Poetry and Prose (148).

65 Myers points out that the mother in Barbauld’s Hymns in Prose for Children (1781) is “likened to God” in the ways that she controls her household in order to pacify her sleeping infant (“Of Mice” 273-4.) If the educating mother-author figure is God-like in Barbauld’s texts, she and the other mother-educators in “Invisible Being” have no need to appeal to a higher power.
This maternal education is the legacy that the mother in Barbauld’s poem will leave her son or daughter.

V

The pregnancy poems I have examined in this chapter are significant not just for their imaginative recovery of women’s influence over the physical aspects of pregnancy and birth, however. I argue that Barbauld, Kelly, and Cave all, in various ways, insist upon women’s right to use the book-as-baby metaphor—a trope long appropriated by male authors—as a valid way to describe their own literary productions. The tropes of birth and parenthood to describe literary creation date back to ancient times, but they were particularly popular in eighteenth-century England, when the establishment of the country’s first copyright law with the 1710 Statute of Anne justified authors’ continuing ownership of their publications by legally treating books as the children of their author-fathers, a metaphor that had a distinctly patriarchal dimension.\(^66\) The eighteenth-century male authors who used the tropes of birth and parenthood to describe the creation of their books differed, however, in the ways in which they deployed these parental metaphors. In *The Yard of Wit*, Raymond Stephanson presents a useful hierarchy of eighteenth-century birth tropes for writing, according to which immaculate male brain births rank above “laborious body births” that borrowed the language of women’s messy reproductive processes and were meant to suggest the inferior quality of these literary productions.\(^67\)

For Cave, Kelly, and Barbauld, on the other hand, the usage of embodied female metaphors for the production of ideas did not indicate that their literature was inferior. In


“Written About a Month after the Birth of the Author’s Second Child” for instance, Cave advises her son to “impregnate his head” with knowledge (56), a command that links both pregnancy and motherhood to wisdom (wisdom that her own poems are impregnated with as well). In Barbauld’s poem, the “charmed verse,” “muttered prayers,” and “favouring spells” that the speaker wishes she could generate in order to speed the baby on its way in a re-imagined female setting have in fact been realized in the poem; thus, the author-midwife has just delivered a poem for which the literal baby can be read (like the fetus, which is an “emblem of the rose unblown” in Kelly’s poem) as a metaphor. Barbauld’s poem-as-baby metaphor in “To a Little Invisible Being” was not, however, the first time that she had used this trope to describe her imaginative literature. In a 1774 letter to her brother, Barbauld fretted over the manuscript of her Devotional Pieces, which she had sent by sea to London for publication: “I am afraid my poor child is tossing upon the waves, for I have not heard yet of its arrival in London; and I cannot help feeling all a parent’s anxiety for its fate and establishment in the world.”68

Interestingly, Barbauld’s assumption of the role of mother to her literary productions echoes Isabella Kelly’s allusion to her position as mother-author in her preface to the 1794 Collection of Poems and Fables:

The writer of these verses is aware, that when works are offered in a printed form to the public, the authors must lay their account with receiving the wreath, or enduring the rod, from the hand of Criticism: and although the sanguine partiality of a parent for its offspring scarcely affords her any expectation of being honoured with the former, she indulges a hope that the circumstance will exempt

her from the latter, and procure her an amnesty for the many defects which she is free to confess may be found in them. 69

As doting mother to her book of poems, Kelly claims that she is unable to judge of its faults impartially, a motherly indulgence and solicitousness that Barbauld also exhibits for her journeying child-manuscript. I should also like to point out, however, that there is a striking difference between the two versions of Kelly’s prefatory address to her reader (published in 1794 and 1807), which indicates that she viewed her relationship to her literary offspring as one that is subject to development and change. In her preface to the 1807 edition of her poems (which is titled Poems and Fables on Several Occasions, although the selection of poems in it is identical to those in the somewhat differently titled 1794 edition), Kelly does not call her volume of poems the “offspring” of a “partial parent,” as she had in the preface to the 1794 Collection. In the 1807 preface, she hints that she is publishing her poems a second time because of the pressing needs of her “infant family.” 70 The shift in the focus of Kelly’s editorial commentary from her book-infant to her living children suggests that the volume of poems, in its infancy in 1794, has matured by 1807 and is able to help Kelly support her other young children. In fact, Kelly raises the subject of her own maturation in both versions of the preface when she explains that her poems express “the appropriate feelings of a child, a wife, and a mother” (Collection iii, Poems iii). Just as Kelly herself has made the transition from dependant child to protective mother (an identity that she particularly embraces in “To an Unborn Infant”), so too has her book of poems developed from an “offspring” with many faults into a mature work capable of helping her to nurture and sustain a family.

69 Isabella Kelly, Preface, A Collection of Poems and Fables (London: W. Richardson, 1794), iii.

70 Isabella Kelly, Preface, Poems and Fables on Several Occasions, 2nd ed. (Chelsea: Stanhope and Tilling, 1807), iv.
Barbauld is similar to Kelly in that she also viewed her books as children in need of attentive nurturing to aid their growth and development, after which time, they must be released into the world to fend for themselves. Just as Kelly imagines that her collection of poems (of which she was so solicitous when they were first published) will grow up and help her to support her family, so too does Barbauld imagine her books as children in need of early nurturing, from birth through the different stages of childhood to the book’s final “establishment in the world.”

This model of authorial motherhood is especially apparent in Barbauld’s *Lessons for Children*, in which Little Charles (the protagonist of these dialogues whom Barbauld named after her adopted son) ages along with his real-life counterpart. In these *Lessons*, it is also significant that Barbauld’s own narrative voice is strongest in the earlier dialogues, and then gradually recedes in order to allow the child’s voice to become more and more prominent in later dialogues (Myers, “Of Mice” 270-1 and McCarthy, “Mother” 98). This is part of allowing children to develop voices of their own, although Barbauld does not sacrifice her own voice in the process.

Barbauld’s and Kelly’s view of authorial motherhood is markedly different from the model for Samuel Richardson’s authorial fatherhood that Barbauld outlines in her introductory essay to *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, which she edited and published in 1804. Barbauld asserts that Richardson “may […] be said to be the father of the modern novel of the

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71 This is how Romantic-era women poets’ vision of textual motherhood differs from their seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century counterparts Anne Bradstreet and Mary Leapor, whose poems “The Author to her Book” and “Upon her Play being returned to Her Stained with Claret” (respectively) welcome their naughty, prodigal literary productions home again after failing to succeed in the wider world.

72 Mitzi Myers (“Of Mice” 282) and William McCarthy (“Mother of all Discourses: Anna Barbauld’s *Lessons for Children*,” *Culturing the Child, 1690-1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Meyers*, ed. Donelle Ruwe. [Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005], 92) have noted that Little Charles’ growth and development keeps pace with that of Barbauld’s son.

73 As McCarthy points out, the mother in *Lessons for Children* “is allowed to have agendas which preclude attention to Charles” (“Mother” 104).
serious or pathetic kind.” She also reports that Richardson himself was fond of saying that he looked upon his three novels as his daughters (Barbauld, “Life” cxliv); gendering his novels as female (even Sir Charles Grandison, the one whose title character is male) implies that Richardson wished to establish and maintain permanent, unquestionable paternal authority over his literary offspring (just as a father could do in perpetuity over his unmarried adult daughters). If Richardson viewed fatherhood to his literary creations (and his biological daughters) as involving perpetual, patriarchal ownership, Barbauld viewed motherhood to her books as an ongoing nurturing relationship whose purpose was to help those book-children eventually achieve autonomy. The same can be said for Isabella Kelly, whose prefaces indicate that she expected her infant literary creation to grow up and become self-sufficient so it could eventually assume the responsibility of supporting and nurturing others in turn. Richardson, by contrast, apparently wished to see his daughters (biological, honorary, and textual) to continue to defer to and dote upon him.

Finally, since the legacies of Cave, Kelly, and Barbauld will be preserved in the poems that they write, the birth of literature is as much of a concern to them as the birth of children. The pregnancy poems of these three authors cohere as a body of work not only because they insist upon women’s competence in managing pregnancy and birth—they also insist that women’s literary productions are as significant as those of their bodies, and that describing the production


75 Barbauld’s “Life of Samuel Richardson” hints that this was indeed the case with Samuel Richardson’s relationship to his biological daughters. As Barbauld points out, only one of Richardson’s four surviving daughters married before his death, which presumably meant that the rest remained in his home under his supervision. Barbauld also notes that his daughters were exceedingly shy and reserved, “in a degree that has been thought by some, a little to obscure those really valuable qualifications and talents they undoubtedly possessed.” The same can be said about his other female protégées, who exhibited a similar reserve and whom Richardson liked to refer to as his daughters. Barbauld also mentions several times in her biographical essay that, from a young age, Richardson preferred the company of ladies, and that he liked their deference to him (“Life” xxxvii-xlii, cxlvii, clxi-clxii, clxii-clxxii, clxxxix).
of that literature using embodied female metaphors like gestation and birth dignifies rather than degrades their work. In an era when women were valued chiefly for their ability to bear children, this marks a noteworthy shift in literary history.
CHAPTER 5

“In my Brain are studies & Chambers”: The Mental Gestations of William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

I

For late-eighteenth-century female poets like Jane Cave, Isabella Kelly, and Anna Letitia Barbauld, lyric poetry established the pregnant body and female literary imagination as sources of maternal authority. By contrast, first-generation male Romantic authors’ poetry about pregnancy and childbirth created sinister visions of sexual reproduction that imposed danger, passivity, and silence upon mothers. Because of the pain and danger inherent in physical gestation and birth, first-generation Romantic male poets also linked the childbirth metaphor for literary creation to failure and death, preferring instead paternal metaphors for writing.

The conventional argument, most notably put forth by Terry Castle and Susan Stanford Friedman, is that male Romantic poets were particularly enthusiastic in their embrace of birth topoi for writing because it was an apt metaphor for the originality, creativity, spontaneity, and organicism of the Romantic aesthetic.\(^1\) Indeed, with the advent of the so-called “Age of Sensibility,” male authors had started to embrace feminine attributes—including maternal characteristics—thus making sensibility suitable for men’s literary usage.\(^2\) I argue, however, that

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the male Romantic poets I discuss in this chapter were not willing to identify wholly with the feminine metaphors that they at least superficially seem to celebrate. In fact, birth’s spontaneity and uncertainty were the very factors that attuned male Romantic poets to the many problems with maternal metaphors for literary creation; for these authors, their disdain for the female labor of childbirth was connected to their disdain for female birth metaphors for writing.

In this chapter, I explore how William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge engaged with the metaphor of childbirth for writing while sidestepping the many problems that the metaphor presented because of its derivation from a female biological process. By denigrating, minimizing, and/or completely bypassing women’s role in physical reproduction, as well as by positing that men played a more significant role than women in successful sexual reproduction, these authors could also posit that literary gestations had paternal rather than maternal origins. Blake’s body of work suggests that childbirth exists in a fallen world of Experience, and that both mothers and children are marred by the birth process. For Wordsworth and Coleridge, childbirth is a similarly fallen process that silences and kills mothers, regardless of their marital status. As a result of their negative views of pregnancy and birth, when all three authors imagine their texts as nascent children, they dwell upon the conception of their artistic offspring—that is, upon the moment when the father plays the most significant role in sexual reproduction. In order to alienate the birth metaphor even further from women, these authors also imagine that their ideal poems spring fully-formed from their heads, rather than figuring their poems as long-gestating fetuses.

Ultimately, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge derive their views of childbirth from Aristotle, as all three authors believed that there is a spiritual dimension—whose source is male—that is crucial to both the conception of children and the conception of poetry. Far from
valuing birth metaphors that are rooted in the female body, they instead use birth topoi in ways that emphasize men’s spiritual role in sexual and textual reproduction. In their search for a mind that transcends the body, these authors avoid associating their creative processes with women; the grossly embodied pregnant and laboring mother is far from the ideal model for the transcendent mind’s production of poetry.

II

Most critics agree that William Blake’s treatment of women is problematic, though while some have argued that Blake’s earlier poems (including The Book of Thel and Visions of the Daughters of Albion) have far more feminist possibilities than do his later works, others contend that Blake’s ambivalence about—or even blatant sexism toward—women spanned his entire writing career. An examination of Blake’s numerous literary representations of pregnancy and birth indicates that however revolutionary his ideas about women might have been at various points in his oeuvre, his hostile attitudes toward women’s role in childbearing did not live up to his revolutionary principles and remained static throughout his literary career. In this section, I

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focus mainly on Blake’s poems published in the 1790s, as these are the texts whose feminism (or lack thereof) is most frequently subject to debate, although I will also briefly consider Blake’s later prophetic work, *The Four Zoas*, which he worked on for close to a decade, beginning circa 1796. I argue that in Blake’s poetry and engravings, pregnancy and birth are fallen, messy, inefficient processes that are best represented by male artists for whom the birth of art is ultimately superior to the birth of children. While it may at first appear that Blake celebrates the birth metaphor for literary and artistic creation because of the abundant birth imagery in his poems, a closer examination of these metaphors will reveal that the kinds of artistic births that Blake celebrates are those—like those of his male literary predecessors—that are furthest removed from the actual female birth experience and that most closely resemble men’s fleeting (and cerebral) role in sexual reproduction.

My readings of *The Book of Thel* (1789), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789-94), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), and *The Book of Urizen* (1794) demonstrate that, for Blake, pregnancy and childbirth are fallen states that exist outside the realm of Innocence in the oppressive world of Experience, even if the institution of motherhood belongs in the realm of Innocence; childbirth is a potentially redemptive process in these texts only because of the possibility of the birth of a male savior. In *The Book of Urizen*, Blake also declares his aversion to the burgeoning medical field of obstetrics, although his differing treatments of the pregnancies of Los (who is male) and Enitharmon (who is female) suggest that men are most capable of giving birth successfully. In fact, Blake is so confident that men are the beings best suited to manage pregnancy and childbirth that in *The Four Zoas* (c. 1796-1807) he subtly endorses Aristotle’s ancient theories about men’s superior role in sexual reproduction. Finally, not only does Blake suggest that men are the creatures best suited to direct the physical aspects of
reproduction, but he also maintains that the male artist (whether Los in his forge or Blake in his engraving workshop) is perhaps the best suited of all—more so than the expectant mother or the male obstetrician—to handle the work of human reproduction via artistic production, which ultimately does not resemble natural, female-centered birth at all.

_The Book of Thel_ has long been interpreted as an imaginative rendering of a young woman’s coming of age as she struggles with the meaning of her existence and her purpose within the world, especially in regards to her potential role as a mother. Exactly what Blake wished to express about maternity in the poem is less clear, however. Does Thel, for various reasons, reject sexuality and its resultant maternity and nurturing, or does she embrace it? The vast majority of critics have suggested that Thel’s retreat back to the Vales of Har represents her fearful refusal of life, adult sexuality, and/or motherhood (all of which are to be found in the realm of Experience rather than the world of Innocence as represented by the pastoral Vales), though Anne Mellor argues that Thel’s retreat back to the Vales of Har marks her triumphant embrace of both adult sexuality and maternal nurturing.⁴ While I concur with Mellor that uncorrupted forms of adult sexuality and motherhood certainly exist in the world of Innocence in _The Book of Thel_ (as well as in _Songs of Innocence and of Experience_), I contend that Blake nevertheless relegates two very specific physical aspects of maternity—pregnancy and childbirth—to the realm of Experience. What Thel confronts in Plate 6 of the poem is not her

fear of a nurturing maternal role, but rather her fear of the physical processes associated with becoming a mother—the foremost of which is death in childbirth.

Robert Waxler has pointed out that the grave plot that Thel encounters in the poem’s sixth plate could be interpreted as a symbol for her womb as well as for death (46), and several other critics have pointed out that the earthy Clod of Clay symbolizes both mortality and motherhood, but no critic has yet synthesized these readings in order to argue that the grave plot might represent Thel’s fear of death as a result of her womb—that is, of death in childbirth. As Thel enters the “land unknown,” she encounters “secrets” that include “the couches of the dead” and “valleys dark.” She hears “Dolours & lamentations” emanating from the ground as she wanders, stopping every so often by a “dewy grave” until she reaches the “hollow pit” of her own “grave plot” (BT, E 6). As vaginal imagery abounds earlier in The Book of Thel, it is hardly a stretch to conjecture that the “valleys dark” are vulvar, and that the “hollow pit” of Thel’s

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5 Vernon Lattin hints at the possibility that childbirth (“Eve’s price”) might be one of the aspects of sexuality that Thel fears, and he even suggests that the Clod of Clay represents both “generation and death” (20); however, because Lattin’s argument about the poem focuses on female sexuality rather than on maternity, he does not pursue this line of inquiry. In a similar vein as Lattin, Diana Hume George aligns the maternal Clod of Clay with the womb as well as a tomb; George, like Lattin, also suggests that Thel’s fear of sexuality is even greater than her fear of death, but she does not link Thel’s fear of sexuality and death to childbirth. See Diana Hume George, Blake and Freud (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 93, 95. Tristanne Connolly argues that the “vale” is “an image of the womb,” and the Worm a fetus, but she does not identify the grave-plot as the specific location of the womb (William Blake 111). Anne Mellor links Thel’s grave plot with maternity when she suggests that Thel’s descent into the grave signifies her acceptance of “the duties and pleasures” of a maternal role, but Mellor focuses only on the positive aspects of maternity in the poem and not on the death that could result from it (Blake’s Human 34). While Michael Tolley suggests that Blake equates birth and death in The Book of Thel, he argues that it is because the poem indicates that “to be born into the world of generation is to die from the world of eternity” (377). What Tolley’s argument—which focuses on the tragedy of birth for the infant—ignores about the correlation of birth and death in The Book of Thel is that the birth of a child can lead to its mother’s physical death (as well as to her infant’s spiritual death).

6 William Blake, “The Book of Thel,” 1789, The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman. (New York: Random House, 1988), 6. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Blake’s poetry are page numbers from this edition; in-text citations will also note the abbreviated title of the text (for instance, The Book of Thel will be shortened to BT), an E to indicate the Erdman edition, and the page number(s) on which the cited line(s) appear.

grave plot (an enclosed space located within the vaginal valleys) is like a womb. While the womb/tomb correlation in this plate could imply that Thel is, like other Blakean women, a sort of earth-mother, it also implies that maternity yokes women to the earth by way of the grave.

A number of the tombs that Thel observes are uterine in nature because they are filled and thus, in a sense, pregnant. Within these tombs/wombs, “the fibrous roots / Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists” (BT, E 6). Obstetric language resonates in this passage, as Blake’s poems frequently associate the anatomically-inflected term “fibres” with elements of the reproductive body, whether it is with the muscular power of the womb, or the microscopic vermicular fibers in seminal fluid. I should like to suggest that the “fibrous roots” growing in the grave plots in The Book of Thel evoke not only muscular uterine fibers and semen, but also the vascular system of the placenta (yet another anatomical feature that fascinated Blake) and perhaps even the umbilical cord, all of whose tentacles “infix” and enclose the fetus within the womb. While Thel’s grave/womb is as yet “hollow,” the other plots that she surveys are “dewy,” which is suggestive not only of vaginal moisture, but also of the amniotic fluid and blood that soak the bed on which a woman gives birth (tellingly, Blake also refers to these underground grave plots/wombs as “couches,” a word that was synonymous with “bed” in the

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9 F. B. Curtis argues that Blake’s “fibres” refer to muscular uterine fibers. See F. B. Curtis, “William Blake and Eighteenth-Century Medicine,” Blake Studies 8.2 (1979), 192. Nelson Hilton suggests that Blake’s “fibres” are connected to male rather than female reproductive physiology (167). Hilton also notes, however, that in Jerusalem, seminal fibers proliferate into what Blake identifies as “roots” that enclose Los, which sounds like it is akin to the uterus that surrounds the fetus.

Thel’s hollow tomb/womb is not “dewy,” since she has not yet been impregnated or given birth, but the voice that emanates from it (usually read as Thel’s own\textsuperscript{12}), implies that filling her womb with a child will simultaneously fill the grave with her own corpse.

In lamenting the weakness of the human senses, which make impressions upon and are in turn impressed by the amorous attentions of others, the disembodied voice from the grave also laments the most significant impression of all resulting from lovers’ intercourse— the impression of man’s seed in woman’s womb that results in pregnancy. The questions asked by the disembodied voice enumerate the physical impressions that are made by, as well as upon, the body of what is most likely a woman (perhaps Thel’s future, Experienced self):

‘Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?  
Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile!  
Why are Eyelids stord with arrows ready drawn,  
Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie?  
Or an Eye of gifts & graces, show’ring fruits & coined gold!  
Why a Tongue impress’d with honey from every wind?  
Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?  
Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror trembling & affright  
Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy!  
Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?’ (\textit{BT}, E 6)

\textsuperscript{11} Hilton suggests that Blake’s usage of “dewy” in “To Spring” refer to “genital juices,” although he identifies these juices as semen (166).

\textsuperscript{12} See, for instance, Bloom, \textit{Blake’s Apocalypse}, 58; Johnson, “Beulah,” 267; Mellor, \textit{Blake’s Human Form Divine}, 33; George, \textit{Blake and Freud}, 93.
While on one hand, these lines evoke the arts of female seduction meant to attract men (which include coquettish glances and smiles, a cajoling voice, a voraciously listening ear, and the panting and trembling that betrays both fear and desire). Tristanne Connolly points out that the questions posed by Thel’s voice also explore “the senses as places where the body is permeable,” leaving the reader with “the impression of lack of control over the body’s borders, of being helplessly overwhelmed by one’s environment and other human beings” (William Blake 22).

Given that no body is as permeable as the pregnant (or potentially pregnant) female body—whose boundaries can be invaded by both penis and semen, and whose contours are then drastically altered by the developing fetus—it can be little wonder that the seventh line of the voice’s speech employs a metaphor that refers to conception. The inward-turning vortex of the “whirlpool fierce” that “draw[s] creation in” evokes not so much the ear as the vaginal canal, which has the potential to “draw creation in” when a woman conceives new life in the form of a child. The impression of the man’s seed upon the woman’s body thus appears to be the ultimate endpoint of the seductions hinted at in this passage.

In arguing for Thel’s horror at the grotesque physicality of childbirth, I do not mean to suggest that The Book of Thel does not value the nurturing provided by the various maternal figures like the matronly Clod of Clay that reside in the Vales of Har. While Blake may elevate the selfless love of mothers for their children—which correlates with the purported moral of the story, as voiced by the Clod: “we live not for ourselves” (M. Johnson 264, 272)—the physical processes of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth are nevertheless exiled to the world of

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13 Mellor has argued that the “fearful and resentful questions of the Voice of Sorrow define a world where love is coquetry” (Blake’s Human 34).

14 In The Four Zoas, the Shadowy Female appears to Orc as a “shadowy Vortex” in “the Caverns of the Grave & Places of human seed” (E 363). Not only does Blake imagine his generative female character as a whirlpool, but he also places her within a grave that is simultaneously the source of human generation; this seeming paradox is more easily understood if the grave in this passage is a symbol for the deadly womb, as it is in Thel.
Experience, where the womb and the grave occupy the same space. The absence of childbirth in the realm of Innocence is even more conspicuous in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the text in which Blake first delineated these two opposing states of being. Mothers and maternal surrogates (such as nurses) abound in the poems of Innocence and Experience; indeed, offspring are produced more naturally in these poems than anywhere else in Blake’s body of work.\(^{15}\) However, the poems “Infant Joy” and “Infant Sorrow,” which are set closest to the moment of childbirth, say almost nothing about this physical process.\(^{16}\) While a vague description of the birth experience appears in “Infant Sorrow” (the poem set in the world of Experience), “Infant Joy” (the Innocence poem) does not allude to birth at all. In “Infant Joy,” the baby is already two days old and already at enough of a temporal remove from its birth that it is able to choose a name for itself, “Joy” (line 5), that it communicates to its mother. “Infant Sorrow,” unlike its Innocence counterpart, more closely approaches the moment of birth as the baby describes the event: “My mother groand! my father wept. / Into the dangerous world I leapt” (lines 1-2). In the world of Innocence, mothers converse with and nurture their newborn offspring, but there is no hint of the physical torment of childbirth—dangerous for mother and child alike—to which the baby in “Infant Sorrow” refers.

In a similar vein, both *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*—which has typically been read as a companion poem to *The Book of Thel* that is set in the world of Experience that Thel ultimately rejects—and *The Book of Urizen* (also set in a world oppressed by Urizenic Experience) depict childbirth as a horrifying oppression of childbearing women as well as of the

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\(^{15}\) According to Connolly, “The *Songs of Innocence and Experience* are populated by many children whose bodies are not horribly malformed, nor the products of earthquakes, direful changes, or gruesome emergences from alternative bodily orifices” (*William Blake* 125).

infants who are being born. In one of her lengthy speeches in *Visions*, Oothoon opines that marriage forces the wife

To turn the wheel of false desire: and longings that wake her womb
To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form
That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more.
Till the child dwell with one he hates, and do the deed he loaths
And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe birth
E’er yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day. (VDA, E 49)

In this passage, Blake refers to several problems surrounding birth at the end of the eighteenth century—a high infant mortality rate, premature (“unripe”) births in the form of miscarriages and abortions, and, perhaps most distressing of all, women who are forced into motherhood by “false desire” and who thereby come to “abhor” their children. Furthermore, *The Book of Urizen* emphasizes the physical illness and pain to which Enitharmon is subjected as she gestates and gives birth to Orc:

[…] Enitharmon sick,
Felt a Worm within her womb. […]
Coild within Enitharmon’s womb
The serpent grew casting its scales,
With sharp pangs the hissings began
To change to a grating cry,
Many sorrows and dismal throes. […]

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[...]Enitharmon groaning

Produc’d a man Child to the light. (BU, E 79)

As the fetal Orc gathers strength and develops from a “Worm” to a “serpent” to a “man Child,” Enitharmon grows increasingly ill until she experiences a final “paralytic stroke” and “Howling, the Child with fierce flames / Issu’d from Enitharmon” (BU, E 79). Though Orc is a character who embodies revolutionary possibilities even as a newborn, the moment of his birth is nevertheless fraught with pain and danger for both him and his mother.

If gestation and birth are flawed, fallen processes that belong in the world of Experience, the fault for this, as other Blake poems will make clear, lies with women and obstetric medicine.18 Though Blake acknowledges in Thel, Visions, and Urizen that giving birth entraps, sickens, oppresses, and even kills women, the sympathy that he extends to pregnant and parturient women’s plights in these texts does not excuse the physical weakness he perceives that they are subject to, nor the physical oppression that they pass on to their children. He is also scornful of the male medical practitioners whose attempts to deliver women from the dangers of childbirth only further restrict what is already an oppressive process. Blake is scornful of both mothers and obstetricians because the children who are being born are, if left to their own devices, active and powerful agents capable of giving birth to themselves without any assistance. These ideas recur throughout Blake’s work, regardless of whether he depicts birth in more realistic forms, or whether, as in his later prophetic works, he turns away from female childbirth toward the metaphorical birth of art that is forged from many different artificial, man-made processes. Indeed, if women are unable to handle childbirth (no matter if they run shrieking from it like Thel, or if they suffer pain, miscarriages, or even death), Blake suggests that men—

18 Connolly argues that Blake viewed female birth as inherently flawed and that he frequently treated “the difficulties of motherhood with hateful scorn” (William Blake, 113, 114).
whether male children who give birth to themselves, or the male artisan who forges new life with his creative arts—have a better chance of succeeding at the creation of new life than women (or even their male physicians) do.

The startling number of babies who actively birth themselves in Blake’s *oeuvre* suggests that he was aware of older obstetric theories that the fetus was primarily responsible for executing the maneuvers leading to its birth. The sulky baby in “Infant Sorrow” informs us that he “leapt” into this “dangerous world” (line 2), a fetal action that is visually rendered at the bottom of Plate 3 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which a half-born baby exuberantly extends its arms outward as it emerges from between its mother’s legs (see Figure 12).19 The text that appears in Plate 3 of *Marriage* is also about birth—the birth of “a new heaven,” whose “advent” was thirty-three years ago, as well as the birth of good and evil, which “spring” from various contraries (*MHH*, E 34).20 In a similar fashion, the “terrible birth” of America in *America a Prophecy* (1793) involves a “young one bursting” into existence (*AP*, E 54).21 The words that Blake uses to describe birth (“leapt,” “spring,” “bursting”), as well as his visual representation of the process, all conjure fetal energy and power that struggles against the oppressive embodiment that the fetus’ mother has forced upon it.22

Furthermore, Blake imagines that these active children who birth themselves are capable of wielding transformative influence at the moment of, or shortly after, their births. In *Europe a

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19 The literally fallen location of the birthing woman at the bottom of Plate 3 is also a visual representation of the fallen nature of childbirth in Blake’s worldview.


22 The active verbs that Blake applies to the fetus during childbirth anticipate those that Barbauld will use to describe birth in “To a Little Invisible Being.”
Prophecy (1794), the birth of Jesus (“the secret child”) is described not as the birth of a helpless baby but rather as the arrival of a powerful ruler who has the ability to transform the world: “the secret child, / Descended thro’ the orient gates of the eternal day; / War ceas’d, & all the troops like shadows fled / to their abodes.” Orc is another such child who is born with more adult than childish characteristics. In The Book of Urizen, he is described as “a man Child” who “Issu’d from Enitharmon” amidst “fierce flames” and howls (BU, E 79). Orc is enough of a revolutionary threat that his father Los chains him to a mountain, where Orc’s voice is nevertheless powerful enough to awaken the dead from slumber (BU, E 80). Likewise, in Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Oothoon calls infants “cherubs in the human form” that are “fearless, lustful, happy […] honest, open, seeking / The vigorous joys of morning light” (VDA, E 49). It is perhaps these descriptors of infants in Visions that led Susan Fox to suggest that Oothoon’s only hope for salvation is “giving birth to the revolutionary male force which can end the victimization” to which Blake (via Bromion and Theotormon) subjects her (513).

In contrast to their active, energetic babies, the women who give birth in Blake’s mythological world enclose and oppress their offspring by the simple act of bringing them into being. In her discussion of For Children: The Gates of Paradise (1793), Mellor has commented upon the ways in which Blake visually presents earthly life “as a graveyard existence dominated by authoritarian reason, psychological oppression and physical suffering,” an embodied existence from which the child must escape (Blake’s Human 67). Of particular significance is the Frontispiece to the work (Figure 13), which depicts a caterpillar-like infant symbolizing

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24 For more about Orc’s various incarnations as a revolutionary force in Blake’s poetry, see S. Foster Damon, Blake Dictionary, 309-11.
mankind, whose “material body” is “tightly swaddled, like the mentally and physically ‘bound’
child in ‘Infant Sorrow’” (Mellor, Blake’s Human 68). Blake lays blame for the caterpillar-
child’s bound condition squarely on its mother’s shoulders, as evinced by the very next
illustration (Figure 14), in which a woman plucks a mandrake-child up from beneath a tree,
clearly intending to add it to a bundle that contains another infant, which she closely clasps
against her abdomen—a posture that places the swaddled infant in the vicinity of her womb. In
these pictures of swaddled babies, Blake hints that mothers are responsible for physically
confining and oppressing their children simply by giving birth to them. He makes this point even
more explicitly in several of the Experience poems in Songs of Innocence and of Experience. In
“Infant Sorrow,” the angry infant is swaddled (“Bound”) and forced to “sulk” upon his mother’s
breast. The speaker in “To Tirzah” is also a child who accuses his mother (“Thou Mother of my
Mortal part” [line 9]) more directly for imprisoning him within an earthly, bodily existence from
which Jesus alone can free him.25 Indeed, read in this context, the “abhorred birth of cherubs in
human form” in Visions of the Daughters of Albion is sinister not only because the cherubs are
unwanted by their mothers, but because the human form imposed upon them is destructive to the
divinity of these cherubs (who “die a meteor & are no more”).26 Since Blake had also
commented negatively on maternal impression theory’s oppression of children in Jerusalem,27 it
would appear that the mothers in his works are only capable of marring their children.

Erdman (New York: Random House, 1988): 30. Though it is not clear whether the speaker is an infant, an older or
adult child, or perhaps even an older version of the newborn speaker in “Infant Sorrow,” the central figure in the
engraving of the poem appears to be an adult male.

26 In a similar vein, F. B. Curtis argues that Blake’s Lambeth books (The Book of Urizen and The Book of
Ahania in particular) associate the “fall from Eternity” in Blake’s mythology with “the fixed petrification of a fallen
state” that is brought about through physical childbirth (197).

27 According to Connolly, Blake made use of maternal impression theory in Jerusalem only to demonstrate
how it oppresses children by binding them to their parents: “Like Urizen’s ‘books formed of me’ […] this
Though Blake almost certainly felt that women were unable to handle the physical and psychological rigors of gestation and birth without destroying either themselves or their infants, he nevertheless did not align himself with the male medical professionals who had mostly taken over the management of middle- and upper-class childbirths by the final decades of the eighteenth century. A number of critics have commented on Blake’s ambivalence toward—and even antipathy to—surgeons like John Hunter, whom he had lampooned as “Jack Tearguts” in *Island in the Moon* (1785).\(^{28}\) Such aversion to male obstetricians is most apparent, however, in *The Book of Urizen*, in which the medicalization of birth adds another layer of binding and oppression to what is already, by nature, an oppressive process for both mother and child. Near the end of Chapter 5, amidst a glut of births that includes Los’ creation of Urizen, the emanation of Enitharmon from Los, and Enitharmon’s birthing of Orc, “All Eternity” is instructed to “‘Spread a Tent with strong curtains around them. / Let cords & stakes bind in the Void.’” As a result,

They began to weave curtains of darkness.

They erected large pillars round the Void

With gold hooks fastend in the pillars

With infinite labour the Eternals

A woof wove, and called it Science. (*BU*, E 78)

Because Blake frequently used the trope of weaving to discuss birth in his later works (Hilton 166), it is possible to connect the woof of science in *The Book of Urizen* to the medical field of

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obstetrics, which oppresses and entraps both mothers and their children. Within the curtained tent of science, a physically ill Enitharmon gestates and gives birth to Orc; after this painful event, “The Eternals closed the tent” (*BU*, E 79). In an inversion of the trope of “Enlightenment” (the usual metaphor for knowledge), obstetric science in Blake’s universe is comprised of “curtains of darkness” that obscure and limit the infinite, enclosing and oppressing both the world beneath it and those born into it.

Though Blake’s poetry rejects male obstetricians’ intervention in pregnancy and birth, his work nevertheless demonstrates that birth and creation are most effectively managed by another kind of man—the male artist whose creative process is far removed from (and in fact hardly resembles) female childbirth. Connolly posits that Blake was ambivalent about the birth process’ potential for success, no matter if men or women were the principal agents involved in it, which prompts her to argue that his work instead values “nonreproductive sexuality” that “expands the possibilities of what sexual activity can produce, such as personified emotions and artwork” (Connolly, *William Blake* 119). There is, however, a dark side of bringing art (and children) into being for Blake, as both creative processes are “a kind of death” if the work of art or the child “can no longer grow or change; an idea can be killed in its formation” (Connolly, *William Blake* xiv, 121). Both processes are thus likely to fall short of their possibilities, if not apt to end in total failure (Connolly, *William Blake* 121-2). The correlation that Connolly notices between the birth of children and the birth of art implies that Blake was wary of the birth metaphor for artistic

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29 Morton Paley also discusses the negative implications of the weaving of the web or net, which have “implications of entrapment” and are related to the oppressive “Net of Religion.” See Morton Paley, “The Figure of the Garment in *The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem,*” *Blake’s Sublime Allegory*, ed. Stuart Curran and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 126.

30 According to Gilpin, Blake critiques science in *Urizen* because it reduces “the world’s body” to a restricted, enslaved human form in the narrowness of the womb (at least as the womb was viewed by obstetric science) (44). I do not mean to suggest that Blake rejects or critiques all branches of medical science in his work; I only argue that he critiques obstetric science in these texts.
creation, just as he was skeptical of childbirth itself. However, I should like to add that Blake was more tolerant of describing his creative process using birth topoi under three conditions: when these metaphors alienated women from the process; when they reproduced Aristotle’s androcentric theories about birth; and, finally, when they didn’t resemble real human birth at all. The only good births in Blake’s oeuvre are of bodies or works of art that are created primarily by male artists using masculine artistic processes within what Brenda Webster calls Blake’s “male-centered creative world” (207).

I build my arguments about Blake’s use of the birth metaphor for artistic creation mostly upon my reading of a key passage from The Four Zoas (c. 1796-1807), the unfinished, unilluminated manuscript poem that represents Blake’s attempt to subsume all of his previous myths as articulated in his Lambeth Books into a single text (Damon 142-3). The culmination of Blake’s mythological systems as expressed in the texts he had published during the better part of the 1790s, The Four Zoas encapsulates the range of Blake’s negative attitudes toward birth, from his early disgust toward the physical process to his acceptance of birth as a metaphor for literary creation only when that creative process bore no resemblance to the physical birth process that women undergo. Though his means of expressing it might have changed, Blake’s disdain for childbirth—whether physical or metaphorical—remained the same.

In Night the Eighth of The Four Zoas, Blake describes the creation of mankind in Golgonooza, Los’ city of “‘Art and Manufacture’” that consists of “the physical bodies of man and woman” (Damon 162). As the following passage indicates, the labor that Blake describes is divided according to the sex of the laborer:

In Golgonooza Los’s anvils stand & his Furnaces rage

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Ten thousand demons labour at the forges Creating Continually
The times & spaces of Mortal Life the Sun the Moon the Stars
In periods of Pulsative furor beating into wedges & bars
Then drawing into wires the terrific Passions & Affections
Of Spectrous dead. Thence to the Looms of Cathedron conveyd
The Daughters of Enitharmon weave the ovarium & the integument
In soft silk drawn from their own bowels in lascivious delight
With songs of sweetest cadence to the turning spindle & reel
Lulling the weeping specters of the dead. Clothing their limbs
With gifts & gold of Eden. Astonished stupefied with delight
The terrors put on their sweet clothing on the banks of Arnon
Whence they plunge into the river of space for a period till
The dread Sleep of Ulro is past. (FZ, E 376)

It is notable that, as described in this passage, the creation of mankind hardly resembles human sexual reproduction at all. While the fact that the Daughters of Enitharmon “weave the ovarium & the integument […] from their own bowels in lascivious delight” sounds as if it could refer to the gestation and birth of children, I should like to point out that the manner of the Daughters’ creation is far more consonant with a spider’s web-spinning than with pregnancy or parturition. The women’s creation of human bodies through weaving on looms—a common trope in Blake’s later prophetic works beginning with The Four Zoas (Paley, “Figure” 119-20)—also physically alienates the female weavers from the birth process, as they fabricate the “integument” on looms that are external to their bodies (even if the “soft silk” is drawn from their “bowels”).

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32 In alienating the Daughters of Enitharmon from the creative labor of childbirth, Blake elaborates upon another theme that had arisen in several of his earlier texts. In Plate 3 of For Children (Figure 14), which I have
Furthermore, even before the Daughters weave the integument (presumably the outer layer of skin, but also perhaps clothing) for the bodies of mankind, Los and his demons labor in their forge to create “the terrific Passions & Affections / Of Spectrous dead.” The birth of mankind in The Four Zoas, then, is artificially constructed rather than an internal, biological, female process.

While Blake’s vision of the artificial construction of mankind could lend itself to some progressive interpretive possibilities (in creating, for instance, a definition of parenthood that is severed from biological reproduction, or perhaps even anticipating twentieth- and twenty-first-century reproductive technologies), I argue that the sexual division of artificial reproductive labor in Golgonooza is far from a gesture toward feminist ideals. In the passage cited above, Blake essentially (and somewhat literally) reproduces the oldest and most sexist ideas about human reproduction known to the Western world—Aristotle’s theory of generation. According to Aristotle’s On the Generation of Animals, “what the male contributes to generation is the form and the efficient cause, while the female contributes the material,” meaning that the female contributes only the gross matter that the male’s energy shapes and infuses with the soul that is contained in the semen.33 When Los and his demons create “time and space,” the sun, the moon, and the stars, as well as “wedges and bars” (FZ, E 376), they are simultaneously forging both the Aristotelian form (the shape or design of the creation, whether celestial bodies or “wedges and bars”) and supplying the efficient cause of mankind—that is, the action necessary to create the body’s form (“creating,” “beating,” “drawing”). Furthermore, Blake’s passage alludes to the

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Aristotelian concept that men are the source of their children’s souls because “semen both has soul, and is soul, potentially” (E8v). The demons in Los’ forge also manufacture the “terrific Passions & Affections” (FZ, E 376) for the forms they create, which suggests that these male creators shape their offspring’s internal as well as external attributes.

The Daughters of Enitharmon, on the other hand, contribute the matter out of which these bodies will be shaped, but Blake makes it clear that what they fabricate is only the outermost layer of these bodies (the “sweet clothing” that the new births don). Even though the Daughters also “weave the ovarium,” it is important that the only internal element of the body that they create is a specifically female organ that itself offers only the physical matter that will be shaped by men’s energy. The Daughters of Enitharmon can create nothing without the inspiriting guidance of a master male creator who forges the body and its soul. Since the medium of Blake’s art—what he called “printing in the infernal method, by means of corrosives […] melting apparent surfaces away” (MHH, E 39)—is similar to Los’ fiery forge, it is likely that Blake identified his own work with Los’ masculine creative labor rather than with the weaving of the Daughters of Enitharmon. For Blake, then, there is a spiritual dimension—whose source is male—that is crucial to both the conception of children and the conception of poetic art.

As I have already noted, Connolly claims that Blake linked artistic production with the creation of human life because both processes are likely to fall short of their full potentials, if not to end in total failure (Connolly, William Blake 121-2). What I should like to argue, however, is that Blake doesn’t so much link the creation of art and childbirth because of their potential for failure as he attempts to sever ties completely between childbirth and creativity. Like his male

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34 In his exploration of the figure of the garment in Blake’s long poems, Morton Paley notes that the garment is an “ambiguous symbol of the body” that is both oppressive and redemptive (120, 130), though he does not comment upon the sexual division of labor in Blake’s mythological world.
predecessors and contemporaries, Blake paradoxically embraced the childbirth metaphor for artistic creation only when it looked nothing like actual childbirth. For instance, in *The Book of Urizen*, Los is pictured giving birth to the “globe of life” from his head, which turns out to be his emanation, Enitharmon (Figure 15). Not only is Los “serving as his own intellectual midwife in pushing forth the bloody globe of life,” as Gilpin suggests (48), but he is also acting as the mother who is giving birth to that life, though in a decidedly unfemale way. Additionally, the globe that Los births in the Morgan Library copy of *The Book of Urizen* is covered with striations that look very much like blood vessels, which harkens back to Blake’s interest in the vascular system of the placenta and chorion.

Blake’s discussion of the chambers of his mind in a letter to John Flaxman, when read alongside another passage about chambers in *The Four Zoas*, also suggests a connection between art and children that emphasizes the mental source of each. In his letter to Flaxman, dated 21 September 1800, Blake boasts,

> I am more famed in Heaven for my works than I could well conceive [sic] In my Brain are studies & Chambers filld with books & pictures of old which I wrote & painted in ages of Eternity. before my mortal life & whose works are the delight & Study of Archangels.\(^{35}\)

Because it posits the pre-existence of a work of art before the artist brings it into being, this passage is linked to the following lines in *The Four Zoas*, which allude to the pre-existence of children: “The Moon has chambers where the babes of love lie hid / And whence they never can be brought in all Eternity / Unless exposed by their vain parents” (*FZ*, E 366). While Connolly notes the similarities between these passages and interprets them as evidence that Blake’s belief

in the preexistence of art and children was linked to his feeling that both could be ruined by 
becoming embodied in reality (William Blake 121-2), I read the repetition of the word 
“chambers” in light of Blake’s attempts to posit a male source for both literary/artistic and actual 
estations. Blake imagines that the production of both art and human souls happens in places that 
are far removed from women’s bodies. His use of the word “concieve” in the Flaxman letter 
suggests that his thoughts about art are rooted in the language of embryology, yet the sentences 
that follow indicate that his artistic conceptions are to be found in the his brain’s “studies & 
Chambers,” both traditionally masculine spaces.36 When Blake imagines that unborn children 
reside in lunar “chambers,” not only does he distance birth from its natural, earthly realm, but he 
also implies that these chambers are akin to his own cerebral chambers. Children are ultimately, 
like his artwork, mental conceptions locked away in places (such as his brain and the moon) that 
are far removed from women’s bodies. Blake’s description of the spaces in his head that are 
capable of conceiving art links him not only to Los, whose head gives birth to his emanation, but 
also to other eighteenth-century male writers who imagined that great literature is the offspring 
of men’s heads rather than women’s bodies.

III

Blake’s conviction that his brain-womb’s creative powers were the conduit for bringing 
his works of art into being stemmed from his disdain for maternal bodily processes, which in his 
cosmology were prone to failure and death for both mothers and babies. That William 
Wordsworth was largely silent on the subject of childbirth in his poetry, and that he too preferred 
the brain-birth metaphor for literary creation, stemmed from the same reservations that Blake had

36 A study is “the private room or office of the master of a house, however it may be used,” while 
“chambers” are either “[t]he section of a royal or noble household concerned with their master's personal quarters 
and affairs,” or “the houses of a legislative body” (OED). Both words thus have masculine associations.
with birth. For Wordsworth, as for Blake, childbirth is deadly for both women and infants, though Wordsworth relegates pregnancy and birth to the margins of his poems rather than engaging with all of the gory physical details on which Blake dwells. Nevertheless, physical violation threatens the pregnant women in Wordsworth’s poems, violation to which they can respond only with silence and passivity because their pregnant bodily processes disconnect them from the ability to use language effectively (if at all). These mothers thus need the intervention of the male poet to tell their stories. Wordsworth’s repeated retellings of the tale of the fallen woman—via Martha Ray in “The Thorn,” Mary Robinson, the Maid of Buttermere, in The Prelude, and Ellen in The Excursion—emphasize that mothers cannot tell their own stories and are dependent upon the male poet to break their silence. Though the women in these poems all become pregnant illegitimately, married mothers fare no better in Wordsworth’s body of work, as my readings of several interpolated anecdotes in The Excursion reveal. For Wordsworth, the poet’s mind ultimately must transcend his body, but because pregnant women are so tied to their bodies, they can never achieve this transcendence. Wordsworth thus echoes Blake in his usage of pregnancy and birth as negative metaphors for the creative process.

One of the most (in)famous mothers in Wordsworth’s oeuvre is Martha Ray, a character who appears in “The Thorn,” which was first published in Lyrical Ballads (1798); Martha’s putative pregnancy and childbirth are hardly the focus of the poem, however.37 Wordsworth’s note appended to the poem in the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads stated that the narrator and the thorn are the central elements in “The Thorn.” After declaring that his narrator was supposed to

be “a Captain of a small trading vessel” who had “retired […] to some village or country town.”

Wordsworth explains his reasoning behind choosing such a speaker:

> It was my wish in this poem to shew the manner in which such men cleave to the same ideas; and to follow the turns of passion, always different, yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed. I had two objects to attain: first, to represent a picture which should not be unimpressive yet consistent with the character that should describe it, secondly, while I adhered to the style in which such persons describe, to take care that words, which in their minds are impregnated with passion, should likewise convey passion to Readers who are not accustomed to sympathize with men feeling in that manner or using such language.  

Wordsworth’s career-long interest in filtering the subject matter of his poems through the consciousness of the poet (or a fictional observer who is frequently the poet’s proxy) is readily apparent in his critical remarks on “The Thorn.” As such, Martha Ray’s story is significant only insofar as it “impregnated with passion” the narrator’s (and Wordsworth’s) brain.

While Wordsworth focused on the importance of the sea-captain narrator in the note he published two years after the poem’s first appearance in print, in his later recollections about the circumstances that led him to write “The Thorn,” he identified the thorn itself as his source of inspiration. According to the Fenwick notes, Wordsworth had recalled that the poem

> [a]rose out of my observing on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn, which I had often past in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn

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permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes this moment? I began the poem accordingly, and composed it with great rapidity.\textsuperscript{39}

When considered together, the later Fenwick note and the earlier note published with the poem in \textit{Lyrical Ballads} suggest that Wordsworth’s primary impetus to write the poem was his desire to make the thorn “an impressive object,” but a secondary impulse prompted him to demonstrate how the thorn became an impressive object to a very particular kind of observer. In both reminiscences, however, Wordsworth omits any mention of the character of Martha Ray as his inspiration for the poem. Although it is well known from Dorothy Wordsworth’s Alfoxden journal that on their fortuitous walk past the thorn the Wordsworth siblings had been accompanied by Basil Montagu,\textsuperscript{40} the young grandson of a real-life woman named Martha Ray (who had been scandalously murdered by her lover outside of a London theatre), Wordsworth makes no mention of this circumstance in either his 1800 note or the Fenwick note, nor of his reasons for putting a woman named Martha Ray in the thorn’s vicinity (which, as I shall discuss below, were literary as well as occasional). Following Wordsworth’s example, a number of twentieth-century critics have pointed out that Martha Ray and her rumored infanticide are only incidental to the poem’s larger purposes, which involve an inanimate object and a male observer.\textsuperscript{41}


However, another critical school of thought on “The Thorn” argues that Wordsworth intended for Martha Ray to be, if not the centerpiece, at least an integral part of a poem that makes sympathetic socio-political commentary on the plight of the fallen woman. Roger Sharrock is perhaps the only critic who has maintained that Martha Ray and her tragedy, rather than the narrator, constitute the “emotional core” of the poem, though Paul D. Sheats, Geoffrey Jackson, James Holt McGavran, Jr., Judith W. Page, and Tim Fulford have all made cases for Wordsworth’s humanitarian impulses in “The Thorn.” Other readers who have argued for Martha Ray’s importance in the ballad have suggested that she was instrumental to Wordsworth’s project in demonstrating the imaginative process, the narrator’s pain, or the production of language and poetry. Even critics who have argued for Martha Ray’s significance, however, have often omitted any mention of the ways in which Wordsworth exploits her for his own personal or poetic ends. I would prefer to believe, along with Jackson, McGavran, Page, and Fulford, that Wordsworth’s depiction of Martha Ray was perhaps an incarnation of his guilt for his treatment of Annette Vallon, or an example of his respect for impoverished women and mothers (regardless of their marital status). Nevertheless, I am

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44 For instance, Sheats argues that Wordsworth “exalts” Martha Ray and makes her “heroic” in her pain (Making 201), but he doesn’t seem particularly concerned with Wordsworth’s seeming fetishization of Martha’s suffering. Jacobus suggests that Martha’s suffering works in tandem with the sea-captain’s narrative in order to show “how the imaginative process makes the tragedy impressive” (Tradition 248), but such a reading assumes that the observer’s interpretation of the event is still more significant than Martha’s own experience of it.
convinced by Wordsworth’s silences at crucial moments relating to pregnancy and birth in the poem that “The Thorn” is a quintessential “lyrical ballad,” a poem in which the storyline is an incidental part of a larger, more significant narrative—that is, the psychodrama of the speaker/observer who comes into contact with the story’s principal players.

Wordsworth’s handling of his unacknowledged source material for the fictional Martha Ray’s lurid tale suggests that the central parts of her narrative—those having to do with women’s issues and the physical processes associated with maternity—are of limited interest to him. “The Lass of Fair Wone” and “The Cruel Mother,” both traditional ballads, are recognized as potential sources for “The Thorn” because of the infanticidal mothers in each poem. The version of “The Cruel Mother” that Wordsworth would have known was printed in Herd’s Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs in 1776; in fact, Wordsworth had printed this version of the poem into his commonplace book (Jacobus, Tradition 242). The ballad opens abruptly with a woman who has “leand her back to a thorn […] And there she has her baby born” (lines 1, 3). The mother buries her child (though there is no indication in the poem of whether or not she had killed it) and then goes back to her father’s house, where she appears to be haunted by her child’s spirit. One of the most striking images in the short ballad (and certainly the most significant as far as Wordsworth is concerned) is that of the mother leaning against the thorn while she is giving birth, but Wordsworth does not specify if the thorn in his own poem had ever served such a function for Martha Ray.


Similarly, in another of Wordsworth’s possible sources for “The Thorn,” William Taylor’s “The Lass of Fair Wone” (a translation of Bürger’s “Des Pfarrers Tochter von Tabuenhain” that was printed in the April 1796 edition of the *Monthly Magazine*), the exiled parturient woman travels through “thorn and briar” until she reaches her father’s garden, where she gives birth in excruciating pain and then kills her baby before dying herself. In “The Lass,” Taylor focuses on the stages of the young woman’s pregnancy, and he also describes her physical agony while giving birth. Although “The Thorn” borrows some details from the ballad (most notably the baby’s “barren grave” that is “three spans in length” and the “pond of toads” near it), it offers no analogous discussions of Martha Ray’s putative pregnancy or childbirth. Of course, Wordsworth is silent on a number of issues in “The Thorn” that are explicit in both “The Cruel Mother” and “The Lass of Fair Wone”; for instance, he does not say if Martha Ray had ever given birth at all, or if she had, if she had actually killed her baby (who may or may not be buried under the hill of moss). While such textual ambiguities may be necessary in order to highlight the superstitious nature of the sea-captain’s imagination, they nevertheless also indicate where Wordsworth’s poetic interests did not lie—with the female processes of pregnancy and childbirth. The very little that we do learn about Martha’s pregnancy is from the sea-captain’s report of Old Farmer Simpson’s opinion of her condition:

> Last Christmas when we talked of this,
> Old Farmer Simpson did maintain,
> That in her womb the infant wrought
> About its mother’s heart, and brought
> Her senses back again:

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And when at last her time drew near,
Her looks were calm, her senses clear. (149-54)

Such third-hand information does little to tell us, however, how Martha Ray herself felt about her pregnancy, or even if she had truly been pregnant at all.

What little the sea-captain does say, via hearsay, about Martha’s pregnancy both raises and subsequently dismisses the possibility of maternal impressions, and thus of the possibility of women’s influence over the physical processes related to reproduction. The captain worries that Martha, who went mad after being impregnated and then abandoned by Stephen Hill, will pass her madness on to the child she is carrying: “Sad case for such a brain to hold / Communion with a stirring child!” (144-5). The speaker’s worries are almost immediately revealed to be unfounded, however, because the speaker informs us in the very same stanza that, as Old Farmer Simpson had assured him (in lines 149-54, cited above), the fetus’s presence in Martha’s womb actually brought her back to sanity. Interestingly, a similar course of events takes place in Wordsworth’s “The Mad Mother” (also printed in Lyrical Ballads) when the nursing baby boy at least temporarily brings his mother back to sanity (31-40).48 This fetal (or infant) influence over the mother in Wordsworth’s poetry suggests that impressions might actually operate in the opposite direction—from fetus (or child) to mother’s mind rather than from the mother’s mind to the fetus. Nevertheless, in “The Thorn” Wordsworth dismisses maternal impressions as just another superstition that only extremely credulous or superstitious men like the captain or Old Farmer Simpson might imagine.

“The Thorn” and “The Mad Mother” are not isolated examples in Wordsworth’s oeuvre of fetuses or children who are possessed of a seemingly supernatural influence or energy. In his

later “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” for instance, Wordsworth asserts that the active “Child of Joy” (34), the “babe” who “leaps up on his mother’s arm” (49), is born into the world “trailing clouds of glory” (64) because “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” (66). It can hardly be surprising, then, that even after its birth and untimely death, the infant in “The Thorn” has the power to protect its mother by preventing the exhumation of its body. As the sea-captain relates,

And some had sworn an oath that she
Should be to public justice brought;
And for the little infant’s bones
With spades they would have sought.
But then the beauteous hill of moss
Before their eyes began to stir;
And for full fifty yards around,
The grass it shook upon the ground;
But all do still aver
The little babe is buried there,

Beneath that hill of moss so fair. (232-42)

Though a number of critics have pointed out that the stirring of the moss and the shaking of the grass can be attributed to natural rather than supernatural phenomena, I should like to offer two alternative readings. First, the baby does not want its grave to be disturbed. Second, the baby is actually protecting its mother by preventing the villagers from exhuming it. The source of this dead infant’s power is, however, the name of the father. The “hill of moss,” as Sheats has noted,

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links the baby to its father, Stephen Hill (“Tis” 96). The baby is thus identified with its father rather than its mother, who lacks the power to leave her infant’s grave or to speak at all, except for her repetitious cries of “Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me! oh misery!” (252-3).

Wordsworth does not leave what little he tells of Martha Ray’s story behind in the *Lyrical Ballads*, however, as this character informs two other tales of illegitimately pregnant women in his poetry—Mary, the Maid of Buttermere, in *The Prelude*, and Ellen in *The Excursion*. A brief consideration of each of these characters will demonstrate Wordsworth’s persistent linkage of pregnancy and birth with death, an association of ideas that prevents the mother’s access to language, and thus to the ability to tell her own story. Wordsworth thereby rejects both maternal agency and maternal metaphors for the production of language or literature.

In the seventh book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s poetic recollections of his residence in London are suddenly disrupted by the memory of Mary Robinson, the so-called “Maid of Buttermere” who intrudes upon his thoughts several times in the middle of the book. As numerous critics have noted, this character is significant because of the issues that she forces Wordsworth to confront. Donald H. Reiman’s argument that the Maid of Buttermere is less significant as a person than as a symbol for innocence is fairly typical of extant critical commentary on her. Other readers have interpreted Mary of Buttermere as a proxy for Wordsworth and/or as a symbol for abstract ideals like home, innocence, purity, and/or adult

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50 Interestingly, Gordon Thomas argues that the thorn is a symbol for Stephen Hill (“Coleridge” 380).


52 According to Reiman, “Mary Robinson’s tale became a moral and emotional touchstone of [Wordsworth’s] sense of his own roots in the Lake Country and his return to them in 1800” and that “[t]he tale of Mary of Buttermere in *The Prelude* does not depend for its relevance upon Wordsworth’s personal knowledge of her or even upon their shared background. She stands as a far more universal example of the power of true innocence.” See Donald H. Reiman, “The Beauty of Buttermere as Fact and Romantic Symbol,” *Criticism* 26 (1984), 148, 153.
Because the Maid of Buttermere is more cipher than person in Wordsworth’s poem, I should like to suggest that she could also be another incarnation of Martha Ray, who is also inextricably connected to her dead, illegitimately-begotten infant and to the site of that infant’s grave.

The daughter of a Buttermere innkeeper, Mary Robinson was introduced to the world at an early age via Joseph Budworth’s travel book *A Fortnight’s Ramble to the Lakes* (1792), which listed her as one of the Lake District’s chief tourist attractions (Reiman 140). This publication brought the young Robinson (only 15 years old at the time) much unsolicited attention, which culminated in her courtship by James Hatfield, a London impostor who presented himself to Robinson in the guise of the Honorable Alexander Augustus Hope (Reiman 142). The two were married (bigamously, as it turned out, as Hatfield already had a wife), and Robinson became pregnant before Hatfield abandoned her. Wordsworth introduces Mary Robinson in Book 7 of *The Prelude* by describing the Sadler’s Wells production of Charles Dibdin’s *Edward and Susan, or The Beauty of Buttermere*, a pantomime loosely based on Hatfield’s seduction and betrayal of Robinson. Once Wordsworth introduces Robinson into his poetic narrative, he is seemingly unable to forget her; though he tries several times to quit the theme and move on with his discussion of London, Mary’s image continues to haunt him.

Wordsworth dislikes the fact that the story of Mary Robinson’s betrayal has been made a public spectacle in London, yet in Book 7 he also casts her in his own mental drama in which she

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plays the role of the bereaved mother who, like Martha Ray, is forever bound to the spot of
ground where her infant lies buried. Though Wordsworth imagines a more peaceful post-
lapsarian existence for Robinson, who “lives in peace / Upon the spot where she was born and
reared” (7.351-2), she is nevertheless forbidden to leave or to represent her experiences in her
own words. Just as Wordsworth’s framing of “The Thorn” precludes a full telling of the story in
Martha’s own words (aside from her barely articulate cry of “Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is
me! oh misery!” [252-3]), so too does his version of the Maid of Buttermere’s story prevent her
from relating her own story, living, as she does, “In quietness” (7.354). Because of Mary’s
silence, we learn no details about her marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, or her infant’s death, nor
can we hear her express her feelings about any of these experiences; we must simply take
Wordsworth at his word that “Happy are they both, / Mother and child!” (7.359-60).

The only maternal character who has access to speech in The Prelude is the prostitute at
Sadler’s Wells, whose dissipated urban lifestyle Wordsworth contrasts with Mary Robinson’s
rural purity. Immediately after invoking the Maid of Buttermere, he introduces the painted
woman at Sadler’s Wells, who was also the mother of a young and as-yet innocent boy. This
passage then leads Wordsworth to yet another remembrance, this time, of his first trip to London,
when he had learned to associate prostitutes with loose and lascivious language:

Southward two hundred miles I had advanced,
And for the first time in my life did hear
The voice of woman utter blasphemy—
Saw woman as she is to open shame
Abandoned, and the pride of public vice.
Full surely from the bottom of my heart
I shuddered (7.416-22).

Though the prostitute whom Wordsworth heard cursing is undoubtedly a different person from the woman of pleasure at Sadler’s Wells, the proximity of the two in Book 7, as well as their shared occupation, suggests an equivalence between them. Wordsworth contrasts the profane speech of prostitutes and the “oaths, indecent speech, and ribaldry” (7.390) that surround the boy at Sadler’s Wells with the Maid of Buttermere’s preferable “quietness.” Because women’s speech in this book is profane, Wordsworth tries to efface the mother-prostitute—almost as much as he does Mary Robinson—by claiming that “scarcely at this time / Do I remember her” (7.394-5). Though Wordsworth meant for the Maid of Buttermere and the prostitute to be construed as polar opposites, these women’s maternity and their lack of access to speech (or at least to legitimate speech) indicate that they are not so different from each other after all. For Wordsworth, the ideal mother is a quiet mother.

Like Martha Ray and the Maid of Buttermere, Ellen in Book 6 of The Excursion is illegitimately impregnated, gives birth to a baby who dies, and then repeatedly visits her dead infant’s grave. The similarities in all three characters’ plot lines connect maternity, death, and silence across Wordsworth’s body of poems. As the Pastor tells the Poet, the Wanderer, and the Solitary, Ellen found herself abandoned with a “secret burthen” (6.870) after being wooed by a faithless lover.54 Although she regained some peace after giving birth to her child and then nursing him for four months, her “scruples” (6.959) about being a burden to her widowed mother led her to accept a position as a wet-nurse. However, her employers wouldn’t allow Ellen to visit her son for fear that “such meeting would disturb / The Mother’s mind, distract her thoughts, and thus / Unfit her for her duty” to nurse their own baby (6.980-2). When her own son grew ill,

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Ellen wasn’t able to tend to him, so he died, presumably for lack of maternal care. After her infant’s burial, Ellen proceeded to visit its grave “oft as she was sent abroad” (6.1005), and here she “oft was seen to stand, or kneel / In the broad day, a weeping Magdalene” (6.831-2). Ellen then sickens, wastes away, and dies; she is buried next to her infant, and her grave shelters it.

Though Wordsworth is clearly contemptuous of Ellen’s employers for not allowing her to visit her infant, he places a significant amount of blame on Ellen for the death of her child. While the pastor surmises that it was “In selfish blindness” (6.976) that Ellen’s employers “Forbad her all communion with her own” (6.979), he also subtly supports Ellen’s own feelings of guilt that her absence caused her baby’s death. He does not contradict her, for instance, when she exclaims that her child was “deserted” (6.990). His suggestion that “Her fond maternal Heart had built a Nest / In blindness all too near the river’s edge” (6.1040-1) also suggests that she was culpable of carelessness. The Pastor insists that Ellen, when visiting her infant’s grave, was a “Penitent sincere” who “mourned in bitterness / Her own transgression” (6.1010-1); because he does not specify if her transgression was her desertion of her child, or the original sexual sin that brought the infant into the world, Ellen must presumably repent of both sins. Wordsworth also twice describes Ellen as a “Magdalene” (6.832, 6.1008). The Catholic Church’s reading of Mary Magdalene as a reformed prostitute was popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (OED), and Wordsworth certainly meant to cast Ellen in this role (although the irony of the fact that Wordsworth imposes a story of sexual transgression onto Ellen just as the Catholic Church imposed the story of prostitution and sexual impurity onto Mary Magdalene does not register in the poem).

In her sexual transgression, Ellen seems very similar to the prostitute at Sadler’s Wells in The Prelude, but because Ellen is a penitent Magdalene, Wordsworth allows her the most
fettered access to speech of any pregnant or maternal character in his oeuvre, though this access eventually dwindles into silence and, finally, death.\textsuperscript{55} During her pregnancy, Ellen wrote a lament on “the blank margin of a Valentine” (6.910) concerning man’s inconstancy in love, a “tender passage” (6.906) that the Pastor recites word for word to his auditors, though “not […] without loss of simple phrase” (6.906-7). Despite the fact that the Pastor mangles Ellen’s words, she is at least able to speak in her own words at this point in the narrative. As her pregnancy progresses, however, she reads rather than speaks. By the time she has her child (and eventually loses it to an illness), her words are no longer accessible in the poem, except as they express her culpability for losing her “deserted Child” (6.990). Every time Ellen speaks, it is to register loss—of her lover (and thus of a father for her baby), and then of her baby itself. Just before her death, Ellen is reduced to relying upon the intercession of the Pastor and the “Congregation,” who together “joined […] in prayer / For her Soul’s good” (6.1061-2), and her own words express her submission to the God who “‘Will mercifully take me to himself’” (6.1069).

If women who become illegitimately pregnant are silenced, go mad, and die, their married counterparts fare no better in Wordsworth’s poetry. The Pastor relates two stories in The Excursion of married women who bear children and who actually appear to fare far worse than their sinful counterparts because they are revealed to be utterly expendable. In addition to Ellen’s story, the sixth book of The Excursion includes the stories of two widowers; both tales suggest that dead mothers are easily replaced by others in their households. In the first story, the Pastor implies that the wife of the widower with six daughters had died in childbirth, because “eight years” have passed since her death (6.1160), and none of the daughters is yet “a full blown Flower” (6.1170). The Pastor does not linger over any details pertaining to the mother’s death,

\textsuperscript{55} Though Martha Ray’s words are also directly quoted in “The Thorn,” her vocabulary amounts to five words that are repeated over and over again, without variation: “Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me! oh misery!” Martha’s access to language is thus much more severely limited than Ellen’s.
however, quickly turning instead to the cottage where her husband and daughters live: “Here rests a Mother. But from her I turn / And from her Grave.—Behold—upon that Ridge / […] the Cottage where she dwelt” (6.1155-6, 1159). The Pastor wishes to assure his companions that the mother’s “Spirit yet survives on Earth” (6.1232) through her daughters, who have taken over her housewifely duties, but a closer examination of their tasks reveals that they learned how to perform their household tasks from their father and from each other:

I see the eldest Daughter at her wheel
Spinning amain, as if to overtake
The never-halting time; or, in her turn,
Teaching some Novice of the Sisterhood
That skill in this, or other household work;
Which, from her Father’s honoured hand, herself
While she was yet a little One, had learned. (6.1220-6)

Though Wordsworth wants to include in these domestic scenes the dead mother—whom he declares is “Thrice happy” (6.1229) though she “rests beneath that turf” (6.1230)—her lack of everyday influence is nevertheless apparent because the father was the source of the girls’ blissful domestic education. In this case, the father was able to teach his daughters to perform household duties at least as ably as their mother could have done. This is in stark contrast with the maternal educators in the poetry of Jane Cave, Isabella Kelly, and Anna Letitia Barbauld, for whom the mother was irreplaceable in their children’s growth and development.

The same theme runs through the story of another widower in Book 6, although in his case, his second wife was able to step capably into the void left by the death of his first wife. This man was “of his Mate deprived, was left / Alone—‘mid many Children; One a Babe /
Orphaned as soon as born” (6.1248-50); unlike the previous widower, this father was unable to “warm these Little-ones” (6.1252) or to feed them because of his poverty (6.1252-7). After he is granted a reprieve from his financial difficulties, however, he goes on to marry “a virtuous Woman, of grave years” (6.1283) who becomes “Mother to his helpless family” (6.1286). The man’s second wife was such a successful stepmother that “in nothing did she fail, / Through various exercise of twice ten years” (6.1287-8). Although fortuitous for the widower and his children, this situation is a prime example of the scenario so dreaded by Isabella Kelly in “To an Unborn Infant”—that her husband’s “future, happier wife” would completely replace her in her home. For the Pastor (and Wordsworth), however, this eventuality is a blessing to be celebrated.

Wordsworth also imagines the mother as passive during childbirth in the story of the birth of Margaret Green in Book 7 of The Excursion. The Pastor relates that a family, after having seven sons, finally has “a Daughter […] the crown and glory of the whole!” (7.661-2). His description of the mother after giving birth, however, is filled with language that emphasizes her inactivity:

Welcomed with joy, whose penetrating power
Was not unfelt amid that heavenly calm
With which by nature every Mother’s Soul
Is stricken, in the moment when her throes
Are ended, and her ears have heard the cry
Which tells her that a living Child is born,—
And she lies conscious in a blissful rest
That the dread storm is weathered by them both. (7.663-70)
Wordsworth depicts not the process of labor or even the moment of birth, but rather its immediate aftermath, when the mother sinks into a postpartum “heavenly calm” of “blissful rest” and only passively hears (rather than actively looks) for signs of her baby’s survival, after which she is subjected to the “penetrating power” of joy. The mother’s susceptibility to penetration (even if it is by joy) contrasts markedly with the father’s reaction to the birth of his daughter—a “bolder transport seizes” him (7.672) and he entertains with “gladness” (6.675) and “cheer” (7.677) all who visit his home. Wordsworth clearly attributes an active role to the father in this postpartum passage, and an inert, passive role to the mother.

Birth and death are most obviously allied in Book 5 of *The Excursion*, however, before the Pastor even begins to relate the anecdotes about his dead parishioners’ lives. As the Pastor escorts the Poet, the Solitary, and the Wanderer through the cemetery, he avers that “from this pregnant spot of ground, such thoughts / Rise to the notice of a serious Mind / By natural exhalation” (5.367-9). Esther Schor has attempted to put Wordsworth’s feminization of death in a positive, productive light by arguing that the process of “bearing the dead” (which is Schor’s term, though the concept is discussed at some length by the Wanderer and the Pastor) has a meaning beyond that of carrying the deceased to his or her final resting place—in this passage, it also gestures toward “conceiving and giving imaginative life to them [the dead]” through the stories that the Pastor tells about them. In Wordsworth’s poem, “the graveyard doubles as a childbed, as the Pastor performs the feminine labor of conceiving and birthing narratives amid the fertile ground of the churchyard” (Schor 158). It is noteworthy, however, that Wordsworth associates the physical (and thus female) aspects of pregnancy and childbirth with death in all of the stories about dead mothers and children in *The Excursion* (and indeed, throughout his body

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of work) while simultaneously allowing the Pastor, a male character, to appropriate the language of a female biological process—pregnancy—as a metaphor for the imaginative work involved with bringing the dead back to life through his stories. The Pastor’s imaginative conceiving is pregnant in name only, however, because it is entirely cerebral. As we shall see with Wordsworth’s other usages of the pregnancy metaphor for mental activity, his birth metaphors for literary creation are always male and mental rather than rooted in the female body.

Wordsworth uses the tropes of pregnancy and birth a number of times in *The Excursion*, as well as in the other poems discussed above, in ways that clearly mark these metaphorical births as mental (and male) rather than bodily (and female). In Book 3 of *The Excursion*, thoughts are repeatedly born of men’s minds (not women’s bodies). For instance, the Solitary remarks that “lively thoughts / Give birth, full often, to unguarded words” that drop from his tongue (3.501-4). Similarly, in Book 7, the Pastor tells of a priest buried in the churchyard who had (much like the Pastor himself as he tells his stories of the dead) “An active, ardent mind; / A fancy pregnant with resource and scheme / To cheat the sadness of a rainy day” (7.117-9). In Book 9, the Poet himself muses as he rows a boat that he is “Pregnant with recollections of the time” when he rowed his boat on Lake Windermere as a boy (9.485). Notably, all of the pregnant minds in *The Excursion* belong to men, and none descend from the head to engage with any of the bodily aspects of pregnancy and birth.

Wordsworth’s 1800 note to the “The Thorn” similarly indicates that minds pregnant with ideas and feelings are male minds:

> It was my wish in this poem to shew the manner in which such men cleave to the same ideas; […] I adhered to the style in which such persons describe, to take care that words, which in their minds are impregnated with passion, should likewise
convey passion to Readers who are not accustomed to sympathize with men feeling in that manner or using such language. (388)

I cite these portions of this passage again because they state that the mind Wordsworth imagines as being “impregnated with passion” is a specifically male mind (“such men cleave to the same ideas”). To put it another way, words are impregnated with passion in a man’s mind (like that of the sea-captain in “The Thorn”), and the birth of those words through speech, which is preserved in Wordsworth’s poem, conveys that passion to auditors/readers. Wordsworth’s mental conceptions and brain births are even more masculine than the births imagined by Aristotle and William Blake, however. While the latter two authors imagined that women provided the gross materials upon which a masculine creative spirit could work, Wordsworth put both elements of the creative faculty—the gross matter (words) and the shaping spirit (passion)—in the man’s mind. Though one could argue that it is Martha Ray who impregnates the sea-captain with passion in the first place, it is nevertheless essential to remember that she is not mentioned at all in any of Wordsworth’s reminiscences about his inspiration for “The Thorn.” In fact, Wordsworth made sure to mention that the source of this passion is “superstition” (388), not any particular story or set of historical circumstances. These facts hardly suggest that Martha Ray was the animating spirit behind the poem.

Even if Martha’s passion does impregnate and inspire the sea-captain’s speech, however, I would argue that Wordsworth demonstrates that such feminine impregnation of a male mind is not conducive to that speaker’s command over language. The narrator of “The Thorn” is, after all, a repetitive and inarticulate speaker, a problem that Wordsworth himself felt compelled to

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In fact, the sea-captain’s speech is as repetitive and inarticulate as Martha Ray’s cries. As Wolfson puts it, Martha’s pathology is also the narrator’s, and this pathology blocks both characters’ attempts at speech (45). Apparently, when women’s passions impregnate men’s minds, male speech devolves until “the Speaker […] cling[s] to the same words, or words of the same character” because “impassioned feelings” heighten “the deficiencies of language” (Wordsworth, Note to “The Thorn” 389). If the feminine invades masculine consciousness, imperfect language is the result.

The most masculine brain births of all, however, can be found in The Prelude, Wordsworth’s record of the growth of his own poetic mind, which gives birth to poetry in an exclusively cerebral, masculine way. In Book 3, Wordsworth describes his dawning awareness of his poetic faculties during his residence at Cambridge:

[...] I was ascending now

To such community with highest truth. [...] 

To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower, 

I gave a moral life—I saw them feel, 

Or linked them to some feeling. The great mass 

Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all 

That I beheld respired with inward meaning. (3.119-20, 124-30)

Wordsworth explains that his poetic consciousness had allowed him to give “moral life” to the seemingly inanimate objects around him, a creative power that he traces back to his “quickening

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Wordsworth responded to the numerous critics who had decried his speaker’s low manner of speaking by writing in his note, “There is a numerous class of readers who imagine that the same words cannot be repeated without tautology; this is a great error […] every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character” (Note to “The Thorn” 389).
soul.” The soul that is pregnant with new, imaginative life is male, however, as Wordsworth insists that he, and he alone, was responsible for such poetic births: “I had a world about me—‘twas my own, / I made it; for it only lived to me, / And to the God who looked into my mind” (3.142-4). Similarly, in his remembrances in Book 4 of his summer vacations from school, he describes the long solitary walks he would take with his dog while “busy with the toil of verse” (4.102). Wordsworth does not fondly remember the “Great pains and little progress” (4.103) that such toil entailed (pains that sound very much like birth pangs), but rather the brilliant moments of poetic revelation when “at once / Some fair enchanting image in my mind / Rose up, full-formed like Venus from the sea” (4.103-5), epiphanies that prompted him to caress his canine companion with “stormy joy” (4.107). Here, masculine brain-births are not celebrated when they are characterized by difficult, sustained, and painful bodily labor, but rather when they materialize as spontaneous flashes of inspiration from which the idea suddenly appears in an entirely finished adult—rather than infant—state.59

In the interpolated story of Vaudracour and Julia (present in the 1805 version of The Prelude, but not in the final published version of 1850), Wordsworth demonstrates the psychological damage that a father (and his child) sustains when he takes on the role of mother. In describing his residence in France in Book 9, Wordsworth tells the tale of two young French lovers, whose differing social classes prevent their marriage. Julia becomes pregnant and is sent away from Vaudracour, who nevertheless does everything in his power to find her. However, Vaudracour’s father, an embodiment of the ancien régime, prevents the couple’s marriage by having his son “lodged in prison” (9.683), forcing him to wear “the fetters of a criminal” (9.684)

59 According to Stephanson (Yard of Wit, [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], 98), this is the kind of brain birth that was most valued by eighteenth-century male authors. I should also like to point out that Wordsworth’s remembrance of the “fair enchanting image” that rose before him like Venus is also reminiscent of Athena, another goddess who was born fully-formed (though she emerged from her father’s head rather than from the sea).
and releasing him only upon the condition that he renounce all hopes of reuniting with Julia. The ardent Vaudracour breaks his promise at the first opportunity and hurries back to the pregnant Julia, who has been “Herself a prisoner” (9.770) while awaiting childbirth. After the birth of his son, Vaudracour remains with him and Julia for several months before Julia is finally compelled to relinquish her child and enter a convent (9.839-40). Vaudracour is left to care for his infant son alone, retiring with to him “To a lodge that stood / Deep in a forest” (9.899-900); unfortunately, despite his efforts in the “office of a nurse” (9.906), the child, “after a short time, by some mistake / Or indiscretion of the father, died” (9.907-8). Thereafter, Vaudracour “never uttered word / To any living” (9.912-3) and “His days he wasted,—an imbecile mind” (9.935).

What is immediately apparent about this story of pregnancy is that it is primarily about Vaudracour, not Julia. During Julia’s confinement due to her pregnant condition, for instance, Wordsworth instead tells us about Vaudracour’s confinement in prison, from which he is released “almost on the eve / Of Julia’s travail” (9.765-6), a release from confinement that foreshadows the end of Julia’s confinement when childbirth occurs. Wordsworth also detains his readers outside the lying-in chamber with Vaudracour; when we are finally permitted to enter it with him, we hear of his transports at his first sight of his son (9.779-96), but nothing of Julia’s condition, which is not necessary for Wordsworth to discuss because he is more interested in representing Vaudracour’s reaction to parenthood.60 If the story of Vaudracour and Julia is a rough approximation of Wordsworth’s own love affair with Annette Vallon, a relationship that also resulted in an illegitimate pregnancy and Wordsworth’s abandonment of both his lover and

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60 The same is true for Coleridge in his Hartley sonnets, which I discuss in the last section of this chapter.
child, his personal connection to the story might help to explain his intense interest in the father’s relationship to his child.

What the reader ultimately learns from Vaudracour’s disastrous attempts to take on the female role of “nurse” to his child, however, is not that men are unable to care successfully for their children, but rather that feminized men are not able to keep their children alive. Spivak has argued that Vaudracour is “a substitute of the poet as father” (333), but I contend that Vaudracour is actually an example of the disastrous effects that ensue from the poet behaving like a mother. As noted above, Vaudracour “conceived a terror” and then underwent a kind of sympathetic pregnancy and confinement in prison during Julia’s pregnancy. His deliverance from prison immediately before Julia gives birth evokes not only the child’s delivery, but also Vaudracour’s own prominent role in that birth; he is, after all, the only character that Wordsworth describes in the lying-in room with the child. Just as motherhood, childbirth, and death are closely intertwined in Wordsworth’s other poems, so too in this tale does a mother-figure (Vaudracour) lack the power to keep her child alive. Vaudracour suffers the same fate as Wordsworth’s other pregnant and birthing mothers—the ultimate result of this feminized character’s conceptions (of a real child and of mental terror) is silence and “an imbecile mind” (9.935).

Though, as Spivak argues, Wordsworth’s goal in the final books of The Prelude was to establish an androgynous poetic identity that encompassed women (including the mother), she also points out (as do Hoeveler and Mellor) that such androgyyny ultimately absorbs women into

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a specifically male identity. Thus, even though Wordsworth imagines that “his heart / Be tender as a nursing mother’s heart; / Of female softness shall his life be full” (13.206-8), the masculine possessive pronoun “his” insistently brackets each end of this proclamation. The equivalence is not exact, either—the poet’s heart will be “as” a mother’s heart, but it will not be the mother. The male poet can subsume the mother, but the male poet must not become the mother, lest he end up, like Vaudracour, with an imbecile mind.

Though Wordsworth may have told the story of Vaudracour and Julia in The Prelude in an attempt to exorcise his relationship with Annette Vallon and its resulting “illegitimate paternity” (Spivak 324), his personal magnum opus nevertheless seeks to reassert the importance of the poet’s paternal ownership over his poetic creations. After his anticlimactic realization that he had just crossed the Alps in Book 6, Wordsworth abruptly breaks off and apostrophizes,

Imagination!—lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through,
And now, recovering, to my soul I say
‘I recognize thy glory.’ (6.525-32)

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63 In this way, I differ from Alan Richardson’s reading of these lines, according to which “Wordsworth celebrates the essential maternity of the fully imaginative man” (“Romanticism” 15).
Although traditionally read as an abrupt transition from “past disappointment […] to a celebration of present creative power,” it is noteworthy that this passage is not immediately celebratory. While Wordsworth can claim that at the present moment of composition in 1805, “I recognize thy glory” (6.532), he juxtaposes this realization of triumph with his initial disappointment and confusion in August 1790, when he had discovered that he had crossed the Alps without having had a sublime experience: “I was lost as in a cloud, / Halted without a struggle to break through” (6.530-1). It is during his later recollection of these moments of discombobulation that Wordsworth praises his “Imagination,” which is a mighty power that he can appreciate and harness in 1805, though he was unable to do so in 1790. The “unfathered vapour” of imagination “came / Athwart” him in the past, almost overcoming him with its power, because the imagination has the potential to be dangerous if the poet cannot control it. In order for imaginative impulses to be useful, they must be shaped and mastered by a father-poet—a role that Wordsworth identified with in 1805, but not in 1790. Wordsworth therefore betrays his Aristotelian leanings once again when it comes to the birth of poetry—the father-poet must provide the shaping spirit that brings his imaginative perceptions to life. More to the point, however, is that Wordsworth believed the true poet’s mind must transcend his body (Mellor, “Writing” 296); while a poet could transcend the body as a father, he could not do so as a mother.

IV

That Samuel Taylor Coleridge was uninterested in writing about the phenomenon of physical birth can be gleaned from one of his musings in a December 1804 notebook entry:

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64 The editors of the Norton edition of The Prelude make this claim in the footnote to this passage (216).
How far one might imagine all the association System out of a system of growth/thinking of the Brain & Soul, what we know of an embryo—one tiny particle combines with another, its like. & so lengthens & thickens.—and this is at once Memory & increasing vividness of impression, one might make a very amusing Allegory of an embryo Soul up to Birth!—Try! It is promising!65

While writing about embryonic life was interesting to Coleridge as an allegory for the development of the “Brain & Soul,” it did not appear to be interesting to him as a physical phenomenon. Indeed, unlike William Blake and William Wordsworth, in whose poetry births of one sort or another abound, Coleridge mostly avoids discussions of pregnancy and childbirth in his poems. Even more than Blake and Wordsworth, however, Coleridge was deeply interested in gestation and birth as metaphors for literary creation, repeatedly invoking these tropes in his philosophical writings and correspondence. The critics who have discussed Coleridge’s usage of maternal tropes for his writing process have argued that he valued this natural and spontaneous metaphor for literary creation.66 A closer examination of Coleridge’s attempts in his poetry and prose to articulate his creative process will reveal, however, that he rejected maternal metaphors for writing at all points in his literary career because he ultimately could not tolerate the passivity associated with pregnant and laboring women. In this section, I read the few poems in which Coleridge discusses childbirth directly in order to argue that he, like his contemporaries, associates birth with death, loss, and silence. I then consider his much more extensive handling—and rejection—of the tropes of gestation and birth for writing, which occur in his


philosophical prose and in “Kubla Khan,” the poem that is often read as a demonstration of his creative process in action.

Coleridge engages most directly with the phenomenon of childbirth in the sonnets that he wrote on the birth of his first son, Hartley, in September 1796, and in the longer poem “Christabel,” which he began composing only two years later. Mothers exist only on the margins of these poems, which associate childbirth with death, loss, fear, pain, and silence, for the mother as well as the male poet. Coleridge’s “Sonnet: On Receiving a Letter Informing Me of the Birth of a Son” was the first poem that he wrote after learning of Hartley’s birth. Because his son was born a bit prematurely—and relatively quickly—Coleridge had been out of town in Birmingham at the time, only learning about the event in a letter from his friend Thomas Poole. The sonnet that Coleridge wrote immediately after reading the letter expresses his shock and confusion at unexpectedly being greeted as a “Father” (1). The news fills him with a “sudden Awe” (2) that, as he reports, “Weigh’d down my spirit!” (2). He kneels and tries to pray, but his “feeble mind” (5) is uninspired to do so:

Ah me! before the Eternal Sire I brought  
The unquiet silence of confused Thought  
And shapeless feelings: my o’erwhelmed Heart  
Trembled: & vacant tears stream’d down my face. (6-9)

The birth of his son was disturbing to Coleridge not only because of its suddenness, but because it had the effect of stopping his utterance rather than aiding it, producing only “unquiet silence” that could not help him to order his “confused Thought” and “shapeless feelings.” The sudden caesuras in lines 8 and 9 further emphasize the halting, hesitant nature of the author’s expression.

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of his feelings. Not surprisingly, Coleridge disliked this poem and he never published it, apparently far from eager to publicize the lack of poetic control over the sonnet (and his feelings) that he suffered as a result of his son’s birth.

Coleridge composed another sonnet on Hartley’s birth the next day as he hurried home to join his wife and new son; as in the previous sonnet, he imaginatively tries to relate to his son while ignoring his wife, Sara. In “Sonnet IX: Composed on a journey homeward; the Author having received intelligence of the Birth of a Son, September 20, 1796,” Coleridge toys (as do Wordsworth and Blake) with the Platonic concept of the pre-existence of souls, a theory that he uses to find common ground with his son. At the very beginning of the sonnet, Coleridge compares his own possible origins to those of his infant, wondering if the “strange fancy” that occasionally comes to his brain in a “flash” is a sign of his own pre-existence. Coleridge seemingly finds common ground with his new son, whom he has not yet met, when he muses that, “some have said / We liv’d, ere yet this fleshy robe we wore” (5-6). “Sonnet IX” is clearly a poem about the relationship between the speaker and his son and their similar origins in a pre-existent world; Coleridge only mentions his wife obliquely in the poem’s final line, in which she is subsumed into the poet’s identity with the word “we.”

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70 Coleridge similarly expunges Sara from “Frost at Midnight,” another poem that is entirely about the poet and the infant Hartley. The final six lines of the poem as originally published mentioned Sara, who holds Hartley as he struggles from her arms to grasp the “pendulous drops” (line 81) on the ends of the melting icicles. When Coleridge prepared the poem for republication in 1816, however, he cancelled these lines. Most critics have discussed the literary merits of omitting these lines—which, as Coleridge himself noted, would have ruined the “rondo” shape of the poem—without noting the significance of the mother’s disappearance from the family circle in the poem.
What is perhaps most fascinating about these two sonnets written in the immediate aftermath of Hartley’s birth, however, is the fact that Coleridge wishes for his son’s death in both poems because it would be better for the child’s spiritual welfare. In the first sonnet, Coleridge hopes “That, ere my Babe youth’s perilous maze have trod, / Thy own shadowing Spirit may descend / And he be born again, a child of God!” (12-4). Although Coleridge could simply be longing for Hartley’s immediate baptism (which is often figured by Christians as a second birth), this reading is less tenable when one considers that infant baptism was not generally accepted in the Unitarian church, in which Coleridge had been active at the time of Hartley’s birth (Oxford DNB). In a more plausible explication of these lines, Anya Taylor suggests that Coleridge wished for Hartley’s death so that the infant would not have to encounter the dangers of childhood and adulthood (41)—much as, I would add, Wordsworth posits that the London prostitute’s son may grow to envy the innocence and peace of the Maid of Buttermere’s dead baby. Again, in “Sonnet IX,” Coleridge imagines the death of his son, which could occur before he arrives home to see him for the first time:

O my sweet Baby! when I reach my door,
If heavy looks should tell me, thou wert dead
(As sometimes, thro’ excess of hope, I fear)
I think, that I should struggle to believe
Thou wert a Spirit, to this nether sphere
Sentenc’d for some more venial crime to grieve;
Didst scream, then spring to meet Heaven’s quick reprieve,
While we wept idly o’er thy little bier. (7-14)
The motive for Coleridge’s repeated wishes for Hartley’s death is different, however, from Jane Cave’s purpose in wishing for her infant’s death. For Cave, death will come for both mother and infant and will keep the mother-child bond intact; for Coleridge, by contrast, Hartley’s death and rebirth as a child of God will safely place him in a patriarchal heaven. In the first sonnet, Coleridge addresses God as the “Eternal Sire” (6), an appellation that unambiguously identifies the divinity as simultaneously male and father. In the second sonnet, the baby will go back to Heaven, from whence he came, to be with God, who is also presumably male in this poem (if Heaven is capable of giving Hartley a “quick reprieve,” there can be little doubt that the God who sits in judgment in Heaven is male, as he is in the previous sonnet). In both poems, however, Coleridge omits almost all mention of the baby’s mother.

Coleridge’s third sonnet on Hartley’s birth, “Sonnet X: To a Friend, who asked how I felt, when the Nurse first presented my Infant to me,” is somewhat different from the first two, as it appears to be the first poem that Coleridge wrote after seeing his son. Because this sonnet is presumably set in the lying-in chamber (in which the monthly nurse is still employed), Sara Coleridge is present and plays a prominent role in it—specifically, in helping Coleridge to love their new baby. As Coleridge relates to Charles Lamb (who is the speaker’s invisible interlocutor), he was disappointed when he first saw Hartley: “Charles! my slow heart was only sad, when first / I scann’d that face of feeble infancy” (1-2). Coleridge’s disappointment with his son’s feebleness mirrors the author’s own “slow heart” (as well as his “feeble mind” in the first Hartley sonnet)—that is, until he sees Sara nurse him:

But when I saw it on its Mother’s arm,
And hanging at her bosom (she the while

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Bent o’er its features with a tearful smile)

Then I was thrill’d and melted, and most warm

Impress’d a Father’s kiss. (5-9)

It is the sight of a nursing Sara, who appears in “an Angel’s form” (11), that “beguil’d” (9) the “dark remembrance, and presageful fear” (10) that had plagued him in the earlier Hartley sonnets. Seeing mother and son together finally allows Coleridge to relinquish his wish for Hartley to return to a patriarchal Heaven, though Sara’s influence is less powerful than it at first appears to be. The mother’s purpose in the poem is to act as an intermediary between father and son to ensure that the father is able to relate properly to his child, which Coleridge finally does when he “Impress’d a Father’s kiss” on the newborn. As in Wordsworth’s story of Vaudracour and Julia, and in Samuel Richardson’s Sir Charles Grandison, the nursing mother is only a kind of set-piece for the father’s reaction to her and the child—his reaction is ultimately what counts.

Coleridge’s long, unfinished poem “Christabel” is more obliquely concerned with birth than the Hartley sonnets are, but enough mention of parturition is made in this poem to suggest that birth, death, and silence are inextricably intertwined—but this time, for the mother. The two extant parts of “Christabel” (of a projected five parts) were first published in 1816, though the first part had been composed in 1797 and the second in 1800 (the poem originally having been intended for publication in the second edition of Lyrical Ballads). The plot of “Christabel,” familiar to readers of both Romantic and gothic literature, is quickly told—the lovely lady Christabel leaves her father’s medieval castle at midnight to pray for her absent lover under an oak tree, where she finds another lovely woman, Geraldine, who has supposedly been kidnapped, raped, and abandoned by a band of roving knights. Christabel invites Geraldine into the castle

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and offers to share her bed with her. Geraldine disrobes, revealing an inexplicably hideous torso, then lies with Christabel, seemingly as both mother and lover. The next morning, Christabel remembers nothing but fears she has sinned. After she introduces Geraldine to her father, Sir Leoline, Christabel becomes increasingly alienated from him. Despite the fact that Sir Leoline has continually mourned his wife, who died giving birth to Christabel, it becomes increasingly apparent that Geraldine might replace both Christabel and Christabel’s mother in his household.

Constant reminders of Christabel’s dead mother are woven throughout the poem in the form of Christabel’s fear of sexuality and its potential results (pregnancy and death). While a number of critics, including David Beres, Jonas Spatz, and Karen Swann, have argued that the poem’s central theme is Christabel’s ambivalence toward or even rejection of adult sexuality, which Geraldine seems to embody, Charles Rzepka takes this line of argumentation to its logical extreme and suggests that Geraldine is actually pregnant (perhaps as a result of her rape), and the horror of seeing her pregnant body is what makes Christabel shrink from sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth.73 Given that Coleridge’s original description of Geraldine’s hideous side (which he struck from the poem before its publication) is that it is “lean and old and foul of hue”—a description that hardly brings to mind the healthy fleshiness of a pregnant woman’s torso—Rzepka’s reading might be a bit of a stretch; nevertheless, his assertion further emphasizes Geraldine’s role in the poem as an evil mother-figure. Because Christabel’s mother became a victim of her own sexuality when she died in childbirth, she remains a marginal figure in the

poem (as are the mothers in other Coleridge poems like “Frost at Midnight”) and is unable to
shield her daughter from danger.\textsuperscript{74}

From a biographical perspective, Coleridge’s marginalization of mothers—and
particularly the birthing mother—is hardly surprising. Critics who have imposed Coleridge’s
biography onto their readings of “Christabel” have argued that he was wrestling with ambivalent
feelings about his own mother in this poem. The conventional argument is that Coleridge’s
ambivalence toward his mother is reflected in the split between the goodness of Christabel’s
mother and the badness of Geraldine-as-mother (with Coleridge identifying with Christabel’s
plight).\textsuperscript{75} Thus, “Christabel” dramatizes Coleridge’s own feelings of being abandoned by the
good mother and dominated and oppressed by the bad mother.\textsuperscript{76} It would appear, however, that
Coleridge also felt ambivalence toward his own wife-as-mother, perhaps because he felt that her
successful management of the birth process left him out of it. Karen Swann suggests that
Coleridge seemed to be competing with Sara during her first pregnancy, having hysterics fits and

\textsuperscript{74} It is noteworthy that even in the version of “Frost at Midnight” in which the mother appears, she is in the
process of being left behind as the infant Hartley attempts to flee from her arms in order to reach for the melting
icicles.


\textsuperscript{76} A number of psychoanalytic readings of the poem (and of Coleridge’s relationship with his mother) have
pains. Despite his attempts to participate in his wife’s pregnancy with his own sympathetic pregnancy, Coleridge might have resented Sara for the easy time she had with giving birth to Hartley—she didn’t have any assistance, and the labor was quick. This state of affairs might have made him fear that his presence was not necessary and left him feeling shut out of the mother-child dyad. Hence, the sonnets about Hartley’s birth shift focus away from the mother to the father’s reaction to the child.

Though Coleridge dealt with childbirth on a limited number of occasions in his poetry, he expressed a great amount of interest—more so than Wordsworth or Blake—in birth as a metaphor for literary creation in his philosophical prose and in “Kubla Khan,” one of his most famous poems. Kiran Toor has argued that Coleridge used the language of embryology, pregnancy, and birth to describe his creative process because it helped him to theorize the genesis of his writing, as well as to account for the production of “monstrous” literary births (265-7). In the final part of this chapter, I should like to refine Toor’s thesis in order to suggest that Coleridge, like Wordsworth and Blake, ultimately preferred paternal rather than maternal metaphors for literary creation. While Toor posits that Coleridge synthesized preformationist and epigenetic theories of fetal development in order to describe his own gestating ideas (Toor 263). I propose that Coleridge favored the metaphor of the (masculine) preformation of ideas, according to which the best poems enter the poet’s mind wholly preformed, over the (feminine) epigenetic development of thought, because the prolonged mental gestation of poems (and the

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act of giving birth to them through writing) are messy processes that mar these perfect mental conceptions. 78

Mechanistic theories about fetal growth and development (which had begun to replace older vitalist theories of the body) abounded during the second half of the eighteenth century. Two competing theories of mechanistic embryological development, epigenesis and preformation, were well-known by Coleridge’s time. According to epigenetic thought, the fetus as it is originally conceived from the seeds contributed by both sexes is a homogeneous substance that grows and develops during gestation into a being quite different, structurally speaking, from its original materials. Preformationist thinkers, on the other hand, posited that the fetus was already perfectly formed in either the egg (ovist preformationism) or the sperm (animalculist preformationism), and that once implanted in the womb, the embryo merely enlarges rather than develops. 79 Thus, more important fetal developments take place in the pregnant woman’s body after conception according to epigenetic theories, whereas according to preformationism, the miniature person is already perfectly preformed in the father’s (or mother’s) body and only needs to grow larger within the mother’s body. Though Coleridge had been aware of both theories, his interest in the work of the Swiss anatomist Albrecht von Haller

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78 Though Toor makes a similar claim when she points out that, for Coleridge, all literary births are marred and that they can only be perfect if they remain in his mind, she apparently assumes that Coleridge theorized all of these literary births (whether mental or externally realized through the birth of writing) as female processes (257, 259-63, 267-8). By contrast, I argue that Coleridge understood his perfectly preformed mental conceptions as the product of a masculine process, and that the monstrosities that were actually created were born of a flawed feminine process.

79 See Eve Keller, Generating Bodies and Gendered Selves: The Rhetoric of Reproduction in Early Modern England (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007), 127, 138-9. Keller identifies two additional theories of embryological development, metamorphosis and pre-existence, although they appear to be variations on the two principle embryological theories discussed above. Metamorphosis shares characteristics of both epigenesis and preformationism, while pre-existence takes preformationism to the extreme by postulating that all future organisms have existed in their respective sperms or eggs since the inception of the universe (Keller 138-9).
(who had at least briefly toyed with animalculist preformationism), suggests that Coleridge’s understanding of preformationism would most likely have had a masculine cast.\footnote{For information on Coleridge’s familiarity with various aspects of Haller’s work, see Trevor H. Levere, *Poetry realized in nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and early nineteenth-century science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 37 and Toor, “Offspring,” 263-4.}

Just as Coleridge entertained the Platonic concept of the pre-existence of souls in the Hartley sonnets, so too did he embrace embryological theories that posited the preformation of mankind’s material bodies in men’s seminal fluid. Both of these theories of humankind’s pre-existent origins had the tendency to ignore women’s role in the conception of their children, since women could incubate, but not create. For this reason, I argue that Coleridge rejected embryological metaphors like epigenesis that emphasized women’s role in reproduction and embraced the metaphor of animalculist preformationism when he described his own creative process. In one of his famous formulations of the imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge at first seems to employ a female embryological metaphor because he describes the operations of the imagination in what sound like epigenetic terms, with the imagination/womb knitting ideas together:

> The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.\footnote{Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, vol. 7.2 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 15-6.}

While the imagination “*fuses*” the elements of poetry together, much as a fetus’ body is fused together as it develops in the womb, it is important to note that Coleridge’s creative process takes
place in the metaphysical realm of “the whole soul of man” rather than in the physical realm of the body. Furthermore, Coleridge’s ideal poet is male; because he refers to the poet with a masculine pronoun, the “man” in “the whole soul of man” most likely refers to the male of the species rather than to “mankind.” Even Coleridge’s most epigenetic descriptions of the poet’s imaginative work are masculinized and thereby transcend the body.

While Coleridge might have described the operations of the imagination in the abstract in vaguely epigenetic terms in the passage cited above, he almost always used the language of a kind of animalculist preformationism when discussing the creation of specific poems. In two of his famous prefaces, Coleridge describes the genesis of both “Christabel” and “Kubla Khan” in the language of masculine preformationism, the metaphor for literary creation that he preferred throughout his career. In the Preface to “Christabel,” he reports that

in my very first conception of the tale, I had the whole present to my mind, with the wholeness, no less than with the liveliness of a vision; I trust that I shall be able to embody in verse the three parts yet to come, in the course of the present year. (161)

Here, Coleridge distinguishes between the completeness of his mental “conception” (which was already “whole”) and the process of bringing it into being (“embody[ing] it in verse”), which is a much longer and more arduous process, as it will take place over the “course of the present year”). Later, in Table Talk, he reinforces his sense of the wholeness of his mental conception of the poem:

The reason of my not finishing Christabel is not that I don’t know how to do it; for I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the
Idea—the most difficult, I think, that can be attempted to Romantic Poetry—I mean witchery by daylight.  

By insisting that the plan was “entire from beginning to end,” Coleridge emphasizes that all of the poem’s constituent parts existed already (just as all of the infant’s parts had existed before it was born, according to the preformationist embryological theory). The next step is for “Christabel” to be brought forth in writing, but the execution of this literary labor is, unlike its conception, exceptionally difficult.

In his infamous Preface to “Kubla Khan,” appended to the poem before its publication in 1816, Coleridge explains how the poem (or at least a poem) rose before him in a vision “as things” and that, “On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole” (181). In describing his poetic inspiration in this way, Coleridge suggests that his ideas came to him preformed in a flash of inspiration akin to the flashes of genius that Wordsworth recalls in Book 4 of The Prelude. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth’s intense interest in the moment of inspiration and their usage of the metaphor of conception to describe it focuses on the one physical aspect of sexual reproduction in which the man plays a role and erases the female body that would gestate the fetus after conception. Believing that his best poetic ideas were whole from their conception in his mind, Coleridge passes over the female process of pregnancy—which would otherwise be the next step according to the logic of the childbirth


83 It bears repeating that such accounts of the source of whole poetic ideas bring to mind the story of Athena springing fully-formed from Zeus’ head. Indeed, Coleridge often talked about “Christabel” as if the poem were an actual woman (Swann, “Literary” 397, 407), which suggests that she, like Athena, is an adult conception waiting to spring forth from her male creator’s mind.
metaphor for literary creation—and implies that he, and he alone, is responsible for his poetic conceptions.

If Coleridge wished to attribute his spontaneous mental conceptions to the role that men play in sexual reproduction, it is undoubtedly because the more feminized the process becomes through lengthy mental gestations and the labor of birthing those ideas into writing, the more difficulties that he expects to encounter because of the problematic nature of women’s role in the reproductive process. Because of his wife’s many pregnancies, Coleridge was all too aware of women’s problems with gestation and labor, and he was, to a degree, obsessed with the pain that women experience as a result of these processes.84 When Sara was pregnant with their first child, Coleridge experienced hysterics, a knee “pregnant” with pain, and other symptoms of what seemed to be a sympathetic pregnancy (Swann, “Literary” 402). Later on, in an attempt to make a young Derwent obey his mother, Coleridge informed his son that he owed his duty to his mother because “she brought you into the world with shocking pains.”85 Coleridge also expressed interest in the mother marks that were supposedly imprinted on the fetus by the maternal imagination during pregnancy (Toor 262-3). Coleridge’s fascination with the potential monstrosities and fatalities that could result from gestation and childbirth led him to fear that invoking these female processes as metaphors for writing would produce only monstrous and abortive artistic creations that would not resemble their perfection as originally conceived.

As a result of these fears, Coleridge described the birth of thought in more recognizably female ways whenever he wished to express the inutility or even danger of identifying his

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creative process with specifically female processes. Coleridge once described himself as an “omni-pregnant, nihili-parturient genius,” implying that pregnancy as a metaphor for his creative process was linked to unproductive, never-ending mental gestations. If a conception is finally brought forth in writing, however, the birth is a slow and painful one, just as it is for women. In a letter to James Tobin, Coleridge recounted that, while writing “Christabel,” “Every line has been produced by me with labor-pangs;” in a letter to Thomas DeQuincey, Coleridge extended this childbirth metaphor to the publication of “Christabel,” which “fell almost dead-born from the Press.” Part of the horror of (literary) childbirth is the author’s complete lack of control over the process, which can result in the miscarriage of the text or even, as the next passage demonstrates, the overwhelming of the author-mother’s conscious wishes and desires. Coleridge’s reminiscence of being under the influence of nitrous oxide expresses his horror at the passivity involved in identifying one’s thought process with gestation, which is akin to being violated by a foreign substance:

Need we wonder at Plato’s opinions concerning the Body, at least, need that man wonder whom a pernicious Drug shall make capable of conceiving & bringing forth Thoughts, hidden in him before, which shall call forth the deepest feelings of his best, greatest, & sanest Contemporaries?

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87 Laurence Sterne notices the same problem with his never-ending labor on *Tristram Shandy*.


In this passage, Coleridge places himself in a feminine posture as he is penetrated by the influence of a “pernicious Drug” that will force his mind to conceive and eventually birth “Thoughts, hidden in him before”—thoughts that were previously foreign to him, and that are born without his volition. The passages cited in this paragraph are the closest that Coleridge ever comes to describing the production of his thoughts using female tropes that have not been masculinized, and the results are horrifying for him to contemplate; to be a woman is to be subject to the vicissitudes of both external and internal influences that she is powerless to resist.91

Whereas in the prefaces to “Christabel” and “Kubla Khan” Coleridge figures his mental conceptions as masculine because they were entirely preformed at the instant of their conceptions, in a notebook entry, he suggests that the longer his ideas gestated, the more formless—and female—they became:

The difference between the style in these Notebooks or Pugillaria, and that in a work adapted to Publication is this: […] in conceiving the thoughts [the author] is a Nature who works in continuous Articulation, and an unbroken series of embryonic formulations, but in delivering them for permanency he becomes the Logos, to whom appertains […] the conditions of distinct Vision and lucid Order.92

In identifying his overly fecund mind as “a Nature,” Coleridge posits its female qualities, for unruly “Nature” was (and often still is) code for the unruly Female; this disorderly, feminine

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91 For Coleridge, women’s thoughts always have the potential to be dangerous, because “a virtuous woman […] is ever on the alert to discountenance & suppress the very embryos of Thoughts not strictly justifiable.” The best that women can hope to do is to “suppress” the “embryos” of unseemly thoughts, but they are apparently unable to avoid conceiving those “embryos” in the first place, just as they cannot help but conceive embryos in their wombs. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “To Unknown Correspondent,” 8 Jan. 1819, Letter 1169 of Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 905.

mind is impregnated with “an unbroken series of embryonic formulations” that are too abundant and not distinctly formed—certainly the opposite of perfectly whole embryos lying inert in the father’s body according to animalculist preformationism. When his mind is overrun by these feminine conceptions, Coleridge must reassert his patriarchal authority over them in order to publish them as written works; he does so by appropriating the female language of birth for the male author. In “delivering” his ideas, he “becomes the Logos” and imposes “distinct Vision and lucid Order” on what was previously shapeless and disorderly. This rare instance of Coleridge’s usage of the language of childbirth as a positive metaphor for writing is nevertheless still informed by masculinity, as the delivery in question is a delivery into Logos—patriarchal language itself.

Coleridge experimented with different embryological metaphors for literary creation in his prose notebooks and letters, but this experimentation carried over into his poetry as well. “Kubla Khan” is perhaps the quintessential poetic representation of Coleridge’s masculinization of poetic birth. 93 It is a critical commonplace that the poem, written sometime in 1797 but not published until 1816, is an allegory of the workings of the creative mind, or more precisely, a poem about the imagination’s struggles (whether successful or unsuccessful) to create a poem. 94


One of the most widely-accepted readings of the poem is that Coleridge favors organic metaphors for literary creation that are rooted in Nature (the natural landscape, sexuality, and childbirth) rather than Kubla’s deliberate, mechanical, eighteenth-century-style creation of the pleasure dome.95 While I concur that Coleridge figures poetic creation in terms of sexual reproduction in “Kubla Khan,” I argue that the birth metaphors that Coleridge favors are masculine and phallic rather than feminine and vaginal. The poet figure with whom Coleridge identifies is male, whether it is Kubla Khan or the male visionary at the poem’s end.96

“Kubla Khan” is about the moment of a poem’s conception rather than about its lengthy gestation and laborious birth into writing; as such, the creation of poetry in “Kubla Khan” is a masculine act because its origins are in fleeting male sexual potency. As is usually noted by critics who read the poem psychoanalytically, the “mighty fountain” (line 19) forced from the chasm in the second stanza is a male ejaculation; though the chasm itself is often identified as a vagina or mons veneris, it is essential to note that this potentially female signifier is dominated by the river and the fountain—both typically read as the true source of creative inspiration—that bursts from it. Far from resembling childbirth, the fountain’s explosion instead brings to mind the moment of conception brought about by male ejaculation. Even if one reads the chasm as a vagina and its underlying “caverns measureless to man” (lines 4, 27) as a womb that houses “oceans” of amniotic fluid that might nurture the poet’s creativity, that amniotic ocean is nevertheless “lifeless” (line 28) and thus a place, as glossed by A. B. England, of “uncreative sterility” (67). If “Kubla Khan” is indeed an “abortive composition” (Milne 19), it may be


96 Sloane (118) and Milne (22-3) also argue that Coleridge identifies with a male figure (either Kubla Khan or the male poet) at the end of the poem.
because the cavern/womb cannot nurture or inspire the poetic genius. Coleridge also describes the cavern/womb as “measureless to man” (4, 27), an adjective, twice repeated, that refers not only to the cavern’s incommensurability, but also to the fact that poetic measures cannot exist there (at least not for “man”). The creative imagination is subject to short, intermittent “Burst[s]” (20) of poetic energy that throw up “Huge fragments” (21)—perhaps poems like “Kubla Khan” itself, which Coleridge identifies as a “Fragment”—but the imagination is unable to maintain such creative force when it settles into the stasis of the womb-like cavern that houses the amniotic “sunless sea” (5).

That the sexually-charged poetic creation in “Kubla Khan” is a masculine rather than a feminine process can also be observed in the actions of the two contrasting female characters that appear in the poem—the “woman wailing for her demon lover” (16) and the “damsel with a dulcimer” (37). Of the two, the damsel is most recognizably an artist, as she plays a musical instrument and sings of “Mount Abora” (40-1), creating a “symphony and song” (43) that the speaker hopes to recreate in his own poetry. Her music is not, however, born of her physical body—in fact, as a “maid” (39), she is presumably a virgin, and thus not yet capable of giving birth. The song that Coleridge would like to revive is one whose creator has not yet been violated by another. By contrast, the woman in the chasm is probably not a virgin because she has a “demon-lover” (16). Though she is sexually active and thereby presumably capable of conceiving a child, she is hardly an artist—she wails, certainly, but her noises are a far cry (literally and figuratively) from the refined “symphony” (43) of the Abyssinian maid. The woman in the poem who has the most potential for sexual fecundity is apparently incapable of artistic creation.
Paternity, and specifically the language of animalculist preformationism, was ultimately more useful to Coleridge’s understanding of his poetic process because it allowed him to establish proper paternal ownership over his poems. “[P]oetic genius,” he wrote in the *Biographia*, is endowed with a “parental instinct” whereby the poet can distinguish “its proper offspring from the changelings, which the gnomes of vanity or the fairies of fashion may have laid in its cradle or called by its names.” The notion of “proper offspring” is an exclusively male concern; while a mother knows for certain that all of her biological children are her own, the children’s father has nothing but the mother’s word that his children are his biological offspring. In distinguishing between the “proper offspring” of his imagination and the mere “changelings” that are incorrectly given the name of poetry, Coleridge positions his “poetic genius” as a father who must be able to identify his real children amongst all of the children that are presented to him as his own. The genuine poetic genius is therefore a father, while false poetic productions are the illegitimate children of a feminized consciousness. In fact, Coleridge strengthens this distinction by further feminizing poetry that is not produced by the paternal poetic genius when he remarks later in the same passage on “the madness prepense of Pseudo-poesy, or the startling *hysteric* of weakness over-exerting itself, which bursts on the unprepared reader in sundry odes and apostrophes to abstract terms” (*Biographia* 85). By tracing “Pseudo-poetry” from its source in a “*hysteric* of weakness,” Coleridge clearly aligns bad poetry with women’s reproductive anatomy (hysteria being, of course, a disease of the uterus). However, he makes women even more culpable for their hysterical, pseudo-poetic maternity with the phrase

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98 Swann points out that in “Christabel,” hysteria blocks the utterance of “all subjects in discourse” (“Christabel” 535).
“madness prepense.” Derived from the legal phrase “malice prepense” (“malice aforethought”), Coleridge’s coinage of “madness prepense” (“madness aforethought”) suggests not only feminine mental instability, but also women’s premeditated attempts to impose their own illegitimate creations (whether children or poetry) on the real, paternal poetic genius. Female anatomy and sexual reproduction could have no place in the brain of the male poet, who must shun maternal metaphors for his creations lest they replace his legitimate poetry with the “changelings” of illegitimate pseudo-poetry.

Like Wordsworth, Coleridge preferred to imagine that ideal poetic creation happens in flashes of inspiration that are analogous to the moment of conception, the one part of human sexual reproduction in which men play a vital role. Like Blake, Coleridge associated the tropes of pregnancy and birth with incompleteness and the failure to produce perfect, legitimate artistic creations. It is hardly surprising, then, that when Coleridge described the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as “half a child of my own Brain,” the second parent whom he discusses is Wordsworth—another father to the essay. It was apparently less troubling for Coleridge to contemplate sharing the paternity of the Preface with Wordsworth than imagining himself as a mother to his poetic works.

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CHAPTER 6

Hideous Progenies: The Literary Gestations of Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley

I

If Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth resisted identifying as mothers to their poems, Percy Shelley might seem, at least initially, to be a poet for whom literary maternity would have been acceptable. Shortly after the birth of his daughter Ianthe, Percy Shelley is supposed to have dramatically clutched the newborn to his breast when his first wife Harriet Westbrook Shelley expressed reluctance to breastfeed, a grand gesture that suggests Shelley’s desire to nurse his infant himself.\(^1\) Percy Shelley’s seeming aspiration to appropriate the power of the maternal body fits neatly with readings of his poetry that argue that his ideal body is the androgyne.\(^2\) Since the physical aspects of maternity had gained the cultural status of fetish when Shelley was growing up,\(^3\) and because he was raised in a household of adoring women, Shelley was obsessed with motherhood from an early age. Barbara Gelpi makes just this argument in Shelley’s

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\(^3\) In the 1790s, the so-called “six-month pad,” which women wore under their clothing to simulate a pregnant body shape, was popular with upper-class women. This sartorial fad must have been fairly widespread, because a 1793 farce, *The Pad*, satirized this trend. See Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, *Shelley’s Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35-60. For more on the cultural enshrinement of the maternal ideal, see Ruth Perry, “Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 16.1 (1992) and Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
Goddess (1992), a study of Prometheus Unbound in which she argues that Shelley’s “mother-centeredness” (4) grew out of his recognition of the mother’s profound impact on children’s language acquisition and that, for this reason, he viewed women as possessions and muses (27) and wished to unite with them by marrying (and ultimately becoming) them (98).

However, I should like to argue that Percy Shelley’s mother-centeredness was rooted not in his identification with the mother, but with the children that she nurtures, and that Shelley’s attempts to breastfeed his daughter can be read in a way that still places the onus of childcare squarely on the mother’s shoulders. According to Gelpi, because it is unlikely that Shelley’s mother, Elizabeth Pilford Shelley, as the wife of a landed aristocrat, would have breastfed her children herself, it is probable that Shelley became obsessed with breastfeeding as one of the key aspects of “the ideal of the maternal” (91). If this is the case, then Shelley’s attempts to breastfeed Ianthe can be read in light of his identification not with his wife, but with his daughter, who might also be deprived of the chance to experience maternal breastfeeding. Thus, Shelley’s abortive attempts at breastfeeding must not be read as a genuine desire to appropriate the mother’s biological functions, but rather as a tactic to pressure Harriet Shelley into performing her rightful maternal task.

Despite his deep and abiding interest in mothers’ influence on their children, the metaphors that underwrote Percy Shelley’s conception of himself as an author were nevertheless rooted in male rather than female reproductive physiology. Like his male Romantic forebears discussed in the previous chapter, Shelley did not wish to identify his authorial process with maternity because he associated maternal tropes for authorship with the destruction rather than the creation of poetry. In the first section of this chapter, I demonstrate how Shelley’s usage of the language of female generativity in A Defence of Poetry (1821) and “Ode to the West Wind”
(1820) reveals that he uses the language of male sexuality to describe the origins of poetry. However inspired by the mother goddess that Shelley might have been, in his life as well as in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), he was unwilling to employ maternity as a positive trope for the creation of poetry as he continually defaulted to metaphors for composition rooted in male sexual response.

While Percy Shelley might have dismissed motherhood as a useful authorial identity, his second wife—the prolific novelist Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin) Shelley—did not. In the chapter’s second section, I argue that Mary Shelley’s first novel *Frankenstein* (1818), as well as her equally famous introduction to the novel’s 1831 edition, mount a critique of her husband’s disingenuous interest in the physical aspects of motherhood and his reluctance to invest maternal tropes for writing with positive meaning. By identifying herself as a mother to her own “hideous progeny” *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley valorizes her continued relationship to her novel, which stands in marked contrast to Victor Frankenstein’s immediate abandonment of his creature, a plot point that reflects and critiques Percy Shelley’s preferred metaphors for authorship based on men’s fleeting role in sexual reproduction.4

II

Despite Percy Shelley’s intense interest in mothers and their influence on their children, surprisingly few pregnant women appear in his literary corpus. *Prometheus Unbound*, the dramatic poem in which Shelley expresses his wish to unite with the powerful and nurturing Mother Goddess (Gelpi 250-73), depicts only one pregnancy—that of Thetis after she is raped by

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4 In the chapter’s first section, “Shelley” refers to Percy Shelley. In the second section, “Shelley” refers to Mary Shelley.
Jupiter and is expecting the child who is destined to overthrow Jupiter. Shelley soon transforms this plot about pregnancy into one about the relationship between two men (Jupiter and Demogorgan), totally ignoring the mother and circumventing the birth process. While Jupiter at first declares that he and Thetis have mingled their spirits to create a superior third being, it quickly becomes apparent that Jupiter is the most important figure in the scene in which he nervously awaits the birth of his son:

JUPITER. Even now have I begotten a strange wonder,
That fatal child, the terror of the Earth,
Who waits but till the destined Hour arrive […]

And thou
Ascend beside me, veiled in the light
Of the desire which makes thee one with me,
Thetis, bright Image of Eternity! […]

even then
Two mighty spirits, mingling, made a third
 Mightier than either—which unbodied now
Between us, floats, felt although unbeheld,
Waiting the incarnation, which ascends—
Hear ye the thunder of the fiery wheels
Griding the winds? (3.1.18-20, 33-6, 42-8)

Even before his son arrives in a far from typical birth scene, Jupiter’s monologue minimizes Thetis’ role in bringing their child into being. Not only does Jupiter erase Thetis by saying that

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“I” (rather than “we”) have “begotten a strange wonder,” but by suggesting that the child exists already as an “unbodied” spirit “Between us, float[ing] […] Waiting the incarnation,” Jupiter hints at the doctrine of the preexistence of souls, according to which women contribute the matter, but little else, to the production of children in the womb. The passage then moves away from birth altogether, as Demogorgon, who identifies himself as Jupiter’s child, emerges not from Thetis (who all but disappears from the scene) but from the depths of the earth in “his chariot thundering up / Olympus” (3.1.50-1).

Not only does Shelley avoid describing childbirth in *Prometheus Unbound*, but he also establishes the primacy of the (albeit destructive) bond between Jupiter and his son at the expense of Thetis, the mother. Demogorgon arrives onstage in the Car of the Hour and then commands Jupiter to follow him into “the abyss” (3.1.53) where, as he says, “we must dwell together” (3.1.55). Jupiter finally acquiesces to Demogorgon’s demands, saying “We two will sink on the wide waves of ruin” (3.1.71). Thetis may be present on stage during this exchange according to the stage directions, but, as Gelpi points out, she is little more than a “prop” for most of the scene (237). Though Gelpi’s analysis (and, to some extent, that of Ross Woodman and Nathaniel Brown⁷) suggests that Shelley wished to identify with the mother’s influence, in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley’s reluctance to engage directly with pregnancy or childbirth suggests a discomfort with these processes as well as his inability to reconcile them with his larger poetic project.

Shelley valorizes the moment of poetic conception in order to glorify male rather than female reproductive metaphors in at least two passages in *Prometheus Unbound*. In the play’s

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⁶ Gelpi notes that Thetis is silenced during this portion of the poem (237).

first act, Prometheus apostrophizes Asia, describing in a sexualized image her role in relation to
him: “Asia! who when my being overflowed / Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine / Which
else had sunk into the thirsty dust” (1.1.809-11). Assuming that Prometheus develops into a poet-
figure who gains a newfound facility with language and image-creation by the end of Act I, as
Daniel Hughes has argued, it is significant that the image that he creates to represent his
linguistic production, which is so tied to his own self-creation as a poet, is his own semen (troped
as wine) spilling into the chalice that is Asia.\textsuperscript{8} Once again, we see the poet fixating on the
moment of inspiration and picturing it as a man scattering his semen.

Shelley returns to the wine-as-semen-as-the conception of poetry metaphor again, and for
similar reasons, in Panthea’s speech at the beginning of Act II, scene iii:

\begin{quote}
Hither the sound has borne us—to the realm
Of Demogorgon, and the mighty portal,
Like a Volcano’s meteor-breathing chasm,
Whence the oracular vapour is hurled up
Which lonely men drink wandering in their youth
And call truth, virtue, love, genius or joy—
That maddening wine of life, whose dregs they drain
To deep intoxication, and uplift
Like Maenads who cry loud, Evoe! Evoe! (2.3.1-9)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{8} See Daniel Hughes, “Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of Prometheus Unbound,” Studies in Romanticism 17.1 (1978), 4, 10.
In this passage, Shelley echoes Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” by evoking a “deep romantic chasm”⁹—in Shelley’s poem, a volcanic “chasm” that hurls meteors as well as “oracular vapours,” expulsions that recall the “fragments” of poetic utterance thrown up by the fountain issuing forth from the chasm in Coleridge’s poem.¹⁰ That these vapours are actually more akin to liquid than gas in Shelley’s poem (and thus similar to Coleridge’s image) is suggested by the fact that men “drink” them; in fact, these vapours are also “The maddening wine of life, whose dregs they drain.” Just as the “fragments” (line 21) thrown up like “chaffy grain” (line 22) from the chasm by the sacred river are akin to poems borne on a male ejaculation in Coleridge’s poem, so too do vapours and meteors and poetic utterances emerge from the “wine of life” that is akin to semen, just as it was in Act I of Shelley’s drama. Poetic utterance, in both “Kubla Khan” and Prometheus Unbound, begins at the moment of male ejaculation.

Similarly, Shelley displays discomfort with pregnancy in other works in his oeuvre that concern the creation of poetry. In both A Defence of Poetry and “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley denigrates the pregnancy trope for writing while favoring male reproductive metaphors for poetic composition.¹¹ In the Defence, Shelley famously writes that

the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness […] but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has

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¹⁰ See Chapter 5, pages 284-5, in this project for a more in-depth discussion of this image in “Kubla Khan.”

ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. (531)

Shelley explains that the longer a poetic work gestates, the more it degrades from its “original conception.” He continues to articulate the idea that long labor on a poem weakens it by suggesting that perfect art tends to be received whole. Even works of art (like paintings and sculptures) that come gradually into being by growing “under the power of the artist as a child in the mother’s womb” have been created by a passive gestational process because the artist “is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process” (532).

In other words, the moment of conception (the time when the man plays a part in sexual reproduction) is when a work of art is perfect, but the process of bringing art into being is passive and results in a “feeble” imitation of the perfectly conceived original. In this way, Shelley’s ideas about the genesis of art are linked to Coleridge’s account of the genesis of “Kubla Khan,” which came to him fully formed in a dream, but then declined into fragments as he tried to recover his dream vision. Shelley reinforces this point yet again when he reiterates that “Poetry […] is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will” (534).

In his praise of Dante’s poetry in the Defence, Shelley also deals a backhanded compliment to gestational tropes for writing. Shelley enthuses that Dante’s “very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor” (528). In this passage, birth does not necessarily bring poetry out of the ashes of obscurity, and pregnant words are only potential words that need a “conductor” to draw down their lightning to bring them into being. That the conductor that will finally bring poetry’s
lightening into being is male rather than female is implied by the phallic shape of most lightning
rods, but the masculine influence necessary for the conception of poetry can also be found in
Shelley’s discussion of preexistence in the Defence. As the passage that praises Dante continues,
Shelley writes that “[a]ll high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks
potentially” (528). Just as he does in Prometheus Unbound when Jupiter anticipates the birth of
his preexistent son, Shelley invokes the doctrine of preexistence because, according to its logic,
the origin of all life begins in the male seed that first begat life. Such a theory suggests that all
life already exists, and that it needs only to grow larger (rather than to change and develop)
during its gestation.¹²

If, in A Defence of Poetry, Shelley “chose to emphasize the source rather than the
development” of his poetry,¹³ it was because it was more perfect the closer it remained,
temporally, to its initial, masculine conception. Similarly, “Ode to the West Wind” demonstrates
that male generative metaphors are better suited to the production of poetry than metaphors
rooted in the female body because the latter are linked to death and destruction. In his ode,
Shelley celebrates and wishes to identify with the active, generative power of the male autumnal
west wind rather than with the female spring west wind. While critics like Andrew Stauffer and
Roman Sympos have suggested that Shelley was anxious about the widespread, aleatory

¹² There is risk in the growth that happens during the gestational period, and it is perhaps for this reason
that Shelley states in the Defence that a poet “would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong”
(517). Though he goes on to claim that embodying his own notions of morality roots them too firmly in their time
and place, I suggest that Shelley was actually fearful of all the potential inconveniences and degradations
concomitant with the trope of embodying ideas—responsibility, temporality, and mortality—as opposed to the
universal, “eternal truth” (515) that the true poet is able to express. Shelley’s ideas here contrast sharply with Mary
Wollstonecraft, who in her Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark discussed
with joy the beautiful thoughts she had embodied: “In solitude, the imagination bodies forth its conceptions
unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation.” See Mary Wollstonecraft, Letters Written
During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, 1796 (London: Centaur Press, 2004), 54.

transmission of texts that were becoming the hallmark of a proliferating print culture,\textsuperscript{14} I argue that “Ode to the West Wind” imagines a widespread, scattered, almost haphazard literary creation and textual transmission as liberating because it mirrors men’s reproductive physiology (i.e. the scattering of sperm) and the perfection of the first moments of their conception.

It is a critical commonplace that Shelley’s west wind is, as Angela Leighton puts it, “creative energy that makes poems,”\textsuperscript{15} and that the scattering leaves in the “Ode” are a metaphor for the leaves of Shelley’s own poetry, which he hopes will “quicken a new birth” (64) of human consciousness (and new poetry):

\begin{quote}
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind! (64-8).\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

While the verbs “drive” and “scatter” might seem ill-matched with one another in this context, as the former word implies “a force of direction” while the latter evokes “a random, entropic dispersal” (Stauffer para. 10), I argue that the conjunction of these actions makes perfect sense as


a process when read in light of male sexuality. What Shelley describes in the third and fourth
stanzas of the poem’s fifth canto is a model for creating and disseminating poetry that is based
not on a female process like pregnancy (as the verb “quicken” might suggest) but rather on male
sexual response (the driving of the male sex organ and then the orgasmic scattering of semen). The scattering of Shelley’s poetry (his “dead thoughts” published on “leaves” of paper)—troped
at various points as leaves, ashes, sparks, and (suggestively) seeds—is thus akin to the scattering
of seminal fluid that will “quicken” a new birth, whether it is the birth of new plant life in the
earth, new human life in a female womb, or of new poetry in other poets.

If it seems a stretch to imagine leaves and seeds (and poetry) as the animalcules in a
poetic ejaculation, it is helpful to remember that the locomotive power that drives these seminal
leaves/seeds/poems is the west wind, which, according to classical mythology, was supposed to
have had “a fertilizing or impregnating power.” Aristotle’s On the Generation of Animals had
stated that air is an essential component of semen, which is “a compound of spirit and water,” the
former consisting of “hot air.” If the spiritual component of semen had been imagined as air by
Aristotle—an author whose work Shelley was intimately acquainted with—the fecundity of the

17 Though Stuart Curran also suggests that Shelley spills his seed upon the ground, he suggests that the poet
does so by spilling his blood (not by scattering the leaves, seeds, ashes, or poetry). See Stuart Curran, Shelley’s

18 I. J. Kapstein, Neville Rogers, and Desmond King-Hele all suggest that Shelley was thinking about the
renewal and rebirth promised by the imminent birth of his next child (Mary Shelley would give birth to Percy
Florence on 12 November 1819, about a month after Percy Shelley composed “West Wind”). See I. J. Kapstein,
“The Symbolism of the Wind and the Leaves in Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind,’” PMLA 51.4 (1936), 1079;

122. See also Curran, Shelley’s Annum Mirabilis, 160. Eben Bass suggests that the west wind is “an agent of love.”
for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature 3 (1967), 336.

“Wild Spirit” (line 13) of Shelley’s west wind becomes legible, particularly when Shelley dignifies this male sexual metaphor by relocating the poetic ejaculation to the poet’s brain. In his essay “On Love,” Shelley refers to the “airy children of our brain” (503), an image that not only uses Aristotelian language concerning air’s role in the semen that begets children, but that also locates the conception of strong feelings (in this case, love) in the author’s brain. For Shelley, mental conceptions of the highest order, whether of poetry or love, are rooted in—though they ultimately transcend—masculine sexual response. Because Shelley wants to be the west wind (“Be thou me, impetuous one” [line 62]) rather than to be merely an Aeolian harp stirred by the wind, he therefore wishes to identify with the active, sexually- and poetically-generative power of the west wind, rather than with the passive, conceiving, and embodied role of women in sexual and textual (pro)creation.

Though Shelley celebrates masculine poetic birth in “Ode to the West Wind,” he treats female generative processes as only possibly conducive to poetic creation. Though Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat suggest that Shelley departs from mythological precedent by making “the restorative force of the spring mildly feminine,” I would like to suggest that Shelley genders the spring west wind as female in order to draw a distinction between the generative abilities of the (male) fall and (female) spring winds. While Shelley trusts the male autumn west wind to disseminate his poetry to “mankind” (67), he is skeptical about the efficacy of the (female) west wind to awaken the seeds to life in the spring because the seeds that the autumnal west wind plants in the ground end up “Each like a corpse within its grave” (7), a tomb that is

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also redolent of the womb. Shelley had already established the womb/tomb correlation in his first major poem *Queen Mab* (1812), in which he had written, “Thus do the generations of the earth / Go to the grave, and issue from the womb” (5.1-2). Shelley preserves the same order of events (grave to womb to birth) in his ode by beginning with the sowing of the seeds in the ground by the west wind in the autumn and then evoking the resurrection of those seeds when brought forth—perhaps via childbirth—by the feminine west wind of the spring. “Ode to the West Wind” thus offers two potential models for the creation and dissemination of poetry—a model rooted in male ejaculatory sexuality found near the end of the poem, and a model rooted in female pregnancy and childbirth (nevertheless fertilized by male “seeds”) found near the beginning. While Shelley is enthusiastic about the possibilities inherent in the former because it allows his words to be scattered amongst mankind, he is anxious about the latter, a fact to which the poem’s final, troubling question attests: “O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (69-70). While Shelley can be certain that his poetic leaves will be scattered about at the moment of their orgasmic conception under the auspices of the masculine autumnal west wind, he is uncertain if the birth of poetry in the spring will be successful because it involves death and a reliance upon the female generative process—the two of which are inextricably intertwined in the womb/tomb.

Finally, Shelley’s story of the genesis of “Ode to the West Wind” suggests that he applied his metaphor of the inseminating generativity of the west wind to the composition of his own poem. In a note appended to the poem, Shelley had written that

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23 The womb/tomb correlation also appears in Blake’s *The Book of Thel* and Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*.

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions.\(^\text{25}\)

Though Shelley uses the language of conception to describe his poetic inspiration, he uses the passive construction “was conceived” to avoid having to feminize himself by using the active voice (i.e. “I conceived this poem”). Even as he reports being the receiver/conceiver of poetic inspiration brought to him on the wings of the potent west wind, Shelley minimizes the language of conception and then, in the poem, identifies himself as the potent generator of poetry that will be scattered by the west wind and in turn impregnate others’ minds. Furthermore, Shelley’s prefatory remarks for “Ode to the West Wind” indicate that he wished to emphasize the wholeness of the poem at the moment of its conception, for he states that the poem was “chiefly written” at the moment he was first inspired to write it. Shelley was therefore just as invested in mythologizing the perfection of the moment of poetic creation as Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge were. As I argue in the next section, however, Mary Shelley was critical of the male Romantic tendency to glorify literary gestations that spring fully-formed from their makers’ heads without proper attention to poetic process.

III

In her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley famously remarked that her novel “did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband” (172). Although twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics’ examinations of extant manuscript copies of *Frankenstein* have revealed that the former part of her statement was inaccurate (her husband Percy Shelley did suggest several incidents in the novel, not least of which was the idea that Victor Frankenstein himself should propose the idea to travel to England), I would nevertheless contend that her second claim—that she didn’t owe “one train of feeling” to Percy Shelley—was truthful. Throughout the 1818 and 1831 texts of *Frankenstein*, with almost no exceptions, Mary Shelley finishes the phrase “train of…” with either “thought” or “ideas.” In the 1831 introductory essay, however, she substitutes “train of feeling” for the usual “train of thought” or “train of ideas.” The feelings that Mary Shelley presents in *Frankenstein* are indeed her own, and they relate to a number of topics—childbirth, motherhood, obstetric medicine, and death—that were foremost in her mind during the years in which she conceived of and wrote her novel.

Perhaps the most well-established feminist reading of *Frankenstein*—the reading that all subsequent interpretations of maternity in the novel have either built upon or sought to dismantle—is Ellen Moers’ argument that the novel is a “birth myth” that reflects its author’s

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own horrific experiences with childbirth and “the trauma of the afterbirth” (93-4).\textsuperscript{29} Shortly thereafter, critics like Marc Rubenstein, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Mary Poovey began to investigate the links between procreation and literary creation in the novel,\textsuperscript{30} a critical trend that, as it continued into the 1980s and 1990s, began to diverge into two distinct camps. Readers who followed Mary Jacobus’ lead criticized feminist critics like Moers who interpreted Shelley’s novel biographically; they sought to correct this tendency by pulling focus away from the female body and directing their attention to psychoanalytic and metaphorical readings of the novel.\textsuperscript{31} However, other critics (most notably Alan Bewell and Anne Mellor) put the female body—and the pregnant female body in particular—back at the center of the narrative in order to suggest that affirming the significance of women’s reproductive experiences was of the utmost concern to Shelley when she was writing \textit{Frankenstein}.\textsuperscript{32} The 1990s saw an upsurge in interest in the novel’s handling of masculinity,\textsuperscript{33} a trend that prompted Ellen Cronan Rose’s astute assessment

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\textsuperscript{29} In an article published in the same year as Moers’ book, Marc Rubenstein also argued that \textit{Frankenstein} is “a parable of motherhood,” although Rubenstein’s essay is as invested in reading \textit{Frankenstein} as Shelley’s search for her own missing mother as it is in reading Shelley herself as a mother. See Marc Rubenstein, “‘My Accursed Origin’: The Search for the Mother in \textit{Frankenstein},” \textit{Studies in Romanticism} 15.2 (1976), 165.


of the development of *Frankenstein* criticism, in which there has been “a clear and systematic movement from the literal toward the figurative, from the material maternal body to the paternal symbolic order.”

Because *Frankenstein* criticism has continued to branch outward in a variety of directions, it can be difficult to generalize the landscape of the novel’s criticism during the first decades of the twenty-first century, but a significant number of critics have continued to study *Frankenstein*’s male characters—particularly Victor Frankenstein as a man of science. In my own feminist reading of *Frankenstein*, I combine earlier approaches to the novel, which view the text as both a birth myth rooted in the female body and as a story about its own literary production, with later critical approaches that focus on Victor, in order to argue that Percy Shelley—as both parent and author—is the target of Mary Shelley’s critiques.

Three arguments about Victor Frankenstein’s significance in the novel regularly surface in *Frankenstein* criticism. Perhaps the most widely-accepted argument about the novel is that it is the story of a man of science who appropriates women’s reproductive powers so that he can

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create life without women’s assistance; this reading, however, tends to focus on the ways in which Victor’s creative process merely approximates pregnancy.\(^3^6\) A related but subtly different line of argumentation proposes that Victor, as a stand-in for Mary Shelley, is a mother himself (though a bad one) who represents Shelley’s often conflicted feelings about the dark side of motherhood that includes pain and suffering, post-partum depression, and ambivalence toward her children.\(^3^7\) However, Victor, as so many critics have suggested, can also be read as an author figure, whether that author is Percy Shelley (and, by extension, all over-reaching male Romantic


authors) or Mary Shelley herself, whose anxieties about her abilities as an author manifested in her identification with Victor’s monstrous creative process.\textsuperscript{38}

In this section, I propose a reading of Victor that combines all three of these dominant interpretations of his character. Because \textit{Frankenstein} is a multi-layered text that “yield[s] to multiple construals”\textsuperscript{39} in its thematic resonances as well as in its many narrative layers, I argue that Victor Frankenstein is a multi-layered character who is simultaneously an expectant mother who suffers the full gamut of physical horrors associated with childbirth and its aftermath; a male obstetrician whom Victor-the-mother seeks out for help, but who ends up persecuting pregnant women; and finally, a proxy for the poet Percy Shelley, who identifies as a parent to his literary creations only at the moment of conception.\textsuperscript{40} By splitting her title character’s identity into both expectant mother and man-midwife, Shelley subtly hints that Victor’s maternal sufferings are meted out by men of science—men like himself. Moreover, if Victor stands in for Percy Shelley, then Mary Shelley’s critique of Victor’s careless usurpation of maternity also extends to her husband’s (and perhaps other male Romantics’) disregard for the challenges associated with motherhood as well as their careless appropriation of the maternal metaphor for authorship. Just as Shelley foists the experience of maternity onto Victor Frankenstein/Percy

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\item Criscillia Benford, ““Listen to my tale”: Multilevel Structure, Narrative Sense Making, and the Inassimilable in Mary Shelley’s \textit{Frankenstein},” \textit{Narrative} 18.3 (2010), 335.
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Shelley in order to demonstrate the physical hardships that becoming a mother really entails, so
too does she assert that being a true mother to a book involves fostering a long-term relationship
with it, not simply celebrating (like Percy) the fleeting moment of its conception. In her
introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel, Mary Shelley establishes herself as the proper
mother to *Frankenstein*—a mother who continues to love her book despite its monstrosity.  

There are a number of aspects of the famous creation scene and its aftermath that evoke
gestation and birth. It took Victor roughly nine months to labor over his creature (Mellor, *Mary
Shelley* 141), during which time Victor confines himself to “a solitary chamber” (32), a
“confinement” (32) that echoes women’s confinement in childbirth (Bewell, “An Issue” 116),
although Victor is not surrounded by a supportive community of women—or anyone—to help
him through the birth process. As he prepares to give birth, Victor also experiences “infinite
pains and care” and an “anxiety that amounted to agony” (34) (anxiety that echoes that of the
authors of the late-eighteenth-century pregnancy poems discussed in Chapter 4). However, few
critics have discussed the amount of physical pain and suffering that Victor endures as a result of
his childbirth, suffering that he looks to obstetric science to alleviate. Not only does Victor’s
workshop of “filthy creation” gesture toward the abjection of the birthing body (Rubenstein 178
and Youngquist, “*Frankenstein*” 347), but, according to Paul Sherwin, when Victor “tortured the
living animal to animate the lifeless clay” (Shelley 32), it was perhaps his own body that was
being tortured in bringing the creature to life (Sherwin 895). Indeed, there are many more
suggestions in the novel of the specifically female nature of Victor’s ailments. In Shelley’s

41 In this way, I differ from critics who have read Victor as Mary Shelley-the-author, whose 1831
Introduction reflects her ambivalence about being an author.

42 Paul Youngquist dissents from Mellor’s calculation that Victor’s work took nine months by arguing that
it only took four months for him to build the body, which qualifies the creature as an “abortion” (*Monstrosities* 158-9).
handwritten addition to a published copy of the novel that she had inscribed to a Mrs. Thomas, Victor describes himself as a “love-sick girl;”43 after giving birth, Victor suffers from a malaise that resembles postpartum depression (Rubenstein 191). Mellor has also argued that, as Victor is being pursued by the creature later in the novel, he begins to feel that the creature is actually inside of him (Mary Shelley 135), a sensation that, along with Victor’s remarks that “I conceived the being in light of my own vampire” (Shelley 49), evokes the gestational nature of Victor’s original relationship to the creature.

The key to Shelley’s construction of Victor as a parturient woman, however, comes when Victor becomes gravely ill with a postpartum fever after giving birth. After creating his male creature at Ingolstadt, Victor reports that he contracted a “nervous fever, which confined me for several months” (37). Hirsch (130) and Hobbs (161), who have commented upon Victor’s fever, emphasize its “nervous” nature and therefore identify it as a psychosomatic manifestation of his guilt, but I would argue that because the word “confined” once again echoes the euphemistic “confinement” that pregnant women undergo during childbirth and its aftermath, the fever from which Victor suffers is more physical (and related to his own pregnancy and childbirth) than mental. Shelley specifically identifies Victor’s postpartum illness as a “fever,” which makes it, by definition, puerperal fever.44 No stranger to the circumstances surrounding her own mother’s death from childbed fever, Mary Shelley would have known only too well the dangers of postpartum illnesses.

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43 The so-called Thomas presentation copy of Frankenstein is owned by the Pierpont Morgan Library. On page 95 of the novel (Figure 16), Mary Shelley augmented the novel with the description of Victor as a “love-sick girl.”

44 “Puerperal” is an adjective that means simply “occurring or existing after childbirth” (OED).
Victor survives his bout of puerperal fever because of his friend Henry Clerval’s attentive nursing; indeed, since he is Victor’s “only nurse,” it would appear that Clerval plays the role of the monthly nurse in this lying-in scenario. However, after becoming so ill as a result of his first childbirth, Victor would undoubtedly wish to learn how to avoid such a dangerous postpartum illness when he gives birth to his second creature. Readers of the novel have often wondered why Victor felt that it was essential to travel to the British Isles to create a female mate for his creature since he had already successfully created life in his laboratory at Ingolstadt, but I argue that, if read in light of Victor-the-mother’s concern for his reproductive health, his trip to England becomes more comprehensible. Victor explains, “I had heard of some discoveries having been made by an English philosopher, the knowledge of which was material to my success” (103). He expands upon this reason when he states that

I remembered […] the necessity imposed upon me of either journeying to England, or entering into a long correspondence with those philosophers of that country, whose knowledge and discoveries were of indispensable use to me in my present undertaking. (104-5)

As an expectant mother who is about to gestate and give birth to a second child, Victor seeks out the help of the male medical profession to carry him safely through his next childbirth. But just which medical practitioners does Victor go to England to consult? I should like to propose several possibilities for the identities of the physicians that Victor travels to England to visit, possibilities that indicate Shelley’s Frankenstein criticizes a wide variety of practitioners of British gynecological science, not only for their inability to help parturient women, but also for

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45 See, for instance, Don Shelton, The Real Mr. Frankenstein: Sir Anthony Carlisle, Medical Murders, and the Social Genesis of Frankenstein, 2009 (PDF file), 459 and Youngquist, Monstrosities, 159.
their frequently destructive impulses and desire to subdue women, impulses to which Victor-the-obstetrician will himself respond.

Paul Youngquist has identified John Hunter and William Hunter, two of the most famous anatomists in eighteenth-century England, as the medical men with whom Victor Frankenstein would have needed to consult, mainly because of their important work on the vascular system of the placenta. William Hunter’s *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, a collection of twenty-eight engravings of dead female bodies at almost every stage of pregnancy, had become the definitive tome on the anatomy of the pregnant body almost as soon as it was published in 1774. *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* was printed as an elephant folio volume with life-size engravings, and it sold for the high price of six guineas, which would have been far above the purchasing power of a young man like Victor without an established profession. The book’s size and high cost could also help to explain why it might not, according to Youngquist’s surmise, have been available in Geneva when Victor would have needed it, thus necessitating a trip to England to consult it (Youngquist, *Monstrosities* 159).46

While the Hunter brothers are certainly viable candidates for Victor to confer with in England, a personal meeting between the three of them would have been impossible, for both William and John were dead by the late 1790s, when the events in Victor’s story would have taken place. Although the Hunter brothers’ work might have been useful to Victor in teaching him how to piece together cadavers to create his own female creature (William Hunter, in particular, was a professor of medicine and carried out dissections in his anatomical theatre), they would not have been able to consult on his particular case or to assist him during his

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46 Don Shelton suggests that John Hunter’s work on gigantism would undoubtedly have been of interest to Victor, whose first creature was, as Shelley described it, “of a gigantic stature” (Shelton, *The Real Mr. Frankenstein* 466-8).
reproductive labors. If Victor Frankenstein was seeking the help of male medical professionals to carry him safely through his next childbirth, he would most certainly have looked to two other physicians—Thomas Denman and John Clarke—who specialized in treating many of the diseases of pregnant and laboring women, and who were alive at the time when Victor would have needed their assistance.

Thomas Denman was a well-known man-midwife whose two-volume *Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, published in 1787, was one of the standard midwifery manuals of its era (Youngquist, *Monstrosities* 144). The entire second volume of Denman’s treatise is devoted to difficult and so-called “preternatural” labors that required the intervention of the man-midwife and his tools. Denman also published *An Essay on Difficult Labors* in two parts in 1787 and 1790, as well as essays on treating uterine hemorrhages and puerperal fever. John Clarke, another prominent late-eighteenth-century obstetrician, published a midwifery manual, *Practical Essays on the Management of Pregnancy and Labor*, in 1793, which also dealt with the prevention and treatment of puerperal fever. Clarke is also notable, however, because he was one of the physicians who had attended the dangerously ill Mary Wollstonecraft in the days after she gave birth to Mary Shelley. The first physician who had arrived at Wollstonecraft’s bedside was Dr. Poignand, who quickly extracted the placenta in several pieces and then went away. By the time Dr. Clarke arrived, the damage had already been done; had he arrived earlier, he might have prevented Dr. Poignand’s forceful extraction of the placenta, which could have prevented the ensuing infection that killed Wollstonecraft ten days later. Denman and Clarke, both well-versed in the treatment of a wide variety of maladies associated with childbirth, would have been the natural choice for a worried, expectant “mother” like Victor Frankenstein to consult.

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Unfortunately, none of the obstetricians that Victor confers with are able to protect him from puerperal fever, for he falls ill again after his violent miscarriage (or more accurately, abortion) of the female creature. Victor is “sickened” by the “filthy process” (113) of working on his female creature, becoming so “restless and nervous” (113) that he eventually decides to terminate his pregnancy. Immediately after he tears apart the body of his unfinished woman, Victor begins to suffer from a “sickening oppression” (115), and soon after he “burned with rage” (116). After these harbingers of illness, he once again contracts a dangerous fever that debilitates him for two months (122). Even though Victor recovers enough to travel back to Geneva, and later to pursue his creation to the ends of the earth, he is never truly healthy again. On five different occasions after his illness he describes himself or is described by others as “feverish” (123, 127, 132, 149) or in “the heat of fever” (136). Just as Victor’s mother, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, ultimately succumbs to a fever (24), so too does Victor at the end of his own life (149). Fevers in this novel are diseases associated first and foremost with mothers, and Victor is no exception.

Why aren’t the male anatomists, surgeons, and obstetricians that Victor consults able to help him have a healthy second pregnancy? On one hand, these circumstances suggest that Mary Shelley was merely being pragmatic about the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth—dangers that she was all too well aware of from her own life circumstances, from her mother’s untimely death in childbed to the loss of several of her young children. In fact, Shelley alludes to these unfortunate events in a passage in which Victor, suffering from his second bout of puerperal fever in Ireland, muses about life’s fragility: “Death snatches away many blooming children, the only hopes of their doating [sic] parents: how many brides and youthful lovers have been one day in the bloom of health and hope, and the next a prey for worms and the decay of the tomb!”
In having Victor dwell upon on the deaths of children and brides, Shelley recalls her own blooming infant, Clara, who died suddenly only two weeks after birth, as well as the death of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who, having been married to William Godwin only five months before giving birth to Mary Shelley, was herself still a bride when she all too suddenly had become “a prey for worms.” Shelley’s invocation of worms in this passage also links Victor’s feverish musings to his previous postpartum dream, in which he kissed his fiancée Elizabeth, only to see her turn into the corpse of his dead mother, whose grave-clothes were crawling with worms (34). Motherhood, illness, and death are closely allied in all of these passages from the novel, just as they were in Shelley’s life, so it is not surprising that the very physicians who had failed Mary Wollstonecraft in her childbed fever would have been unable to save Victor from his puerperal illnesses.

However, in addition to the obvious physiological dangers of gestation and childbirth in Frankenstein, Shelley adds another layer to her critique of male physicians’ inefficacy with an added layer to Victor’s character, who, in addition to being an expectant mother, is also an obstetrician who harms pregnant women in meddling with the birth process. While Victor’s morally questionable practices for obtaining dead bodies for his experiments (including robbing graves and visiting slaughter houses) link him with the science of anatomy, his interest in bringing new life into the world associates him with obstetric science as well. Victor’s desire to “pursue […] nature to her hiding places” (32) would make him sympathetic to the work of William Hunter, whose Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus consists of engravings of pregnant

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women’s bodies, many of which are flayed open with the skin peeled back for a better view of the uterus, illustrations that display the most up-to-date knowledge of women’s reproductive anatomy (see Figure 7). Hunter’s Anatomy, which provides visually shocking examples of a scientist’s pursuit of nature to her hiding places, would inevitably drive home to Victor-the-obstetrician the fact that the creation of life may be the work of women, but that women’s bodies can (and perhaps even should) be opened up to the scrutiny of male medical science. Victor performs a similar act of mutilation when he destroys the nascent female creature in the third volume of Frankenstein, and he almost (but not quite) comprehends the violence of his actions on female flesh when he remarks that “I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (118). Victor’s violence here is “almost,” but not quite the mangling of “living flesh” because his anatomical subject, like those in Hunter’s engravings, is dead.

Hunter’s Anatomy (and obstetrical atlases like it) would also have been of great interest to Victor because they often depict anatomical subjects that, like the subjects of Victor’s experiments, are the sum of disparate parts joined together to make a monstrous whole. It was not an unusual practice for eighteenth-century obstetricians and anatomists to allow the illustrators of their obstetric atlases to take some amount of artistic license in preparing and drawing their anatomical models. For instance, William Smellie’s pupil, Peter Camper, reports that Smellie’s pregnant figures in his Sett of Anatomical Tables (1754) “were not all from real

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49 In an article published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, Don Shelton proposes that obstetric pioneers like William Smellie and William Hunter “were responsible for a series of 18th-century ‘burking’ murders of pregnant women” in order to gain the requisite number of specimens for their midwifery atlases, which included pregnant women at every stage of pregnancy. Shelton suggests that these anatomists’ actions, which basically amounted to dozens of “murders to order” of specifically targeted pregnant women, might have been suspected by the public, but that, “over the last 250 years, no record has been found of a previous attempt to determine the legitimacy of the many undelivered subjects” in William Hunter’s Anatomy. Though Shelton’s claims are controversial and far from being substantiated, his argument nevertheless speaks to the very real fear and mistrust of anatomists who dissected human remains during the eighteenth century. See Don Shelton, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 103 (2010), 46.
life. […] The children are placed in pelves of women, the children themselves looked natural, but the other parts were copied from other preparations.”

Piecing together maternal and fetal cadavers, which was standard practice for Smellie—and perhaps for Hunter, who had been trained by Smellie and who had employed the same artist, Jan Van Rymsdyk—would have had a particular resonance for Victor Frankenstein, whose second project involved piecing together female cadavers to create a similarly monstrous whole.

Victor’s sinister anatomical practices do not end with his profanation of dead bodies, however. Youngquist posits that it is at the moment that Victor dismembers the female creature that he “turns obstetrician” (Monstrosities 160), which suggests that Victor’s pursuit of nature to her hiding places aligns him with obstetricians like Hunter who mutilate the female bodies upon which they work. I would add, however, that Victor’s destruction of the female creature also hints that even when obstetricians have good intentions, they can do more harm than good.

Because obstetricians were legally permitted to use surgical instruments, they were responsible for undertaking obstetric operations to deliver children and, as a last resort, to sacrifice the life of the child to save the mother. If a fetus was undeliverable because of a breach position or a condition like hydrocephalus, male physicians would use instruments such as the tire-tête and the crochet to break apart the fetus’ skull (and the rest of its body, if necessary) in order to remove it. While such procedures were often the only hope of saving the mother’s life, they would also put her in grave danger of punctured organs and infections. With Victor’s dismemberment of the female creature, Mary Shelley stages the circumstances of her own mother’s death, which was

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51 If it seems far-fetched that Shelley would have been familiar with eighteenth-century anatomical practices, it is essential to keep in mind that William Godwin was friends with a number of physicians and anatomists, including Anthony Carlisle, and that their conversations frequently involved the latest advances in science and medicine (Shelton, The Real Mr. Frankenstein 413, 448-9).
brought about by a well-intentioned physician. As is well known (and previously mentioned), Mary Wollstonecraft didn’t die directly as a result of childbirth, but rather because a hasty man-midwife, Dr. Poignand, put his hands into Wollstonecraft’s vagina and ripped the retained placenta out in many pieces, causing extensive bleeding and introducing the puerperal infection that not even the eminent Dr. Clarke could cure. When Victor tears his own female creature apart (an action that he ascribes to altruistic motives that include rescuing humanity from the dangers of a potentially obstinate female will [114]), he enacts the role of the well-intentioned but nevertheless destructive obstetrician who simultaneously dismembers the fetus and kills the (potential) mother (who are both represented by the female creature). On a more sinister level, however, in killing the female creature, Victor symbolically kills Mary Wollstonecraft and the female independence that she had championed.

While Victor Frankenstein can be read as both suffering pregnant woman and destructive male obstetrician, there is one final light in which we must examine him—as a male Romantic poet who, like Percy Shelley, disingenuously appropriates the language of gestation and birth. Critics have long pointed out how Victor is, in many ways, a portrait of Percy Shelley, from the name “Victor” (which was Percy Shelley’s early pen name) to the fact that Victor Frankenstein’s chemical and electrical experiments resembled those that Percy undertook as a young student.52 It is, however, Mary Shelley’s benediction to her “hideous progeny” at the end of her introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel that has prompted critics to read Victor’s horrified feelings about the birth of his hideous creature as analogous to Mary Shelley’s similarly horrified

52 See footnote 38 for some of the critics who have noted that Victor’s similarities to Percy Shelley were meant as a critique of Percy Shelley and the egotistical male Romantic project.
feelings toward the birth of her novel (and of herself as an author).\textsuperscript{53} Though Mellor makes a convincing case for the ways in which the distance between Mary Shelley and Victor had lessened considerably in the 1831 edition of the novel (\textit{Mary Shelley} 176), I would maintain that Mary Shelley’s identification of the novel as her “hideous progeny” (along with the 1831 frontispiece of the novel and a new passage added to the novel’s first volume) were meant to heighten the differences between Mary Shelley and Victor, while emphasizing the already striking similarities between Percy Shelley and Victor.

As soon as readers opened the 1831 edition of \textit{Frankenstein}, they would have confronted the now-famous frontispiece that depicts the moment of Victor’s abandonment of his creature after bringing him to life in his laboratory (Figure 17). Although Shelley did not sketch this picture, the illustration nevertheless draws upon the book-as-baby metaphor that Shelley employs only a few pages later in her introduction to the new edition. In the frontispiece, a book—which is the record of Victor’s toils in his laboratory to create life, but also \textit{Frankenstein} itself, which is Shelley’s own record of her terrifying dream—are visually analogous to one another because they are in virtually the same half-recumbent position. As both book and monstrous child lie dazed on the floor, Victor rushes out the door on the right, his eyes wide with terror.

It is this moment of abandonment that Shelley’s introduction to the novel seeks to correct. While acknowledging the hideousness of her literary progeny at the end of the introduction, Shelley makes a point of mentioning that she still looks after her novel by tending to it as a mother would tend to a child. In discussing the “alterations” she made to the novel,

Shelley treats *Frankenstein* as if it were a disheveled child whose clothes had been torn: “I have mended the language where it was so bald as to interfere with the interest of the narrative” (173). Shelley’s solicitousness for her literary creation and its clothing stands in stark contrast to Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, who (as Shelley represented them in her introduction) wanted to clothe their creations in clothing that was far less substantial. Shelley writes that Byron, while writing the third canto of *Childe Harold*, “clothed” his thoughts “in all the light and harmony of poetry” (170). Similarly, Percy Shelley was, according to his wife’s assessment, “more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery” (171). Shelley’s introduction thus draws a sharp distinction between her ongoing relationship with her novel even a decade and a half after its initial publication, and Victor Frankenstein’s immediate abandonment of his creature at the moment of its birth, a model for literary creation that is similar to that of male Romantic writers who had no practical sense of how to care for their literary (or their real) progeny.54

Shelley’s exasperation with irresponsible authors who won’t properly parent their books is present at the end of *Frankenstein* as well as at the novel’s beginning. When Victor revises the version of his life that Robert Walton has set down in his journal, he explains that he does not want “a mutilated [story to] go down to posterity” (146), a statement that at first seems to hint that he may have learned that motherhood (at least to books) is an ongoing endeavor. What becomes apparent from this passage, however, is that Victor would be ashamed of his story if it were mutilated, and his efforts to correct the shortcomings in his narrative indicate that he cannot connect his care of a mutilated manuscript to his responsibility to care for his similarly mutilated

54 Mary Shelley’s skepticism of Byron’s treatment of his daughter Allegra, as well as her frustrations with Percy Shelley’s indifference to his children’s health and well-being, have been well documented by Jane Dunn, Anne Mellor, Emily Sunstein, and Miranda Seymour, among others.
child. Furthermore, a passage added to the 1831 edition indicates that, over the years, Shelley had grown even less certain that Victor/Percy had ever learned how to be a proper literary mother. After Victor hears “a man of great research in natural philosophy” discredit the work of Cornelia Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, he reports that “I at once gave up my former occupations, set down natural history and all its progeny as a deformed and abortive creation” (22). This passage (which foreshadows Victor’s abandonment of his defective creature) further emphasizes Victor’s lack of patience for defective narratives of any kind and suggests that he is ready to abandon any narrative (either others’ or his own) that are “abortive” or “mutilated.”

Shelley also extends her critique beyond Victor to male Romantic poets like her husband, who, aside from not caring for their literary gestations properly, do not have an accurate sense of how these literary gestations develop. Victor’s creature is, after all, born fully-formed (at least physically, if not mentally) in much the same way that Athena springs, fully-formed, from Zeus’ head—and in the same way that poets like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy Shelley expected their own literary gestations to come into being. For Mary Shelley, on the other hand, literary motherhood is, like actual motherhood, an ongoing endeavor that attends to process as well as end product. It is for this reason that Shelley’s introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel dwells upon the details concerned with the novel’s growth and development rather than reflecting on the novel as a completed whole, as does Percy Shelley’s preface to the 1818 edition of the novel.56


56 Not only is Percy Shelley’s 1818 preface much shorter than Mary Shelley’s 1831 introduction, but it also tries to explain the effects of the completed work (e.g. how the novel’s central event will affect the imagination, how the author handled human nature, etc.). In fact, the final line of Percy Shelley’s preface glosses over Mary Shelley’s writing process and further emphasizes the end product: “The following tale is the only one which has been completed.” See [Percy Shelley], Preface, *Frankenstein*, 1818, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1996), 6.
Mary Shelley’s critique of Victor Frankenstein’s/Percy Shelley’s failure as a parent to his literary progeny emerges much more forcefully in the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* because, by then, she would have read Percy Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” and *A Defence of Poetry*, both of which were written after *Frankenstein*’s initial publication, and both of which disingenuously use the language of maternity to discuss a writing process that is really based on men’s sexual response and procreative role. In fact, Shelley’s critique of her husband’s appropriation of maternal metaphors for authorship extends beyond her revisions of *Frankenstein* to at least one of her subsequent novels as well. In her “Author’s Introduction” to *The Last Man* (1826), Shelley gives an autobiographical account of her trip to Naples with Percy Shelley in December 1818 and of their trip across the Bay of Baiae to the Elysian Fields, Avernus, and “the gloomy cavern of the Cumaean Sibyl.” In this reminiscence, Shelley critiques Percy Shelley’s male-centered view of poetic generation in “Ode to the West Wind” by positing a female origin for poetry—the womb-like Sybil’s Cave that contains the poetic leaves that Percy Shelley had imagined being scattered abroad at the end of his poem.

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Mary Shelley’s description of the Bay of Baiae in her introduction to *The Last Man* echoes Percy Shelley’s description of the same bay in “Ode to the West Wind,” though with significant differences. In the third canto of “West Wind,” Percy Shelley invokes “a pumice isle in Baiae’s bay” (line 32), beside which “sleep old palaces and towers” under the waters of the Mediterranean (33). He also describes the “sapless foliage of the ocean” (40) as it “grow[s] grey with fear” (41) when the west wind disturbs the sea. While Percy Shelley describes a sea that is choppy and disturbed by the autumnal west wind (“the Atlantic’s level powers / Cleave themselves into chasms” [37-8]), Mary Shelley describes a bay that is “tranquil” and “radiant” (1) despite the fact that it is wintertime: “The translucent and shining waters of the calm sea covered fragments of old Roman villas, which were interlaced by sea-weed, and received diamond tints from the chequering of the sun-beams” (1). It is in this other significant introductory essay that Mary Shelley directly answers the question that Percy Shelley poses at the end of his ode. When Percy asks “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?” (70)—a question that, as I argue in the previous section, points to his insecurities about metaphors for


Phyllis Zimmerman points out the similarities between the Author’s Introduction and Percy Shelley’s letters and “Ode to the West Wind,” but she does so in order to argue that Mary Shelley was either emulating Percy Shelley or completing a work that he had begun. See Phyllis Zimmerman, “Some Lines of Italian Poetry in the Introduction to The Last Man,” *Notes and Queries* 37.1 (1990), 32. Steven Goldsmith also argues that Mary Shelley meant to emulate Percy Shelley in her construction of her tale from the Sibyline leaves (283). By contrast, I emphasize the ways in which Mary Shelley departs from—and critiques—Percy Shelley in her introduction.
authorship rooted in female reproductive physiology—Mary Shelley answers with a resounding yes:

Though it was winter, the atmosphere seemed more appropriate to early spring; and its genial warmth contributed to inspire those sensations of placid delight, which are the portion of every traveller [sic], as he lingers, loath to quit the tranquil bays and radiant promontories of Baiae. (1)

If Percy Shelley is unsure that the seeds of poetry will germinate and sprout while they are in the womb/tomb of the earth waiting for the “azure sister of the spring” to blow (7-9), for Mary Shelley, springtime, with its possibilities for birth and regeneration, follows so quickly upon winter that winter itself is displaced by weather that “seemed more appropriate to early spring.”

Further evidence that Mary Shelley’s introduction to The Last Man functions as a response to Percy Shelley’s dismissal of pregnancy as a conducive metaphor for poetic creation in “Ode to the West Wind” can be seen in her description of her expeditions into the Sibyl’s Cave, a womb-like natural structure in which poetic leaves are embedded. As Shelley and her companion (presumably Percy Shelley) enter the vaginal “humid pathway” (1) to the cave, they encounter a series of caverns that finally lead them to the Sibyl’s cave, in which they find a number of “Sibylline leaves […] traced with written characters” in many different languages (3). Shelley makes certain to emphasize that the leaves she found were actually leaves (“leaves, bark, and other substances” [3]), a clarification that links her anecdote to the end of Percy Shelley’s poem, in which he asks the west wind to “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!” (63-4). As I have already argued, though Percy uses a word associated with pregnancy (“quicken”), the reproductive process that he actually invokes in

60 Though Katey Castellano also notes the echo of Percy Shelley’s “withered leaves” in Mary Shelley’s Sibylline leaves, she draws a distinction between the leaves of paper on which Percy Shelley’s poetry is printed and the real leaves on which the Sibyl’s words are inscribed (80).
these lines more closely resembles male ejaculation and insemination. By finding in the cave the Sibylline leaves and the prophecies inscribed on them (prophecies that also echo the prophecies that Percy wishes to send aloft with his leaves in “West Wind”), Mary Shelley locates these prophetic utterances within a womb out of which only a female author—Shelley herself—can deliver them. Although she writes that she and her companion made many trips back to the cave to collect additional leaves, it was Mary Shelley alone who worked on “deciphering these sacred remains”: “Scattered and disconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form” (3-4). Shelley’s use of the word “scattered” echoes Percy Shelley’s use of the same word in “West Wind” when he asks that the wind “Scatter [...] Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!” (lines 66-7). Whereas the male poet scatters leaves, ashes, and seeds into the universe and then has no further connection to them, it is up to the female author to knit these scattered words together into a coherent whole—much as a woman’s womb knits together a fetus from the scattered male seed.61

The metaphor of pregnancy that Mary Shelley develops in her introduction to *The Last Man* becomes even more legible when we read her translation and arrangement of the Sibylline leaves as a metaphor for her editing of Percy Shelley’s poetry for publication, a project that she threw herself into in the years immediately following her husband’s death. While Percy Shelley’s literary productions, as Mary Shelley remarks in her Preface to the first collected edition of Percy’s poems, “sprung, living and warm, from his heart and brain”62 (much as the creature emerged fully-formed from Victor Frankenstein’s brain), it was Mary Shelley who carried out

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61 In this way, my reading differs from that of Maggie Kilgour, who argues that the Author’s Introduction registers Percy Shelley’s “centrifugal energy” (572).

the long-term maternal relationships with literary texts—her own as well as her husband’s—that she believed were essential for mothers to have with all of their children, hideous or not.
EPILOGUE

In *Of Woman Born* (1976), Adrienne Rich asserts that competing cultural interpretations of female reproductive physiology (though not the actual physical act of giving birth) are at the heart of women’s social disenfranchisement:

> [t]he woman’s body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradiction: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil; a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture.¹

In this project, I have demonstrated the ways in which eighteenth-century medical representations of the pregnant body, as well as contemporary parental metaphors for writing, were concomitant with male authors’ literary efforts to regulate women’s unruly bodies and speech. Eighteenth-century and Romantic male authors denied autonomy and speech to their pregnant characters and rejected maternal metaphors for writing in order to posit a transcendent male mind that was fundamentally different from—and superior to—women’s gross embodiment. By contrast, the female Romantic authors I have examined in this study celebrated both maternity and the maternal metaphor for authorship because motherhood and authorship, embodiment and intellect, were not mutually exclusive for them. In short, the male authors in my study felt that associating their mental processes with female bodily processes was degrading,

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while the female Romantic authors I have focused on found dignity in correlating the
productions of their minds with the productions of their bodies.

However, it would take another century for the positive correlation between maternity
and authorship to take hold once again. As the rest of the nineteenth century unfolded, literary
representations of pregnancy disappeared almost completely in British novels. Emily Brontë’s
_Wuthering Heights_ (1847) and George Eliot’s _Adam Bede_ (1859) are two famous examples of
nineteenth-century novels in which pregnancies play decisive, though hidden, roles in the novels’
plots; indeed, Charles Dickens’ _Martin Chuzzlewit_ (1843-4) satirizes the unspeakable nature of
pregnancy at this time (Malone 369). While childbirth is alluded to most frequently in
nineteenth-century “fallen woman” narratives, from Elizabeth Gaskell’s _Ruth_ (1853) to Thomas
Hardy’s _Tess of the d’Urbervilles_ (1891), these types of fictions tend to elide discussions of
gestation and childbirth, as they are more concerned with portraying the social consequences of
(illegitimate) births. The pregnant body can be found much more frequently in the poetry of the
nineteenth century, though these poetic representations of expectant mothers by both men and
women are similar to those from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as they are
usually characterized by domesticity and conventional Christian sentiments that regard God as
the supreme arbiter of conception and birth.  

It would appear that nineteenth-century male authors followed the pattern of their
eighteenth-century and Romantic forebears when it came to using parental metaphors to relate to

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their literary productions. In his preface to the 1869 edition of *David Copperfield* (1850), Charles Dickens wrote that “like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD.” Though Dickens seems to include the mother in his invocation of literary parentage in this famous passage, he also calls his imaginative works “the creatures of his brain” (xvii), a phrase that links his literary process to male brain births rather than to maternity. Furthermore, one of the foremost poets and literary critics of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, evinced discomfort with pregnancy and birth as metaphors for poetry’s cultural work. Though some nineteenth-century women writers like the poet Alice Meynell (known by her contemporaries as the “pencilling mamma”) continued the female Romantic tradition of attempting to reconcile maternity with authorship, other prominent nineteenth-century women writers avoided connecting motherhood with their literary vocation. Mary Anne Evans’ decision to adopt the male pseudonym George Eliot hints at her desire to dissociate serious literary endeavors from a feminine identity. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, the novelist and political activist Olive Schreiner vehemently disavowed any natural connection between women’s reproductive physiology and their capacity for writing:

> It is sometimes stated, that as several women of genius in modern times have sought to find expression for their creative powers in the art of fiction, there must be some inherent connection in the human brain between the ovarian sex function and the art of fiction. […] Scientifically speaking, it is as unproven that there is any organic relation between the brain of the female and the production of art in

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the form of fiction, as there is an organic relation between the hand of woman and
the typewriter.\textsuperscript{7}

Schreiner’s insistence that women’s maternal and literary capacities were entirely separate from
one another undoubtedly influenced twentieth-century critics who, like Virginia Woolf in \emph{A
Room of One’s Own}, assumed that the child-free status of nineteenth-century women writers like
Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot was a necessary precondition of
their success.\textsuperscript{8}

If nineteenth-century authors were reluctant to write frankly about pregnancy and birth
and hesitant to use maternity as a positive trope for authorship, twentieth-century authors
demonstrated the opposite tendency. Susan Stanford Friedman argues that a copious number of
twentieth-century women writers—including H. D., Sylvia Plath, Erica Jong, Muriel Rukeyser,
Anaïs Nin, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, and Paula Gunn Allen, among
others—have expressed a wide range of responses toward pregnancy and birth, though many of
these authors sought to “reconstitute woman’s fragmented self into a (pro)creative whole uniting
word and flesh, body and mind.”\textsuperscript{9} Despite this new era of openness toward artistic renderings of
parturient bodies and enthusiasm for linking maternity and creativity, there are nevertheless still
far too many current examples of the old chauvinist belief that women are not qualified to make
decisions—or even to speak publically—about their own reproductive processes. In February
2012, an all-male panel of religious leaders testified before a U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform hearing on women’s access to birth control

\textsuperscript{7} Olive Schreiner, \emph{Woman and Labor}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1911), 162, 163.

\textsuperscript{8} Virginia Woolf, \emph{A Room of One’s Own}, 1929 (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace

\textsuperscript{9} Susan Stanford Friedman, “Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary
Discourse,” \emph{Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism}, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price
under the Affordable Care Act. In June 2012, the male Speaker of the House of Representatives of the State of Michigan banned two female representatives from speaking on the House floor after they had used medically-correct language (including the word “vagina”) while defending female reproductive rights during a House floor debate on pending legislation to place severe restrictions on abortion clinics in the state. Though far removed both temporally and geographically from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, these disconcerting occurrences in twenty-first-century America remind us that women’s voices have long been, and sadly continue to be, suspect and censored when they speak about issues pertaining to their own bodies. It is therefore imperative for women writers of the present day—no less than it had been for women writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—to defend women’s autonomy by continuing to write intelligently, compassionately, and publically about women’s bodies, minds, and lives. It is still up to women to create a world in which maternity is compatible with all occupations and endeavors.
Figure 1. Presentation of Sadler’s *Private Looking-Glasse* to a pregnant woman. Frontispiece to John Sadler, *The Sick Womans Private Looking-Glasse* (1636).
Figure 2. Fetal positions.
Figure 3. Presentation of Rösslin’s *Der Rosengarten* to a pregnant woman. Frontispiece to Eucharius Rösslin, *Der Rosengarten (The Rose Garden)* (1513).
Figure 4. Midwives assisting at a birth.
Eucharius Rösslin, *Der Rosengarten (The Rose Garden)* (1513).
Figure 5. Mother and fetus. Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book* (1671).
Figure 6. Placement of fetus in the womb.  
William Smellie, Table 12, A Sett of Anatomical Tables (1754).  
History & Special Collections for the Sciences  
Library Special Collections, UCLA
Figure 7. Placement of fetus in dissected cadaver.
Figure 8. Forceps delivery.
History & Special Collections for the Sciences
Library Special Collections, UCLA
Figure 9. Delivery of fetal head with a crochet.
William Smellie, Table 36, A Sett of Anatomical Tables (1754).
History & Special Collections for the Sciences
Library Special Collections, UCLA
Figure 10. Catheter separating the peritoneum from the uterus. William Hunter, Detail from Plate 26, *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774). Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA
Figure 11. Obstetrical teaching manikin from early nineteenth century.  
History & Special Collections for the Sciences  
Library Special Collections, UCLA
Figure 13. “What is Man!”
Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress.
Copyright © 2013 William Blake Archive.
This project is supported in part by a
William Blake Archive Reproduction Grant for Graduate Students.
Figure 14. A woman plucks a mandrake-child from beneath a tree. William Blake, Plate 3, *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (Copy D, 1793). Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress. Copyright © 2013 William Blake Archive. This project is supported in part by a William Blake Archive Reproduction Grant for Graduate Students.
Figure 15. Los gives birth to “the globe of life.”
The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. PML 63139.
Photography by Schecter Lee.
letters: and only took notice of my silence by inquiring into my occupations more particularly than before. Winter, spring, and summer, passed away during my labours; but I did not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves — sights which before always yielded me supreme delight, so deeply was I engrossed in my occupation. The leaves of that year had withered before my work drew near to a close; and now every day showed me more plainly how well I had succeeded. But my enthusiasm was checked by my anxiety, and I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favourite employment. Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree; a disease that I regretted the more because I had hitherto en-

Figure 16. Mary Shelley’s handwritten emendation of a passage in Frankenstein. Page 95 of the Thomas presentation copy of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818). The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. PML 16799.
Figure 17. Victor Frankenstein abandons his creature. Frontispiece to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831 edition).
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