

REPRODUCING WOMEN: FEMALE BODILY NARRATIVES AND ENGLISH
PATRIARCHIES, 1600-1660

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

During the early Stuart period, England's return to male monarchal rule resulted in the emergence of a political analogy that understood the authority of the monarch to be rooted in the "natural" authority of the father; consequently, the mother's authoritative role within the family was repressed. As the literature of the period recognized, however, there would be no family unit for the father to lead without the words and bodies of women to make narratives of dynasty and legitimacy possible. Early modern discourse reveals that the reproductive roles of men and women, and the social hierarchies that grow out of them, are as much a matter of human design as of divine or natural law. Moreover, despite the attempts of James I and Charles I to strengthen royal patriarchal authority, the role of the monarch was repeatedly challenged on stage and in print even prior to the British Civil Wars and the 1649 beheading of Charles I. Texts produced at moments of political crisis reveal how women could uphold the legitimacy of familial and political hierarchies, but they also disclose patriarchy's limits by representing "natural" male authority as depending in part on women's discursive control over their bodies. Due to the epistemological instability of the female reproductive body, women play a privileged interpretive role in constructing patriarchal identities.

The dearth of definitive knowledge about the female body during this period, and the consequent inability to fix or stabilize somatic meaning, led to the proliferation of differing, and frequently contradictory, depictions of women's bodies. The female body became a site of contested meaning in early modern discourse, with men and women struggling for dominance, and competitors so diverse as to include kings, midwives, scholars of anatomy, and female religious sectarians. Essentially, this competition came down to a question of where to locate somatic meaning: In the opaque, uncertain bodies of women? In women's equally uncertain and

unreliable words? In the often contradictory claims of various male-authored medical treatises? In the whispered conversations that took place between women behind the closed doors of birthing rooms? My dissertation traces this representational instability through plays by William Shakespeare, John Ford, Thomas Middleton, and William Rowley, as well as in monstrous birth pamphlets, medical treatises, legal documents, histories, satires, and ballads. In these texts, the stories women tell about and through their bodies challenge and often supersede male epistemological control. These stories, which I term female bodily narratives, allow women to participate in defining patriarchal authority at the levels of both the family and the state.

After laying out these controversies and instabilities surrounding early modern women's bodies in my first chapter, my remaining chapters analyze the impact of women's words on four distinct but overlapping reproductive issues: virginity, pregnancy, birthing room rituals, and paternity. In chapters 2 and 3, I reveal how women construct the inner, unseen "truths" of their reproductive bodies through speech and performance, and in doing so challenge the traditional forms of male authority that depend on these very constructions for coherence. Chapter 2 analyzes virginity in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's play *The Changeling* (1622) and in texts documenting the 1613 Essex divorce, during which Frances Howard, like Beatrice-Joanna in the play, was required to undergo a virginity test. These texts demonstrate that a woman's ability to feign virginity could allow her to undermine patriarchal authority within the family and the state, even as they reveal how men relied on women to represent their reproductive bodies in socially stabilizing ways. During the British Civil Wars and Interregnum (1642-1660), Parliamentary writers used Howard as an example of how the unruly words and bodies of women could disrupt and transform state politics by influencing court faction; in doing so, they also revealed how female bodily narratives could help recast political historiography. In

chapter 3, I investigate depictions of pregnancy in John Ford's tragedy, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633) and in early modern medical treatises from 1604 to 1651. Although medical texts claim to convey definitive knowledge about the female reproductive body, in actuality male knowledge frequently hinged on the ways women chose to interpret the unstable physical indicators of pregnancy. In Ford's play, Annabella and Putana take advantage of male ignorance in order to conceal Annabella's incestuous, illegitimate pregnancy from her father and husband, thus raising fears about women's ability to misrepresent their bodies. Since medical treatises often frame the conception of healthy, legitimate offspring as a matter of national importance, women's ability to conceal or even terminate their pregnancies could weaken both the patriarchal family and the patriarchal state that the family helped found.

Chapters 4 and 5 broaden the socio-political ramifications of women's words and bodies by demonstrating how female bodily narratives are required to establish paternity and legitimacy, and thus help shape patriarchal authority at multiple social levels. In chapter 4, I study representations of birthing room gossip in Thomas Middleton's play, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), and in three *Mistress Parliament* pamphlets (1648) that satirize parliamentary power. Across these texts, women's birthing room "gossip" comments on and critiques such issues as men's behavior towards their wives and children, the proper use of household funds, the finer points of religious ritual, and even the limits of the authority of the monarch. The collective speech of the female-dominated birthing room thus proves central not only to attributing paternity to particular men, but also to the consequent definition and establishment of the political, socio-economic, and domestic roles of patriarchy. Chapter 5 examines anxieties about paternity in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611) and in early modern monstrous birth pamphlets from 1600 to 1647, in which children born with congenital

deformities are explained as God's punishment for the sexual, religious, and/or political transgressions of their parents or communities. Both the play and the pamphlets explore the formative/deformative power of women's words and bodies over their offspring, a power that could obscure a father's connection to his children. However, although the pamphlets attempt to contain and discipline women's unruly words and bodies with the force of male authority, the play reveals the dangers of male tyranny and the crucial role of maternal authority in reproducing and authenticating dynastic continuity and royal legitimacy.

My emphasis on the socio-political impact of women's self-representation distinguishes my work from that of scholars such as Mary Fissell and Julie Crawford, who claim that early modern beliefs about the female reproductive body influenced textual depictions of major religious and political events, but give little sustained attention to the role female speech plays in these representations. In contrast, my dissertation reveals that in such texts, patriarchal society relies precisely on the words women speak about their own and other women's bodies. Ultimately, I argue that female bodily narratives were crucial in shaping early modern culture, and they are equally crucial to our critical understanding of sexual and state politics in the literature of the period.

Dedicated to the memory of
Elmer Drerup
Mildred Fletcher
William Luttfring, Jr.

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Chapter 1: Representing the Female Reproductive Body and Women's Speech in Early Modern England

What did early modern men and women have in mind when they thought about the female reproductive body? Did they think about descriptions and illustrations from medical treatises; local or court gossip; or the bodies of boy actors performing virginity, promiscuity, and even pregnancy on the public stage? Did women think about their own bodies, or about those of friends, relatives, or neighbors whom they may have attended in childbirth? Given the influence of the Galenic "one sex" model, did men and women consider male bodies when thinking about the female body?¹ Even this cursory list of possibilities reveals the wide and varied range of voices and sources that contributed to the representation and conceptualization of the female reproductive body during the early modern period. In considering this discursive multivocality, this project will examine the representational crisis produced by the dearth of definitive knowledge about the female body and the consequent inability to fix or stabilize somatic meaning. This uncertainty meant that differing, frequently contradictory depictions of the female body proliferated, and this proliferation led to conflict and competition over who controlled representation. Such conflict was frequently gendered, with men and women struggling for dominance, and the competitors were so diverse as to include kings, midwives, scholars of anatomy, and female religious sectarians. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that meaning was produced through ever-shifting combinations of words and bodies, male-authored texts and women's orally-transmitted knowledge, creating an atmosphere of representational instability in which women's narratives challenged and often superseded those of men.

The risks and possibilities resulting from this instability are illustrated in Richard Watkins's 1651 pamphlet, *Newes from the Dead*, which relates the account of Anne Greene, an

Oxford woman who was hanged for infanticide only to miraculously revive moments before physicians were to begin dissecting her. The pamphlet begins with a straightforward account that seems to assume Greene's guilt: she admits to satisfying the "unlawfull pleasure" of her employer's grandson, and in doing so she conceived a child, which was born in secret and found dead in an outhouse (B). The community assumes that she murdered the child in order to conceal her shame, and she is promptly examined, jailed, arraigned, condemned, and executed (Bv). After her execution, she is brought "to a private house, where some Physitians had appointed to make a Dissection," but before they can begin, they notice that she seems to breathe (Bv). For several days the physicians labor to revive her fully, and they succeed; upon hearing of her survival, the governor and justices of the peace perceive "the hand of God in her preservation, and being willing rather to cooperate with divine providence in saving her, then to overstraine justice by condemning her to double shame & sufferings, they were pleas'd to grant her a Repreive until such time as her Pardon might be compleatly obtained" (B2v). The pamphlet, which begins by assuming Greene's guilt, ends by promoting her innocence and arguing that her child was likely stillborn (B4v-C).

In this account, Greene's body consistently challenges attempts by male authorities to control, contain, and explain it. First, the unmarried Greene engages in an illicit sexual affair with a man who is her social superior and becomes pregnant; whether or not she is actually guilty of infanticide, she does successfully conceal her pregnancy prior to giving birth or having a miscarriage. This sexual unruliness is compounded by her body's refusal to succumb to the punishment meted out by male legal authorities: despite her conviction and repeated strenuous attempts to hasten her death (Bv), Greene simply will not die. As a result, her body also evades the attempts of male medical authorities to probe its depths; the pamphlet notes that the

physicians “missed the opportunity of improving their knowledge in the dissection of a Dead body,” but insists that they nevertheless “advanced their fame by restoring to the world a Living one” (Cv). Although Watkins praises the physicians’ medical skill, he glosses over the fact that their reputation is enhanced not through the successful destruction or containment of Greene’s sexually unruly body, but by her unexpected survival. Moreover, the governor and justices find themselves in the awkward position of having to reverse their verdict, and in a coincidence that the pamphlet author shrugs aside but cannot resist repeating, the “Grand Prosecutor Sir Thomas Read” dies upon hearing of Greene’s revival (C).

The triumph of Greene’s body over sexual, legal, and medical regulation is matched by the gradually strengthening force of her speech and the way that her own and other women’s narratives help to make sense of her survival, framing it and imbuing it with meaning. Initially, Watkins gives very little space or specificity to Greene’s defense of herself during his description of her trial and execution; on the scaffold she sings a psalm, “and something said in justification of herself, as to the fact for which she was to suffer, and touching the lewdnesse of the Family wherein she lately lived” (Bv). As Greene revives, however, her ability to speak is frequently noted as a sign of her recovery. At first she seems unable to communicate, but gradually she begins to speak intelligibly and answer questions (B2v); Watkins carefully notes that she progresses from “sighing and talking to her selfe” to “laugh[ing] . . . merrily” and “talk[ing] cheerfully” (B3). Greene’s physical improvement, demonstrated by her ability to speak, tracks with the rehabilitation of her reputation, and in this, too, women’s speech is central. Toward the end of the pamphlet, Watkins devotes two pages to a reconsideration of the charge of infanticide leveled against Greene, noting that, in the opinion of a midwife, the dead child was so underdeveloped that it had probably been stillborn. Moreover, other servants (most likely women,

given their intimate knowledge of Greene's body) testify that Greene "had certaine Issues for about a month" prior to the birth, beginning after "shee had violently labour'd in skreening of malt" (B4v-C). Watkins uses this testimony about the appearance of the dead child, Greene's bodily discharges, and the physical labor she undertook while pregnant as evidence of miscarriage, not infanticide. We also learn that Greene had "ingenuously confessed" to this information during her trial and at her execution, "and the very first words, after shee came to her selfe againe (which certainly were not spoken with designe, or purpose to deceive) confirmed the same" (C). Greene's story about her miscarriage, bolstered by the testimony of her fellow servants and the midwife, prevails over narratives of her guilt because it better meshes with the seemingly divine intervention that enabled her survival. The consistency and persuasiveness of her own and other women's speech, as well as her physical resilience, dramatically reverse the social, moral, legal, and medical narratives that had been constructed about her body by male authorities.² This dissertation examines a wide range of texts from the early 1600s through the Civil Wars and Interregnum in which, as in *Newes from the Dead*, the female reproductive body and women's speech evade men's control and understanding. In plays, monstrous birth pamphlets, medical treatises, histories, satires, and ballads, women's discursive power shapes interpretations of the female body, and in doing so helps to shape the ways that various forms of male authority, from fatherhood to kingship, are understood and defined.

My project advances a critical discussion that examines how early modern ideas about the female reproductive body were used to represent larger socio-political concerns. My intervention in this ongoing dialogue is my careful analysis of texts that gesture to women's key roles in reproducing the socio-political order, and my theorization of the complex intersection of words and bodies in this process. This emphasis on depictions of women's discursive authority

distinguishes my work from studies such as Laura Gowing's *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (2003), in which she analyzes the relationship between the female reproductive body's "cultural construction" and "corporeal experience" (4). Gowing argues that the opacity of the female body ultimately worked to disempower women, resulting in increased discipline and punishment at the hands of those acting in the interests of patriarchal authority: "The unpredictable body demanded regulation, intervention and surveillance, and those practices . . . did much to effect the subordination and vulnerability of female bodies" (5). Although the evidence Gowing presents is compelling, her sources consist primarily of legal records, which by their very nature record and emphasize acts of "regulation, intervention and surveillance." Because my examination shifts attention toward a wider array of early modern texts, it reveals a more complex picture of how the female body was constructed and understood. Many of the texts I examine represent how the female body's unpredictability required women to take an active role in stabilizing somatic meaning, and thus depict women not as inert matter, but as exercising narrative, and hence cultural and political, power.

Like Gowing, Mary E. Fissell and Julie Crawford explore the volatility and unknowability of the female reproductive body, and they examine how these qualities impacted textual representations of sexual and state politics. In *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (2004), Fissell argues that early modern medical treatises use the female body as an "open interpretive space" with which to think through the social upheavals brought about by the Protestant Reformation and the British Civil Wars (1). In *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (2005), Crawford argues that a similar kind of work takes place in early modern monstrous birth pamphlets, in which the female reproductive body and the "monsters" it produces become the vehicles for

“creative reimaginings of . . . social and religious controversies” (2). However, although Fissell and Crawford convincingly demonstrate that early modern beliefs about the female reproductive body influenced textual representations of major religious and political events, they do not give sustained attention to how such texts portray the effect of women’s words on this process. My dissertation, on the other hand, will examine texts in which women’s speech plays a powerful role in shaping knowledge about both female bodies and state politics, and in doing so I will attend to the complex interlayering of different authorities and modes of understanding women’s bodies that these texts reveal. Rather than shutting down female narrative dominance, these texts depict patriarchal society relying on women’s speech about their bodies for continuation and coherence.

In *Midwiving Subjects in Shakespeare’s England* (2003), Caroline Bicks does stress the importance of women’s speech about reproduction, arguing that women had “the power to create the most pervasive stories about a man’s sexuality and, consequently, his ability to father a child” (29). Although Bicks’s primary sources are impressively diverse, for the most part she confines her analysis to the significance of the words spoken by midwives in the birthing room, and she focuses mainly on issues of paternal legitimacy when discussing male authority. My own project likewise examines the importance of midwives and birthing rooms, especially in chapter 4, and my discussion of these issues owes many debts to Bicks’s insightful analysis. However, my dissertation extends this analysis to consider representations of the speech of court ladies and country wenches, pregnant women and dissembling virgins, religious heretics and virtuous queens, in contexts that range from church to courtroom to private home to public street and beyond. Moreover, my dissertation examines patriarchy as a network of sexual, political,

economic, religious, legal, and medical power in texts that imagine women's bodies and speech as crucial in defining, authorizing, and even challenging men's power across this spectrum.

1. Somatic Uncertainty and Bodily Narratives

As other scholars have shown, the female reproductive body proved a frustrating subject for those who wished to describe, interpret, police, and control it during the early modern period.³ In an age without ob-gyns, paternity tests, or sonograms, bodies and words endlessly replaced each other as unstable interpretive sites. Men believed that women's claims about their own bodies were unreliable, but physical signs could also be misleading. Moreover, the interpretation of physical signs typically fell to other women, whose own potentially unreliable speech began the circle anew. Although medical treatises and popular wisdom alike abounded with tests that would allegedly determine whether a woman was pregnant or a virgin, and husbands fantasized about cuckold's horns, the plays, court records, medical texts, and satiric pamphlets of the period contain example after example of failed tests, undetected adultery, and faithful wives wrongly accused. Amid this atmosphere of uncertainty, it often fell to women to make reproduction legible through the stories they told about their bodies and the ways they acted these stories out, a combination of verbal and physical performance that I term bodily narratives.⁴

My project defines "bodily narratives" as stories that are constructed not only about, but also through, the female reproductive body, and the term connects the intertwined discursive and corporeal threads that I trace throughout this project. In my theorization of "the bodily," I analyze multiple manifestations and deployments of the female body: it appears as an inert object to be read and interpreted, but also as an active part of the social performance of reproductive

states and roles, and, in dramatic texts, as an “absent presence” constructed by boy actors during stage performances. I pay similarly close attention to the wide range of speech acts and discursive communities that make up the term “narrative”; my chapters analyze bodily narratives that take the form of dialogues, verbal performances, story-telling, legal testimony, prayer, and interpretive reading, and they examine how different types of narrative play out within and among different communities, including royal courts, gossip networks, urban neighborhoods, and rival religio-political factions. I also attend to the ways genre determines what kinds of female speech acts are authorized and how they are represented, examining how, for example, similar bodily narratives might be celebrated in romance, playfully satirized in city comedy, and vilified in polemical pamphlet literature. Furthermore, my project analyzes the role of silence in constructing bodily narratives, demonstrating how women could tell stories about their bodies by withholding information available only to them. Ultimately, I argue that men’s desire to produce definitive readings of passive female bodies is complicated by the fact that, in early modern texts and stage performances, such readings hinge on the ability of female figures to represent the reproductive body in socially and politically legible ways.

Through speech, behavior, and appearance, women were expected to construct narratives that demonstrated their obedience to patriarchal authority by accurately conveying information about their sexual status. However, by exploiting the interdependence of words and bodies through their bodily narratives, women could produce “truths” about reproduction that were seemingly grounded in concrete corporeal reality, but which were in fact discursively constructed and subject to manipulation, falsification, and change. An unmarried woman who wanted to conceal a sexual affair, or a married woman who wanted to convince her husband that another man’s child was his own, could do so by constructing a story about her reproductive

body that conformed to normative gender ideology. Moreover, the power of bodily narratives extended beyond stories told about the female body to include the ways that women's speech about reproduction shaped men's social identities, as well as the ways that language worked through the maternal body to shape the bodies and minds of offspring. Of course, women's words were not automatically trusted and could be challenged and critiqued by the competing narratives of others. The crucial point, however, is that none of these competing claims could be absolutely proven by physical evidence, a situation that worked to significantly level the discursive playing field.

My analysis of female bodily narratives focuses on four reproductive states or roles, each of which form the thematic basis for one of my subsequent chapters: virginity, pregnancy, birthing room rituals, and parental influence. As I demonstrate, these issues operate as flashpoints within the more general atmosphere of uncertainty that surrounds women's speech and the female reproductive body, points at which women's relationship to the social order is particularly vexed. In addition, they are issues that highlight the opacity of the female body, thus making apparent the important role women play in representing, interpreting, and acting out their own bodies and those of others. Virginity, for example, despite being crucial to determining a woman's moral character and marital prospects, was nearly impossible to trace physically during the early modern period. Pregnancy occupied a similarly liminal position between visible and invisible, word and body, agency and containment, public and private. Being able to accurately detect pregnancy enabled communities to police the illicit sexual behavior of women, but like virginity, pregnancy could be extremely difficult to perceive; in the cases of both virginity and pregnancy, detection often relied heavily on women's bodily narratives.⁵ Similarly, collective women's speech was central to birthing room rituals and the establishment of paternity. The

enclosed, exclusively female nature of the birthing room set it apart from direct patriarchal oversight, and male commentators worried about the generally unruly potential of unmonitored female conversations, fearing especially that the women in the birthing room would conspire to conceal or lie about a child's paternity.⁶ Of perhaps equal concern was the possibility that a woman, even if sexually chaste, could usurp paternal authority through her influence over her children both before and after birth, since the formative power of a mother's body and speech was believed to mentally and physically shape her offspring in ways unavailable to the father.⁷

In addition to examining the intersections between female bodies and female speech, my dissertation will also theorize the relationships among women's bodies, women's bodily narratives, and the texts through which both bodies and narratives are represented. In many of the accounts of the female reproductive body that I analyze, the body is depicted as a text that requires interpretation, and the printed texts that convey these accounts offer themselves as guides on how to effectively "read" the body's signs. These signs range from the blatantly obvious (monstrous offspring that physically manifest their mothers' sins), to the relatively ambiguous (changes in the appearance of a woman's face and body that might indicate pregnancy), to the super-subtle (the modest comportment and demeanor that marks the true virgin), and the texts that convey them run the gamut from sensational pamphlets to medical treatises to conduct books. Connecting all of them, however, is the notion that the surfaces of a woman's reproductive body and the bodies of her offspring contain truths about her physical and moral interior, truths that can be discerned with the help of careful attention, moral rectitude, and, of course, the guidance of the right text. Even plays, whose function as interpretive guides is often not as overt as the anatomical illustrations in a medical treatise or the heavy-handed injunctions of a conduct book, present the sexual duplicities of women only to finally reveal the

“truth” to the audience and, usually, the other characters. However, at the borders of every text that sets out to guide its audience in the successful interpretation of the female reproductive body there lurks a reminder of women’s bodily narratives, which enable, and sometimes thwart, such interpretive frames.

At the heart of my project is the conviction that when searching for information about how early modern men and women understood female bodies and bodily narratives, one must do so through the examination of a wide range of texts: canonical and obscure; popular and literary; texts rooted in fantasy as well as fact. I join literary critics and historians such as Pamela Allen Brown, Frances Dolan, Joad Raymond, and Alexandra Walsham in examining the “small, insignificant, ephemeral, disposable, untrustworthy, unruly, noisy, deceitful” pamphlet literature that became “the primary means of creating and influencing public opinion” during the seventeenth century (Raymond 10, 26).⁸ I also analyze texts, such as court records and medical treatises, that would seem to hold claim to legal or scientific objectivity, but which in fact have their own socio-political axes to grind.⁹ By combining these readings with readings of relatively well-known plays, I call attention to how the dramatic texts engage with other discourse about female bodily narratives. In searching for traces of these narratives and in analyzing their significance, I do not attempt to identify or uncover “authentic” female speech, since our access to any early modern speech act is always mediated by the printed texts and manuscripts through which it is transmitted. Instead, I analyze representations of women’s bodily narratives contained in male-authored texts, arguing that although these texts often elide, critique, and/or ridicule female speech, their attempts to foreclose its explanatory power simultaneously serve as a recognition of its potency. Male authors writing in a broad spectrum of genres were forced to think through the ways that men rely on women to explain the female reproductive body, and in

doing so they circulated representations of female bodily narratives widely, making them central to how people imagined women's bodies, women's speech, and the impact of both on patriarchal society.

Attempts by state and church authorities to oversee and control childbirth illustrate men's uneasy privileging of female bodily narratives in the face of somatic uncertainty. Legislative interventions such as the licensing of midwives and the passage of increasingly harsh infanticide statutes attempted to regulate the female reproductive body, but they also reveal such regulation to hinge uneasily on women's potentially unreliable speech. A surviving example of a seventeenth-century midwife's oath demonstrates how ecclesiastical law tried to prevent women from engaging in illicit, unlawful reproductive practices, such as falsifying paternity, concealing or feigning pregnancy and childbirth, and secretly destroying both unborn and newly-born offspring:¹⁰

2. Item, Yee shall neither cause nor suffer any woman to name, or put any other Father to the Childe, but onely him which is the very true Father thereof indeed.
3. Item, You shall not suffer any woman to pretend, faine, or surmize her selfe to be delivered of a Childe, who is not indeed; neither to claime any other womans Childe for her owne.
4. Item, You shall not suffer any Womans Childe to be murdered, maimed, or otherwise hurt, as much as you may . . .
5. Item, That you shall not in any wise use or exercise any manner of Witchcraft, Charme; or Sorcery, Invocation, or other Prayers than may stand with Gods Laws and the Kings.
6. Item, You shall not give any counsell, or minister any Herbe, Medicine, or Potion, or any other thing, to any Woman being with childe whereby she should destroy or cast out that she goeth withal before her time.
- . . .
8. Item, You shall not consent, agree, give, or keepe counsell, that any woman be delivered secretly of that which she goeth with, but in the presence of two or three lights readie. (*Book of Oaths* 285-87)

The oath demonstrates a concern not only with unlawful actions such as fornication, murder, and witchcraft, but also with unlawful speech: the naming, claiming, invocations, counseling, and

consenting that conceal such actions, thus making them possible. Secrecy is of particular concern, and the oath attempts to make public and transparent the exclusively female transactions of the birthing room by prohibiting certain types of speech (such as pretending and feigning), and demanding others (such as the accurate naming of the “very true Father”). However, the oath also stipulates the *necessity* of keeping details about the female reproductive body and the practice of midwifery secret, especially from men: “9. Item, You shall be secret, and not open any matter appertaining to your Office in the presence of any man, unlesse necessity or great urgent cause do constraine you so to do” (287). Although this clause assumes that certain matters must be revealed in situations of “necessity or great urgent cause,” it does not specify what such situations might look like, but appears to leave decisions about the disclosure of information to the discretion of individual midwives. The oath’s combination of odd silences and mandated speech places ambiguous limits on male knowledge of the female reproductive body. Although the oath insists that the midwife’s duty is to be an obedient intermediary between the female body and the religious and legal institutions of patriarchal authority, like all prescriptive discourse it also acknowledges the ways that midwives and other women might construct bodily narratives that misrepresent the very information they are supposed to truthfully reveal.

Similar ambiguities appear in a 1624 Parliamentary statute that decrees that the secret burial of an illegitimate child will be interpreted as evidence of infanticide and punishable by death unless the mother can produce a witness to testify that the child was stillborn.¹¹ As in the case of Anne Greene, the law casts the mothers of illegitimate children as villains, emphasizing the “great mischief” perpetrated by “lewd women” trying “to avoid their shame” (*Collection* 1409).¹² However, in decrying the allegedly dangerous frequency with which women secretly

destroy illegitimate children, it also calls attention to the ways women might conceal such crimes not simply by disposing of their children's bodies, but also by constructing false bodily narratives: "the said women doe alleadge, that the said Child was borne dead" (1409). Although the statute is based on the premise that many of these women are lying, it admits that such deceit is "hardly . . . to be proved," presumably because unmarried women often gave birth alone, without a midwife or other female attendants to act as witnesses (1409). In order to safeguard against the violence made possible by such duplicitous speech, the statute assumes that an unmarried woman who conceals a dead newborn is guilty until proven innocent. However, the proof of innocence deemed admissible is most likely to come from other women, since early modern birthing rooms typically excluded men. Because women's speech is still central to determining whether or not a crime has been committed, the risk of false bodily narratives lingers. As these two examples illustrate, and as my dissertation will explore, men's reliance on women to accurately report information about their own and other women's reproductive bodies reveals how female bodily narratives helped to define the enactment of patriarchal power, not only at the level of the family, but also at the level of religio-political law. Despite men's attempts to contain and regulate female bodies and words, women's exclusive knowledge about virginity, pregnancy, birth, and paternity competes with male control. The socially constitutive and potentially destructive power of female bodily narratives thus reshapes the very nature of patriarchal authority, revealing both its origins and its limits.

2. Bodily Narratives and Patriarchal Histories

The inability to obtain accurate knowledge about women's bodies during the early modern period threatened the very foundations of a social system under which male lineage and

patrilineal property transmission, as well as the authority of fathers and husbands in general, depended on being able to know and limit the sexual activity of women. Virginal brides and chaste wives guaranteed that the benefits of a man's name and property would only be enjoyed by his biological offspring, promoting the idea that women's bodies were themselves property over which their husbands maintained exclusive sexual ownership.¹³ However, although supposedly based in the laws of nature and the will of God, a man's authority over his household was always under negotiation. As a practical matter, familial patriarchy was dependent on women's words for legitimacy, since women's speech about their bodies and their willingness to confirm (or invent) "truths" about paternity, legitimacy, and male dominance undergirded male authority. It was not enough, in other words, for women to merely *be* chaste and obedient; women were also expected to construct the narratives and perform the roles that allowed men to understand the female body as physically manifesting and reproducing patriarchal ideology. Female bodily narratives thus helped to shape male power within the household and determine its limits, demonstrating that patriarchal identities were not fixed but always in process, constantly being redefined by dialogue and debate in which women took an active part.

Within this give and take, women's bodily narratives could threaten or support the authority of fathers and husbands, in the process revealing the constructed nature of these positions of social power. Recent scholarship has moved to separate manhood from patriarchy during the early modern period, pointing out that simply being born male did not guarantee access to the socio-political authority that Alexandra Shepard refers to as "patriarchal privilege" (1). As Shepard argues, normative manhood was an elevated social position occupied only by some men, one that demanded the exercise of "rational discretion, thrift, industry, and self-control" (86). The management of a household was the ultimate proving ground for these

virtues, thus making patriarchy a matter of both paternity and socio-economic responsibility: “Heading a household was associated with the mastery not only of a man’s self, but of his subordinates and his resources[.] . . . Heading a household was presented as the greatest portion of the patriarchal dividend to which all adult males might aspire, and it was often approached as the precondition of men’s political involvement with the wider community” (70). Although texts such as the ubiquitous “Homily of the State of Matrimony” define women as the “weaker vessel[s]” who must “obey and cease from commanding and perform subjection” towards their husbands (16, 17), my analysis reveals that women’s bodily narratives played a key role in determining the sexual, familial, and economic behaviors that connoted patriarchal privilege. Required to publicly and properly enact the roles of husband, father, and master—to be loving but not weak, authoritative but not cruel, thrifty but not miserly, and of course, sexually potent—men frequently relied on women to interpret and evaluate the performance of their patriarchal identities. In the texts I examine, the authority of fathers and husbands is thus constantly being reconstituted through discursive negotiations between male “superiors” and their female/feminized “subordinates.”

Moreover, the attributes that determined a man’s domestic and economic authority within his family are extended to the definition of kingship in conduct manuals that equate the household with the state, such as John Dod and Robert Clever’s frequently reprinted *A Godly Forme of Household Government* (1612): “[I]t is impossible for a man to understand to governe the common-wealth, that doth not know how to rule his owne house, or order his owne person, so that he that knoweth not to governe, deserveth not to raigne” (16).¹⁴ Like familial hierarchies, religio-political hierarchies were contested and subject to change during the first part of the seventeenth century; although James I, in texts such as *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598)

and *Basilikon Doron* (1599), asserted a theory of absolute monarchy rooted deeply in the notion of paternal authority,¹⁵ this view was increasingly destabilized as the country, idealized as a unified body headed by the king/husband/father, grew more and more fragmented and multivocal.¹⁶ Even more so than his father, Charles I attempted to increase monarchical authority, dissolving Parliament and initiating personal rule in 1629, but as he withdrew into the enclosed world of his court, which he imagined as “a household, a little commonwealth, in which every member knew his proper place,” the country was splintering into civil war (Carlton 123). By the time Parliament ordered Charles I’s execution in 1649, faith in the absolute authority of the king had failed, and with it the argument that patriarchal monarchy was the only “natural” political order. In texts produced between 1600 and 1660, the authority of fathers, husbands, and kings is similarly tenuous, and similarly dependent on subordinates’ willingness to speak their own submission. Female bodily narratives could thus challenge or uphold the legitimacy of patriarchal authority at multiple social levels, and they could also reveal its limits by serving as reminders of the foundational socio-political power of women’s bodies and words.

My chapters juxtapose pre-Civil War and Civil War texts, setting non-dramatic works from both periods alongside plays. This historical spread allows me to demonstrate how socio-political upheaval impacts bodily narratives, and to trace changing ideas about the patriarchal identities that are under construction in these texts. From James I’s anxious claims of fatherly kingship through the social and political turbulence of the 1640s and 1650s, women’s bodies and speech troubled hegemonic social hierarchies, but the connection between female bodily narratives and the state is made particularly explicit in Civil War-era texts, in which gendered discursive competitions over the reproductive body and male identity become part of political contests.¹⁷ The fracturing of the political structure meant that the female body and women’s

speech could serve contestatory polemic purposes, and male writers frequently used the female reproductive body to think about sexual and state politics, representing it in ways that ranged from the satiric and grotesque to the devout and sanctified. However, the female body was not merely a discursive tool in the hands of men. During the social upheaval of the mid-seventeenth century, women's religio-political authority became increasingly visible due to the activism (both in person and in print) of female sectarian preachers and prophets. As Sharon Achinstein points out, sexual satires published during the Civil War period reflect the fact that real women actually were assuming unprecedented roles in religion and politics, "voting, speaking out in public spaces, voicing religious truths, challenging authority in ways that . . . were politically recognizable" (135).¹⁸ As a result, representations of women's bodies and speech were more overtly politicized during this period, but even prior to the civil wars, women's bodily narratives played a crucial role in generating normative male identities and in constructing counter-positions of female authority from which domestic, religious, and political hierarchies could be re-envisioned. In doing so, the female reproductive body and the female speech and actions that governed its interpretation were constantly helping to reshape the patriarchal identities that were under construction at any given historical moment. Despite attempts to control and critique women's speech, female bodily narratives were crucial to shaping and reproducing early modern culture, and they are equally crucial to our critical understanding of the sexual and state politics of the period.

3. Representational Possibilities and the Female Reproductive Body

Although many of the texts analyzed in this dissertation open, interpret, critique, and punish the female bodies they depict, they also represent women's narratives in competition with

the injunctions of male authority. Some of the female bodies contained within prescriptive texts behave in ways that are orderly and predictable, but these texts also represent women who are messy, unruly, and disordered, not only physically, but also in their ability to speak for themselves. In drama, the transition from page to stage vividly illustrates the overlap of performing bodies, textual narratives, and women's bodily narratives. The character who is a woman on the page is represented by a boy actor in the public theater, and the female reproductive body is constructed through costume, make-up, speech, and gesture. When confronted with the ease with which a boy actor can make an audience (temporarily) believe he is a pregnant mother or a bashful maiden, hard and fast rules about reading and interpreting the female reproductive body suddenly appear much less reliable. If players can enact convincing bodily narratives, what prevents women themselves from doing the same? In many ways, the early modern female body, both on and off stage, was "performative" as defined by Judith Butler: "essence or identity . . . are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (173). Although Butler's theorization of the performative is much less voluntaristic than my own, many of the representations of the female body examined in this study can be read as the kinds of "hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural'" that, Butler argues, "reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (187). Drama thus adds another layer of instability to the already unstable process of producing somatic meaning.

The somatic fluidity of drama is a particularly vivid instance of the wide range of representational possibilities with which I opened this chapter, the plethora of sources that discursively constituted the female reproductive body in early modern England. My dissertation focuses particularly on texts that delve deeply into the ambiguities surrounding the female body; as noted above, the experience of seeing cross-dressed boys play women on the early modern

stage would have emphasized the female reproductive body as something constructed through speech, gesture, and appearance, but plays are not the only cultural forms that make the body's constructedness apparent. The female body is equally, if differently, constructed in medical treatises purporting to offer a glimpse inside the womb through textual descriptions and woodcut illustrations, or in court records that try to translate women's bodies and speech into the formalities of legal discourse. By reading non-dramatic works not merely as context, but as possessing rhetorical agendas that reward literary analysis, we can broaden our conceptualization of how women's everyday speech and performance could leave traces in a wide range of texts that anxiously imagine the enactment of various female bodily states.

The following chapters examine early modern texts that represent women's bodily narratives as organizing and reorganizing domestic and political relations in ways that inform sexual and state politics. Chapters 2 and 3 address how women's speech shapes interpretations of the inner, unseen "truths" of their reproductive bodies, and how these interpretations impact the patriarchal authority of fathers, husbands, judges, physicians, and kings. Chapter 2, "The Politics of Virginity in *The Changeling* and the Essex Divorce," explores the effect of women's narratives about virginity on representations of familial and court politics by examining Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's play alongside texts documenting the life of Jacobean courtier Frances Howard, who claimed to be a virgin in order to obtain a divorce. In all of these texts, representational control over the virginal female body is at stake, and virginity is shown to be located as much in the ways women narrate their bodies as it is in their bodies themselves. The texts I examine demonstrate that a woman's ability to speak about and perform virginity could allow her to undermine patriarchal authority within the family and the state, even as they reveal how men relied on women to represent their reproductive bodies in socially stabilizing ways.

Particularly during the Civil Wars, when many forms of authority were being questioned, Howard became an example of how the unruly words and bodies of women could disrupt and transform state politics by influencing court faction and helping to recast political historiography. Civil War-era historians used Howard's controversial virginity narrative not only to illustrate what they believed to be the corruption of James I's reign, but also to validate the dissolution of the British monarchy itself.

In chapter 3, "Pregnancy, Interiority, and the Circulation of Knowledge in Early Modern Medical Treatises and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*," I examine the effect of women's bodily narratives on depictions of pregnancy. Prior to its tragic conclusion, John Ford's play entertains the dangerous notion that women are in sole possession of accurate knowledge about pregnancy, and that they are able to use this knowledge to misrepresent their bodies, thereby concealing their actual sexual behavior from men. I analyze the play in the context of medical treatises such as James Rueff's *The Expert Midwife* (1637) and Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* (1651), books that claim to convey definitive knowledge about the female reproductive body. In actuality, however, male knowledge frequently hinges on the ways women choose to interpret the unstable physical indicators of pregnancy, and, as in Ford's play, women can use this representational control to usurp male authority over the female body and the patriarchal family. Moreover, medical treatises often frame the conception of healthy offspring as a matter of national importance, each unborn child imagined as a prospective subject who would enhance the authority of England's male rulers. Thus, women's exclusive knowledge about conception, and their ability to conceal, misrepresent, or even terminate their pregnancies, are seen as a threat to the health of both the patriarchal family and the patriarchal state that the family helps found.

Chapters 4 and 5 expand the scope of women's discursive authority beyond the interpretation of the female body by demonstrating how women's bodily narratives help to define men's social roles by establishing (or threatening) familial and political patriarchal privilege. In chapter 4, "Birthing Room Speech and the Construction of Patriarchal Authority in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Early Modern Gossip Satire," I analyze depictions of the collective speech that took place among women in the early modern birthing room, arguing that such multivocal bodily narratives offer an alternative to the absolute, univocal patriarchal authority of fathers and kings. In the texts I analyze, women's birthing room speech works to police, define, and authorize this doubled patriarchal power by commenting on and critiquing such issues as men's behavior towards their wives and children, the proper use of household funds, the finer points of religious ritual, and even the limits of the authority of the monarch. Women's collective speech is thus shown to be central not only to attributing paternity to particular men, but also to the consequent definition and establishment of the multiple roles and reach of patriarchy. Even though these bodily narratives serve as models for countering traditional forms of male authority, they are not only permitted, but actually required, by patriarchal society.

Chapter 5, "Paternity, Maternity, and (De)Formative Speech in Early Modern Monstrous Birth Pamphlets and *The Winter's Tale*," analyzes the formative power of women's bodies and speech and the competition that plays out between male and female representational authority. Just as the female body was the point of origin for male lineage, so were female bodily narratives the point of origin for male knowledge about paternity during the early modern period, and men feared the corrupting influence of women's bodies and words on their patriarchal authority. In order to counteract this threat, authors of monstrous birth pamphlets attempt to assert

representational control over the female body and its offspring by overwriting women's bodies and speech with their own narratives in which sexual, religious, and/or political transgression are demonstrated through the bodies of mothers and children. However, although *The Winter's Tale* similarly raises anxieties about uncontrollable female speech and sexuality (anxieties which are never quite put to rest), it warns of the dangers of tyrannical authority at the levels of both sexual and national politics. Ultimately, the play demonstrates that attempts to suppress women's influence over their offspring are not only unsuccessful, but actually harmful to the patriarchal family and the state. Thus, although monstrous birth pamphlets attempt to contain and discipline women's unruly words and bodies with the force of male authority, *The Winter's Tale* points to the dangers inherent in such a project, given the crucial role of female bodily narratives in representing and reproducing dynastic continuity and claims to legitimate rule.

Each chapter of my dissertation analyzes one of my central motifs (virginity, pregnancy, birthing room ritual, parental influence) across a range of texts, always paying particular attention to the treatment of women's speech in representations of the female reproductive body. My purpose is not to construct an account of the early modern female body that can claim totality, wholeness, or completion—one of my central points is that any understanding of women's bodies, whether our own or that of early moderns, is always partial. Instead, I want to demonstrate the ever-multiplying representational possibilities that existed for both the female reproductive body and women's bodily narratives, and the even more numerous possibilities for interpreting these representations. In doing so, I attend to many texts that diverge from what was considered normative or ideal by dominant ideologies, representations that are alienating, disorienting, frightening, or uncanny, and that demonstrate the potential of women's bodies and words to be unruly and disorderly. This dissertation does not attempt to identify a singular,

standardized bodily experience common to all early modern women, but instead explores the plethora of corporeal and discursive possibilities imagined within early modern cultural fantasies and nightmares. In doing so, I demonstrate how these fantasies and nightmares about the female reproductive body and the perceived force of women's bodily narratives were used to interpret and understand society and politics across the first half of the seventeenth century.

Notes

¹ On the Galenic "one sex" model during the Renaissance, see Laqueur, esp. chapters 2-4.

² Dolan attributes Greene's exoneration to male "medical and legal interpretation," arguing that the pamphlet depicts Greene as having "no control over her body" and "utterly lack[ing] self-consciousness" (*Dangerous* 137, 138, 139). I would argue that the pamphlet's emphasis on Greene's speech about her body complicates this reading.

³ My understanding of the instabilities of the female reproductive body during the early modern period has been shaped by a wide range of scholars, and I will acknowledge specific debts in the chapters that follow. Studies by Paster, Bicks, Gowing, J. Crawford, and Keller have particularly and consistently influenced and illuminated my thinking.

⁴ Like Scholz in *Body Narratives: Writing the Nation and Fashioning the Subject in Early Modern England* (2000), my examination of "bodily narratives" seeks to explore the discursive intersections between the human body (specifically the female reproductive body) and the body politic. However, whereas Scholz argues that women's bodies and behavior were "determined by patriarchal power structures" (58), I demonstrate how women's influence over interpretations of their bodies reverses this equation, giving women the ability to help shape and define patriarchal authority.

⁵ On the detection, concealment, and elimination of pregnancy, see Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 41-44, 47-50; and Gowing, ch. 4. On the ambiguities of early modern virginity, see Loughlin, *Hymeneutics*; Schwarz; Amster; and Bicks, ch. 2.

⁶ In addition to facilitating the safe birth of healthy offspring, the midwife and other attending women were charged with obtaining accurate information about a newborn's paternity; see Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 73-79; Gowing, 159-66; Pollock, 303-304; and Bicks, ch. 1. On how the traditional practices of early modern gynecology and obstetrics limited men's access to the female body, see Bicks, 9-12; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 15-229; Mendelson and Crawford, 153-54, 208-209; and Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth."

⁷ On early modern theories about the respective contributions of men and women in human generation, see Keller, ch. 4. On early modern beliefs about the effects of breastfeeding on physical, mental, and moral development, see Paster, 197-208; Wall, ch. 4; and Trubowitz, “‘But Blood Whitened.’” On the risks to male development posed by the presence of the mother and other women, see Rose; Adelman; and Lamb. On maternal impression and monstrous birth, see Gowing, 127-35; Fissell, “Hairy Women”; J. Crawford; and Huet, 13-123.

⁸ On early modern popular culture (particularly pamphlet literature) and its place in literary and historical studies of the period, see Brown, 17-32; Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 1-12; Raymond, 4-26; and Walsham, 33-51.

⁹ On the mediated, contested nature of court records, see Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 5; and Gowing, 13-14. On the narrative properties of legal documents and their relationship to literary fiction, see Davis. On the socio-political biases of medical treatises, see Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*; and Keller.

¹⁰ In order to become a licensed midwife, a woman was required to take the oath before “the Bishop or his Chancellor of the Diocese” (*Book of Oaths* 284). This oath was published in *The Book of Oaths* (1649) and is typically dated as a seventeenth-century example of a type of oath that originated in the early Tudor period; see Gowing, 159; and Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 63-65. References to the Book of Common Prayer and proscriptions against Roman Catholic baptism mark the oath as post-Reformation, and the reference to the “king” in item 5 suggests it is from the early Stuart period. Although it is unclear precisely when or where this oath was used (since licensing procedures for midwives differed by diocese), its general concerns are shared by legal documents, satires, medical treatises, and plays from throughout the early Stuart and Civil War periods.

¹¹ It was not only in cases of concealed illegitimate birth that the law intervened; during the early modern period, church courts imposed penance and fines for adultery and fornication, while illegitimate births were dealt with by the quarter sessions: “Under the poor law legislation, [the quarter sessions] could make arrangements for the support of illegitimate children and punish their parents by whipping and imprisonment in the local house of correction. Mothers were, usually, more likely to face punishment than fathers” (Gowing 12-13).

¹² On early modern infanticide statutes, see Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 127-32. As Dolan points out, these statutes “increasingly associated the murder of newborns with social and sexual disorder,” particularly on the part of women (*Dangerous* 128).

¹³ See Stallybrass, esp. 127-29. On the connections between female virginity and chastity and patriarchal property arrangements, see Stone, 501-507.

¹⁴ As Schochet has shown, England’s return to male monarchical rule during the first part of the seventeenth century resulted in the rise of political analogies in which the authority of the (ideally male) monarch was rooted in the “natural” authority of the father, and the mother’s authoritative role within the family was repressed; see Schochet, 64-84; and Amussen, ch. 2.

¹⁵ Similar political theories were promoted by works such as Richard Mocket's *God and the King* (1615) and Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*. *Patriarcha* was written sometime during the early 1640s, but was not published until 1680; see Schochet, 116.

¹⁶ On early Stuart political dissent prior to the Civil Wars, see Cust and Hughes; Cogswell; and Clucas and Davies. On cultural responses to James I's reign and early Stuart favoritism, see Perry, *Making of Jacobean Culture and Literature and Favoritism*. On the participation of women writers in the socio-political controversies of the seventeenth-century, see Gray.

¹⁷ Fissell argues that, "[i]n the midst of a world turned upside down by civil war, . . . the human body [was imagined] as a source of stability and an image of appropriate relations between men and women" (135), but as I will demonstrate, many texts of this period present a less normative view of gender and other hierarchies in their depictions of the female reproductive body.

¹⁸ Critics such as Fissell and J. Crawford similarly argue that anxiety over women's increasingly visible public roles during the Civil Wars and Interregnum was translated into concern over their unruly reproductive bodies by authors of medical treatises and monstrous birth pamphlets, respectively; see Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, esp. chapters 5 and 6; and J. Crawford, esp. chapters 4 and 5. For a more general overview of women's religio-political activities during this period, see Davies.

Chapter 2: The Politics of Virginitv in *The Changeling* and the Essex Divorce

Three decades and two civil wars separated the 1653 publication of Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's play *The Changeling* from its first performance by the Lady Elizabeth's Men at the Phoenix theater in 1622. An additional decade separated the play's publication from the scandalous Essex divorce trial of 1613, during which Frances Howard was physically examined by a jury of women in order to prove her claim that her arranged marriage to the Earl of Essex had never been consummated, and that she was still a virgin. Literary critics have long suggested that Howard helped to inspire some of *The Changeling*'s most colorful moments, particularly the scene in which Beatrice-Joanna falsifies her own virginity when subjected to a test.¹ Few critics, however, have explored what made the Essex divorce and the play that it inspired subjects of such enduring interest (and profit) for authors and publishers throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, and particularly during the politically fraught 1640s and 1650s, which saw not only the first publication of *The Changeling*, but also several prose histories of James I's reign featuring accounts of the divorce. During the early Stuart and Civil War eras, Howard's story consistently provoked anxiety about women's ability to feign virginity, and *The Changeling* and accounts of the Essex divorce demonstrate the ideological contradictions inherent in a system that relies on women to provide evidence of their submission to men through their bodies and words. As literary and historical representations of Howard demonstrate, women's participation in the construction of their own virginity had the potential to bolster, but also to destabilize, patriarchal authority at multiple socio-political levels. At times of social upheaval, when patriarchal authority was being questioned or challenged, latent anxieties about the larger effects of women's bodily narratives became more manifest, and unruly figures like Frances Howard and Beatrice-Joanna took on greater political resonance.

In the early modern period, the unreliable nature of physical signs of virginity presented a paradox both for women like Howard and for the men concerned with their sexual conduct. Virginity was crucial in determining a woman's value on the marriage market and ensuring the legitimacy of her husband's familial line,² but rather than being a matter of biological fact, it was deeply dependent upon women's bodily narratives. Men often proved a skeptical audience for these narratives, fearing that women could use the ambiguity of the female body to falsify virginity in order to further their own agendas. Nevertheless, men were frequently forced to depend on women's potentially unreliable words, behavior, and appearance for "proof" of physical and moral integrity. Whereas previous critics have tended to focus on either women's bodies or their words as the primary site where ideas about virginity were formed,³ it was precisely the impossibility of fixing virginity in any single body part or speech act that opened up the potential for even non-virgins to exploit virginity's ambiguities and gain control over the interpretation of their bodies. This uncertainty created a circle of deferred meaning in which men determined to define a woman's sexual status shifted uneasily between looking to women's bodies and words for evidence, sometimes privileging one over the other, but ultimately exhibiting a distrust of both.

The acts of reading and interpretation intended to bolster patriarchal authority were therefore doubly feminized and destabilized: first, because they took women's unreliable bodies as their subject; and second, because women's potentially untrustworthy words were crucial to the production of somatic meaning, which in turn shaped the ways sexual and state politics were represented and understood. Such was the case with Frances Howard, whose perceived ability to feign virginity was associated with the atmosphere of secrecy and exclusivity that permeated the court cultures of both James I and Charles I, thus linking uncertainty about the female body with

the failures of patriarchal hierarchies and court politics. In this chapter, I will trace these linked sexual and political threads through the court records of the Essex divorce trial, *The Changeling*, and three Civil War-era histories that revisit Howard's claims of virginity. As Alastair Bellany and David Lindley have demonstrated in penetrating studies, representations of Howard have been shaped by the ideological agendas of seventeenth-century writers and commentators.⁴ By unpacking how physical performance and narrative speech (which is itself a form of verbal performance) intertwine in the construction of virginity, I will show how the bodily narratives of women like Howard could in turn influence ideology by helping to shape the patriarchal family, the workings of court politics, and historical interpretations of the monarchy.

1. Knowledge, Authority, and Virginity in Early Modern England and the Essex Divorce Trial

Examinations like the one performed on Frances Howard were relatively rare, but even when physical examinations of women's reproductive organs did occur, the evidence they provided about women's virginity was uncertain and contested. As Marie H. Loughlin points out, early modern authors of medical treatises were extremely divided over whether the hymen could be used to determine the status of a woman's virginity, or indeed whether such a membrane existed at all (*Hymeneutics* 29-30). Anatomists who dissected the corpses of unmarried women in search of the hymen came up with decidedly mixed results, particularly because there was no way of knowing whether the absence of the hymen signaled its non-existence, or its loss through premarital sex, masturbation, or accident (Loughlin, *Hymeneutics* 41-47). Physical examinations of living women were no less problematic, particularly since they were typically conducted by female midwives. In cases such as Howard's, interpretive authority

over the female body fell to women rather than men, despite the fears of male medical writers that midwives would misread or mishandle the female body, or even that a careless examiner would rupture a woman's hymen in the act of searching for it.⁵ Less invasive tests, usually involving having a woman drink or inhale different substances to see if they made her urinate, were discounted by writers such as Robert Burton, who in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) calls them "strange absurd trialls" concocted by a "jealous braine" (685).⁶

In order to compensate for the unreliability of the hymen, other methods of establishing virginity had to be proposed. One such method rested on the assumption that a woman's outward appearance and conduct would mirror her inward physical state. This assumption placed on women the added burden of having to enact virginity in addition to abstaining from sex, but it also suggested that a sexually active woman could enjoy the social prestige of a virgin if she could convincingly feign purity by assuming its outward signs. In Thomas Tuke's *A Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* (1616), he warns that "she that is chaste, must seeme chaste: . . . shee that is modest, must seeme to bee so, and not plaister her face, that she cannot blush upon any occasion" (10).⁷ Part of Tuke's critique of cosmetics is that they provide a mask behind which a woman can conceal her blushes, but blushing itself was an ambivalent physical sign which could indicate the modesty of a virgin or the shame of a sexually guilty woman. Even as he insists on the necessity of a correspondence between a woman's inner virtue and her outward appearance, Tuke suggests that what a woman "is" can be concealed or fabricated by the way she "seems," and he appeals to physical signs that, even when not concealed, are not easy to interpret.

As Mara Amster points out, the "principal, though unacknowledged, goal" of books such as Tuke's seems to be "[t]eaching women how to create a readable chaste body, rather than

advising them how actually to remain chaste,” and thus such texts risk becoming manuals on ways to fake virginity (226). Amster is primarily concerned with the ability of the female body to physically perform virginity, but female bodily narratives play an equally important role in determining whether or not a woman can be “read” as virginal for conduct writers like Tuke and even for physicians like Helkiah Crooke. In *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), Crooke notes that, although pain and bleeding during intercourse are usually a sure sign that a woman is a virgin, a woman who is menstruating or has recently menstruated may not exhibit such symptoms. Crooke goes on to note that in such instances, “some men have unworthily suspected the uncorrupted chastity of their wives,” and he stresses the need for a bride’s female friends and relatives to enlighten her new husband about the complexities of the female body in order to avoid scandal: “it were fit the mothers or women friends of such Virgins should have care of their Honor, by giving warning to their Bride-groomes of their Brides purgations, if at that time they be upon them” (236). Crooke assumes that certain elements of women’s physiology, such as their menstrual cycles, will have to be explained and interpreted for men by women, and thus suggests a bodily narrative that women might use to successfully falsify virginity. Similarly, for Tuke what a woman “is” or “seems” is further complicated by what she says, since he implies that a woman who would use cosmetics to conceal her true appearance would also use lies to conceal her true character: “How unworthy the name of Christian it is . . . to lie with the countenance, who may lie with their tongue” (18). These examples demonstrate how women could represent themselves as virginal through the interplay of words and bodies, and how these representations were both desired and feared by men: on one hand, virgins were expected to behave and speak virtuously, but on the other, there was nothing to say that non-virgins could not

do the same. In the absence of a definitive virginity test, it was up to women themselves to produce legible signs of their own innocence.

During the summer of 1613, the divorce trial of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and Frances Howard, Countess of Essex, dragged the consequences of women's semantic and somatic control over virginity into the national spotlight, and the threat that uncertainties about virginity posed to patriarchal social order can be glimpsed in the court records of the divorce proceedings.⁸ Given their male authorship and formal constraints, these records of course do not provide direct or clear-cut access to Howard's self-representation. They do, however, offer an account of her and other women's roles in the trial, albeit one that is partial and mediated.⁹ They also serve as an example of how even official, male-penned records construct Howard as actively participating in the manipulation of sexual codes, a project in which she is backed by her powerful male relatives and James I, as well as by other women. While the true extent of Howard's control over her divorce proceedings cannot be fully known, the official record depicts her bodily narrative as central to the outcome of the trial. The proceedings begin by crediting Howard with persuading the king to set the trial in motion: "Upon the petition of Frances countess of Essex, complaining that the Earl her Husband was incapable of consummating their Marriage, and praying a Commission to examine, if her Complaint was well founded; the king granted her request" (785).¹⁰ In May 1613, Howard submitted a written libel to the panel of commissioners convened by the king in which she claimed that her marriage to Essex had never been consummated and requested that the union be nullified.¹¹ The court record's account of the libel emphasizes Howard's professed reluctance to speak, and in doing so produces an impression of her as modest and obedient to her husband even as it describes her written repudiation of their marriage: "In regard of womanish modesty, the lady Frances hath concealed

all the former matters, and had a purpose ever to conceal them, if she had not been forced, through false rumours of disobedience to the said Earl, to reveal them” (*ST* 787). Although the court proceedings do not reproduce Howard’s actual libel, but rather a summary written in the presumably male voice of the official record, the absence of her first-person speech ironically gives added force to her claims. In overwriting Howard’s original account, the court record aids her in producing written proof of her physical virginity by inscribing her as silent, obedient, and, presumably, chaste.¹²

However, although Howard’s libel concedes that Essex may not be completely impotent, but only impotent towards her, her narrative of virginity tells a story about Essex’s body that he is unwilling to authorize. In his response to the libel, Essex invests himself with the full authority to read health and fitness in both of their bodies, questioning Howard’s claim that she is sexually able on the grounds that he has never been able to prove this for himself. Although he rather cagily admits that he “was not able to penetrate into her womb, nor enjoy her,” he insists that he “found not any defect in himself.” In addition, he refuses to concede to her claim that she is “able and fit for carnal copulation, because he hath not found it,” and he challenges her claims to sexual submission and obedience, complaining that although she sometimes showed herself sexually willing, at other times she refused him his husbandly rights (*ST* 787). Essex’s revisions of Howard’s narrative of virginity are subtle, but significant: although he does not deny that she is still a virgin, he denies any “defect in himself,” thus suggesting that the problem lies with some physical or mental block in Howard. Their contentious exchange demonstrates the high stakes of Howard’s bodily narrative, since her claims about her virginity reflect upon and threaten to undermine the earl’s virility. Their bodies are construed reciprocally, and so they each struggle to obtain narrative dominance.

As the trial progressed, the court circled between words and bodies in attempting to locate the truth about Howard's virginity, and the testimony of other women became crucial in confirming Howard's narrative. The court records contain ten statements from witnesses, half of them women, who claim to have personal knowledge of Howard's failed attempts to engage her husband in sexual intercourse. None of the witnesses claims to have actually seen any attempted sex acts, but rather they extrapolate convincing stories from details that suggest the *appearance* of cohabitation: Howard and Essex were seen going into the same bedroom, seen lying together in bed undressed, seen eating together, etc. One female witness uses this sort of evidence to construct a narrative of frigid marital relations: "She and the lady's chamber-maid turned down the bedcloaths, and there they saw the places where the earl and lady had lain, but that there was such a distance between them, that this deponent is persuaded they did not touch one another that night" (*ST* 791). The case such ambiguous physical evidence builds is complex, since it must tell the story of a woman who appears to be sexually willing, in that she goes to bed naked with her husband, but also the story of an unconsummated marriage, rendered vividly by the image of the distance between the indentations left in the mattress by the bodies of husband and wife. At this point in the trial, even the most intimate evidence of Howard's virginity, that which is found under the covers, rests more on the narration of a plausible story than on objective proof—the witness did not see Howard and Essex refusing to touch each other, but that was the story she told, a story which supported Howard's claims and was entered into the official record.

Evidence of an even more intimate nature was soon to be procured, and it rested on the interpretive and narrative authority of a different set of women: "the Court thought it necessary to satisfy themselves of the truth by the inspection of midwives and matrons" (*ST* 802). A panel of midwives and married women were called in as expert witnesses regarding the female

reproductive body, and they were asked by the panel of male religious and legal authorities presiding over the case to physically examine Howard in order to determine whether she was “a virgin carnally unknown by any man” and whether, if so, she was “fit and apt for carnal copulation” (*ST* 803). Since in early modern England the medical examination and handling of women’s reproductive organs was almost entirely the responsibility of other women, especially (but not exclusively) midwives, the delegates presiding over the court assumed that these women could “know” another woman as no man could. Moreover, the exam was conducted in a way that consolidated women’s interpretive control over the female body by keeping many of the details secret from men. Presumably in order to preserve Howard’s modesty, the exam was performed in a closed room with no male witnesses present, and the report was delivered in almost equal privacy: “[They] delivered in their Report under their hands; all persons being removed except the Register, that so the ladies and midwives might more freely deliver their secret Reasons, &c. which were not fit to be inserted into the Record” (*ST* 803). Even the official record shrouds the exam in secrecy, since it reports none of the potentially graphic details of the exam, but only the women’s conclusion that Howard was capable of sex and still a virgin.¹³

The above passage is suggestive in its conflation of the bodily with the verbal/textual: words such as “deliver,” “hands,” and “insert” are reminders of the physical examination performed by the midwives and other women, but what is being delivered is ultimately not physical evidence, but a verbal report that is transmitted into writing by a scribe and signed by the female witnesses. Although knowledge of Howard’s body is considered crucial to the case, the male court authorities gain this knowledge only through the interpretive screen of women’s bodily narratives. After her examination, Howard capitalizes on this dependence on female

testimony and consolidates control over the interpretation of her body by boldly claiming that only her own oath, which is backed up by her aristocratic female kin network, can reveal the truth about her virginity: “The countess in open court produced seven women of her consanguinity, That inasmuch as the truth was best known to herself, she might by virtue of her Oath discover the same, and her oath should be no farther regarded than as it was confirmed by the oath of her kinswomen” (*ST* 803). Howard is confident that her own narrative of virginity, bolstered by her and other women’s exclusive knowledge about the female body, will carry the most legal weight, and in the eyes of the law Howard’s claims were indeed ruled to be authoritative. The delegates, by a vote of seven to five, returned a sentence that nullified the marriage, allowing Howard to almost immediately take a second husband, court favorite Robert Carr.

Despite the favorable ruling, the audience for Howard’s bodily narrative was larger than the official court panel, and a significant portion of this audience remained unconvinced of her virginity. Critics of Howard promoted alternative accounts over and against hers, and in doing so they questioned the validity of Howard’s and other women’s testimony as well as the reliability of the female body as evidence of virginity. One of these alternative accounts was produced by George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury, who presided over the trial and felt that James I had strong-armed the court into approving the nullity. On 2 October 1613, just a week after the verdict was declared, Abbot produced his own manuscript account of the case, in which he calls Howard’s virginity, Essex’s impotence, and the knowledge of the midwives and matrons into question.¹⁴ Abbot claims that during the trial Essex expressed doubts not just about his wife’s sexual fitness, but about her virginity, by suggesting that his inability to penetrate her did not mean that someone else had not: “When he was to answer to the article, that she was ‘Virgo

incorrupta;’ he smiled, and said, ‘She saith so, and she is so for me’” (*ST* 807). Essex’s wry answer pulls narrative authority back to him, implying that it is Howard’s virginity, rather than his virility, that is selective, and that her words may be untrustworthy. Abbot also claims to have been told about an incident in which Essex exposed himself to “five or six captains and gentlemen of worth in his chamber,” showing them “so able and extraordinarily sufficient matter, that they all cried out shame of his lady” (*ST* 822). Although Essex was not physically examined as part of the trial proceedings as Howard was, he seems to have impaneled his own informal jury of male experts before which to perform his virility, and this rather bizarre anecdote is evidence of the central yet elusive role that the body and its visible signs played in the narrative competition between Essex and Howard. Further evidence to this effect can be found in the skepticism with which Abbot regards the claims of the female jury; he reports the concern of one of the other judges “that the ladies knew not well what to make of it; that they had no skill, nor knew not what was the truth; but what they said, was upon the credit of the midwives, which were but two, and I knew not how tampered with” (*ST* 807). The judge implies that the matrons on the jury merely followed the lead of the midwives, who may have been bribed or otherwise compromised by Howard or someone acting on her behalf, and thus calls into question the physical examination and female testimony so central to the trial’s verdict.

Although Abbot never directly claims that Howard was not a virgin at the time of the trial, other writers were not so reticent about questioning the extent to which her physical examination plausibly confirmed her virginity. Court observer John Chamberlain suggests in a letter that the verdict of the female jury is questioned by male medical authorities: “the Lady hath been visited and searcht by some auncient Ladies and midwifes expert in those matters, who both by inspection and otherwise find her upon theyre oath a pure virgin: which some Doctors

thincke a straunge asseveration.” In the same letter, Chamberlain claims that “the world speaks liberally” of Howard’s relationship with Carr, suggesting that Howard’s control over her bodily narrative was challenged by gossip and rumor (461).¹⁵ A similar challenge occurs in libelous poems such as those contained in one seventeenth-century manuscript, which suggest that Howard’s claims about her virginity were false. These poems, believed to have been written sometime between the divorce trial (May-September 1613) and the Overbury murder trials (October 1615-May 1616),¹⁶ frame Howard’s narrative of virginity as a lie concocted to achieve a divorce and conceal her sexual misconduct, and they accuse Howard of having obtained a substitute virgin to be inspected in her place: “This dame was inspected, butt found interjected, / A mayd of more perfection. / Holde the midwives door handle while the knight houlds the Kandle / O, there was cleere inspection” (Farmer 69). The first two lines claim that “a mayd of more perfection” than Howard (i.e., an actual virgin), was “interjected” into Howard’s place. The last two lines are still more sinister, since they call to mind a type of virginity test, described in works such as Laurent Joubert’s *Popular Errors* (1578), in which an object such as a candle was inserted into a woman’s vaginal canal, and the ease or difficulty of the insertion was used to determine the state of a woman’s virginity; Joubert frowned on such tests because he claimed that they could destroy a woman’s virginity in the process of detecting it (Amster 229-30). In the poem, the virginity exam becomes a perverse sex act: the “knight” (probably a reference to Carr) wields the penetrative implement while the midwives guard the door. Like Chamberlain, albeit in a much cruder way, the author of this poem casts doubt on Howard’s bodily narrative and the evidence supporting it provided by the women’s inspection and testimony. The poem refers to the divorce proceedings as “a trick of nullity,” suggesting that, no matter how officially sanctioned, Howard’s claims about her body are an obvious charade through which she seeks to

escape the “servility” of her marriage to Essex and satisfy her “lust” for Carr (Farmer 67). However, despite the poet’s obvious desire to shame Howard by exposing her as sexually voracious and decidedly non-virginal, part of what fuels both the satiric and the more serious refutations of Howard’s claims is that her “trick of nullity” was ultimately successful in obtaining a divorce. In the absence of an authoritative test of virginity, the decision of the court ultimately relied on the words of women to interpret the female body, enabling Howard to construct a bodily narrative that, false or not, worked to her benefit.

Although verse libels like the one described above emphasize Howard’s sexual misconduct, the stakes of the Essex divorce trial were higher than the alleged promiscuity of one woman. Howard’s claims about her own and Essex’s bodies raised uncomfortable questions about a man’s physical and legal control over his wife, and about what actually constituted a marriage. During the divorce proceedings, Howard’s social status was in a strange state of flux. As a married woman, she was no longer under the control of her father, but since she was allegedly still a virgin, the legality of her marriage and the extent of her husband’s authority over her was being called into question. Although she was rumored to be involved with Carr, they were not yet married, and so she didn’t fall under his control either. Another satiric poem from the same manuscript as the one discussed above captures Howard’s liminal social status by comparing her to a boat without a captain that sails from one man’s “shoare” to another’s (Farmer 61). Chamberlain’s letters provide a similar sense of the difficulty of placing Howard when, after the nullity is approved, they abruptly switch from referring to her as Essex’s lady to referring to her as Frances Howard.¹⁷ These texts, despite the disapproving tone they take towards Howard’s supposed deceptions, highlight Howard’s ability to manipulate uncertainties about the female body in order to challenge her husband’s sexual potency and marital authority.

Since a man who cannot consummate his marriage relinquishes his exclusive claim to his wife's body, during the divorce trial Howard is neither maid, widow, nor wife; she becomes, if only briefly, something of a sexual free agent as she floats in the uncharted waters between marriage and maidenhood.

In addition to confusing the institution of marriage, Howard's bodily narrative also brought disorder to the Jacobean court by undermining male monarchical authority and redistributing power and influence. James I showed an active interest throughout the trial, and he made no secret of his support for the divorce that would allow his favorite to marry into a powerful family, going so far as to write a letter in which he answered objections point by point (*ST* 798-802).¹⁸ As Bellany notes, James I's collusion in the Essex divorce, and his subsequent pardon of Howard for her role in the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury, created a public perception of the Jacobean court "as a house of patriarchal disorder" where "women, irrational and dangerous, ran free" (164). In his discussion of the Overbury murder, Curtis Perry similarly notes how this scandal, frequently linked with the Essex divorce, influenced impressions of James I's court: "[t]he image of poison in a painted or golden cup was a standard way of expressing the more general idea that glorious outsides could hide inward corruption." Perry goes on to argue that poison was analogous "to other forms of secret corrupting inwardness lurking within the body politic," and for him, this inwardness takes the form of the poisoning male courtier (*Literature* 101). However, the debate over Howard's virginity shows a similar fascination with the "inward corruption," both physical and moral, that Howard allegedly concealed by representing her outwardly "glorious" body as virginal. Both Bellany and Perry focus primarily on the Overbury poisoning, but while it is true that this scandal brought renewed attention to the Essex divorce, Howard's alleged feigning of her virginity stands on its own as a

prior act of socio-political “poisoning,” one that corrupts and weakens patriarchal authority. Moreover, whereas the Overbury murder plot was eventually revealed and the perpetrators punished (although, in the cases of Howard and Carr, not as harshly as some might have wished), Howard’s supposed charade during her divorce trial evaded legal detection and sanction.¹⁹ Instead, the uncertainty surrounding Howard’s virginity allowed her to increase her standing at court, since by divorcing Essex and marrying Carr she allied herself and her family with James I’s current favorite, and thus to a wealth of political access and influence.

Although Howard, by birth a member of a prominent family and married to two high-ranking men, was certainly helped by her position of privilege and her powerful friends, Abbot feared that her bodily narrative might set a pattern for all couples desiring divorce to follow: “[W]e may not say, that it is for noble personages, and great peers in the state, and not for others of inferior rank. Whatsoever couple therefore have no children, and live discontented, come presently to take part of this grand jubilee” (*ST* 858). The word “jubilee” is particularly significant here, since in addition to meaning “a[n] . . . occasion of general rejoicing,” it could refer more specifically to “a time of restitution, remission, or release” from slavery or from the consequences of sin (*OED*). Abbot predicts that the precedent set by Howard will give couples, but perhaps especially women, other options than to suffer “with patience and quietness” when trapped in an unfulfilling marriage (*ST* 857). Abbot worries that the Essex divorce will encourage other women, and even men, to exploit the ambiguities of female virginity in order to obtain divorce, and his concerns demonstrate that male anxiety about Howard’s ability to narrate virginity was not exclusive to her case. Like the Essex divorce, *The Changeling* grapples with the possibility that a woman might feign her own virginity, even when put to a physical test, and bring sexual and political disorder to patriarchal society. Perhaps even more so than the trial,

The Changeling interrogates the relationship between virginity and sexual experience, and suggests that the two states are not merely intertwined, but frequently indistinguishable to anyone but the woman in question. The play demonstrates how the circle of deferral between words and bodies allows women to create bodily narratives that strategically deploy the intertwined nature of these two states in order to further their own agendas.

2. Enacting Innocence and Experience in *The Changeling*

Although *The Changeling*'s first performance in 1622 came nearly a decade after the Essex divorce, the play resonates with the themes of illicit sex and feigned virginity that thrilled the public during the trial. In pointing out links between the Essex divorce and *The Changeling*, literary critics have frequently argued that the play depicts Beatrice-Joanna's falsification of virginity in order to condemn her stereotypically female sexual immorality, a critique that is read both through and onto Frances Howard.²⁰ However, although the play does warn against the damage wrought by women who manipulate men's uncertainty about the legibility of the female body and the reliability of the female word, it also reveals that women's enactment of virginity gives patriarchal society structure and coherence by providing at least the appearance of an orderly system of patrilineal descent, dynastic power, and stable socio-political hierarchies.²¹ During the 1620s and 1650s, decades that saw, respectively, the first performance and first printing of *The Changeling*, the play would have resonated deeply with English audiences and readers growing increasingly concerned about the efficacy and legitimacy of patriarchal authority and the socio-political impact of women's bodily narratives.

Although the role of the body is spectacularly foregrounded in the play's on-stage virginity test, Beatrice-Joanna's words, like Howard's, are crucial to the construction of virginity

that allows her to gain control over her marriage prospects. As in the account of Howard's libel, Beatrice-Joanna recognizes the importance of appearing modest, submissive, obedient, and, hence, virginal. To this end, she uses language that emphasizes her position as an object of exchange between men and as subject to her father's will, which she frequently figures as not only patriarchal, but also royal. Since fathers and children, husbands and wives, and kings and subjects modeled each other in the early modern system of patriarchal social hierarchy, Beatrice-Joanna's feigned obedience to her father thus creates the impression of her allegiance to a system in which the virginal body has great political value, positioning her not only as an ideal daughter and wife, but as an ideal subject as well. During the first conversation we witness between Beatrice-Joanna and Alsemero, a nobleman-sailor newly arrived in her father's land, Alsemero uses political rhetoric to argue that their mutual love for each other is enough to ensure the success of their relationship. He claims that both "houses" of his brain—his eyes and his judgment—are in agreement, and that only her consent is needed to bind them together: "Both houses then consenting, 'tis agreed; / Only there wants the confirmation / By the hand royal. That's your part, lady" (1.1.80-82). Alsemero's metaphor places Beatrice-Joanna in the role of a constitutional monarch who must authorize acts of the houses of Parliament, but she quickly rejects this position and defers to her father, Vermandero, casting him in the role of absolute monarch (or perhaps even deity) instead: "Oh, there's one above me, sir" (1.1.83). Even though her next lines express doubt about her arranged marriage to Alonzo, she speaks these in an aside so as to maintain the appearance of submitting to her father's political/familial patriarchal authority in Alsemero's eyes.²²

As her wedding to Alonzo draws closer, Beatrice-Joanna continues to manipulate men's notions of ideal virginity in order to gain marital choice. In an effort to delay her marriage, she

plays the part of a timorous virgin who is obedient to her father's wishes yet fearful about losing her maidenhead, and in doing so she again uses language which frames her father's authority as political. When Vermandero announces that his daughter must be married to Alonzo within a week, Beatrice-Joanna pleads for a postponement: "With speed / I cannot render satisfaction / Unto the dear companion of my soul, / Virginitie, whom I thus long have lived with / And part with it so rude and suddenly. / Can such friends divide, never to meet again, / Without a solemn farewell?" (1.1.196-202). Her polite request, with its language of "parting" and "dividing," serves as a discreet yet forceful reminder of her physical intactness, and these allusions to her virginity are reinforced by her simulated submission to her father's authority. Later, Beatrice-Joanna again "entreat[s]" Vermandero to postpone the wedding on the grounds of maidenly trepidation, and her father chuckles at her "motion . . . to reprieve / A maidenhead three days longer" (2.2.115, 117-18). Although her real motive is not fear of sexual intercourse, but rather her sexual desire for Alsemero, Beatrice-Joanna depicts herself as a humble petitioner appealing to her father's judicial/royal authority for a stay of execution. By manipulating Vermandero without openly defying him, Beatrice-Joanna narrates chaste, submissive obedience to an adoringly receptive male audience, even as she undermines both paternal authority and the legal and monarchical authority it represents.

When her servant De Flores demands sex in exchange for murdering Alonzo, Beatrice-Joanna's control over her virginity seems to break down.²³ However, although De Flores insists that Beatrice-Joanna's true nature is murderous and lustful, his words also imply that Beatrice-Joanna's body need not betray her defloration as long as she continues to narrate virginity through her words, appearance, and behavior. Despite being a "murd'ress," he admits that she is "fair"; he claims her criminal bond with him is printed in her "conscience," not her appearance;

although she is a “whore in [her] affection,” he knows she can still “writ[e] maid” in public (3.4.141, 132, 142). Beatrice-Joanna has already sinned by desiring a man other than the one her father selected and conspiring in the murder of her fiancé, yet De Flores must concede that these crimes are not visible on her body. Moreover, although De Flores professes amazement that “a woman dipped in blood” would dare “talk of modesty,” he himself is adept at speaking and behaving in ways that conceal his true intentions and motivations (3.4.126). Beatrice-Joanna herself seems to hold out hope that the loss of her virginity to De Flores will not necessarily mean the end of her plans to marry Alsemero. When she asks, “Was my creation in the womb so curst / It must engender with a viper first?,” the word “first” implies that De Flores need not be her only sexual partner (3.4.165-66). Ultimately, Beatrice-Joanna is indeed able to continue enacting virginity for Alsemero, even after having sex with De Flores. She puts the deferral of meaning that creates virginity to her own use, exercising physical as well as verbal control over her body in order to manipulate the ideological contradictions underpinning early modern virginity.

As *The Changeling* reveals, during the early modern period the relationship between virginity and sexual experience was more complex than one of mere opposition. Rather than being two discrete segments of a woman’s life, virginity and sexual experience were imagined as always existing together, even symbolically constituting each other, in the sense that virginity was frequently valued only in the context of its inevitable loss. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie point out that much of the value accrued by virginity hinged on its being “a temporary stage through which a young girl passed on the way to chaste marriage. Virginity was a valuable commodity, but it had a very limited shelf-life” (21). In other words, the ideal virginal body *must* eventually fall, however controlled this fall might be by the patriarchal

marriage system. A woman whose body is completely inviolable (like Howard's allegedly was for Essex) is not an ideal, but a threat to the systems of marriage and reproduction by which society perpetuates itself.²⁴ For this reason, virginity carries a sexual charge: part of its attraction (for men) is the anticipation of its eventual loss. The ideological tension inherent in men's desire for women to be chaste and inviolable, but only temporarily, is suggested by the concern during the Essex divorce trial with establishing Howard as *both* virginal and sexually functional, but it is interrogated even more strongly in *The Changeling's* depiction of a virginity test. Whereas Howard, even if still a virgin during the trial, had presumably had some sexual contact with Essex during their failed attempts at intercourse, Alsemero expects Beatrice-Joanna to be completely sexually naïve when he performs his test. Despite Alsemero's assumptions about his new bride's sexual ignorance, however, he administers a test that effectively erases the divide between virginal innocence and carnal knowledge.²⁵ Beatrice-Joanna symbolically performs the loss of her virginity in order to retroactively prove its existence to Alsemero, whose desire is piqued by the spectacle of a (supposed) virgin enacting defloration as she moves toward marriage.²⁶

Although Marjorie Garber's Freudian reading of the play's virginity test as orgasmic may be, as Amster points out, somewhat anachronistic (Amster 230),²⁷ the effects of the test are nevertheless sexual, even in strictly early modern terms: "Give the party you suspect the quantity of a spoonful of the water in the glass M, which, upon her that is a maid, makes three several effects: 'twill make her incontinently gape, then fall into a sudden sneezing, last into a violent laughing" (4.1.45-49). All of these effects involve a woman's open mouth, which during the early modern period was frequently understood sexually, and the use of the word "incontinent" implies sexual looseness (*OED*). Instead of showing the body of a virgin to be closed and

inviolable, the test suggests its inevitable penetration and exposes the central paradox of this virginity test as well as the type administered to Howard: both require the *opening* of the virginal female body, which ought, by definition, to remain closed until it is penetrated during marital intercourse.²⁸ However, although the compulsive nature of the effects of Alsemero's test gestures toward the way that the ideal virgin relinquished control over her body to the authority of her father and husband, Beatrice-Joanna is not actually forced to yawn, sneeze, and laugh; she instead retains control over her body in her deliberate performance of these effects.

Moreover, since the test demands in a woman's enactment of virginity the suggestion of its eventual loss, it seems that sexual experience and carnal knowledge might actually help Beatrice-Joanna perform her body as virginal more successfully. Having experienced the loss of her own virginity, Beatrice-Joanna is able to figuratively reproduce this experience during the test, which itself confuses the categories of virginity and sexual experience by defining the "symptoms" of virginity as sexual, symptoms which paradoxically become evidence of her supposedly intact state. By manipulating men's need to see the virginal body as a potentially sexual object, Beatrice-Joanna is thus able to increase her new husband's desire for her despite (or even because of) her premarital sexual activity. Alsemero's reliance on the test indicates his own uncertainty about his ability to determine Beatrice-Joanna's virginity merely by having sex with her, thus suggesting that a man cannot reliably detect the absence or presence of a woman's virginity through her body during sex *or* via a test (as the bed-trick later reveals, Alsemero cannot even detect the absence of Beatrice-Joanna herself on their wedding night). Diaphanta, for one, is not afraid that having sex with Alsemero will prevent her from making a successful match later on; in fact, she predicts that the payment Beatrice-Joanna promises her for taking part in the bed-trick will allow her to marry a higher caliber of man: "The bride's place, / And with a

thousand ducats! I'm for a justice now. / I bring a portion with me; I scorn small fools" (4.2.127-29). When at the end of the play Alsemero exclaims, "Oh, cunning devils! / How should blind men know you from fair-faced saints?," his rage and disgust are directed at the fact that "cunning devils" and "fair-faced saints" become interchangeable within a paradigm of virginity in which women construct their own sexual status for men who are "blind" (5.3.118-19).²⁹

By Act 5, Alsemero is no longer the eagerly credulous audience for Beatrice-Joanna's bodily narratives that he was earlier in the play. However, despite increasing evidence that Beatrice-Joanna's virginity cannot be accurately determined by referencing either her words or her body, in the final scene Alsemero frantically shifts between them in search of proof of her guilt. He begins by trying to exact a narrative of confession from Beatrice-Joanna:

ALSEMERO: Pray resolve me one question, lady.

BEATRICE: If I can.

ALSEMERO: None can so sure. Are you honest? (5.3.19-21)

Despite his rising suspicions, Alsemero assumes that Beatrice-Joanna possesses exclusive knowledge about her own body, even going so far as to claim that no one else would be able to resolve matters as surely as she. When Beatrice-Joanna sidesteps his question by laughing and turning it into a joke, Alsemero switches tactics and tries to find answers in her behavior rather than her words: "Do you laugh? My doubts are strong upon me" (5.3.24). Whereas during the virginity test laughter was a sign of chastity, here Alsemero reads it as an indicator of guilt, and Beatrice-Joanna mocks his reliance on ambiguous physical signs that can easily be counterfeited: "'Tis innocence that smiles, and no rough brow / Can take away the dimple in her cheek. / Say I should strain a tear to fill the vault, / Which would you give the better faith to?" (5.3.25-28). At this, Alsemero abruptly alters course again and claims that no external sign can change what he believes to be true: "Neither your smiles nor tears / Shall move or flatter me from my belief: /

You are a whore” (5.3.30-32). Yet, a few lines later he returns to the female body as a source of truth, this time seeking proof in its interior: “I’ll all demolish and seek out truth within you, / If there be any left. Let your sweet tongue / Prevent your heart’s rifling; there I’ll ransack / And tear out my suspicion” (5.3.37-40). Although Alsemero threatens to “seek out truth within” Beatrice-Joanna’s body, his language of demolition and tearing suggests an awareness that even the ambiguous physical “truth” of the hymen is lost to him, whether through his own penetration of her or some other man’s (at this point in the play, Alsemero is unaware of the bed-trick and believes that he has slept with Beatrice-Joanna). Moreover, even as he threatens to physically “rifle” her heart for evidence, he turns yet again to Beatrice-Joanna’s words when he suggests that she could prevent his violent search/abuse of her body by providing more certain proof with her “sweet tongue.”

Despite Alsemero’s conviction that Beatrice-Joanna is unchaste, he is confused about what kind of evidence (verbal, behavioral, internally/externally physical) he needs to confirm his suspicions, as well as about how to interpret that evidence. Moreover, even at the moment when Beatrice-Joanna begins to tell the truth, the play continues to raise questions about the reliability of women’s speech. Beatrice-Joanna provides the narrative of confession that Alsemero demands, but her words conceal even as they reveal. She first tells only a partial narrative, in which she confesses to murder but insists that she is chaste: “To your bed’s scandal, I stand up innocent, / Which even the guilt of one black other deed / Will stand for proof of: your love has made me / A cruel murd’ress” (5.3.63-68). In this account, the murder of Alonzo becomes “proof” of Beatrice-Joanna’s love and faithfulness to Alsemero rather than of her unchastity. Eventually, Beatrice-Joanna does make a full confession as she is about to die, but the prolonged revelations in the final scene suggest that female virtue exists only as a verbal and physical

construct, and that knowledge about it depends in large part on the unreliable bodily narratives of women.

In undermining male knowledge of the female reproductive body, Beatrice-Joanna's deception raises the specter of Frances Howard's divorce trial. In doing so, the play calls attention to the high stakes of women's bodily narratives in a political climate unsettled by fears of Catholic infiltration via the Spanish Match, negotiations for which were a hot-button issue during the decade between the Essex divorce in 1613 and the debut of *The Changeling* in 1622. Early in the play, Vermandero refuses to allow Alsemero to visit his castle without first knowing whether he is friend or foe: "[O]ur citadels / Are placed conspicuous to outward view / On promonts' tops, but within are secrets" (1.1.165-67). As Cristina Malcolmson notes, Vermandero's concern with protecting his castle from penetration by outsiders can be read as a metaphor for his failure as a father to protect his daughter from the same, and this figuration can be extended to the perceived failure of James I to protect his nation: "the vulnerable female body symbolizes the weakness of the body of the state, disturbingly open to the infiltration of foreign Catholic powers" (152). Although much analysis has focused on the play's critique of the Spanish Match, the fear that Catholicism might infiltrate the English court via marriage was also raised by Carr's marriage to Howard, who in addition to being sexually suspect was related to prominent Catholic sympathizers, most notably her great-uncle, the powerful Earl of Northampton.³⁰ Unlike Elizabeth I, whose rhetoric of virginity strengthened the Protestant nation, making it and her body appear inviolable, Howard's bodily narrative emasculated Protestant English manhood (represented by Essex) and, by enabling her marriage to the court favorite, allowed Catholic influence to creep closer to the throne.³¹ In 1622, the wife and mother of George Villiers, who had replaced Carr as James I's favorite, converted to Catholicism in

anticipation of Charles I's (never realized) marriage to the Spanish Infanta,³² thus further stimulating fears that Catholicism could threaten England not only from without, in the form of invading foreign powers, but also from within.

The concern over Catholicism's domestic threat raised by court marriages and conversions was echoed in more general paranoia about Catholic recusancy, which, like concerns about virginity, often focused on secrecy and inwardness, on the fear that, to borrow from Alsemero, "cunning" (Catholic) "devils" might be indistinguishable from "fair-faced" (Protestant) "saints." Recusant Catholic women were particularly feared for their ability to secretly perpetuate Catholicism in England through biological reproduction and the education of their children, and they were also frequently suspected of harboring fugitive priests and hosting secret Catholic rituals in their homes.³³ As a political allegory, *The Changeling* reminds viewers and readers that women, both foreign princesses and homegrown English wives and mothers, might undermine male authority both sexually and politically, and that even those who, like Beatrice-Joanna, *appear* to be ideal daughters, wives, and subjects might spread the Catholic corruption hidden within them via sexual and/or verbal persuasion. The play's obsession with female sexuality suggests that virginity offered an embodied and specific way for early moderns to think about the problematic relationship between women and politics: not only does virginity symbolically link women's bodies to the interiority and secrecy of court corruption, but it also provides a means by which women might participate in the construction (or destruction) of sexual, religious, and political ideologies and hierarchies.

Although Beatrice-Joanna's confession and death seem to defuse her threat to male authority, she continues to affect patriarchal systems of dynastic marriage and patrilineage even after her death. Beatrice-Joanna herself sees her death as healing her father, and thus patriarchy

in general (“I am that of your blood was taken from you / For your better health” [5.3.159-60]), but her purification does not necessarily ensure the soundness of her family or her society.

Alsemero assures Vermandero that he will continue to honor him as a father (5.3.227), but this father/son relationship, predicated on Beatrice-Joanna’s manipulations, seems tenuous, especially since just a short time earlier Alsemero was ready to kill the man Vermandero had hand-picked to be his son-in-law (2.2.28). Moreover, the symbolic phlebotomy that Beatrice-Joanna believes will heal her father can be read as having a weakening effect if one understands the “blood” that is “taken” from Vermandero to be a reference to his blood-line, which ends with Beatrice-Joanna. Although her silenced corpse is finally legible, it cannot act as a vessel for the transmission of male lineage, and the all-male family celebrated at the end of the play is, as Deborah G. Burks points out, ultimately barren.³⁴ The female body, and the bodily narratives women construct about and through it, might be threatening and unreliable, but they are also absolutely necessary to the coherence and continuation of patriarchal society.

Thus, despite the scrambling on the part of *The Changeling*’s surviving male characters to salvage a happy ending from the tragedy and absolve themselves of blame, there is also the sense that they would have been happier if Beatrice-Joanna had been able to persist in representing herself as virginal, even if this representation was false. Alsemero recalls being deceived with a tone of nostalgia: “There was a visor / O’er that cunning face, and that became you; / Now impudence in triumph rides upon it” (5.3.47-49). In his preference for the visor or mask over the truth, Alsemero suggests that it was Beatrice-Joanna’s appearance of virtue that he desired at least as much as, if not more so than, her physical intactness. Even the resolutely chaste Isabella demonstrates the double-edged sword of female bodily narratives, which patriarchal society both fears and depends on. Imprisoned by her jealous husband and beset by

men who want to have sex with her, she preserves her chastity by impersonating madness and unruly sexuality, a combination that proves off-putting to her suitors (4.3.126). Whereas Beatrice-Joanna undermines male control over female sexuality by feigning virginity, Isabella upholds it by feigning unchastity, and furthermore, she suggests that such deception is the mark of all rational members of society, and that only in the insane do interior and exterior selves match perfectly: “our schools of lunatics, / . . . act their fantasies in any shapes / Suiting their present thoughts. If sad, they cry; / If mirth be their conceit, they laugh again” (3.3.193-96). Despite Isabella’s refusal to cuckold Alibius and her reconciliation with him in the final scene, her successful defense of her chastity points to her husband’s failure to protect the same. The play thus shows patriarchal authority over female sexuality to hinge on women’s bodily narratives, which may or may not correspond to their actual sexual experience.

By the time *The Changeling* was first printed in 1653, the abolition of the British monarchy and the execution of Charles I led to the questioning of other forms of social authority that had been believed to be analogous with kingship, such as that of husbands over wives and, more generally, men over women. Given the play’s notable absence of royal figures,³⁵ it is not a simple matter to posit how it would have been interpreted in the political climate of the Civil Wars and Interregnum, but this ambiguity may have been part of its appeal during this tumultuous period. In the play’s depiction of a society turned upside-down, Royalist readers could have seen a condemnation of rebellious subordinates who, like Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores, violently usurp legitimate patriarchal authority. A Parliamentarian reading, on the other hand, might critique the play’s patriarchal figures, who are unable to maintain order due to being, at best, inept and blind (like Vermandero and Alsemero), or, at worst, cruel and tyrannical (like the jealous Alibius). As I will demonstrate in the next section, such concerns over patriarchal

legitimacy during the 1640s and 1650s were coupled with anxieties about female bodily narratives. Like *The Changeling*, historical accounts of James I's reign published during this period examine the socio-political implications of virginity's ambiguity through references to Frances Howard. In addition to using Howard to retrospectively reveal the dissolution, corruption, and feminization of the early Stuart court, these texts demonstrate the potential for women's words and bodies to influence the reading and writing of history itself.

3. Narrating Historical Bodies

Critics such as Mary E. Fissell and Julie Crawford have argued that anxiety over women's increasingly visible public roles during the Civil Wars and Interregnum was translated into concern over their unruly reproductive bodies by authors of medical treatises and monstrous birth pamphlets.³⁶ In such texts, the fear that the female body will literally reproduce social unrest is countered by attempts to reinsert it back into its proper place in the gender hierarchy, thus, in theory, reestablishing social order on the levels of class and politics as well. Although histories such as *The Five Yeares of King James* (1643), Anthony Weldon's *The Court and Character of King James* (1650), and Arthur Wilson's *The History of Great Britain* (1653) are not as overtly concerned with the female reproductive body as the treatises and pamphlets discussed by Fissell and Crawford, their depictions of Frances Howard take part in a project similar to those these critics describe.³⁷ In their attempts to locate the root causes of the failure of the British monarchy, they use Howard as an example of James I's inability to properly execute his authority as king, and they attempt to rectify this patriarchal failure by refuting Howard's claims of virginity. Like *The Changeling*, the histories discredit Howard's bodily narrative in order to link the female reproductive body with secrecy, inwardness, and deceit,

depicting her as both symptom and cause of Stuart court corruption in general. However, in their efforts to correct the lies they claim Howard told about and through her body, the histories accord Howard semantic and somatic power even as they endeavor to diminish and critique her use of it. Although they attempt to show Howard as a passive token of political exchange between powerful men, historical accounts also depict these men collaborating with Howard in ways that are mutually beneficial. Because of the key role she plays in court machinations, the history writers are forced to take Howard into account, and to present her bodily narrative, debunked though it may be, as significant and even influential to their own historical analysis.

Unlike Beatrice-Joanna, Howard did not provide a resolution to her “tragedy” by confessing to sexual misconduct. To compensate, the histories challenge, revise, and overwrite Howard’s claims in order to establish a definitive, male-authored truth about her virginity. An early example of this occurs in *The Five Yeares of King James*, erroneously attributed to Fulke Greville.³⁸ Although this account invests Howard with narrative authority insofar as it holds her responsible for concocting the story about her virginity and Essex’s impotence (27), it depicts her account as never having been authoritative in the eyes of a larger audience:

the world, who growes jealous of fraud, doubting either corruption or deceit, (for it was vulgarly reported) that she had a child long before in my Lords absence; whereupon, some say this, some say that, and most that the Countesse was not searched; but that one of Sir Thomas Monson’s daughters was brought in to be searched in her place, and so both Jury and Judges deceived. But how true this is, is not credible. (28-29)

The author is coy about asserting the truth or falsity of the gossip he reports, but the history’s depiction of Howard up to this point, as a woman “of a lustfull appetite, prodigall of expence, covetous of applause, ambitious of honour, and light of behavior,” only confirms the rumors of the vulgar (8). *Five Yeares* uses a similar technique to undercut Howard’s narrative authority over Essex’s body, noting that her claims of his impotence “seemed strange unto the world, who

tooke notice of the Earle to be of an able body, and likely to have many children” (27).

Howard’s ability to narrate her virginity and Essex’s impotence is depicted as limited; although she deceives her “Jury and Judges” and obtains a divorce, the verdict of the court of public opinion and, the author seems to assume, the ultimate verdict of history, read her as non-virginal.

As in *Five Yeares*, later histories take pains to discredit the results of Frances Howard’s virginity exam, thus stripping women of interpretive control over the female body. In *The Court and Character of King James*, Weldon repeats the by then well-worn tale of Howard getting a substitute virgin to be examined in her place, claiming for evidence the account of “a Gentleman, he had it *verbatim* from a Knight, (otherwise of much Honour, though the very dependency on that Family may question it) which did usher the Lady into the place of inspection, and hath told it often to his friends in mirth” (81). Despite the third-hand nature of the account, and despite the dubious honor of the “eyewitness,” Weldon assumes that the testimony of a man, however couched in the language of frivolous gossip, will trump Howard’s. He also suggests that the female jury was not a source of authority when it came to reading and interpreting Howard’s body: “a Jury of grave Matrons were found fit for that purpose, who with their Spectacles, ground to lesson [sic], not to make the letter larger; after their inspection gave verdict, she was (*intacta virgo*)” (79). Using “spectacles” that obscure Howard’s true bodily condition rather than clarifying it, the women, perhaps deliberately, produce a false reading, but according to Weldon, the eyes of public opinion are clearer. Like the author of *Five Yeares*, Weldon claims that Howard’s lack of virginity was common knowledge even as she was passing herself off as a virgin in court: “the World tooke notice that her way was very near beaten so plaine, as if (*regia via*) and in truth, was a common way before Sumerset did ever travel that way” (79). In addition to asserting that Howard’s claims had not held up under public scrutiny, Weldon’s reference to

Howard's body as a "regia via" (king's highway) positions her as a common, well-traveled road that powerful men like Carr, the Earl of Northampton, and possibly even James I could use to reach their sexual and political desires.

As the above allusion to the king suggests, Weldon implicates James I in the scandal of the Essex divorce. According to Weldon, Carr and Howard achieved their divorce "by making the King a Party in this bawdy businesse, which was no hard matter to effect; for the Kings eye began to wander after a new Favourite, being satiated with the old" (77). Weldon's reference to the king's "wandering eye" invites interpretation; while this passage could simply mean that the king had no reason to impede Carr's marriage since his desire for him had waned, it could also imply that James I felt furthering Carr's marriage would help him to achieve a new favorite. In this second reading, Howard becomes a token given to Carr by James I to compensate for the withdrawal of his royal favor, in an attempt to make the transition from one court favorite to another smoother. As in the reference to Howard as a "king's highway," Weldon depicts Howard as a pawn of powerful men, and in addition to suggesting that James I used the Essex divorce to further his own erotic and political interests, he claims that Howard was initially sent to seduce Carr by her great-uncle Northampton so that her family could benefit from a relationship with the court favorite (66-67). However, this notion of Howard as an object of exchange between men is complicated by her similarities to these men, particularly to James I. Like Howard, who supposedly sought to replace Essex with Carr, James I wanted to replace Carr with someone new; later, Weldon makes the connection between Howard and the king more explicit when he describes James I's "passion of love to his new Favourite [George Villiers], in which the King was more impatient, then any woman to enjoy her love" (94). The comparison of James I's lusty "impatience" to that of a woman immediately brings to mind Howard, whose

own impatience to be rid of Essex led her to falsify virginity, at least according to popular opinion. In this sense, Howard is portrayed as parallel to James I, rather than as his pawn. Although Weldon seeks to position Howard as an object of exchange who acts only in the political interests of men, the intersecting sexual agendas of Howard and James I suggest that her narrative of virginity benefited her as well as the men around her.

Moreover, although the histories tend to emphasize Howard's sexual voracity as her primary motive for wanting a divorce, they also suggest that she, like her powerful male collaborators, had economic and socio-political goals. Weldon invents a motto for James I to describe his use of dissimulation or "King-craft": "Qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare" (Whoever is unable to lie is unable to rule) (102, 103). In Weldon's history, however, James I is equaled, if not surpassed, by Howard in terms of lies and deception, and the motto suggests that the false bodily narrative Howard is accused of telling might be a sign of her own will to power. In *The History of Great Britain*, Wilson attributes Howard's attraction to Carr to ambition as well as to lust,³⁹ and it appears that her ambitions, and the narrative she composes to achieve them, have concrete results: "The good Earl of Essex must repay the Portion, to do which he is forced to sell Benington in Hartford-shire[.] . . . [Howard's] beauties shine in the Court . . . she is the Kings Favourite, as well as her Husband" (71). Howard personally benefits from her divorce both economically (through the refunding of her marriage portion) and politically (by becoming a favorite at court), and Wilson also claims that Carr's promotion to Earl of Somerset is as much for Howard's benefit as for his, since her new husband "must be of equal rank to her, that she may not descend, therefore he is Created Earl of Somerset" (72). Howard's ability to pass as a virgin has far-reaching consequences here, as it does not merely work to achieve a divorce, but to redistribute money and influence in her favor.

In addition to affecting the factional politics of the Jacobean court, Howard's bodily narrative, even when contested, is depicted as historically significant. A particularly striking example of this occurs on the title page of Weldon's *Court and Character*, which features a portrait of James I, under which are listed seven Latin words: "Mars, Puer, Alecto, Virgo, VULPES, Leo, Nullus." These words reference an early Tudor (or pseudo-early Tudor) prophecy supposedly made by a Jesuit during the reign of Henry VII concerning "all the Kings and Queens that should succeed in England": "Mars the God of war, Hen. 8, Puer, a Boy, Edward the 6, Alecto, a Fury, Queene Mary, Virgo, a maiden Queen Elizabeth, Vulper, a Fox King James, Leo a Lyon King Charles, Nullus, None." This quote, taken from J. L. Philalethes's emblematic broadside, *Old Sayings and Predictions Verified and Fulfilled* (1651), gives each Latin word a specific historical referent, but on Weldon's title page they are listed out of context as signifiers with no fixed signifieds.⁴⁰ As such, they allow for readings that insert other figures into what was, in the prophecy, an orderly historical march towards the dissolution of the British monarchy—figures like Frances Howard. The most direct link to Howard can be found in the second pair of words, Alecto (the name of one of the Greek furies) and Virgo (virgin). Historical accounts of Howard stress the contrast between her narrative of virginity and her complicity in the Overbury poisoning, and in *The History of Great Britain*, Wilson actually calls Howard "another Alecto" when describing her furious desire to divorce Essex, marry Carr, and "take away Overbury," goals which she accomplishes in part by feigning virginity and "Maiden bashfulness" (67). *Five Yeares* similarly emphasizes Howard's Alecto-like desire to punish Overbury for slandering her, claiming that she becomes "revengefull" and "breakes forth with furie" (31). In the prophecy, the descriptors Alecto and Virgo refer to Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I, but in histories of James I's reign, Howard seems to usurp the place of the two queens as a

politically and historically significant force. Weldon's borrowing of the prophecy's terms reminds the reader of the political and historical importance of women's narratives of virginity, including the one produced by Elizabeth I, but also of the impossibility of ever verifying the truth of such narratives, no matter how firmly they are enshrined in the national imagination.⁴¹

Moreover, in its comparison of historiography to dissection, Wilson's "Proeme" to *History of Great Britain* suggests that Howard's bodily narrative helped to shape his own historical narrative:

Histories are like Anatomies, especially when they reflect on Persons[.] . . . [A]s the dissimilar parts of the body, head, hands, feet, &c. are apparently known; and the Similar parts, as veins sinews, nerves, &c. are easily discovered; so the motions and operations of the more secret and hidden parts are controverted, and hard to find out[.] . . . So in this Work; the chief part of what is written, is either apparently known, or easily discovered, and those things that never saw the Light yet, may be collected and inferred[.] (A3v-A4)

Wilson claims historians must deal primarily with what they can easily know and discover, just as anatomists must make do with studying those parts of the body that are most accessible, and in his history he uses observations of what is "apparently known" and "easily discovered" to "infer" information about what is "secret and hidden." Earlier in the Proeme Wilson warns rulers that their actions are not immune from the censure of history, but he later concedes that he is unable to "discover all the Contrivances hatcht, and brooded in the secret corners of Princes Councils" (A4v). Therefore, he must use incidents that are more "easily discovered" to shape his narrative of James I's reign and court. Although the dissected body in the Proeme is ungendered, Wilson's focus on uncovering hidden political secrets finds a striking parallel in his anatomically explicit description of Howard's death from uterine cancer in 1632, suggesting that her female reproductive body might be particularly revelatory to a history of James I's reign:

[T]hough she died (as it were) in a corner (in so private a condition) the loathsomeness of her death made it as conspicuous as on the house top: For that part of her Body which had been the receptacle of most of her sin, grown rotten (though she never had but one Child)

the ligaments failing, it fell down, and was cut away in flakes, with a most nauseous and putrid savour.

In contrast, the next paragraph describes Carr as “comely” and “handsome,” a man with a “gentle mind” and an “affable disposition” who died “without fame” after being led astray by Howard: “If he had not met with such a Woman, he might have been a good man” (83). Carr’s body, lovely and intact, stands as a sign of his relative innocence; it is only the monstrous female body that gives itself away, revealing the inward corruption of the Jacobean court to Wilson’s probing eye and providing evidence to help undergird the analysis of political history.

However, although Wilson depicts Howard’s body as revealing the “truth” of her sexual misdeeds after her death, her living body, like Beatrice-Joanna’s, is much more problematic. In describing Howard’s performance of virginity on her and Carr’s wedding day, Wilson vacillates between wanting to make her body reveal her crimes and admitting that this is impossible: “She thinking all the World ignorant of her sly practices, hath the impudence to appear in the habit of a Virgin, with her hair pendant almost to her feet; which Ornament of her body (though a fair one) could not cover the deformities of her Soul: But . . . her indeed lovely Cheeks did not betray themselves to blushes” (72). Although Wilson insists that the “deformities of [Howard’s] soul” were not concealed from the world by her virginal disguise, it is difficult to determine how these deformities manifested themselves, since her body refused to “betray” itself by blushing. Her soul, deformed though it may be, is invisible, and cannot provide physical evidence against her; to borrow from *The Changeling*, it is impossible to tell by looking whether Howard is a “cunning devil” or a “fair-faced saint.” Despite his confidence in Howard’s guilt, Wilson is brought back to the problems of interpretation that plagued writers of conduct books and medical treatises, and that are made so manifest in the Essex divorce records and Middleton and Rowley’s play.

On one level, then, Wilson's grotesque description of Howard's death graphically reveals the sexual misconduct that her bodily narrative was believed by many to have concealed. Her reproductive body literally turns against her, and in doing so, corrects the error made by the divorce court when it proclaimed her a virgin. However, Howard's words (however refuted) and body (however grotesque and abject) cannot be summarily dismissed or ignored by writers of history. In order to discredit the Jacobean court (and through it, the British monarchy in general), the histories need something to reveal, overwrite, and narrate against: the poison within the cup, the secrets of the citadel, the deception and corruption of women's speech and the female body. As one of the "easily discovered" parts of the political body that reveals the "secret and hidden" corruption of James I's reign, Howard's bodily narrative structures these accounts of the Jacobean court by providing a story against and through which historians and publishers can produce critiques of the Stuart monarchy. At the same time, the possibility that women might effectively feign virginity lingers in these texts, despite the efforts of historians to retrospectively "prove" Howard's guilt. By depicting Howard as acting in collaboration with politically powerful men, and as reaping sexual, economic, and political gains from this collaboration, the histories point to the social power inherent in female bodily narratives even as they critique women's abuse of this power.

Both *The Changeling* and the histories attempt to solve the problem of interpretive authority by exposing women's falsification of virginity, but they also reveal the unreliability of their own methods of exposure (since presumably not every woman who faked virginity confessed or died of a symbolically significant uterine disease). Ultimately, the impossibility of determining or even locating virginity in the early modern period forced men to rely on women to represent their reproductive bodies in socially stabilizing ways. Although men feared the

damage false virgins might do to patriarchal society, women's bodily narratives about virginity provided a structure and coherence to this very same system. As these texts demonstrate, male anxiety about the destructive, destabilizing effects of deceptively unchaste women was fueled by the nevertheless crucial role that women's bodies and speech played in shaping and perpetuating patriarchal society.

Notes

¹ Heinemann, Simmons, and Randall were among the earliest critics to point out, with varying degrees of certainty, possible links between Howard's examination by the jury of women and Beatrice-Joanna's virginity test in *The Changeling*. Critics such as Bromham and Bruzzi, Hopkins, and Amster have since put forward more assertive readings of Howard's life and trials as a source for Middleton and Rowley's play, and the connection is now something of a critical commonplace. See Heinemann, 178; Simmons, 154-63; Randall, 362; Bromham and Bruzzi, 18-36; Hopkins, "Beguiling the Master," 152-57; and Amster, 227-28.

² On the connections between female virginity and chastity and patriarchal property arrangements, see Stone, 501-507.

³ Amster, for example, focuses specifically on the ability of the female body "to perform the role of the virgin adequately and believably" (213). Schwarz, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the significance of women's words in determining virginity; although she does discuss women constructing virginity through "performance," she seems primarily concerned with the performance of speech acts, describing virginity as "a speech act that masquerades as a bodily state" (15). This chapter also differs from studies of early modern virginity by scholars such as Jankowski, Kelly, and Leslie, which take as their primary objects of analysis texts that depict women who refuse sex altogether. Instead, I will look at texts in which sexually active women are accused of feigning virginity in order to gain greater control over their place in the "sexual economy" of patriarchal marriage (Jankowski 6), as well as at the larger social and political consequences of false bodily narratives.

⁴ Bellany focuses primarily on how Howard and the other conspirators in the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury were co-opted by early modern "news culture," while Lindley works to recover Howard from a misogynist historical record.

⁵ For more on the role of midwives as medical examiners and interpreters of virginity, see Bicks, 60-93.

⁶ For an overview of the early modern sources for such tests, see Randall, 356-59.

⁷ As Perry points out, Tuke's treatise is particularly noteworthy in the link it makes between the use of cosmetics and other social ills, listed on the title page as murder, poisoning, pride, ambition, adultery, and witchcraft; see Perry, *Literature and Favoritism*, 103. Tuke actually discusses the Overbury murder, although he does not specifically mention Howard's role in it, nor does he mention the Essex divorce (Tuke 49, 52).

⁸ Accounts of the divorce circulated in various manuscript and print forms in the years and decades after the trial. During the 1610s, news and gossip about the trial were mostly found in manuscript forms: newsletters such as those written by John Chamberlain, scribally produced separates, and verse libels, for example. In addition, transcriptions from the official trial records appear in some commonplace books and manuscript collections produced around the time of the Essex divorce and Overbury murder trials. For information on the circulation of news in oral and manuscript forms during the early seventeenth century, see Bellany, 80-114; for information on the manuscript circulation of the trial records from the Essex divorce specifically, see Bellany, 94-95. Later in the century, print accounts of the trial also copied material directly from the court records, which were not published in their entirety until 1709; see, for example, *A True and Historical Relation of the Poysoning of Sir Thomas Overbury* (1651) and *Truth Brought to Light and Discovered by Time; The Narrative History of King James* (1651).

⁹ Gowing argues that early modern legal records "excelled in recording speech," although she acknowledges that they "can hardly be said to be authentic, unmediated texts" (13, 14). Despite the interpretive challenges they pose to scholars, Gowing asserts that legal records nevertheless provide "perhaps our best hope of hearing some of the different languages and discourses that constituted early modern culture" (14).

¹⁰ All quotations from the court records are taken from Howell's *Complete Collection of State Trials* (1816). In parenthetical citations, I will refer to this source as *ST*.

¹¹ During the early modern period, the word "libel" was used to refer to a plea submitted by a plaintiff in a civil or ecclesiastical trial; see *OED*.

¹² As Gowing points out, "It was . . . positively virtuous for respectable women to be unable to speak explicitly about the body and its processes" during the early modern period, "[e]ven in court" (10).

¹³ For competing accounts of the virginity exam, see Lindley, 109-10.

¹⁴ Although it is uncertain how widely Abbot's manuscript would have circulated, his words indicate that he anticipated that his personal account of the trial would eventually become public. He imagined his account as providing "the truth to posterity, when this case shall be rung from Rome gates, or the fact hereafter be questioned" (*ST* 829). Anticipating Catholic ridicule over the ease with which Howard and Essex obtained a divorce, Abbot wanted to make his objections to the verdict clear to "posterity."

¹⁵ Letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, 23 June 1613.

¹⁶ The poems are contained in a commonplace book that is a collection of “prose tracts of a political (or even propagandistic) nature, copies of personal and official letters, records of state trials, copies of official pronouncements and proclamations . . . epigrams, epitaphs, bitter and denunciatory satires, lyric poems and verse epistles” in a variety of different hands (Farmer 7). Many of the entries pertain to topical events such as English colonization efforts in Virginia, Robert Cecil’s death, and the Spanish Match, in addition to the Essex divorce and Overbury murder trials (Farmer 7). In the section of the manuscript devoted to the Essex divorce trial, the poems are accompanied by “a report of the pre-divorce examinations” that is copied almost directly from the official court records (Farmer 13). The section of the records transcribed in the manuscript gives prominence to Abbot’s role in the trial; since the person transcribing the material would have had access to the court records prior to their publication, the manuscript was, for a time, believed to have belonged to Abbot himself, although this is far from certain (Farmer 13, 5). For more on the dating and authorship of the manuscript, see Farmer’s introduction to “Poems from a Seventeenth-Century Manuscript with the Hand of *Robert Herrick*,” 5-19. Most of the poems on the Essex divorce contained in this manuscript can also be found in other manuscript collections, and there is a good possibility that they and others like them may have been recited orally and posted publicly as well; as Bellany demonstrates, manuscript verse libels had a geographically and socio-economically diverse audience. See Bellany, 88, 97-111.

¹⁷ The switch occurs in Chamberlain’s letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, 14 October 1613 (478).

¹⁸ As Bellany notes, at least one early seventeenth-century commonplace book has been found that contains a transcript of James I’s letter (95). The letter is also contained in the same mid-century print accounts that publish other records from the trial (see note 8 above).

¹⁹ Although Howard alone confessed to conspiring to murder Overbury, compared to her lower-class co-conspirators she escaped lightly. She and Carr were imprisoned in the Tower from 1616 until 1621, then released and, in 1624, pardoned. Richard Weston, Anne Turner, Sir Jervis Elwes, and James Franklin were, like Howard and Carr, found guilty of conspiring in the murder, but they were executed.

²⁰ See Heinemann, 178; Simmons, 154-63; Randall, 362; Bromham and Bruzzi, 18-36; Hopkins, “Beguiling the Master,” 156-57; and Haber, 79-80.

²¹ For a reading of the play that examines the political implications of Beatrice-Joanna’s sexuality in the context of early modern rape law and its relationship to inheritance and property rights, see Burks, 145-89.

²² A similarly telling aside occurs when Vermandero speaks of Beatrice-Joanna’s engagement to Alonzo: “He shall be bound to me as fast as this tie / Can hold him; I’ll want my will else.” In an aside, Beatrice-Joanna rejoins, “I shall want mine if you do it” (1.1.225-27). As Burks notes, this exchange reveals the conflict between Beatrice-Joanna’s desire and intention and that of her

father, a conflict that undermines “the family’s sexual and social welfare,” but it also demonstrates Beatrice-Joanna’s ability to conceal her willfulness from the men around her through her actions and speech (164-65).

²³ Malcolmson reads this scene as evidence of the play’s subscription to normative gender hierarchies: “De Flores is . . . the means by which the play reinstates the proper balance between female weakness and male rule” (157). However, as I will argue below, Beatrice-Joanna’s sexual submission to De Flores does not signal a blanket submission to male authority. Moreover, although Malcolmson argues that the roles of mistress and servant reverse themselves when Beatrice-Joanna gives in to De Flores, Beatrice-Joanna continues to refer to him as her servant even after they have sex (see, for example, 5.1.74).

²⁴ On the threat posed to patriarchal society by prolonged virginity, see Jankowski, 6-12; Kelly and Leslie, 16-22; Loughlin, “‘Love’s Friend,’” 834-40; and Schwarz, 16-17.

²⁵ Although she does not discuss the virginity test at length, Haber argues that the “erotic logic” of the play insists “on the coincidence of . . . virgin and whore,” reflecting “a society in which virginity is eroticized” (80, 82).

²⁶ Loughlin argues that virginity “is only certain in the absence wrought from sexual intercourse,” and thus can only be “unequivocally asserted” through virginity tests that enact “symbolic defloration” (*Hymeneutics* 47). Her analysis focuses on virginity in the plays of John Fletcher, but this part of her argument can be usefully applied to the virginity test in *The Changeling* as well.

²⁷ See Garber, 19-38.

²⁸ On the ideal of the enclosed female body, see Stallybrass.

²⁹ Hopkins argues that *The Changeling* unequivocally condemns the performativity that marks Beatrice-Joanna’s deception: “performance becomes openly equated with the immoral mendacity castigated by Puritan opposition to theater when Beatrice-Joanna . . . enacts a staging of virginity—in itself, ironically, a state guaranteed precisely by an *absence* of performance” (“Beguiling the Master” 152). I would argue, however, that texts such as Tuke’s demonstrate the *necessity* of women’s performance of virginity, and that the play’s condemnation of Beatrice-Joanna’s deception is uneasily situated in the context of cultural imperatives that demand that a woman not only “be chaste,” but also “seem chaste.”

³⁰ For a detailed reading of *The Changeling*’s allusions to the Spanish Match, see Bromham and Bruzzi, 37-78. On the Howard family’s religio-political affiliations, see Bromham and Bruzzi, 32; and Lindley, 83.

³¹ On the anti-Spanish, “ardently Protestant” reputation of the Essexians, see Lindley, 83.

³² See Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 95.

³³ See J. Crawford, 135; and Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 61-72, 136-56.

³⁴ Burks, 189. For a less pessimistic reading of the homosocial resolution of *The Changeling*, see Little, 35-36; Stockton, 460; Hopkins, "Beguiling the Master," 158; and Haber, 89-90.

³⁵ Burks, 188.

³⁶ See Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*; and J. Crawford.

³⁷ Bellany astutely notes how "old scandals" were reappropriated "for new and increasingly radical political ends during the 1640s and 1650s," but his focus is primarily on the Overbury murder, and so he does not consider these texts' politicization of Howard's virginity narrative; see Bellany, 261-78. Lindley uses both *The Changeling* and the Civil War-era histories to critically reassess the Essex divorce and Overbury murder scandals, but although he briefly notes the Parliamentary sympathies of some of the histories' authors (2), he does not give much sustained attention to how representations and interpretations of Howard might have been impacted by changing political contexts in the decades following the trials.

³⁸ The text published in 1643 as *The Five Yeares of King James* circulated in manuscript possibly as early as 1616, through the 1620s or 1630s. However, since this text seems to have been extremely rare in its manuscript form, and because it was republished as part of a compilation in 1651, I include it as part of my discussion of Civil War-era print accounts of Howard. See Bellany, 96-97, 262-63.

³⁹ See Arthur Wilson, 56, 57, 68.

⁴⁰ The prophecy is also cited, with slightly less explication, in Parker's *The True Portraiture of the Kings of England* (1650), 39.

⁴¹ Schwarz points out that doubts about whether Elizabeth I was "really" a virgin were raised during the early modern period and continue to be explored by historians, fiction writers, and filmmakers today (4-5). To take a recent example, Tom Hooper's mini-series *Elizabeth I* (HBO, 2006) opens with Elizabeth being examined by a male doctor, who proclaims her "virgo intacta." However, the film also depicts the queen engaging in physically passionate relationships with Robert Dudley and Robert Devereux (father of the Robert Devereux who was Howard's first husband), thus calling both her virginity and male knowledge of it into question.

Chapter 3: Pregnancy, Interiority, and the Circulation of Knowledge in Early Modern Medical Treatises and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

During the first half of the seventeenth century, medical treatises often framed the conception of healthy offspring as a matter of national importance, each unborn child imagined as a prospective subject who would enhance the authority of England's male rulers, as well as that of its biological father. However, despite its importance to the perpetuation of patriarchal order at multiple social levels, pregnancy presented serious interpretive problems for the medical, political, and familial authorities who policed the female reproductive bodies that were supposed to be vehicles for the continuation of male socio-political power. No medical treatise that touched on the female reproductive body was complete without a long list of ways to determine pregnancy, but these treatises were also quick to point out that there was no such thing as a sure sign of pregnancy, since any "symptom" could potentially be mistaken or misread. Moreover, these texts frequently instructed readers seeking knowledge about a woman's pregnancy to rely on signs that would have to be reported by the woman herself, signs predicated on a woman's narratives about her own body. This chapter will examine the implications of women's epistemological authority over the pregnant body in John Ford's play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633) and in early modern medical treatises from the early Stuart and Civil War eras. As these texts reveal, pregnancy was a site of male-female interpretive competition over meaning and representation. In them, men seek to consolidate interpretive authority, but they are also forced to admit gaps and limits in their knowledge, points at which the female body (particularly the pregnant body) refuses to clearly signify, and men must rely on women's potentially unreliable bodily narratives to create somatic meaning. Although male characters in the play and male medical professionals attempt to treat the pregnant body as a mirror in which they can view

and confirm their patriarchal identities and authority, the female reproductive body proves opaque and evasive, undermining men's desire for it to reflect the strength of the patriarchal system and their own powerful roles in it.

Prior to its tragic conclusion, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* entertains the dangerous notion that women are the sole possessors of accurate knowledge about pregnancy, and that they are able to use this knowledge to misrepresent their own and other women's bodies, thereby concealing illicit female sexual behavior from men. The play casts doubt on the ability of men to correctly read and interpret women's pregnant bodies by showing Annabella's pregnancy, the result of her incestuous affair with her brother Giovanni, to be a source of constant confusion to male characters; Annabella's tutoress, however, easily and accurately diagnoses the pregnancy and assists in concealing it. Throughout the play, Giovanni attempts to idealize his relationship with his sister by emphasizing the more easily poeticized heart rather than the maternal womb as the site of their union, and during the play's bloody climax he murders Annabella and effectively dissects her, displaying her heart on the point of his knife as a sign that is both grotesquely corporeal and neo-platonically symbolic. However, despite Giovanni's interpretive posturing, his grisly emblem only increases the confusion of his onlookers. Silenced by death, Annabella's body continues to resist male interpretive authority; her heart, like her pregnant womb, refuses to signify, and men's attempts to speak for her and impose meaning on her body are at best incomplete.

The implications of a woman's ability to construct a narrative about her pregnant body's interior through her silence or her speech are further explored in the male-authored medical treatises that proliferated during the first half of the seventeenth century, texts in which many critics read a backlash against female authority. Laura Gowing argues that the "opaque mystery"

that women's bodies presented during the early modern period resulted in increased policing and surveillance of the female body by communities seeking to uphold patriarchal order (112, 142). Similarly, in her reading of Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* (1651), Mary Fissell argues that this treatise attempts to shift representational authority over the female reproductive body towards men.¹ Although Eve Keller notes that "[a] woman's own expression of her somatic experience . . . was . . . the best register of her condition" (134), she goes on to argue that subjectivity was ultimately denied to pregnant women by theories of embryology that figured the fetus or embryo as the autonomous, active, implicitly male subject.² While these critics read the pregnant mother as passive and silenced by male socio-medical discourse, I would argue that medical treatises actually reveal the potency of the female epistemological authority that they attempt to suppress, an authority unleashed by the opacity of the pregnant body. Despite men's fears that women would deliberately misrepresent their bodies, male knowledge frequently hinged on the ways women chose to interpret the unstable physical indicators of pregnancy, and women could use these bodily narratives to usurp male authority over the female body. Women's exclusive knowledge about conception, and their ability to conceal, misrepresent, or even terminate their pregnancies, gave them a dangerous power over both the patriarchal family and the patriarchal state that the family helped found.

1. The Body on Display: Anatomy, Medical Writing, and Pregnancy

During the early modern period, both in England and on the European continent, male medical scholars were increasingly determined to see for themselves the hidden spaces of the human body in general, and the female body in particular, focusing more on the importance of knowledge gained through witnessing and performing anatomical dissections, and relying less

heavily on classical authorities. In 1315, the first documented postclassical public dissection was performed in Bologna by Mondino de' Luzzi, professor of surgery from the late 1290s until 1326, providing a model for European dissections which was followed for roughly the next two hundred years. In these early dissections, the professor of anatomy, elevated above the proceedings in a visibly authoritative position, would read aloud from an anatomy text, while a surgeon, or demonstrator, cut and handled the body, and an ostensor used a wand to indicate the parts to which the professor referred.³ In the 1530s and 1540s, Andreas Vesalius performed before increasingly larger audiences in the anatomy theaters of Padua and Bologna, but unlike Mondino, Vesalius did not confine himself to an elevated seat overlooking the corpse being dissected. Instead, he began a trend in which the anatomist was the central live performer in the spectacle of dissection, taking on the roles of demonstrator and ostensor himself and improvising or memorizing his lectures rather than reading them aloud.⁴ Unlike previous scholars, who had used dissection to illustrate a pre-existing text, Vesalius's performance-oriented, improvisational style made the body on the dissection table the primary source of knowledge, and the male anatomist the primary interpreter of that knowledge for the assembled audience.

As I will demonstrate, many of the medical treatises published in English in the seventeenth century reflect this desire for first-hand, practical knowledge, often stressing the importance of being able to see (or at least visualize) the interior of the human body. Aware that most of their readers would not have access to a dissected corpse, the authors and editors of these treatises disseminate anatomical knowledge to a wider, more diverse reading public through the vivid descriptions and illustrations contained in their texts, and in doing so they also disseminate the fantasy that the interior of the female body, so opaque and confusing to the unpracticed, uneducated eye, is actually an open book, capable of being observed, catalogued, and understood

by male authority. As Jonathan Sawday notes, “anatomy was a science of *seeing*, and thus knowing and controlling the body, in order to harness its appetites and desires” (219). Long before sonograms and over-the-counter pregnancy tests, medical treatises offered readers a way to decipher the hidden secrets of the female reproductive body’s interior, and in doing so they offered the female body as a mirror in which men could view and consolidate their own socio-medical authority.

However, the ability of male writers and scholars to “harness” the female reproductive body through a “science of seeing” was limited by expectations about female modesty that frequently prevented male physicians and surgeons from examining women’s reproductive organs or attending women in childbirth; these jobs fell instead to female midwives, who as a result gained something of a monopoly over practical, first-hand knowledge of the female reproductive body.⁵ Anatomists were also limited in their access to the female body because they traditionally dissected only the bodies of executed criminals. Since women made up a very small percentage of executed criminals, and since the execution of pregnant women was almost always delayed until after they had given birth, opportunities to observe the dissection of a pregnant human cadaver were exceptionally rare.⁶ Moreover, even if an anatomist was able to dissect a pregnant body, he still would not fulfill the fantasy of absolute control over its meaning, since, as Luke Wilson points out, even the corpse on the dissecting table was not completely without epistemological authority. Since no two bodies are identical, the dissected body dictated what could and could not be said about it by the anatomy professor: “[the anatomist] responds to the material constraints of the cadaver’s particularity. It is as though the cadaver itself appropriates the text in the performance through which it provides an account of itself” (L. Wilson 83). The particularity of an individual body ultimately preceded anything written about

the body in general by anatomical scholars, thus shifting the balance of authority from male scholar to female/feminized corpse and making the generalized knowledge contained in anatomy texts of questionable usefulness.

Furthermore, as I will show, conception was primarily ascertained not from the general precepts of anatomical knowledge, but from the physical symptoms of individual women, many of which were not readily apparent to an outside observer, but instead had to be revealed by the pregnant woman herself. Thus, although Gowing argues that “increasingly detailed” anatomical treatises and illustrations promoted “textual knowledge, dissection and medical observation over the more intuitive physical practice of midwives” (112), in doing so these texts also called attention to the limits of their knowledge, to the points (particularly those concerning pregnancy) where they had to cede ground to women’s bodily narratives. As both *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* and early modern medical treatises show, male writers feared that women could and would use their exclusive knowledge about the female reproductive body to knowingly conceal illicit pregnancies, either by concocting false interpretations of physical signs or by simply refusing to report the indicators of conception that only they were able to perceive. However, although women’s ability to lie about their bodies in order to deceive men threatened patriarchal authority, women’s refusal to speak about their bodies at all posed an equally serious threat, since it cut off even the limited access men had to the interior secrets of the living pregnant body.

This tension between male socio-medical authority and female bodily narratives is evident in *The Birth of Mankind*, the first printed English treatise on obstetrics and gynecology. Thomas Raynalde’s translation of Eucharius Rosslin’s 1513 German treatise (which itself was based on a third-hand manuscript version of a second-century work by Soranus), was published in at least fourteen editions between 1540 and 1654, making it the most frequently reprinted

work of its kind during the first half of the seventeenth century.⁷ Raynalde frames his vernacular translation as a service to “this noble Realme of Englande,” imagining his book as saving English women (and the future English citizens they will conceive, carry, and give birth to) from the ignorance that is the lot of even “wise” and “good” female authorities: “it may supplie the roome and place of a good Midwife, and advise them many tymes of sundry causes, chaunces, and remedies, wherein peradventure right wise women and good Midwives shalbe full ignoraunt” (14). In his “Prologue to the women Readers,” Raynalde defends his translation’s inclusion of a section on anatomy which was not part of earlier Latin or English versions of Rosslin: “[T]ake it as the foundation and grounde, by the perceiverance whereof, your witts and understanding shall be illuminated and lightned, the better to understand how every thing commeth to passe within your bodyes, in the tyme of conception, of bearing, and of birth” (3). In this passage, it is up to the male scholar to “illuminate” the understanding of his women readers, who would otherwise be ignorant of the reproductive processes occurring within their own bodies. Raynalde promises to describe “all the inwarde partes of women . . . not only in wordes, but also in lively and expresse figures . . . as though yee were present at the cutting open of Anathomy of a dead woman” (3). Although Raynalde suggests that female readers can use his text to obtain the knowledge of the anatomy theater, the “as though” is significant, reminding women that they have only second-hand access to this privileged male realm, and that their knowledge of anatomy will always be mediated by the words of men.⁸ Moreover, by telling women readers that knowledge of the “inwarde partes” of a “dead woman” will help to illuminate the workings of “your bodyes,” he places his living readers in the passive position of the dead woman being dissected, even as he offers them partial access to the active gaze of the male anatomist.

However, although Raynalde's *Birth of Mankind* depicts male physicians' knowledge of the female body as superior to that of women, this knowledge is mediated by the need for men to rely for their interpretations on women's accounts of the feelings, changes, and condition of their bodies, as well as by men's lack of access to the bodies of live pregnant women and the scenes of their childbirth. In his introduction to a section on how to detect conception, Raynalde continues to emphasize the superiority of male medical knowledge: "Now wil we shew . . . how to know whether the woman be conceived or no, according to the minde of right expert Phisitians" (191). However, the signs of pregnancy Raynalde lists demonstrate that the mind of the physician is not sufficient to diagnose a conception; instead, the physician's knowledge must be supplemented by the woman's bodily narrative. Many of these signs hinge on tracking changes in a woman's body: "First the flowres issue not in so great quantitie as they are wont, but wax lesse and lesse[.] . . . Also the brests begin to wax rounder, harder, and stiffer then they were wont to be: the woman shall long after certaine things otherwise then she was used to doe before that time" (192). Diagnosing pregnancy thus requires an intimate knowledge of the "before" or pre-pregnancy condition of a woman's menstrual flow, breasts, and cravings, as well as an awareness of any changes in these conditions, knowledge that would most reliably be gained from the report of the woman in question. Other symptoms of pregnancy rely on a woman's feelings, a kind of knowledge which, again, must be transmitted to observers by the woman: "the [pregnant] woman *feeleth* her matrix very fastly and closly shut[.] . . . [I]f after [a] drinke [of wine, water, and honey] she *feeles* great paine, gnawing and tumbling in her belly, then bee yee sure that she is conceived" (192-93, my emphasis). Such diagnostics rely heavily on women's own knowledge of their bodies and on their willingness to report this knowledge accurately, an epistemological

foundation that Raynalde's descriptions, in erasing women's actual words, work to suppress so as to promote the authority of the male practitioner.

Just as the physician's knowledge of a woman's body is mediated by her bodily narrative, so is the transmission of the medical knowledge contained in Raynalde's book similarly mediated by the speech of women. When Raynalde imagines *Birth of Mankinde* in use, he describes a scene in which the book's knowledge is transmitted to the midwife in the birthing room by "honorable Ladies, and other worshypfull Gentlewomen" who "haunt women in their labours, carying with them this booke in their hands, and causing such part of it as doth chiefly concerne the same purpose, to bee read before the Midwife, and the rest of the women then being present, whereby oft times, they all have been put in remembrance of that, wherewith the labouring woman hath been greatly comforted" (14-15). In this scenario, women bring and read the book to the midwife, and women decide which parts of the book should be read depending on the condition of the laboring woman. Such a scenario seems rife for improvisation; just as the body of the corpse on the dissecting table determined what the anatomist could or could not say about it, regardless of the prepared notes or printed text from which he was lecturing, so the body of the woman in childbirth and the observations of the women attending her would determine which parts, if any, of Raynalde's text were useful, and which might need to be ignored or supplemented. The ability of readers to improvise on the book's knowledge becomes a source of anxiety when Raynalde considers ways that his text might be abused, worrying "that some ill disposed person should wickedly abuse such medicines as be here declared for a good purpose, to some devilish and lewde use: What I meane by the lewde use of them, they that have understanding, right soone will perceive" (11). Although Raynalde refuses to specify the misuses to which his book could be put (which, considering the book's scope, might well include

procuring an abortion or concealing a pregnancy), he cannot deny that those with “understanding” of the workings of women’s bodies could easily reach their own conclusions. He expresses hope that no copies of his book “shall fall in any such persons handling” (12), but the dissemination of *The Birth of Mankind* in print makes ensuring this impossible; as Raynalde himself realizes, the circulation of his book, as well as the applications and interpretations to which it will be put when it is read and discussed by women behind closed doors, evade his authorial control.

Like *The Birth of Mankind*, Jacques Guillemeau’s *The Happy Deliverie of Women*, published in Thomas Hatfield’s English translation first in 1612 and again in 1635, emphasizes the superior knowledge of male medical practitioners while also revealing a competitive, but also collaborative, relationship between the male-authored printed text and female bodily narratives. The tension between male medical knowledge and women’s speech is heightened by Guillemeau’s status, proclaimed prominently on the title page, as surgeon to the king of France, a relationship which suggests that his authority is sanctioned not only by his medical credentials, but also by his political connections, thus linking the control over women’s bodies asserted by the text with the patriarchal political authority of male monarchs. In order to bolster this sense of patriarchal authority over the female body, Guillemeau’s introduction contrasts the limited knowledge of women (even midwives) with the expansive, life-saving abilities of the male surgeon, who sweeps in to save the day in cases where birth is especially difficult and dangerous, and whose medical skill is often frustrated by delays resulting from “the wilfulnesse of the kinffolks, or obstinacy of the Midwives”—in other words, from women who are reluctant to relinquish medical authority to a male practitioner (2v).

However, although Guillemeau's "Epistle Introductory to the Reader" sharply distinguishes between competent male and bumbling female practitioners, Hatfield's "Translator's Preface" identifies similarities between women and learned physicians, since both possess secret knowledge that they guard jealously:

If therefore it be thought prejudiciall, wither to the literarie common-wealth of Physicke, that I have exported and made common a commoditie, which the learned would have had private to themselves: or if I have been offensive to Women, in prostituting and divulging that, which they would not have come to open light, and which beside cannot be exprest in such modest termes, as are fit for the virginitie of pen & paper, and the white sheetes of their Child-bed. I must (as well as I can) defend my selfe from these imputations, and shew my care to keep both learning and modestie illibate, and inviolable. (2v)

Hatfield worries that both physicians and women might take offense at a publication that makes "common" a "commoditie" (the female body) over which both groups wish to consolidate "private" control. The terminology he applies to the concerns of physicians, however, ("common-wealth," "exported," "commoditie") suggest that their primary concern is ensuring the economic well-being and social status guaranteed by exclusive access to anatomical knowledge. By contrast, when speaking of women's concerns Hatfield switches to more overtly sexualized language ("prostituting," "modest," "virginitie"), thus implying that women fear more for their sexual reputations than for their status as medical practitioners. Nevertheless, the passage does call attention to women's epistemological authority, since "the virginitie of pen & paper" and "the white sheetes" of "Child-bed" reference bodies of anatomical and medical knowledge (the detection of virginity and the rituals and procedures of the birthing room) over which, as I demonstrate in chapters 2 and 4, women exercise interpretive control. Thus, even as Hatfield attempts to contrast the professional threat feared by men with the sexual threat feared by women, his language also brings to mind points at which female sexual knowledge threatens male professional authority.

The preface's word play uneasily situates these subjects as (barely) fit for print, anticipating arguments that to bring such matters into "open light" will require sexually explicit language that will contaminate the paper it is printed on and, by extension, the minds of readers. Hatfield counters such arguments by paradoxically promising to keep both medical knowledge and women's modesty "illibate" (from the Italian *illibato*, or chaste) and "inviolable," even as he lays the secrets of women's bodies open in the acts of translation and publication. He reconciles this paradox by promising to couch these secrets in discrete language: "I have endeavoured to be as private and retired, in expressing all the passages in this kind as possibly I could" (3). Hatfield apparently means to intentionally lose something in translation, to obscure his descriptions of women's reproductive bodies with "private," "retired" language that will only truly make sense to an audience already in the know. In constructing such an audience, Hatfield draws midwives and other women into an exclusive medical cadre that also includes male physicians and surgeons. Hatfield thus targets women as ideal readers and consumers of his book, a categorization that assumes they have the prior medical knowledge (and the authority that comes with it) that an informed reading of his book requires.

When it comes, moreover, to *obtaining* knowledge about the pregnant female body, *Happy Deliverie* sets up a hierarchy of sources in which women's bodily narratives are paramount. Unlike many early modern medical treatises that focus on women's reproductive bodies, Guillemeau begins not with an anatomical discourse, but with practical advice on how "to know whether a woman be with childe, or no" (2). The title of this first chapter, with its homonymic play on "know"/"no," suggests the easily negated quality of knowledge about pregnancy, and the chapter begins with a warning to young surgeons against making hasty diagnoses: "For there is nothing more ridiculous, then to assure a woman that shee is with childe;

and afterward, that her naturall sicknesse, or store of water should come from her: and instead of a childe, some windie matter should breake from her, and so her belly fall, and grow flat againe: which hath hapned unto many men, that have beene well esteemed, both for their learning, and experience” (2). By placing his chapter on diagnosing pregnancy at the beginning of his book, and by emphasizing the risks such diagnoses entail to the professional reputations of male practitioners, Guillemeau implies that being able to accurately determine pregnancy serves as a kind of high bar for ranking medical skill. Guillemeau thus puts male surgeons in the perilous position of having to prove their competency by correctly deciphering the bodies that most resist interpretation: those of pregnant women.

As in *The Birth of Mankind*, however, a man’s ability to diagnose pregnancy (and thus ensure his reputation as a medical expert) is largely contingent on women’s feelings, on the ways they experience and interpret the interior of their own bodies and report those experiences to men. Like Raynalde, Guillemeau does not acknowledge his reliance on women’s bodily narratives, but his methods of diagnosis reveal the ways female speech determines male knowledge even as he works to erase this speech. Guillemeau lists four categories of pregnancy indicators: those “collected from the Husband, from the Wife, from the Child, and from the Midwife” (3). Although he begins with “signs . . . taken from the Man,” which are obtained from a man’s account of his experience of sexual intercourse (3), Guillemeau asserts that such signs are less “manifest and certaine” than those “signes which are taken from the Woman” (4). These latter signs include a variety of physical sensations that a woman might experience during or immediately after sex, such as feelings of “yawning,” “stretching,” “shaking,” “quivering,” “chilnesse,” “paine,” “rumbling or disquietnesse in the neather belly,” and “tickling,” none of which can be determined by an outside observer, but must instead be described by the woman

herself (4). Other signs, such as vomiting and the analysis of urine, are more easily discernible, but none of the signs “taken from the Woman” are definitive on their own; one must analyze “all these signes joyned together,” including the signs that only the women themselves can detect, in order to reach a diagnosis (4). Even then, Guillemeau warns, “these signes [from the woman] are not so certaine, the truest and surest are those which are collected from the child, when he begins to stirre and moove” (6). Guillemeau performs an interesting maneuver here by claiming that the “truest and surest” signs come from the fetus, which he genders male, rather than from the mother, but in practice the subtle, delicate quickening of the fetus, which Guillemeau compares to “the stirring of a flie when he flieth,” would first be detected by the mother, who would then describe and interpret these feelings (or not) for other interested parties. The final category of signs are those “perceived by the Midwife, who putting up her finger into the wombe to touch the inner orifice thereof, if the woman be with child she shall finde it close shut” (7). Like quickening, Guillemeau designates the midwife’s manual examination as eliciting “certaine” signs of pregnancy (7), but again, these signs must be narrated to men by a woman; Guillemeau does not even consider the possibility that a male practitioner might touch a woman’s genitals to obtain information about pregnancy. Thus, the knowledge about pregnancy upon which rests the medical authority of male surgeons, and the patriarchal authority of husbands and fathers, is created or withheld by what women choose to say about the female reproductive body.

While these earlier treatises are relatively subtle in their erasure of the role female bodily narratives play in the diagnosis of pregnancy, John Sadler’s *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse* (1636) and James Rueff’s *The Expert Midwife* (1637) more forcefully emphasize the risks posed by women’s control over the reproductive body and argue for the suppression of female

authority. These texts depict women's knowledge about the female body as at best faulty and in need of correction, and at worst dangerous to the health of women and their children, and they insist that women's reproductive bodies require constant male oversight, even as they reveal the limits of such surveillance. In *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse*, Sadler acknowledges the role that women's speech might play in diagnosis by emphasizing the need for women to "divulge and publish" information about their bodies (A5v), but he sees this role as purely negative in practice, since he assumes that women's "ignorance and modestie" will cause them to keep silent (A5), thus preventing the male physician from effectively doing his job. As an antidote, Sadler promises that his book will serve as a mirror in which a woman "may see her selfe in private" and thus understand "the nature, cause, signes, prognosticks and cure" of the ailments that afflict her (A5v-A6). However, Sadler hastily goes on to caution women against taking their reproductive health entirely into their own hands; the knowledge women gain from his book must be used only to aid them in consulting a physician, "least by the misapplying of the remedy you augment your disease" (A6). In other words, although a woman may consult Sadler's book in private, she is not to keep her knowledge to herself, and she may not use the knowledge she gains from her reading to decide on her own course of action, but instead must defer to the judgment of a male practitioner.

The danger of female self-diagnosis is elaborated in Sadler's chapter on "the signes of Conception," which opens with a diatribe against women's misreading of their bodies:

Ignorance makes women become murderers to the fruit of their owne bodies. For many having conceived, and thereupon finding their bodies to bee out of course, and not knowing rightly the cause, doe either run to the shop of their own conceit and take what they thinke fit; or else as the custome is they send, to the Physitian for cure, and he perceiving not the cause of their grieffe (seeing that no certaine judgement can bee given by the urine) prescribes what hee thinks best, peradventure some strong diureticall, or catharticall potion whereby the conception is destroyed. (143)

According to Sadler, ignorant women interpret their stopped menstrual courses as a disease rather than a pregnancy, and in attempting to procure a remedy may inadvertently (or intentionally?) cause an abortion instead. Although this passage also reveals the limits of the knowledge of physicians, who are equally capable of misdiagnosis, it is the women who are labeled “murderers” and who are held responsible for the destruction of their unborn children. In *The Expert Midwife*, Rueff also takes up the issue of abortions caused by confusing pregnancy with reproductive diseases, but for Rueff the danger lies not in women’s ignorance, but in their intentional misuse of knowledge and misrepresentation of their bodies. According to Rueff, women who engage in sex outside of marriage are all too adept at reading the signs of their own pregnancies: “When first being deflowred . . . they have perceived some alteration to be caused in them, as variable appetites, a loathing of their accustomed meate and drinke, continuall vomiting, dispositions to parbrake [vomit] in the morning, passions and paines of the heart, swoonings, paines of the teeth” (59-60). After diagnosing themselves, such immoral women embark on a course of self-treatment that begins with over-tightening their corset laces and, if this fails, proceeds to engaging the aid of “some old Witch” (60). Rueff describes women’s requests for abortifacients as being couched in coded language: the pregnant women will ask about a “cure and remedie of the stopping of their Termes,” and the “old Witch,” being “not ignorant of the matter,” will understand what these women really mean and will assist them in terminating their pregnancies (60).

In the paranoid scenario Rueff lays out, knowledge about the detection and termination of pregnancy is held exclusively by women and concealed from male (and even female) authority figures such as “Fathers, Masters, and Mistresses of the house” (61). Moreover, Rueff fears that women will circulate this illicit knowledge to others, thereby setting off an epidemic of sexual

immorality and the abortions necessary to conceal it: “they impart and communicate likewise those murdering arts and cruell practices to others, that thereby many murders of sillie Infants are committed” (61). In contrast, the signs of pregnancy that Rueff, billed on the title page as a “learned and expert Chirurgion,” disseminates in his treatise are uncertain and tentative: “Although it be a hard thing to know the true conception of women, yet we may give a conjecture by many signes” (181). Unlike the women Rueff discusses earlier in the treatise, who seem to know instantly when they have become pregnant, Rueff and his readers must rely on “conjecture.” Women’s knowledge about pregnancy, spread orally through coded language within a female community like those discussed in chapter 4, thus highlights the deficiencies of male medical writing such as *The Expert Midwife*. Moreover, women’s ability to take advantage of male ignorance threatens patriarchal order on a broader socio-religious scale, requiring the heightened vigilance of “godly and religious Magistrate[s]” who must “observe & prevent all these things” (61). Rueff’s treatise, however, gives these magistrates little information that would guide their observations and enable them to successfully detect the conception or destruction of an illicit pregnancy.

Interestingly, Rueff’s diatribe against women’s ability to conceal and misrepresent their pregnancies comes not in his chapter on “signes of conception” (181), but in an earlier chapter that discusses “the Condition of the Infant in the wombe” (58). More anatomically descriptive than diagnostic, this chapter concludes with a detailed woodcut of the female reproductive organs featuring a uterus that has been cut open to reveal the fetus it contains (63). Such illustrations amount to a kind of wishful thinking that is belied by the text, a desire on the part of male medical practitioners (and patriarchal authority in general) for such an impossibly clear-cut view of the female reproductive body’s interior. Rueff’s treatise insists upon the importance of

anatomy to the midwife's practice, arguing that without this particular brand of knowledge, a midwife will be unable to help the women in her care: "For as a blind man, which is deprived of the benefit of the light, will set forth no excellent and artificial worke: even so a Midwife, ignorant of these Precepts, shall not be able in doubtfull and dangerous cases to discharge her duty" (44). Without knowledge of anatomy, Rueff argues, midwives are as good as blind, but Rueff's insistence on the superiority of formal male medical education over orally-transmitted female knowledge is belied elsewhere in his treatise, when, as demonstrated above, women's narratives dictate what men can and cannot "see."

Like Sadler, Rueff describes the information in his book, specifically its anatomical descriptions and illustrations, as "a Looking-glasse" (44, 46), but one might question precisely what and who is being "reflected" in these woodcuts and treatises. Although male authors assume that women will gaze into them in order to supplement their imperfect understanding of their own bodies, these authors also attempt to convey through their texts the reassuring image of their own patriarchal authority over the female body, which women's narrative control over reproductive knowledge threatens to undermine. In John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, the threat posed to patriarchal authority by women's bodies and words, as well as men's desire for the female body to mirror their patriarchal authority back to them, is examined through the incestuous relationship between siblings Giovanni and Annabella, an affair which results in an illicit pregnancy. Throughout the play, but particularly during its bloody climax, male characters attempt to look within the female body in order to define and affirm their own identities, but the female body stubbornly refuses easy interpretation, and male speech proves unequal to the task of uncovering the body's secrets. Instead, men must rely on women's evasive, potentially

unreliable bodily narratives to reveal the hidden corporeal knowledge on which patriarchal authority rests.

2. Hearts, Wombs, and Knives: Anatomizing the Female Body in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

'Tis Pity She's a Whore opens with the return home to Parma of Giovanni, a young scholar who has been attending the university in Bologna. Much has been made of the way Giovanni engages in classical scholarly debates over the ethics of incest with his tutor the Friar; critics have argued that Giovanni's theological, philosophical, and rhetorical education have given him a misguided confidence in his own ability to justify his actions and a Faust-like disregard for God's superior judgment.⁹ Less frequently noted is the fact that, during the early modern period, Bologna was one of the first and foremost universities to include anatomy as part of its medical curriculum.¹⁰ While some critics of the play have commented on the way that Giovanni effectively "dissects" his sister in attempting to reveal the truth about their affair, little has been written about the gendered epistemological struggle, which I outlined in the previous section, that is implicit in the play's allusions to anatomy.¹¹ As I will argue, Giovanni seeks self-knowledge and control over his own fate and identity through his sexual and verbal mastery of his sister Annabella's body. However, the female reproductive body persistently resists his and other men's attempts to know it and control its meaning, and even more overtly than in the medical treatises, male knowledge of the mysterious space of the pregnant womb is ultimately bounded by the words women choose or refuse to speak about it. By the end of the play, Giovanni has rejected the womb as a potential site of male discursive authority and instead penetrates Annabella's heart with his dagger, attempting to impregnate it with significance through his masculine speech.¹² Both here and elsewhere, Giovanni tries to substitute the

poeticized heart for the sinful corporeality of the womb, but ultimately both Annabella's heart and her womb refuse to signify in a way that would relieve patriarchal anxiety about the female reproductive body, and the Cardinal's empty interpretive platitudes provide a glib, unsatisfying conclusion to the tragedy.

In the first scene of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Giovanni grounds his defense of his incestuous desire for his sister through reference to the female reproductive body, arguing that their shared point of origin (their mother's womb) would make their love for each other *more* lawful and natural, rather than less: "Say that we had one father, say one womb / (Curse to my joys!) gave both us life and birth; / Are we not therefore each to other bound / So much the more by nature? By the links / Of blood, of reason? Nay, if you will have't, / Even of religion, to be ever one, / One soul, one flesh, one love, one heart, one all?" (1.1.28-34). Giovanni draws on the neo-platonic language of spiritual unity and "oneness" to incorporate his sister into himself, thus gaining mastery over the social customs governing "reason" and "religion," but these bonds are cemented and even legitimated through the physical connections of "blood" and "flesh." Thus, although Giovanni begins by crediting both their father and their mother as shared sites of origin, his emphasis on his physical links with Annabella places more importance on the mother, who is referred to in exclusively corporeal terms ("one womb"), than on the father, whose role as progenitor is less overtly physical (and, as I discuss in chapter 5, less verifiable).

However, even as Giovanni uses his mother's womb as the lynchpin of his argument, an argument through which he seeks to locate, define, and augment his and Annabella's interdependent social and ethical identities, his speech also reveals the destabilizing effect that the womb has on his defense. He begins confidently, conceding established facts as though they were merely rhetorical possibilities ("Say we had one father, say one womb . . . gave both us life

and birth”), but his progress towards his triumphantly “logical” conclusion is arrested by the word “womb.” On speaking that word, he interrupts himself violently, cursing as a *barrier* to his “joys” the womb that, outside of his parenthetical interjection, he claims is proof of the legitimacy of his desire. Although Giovanni attempts to find in the womb a symbol of neo-platonic unity, and thus frame his desire for Annabella as spiritual rather than sexual, the womb also forces him to acknowledge the corporeal implications of his relationship with his sister, and to curse the maternal body that makes the physical consummation of his “joy” sinful in a way that his logic cannot entirely dispute. Throughout this speech, Giovanni shifts uneasily back and forth between the masculine/rational/spiritual and the feminine/physical, moving from “father” to “womb,” from “nature” and “blood” to “reason” and “religion,” and from “soul” to “flesh.” He ends by replacing the maternal womb with the neo-platonic heart, a symbol that constructs a physical connection between him and Annabella even as it evades the sexually troubling female reproductive body.

In a similar evasion, when confessing his love and presenting his case to his sister, Giovanni drops the reference to the womb around which he had attempted to structure his argument to the Friar. Instead, he substitutes references to other body parts that are more conventional to the language of courtly love, attempting to woo his sister through elaborate praise of her physical beauty:

Such a pair of stars
As are thine eyes would, like Promethean fire,
If gently glanced, give life to senseless stones.
...
The lily and the rose, most sweetly strange,
Upon your dimpled cheeks do strive for change.
Such lips would tempt a saint; such hands as those
Would make an anchorite lascivious.
...
If you would see a beauty more exact

Than art can counterfeit or nature frame,
Look in your glass and there behold your own. (1.2.197-207)

As Sawday demonstrates, poetic blazoning of the female body, such as that attempted by Giovanni in his catalogue of Annabella's charms, was ideologically similar to the dissections taking place in early modern anatomy theaters, since both involved men demonstrating their mastery over the female/feminized body: "Just as the courtiers relished the opportunity to demonstrate their wit over and above the female body [in poetic blazons], so the physicians and anatomists could consume bodies—particularly female bodies—in front of an admiring, and largely male audience" (212).¹³ Giovanni urges Annabella to use a mirror to learn the truth about her beauty, but the body that Giovanni wants Annabella to see reflected back to her is one that has been taken apart, reassembled, and given meaning by male poetic intellect. In constructing this image of Annabella, Giovanni has also used his sister's body to create a preferred image of himself, similar to the anatomical looking glasses in the medical texts. Gazing into the magic mirror of the blazoned female body, Giovanni can see himself not as a willfully arrogant, incestuous sinner, but as a conventional lover helpless in the face of his beloved's eyes, cheeks, lips, and hands, which have the power to seduce even saints and anchorites, as well as to "give life to senseless stones."

Annabella, however, does not immediately fall into the role that her brother has constructed for her; her blazoned body is not passive and silent but talks back, teasingly interrupting Giovanni's poetic outpourings: "Fie upon 'ee!," "D'ee mock me, or flatter me?," "Oh, you are a trim youth!" (1.2.199, 204, 208). In response, Giovanni gives her his dagger and urges her to cut out his heart to prove the truth of his love:

GIOVANNI: Rip up my bosom; there thou shalt behold
A heart in which is writ the truth I speak.
Why stand 'ee?

ANNABELLA: Are you earnest?
 GIOVANNI: Yes, most earnest.
 You cannot love?
 ANNABELLA: Whom? (1.2.210-13)

Here Giovanni, as the courtly lover, offers up his own body for dissection and inspection and places Annabella in the role of anatomist, but in doing so he frames the discussion so that it centers on his own masculine heart rather than on his sister's sexualized female body, which has eluded his attempts at linguistic mastery. Giovanni assumes a prior knowledge of the "truth" written on his heart, similar to a pregnant woman's knowledge of her own body's interior, but he finds that his body refuses to function as a legible sign when Annabella cannot or will not decipher his declaration of love. In his frustration, he falls back on his previous, neo-platonic line of argument, in which he attempts to spiritually incorporate their two bodies into one: "Wise Nature first in your creation meant / To make you mine; else 't had been sin and foul / To share one beauty to a double soul" (1.2.236-38). As always, however, Giovanni imagines his relationship to his sister as one more of mastery than of unity; although he argues that their shared physical traits signify the rightness of uniting their souls, what Giovanni really desires is to possess his sister, to erase her individual subjectivity, "to make you mine." Giovanni credits omnipotent "Nature" with creating the physical resemblance that, in his mind, justifies their love, and in doing so he avoids mentioning the mediating maternal womb that disturbed his earlier line of argument; instead of being incestuous, his desire for his sister is instead ordained by the laws of nature.

Although she finally confesses that she returns her brother's love, unlike Giovanni, Annabella refuses to ignore the shared maternal body, but instead incorporates a reminder into the pseudo-marriage vows that she initiates: "Brother, even by our mother's dust, I charge you, / Do not betray me to your mirth or hate. / Love me, or kill me, brother" (1.2.254-56). In

response, Giovanni mirrors her words back to her, with, as has often been noted, one crucial difference: instead of referring to “our mother,” Giovanni vows “by *my* mother’s dust” (1.2.257, emphasis added). As Susannah B. Mintz argues, Giovanni’s revision works to reconstruct Annabella’s identity—she is either “an extension of himself” or, if she is a separate person, she is *not* someone with whom he shares a mother (284-85). Once again, the female reproductive body is reconfigured as a mirror through which male identity can be established, but the reflection must be distorted (a task made easier since their mother is dead), because the true image of the living maternal body that Giovanni shared with his sister threatens to undermine his attempts at self-fashioning. Nevertheless, the romantic relationship that Giovanni works so hard to create with his words is always secondary to the sibling relationship created through their mother’s womb; particularly when confronted with the image of the womb, Giovanni’s logic falters, and his poetic attempts to take apart Annabella’s body and incorporate it into his own are turned back first by her mocking laughter and then by her insistence on acknowledging the primacy of the maternal body that joins them together *first* as brother and sister. Thus, the Annabella persistently evades Giovanni’s attempts to define and control her body through rhetoric or poetry.

Soranzo, Giovanni’s rival for his sister’s affections, similarly attempts to use Annabella’s body to fashion an identity for himself as a poetic courtly lover prior to their eventual marriage. Act 2, scene 2 finds him reading and responding to a poem by Jacopo Sannazaro that complains about the pain and hardship caused by unrequited love. Like the poets of the blazon tradition that Giovanni mimics, Soranzo explicitly frames himself as competing with another male writer, and describes his poem as a challenge to Sannazaro’s poetic authority: “To work, then, happy Muse, and contradict / What Sannazar hath in his envy writ. / . . . / Had Annabella lived when

Sannazar / Did in his brief encomium celebrate / Venice, that queen of cities, he had left / That verse which gained him such a sum of gold, / And for one only look from Annabell / Had writ of her and her diviner cheeks” (2.2.8-17). It seems to make no difference to Soranzo that he is comparing his admiration of Annabella’s body (“her diviner cheeks”) to Sannazaro’s praise of the city of Venice; both are simply vehicles for the display of male poetic ingenuity, for which the writer is rewarded with increased economic and/or cultural capital.

However, although Soranzo attempts to position Annabella’s body as a mute object of his poetic imagination, another woman speaks out against his hypocrisy. Soranzo’s poetic reverie is interrupted by Hippolita, the married woman Soranzo seduced and then abandoned, and Hippolita calls him to account for the easy falseness of his words: “Call me not ‘dear,’ / Nor think with supple words to smooth the grossness / Of my abuses” (2.2.46-48). Annabella is unaware of Soranzo’s broken vows to Hippolita, but she, too, is dismissive of the “supple words” he uses in his attempts to woo her, particularly when, like Giovanni, he suggests that his heart bears physical signs of his love for her:

SORANZO: Did you but see my heart, then would you swear—
ANNABELLA: That you were dead. (3.2.23-24)

Like Giovanni, Soranzo assumes prior knowledge about the legibility of his own heart; while the female reproductive body (particularly the womb) may be opaque, uncertain, and uncontrollable, both of Annabella’s suitors are confident in their epistemological authority over their own bodies. Taking on the roles of both the anatomist and the anatomized, the men attempt to gain full control over the production and interpretation of somatic meaning. However, Annabella takes Soranzo’s offer of self-anatomization even less seriously than she did her brother’s, interrupting him with dry literalness. In doing so she shatters the male poetic authority that we

see Soranzo attempting to wield in Act 2, an authority through which he desires to construct his masculine identity by exercising interpretive control over both his own body and Annabella's.

When Annabella becomes pregnant with Giovanni's child, the female reproductive body's resistance to men's control and interpretation is played out on a much more literal level, and women's ability to tell or keep secrets about pregnancy threatens the stability of male identity and patriarchal social order. After Annabella sickens in 3.2, the men in the play misinterpret the signs of her pregnancy as symptoms of illness, and Giovanni and Soranzo both fear that she will die. It is Annabella's tutoress, Putana, who reveals to Giovanni that his sister is pregnant, and when Giovanni incredulously demands to know how she can be sure, Putana defends her narrative of Annabella's body by drawing on the interpretive knowledge and experience that her gender and age give her: "How do I know't? Am I at these years ignorant what the meanings of qualms and water pangs be? Of changing of colors, queasiness of stomachs, pukings, and another thing that I could name? Do not, for her and your credit's sake, spend the time asking how and which way 'tis so; she is quick, upon my word. If you let a physician see her water, you're undone" (3.3.11-17). Putana's "word" is authoritative here, bolstered not only by her superior ability to interpret Annabella's "qualms" and "queasiness," but also on her knowledge of "another thing" (probably Annabella's menstrual cycle), the details of which she withholds even from Giovanni. In coyly alluding to knowledge about the secret workings of the female reproductive body, a knowledge that cannot be named, Putana, like the medical texts, constructs a hierarchy of epistemological authority, creating discursive categories that are only accessible to those already in the know.

Putana's revelations about Annabella's pregnancy pull the rug out from under Giovanni's justifications and rationalizations, including his previous attempts to use Annabella's body to

prove to the Friar that their neo-platonic love is “both fit and good”: “the frame / And composition of the mind doth follow / The frame and composition of body. / So, where the body’s furniture is beauty, / The mind’s must needs be virtue; / . . . / . . . This proves / My sister’s beauty, being rarely fair, / Is rarely virtuous—chiefly in her love, / And, chiefly in that love, her love to me. / If hers to me, then so is mine to her” (2.5.15-25). Giovanni’s confidence in his own virtue, which he believes is mirrored in his sister’s “rarely fair” beauty, is shaken when confronted with the sinful reality of her puking, pregnant body. Moreover, in direct contradiction to Giovanni’s depiction of himself as a courtly, refined, and pure lover, Putana declares that Annabella’s pregnancy is a harbinger of Giovanni’s ultimate punishment and damnation: “You know what you have done; heaven forgive ‘ee! ‘Tis too late to repent, now heaven help us!” (3.3.8-9). Putana’s bodily narrative forces Giovanni to “know” the full consequences of his affair with his sister, forces him to come out from behind the poetic identity he created for himself to face a new identity as the damned, incestuous father of Annabella’s child. For once, Giovanni does not have a quick answer, but is cast into confusion: “Oh, me, / I have a world of business in my head! / . . . How does this news perplex me!” (3.3.23-25). Fearing that the grotesque physicality of Annabella’s pregnancy, like their mother’s womb, will reveal their relationship as corporeal and sinful, rather than spiritual and sanctified, Giovanni charges Putana with concealing Annabella’s pregnancy from their father and from any doctor that might be called to examine his sister. He is unnecessarily concerned, however, since Annabella’s pregnancy is just as opaque to these figures of familial and medical authority as it was to him.

Although Putana believes that any physician who might examine Annabella’s urine would come to the same conclusion she did, the very next scene begins with Richardetto, the

sham doctor, misdiagnosing Annabella's illness: "I see no danger, scarce perceive she's sick, / But that she told me she had lately eaten / Melons, and, as she thought, those disagreed / With her young stomach" (3.4.2-5). Unbeknownst to the other characters, Richardetto is only posing as a doctor in order to spy on his unfaithful wife Hippolita, but his interpretive words are nevertheless valued and deemed necessary to treatment; this exposure of false authority calls to mind the medical treatises discussed above, which frequently note the ease with which a woman who is not pregnant may be diagnosed as pregnant, and vice versa, even by experienced male practitioners. Richardetto assures Florio that Annabella's sickness results from "a fullness of her blood," from the "green sickness" that was believed to afflict unmarried women when their unsatisfied sexual desire caused the cessation of their menstrual periods (3.4.8).¹⁴ Believing that Annabella's symptoms result from the frustration of her desire rather than, as is actually the case, the satisfaction of it, Florio quickly decides on a remedy for his daughter: "She shall be married ere she know the time" (3.4.11). This diagnosis and course of treatment echoes Vasques's earlier reassurances to Soranzo: "Maybe 'tis but the maids' sickness, an overflux of youth; and then, sir, there is no such present remedy as present marriage" (3.2.80-82). In the men's reading, the very symptoms that actually indicate Annabella's premarital sexual activity are understood instead as signs of excessive virginity; misled by Annabella's easy lie about eating too many melons, as well as by their own desire to fit her into an orderly patriarchal system under which marriage is the ultimate "cure" for unruly female sexual desire, Florio, Richardetto, and even the perpetually suspicious Vasques misinterpret the female reproductive body, which for Putana is an open book.¹⁵ Taking advantage of male ignorance, Annabella agrees to marry Soranzo in accordance with her father's wishes, thus playing the roles of obedient daughter and virginal bride in what is actually a last-ditch effort to conceal the illegitimate, incestuous nature of her pregnancy. In

doing so, she challenges the patriarchal authority that governs the orderly, exogamous transfer of a virginal woman from father to husband and ensures the legitimacy of male lineage through the interpretation and categorization of the female reproductive body.

Unlike Giovanni, who must be informed that Annabella is carrying his child by the more-knowledgeable Putana, Soranzo discovers Annabella's pregnancy on his own. However, rather than framing this as a triumph of male interpretive control over the female reproductive body, the play depicts Soranzo as unable to fully understand what has happened without the authoritative knowledge provided by women's bodily narratives. Confronted with Soranzo's outraged accusations, Annabella is strangely defiant, criticizing Soranzo for usurping her prerogative to reveal her pregnancy: "had ye lent me time / I would have told 'ee in what case I was; / But you would needs be doing" (4.3.18-20). Soranzo expresses shock that Annabella can speak about what she's done ("Dar'st thou tell me this?" [4.3.21]), but he also demands a confession: "art thou not with child?" (4.3.26). Despite his seeming certainty about what she has done, Soranzo needs his suspicions confirmed by the authority of Annabella's words. Annabella freely confesses that she is pregnant, but when Soranzo demands to know who the father is, she refuses to implicate Giovanni, taunting Soranzo with knowledge about her pregnancy that is completely unavailable to him: "You shall never know" (4.3.51). Soranzo then threatens to find the information himself through the kind of dissection that both he and Giovanni earlier suggested she might perform on them, and in doing so he makes the by now familiar move of substituting legible heart for unruly womb: "I'll rip up thy heart / And find it there—" (4.3.53-54). However, although Soranzo implies that simply opening the female body will allow him to gain access to the truth he seeks, his other threats suggest that violence to Annabella's body would be merely a means of forcing her to reveal the truth through her words: "Come, whore, tell me your lover, or,

by truth, / I'll hew thy flesh to shreds"; "Thus will I pull thy hair, and thus I'll drag / Thy lust-belepered body through the dust. / Yet tell his name" (4.3.57-58; 60-62). Despite his threat to "rip up" her heart, Soranzo realizes that mere observation of Annabella's body, even the secrets of its interior, will not reveal the knowledge about her pregnancy that he seeks, a knowledge he ultimately gains only when Vasques tricks Putana into confiding in him. Although Vasques gloats that his "smooth tale" (the lies he tells Putana in order to gain her confidence) has triumphed over Annabella's "smooth tail" (her duplicitous reproductive body) (4.3.241-42), his smugness is undercut by his own reliance on the "tale" that Putana reveals to him, as well as by Annabella's steadfast refusal to tell the information that Soranzo so desperately desires. Although Vasques and Soranzo ultimately uncover the truth of Annabella's incestuous pregnancy, they must rely on women's bodily narratives for accurate information about the female reproductive body, and these narratives continue to dictate male identity, forcing Soranzo to relinquish his roles as courtly lover and proud husband and instead play the part of shamed, vengeful cuckold.

By the final act of *'Tis Pity*, all of the play's female voices are silenced: Hippolita and Annabella have been murdered, Philotis has fled to a convent, and Putana has been gagged and blinded and will soon be executed for her knowledge of the incestuous affair. Annabella's dead body is imagined as a source of knowledge that can finally be brought under male control, but meaning is once again obscured when the heart is substituted for the womb as the source of that knowledge. Enraged by his sister's marriage to Soranzo, Giovanni murders Annabella and cuts out her heart, displaying it impaled on his dagger in order to establish his ultimate triumph over fate and social convention through the revelation of his crime. However, although Hillary Nunn interprets this scene as a demonstration "of Giovanni's ultimate control over his sister's flesh and

the spirit that had animated it" (146),¹⁶ Giovanni is no more successful in imbuing Annabella's literal body with meaning than he was when he tried to use the female body as a rhetorical trope. The onlookers, assembled for a banquet in honor of Soranzo's birthday, react to the grisly emblem with confused questions, not the understanding that Giovanni expects: "What means this?," "What strange riddle's this?," "What is't thou say'st?" (5.6.14, 29, 39). Like the anatomist in the anatomy theater, Giovanni must explicate the body he displays, and in doing so he returns to neo-platonic tropes about the united hearts of lovers: "'Tis a heart, / A heart, my lords, in which is mine entombed. / Look well upon't. D'ee know't?" (5.6.26-28). Giovanni's explanation, however, is not illuminating, since he expects his on-stage audience to be able to identify the person to whom the heart belonged—an impossible task, since unlike the easily legible hearts imagined by Giovanni and Soranzo, Annabella's bears no truths written on its surface. In addition to failing in his attempts to give the heart literal significance, Giovanni's symbolic explanation also fails. Although he describes Annabella's heart as a tomb/womb that encloses his own heart in a neo-platonic union, this trope is belied by the spectacle he presents. The female body does not envelop male subjectivity, but is instead violently penetrated by the phallic dagger, a literalization of the way that both Giovanni and Soranzo want to mince Annabella's body up into small, easily-poeticized pieces; like the blazon, the impaled heart represents an extreme attempt to gain mastery over the female body, an attempt that ultimately fails when confronted with the opacity of the pregnant womb.

When Giovanni's emblem of the impaled heart proves too abstract for his audience to interpret, despite its gory immediacy, he shifts suddenly to a discussion of the womb in a reversal of the womb-to-heart pattern that characterized his earlier thinking: "'Tis Annabella's heart, 'tis. Why d'ee startle? / I vow 'tis hers. This dagger's point plowed up / Her fruitful womb, and left

to me the fame / Of a most glorious executioner” (5.6.30-33). Forced to be more sexually explicit, his graphic image of himself “plowing” Annabella’s body with his phallic “dagger’s point” marks the return of the sinful, incestuous womb which he had earlier abandoned in favor of the more poetic heart. Later, Giovanni again refers to the womb as he spells out his incestuous affair with Annabella for his still-perplexed audience: “For her too fruitful womb too soon bewrayed / The happy passage of our stol’n delights, / And made her mother to a child unborn” (5.6.48-50). In both instances, Giovanni speaks about the his sister’s pregnant body as though its excessive “fruitfulness” makes their transgressions easy to interpret, but in doing so he ignores the ways Annabella and Putana successfully (albeit temporarily) concealed Annabella’s pregnancy and the truth of her child’s paternity. Moreover, Giovanni’s explanations, even when they directly address the womb, do little to enlighten his audience. Indeed, Soranzo is so unable to put all the pieces together that he insists Annabella be brought out to testify to her own misdeeds: “Bring the strumpet forth” (5.6.54). Although Soranzo already knows that Annabella has conceived a child by Giovanni, and although he has seen the bloody emblem and heard Giovanni’s declarations, he still cannot make the connection between womb and heart, incest and murder, and his outraged demand that Annabella confess her crimes demonstrates his continued reliance on the truths that can only be revealed by her words. When it is finally confirmed that Annabella is dead, Vasques assures the Cardinal that he can still bring forth Putana “to confirm what from Giovanni’s own mouth you have heard” (5.6.130-31). Even after these women have been silenced and discredited, men continue to rely on their speech to reveal accurate knowledge about the female reproductive body. Paradoxically, order can only be restored to patriarchal society through a critique of female duplicity that is grounded in the bodily narratives of the deceitful women themselves.

At the end of Act 5, the Cardinal, nominally a figure of religious authority, attempts to explain the tragedy by falling back on moralistic platitudes to interpret Annabella's reproductive body: "Of one so young, so rich in nature's store, / Who could not say, 'Tis pity she's a whore?" (5.6.160-61). However, like *The Changeling*, *'Tis Pity* demonstrates that destroying the criminally unruly female body does not strengthen patriarchal authority, but in fact renders it barren. At the end of the play, Giovanni and Annabella's father, Florio, dies of a broken heart; Annabella and the child she carries are killed; and Giovanni, who acknowledges that he is the last surviving member of his genealogical "house," is murdered by Vasques (5.6.67). The "gold and jewels" of the dead are not inherited because all genealogical lines have been cut off (5.6.150); instead, the wealth and property of Florio and Soranzo are seized by the Cardinal in the name of the Pope. By killing (or sequestering in a convent) all potentially fertile women, the play eliminates the threat posed by women's interpretive authority over the pregnant body, but it also eliminates the female reproductive bodies needed to perpetuate patriarchal society.

Moreover, although the Cardinal has the last word, his is not the only religiously-inflected interpretation of Annabella's reproductive body voiced in the play. In defending herself to Soranzo in 4.3, Annabella narrates her conception of Giovanni's child in a way that relates her to the Virgin Mary, mortal mother to the offspring of a divine father: "This noble creature [Giovanni] was in every part / So angel-like, so glorious, that a woman / Who had not been but human as was I / Would have kneeled to him and have begged for love" (4.3.36-39).¹⁷ Even when confronted with the crimes of fornication and incest, Annabella refuses to interpret her body in a way that is comprehensible to patriarchal authority, aligning herself not with the figure of the whore, but with a Catholic religious tradition that invested women, particularly in their maternal roles, with a great deal of socio-spiritual authority. As Frances Dolan notes, this

tradition was often invoked in contemporary references to Charles I's wife Henrietta Maria, who had already been pregnant three times and successfully delivered two heirs when the play was published, and who was frequently compared to the Virgin Mary by both her supporters and her detractors.¹⁸ By casting Annabella as a kind of perverse Virgin Mary/Whore of Babylon, as well as by frequently referencing the neo-platonic conceits that were so often used to describe the relationship between Charles I and Henrietta Maria, the play may be contributing to critiques that perceived the royal court as becoming increasingly like the royal womb: a foreign, feminized, enclosed, secret, Catholic space presided over by a maternal reproductive power that was emasculating to Protestant English patriarchal authority.¹⁹ However, like Henrietta Maria, whose ability to conceive heirs was vital to the security of the nation even though her religious-political influence over her husband and children was feared, Annabella's body is vital to the men in the play, despite their inability to wrest full interpretive control over its secrets. The elimination of the female reproductive body and the female voices that reveal knowledge about it signals the death of the patriarchal family upon which the whole of Protestant English society was grounded. In the next section, I will discuss how Civil War-era texts figure the importance of women's knowledge about their reproductive bodies, and specifically their pregnancies, as a matter of national importance, even as they attempt to keep the bodily narratives of women under the control of male social, medical, and religious authorities.

3. Pregnancy, Knowledge, and the Health of the Nation during the British Civil Wars

During the 1640s and 1650s, texts that undertook to explain the female reproductive body and address women's knowledge about pregnancy became more overtly politicized as they grappled with the upheaval that gripped the nation. One of the most popular of these texts was

Nicholas Culpeper's *A Directory for Midwives* (1651), which was printed four times in the 1650s, and regularly after that until 1777. As Fissell points out, Culpeper's medical treatise was a vehicle for his Independent religio-political views and his "trenchant critiques of hierarchical social relations," critiques which, Fissell argues, did not extend to gender hierarchies: "[Culpeper's] midwifery book emphasized men's superiority to women and undermined the authority of midwives" (*Vernacular* 143). However, although Culpeper's book certainly has many moments in which women are depicted as inferior to men in terms of both their bodies and their understanding of their bodies, its 200-plus pages also frequently celebrate the skill of midwives and suggest that women can use the book to increase their knowledge of the reproductive body beyond that of many male practitioners. Moreover, Culpeper imagines the health of pregnant women, which is safeguarded by the combined efforts of midwives and male writers like himself, as a matter of national importance, particularly during times of war and social unrest; whereas earlier texts imagined the female body as a mirror reflecting the professional and/or social identities of individual men, in Culpeper the pregnant body mirrors the health and identity of England as a whole. In this section, I will examine Culpeper's *Directory* alongside other texts from the Civil War and Interregnum eras that address the interpretive challenges posed by the female reproductive body. In doing so, I will demonstrate how the pregnant body stood as an object of both fear and hope during this politically fraught period, as well as how some male writers attempted (not always successfully) to direct and contain women's interpretive authority over the female reproductive body's interior in order to perpetuate the gendered status quo.

I will begin with a text that falls on the most repressive end of the spectrum, a monstrous birth pamphlet that depicts a woman's bodily narrative about her pregnancy as not only false, but

blasphemous. *The Ranters Monster* (1652) is an account of a sexually deviant sectarian woman who shocks her community by claiming to be pregnant with the true Messiah, and who subsequently gives birth to a monstrous child whose deformity disproves her sinful claims. In the pamphlet, Mary Adams claims exclusive knowledge about the divine nature of the child she is carrying, and in doing so challenges the authority of the Gospel itself: “[she] said that she was the Virgin Mary, and that she was conceived with child by the Holy Ghost, and how all the Gospel that had bin taught heretofore, was false; and that which was within her she said was the true Messias” (A2). Adams’s claim invokes the specter of Mariolatry and female religious authority that, as Julie Crawford points out, informed many critiques of sectarians, particularly Ranters, who believed that God was incarnated in the bodies of the elect through the secret workings of the Holy Spirit; such groups were accused of sharing with Catholic recusants “a too-keen belief in the figure of the Virgin Mary and in its inevitable associations with, and reverence for, the power of women” (167). For Mary Adams, such power was located in knowledge of what was taking place within her pregnant body, a space invisible and (presumably) unknowable to everyone but herself and the divine presence that she claimed was at work within her.

However, in this pamphlet, unlike in *'Tis Pity* and the medical treatises discussed above, women’s bodily narratives pose no challenge to socio-political patriarchal authority. Adams’s words, rather than confusing or persuading those around her, are turned against her in order to expose her as sinful and legitimate her punishment by male religio-legal authority: “For which blasphemous words, and wicked opinion of hers, Mr. Hadley the Minister caused her to be apprehended, & cast into prison” (4). Just as her speech is easily interpreted as blasphemous and untrue, Adams’s body, like her words, gives her away, undermining rather than consolidating her interpretive authority over the religious significance of her pregnancy. In addition to giving birth

to “the most ugliest ill-shapen Monster that ever eyes beheld,” Adams’s body “rotted and consumed as she lay, being from the head to the foot as full of botches, blains, boils, & stinking scabs, as ever one could stand by another” (4). Although Adams claims that her pregnant body’s interior is the vehicle for secret religious truths, she is disproved by the deformity that exteriorizes her sin and makes it easily legible, just as Giovanni feared that Annabella’s pregnancy would reveal their crime of incest in *’Tis Pity*. Adams ends her own life by “rip[ping] up her bowels” with a knife, a form of suicide that suggests the kind of self-dissection described, but never performed, by Giovanni and Soranzo, a way of revealing the heart that she claims is “so hardened in wickedness, that she had no power to repent” (4). Driven to violently expose the spiritual emptiness of the body that she once claimed harbored the son of God, an emptiness that Hadley the minister has already diagnosed, Adams becomes a testament to male interpretive authority over the bodies and beliefs of women, an authority wielded by both Hadley and the pamphlet’s author, as well as by the nine male local officials (two church-wardens, a constable, three collectors, and three headboroughs) whose names affirm “the truth of this matter” (5).²⁰ As the use of the word “matter,” with its etymological links to “mater” and “matrix,” implies, the “truths” that the officials seek are specifically those of the pregnant body.

However, not all authors who examined the socio-religious implications of women’s knowledge of pregnancy during the Civil War era were so quick to discredit women’s interpretive authority. Although William Herbert’s *Herberts Child-bearing Woman* (1648), a book of “Meditations, Prayers & Songs” that focus on women’s experience of maternity “From the Conception To the Weaning Of the Child” (title page), bears no generic resemblance to *The Ranters Monster*, both texts examine how God’s divine power works within and through the secret, unseen space of the female reproductive body. Unlike the pamphlet, in which the bodily

narrative of the pregnant Mary Adams is completely at odds with God's purposes (as interpreted by the male author and local male authority figures), *Child-bearing Woman* imagines women as possessing accurate knowledge of what is taking place within their bodies, and as acting in collaboration with God to carry, deliver, and care for healthy Christian children. Herbert dedicates his book first and foremost to his late wife, Frances, but he quickly moves to framing his project as furthering the good of the entire nation; the title page describes his book as "publisht for the good of all the wise and pious Women of England, Scotland, Wales," and the titles of his dedicatory epistles ("To all the Wise and Religious Child-bearing Women of Great Britain" [9] and "To All the Wise and Religious Midwives of England, Scotland, Wales" [11]) re-emphasize this focus on a national audience. Unlike in *The Ranters Monster*, however, ensuring national health does not require silencing women or wresting authority over their bodies away from them. Herbert modestly insists that he does not desire to control women's religious discourse, but merely wants to offer assistance: "I presume not to give thee my conceits, for limits to thy devotions; but for a friendlie help" (6); moreover, he claims that the midwives that make up part of his imagined audience must "answer for [the] honestie" of his book (11). As I will demonstrate, the prayers themselves imagine women using their authority over their bodies to strengthen, not undermine, the physical and spiritual well-being of their children and, through them, the nation.

The first prayer in Herbert's book is designed to be used by a woman "When she thinks, she's with Child," and it begins rather tentatively: "Thy mightie hand is (I suppose) framing a Child in my womb . . . thou dost in me great things" (13). The female speaker seems unwilling to declare definitively that she is pregnant at this early stage (since the prayer that follows this one is for a woman "When she is quick" [16], it can be assumed that the first prayer is intended

for use prior to quickening), and although she claims that “great things” are taking place inside her body, she credits them to God’s “mightie hand.” As the prayer develops, however, the speaker begins to offer her own input into how the “framing” of her child should proceed, asking God (politely but persistently) not to deform her child in any way: “Lord, I crave thy blessing upon the child, which I conceive thou form’st in me. O sweet Father, shape its bodie so well, both in proportion and color; that who shall see its rare beautie, may justly say: how beautiful is the maker of this fair Creature!” (14). The speaker goes on to list the birth defects she wants God to avoid (those of the eyes, ears, tongue, and limbs), as well as the attributes of soul and mind she wants the child to possess (14-15). Although all of these requests are made with due reverence for God’s might, they also suggest that a pregnant woman can intervene with God on behalf of her unborn child, using her knowledge of conception and her words of prayer to ensure her child’s healthy development from the very earliest stages of her pregnancy.

The idea of maternal religious intervention, which, as Dolan points out, was a point of anxiety in many critiques of Mariolatry, is here viewed as a positive exercise of female spiritual authority.²¹ This authority is promoted even further in the next prayer, to be used after quickening. The prayer begins by confirming the knowledge of pregnancy about which the speaker had previously been a bit uncertain, thus affirming women’s special access to information about their reproductive bodies: “Feeling, O God, thou has wrought in my womb what I suppos’d thou was forming, . . . I humbly bow before thy majestie” (16). In the next prayer, “When the Child stirrs,” the speaker demonstrates not only the ability to accurately interpret her body’s physical feelings, but to comprehend their spiritual significance as well (17). Unable to see the child, the pregnant speaker nevertheless can tell when it is playing, leaping, sleeping, or moving slowly, and she narrates these different movements as symbolic of her

child's spiritual growth, assuming, for instance, that when "[m]y babe seems to play in my womb," it does so because "[t]he poor infant knows not, to what miseries it is made" (17), whereas when the child's motions slow, it is because "age hath taught it gravitie" (19). At the conclusion of this prayer, the woman asks God to "give my Child that wisdome, to know always what's fittest for its age" (19); by interpreting her child's movements and petitioning God accordingly, she thus safeguards her child's spiritual as well as physical development.

When pondering the mystery of her newly-quickened child's creation, the female speaker interprets her pregnancy as a collaboration between her and God, the child conceived in both body and soul without the participation of a human father: "Glorie to God, whose mightie hand hath wrought in me a wonder of nature, a marvellous creature, whose bodie is made of my bloud, by the secret operation of God, and its soul of nothing, by that same God" (16). This elision of an earthly father is later repeated in a prayer composed for use by midwives, who request that God help the laboring mother to deliver her baby safely, "making it thy loving Child and hers" (35). Such depictions of conception and parenthood subtly invoke the Virgin Mary, another woman whose child had no human father, but of course Herbert's female speakers do not, as Mary Adams did, claim to be carrying Jesus Christ. They are not shy, however, about drawing comparisons between the human children for whose health they pray and the infant Jesus: "Remember Lord, thy Son Jesus was once to save mankind what my infant is now, a weak thing in the womb" (17).²² Whereas Adams was condemned for claiming the presence of God within her, Herbert's prayers assume that God works within the female reproductive body in ways that women can understand, influence, and communicate through their prayers. These women use their knowledge about the near-miraculous inner workings of their bodies to petition God on

behalf of their developing fetuses, and thus to deliver physically and spiritually healthy children for the glory of both God and country.

Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* seems in many ways like an attempt to draw medical and spiritual authority over the female body away from women and towards men, to make male knowledge the source of accurate narratives about the female body, and to make men responsible for ensuring the health and security of the nation's infants. Whereas Herbert's prayers imagine God working through women's bodies, and women collaborating with God through their prayers, Culpeper imagines himself as God's collaborator, and his text as the medium through which God works: "I am not afraid nor ashamed to own this Work another day before the great Jehovah, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Angels; what Knowledg they have given me herin, I have revealed to you, and have not concealed a tittle" (217). In another echo of Herbert's prayers, Culpeper describes his book as the product of himself (as its human "mother") and God (as its divine "father"): "I have viewed over this Work, and acknowledg it as my own Child begotten in me by the Eternal Providence of God, . . . If it be good, let the Father have the praise, its corruption it hath drawn from its Mother" (A5v-A6). Here Culpeper uses the language of divine mystery and religious revelation to describe his metaphorical childbirth, and he makes the production of knowledge about the female body, which ensures the successful reproduction of healthy children, a collaboration between himself and God, seemingly writing women out of the equation even as he uses his identification with the maternal to validate his publication of reproductive secrets.

However, in feminizing himself, Culpeper also elides traditional forms of non-divine patriarchal authority, since he imagines conception taking place without the participation of a human father. A religious Independent and soldier in the Parliamentary army,²³ Culpeper was

deeply suspicious of political, religious, and medical hierarchies, and his *Directory* frequently criticizes those who would hoard medical knowledge, concealing information from the general public in order to benefit financially and enhance their own professional reputations: “What an insufferable injury it is, that in a free Common-wealth Men and Women should be trained up in such Ignorance, . . . Is not this to uphold a company of lazy Doctors, most of whose Covetousness out-weighs their Wits as much as a Millstone out-weighs a Feather?” (“Epistle Dedicatorie” 2v-3). In order to combat the tyranny of the College of Physicians, Culpeper offers his treatise as a vehicle for a new, more populist professionalization of medicine, writing in “plain, and easie” vernacular language in order to alleviate the “ignorance” of his audience of midwives (“Epistle Dedicatorie” 4-4v, 5v).²⁴ Culpeper is careful to stress, however, that women’s ignorance is not innate; although he compares the understanding of his female readers to that of “Children,” they are only so because “the Colledg hath wrap’t them up in Blankets of Ignorance” (A5). Culpeper takes it upon himself to undo the “bondage” imposed on midwives by the College of Physicians (“Epistle Dedicatorie” 7), but he concedes that even his own authority is not infallible. He goes so far as to provide his readers with an address at which they can contact him should they discover “by [their] own Experiences” any mistakes in his book (“Epistle Dedicatorie” 7v), and it is notable that Culpeper includes this invitation only in his dedication to the midwives, and not in the more general epistle “To the Reader” that follows. Although it would be difficult to argue that he views his female readers as his intellectual equals, since the reason he writes his treatise is because he believes their knowledge and education to be woefully inferior, Culpeper does assume that, through a combination of his book and their own practical experience, midwives can improve their knowledge of the female body to the point where they might be able to correct or augment his own.

Culpeper believes that women are most in need of anatomical knowledge about the interior of the reproductive body, and Fissell uses his emphasis on anatomy to argue that “Culpeper sets up a new epistemology of female bodies, one in which women can learn only from men, not from each other,” since “[o]nly an anatomically trained person (which in mid-seventeenth-century England almost always meant a man) could make truths about the female body” (*Vernacular* 149, 153). However, Culpeper’s stance cannot be reduced to a simple juxtaposition of the inferior knowledge of uneducated midwives and the superior knowledge of formally-educated male medical practitioners, since Culpeper argues that most male “authorities,” both ancient and contemporary, are just as ignorant about female anatomy as are women. Culpeper points out that even Galen “never saw a Man nor Woman dissected in his life time” (33), and that “later Writers,” who were considered “famous men” and “little god-a-mighties” for their anatomical treatises, “never saw a Woman anatomized in their lives” (34). Even Vesalius, whose monumental *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543) famously features a dissected female cadaver on its title page, had never dissected a *pregnant* woman, Culpeper argues, but instead used the anatomy of a pregnant dog to describe and illustrate the pregnant human body (62).²⁵ According to Culpeper, knowledge of the interior of the pregnant womb “is the most difficultest piece of work . . . in the whol study of Anatomy, because such Anatomies are hard to be gotten, most Women that lie on their death beds when they are with child, miscarry before they die, if not all” (55), and he writes with some pride about the single time he observed the dissection of a pregnant woman: “My self saw one Woman opened that died in Child-bed, not delivered, and that is more by one than most of our Dons have seen” (55-56). Culpeper assumes that his own knowledge of anatomy, which he wants to impart to women, is superior even to that of most learned men, and he criticizes the male medical establishment for

hoarding their limited knowledge by “base[ly]” denying women admittance to anatomical demonstrations (56). Although Culpeper does not have the resources necessary to perform dissections for a female audience, he attempts through his book to give women access to the privileged space of the anatomy theater, thus bridging the gap between professional male knowledge and the women readers who might most effectively put it into practice.

However, even at points when Culpeper seems most confident about his ability to illuminate the mysterious interior of the pregnant female body, his text reveals the limitations of the techniques and advice it expounds, and suggests that women construct bodily narratives to aid or block the detection of pregnancy. In the introduction to the fifth book of his treatise, “A Guide for Women in Conception,” Culpeper acknowledges that although some women may be unable to tell when they are pregnant, others might simply choose not to reveal the fact: “Some women are so ignorant they do not know when they are conceived with Child, and others so coy they will not confess when they do know it” (125). He avoids speculation about where these coy women get their information, proceeding instead to his own list of “signs of conception,” which, he warns, “happen true in many women but not in all” (126). Despite this initial uncertainty, Culpeper all but guarantees a few indicators of pregnancy, which he claims “never yet failed me” (127). One that he deems particularly infallible involves observing the swelling and discoloration of a woman’s eyes, and unlike quickening, this sign can be discerned by anyone, male or female, who looks at a woman. However, Culpeper warns that a diagnosis based on such information is only accurate “if the Woman have not her terms upon her at the time, nor watched the night before” (128), since a woman’s menstrual cycle or a bad night’s sleep could produce a false positive by replicating the changes to her eyes that would otherwise indicate pregnancy. Since information about a woman’s menstrual cycle and sleeping habits would come

most reliably from the woman herself, an accurate diagnosis involves a collaboration between the possibly pregnant woman and the medical practitioner examining her. As in the earlier medical treatises, knowledge about pregnancy hinges on what information women are willing to reveal about their bodies, even though Culpeper downplays the actual transmission of this knowledge through female bodily narratives.

Moreover, despite Culpeper's emphasis on the importance of anatomical knowledge, he does not completely discredit other, more traditionally female forms of medical knowledge and practice. As Fissell points out, Culpeper can be rather dismissive of knowledge he views as unfounded or superstitious (Fissell, *Vernacular* 147-48), but he does encourage women to "instruct one another" in traditional herbal remedies (at least until he has time to write a treatise on the subject) (Culpeper 100). Furthermore, although he provides a few tips on how to ease a woman in her labor, Culpeper carefully refrains from presuming to instruct midwives in the "hands-on" work of delivering a child: "I have not medled with your Callings nor Manual Operations, lest I should discover my Ignorance like Phormio the Phylosopher, who having never seen Battel, undertook to reade a Military Lecture before Hanibal, the best Soldier in the World" (172). Culpeper assumes that a midwife's skill can be improved by anatomical knowledge, but he expects that this knowledge will enhance, rather than replace, the practical knowledge of midwives and other women, whom he describes as generals fighting for the health and safety of mothers and their children on the frontline battlefields of the birthing room.

For Culpeper, the end to which both the knowledge in his book and the practical skills of women should be put is nothing less than to ensure the health, strength, and reputation of Great Britain, a goal he takes quite literally when he critiques the state for not doing more to ensure that all pregnant women have access to nutritious food: "I wish from my heart our State would

but be so happy to take such a course that [pregnant] Women . . . might not want, 'tis one way to make them dear in the Eyes of God, and give a leading example to other Nations; besides, the more Childrens lives are preserved, the more Soldiers will they have when they need them” (153). To a country traumatized by civil war, Culpeper gives hope for divine approval, increased international standing, and military might, all of which are contingent on successful pregnancies. However, as Culpeper points out when acknowledging that the “practical part” of anatomical theory (that is, its practical applications) is properly the domain of midwives (“Epistle Dedicatorie” 4), the health of a pregnant woman and her child, and by extension the well-being of the nation, can be secured only through the collaboration of women and male writers. Thus, although *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Ranters Monster* demonstrate the potential threat to patriarchal society posed by women's interpretive authority over their pregnancies, Culpeper's *Directory* and Herbert's *Child-bearing Woman* show that the health of the nation nevertheless depends on women's epistemological control over the female reproductive body, a control that cannot be usurped by the anatomist's scalpel, the treatise-writer's pen, or the avenger's dagger.

Notes

¹ See Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 144-56. Similarly, Keller argues that Culpeper emphasizes his own certainty “about the *meanings* of the female body,” meanings which “make impossible any stable sense of a volitional, agential woman” (85).

² See Keller, 134-55.

³ See L. Wilson, 64-69.

⁴ See L. Wilson, 69; Ferrari, 62-66; Nunn, 9-16.

⁵ For more on how the traditional practices of early modern gynecology and obstetrics limited men's access to the female body, see Bicks, 9-12; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 15-229; Mendelson and Crawford, 153-54, 208-209; and Adrian Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth.”

⁶ See Park, 214, 219.

⁷ For more on the publication history of *The Birth of Mankind*, see Keller, 76-80.

⁸ Most scholars assume it to be highly unlikely that women (or, for that matter, many men) would have attended any of the infrequent anatomical dissections that took place in early modern England; see Sawday, 230; and Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 145. Nunn argues for a broader audience for English dissections that may have included women, but her evidence on this point is tentative; see Nunn, 35, 57n36. She does not consider midwifery treatises such as Raynalde's and Culpeper's which, as I demonstrate, seem to assume women's exclusion from the anatomy theaters. Moreover, the broader audience Nunn posits, while not composed exclusively of medical students and practitioners, nevertheless seems to be limited to the upper classes, meaning that even if women were not entirely excluded from anatomy theaters, middle- and lower-class women (who made up the majority of midwives) would still have been denied access; see Nunn, 35.

⁹ See Amtower, 189-93; Boehrer; Hopkins, "Knowing Their Loves," 6-7; and Hoy.

¹⁰ On Bologna's important role in the history of anatomy, see Ferrari.

¹¹ Clerico draws parallels between the play's obsession with literalizing its own figurative language of blood and hearts and William Harvey's observations on the circulation of blood (425-34). Neill argues that Giovanni tears open Annabella's body in order to uncover the mysterious truths of her heart, only "to find there is *nothing there*" (241). Hopkins notes Giovanni's desire "to uncover [the womb's] secrets by direct contact with it" and in doing so gain the kind of "experiential" knowledge about the female body also sought by early modern anatomists ("Knowing" 6), but she does not consider the pregnant body's resistance to interpretation, nor the role women's words play in constructing somatic knowledge.

¹² On the multivalent symbolism of the heart during the early modern period, see Slights.

¹³ On the relationship between poetry and anatomy in the blazon tradition of early modern France, see Vickers.

¹⁴ See Guggenheim.

¹⁵ The men's diagnoses and remedies resemble information in some seventeenth-century medical treatises. In *A Directory for Midwives*, Culpeper points out that some of the symptoms of menstrual blockage (a disease he distinguishes from the cessation of menstruation that results from pregnancy) are the same "as happen to Women with Child" (94). In *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse*, Sadler declares that the fainting spells caused by "the retention of the seed [i.e. menses]" can be cured by "a good husband" (74).

¹⁶ Similarly, Slights describes Giovanni in the final scene as an “imperial conqueror who comes to worship at and finally to destroy the rich, illicit shrine of the female heart” (117).

¹⁷ Hopkins makes a similar comparison between Annabella and the Virgin Mary, arguing that, like Mary, Annabella is “possessed of special, divinely imparted knowledge” about the child she carries (“Knowing” 13).

¹⁸ On the anxieties that circulated around Mariolatry, Henrietta Maria, and Catholic motherhood in general, see Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 95-156. On Henrietta Maria’s pregnancies, see Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 131-36.

¹⁹ On the platonic tradition in the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, see Carlton, 130-32; and Clerico, 420-21. On the increasingly central role the royal family played in court life and politics during the 1630s, and the subsequently private, closed-off nature of the Caroline court, see Carlton, 135-36; and Mintz, 270-71. On the political effects of public perceptions of Henrietta Maria’s influence over Charles I, see White. On the relationship between Henrietta Maria’s political sway, Catholic beliefs, and artistic patronage, see Griffey. On secrecy and royalist culture more generally during the Civil Wars and Interregnum, see Potter, *Secret Rites*.

²⁰ For more on the religio-political context of this and similar pamphlets, see J. Crawford, 146-70. Crawford discusses the ways religious transgression is gendered through these pamphlets’ emphasis on reproduction, but she does not examine how *The Ranter’s Monster* seeks to assuage concerns about the limitations of male reproductive knowledge and the socio-political ramifications of women’s interpretive authority.

²¹ See Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 118-19.

²² See also Herbert, 28, 31, 36.

²³ On Culpeper’s politics, see Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 133-42.

²⁴ For more on the College of Physicians and their rivals in anatomy, the Barber-Surgeons’ Company, see Nunn, 31-35.

²⁵ As Park points out, the woman on Vesalius’s title page was notable for *not* being pregnant, since she was a convict who attempted to avoid execution by claiming to be carrying a child, but was executed anyway and found, when dissected, to have been lying about her pregnancy (211). As far as historians can tell, Culpeper was correct in stating that Vesalius had never dissected a pregnant woman; see Park, 219-20.

Chapter 4: Birthing Room Speech and the Construction of Patriarchal Authority in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Early Modern Gossip Satire

During the early modern period, the women who attended a laboring mother in the birthing room were referred to as her “gossips,” and the etymology of this word reflects conflicting attitudes towards these female communities. From the eleventh through the nineteenth century, “gossip” could refer to a person, male or female, who acted as a godparent at a child’s baptism, a usage derived from the term “god-sibling” or “god-sib.” Roughly around the end of the sixteenth century, however, the word began to be commonly used to refer exclusively to women, specifically the group of women present at a birth, or to describe any woman or group of women who engaged in idle chatter. During the seventeenth century, the verb form of this latter usage developed, so that the word “gossip” could be used to refer both to women who talked and to the kind of talk in which they engaged.¹ In its oldest form, the word “gossip” was a title of great social significance, since the selection of godparents was crucial in forming and cementing bonds between a child, its parents, and other members of the family and/or community.² However, as the word broke away from its specific links to baptism and godparentage and was applied more generally to groups of female friends, relatives, and/or neighbors, its usage grew more pejorative, reflecting an increasing sense of unease about the significance of women’s bodily narratives, particularly those of the birthing room. Although men derided female speech as frivolous, they also relied on women to testify truthfully about what was done and said in the birthing room, even as they worried that women could use this closed space to put themselves and their words temporarily beyond the reach of direct male oversight.

I will explore this anxiety about women's bodily narratives and their socio-political ramifications by charting how gossips' speech and its effects are represented over a cluster of generically divergent texts that span the first half of the seventeenth century. The texts I consider include gossip satires from the early seventeenth century; Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), which prominently features a birthing room gathering of gossips; and three *Mistris Parliament* pamphlets from 1648, in which anti-monarchal groups are allegorized as female members of a hostile birthing room community. Across all of these texts, gossips' speech works to define and authorize patriarchal power, revealing the multifaceted nature of patriarchy by commenting on such issues as men's behavior toward their wives and children, the proper use of household funds, the finer points of religious ritual, and even the limits of monarchal authority. Rather than being a matter of natural law or divine right, domestic, religious, and political patriarchy are shown to be, at least in part, a matter of women's words. The dialogues of gossips serve as a synecdoche of larger networks of women's speech that operate beyond the birthing room, spreading collective female authority across multiple levels of society.

Both literary critics and social historians have tended to focus on the early modern birthing room's containment within patriarchal structures of authority. Scholars of the play, such as Gail Kern Paster and Shannon Miller, and the pamphlet literature, such as Linda Woodbridge and Katherine Romack, argue that these frequently satiric texts stigmatize the speech of women in the birthing room as unruly and potentially destructive, particularly when this speech threatens or ridicules patriarchal sexual and socio-political authority.³ Scholarship on the historical significance of women's birthing room communities has been more divided. In his landmark study, "The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation" (1990), Adrian Wilson argues that

the presence of a community of women, the absence of men, and the demarcation of the birthing room as a separate physical space allowed a pregnant woman to withdraw from the demands of her domestic responsibilities and become the ultimate household authority, thus reversing the traditional hierarchy that placed the husband over the wife (73, 87-88). Critics such as Linda Pollock and Laura Gowing, on the other hand, have offered useful correctives to Wilson's optimistic reading, arguing that the authority of the laboring mother was subject to certain checks, particularly in cases of unwed mothers, and that these checks were placed on her not by her husband or other men (at least, not directly), but by women operating in the interests of patriarchal authority.⁴ Yet these recent correctives, like many readings of the play and pamphlets, go too far in downplaying women's authority, ignoring how women who are put in charge of enforcing patriarchal norms also gain the power to shape these norms. Caroline Bicks insightfully argues that women in the birthing room "have the power to create the most pervasive stories about a man's sexuality and, consequently, his ability to father a child" (29), but the impact of gossips' speech goes beyond determining a man's sexual potency, and extends to establishing whether he appropriately performs the role of patriarch with reference to his wife, children, and the larger (specifically female) community. Janelle Day Jenstad points out that the consumer goods showcased in the early modern birthing room acted as markers of a man's "material success" (391), and thus were meant to be "read" by the rest of the community (389), but she does not examine the importance of women's speech in this process of socio-economic interpretation. Such arguments reveal the need for a sustained analysis of the crucial role that the bodily narratives of gossips play in helping to establish and disseminate patriarchal identities.

In both *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and the gossip satires, birthing room gossip helps to shape patriarchal power and determine its limits, demonstrating that patriarchy is not fixed but

always in process, constantly being redefined by dialogue and debate in which women take an active part. The play and the earlier satires represent women's bodily narratives as central in establishing paternity and determining the sexual, familial, and economic behaviors that connote patriarchal privilege. In the *Mistress Parliament* pamphlets, the latent political implications of this female authority are foregrounded when the birthing room becomes a site of political conflict, with the speech of gossips both threatening and ultimately restoring the patriarchal power of the monarch. By examining patriarchal authority as a nexus of interrelated social, sexual, economic, legal, religious, and political roles, all of which depend on women's words for legitimacy, this chapter demonstrates how birthing room gossip might dramatically affect the wider community and even the nation by performing functions that are socially constitutive, economically stabilizing, and/or politically comforting. In this sense, multivocal gossips' narratives are not only permitted, but actually required, by patriarchal society, even though they also serve as models for challenging absolutist patriarchal authority. Thus, the most biting satiric depictions of gossips and gossiping are fueled by an underlying acknowledgment of the power of women's bodily narratives to organize the larger community by determining male socio-political identity.

1. Early Modern Birthing Rooms and Gossips' Speech

As social historians such as Adrian Wilson and David Cressy have shown, childbirth in early modern England typically took place at home in a clearly demarcated physical space, usually a room that was transformed into a birthing chamber by being sealed off from the rest of the house and from the outside world: "Air was excluded by blocking up the keyholes; daylight was shut out by means of heavy curtains" (Wilson, "Ceremony" 73).⁵ If an entire separate room

was not available, the bed on which a woman gave birth might be divided from the rest of the house by curtains in order to create a similar, if smaller, enclosed space. The medical explanation for this custom was based on the belief that cold air was harmful to the reproductive organs; in *Child-Birth, or The Happy Deliverie of Women* (1612), Jacques Guillemeau explains that a woman giving birth “must be kept from the cold air because it is an enemy of the spermatical parts . . . and therefore the doors and windows of her chamber . . . are to be kept close shut” (190). In addition to keeping the mother safe and healthy, closing off the birthing room had the added effect of excluding men. Although a male physician would sometimes be called in cases where labor became especially difficult or dangerous, most birthing rooms were exclusively female spaces consisting of the laboring mother, her midwife, and several friends, relatives, and/or neighbors (all women) whose job it was to assist the mother and midwife and witness the birth.⁶ After the child was born, the mother’s recovery or “lying-in” was a period of confinement lasting about a month, during which many of the same women who attended the delivery visited to comfort, entertain, and celebrate with her. Like the birth itself, these gatherings usually excluded men.⁷

Although often figured as bawdy, unruly, and ridiculous, the words spoken by women in the birthing room were also considered necessary to the work performed there, both in terms of ensuring a successful childbirth and accurately establishing paternity. Early modern texts demonstrate a range of possibilities for female discursive authority opened up by the birthing room, including a mode of religious authority that made birthing rooms one of the few spaces left open to Protestant women for collective female worship after the closure of the nunneries. Prayer was considered crucial in overcoming the danger, pain, and fear of childbirth, and devotional texts such as Thomas Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrones* (1582) feature prayers

for all aspects of pregnancy and labor.⁸ The headings to many of the prayers in *The Monument*, such as “The praier in long and dangerous travell of child, to be used either of the woman hir selfe, or by the women about hir in hir behalfe” (112), suggest that they were meant to be recited aloud during labor either by the mother or to her by her gossips. One of the prayers is actually structured as a dialogue, with the midwife leading the prayer for the other attendants, who respond at various points, much as a church congregation responds to an officiant:

MID[WIFE] O Lord save this woman thy servant and hand-maid.
WO[MEN] Which putteth hir onlie trust in thee.
MID. O Lord send hir present helpe from thy holie place.
WO. And evermore mightilie defend hir. (139)

This prayer is meant to be used during extremely difficult labors, and the heading stresses the importance of all the members of the birthing room community being involved: “If the woman have verie sore labor, and be long in travelling, and in danger of death, then let the mid-wife, and all the women assistant about hir, kneele downe, and praie one after another, hartilie and earnestlie” (138). Such texts frame birthing room prayers as important acts of communal speech, meant not merely to comfort the laboring woman, but also to gain divine aid and protection, and thus to achieve a safe, speedy delivery. Although such prayers always emphasize the women’s submission to God, they also place them in positions of religious authority, since the exclusion of men from the birthing room means that women must temporarily assume the role of minister. Moreover, the prayers suggest that women’s exercise of religious authority is crucial to the health and safety of both mother and offspring, and thus to the perpetuation of the patriarchal family.⁹ Even after the baby was safely delivered, a woman’s secular speech with her gossips was considered beneficial to her health and recovery, since it kept her from falling asleep too quickly after childbirth (deemed to be potentially harmful) and helped to keep her spirits high (Cressy, *Birth* 84).

Less convivial, but perhaps even more crucial, was the role birthing room bodily narratives played in establishing paternity. In cases where paternity was uncertain, the attending women, and especially the midwife, were responsible for eliciting a confession as to the identity of the child's father, a process that, as Gowing has shown, could be prolonged and painful: "[Midwives] questioned single women repeatedly, until a 'true confession' was given; they withheld their help until the mother confessed; and they timed their interrogations to the moment of greatest pain, when a mother would be sure to tell the truth" (159-60). In such situations the interrogatory dialogue between the attending women and the laboring mother determined the man who would be responsible for the economic welfare of the child (as well as who might be punished for sex outside of wedlock), with women assuming the responsibilities of confessors, policemen, and judges. Gowing sees women's role in eliciting confessions about paternity as an intrusion of patriarchal authority into the birthing room, but since men had very little direct oversight when it came to the actual scene of confession, the possibility always existed that birthing room attendants could assist a single mother in concealing the identity of her child's father, or in naming the wrong father.¹⁰ Given the centrality of women's words in enabling healthy births, policing sexual behavior, and establishing and maintaining a man's ownership over his children and their mother, the birthing room gossip could not be summarily dismissed as frivolous and worthless, but neither were men entirely comfortable with the power held by these communities of women.

Despite their strong critiques of women's unruly words and bodies, early modern satires that focus on meetings of gossips, such as *The Batchelars Banquet* (1603) and W. P.'s *The Gossips Greeting* (1620), also perpetuate and enlarge the role of gossip as a socio-political authority figure, expanding her influence from determining the legitimacy of a child to defining

the legitimate exercise of patriarchal authority.¹¹ Although the locations of the gatherings featured in these and other gossip satires are not limited to the birthing room, but range from the bedroom to the bakehouse to the tavern, they repeatedly refer to women as “gossips” regardless of the setting, and the different types of meetings they depict reproduce many of the stereotypical hallmarks of birthing room meetings: the women gather and exclude men, usually in a closed room; they share food and alcoholic drinks, often to the point of excess; and their conversation frequently criticizes men and explores how women can gain the upper hand in their relationships with men, especially their husbands. In such texts, male narrative voices encourage readers to see these gatherings as occasions of waste, where too much is consumed and nothing of value is produced. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that these women are using bodily narratives to structure and organize the communities in which they live, and to determine their own and other people’s places in it, including, and perhaps especially, the place of men. Thus, the frustration expressed by male characters/narrators/authors in satiric pamphlets is due not merely to their disgust over the excesses of women’s gatherings, but rather to their anxiety over being excluded from these gatherings, during which important, if informal, social verdicts are handed down that help to shape patriarchal identity.

In its third chapter (“The humor of a woman lying in childbed” [61]), *The Batchelars Banquet* ties women’s excessive speech to their excessive appetites for costly edibles, but the gossips it critiques argue that such gatherings actually display the norms of hospitality and expenditure that should be expected from, and actually help to define, a proper patriarch.¹² The chapter begins by detailing the hardships a husband must endure during his wife’s pregnancy, labor, and lying-in. Much of his strife is the result of the considerable financial outlay required to satisfy his wife’s cravings, entertain her gossips, and employ the extra help she requires.

Exotic foodstuffs are the chief expenditure; the pregnant wife “longs for strange and rare things. . . She must have cherries, though for a pound he pay ten shillings, or green peasecods at four nobles a peck” (61). Similarly, the gossips at the christening feast expect to be entertained with wine and with “sugar, biscuits, comfits and caraways, marmalade and marchpane, with all kind of sweet suckets and superfluous banqueting stuff, with a hundred other odd and needless trifles which . . . must fill the pockets of dainty dames.” In addition, the dry nurse the husband hires to cook and care for his wife insists on sharing the “warm broths and costly caudles,” “partridge, plover, woodcocks, [and] quails” that she prepares for her mistress, and she also pilfers “the sugar, the nutmegs and ginger, with all other spices that comes under her keeping” (62). From this perspective, the pregnant female body and the community of gossips that is established around it constitute a drain on both household resources and on the honor and credibility of patriarchal authority; as a result of the childbirth expenditures (including a new dress for his wife to wear to her churching), the husband struggles to pay off his debts, and must “diminish his own port [deportment, apparel]” in order to “augment his wife’s bravery” (72-73). This depiction of the birthing room as non-productive is reinforced by the under-valuation of the new baby, who is not mentioned by the husband or narrator except for a description of its annoying “brawling,” which is linked to the way the nurse scolds and brawls at the husband for seemingly no other reason than sheer perverseness (72). Rather than being viewed as a valuable addition to the household and a perpetuation of the husband’s familial line, the baby is lumped in with the other expenses and annoyances of the birthing room—just another noisy mouth for its father to feed.

The chapter’s pessimistic view of female-dominated family life is formed through male perspectives, specifically those of the father and the (presumably male) narrative voice, and the text as a whole invites male readers to imagine themselves as the titular “bachelors” who can

revel in a “banquet” of misogynist critique from outside the institution of marriage. However, the text also reveals the women’s perspective, and in doing so it produces a counter-narrative to its own satire. This female point of view presents a very different way of thinking about the constitution of patriarchal authority through economic expenditure, and it demonstrates how gossips and gossiping could define the proper exercise of this authority. Male readers may have derived pleasure from imagining themselves as perpetual bachelors, but as actual or prospective husbands who hoped to achieve the standing of respectable heads-of-household, they would have been forced to recognize the social power of female bodily narratives even as they enjoyed the text’s critique of women’s speech. According to *The Batchelars Banquet*, the subject matter of gossips’ conversation is partially determined by whether they feel they have been entertained well by their host, the father of the newborn baby. If “the good man . . . welcome[s] them with all cheerfulness and [is] sure there be some dainties in store to set before them,” then they will refrain from criticizing him (62). However, if “they find not things in such plenty and good order as they would wish,” they set about slandering him to his wife:

Trust me, gossip, I marvel much, and so doth also our other friends, that your husband is not ashamed to make such small account of you and this your sweet child. If he be such a niggard at the first, what will he be by that time he hath five or six? It doth well appear he bears but little love to you, whereas you, vouchsafing to match with him, hath done him more credit than ever had any of his kindred. (64)

The women construct a narrative in which the husband fails to perform the socio-economic role of patriarch, opining that he is not properly demonstrating his appreciation of the labor of his wife in the production of their child, and that the wife is not getting a fair return on her investment in her husband and their household. Unlike the account from the male perspective, which characterizes the reproductive labor of women as virtually worthless, in the gossips’ bodily narrative a great deal of value adheres to the wife’s work in birthing a child, as well as to

the anticipation of her production of future offspring and to the “credit”/social capital she bestowed on her husband in agreeing to marry him. By this logic, it is only fitting that a grateful husband would publicly “make account” of his wife’s valuable work and status by devoting a generous portion of the household resources to the celebration of her and the baby through festive lying-in celebrations, during which the entire community (and especially its female members), can witness his appreciation of his wife, their child, and the women who assisted in the birth. Although, in the case of this married couple, the husband’s paternity is assumed and its confirmation by the gossips is not required, the gossips’ bodily narrative nevertheless contributes to the definition of his patriarchal status in relation to his wife and child, and thus helps establish his standing in the community.¹³

Agreeing that the husband’s reluctance to spend money on the traditions and rituals of birth is an injustice to his wife, the gossips proceed to instruct her on how to gain domestic status that is equal (if not superior) to that of her husband. Not surprisingly, they suggest that a woman’s best means to achieve these ends are her words, and they brag about how they have succeeded in dominating unloving, stingy, and even abusive husbands through the power of their speech: “For be it right or wrong, if I say it, he will not gainsay it, for, . . . let him do what he can, I will be sure to have the last word”; “Believe me gossip, . . . were I in your case, I would give him such a welcome at his coming home, and ring such a peal of bad words in his ears, that he should have small joy to stay the hearing” (65). Although this advice is depicted as conventionally shrewish, the wife is able to use her words to ensure that her husband properly performs the role of devoted mate and proud new father. She does so in part by narrating her newly-delivered body for him, emphasizing the weakness, discomfort, and danger she endures even after giving birth, and although her complaints of a weak stomach and restless sleep are

deemed by the narrator to be “mere lies,” her husband responds solicitously, even going so far as to prepare meals for her himself, despite the presence of maids and a hired nurse (67). As a reward for “play[ing] . . . the cook” (67), the wife “commends [his broth] to the heavens, affirming also that the broth which the others made . . . was nothing worth,” upon hearing which the husband becomes “not a little proud” (68). The pamphlet critiques the wife for making her husband take on the work of female servants, but it also reproduces the power of the birthing room by demonstrating how the wife’s bodily narrative constructs her husband’s sense of his own “worth” in the household.

Moreover, *The Batchelars Banquet* demonstrates that a man’s status within his household and his treatment of his wife and children can carry over to affect his standing in the wider community. Near the end of Chapter 3, the husband attempts to shortcut established post-partum patterns and rituals: he balks at throwing a lavish “gossips’ supper” and hints that his wife’s abstention from household duties has already gone on too long, even though the traditional lying-in month is only half over. In response, his wife warns him that his lack of generosity towards her and his refusal to respect the traditions of the birthing room will work to devalue him in the eyes of the community: “Though the sorrow be mine, the shame will be yours” (68). Although exasperated, the husband gives in to her chastisement: “[B]y reason of his wife’s words, he buys more meat and prepares a great deal better cheer than he thought to have done” (72). On the day of the feast, the husband resents what he sees as the gossips’ excessive consumption of his food and wine, but he nevertheless plays the good host, “cover[ing] his discontent with a merry countenance” so as not to incite their disapproving speech, which has the power to jeopardize not only his relationship with his wife, but also his standing in society (72). Rather than simply policing female sexual behavior in the interests of patriarchal power, as Gowing and Pollock

argue, these gossips also regulate male behavior by defining and enforcing the norms that determine a man's place in the larger community. Thus, even an avowedly misogynist text like *The Batchelars Banquet* demonstrates that the enclosed nature of the birthing room does not limit the scope of the discursive authority women derive from it, but instead positions the birthing room as a point of origin from which the centrifugal force of women's words can extend.

In its portrayal of three different types of gossips' meetings, *The Gossips Greeting* similarly reveals the impact of women's speech on the construction of patriarchal authority, and although at twenty-six pages it is only about one-third the length of *The Batchelars Banquet*, its significantly harsher tone makes it perhaps even more illustrative of men's fears over gossips' verbal power. The main text is divided into three sections: the first describes a dialogue between two women on their way to a birthing room for an upsitting;¹⁴ the second involves three women who meet in the bakehouse and then adjourn to a tavern to continue their conversation; and the third is an anecdote about a man who is lured into a brothel by a group of "entising gossips" (C4r). The bodily narratives of the birthing room (referenced as the context for the meeting in the first section but never actually depicted) are the point from which other scenes of women's discursive power radiate. Like *The Batchelars Banquet*, *The Gossips Greeting* shows women inverting misogynist commonplaces in order to critique the misuse of patriarchal authority.

In one of the prefatory poems to *The Gossips Greeting*, the author, "W. P.," declares his intent to describe subversive women in detail so that men will know to avoid them in favor of better-behaved women: "These . . . / Meane I to limbe, and Painter-like set out, / That men hereby may know a modest wife" (B1v). However, the gossip characters who are being "set out" by the male narrative voice are just as adamantly working to regulate and categorize men's behavior; despite itself, the text thus deconstructs its own misogynist lesson by representing a

critique of male behavior from the perspective of women. In the first section, as in *The Batchelars Banquet*, the gossips are satirically depicted as gluttons who greedily list the refreshments they expect to find at the upitting, anticipating particularly an abundance of wine: “And as for wine, I am sure we cannot scape, / Till we are stained with the purple grape” (B3v). These women are “stained” by their desire to fill themselves with a man’s expensive household goods, and a few pages later the author accuses them of disturbing the financial security of the entire domestic unit through their over-consumption: “Husband nor household do they ought respect, / . . . / They are not contented when they come to feast, / To feed and cram even till their bellies crack / . . . / They ne’re respect no charge nor any cost” (B4v-C1r). Here the gossips de-center the household, threatening its position as an extension and reflection of the husband’s patriarchal identity, and the “cracking” of their bellies operates as a grotesque parody of birth that consumes and surfeits rather than produces. However, even as the pamphlet condemns these women for squandering household resources, it reveals that men can do the same. Part of the gossips’ conversation in this section involves the discussion of an acquaintance’s bad husband, who gambles away his income while his wife struggles to keep the household financially solvent: “Whilst all the weeke at home poore heart she toyle, / Her husband doth abroad live of the spoyle, / And like a unthrift commonly each day; / At Tables, Dice, and Tennis he doth play / Lewdly consuming what he never got” (B3v). In this anecdote, accusations of female profligacy are inverted: it is the wife who produces and the husband who consumes, and the man’s daily gambling makes the occasional gossips’ feast seem relatively benign.

The women go on to invert another commonplace about women when they conclude that men’s exterior shows of virtue frequently do not match their dissolute inner natures: “That countenance and conscience seldome gree / Where one corrupt the other smooth we see” (B4r).

Their words are a direct challenge to the text's own male narrative voice, which later accuses women of "making Sirens shew of purity, / Only to hide their foule impiety" (C4r). The second section, which satirizes women who spend their time drinking in a tavern rather than taking care of their husbands' needs at home, also gives voice to the women's complaints about their husbands' drunkenness, cruelty, and profligacy (C2v), and the third section, in which a man is tricked into spending all his money drinking in a brothel, demonstrates exactly the kind of irresponsible male behavior about which the women in the first two sections complain.

Although the text purports to be an exposé of women's bad behavior, in doing so it is forced to give voice to the women it critiques so as to demonstrate the kinds of unruly speech it rails against. Although the women are dismissed as "quite devoid of shame" and their complaints as "venom'd hate" (B4v), the overlap between their critiques of men and the critiques being leveled against them makes the misogynist and anti-misogynist positions seem dangerously interchangeable, and potentially equally available to readers. The text thus enacts a kind of dialogic, intratextual *querrelle des femmes* in which men and women each attempt to define the limits of the other's social and sexual authority.¹⁵

In *The Gossips Greeting*, women's authority to critique male behavior originates in the privacy of the birthing room, where they are able to "safely sit, some certaine houres, / Discoursing of owne and Husbands powers," and where they "neede not . . . husbands feare" (B3v). The birthing room thus serves as a model for other exclusively female meetings and discourse, and also as a flashpoint for male anxiety about the constitutive power women's words might have to delimit and police the authority of men within both their families and their wider communities. Although women's discursive power begins with the bodily narratives of the birthing room, it extends beyond issues of childbirth and paternity to define men's broader socio-

economic patriarchal roles. Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* explores this power in more depth, depicting women's bodily narratives about paternity as the basis of a communal reproductive logic that constructs patriarchal identity through the distribution of economic and sexual resources. The play also begins to suggest the role played by women's speech in the formation and organization of national politics.

2. Women's Speech and Communal Reproductive Logic in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

First performed in 1611 at the Swan Theater by the Lady Elizabeth's Men and first published in 1630, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* abounds with illegitimate children and anxiety about excessive or inadequate male potency. However, it is not the establishment of true paternity, but the judicious concealment of it through women's bodily narratives, that results in contentment and prosperity for both male and female members of the Cheapside community. When Mrs. Allwit's friends and neighbors gather for a gossips' feast celebrating the christening of her new baby, the product of an adulterous affair, the festive speech of her gossips is crucial to concealing her sexual transgression and maintaining her own respectable reputation as well as those of her lover, Sir Walter Whorehound, and her cuckolded husband, Mr. Allwit. Mrs. Allwit's birthing room serves as a microcosmic example of the importance of women's speech in the Cheapside community as a whole, which, given its wide variety of character types, can itself be read as a microcosm of the nation. At one point in the play, Tim Yellowhammer, eager to show off his Cambridge education, brags, "By logic I'll prove anything," and claims that he can use his stilted rhetorical logic to "prove a whore to be an honest woman," even if she "had three bastards" (4.1.39-40, 42, 48-49). Although Tim is later made to eat his words when the woman he marries turns out to be another man's discarded mistress, the play nevertheless reveals that the

kind of logical leap Tim describes is quite possible in a community where socio-economic practicality trumps sexual propriety, and those with abundant economic and/or reproductive resources compensate for those who are lacking. In this section, I will argue that the lynchpin of this communal logic, which permits immoral behavior in the name of civic good, is not the tortured rhetoric of men like Tim, but rather the speech of women, which is central in constructing the narratives of paternity and patriarchal identity that, even if not literally true, form the foundations upon which Cheapside's socio-economic stability is built. Moreover, the play hints that women also exert discursive control over male religio-political authority.

In 3.2, Mrs. Allwit's gossips gather in her birthing room to celebrate the baptism of her newborn daughter with eating, drinking, and, of course, conversation.¹⁶ Middleton's portrayal of this type of gathering contains many of the conventions of the gossip satires analyzed above: the women chatter and tell semi-scandalous secrets, feast on sweets and wine, get tipsy, and overturn stools. As the titular head of the household and host of the festivities, Mr. Allwit, like the narrators of the satires, is the play's mouthpiece for male concern about female overconsumption, and he provides a running commentary on the expenses racked up by his wife and her gossips: "When she lies in / . . . / A lady lies not in like her: there's her embossings, / Embroid'rings, spanglings, and I know not what, / As if she lay with all the gaudy shops / In Gresham's Burse about her; then her restoratives, / Able to set up a young pothecary / And richly stock the foreman of a drug shop" (1.2.30-37). Mr. Allwit's hyperbolic description emphasizes the excess of his wife's birthing room—not content with merely enough, she consumes entire shops' worth of goods.¹⁷ When Mrs. Allwit's gossips arrive, they join her in conspicuous consumption, and although he outwardly performs the role of good host, behind their backs Mr. Allwit ridicules his female guests for their greed: "These women have no consciences at

sweetmeats, where'er they come; see an they have not culled out all the long plums too. They have left nothing here but short wriggle-tail comfits, not worth mouthing. No mar'l I heard a citizen complain once that his wife's belly only broke his back" (3.2.70-75). In addition to critiquing the gossips' appetite for sweets, Mr. Allwit's complaints about the gossips' preference for "mouthing" "long plums" rather than "short wriggle-tail comfits" implies that the women are sexually voracious as well. After the women have left, Mr. Allwit grumbles about the damage they have done to his expensive household goods through their careless dribbling of wine (or perhaps urine): "Fair needlework stools cost nothing with them" (3.3.220-21). Even the female reproductive body seems oddly *non*-productive, since in the anecdote about the citizen's complaint related by Mr. Allwit, pregnant women's "bellies" consume instead of produce, and in doing so threaten their husband's socio-economic standing.

In her influential analysis, Paster reads Mr. Allwit's "male anxiety at the christening scene" as reflective of the play's overall attitude towards female consumption, arguing that "the enemy of middle-class conservation of wealth is women," and that the men of the play must unite "to conserve . . . an economic and sexual substance that the appetite of woman and her conspicuous lack of self-control threaten to destroy" (57). Similarly, Miller argues that in *Chaste Maid*, "women become, through their desire and their consumption of products, destructive and dangerous" to the rest of society (82). Rick Bowers offers a caution to readings such as Paster's and Miller's when he warns against "tak[ing] Allwit at his word" and "viewing the gossips' scene through *his* judgmental eyes." In Bowers's reading, the christening scene is an "unthreatening environment" within which the gossips "enjoy themselves, express themselves, and indulge excessively. . . . Within the patriarchal comic confines of Middleton's scene, such behaviour is all that is permitted them" (1.11). As Bower notes, it is important to read past the

conventionally misogynistic view of women's gatherings and speech put forward by Mr. Allwit; whereas the narrators of gossip satires frame the text and guide the reader's interpretation of the gossips, in the play the critical male figure is just another character, one voice among many. However, Bowers's reading of the christening scene seems to veer too far in the other direction from Paster and Miller: instead of being destructive and threatening, his gossips are constrained and socially benign. Ultimately, Bower, like Paster and Miller, denies the socially constitutive power of female bodily narratives, ignoring the active role they play in determining which of *Chaste Maid's* male characters are viewed by the community as successful patriarchs, and which are not.

Mr. Allwit's economic and social success depend on the interaction between his wife's reproductive body and the presence and speech of her gossips. The charade that enables Mrs. Allwit and Sir Walter to have an affair while still permitting all parties to retain the appearance of respectability requires an audience to interpret and validate it. As Jenstad argues, "Allwit requires interpreters—in this case the gossips at the christening feast—who will read the markers of wealth in the lying-in preparations" (390). Aside from this observation, Jenstad does not focus much attention on the significance of women's words to this process of social identity formation, and her bracketing of the gossips suggests that the gender of the interpreters is of little relevance. However, as demonstrated in the gossip satires, women's dominance in the birthing room made them the primary interpreters of both biological paternity and socio-economic patriarchy. Although Mrs. Allwit's gossips do not knowingly condone adultery, their speech enables the affair to continue, and Mr. Allwit to benefit from it. As noted in the previous section, the women attending a birth were charged with determining paternity particularly when a child was born out of wedlock. Although this sense of urgency concerning paternity typically did not

surround the labor of married women, the play's many instances of secret adultery actually foreground how crucial the establishment of paternity is; even when inaccurate, such determinations carry enormous social weight, and are never publicly contradicted.¹⁸ After the baptism, the gossips gather at Mrs. Allwit's bedside and congratulate her on her baby, remarking on the child's resemblance to its "father": "Gossip, is't not a chopping girl, so like the father?" / "As if it had been spit out of his mouth" (3.2.9-10). The claim that the baby so resembles Mr. Allwit that it could have emerged from his mouth creates an imaginary physical bond between him and "his" child, a bodily narrative which elides the fact that the baby's legitimacy is actually established through the words "spit" from the mouths of the gossips, who act as authoritative sources of "evidence" of his paternity.

Furthermore, the claims the women make about Mr. Allwit's paternity help to establish his social standing, since the gossips interpret his many children and lavish birthing room furnishings as signs of his virility, wealth, and generosity. When Sir Walter enters the gathering with gifts for the baby, the gossips compare his smooth words and upper-class manners with the less-sophisticated ways of Mr. Allwit, and one of the women opines that Mr. Allwit "shows like a clown" next to Sir Walter. However, another gossip quickly speaks up in his defense, declaring, "I would not care what clown my husband were, too, so I had such fine children" (3.2.32, 34-35). The gossips' very disagreement demonstrates their role in helping to establish Allwit's patriarchal standing by comparing him favorably (at least in terms of his ability to father children) to an upper-class man like Sir Walter. When the women marvel at the richness of the Allwit household, they elevate Mr. Allwit (figuratively) to the status of a count, declaring that Mrs. Allwit lies in "like a countess" (3.2.101). Like the husbands and narrators of the satires, Mr. Allwit grumbles about the gossips' idle chatter and voracious appetites, complaining that

they consume all his food and wine but “never think of payment” (3.2.88), but this birthing room ritual and the female speech that dominates it are clearly not as valueless as he suggests.

When Mr. Allwit imagines his wife’s birthing room as various types of shops in the passage quoted above, he implies that, in addition to being a place of consumption, the birthing room might also be a place of commerce and profit for the rest of the household as well as for the wider community—and as it turns out, this is exactly the case. Mr. Allwit accepts his role as a cuckold as long as Sir Walter is willing to financially support the Allwit family, and despite his wife’s infidelity, Mr. Allwit professes that he could not be happier with his situation: “I thank [Sir Walter], he’s maintained my house this ten years; / Not only keeps my wife, but ‘a keeps me / And all my family. I am at his table; / He gets me all my children, and pays the nurse / Monthly or weekly; puts me to nothing” (1.2.16-20). Not only does Mrs. Allwit’s affair with Sir Walter provide income for her husband, but it also increases Mr. Allwit’s standing in the community. When Mrs. Allwit gives birth to an illegitimate child, Sir Walter spares no expense in providing her with fine bed linens, expensive medicines from the apothecary, “sugar by whole loaves,” and “wines by runlets” (1.2.38); in addition to stimulating the local economy (represented by the presence of “a comfit-maker’s wife” and “a pothecary’s [wife]” among Mrs. Allwit’s gossips [2.4.13, 14]), this conspicuous consumption is interpreted by the gossips as a sign of Mr. Allwit’s status as a wealthy and virile patriarch. Mr. Allwit takes full advantage of the benefits he accrues from his wife’s affair, knowing that in the eyes of the community, he comes across as a productive, valuable member of society: “I pay for none at all, yet fools think ‘s mine; / I have the name, and in [Sir Walter’s] gold I shine” (1.2.40-41). The material expenditure of the birthing room is turned, through women’s bodily narratives, into patriarchal privilege for Mr. Allwit, and the gathering of gossips is crucial in establishing the communal

logic that allows for the socially beneficial redistribution of economic and sexual resources from those, like Sir Walter, with an abundance to those, like Mr. Allwit, who are lacking. The gossips' ability to define and interpret these resources gives them the power to confer socio-economic status upon the male members of their community.

At other points in the play, the power of women's bodily narratives extends outward from the birthing room to a more public and mobile context, demonstrating how the kinds of speech and authority licensed by birthing room ritual serve as the basis for women's broader influence over definitions of patriarchy. In the midst of the rampant adultery and illicit sexual liaisons that characterize the Cheapside community, women's words weave sense and harmony out of seemingly farcical patriarchal substitutions and swaps. Like the Allwit/Whorehound plot, Touchwood Sr.'s relationship with Sir Oliver and Lady Kix demonstrates the importance of women's words in creating narratives of paternity that determine how men fit into the socio-economic order of Cheapside while providing for a more equitable distribution of economic and sexual resources. Touchwood Sr. must leave his household and live apart from his wife because they are too fruitful for their own financial welfare: they "only can get children and no riches" (2.1.12). The Kixes are on the opposite side of this equation: wealthy but infertile, they "only can get riches and no children" (2.1.11). Moreover, their infertility puts even their wealth at risk, since by not having children they risk losing an inheritance that would otherwise come to them. Although each of the Kixes accuses the other of being infertile, Sir Oliver seems more intimidated by his wife's words than she does by his, and he begs her to stop talking, worrying about the effect her bodily narrative will have on his masculinity: "Talk not on't, pray thee. / Thou'lt make me play the woman and weep too" (2.1.157-58). Touchwood Sr. devises a plan to manipulate the uncertainties of paternity to resolve all their problems: he will sell Sir Oliver an

expensive sham remedy for infertility and then impregnate Lady Kix himself, allowing her to bear a child that Sir Oliver will believe to be his own.

However, the authority of female speech is not lessened when Touchwood Sr. swoops in to seemingly save the patriarchal day, since women's knowledge of reproductive matters is needed to clinch the deal. It is the Kixes' maid, and not Touchwood Sr. himself, who first introduces his offer of aid, and she enables the sexual substitution that follows by vouching for the efficacy of his "remedy" over all the others the couple has tried (2.1.180-86). Exactly how the Maid came by her information and whether or not she truly believes it is unclear, but Sir Oliver trusts that the knowledge she relates is accurate, eagerly promising, on the basis of her word, to spend whatever it takes to obtain this remedy (2.1.195-99). Later, female knowledge about the reproductive body is even more explicitly tied to economic exchange when Touchwood Sr. and Sir Oliver work out a system of payment to be administered at various points during Lady Kix's pregnancy: an initial payment of one hundred pounds, and then three additional installments of one hundred pounds apiece to be paid when quickening, labor, and live birth occur (3.3.147-54). Given that quickening (the first time a woman feels her child move inside her) was largely a matter of a woman's testimony about her own body,¹⁹ and that successful labor and childbirth depended on the birthing room speech of gossips, it is clear that women's words are the organizing force behind the plan that will establish the patriarchal authority of Sir Oliver and Touchwood Sr. by ensuring the economic security and social respectability of both.

Upon discovering that his wife has quickened, Sir Oliver exclaims: "I am a man forever!" (5.3.1). Lady Kix's pregnancy, which is presumably confirmed through her own speech, establishes him in the eyes of the community as a virile patriarch and a wealthy one, since it

ensures that he will receive the inheritance he desires. Moreover, it allows Touchwood Sr. to resume his place at the head of his own household: the elated Sir Oliver tells Touchwood Sr. to return home to live with his wife, promising that he will provide for any children they might conceive (5.4.84-85). This happy resolution is, of course, predicated on Sir Oliver's assumption that the child Lady Kix has conceived is his own, a notion of which she does nothing to disabuse him. Indeed, Lady Kix's presence at Mrs. Allwit's lying-in suggests that, as part of the same social network of women, her own lying-in will resemble her friend's, complete with many of the same gossips in attendance, who will spout the same fictitious narratives about her child's paternity and her husband's sexual potency. Lady Kix's deception, conceived independently of her gossip network but rooted in the discursive power derived from it, stretches the authority of women's bodily narratives beyond the borders of the birthing room.

The Country Wench pushes this expansion even further, for unlike Mrs. Allwit and Lady Kix, she is completely removed from the gossip network of Cheapside—her very appellation designates her an outsider. In fact, her unmarried status and multiple illegitimate children make her reminiscent of historical accounts of itinerant unmarried pregnant women who were chased out of town to prevent the financial burden of their illegitimate children from falling on the parish.²⁰ As a result, the Country Wench is forced to operate on the fringes of society, resorting to blackmail and child abandonment as she designates paternity and, in the process, redistributes economic resources. Despite her marginal position, however, the Country Wench's speech, like that of the Cheapside gossips, demonstrates women's discursive reproductive authority, as well as the ways they might use this authority to enforce communal logic. In 2.1, the Country Wench blackmails Touchwood Sr., threatening to publicly shame him by naming him as the father of her illegitimate child unless he pays her to keep quiet: "Do you see your workmanship? Nay, turn

not from it, nor offer to escape, for if you do I'll cry it through the streets and follow you" (2.1.66-68). The Country Wench authoritatively declares Touchwood Sr.'s paternity and demands that he recognize his own "workmanship," and her threat to speak publicly about his sexual misconduct, to "cry it through the streets," is one he takes seriously, giving her all the money in his purse in exchange for her silence. Whereas in the birthing room paternity is determined through a dialogue between multiple women, here on the streets of Cheapside the authority to name a father lies entirely with the mother herself. Whether or not Touchwood Sr. actually believes the Country Wench's claims is beside the point in their exchange; he recognizes the threat her bodily narrative could pose to his reputation in the community, and so he treats it as authoritative. For her part, the Country Wench, like the Allwits and the Kixes, uses narratives about reproduction and paternity for her own economic benefit.

In addition to benefiting her, the Country Wench's ability to choose her child's father contributes to the communal logic of the play, in that it results in a greater distribution of goods and capital. After letting Touchwood Sr. off the hook, the Country Wench abandons the baby with two Promoters who have been confiscating meat from citizens, ostensibly because it is Lent, and exchanging it for sex with prostitutes (2.2.71-73). To incite the Promoters' greed, she hides the baby in a basket underneath some mutton and then claims to be a servant on an errand, dismayed at the confiscation of her master's goods. The Country Wench makes the Promoters swear that they will keep whatever is in her basket until she returns with her master and then runs off, permanently abandoning her baby with them. When the men realize what has happened, they feel bound by the oral agreement into which they were deceived: "The quean made us swear to keep it, too." / "We might leave it else" (2.2.197-98). By putting them in charge of her baby, the Country Wench indirectly "names" the Promoters as joint fathers of her child; like the

gossips of Cheapside, she constructs paternity through language (the sworn oath) rather than biological proof. In doing so, she corrects the Promoters' enactment of manhood by bringing them within the orbit of a patriarchy defined in terms of household expenditure that contributes to the larger economy: "Half our gettings must run in sugar-sops and nurses' wages now, besides many a pound of soap and tallow. We have need to get loins of mutton still, to save suet to change for candles" (2.2.201-204). Thus the Country Wench, like the gossips, helps define and direct the host of socio-economic responsibilities that make up patriarchal authority.

So far my analysis of *Chaste Maid* has focused on how women's bodily narratives determine patriarchal social identity and the distribution of economic resources in the play. However, a brief moment during the christening scene serves as a reminder of the religious roots of the title of "gossip" and hints that the authority of women in the birthing room extends to religio-political issues as well. As the gossips enter the birthing room following the christening, one of the Puritan women assures Mrs. Allwit that the baby has been "well kursened, i'the right way, / Without idolatry or superstition" (3.2.3-4). Nothing more is said about the details of the child's baptism, but this bit of dialogue alludes to specific controversies that were considered quite serious during the seventeenth century. As Cressy notes, "One of the longest-running disputes among early modern churchmen concerned the sign of the cross in the sacrament of baptism. . . . Some ministers and parents vehemently objected to the cross in baptism as a superstitious and contaminated remnant of Roman Catholicism, and did all they could to prevent its use" (*Birth* 124). Dissenting lay people took it upon themselves to reject this symbol of conformity and discipline by interfering with baptismal ceremonies, and according to Cressy it was often a woman "who seized the initiative, disparaging the sacrament and posing a challenge to male and ecclesiastical power" (*Birth* 133). Since mothers were rarely present at their

children's baptisms during this period, the disruptive women at christening ceremonies were more likely to be godmothers, midwives, neighbors, or relatives—in other words, gossips.

Although *Chaste Maid* does not reveal specific details about the baptism of Mrs. Allwit's new baby, the Puritan woman certainly suggests that she and the other women took it upon themselves to determine right religious doctrine, at least at this local event, and were ready to protest at the first sign of "idolatry or superstition." Whether they were acting at the request of Mrs. Allwit or on their own initiative, the social authority attributed to them as gossips made them feel authorized to intervene in the religiously and politically fraught ceremony of baptism, should they have deemed it necessary. By depicting women placing their own religious judgments above those of the Anglican hierarchy, the play begins to open up the possibility that women might use the communal logic of the birthing room to decentralize and redistribute monarchal and ecclesiastical authority as well as sexual and economic resources. The Civil War-era pamphlets that I will examine in the next section take up the political ramifications of this communal logic even more explicitly, since in them the king's patriarchal power is restored only after political authority is spread across a multivocal, feminized collective in the birthing room.

3. "Mistris Parliament" and the Politics of Gossip

Although in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* communal reproductive logic appears to bring about social stability, the idea that a man's authority over his family, social standing, and economic well-being were determined by the judgment and speech of women could certainly be viewed as threatening to a society in which both sexual and political hierarchies were based on patriarchal values. If women's bodily narratives could support or threaten the authority of a father, then the speech of subjects might have the same potential power over monarchal

authority, since fathers and children, husbands and wives, and kings and subjects all modeled each other in the early modern system of patriarchal social hierarchy. The potential threat to sexual and political hierarchies of the powerful female/feminized speech exemplified by birthing room gossips is evident in three Royalist pamphlets from 1648, all written under the name Mercurius Melancholicus: *Mistris Parliament Brought to her Bed of a Monstrous Childe of Reformation*, *Mistris Parliament Presented in her Bed*, and *Mistris Parliament Her Gossipping*.²¹ In these pamphlets, the divisive political climate of Civil War-era England is represented allegorically through the figures of a laboring woman, Mistress Parliament, and her birthing room community of gossips, which includes figures such as Mrs. England, Mrs. Truth, Mrs. Sedition, and Mrs. Schism. These pamphlets critique a feminized Parliament that wrongfully grasps at Charles I's patriarchal authority in an attempt to reorder a world turned upside-down by attacks on the monarch. However, although the pamphlets denigrate the feminized voices of Parliament and "her" supporters, the challenge posed to the authority of univocal patriarchs by the multivocal female collective reveals the important role this collective plays in helping to stabilize and perpetuate patriarchal authority. This reliance is made even clearer in another Royalist pamphlet, *The Gossips Feast* (1647), in which gossips become voices of reason and order that attempt to rehabilitate a disturbed nation.

The *Mistris Parliament* pamphlets depict a politically fraught version of the type of birthing room portrayed in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and the gossip satires, and their play-like structure and satiric tone link them even further to city comedies such as *Chaste Maid*. In the first pamphlet of the series, *Mistris Parliament Brought to Her Bed*, midwife, nurses, and gossips gather in the birthing room as Mistress Parliament goes into labor and gives birth to her bastard, "a monstrous Childe of Reformation," and in the two sequels, this same community of women

attends Mistress Parliament's lying-in. Mistress Parliament is married to Charles I himself, who in 1646-47 had been defeated by the Parliamentary Army and taken into custody,²² and the pamphlets offer a strong critique of Mistress Parliament's disobedience to her husband/king, casting it as an act of both political defiance and sexual unruliness: "she hath imprisoned her Husband, and prostituted her body . . . and since, hath followed the Camp, . . . and turn'd up her tayle to every lowly . . . Rascall in the Army" (*Brought to Bed* 4). Whereas in the play the adultery of Mrs. Allwit and Lady Kix ultimately works to their husbands' advantage, the patriarchal authority of the monarch is weakened by his cuckolded state, and the pamphlets depict Charles I as a wronged husband quite literally at war with his cheating wife and the gossips with whom she collaborates.

Moreover, in *Mistris Parliament Presented in her Bed*, Mercurius Melancholicus implies that Mistress Parliament is a metaphorical representative of a wider rebellious female discourse, and that her rejection of her husband/king's patriarchal authority might be seconded by many English women. When Mistress Parliament falls ill with "a suddain shivering" and begins to swoon, Mrs. Suburbs suggests that they "burne some ill-senting thing under her nose" in order to revive her. Another gossip suggests that they burn the Vote of No Addresses (passed by Parliament on 11 February 1648), which cut off negotiations and dialogue between Charles I and Parliament by making it illegal to send messages to or deliver messages from the king:²³ "Nothing makes a loathsomer smell than the Vote wherein she resolved upon the question, that she would make no more addresses to her husband, her head." Mrs. Jealousie objects that burning this vote might not have the desired effect, since it would in fact have a pleasant smell: "no incense would smell better, and be more comfortable in all mens nostrils than the fume of that, burnt" (7). However, another gossip corrects her, pointing out that, although burning the

vote might please “all men,” it would not be pleasant “in the nostrills of all women, especially [Mistress Parliament’s], because it would trouble her much to be made sensible of the burning of that her darling” (7-8). The logic here is convoluted, but basically it is assumed that “all men” would side with the king, and would be pleased if the vote, which rejects the king’s patriarchal authority and effectively silences him politically, was destroyed. On the other hand, not “all women” would want to see the vote burned, presumably because they, like Mistress Parliament, would like to undermine and silence their husbands in order to obtain power for themselves. Although the Parliament it allegorizes as female was controlled by men, the pamphlet uses the image of the birthing room to suggest that the rejection of the patriarchal authority of the king was an issue in which actual English women had a large stake and role.²⁴

In her refusal to accept monarchical rule, Mistress Parliament casts England into chaos, and like the narrators of the gossip satires and Mr. Allwit in *Chaste Maid*, the *Mistress Parliament* pamphlets depict the unruly speech enabled by the birthing room as undermining legitimate patriarchal authority. Because these pamphlets take the form of dramatic dialogues, they consist almost entirely of women’s words, with speech prefixes indicating the many and varied female voices.²⁵ In *Mistress Parliament Presented in her Bed*, Mrs. Schism and Mrs. Sedition bicker over whether church or state holds pride of place among those who helped to bring down the king (3-5), and the increasingly hostile in-fighting of the gossips reflects the divided nation. This pamphlet ends with a call to arms that urges English men to come to the king’s aid and restore to him the monarchical, and perhaps phallic, power that has been usurped by the feminized Parliament: “Rowze up your valiant hearts brave English men / And put in Charles his hand his sword again” (8). However, although the *Mistress Parliament* pamphlets certainly depict a community of gossips that is in many ways grotesque, unruly, and socially destructive, they also

depict collective female speech, not male martial strength, as central to restoring the body politic to health.

As in actual birthing rooms, in the *Mistris Parliament* pamphlets it is up to women to elicit confessions of wrong-doing and reveal the truth. Thus, even as the pamphlets satirize women's birthing room communities, they also portray gossips as key figures in re-constituting the patriarchal authority of the king. In *Mistris Parliament Brought to Bed*, Mistress Parliament's confession is obtained in much the same way as confessions of paternity. First the midwife, Mrs. London, withholds her aid, and as Mistress Parliament's birth pangs increase to the point of "grievous agony" (5), she finally dictates a confession of treason to Mrs. Truth. In it, she admits to having "most trayterously betrayed, and imprisoned my lawfull King, the Anointed of the Lord," and thus to having "Robbed both God, and the King" of their authority (6), as well as to having "Stole . . . the Goods and Chattells of many thousands of his Majesties Loyall and obedient subjects" (7). As Mistress Parliament grows "still worse and worse," Mrs. Priviledge urges her to relinquish what she has wrongfully usurped and to return Charles I to his rightful position of patriarchal authority: "restore all that thou hast fraudulently taken away, either from God, thy King, or thy Neighbour, and . . . deliver thy Lord and Master out of Prison" (7-8). Although Mistress Parliament does not voluntarily take Mrs. Priviledge's advice, by the end of *Mistris Parliament Her Gossipping*, the last pamphlet in the series, patriarchal order is restored through the trial and sentencing of Mistress Parliament, a restoration accomplished through the speech of gossips.²⁶

In *Mistris Parliament Her Gossipping*, the socio-legal power of birthing room speech is brought to its most extreme conclusion, extending beyond bodily narratives of paternity and sexual behavior to decide the fate of patriarchal political authority. Although the title page

advertises this pamphlet as a depiction of a gossips' feast, "full of mirth, merry tales, chat, and other Pleasant Discourse," here the birthing room literally becomes a courtroom, in which former gossips act as judge and jury, and the "Pleasant Discourse" takes the form of accusation, interrogation, and sentencing. The title page of the pamphlet visually depicts a community split between Royalist prosecution and Parliamentary defense by listing the female characters in two separate columns, rather than in a horizontal row as in the previous two pamphlets. Mrs. Statute, Mrs. Justice, and Mrs. Truth are set opposite from and in opposition to Mistress Parliament, Mrs. Ordinance, and Mrs. Synod, and as the pamphlet progresses the first group of gossips places Mistress Parliament on trial for treason against the king. The Royalist female figures act on behalf of Charles I and voice his grievances for him: Mrs. England, who on the title page is named as the "Moderator" of the gossips' feast-turned-trial, orders Mistress Parliament to "answer what shall be objected against you *for my Lord the King*" (7, emphasis added). After Mrs. England recites an extensive list of accusations, Mrs. Statute orders Mistress Parliament to enter a plea, and the prisoner admits to being "Guilty of all this, and ten times more." Mrs. Statute then passes a sentence of death, closing with the traditional refrain of legal judgment: "So Lord have mercy on thy soul" (8).

In her reading of the *Mistris Parliament* pamphlets, Romack argues that their negative depictions of women "negate women's engagement in the arena of public politics by ridiculing the specter of female collectivity and aligning the undesirable elements of statecraft with the bodies of women so that they might be eliminated from the healthy body politic" (218). However, although Romack argues that the pro-monarchal pamphlets specifically critique "the *plurality of voices*" allegorized by the female-centered birthing room (218-19), it is ultimately not univocal male authority, but the multivocal political narratives of a feminized, *Royalist*

birthing room collective, that must decide the fate of the nation. Even seemingly monolithic entities such as “Truth” and “Justice” are allegorized as part of a female community in these pamphlets, and when charges are brought against Mistress Parliament, they are read by the collective voice of a feminized “England.” That the female figures in the *Mistris Parliament* pamphlets function ultimately in the best interests of the king does not mean that the pamphlets write out female authority—quite the contrary. As in the gossip satires and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, patriarchal authority is constructed through dialogue and debate in which women actively participate, and birthing room narratives play a key role in imposing political order.

Patriarchal authority’s reliance on female speech for stability is made even more apparent in another Civil War-era pamphlet, *The Gossips Feast*, with which I will conclude this chapter. At its outset, the 1647 pamphlet seems to frame the gossips’ meeting as an occasion that fosters lies and political disorder: Mother Bumbey’s daughter gives birth to a baby who, at its christening, declares itself to have come “into the world that I might cleave to the Divell and be an Agent with him in all his workes.” The child, whose godparents are Goodman Last-Time, Goodman Wicked-Time, Gammer Divellish Plot, and Gammer Hate-King, further vows to tear down the monarchy “and set up Anarchy, to pull down all order, and erect the worst of disorder” (2). After this portentous baptismal ceremony, Mother Bumbey invites all her friends to join her in a feast of ale and bacon during which they entertain each other by singing songs and telling stories. In addition to being voiced by women, in some cases these songs and stories are marked as specifically female by their provenance: Mother Bumbey’s song “is an old Ballad which I have heard my mother often sing in the winter nights by the fire side” (2), and she originally heard her story from a friend of her mother’s (5). The narrator describes these tales as being “true in part, yet it is [the tellers’] manner either to adde or diminish, according to their own

fancy, and infinitely to falsifie the truth” (2). Gossips’ speech is thus established as existing within a framework of rebellion, social chaos, and untruth.

However, the rest of the pamphlet depicts the gossips’ feast as a decidedly orderly and surprisingly pro-monarchal affair. In turn, each of the women sings a song and tells a story; all are invariably sympathetic to Charles I, critical of his attackers, and hopeful of his eventual return to power, and many give specific events of the Civil Wars a decidedly Royalist slant. In one story, Gammer Scumble tells the tale of “a King peaceable and vertuous,” who is captured by his enemies and imprisoned until “that Army of his Enemies who had before fought against him, fell at variance with the chiefest of those that had employed them, their Consciences also smitten with remorse to behold their Sovereignes despicable estate, so that they resolved to set him at liberty” (10). After this change of heart, the army that had previously fought for the king’s enemies frees him from prison and takes him into their company, where “he was entertained as the Ark God was by the Israelites, with showting and rejoycing” (10). Gammer Scumble’s tale seems to be a thinly veiled relation of actual events, albeit one that puts a remarkably sunny spin on them. In the spring of 1647, the New Model Army broke with Parliament for, among other things, Parliament’s inability to provide the soldiers with the back pay they were owed. As a power-play in this dispute, a small party of soldiers removed Charles I from Parliamentary custody and took him into the custody of the Army in June 1647. Although Pauline Gregg notes that being in the custody of the Army was perhaps more “pleasant” for Charles I than being held by Parliament, since he was able to “[dine] frequently in public, basking in the prayers and acclaim of the bystanders” (414), the king’s experience was probably not the one of complete liberation and ecstatic deification described by Gammer Scumble.²⁷ In their songs and stories, the community of women in *The Gossips Feast* revises historical

narratives to further Royalist agendas, and the birthing room is thus repositioned as a site of potential political critique and history-making.

Moreover, the pamphlet suggests that by dictating how the events of the past are perceived women's political narratives can also predict, or even help to determine, how future events will unfold. In Mother Bumbey's prophetic song, she assures Charles I that he will soon be restored to power: "The Fates are just / And Jove I trust / Will state thee as thou wert before: / Then will we sing, / Long live the King, / And send him blisse for evermore" (4). Although Mother Bumbey credits "Jove" and the "Fates" with restoring Charles I to power, she also claims that the songs of his subjects (and perhaps especially, in the context of this pamphlet, his female subjects) are responsible for the king's everlasting "blisse." Thus, the song implies that female speech acts (such as the songs of the birthing room) have the power not only to foretell, but to actually help bring about, a "happy ending" for Charles I. Mother Bumbey's prophetic power is made more explicit when one of the gossips asks her what the end result of the civil unrest in England will be: "M. Bumbey you can recover goods that are Stollen, and [tell] the losers, who were the theeves, you are called a cunning woman, and have skill in things to come" (12). During the early modern period, the term "cunning woman" was used to refer to a woman who possessed "magical knowledge or skill," such as a "fortune teller" or "conjurer" (*OED*), and Mother Bumbey's prophecy about the eventual peaceful restoration of the king fits her into this definition. The word "cunning" was also used in a more general sense to refer to someone "possessing practical knowledge or skill" (*OED*)—the kind of knowledge and skill, for example, that midwives and other women demonstrated in the birthing room. The pamphlet thus links Mother Bumbey's prophetic speech, and its potential for restoring political order, with the speech and activities of gossips.

The Gossips Feast credits this speech with being able to “recover” the monarchical authority that has been “Stollen” from the king, but although Bicks argues that “Mother Bumbeey uses her powers of prophecy to return England to its ‘natural’ state” (112), it is important to note that Mother Bumbeey’s words do not magically restore the king. Instead, the speech of the female figures in the pamphlet works to put forward an argument in support of Charles I’s monarchical power by reframing history from a Royalist perspective. As in the other satiric texts examined in this chapter, female narratives established from the outset as tending to “falsifie the truth” play a key role in imposing order on patriarchal society, suggesting that the speech of gossips is socially beneficial even (or perhaps especially) when it blurs or erases the line between truth and fiction. Although the texts discussed in this chapter satirize multivocal gossips’ narratives when they threaten to challenge and undermine univocal patriarchal authority, they also demonstrate that these bodily narratives, whether true or false, are an ordering force at multiple levels of early modern patriarchal society.

Notes

¹ See *OED Online* entries for “gossip, *n.*” and “gossip, *v.*,” as well as Adrian Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth,” 71.

² See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 156-61.

³ See Paster, 52-63; Miller, 80-86; Woodbridge, 224-43; and Romack, esp. 216-19.

⁴ As Gowing notes, the midwives and other “honest matrons” acted as confessors and legal officials in order to “uphold and enforce the interests of the parish” by establishing the paternity of an unwed mother’s child (159, 160); in such cases of illegitimacy, according to Pollock, the midwife took on the role of a “state official” (303).

⁵ See also Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 53-54.

⁶ Although male midwives became increasingly popular and prevalent in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the female-dominated birthing room remained the norm until the mid-eighteenth century. See Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-Midwifery*.

⁷ For more on the traditional practices and rituals of early modern British childbirth, see Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 15-229; Mendelson and Crawford, 153-54, 208-209; and Adrian Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth.”

⁸ For more on the prayers in *Monument of Matrones*, see Atkinson and Stoneman; and Hellwarth, 61-88.

⁹ Hellwarth argues that, although the prayers in *The Monument of Matrones* suggest a laboring mother’s privileged relationship with God, they also insert male authority into the birthing room since they set up “traditional models of patriarchal expectations of appropriate maternal behavior,” and are compiled and edited by a man (73, 63). However, as Cressy points out, evidence from early modern letters and diaries suggests that people frequently modified prayers from devotional texts or spontaneously composed their own prayers (*Birth* 25-26). Thus, I would argue that texts such as *The Monument of Matrones* do not lay out rigid guidelines for women’s prayer as much as they provide written evidence of a religious practice that was most likely often informal and oral. For more examples of devotional texts containing prayers for pregnant and laboring women, see Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 24-25.

¹⁰ For more on the licensing of midwives and their role in eliciting confessions, see Gowing, 159-63.

¹¹ For a more thorough overview of this genre, see Woodbridge, 224-35.

¹² For more on the translation, authorship, and publication history of *The Batchelars Banquet*, a seventeenth-century English translation of a fifteenth-century French text, see Gildenhuis’s introduction to the 1993 edition, esp. 22-30, 42. As Gildenhuis notes, the book was something of an early modern bestseller, going into ten editions before the end of the seventeenth century (13).

¹³ At the very beginning of the chapter, the narrator suggests that a married woman might become pregnant “by the help of some other friend” (not her husband), but the issue is not raised again, and it is assumed that the husband will simply “persuade himself” that the child is his (61).

¹⁴ The upsitting occurred approximately one to two weeks after a woman gave birth; it marked the point at which the newly-delivered mother was able to leave her bed, although she tended to restrict her movements to the birthing room for approximately another week. Frequently, the occasion of the upsitting was marked by a celebration in the birthing room attended by the woman’s gossips. See Adrian Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth,” 75-76.

¹⁵ The dialogism I track in the satiric gossip pamphlets is similar to that which Lesser identifies in the *querelle des femmes* publications of Thomas Archer. Lesser argues that, both within and across individual texts, Archer presents violent misogyny and spirited counter-arguments in defense of women within a framework that distances unruly discourse on *both* sides of the “woman question” from the stability of traditional patriarchal marriage; see Lesser, ch. 4. However, I would argue that both the gossip pamphlets and *Chaste Maid in Cheapside* complicate this formulation by depicting this dialogism as taking place *within* the bounds of marriage and the household, and in fact as working to establish the very terms that constitute middle-class companionate marriage.

¹⁶ Since early modern baptisms typically occurred during the lying-in period, the mother would not usually be present at the ceremony, but afterwards she would often be joined in her birthing chamber by her female gossips, many of whom would have been attendants at both the birth and the baptism.

¹⁷ As Newman argues in her analysis of *Epicoene*, city comedies dramatize an “intersection of woman, the city, and consumerism,” and reveal anxieties about the changing economies of English cities as well as a “discursive slippage between women’s talk, women’s wealth, and a perceived threat to male authority” (138). Although Newman claims that male anxiety about women’s unruly speech and unchecked consumerism is specifically directed at women who leave their homes to “gallivant about the city streets spending breath as well as money” (135), I would argue that *Chaste Maid* reveals that women can exercise discursive and economic authority even from within the confines of the birthing room.

¹⁸ Not everyone in the play is blind to the truth of the Allwit/Whorehound relationship. In 1.2 and 2.3, for example, the Allwit servants and Davy, Sir Walter’s man, make it clear that they know who is really the father of Mrs. Allwit’s children. Moreover, it is not difficult to imagine a staging of the christening scene in which the gossips perform certain lines in ways that imply knowledge of the affair. However, even if not all the members of the Cheapside community are entirely convinced by Mr. Allwit’s masquerade of paternity, the extent to which they vocalize their suspicions is limited to asides and ambiguous hints. No one publicly disputes Mr. Allwit’s paternity, and he is allowed to believe (perhaps correctly) that the majority of the community thinks of him as a virile and wealthy citizen.

¹⁹ See Gowing, 121-22.

²⁰ See Gowing, 156-59.

²¹ For more on the publication history and political context of the *Mistris Parliament* pamphlets, see the introductions and notes to Potter’s edition. Potter includes a fourth pamphlet, *Mrs. Parliament Her Invitation of Mrs. London*, along with the three that I discuss. Although it contains some of the same characters as the other three pamphlets, *Her Invitation*, as Potter points out, “makes no use of the metaphors of childbirth and gossiping [sic], which had been the linking factor in this series,” and so stands outside the scope of my discussion (“*Mistress Parliament*” 159).

²² See Gregg, 405-17.

²³ The full text of this vote can be accessed at: <http://www.constitution.org/eng/conpur079.htm>.

²⁴ As Achinstein points out, sexual satires published during the Civil War period reflect the fact that real women actually were assuming unprecedented roles in religion and politics, “voting, speaking out in public spaces, voicing religious truths, challenging authority in ways that . . . were politically recognizable” (135). Achinstein argues that such texts “attempt to exclude women” from the public sphere (135), but the gossip satires that I examine here (which Achinstein does not discuss) figure women’s political participation as *both* a potential threat to the nation and as essential to its restoration to health. For a more general overview of women’s religio-political activities during this period, see Davies.

²⁵ Male voices are, while not entirely excluded, extremely peripheral in these pamphlets. In *Mistris Parliament Presented in her Bed*, “King Charles” speaks two lines in his own defense at the beginning of the pamphlet, and “Melancholicus” speaks a few snide asides “from behind the Curtaine” (3, 7, 8); there are no male characters in *Mistris Parliament Brought to Bed* or *Mistris Parliament Her Gossipping*.

²⁶ Bicks argues that *Brought to Bed* “uses the midwife as a voice of royalist righteousness and divine justice” (109). However, in both the first pamphlet and the two others, it is not the midwife alone who is responsible for restoring the body politic to health, but a multivocal faction of Royalist gossips.

²⁷ For a fuller account of these events, see Gregg, 412-16.

Chapter 5: Paternity, Maternity, and (De)Formative Speech in Early Modern Monstrous Birth Pamphlets and *The Winter's Tale*

As I discuss in chapter 4, women's bodily narratives were often the strongest evidence men had to go on in their attempts to establish some semblance of "truth" about paternity, which was itself the legitimating ideal behind patriarchal authority at multiple social levels during the early modern period. Men unwilling or unable to trust women's testimony about paternity anxiously searched the faces and bodies of their children for signs of physical resemblance that would assure them of the chastity of their wives and the legitimacy of their heirs. Suspicious husbands fantasized about cuckold's horns and eyed their children for similarities to other men, longing ultimately for the certainty provided by physical evidence, even if that certainty led to social disgrace. However, such certainty was unobtainable, and the supposedly natural authority of a man over his wife and children was undercut not only by concerns about women's unruly sexuality, but also by the fear that the physical and verbal influence a mother had over her child would overwhelm the father's ability to shape his offspring in his own image. While medical scholars were uncertain how much influence male seed had over the formation of a child, women were linked to their children through an undeniable (but, for men, often invisible) physical bond that began in the womb and extended well past birth. Consequently, women were believed to have a profound formative influence on the bodies and minds of children: a woman's imagination or speech could change the shape of the fetus she was carrying; her breast milk could transmit good or harmful traits to a nursing infant; and her control over her child's education could set the course for that child's future mental and spiritual development. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the power of female bodily narratives thus extends beyond women's

speech *about* their reproductive bodies to include the way that language works and passes *through* the maternal body to shape the bodies and minds of offspring.

In texts such as William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611) and monstrous birth pamphlets from both the early seventeenth century and the Civil War period, men try to counteract the threat posed by the formative reproductive authority of mothers by overwriting women's voices and reproductive bodies with male-authored narratives of sexual, religious, and/or political transgression. These texts attempt to negotiate the intra-familial competition over parental authority and the ability to influence the development and identity of children, and this competition, initially played out within the family between mothers and fathers, ultimately extends outward when other voices (such as those of midwives, gossips, pamphlet writers, church officials, and even God himself) work to augment maternal and paternal authority. In depicting this competition, these texts insistently question the extent of maternal power in biological and social reproduction, raising concerns about the potentially corrupting effects of women's bodily narratives on both the family and the state. Men read signs of transgression in the bodies of mothers and children, and in doing so establish a system under which unruly bodies and speech can be explained, critiqued, and destroyed by the authority of the patriarchal word. However, these texts are also invested in examining the limitations and dangers of paternal power, and they reveal that attempts by fathers and other patriarchal figures to suppress maternal authority risk either the emasculating shame of failure or the destructive slide into tyranny. Despite its disruptive potential, women's reproductive authority plays an integral role in shaping both offspring and the religio-political order, and men's attempts to eliminate this authority and achieve absolute control over the shape of the family or the state can prove just as monstrous as unruly female bodies and speech.

While critics such as David Cressy and Julie Crawford have shown that monstrous birth pamphlets are didactic texts influenced by sexual, religious, and state politics, they do not link these tales of the maternal imagination and reproductive body gone awry with less spectacular, but no less deep-seated, anxieties about the potential of women's imaginations, bodies, and words to obscure or erase paternity and promote maternity.¹ Diane Purkiss does make this link when she notes that "monstrous births were . . . signifiers of female imaginative and reproductive power acting without the constraint of paternity" (154), and Marie-Hélène Huet and Mary E. Fissell similarly discuss male anxieties about the power of the maternal imagination to both obscure paternity and create monsters.² However, whereas these critics limit their focus to the formative power of women's imaginations and desires over their developing fetuses, this chapter will theorize a more active and far-reaching vision of female authority by arguing that women's words played an equally crucial role in shaping not just children, but also religious belief and state politics. Monstrous birth pamphlets promote fantasies of neat, easy male interpretive control, facilitated by the will of God, but such depictions also serve as reminders that, when men searched the bodies of non-monstrous children for similarly clear signs of paternity, their attempts at interpretation were blocked by the power of maternal influence and overwritten by the authority of women's bodily narratives. However, although *The Winter's Tale* begins by raising fears about the threat to patriarchal authority (both paternal and monarchical) posed by women's control over the bodies and minds of children, the play challenges the notion that socio-political order is only possible when female reproductive bodies and women's speech are regulated and controlled by men.

Numerous critics of *The Winter's Tale* have noted its depiction of the difficulties inherent in attempting to "read" biological paternity, the double-bind facing suspicious men who cannot

trust the bodily narratives of women, but who lack the ability to accurately determine paternity for themselves. Whereas Carol Thomas Neely and Janet Adelman argue that the conclusion of the play insists that men acknowledge the generative, benign power of the female reproductive body, critics such as Gail Kern Paster and Donna C. Woodford argue that the play must diminish and efface maternal power in order to alleviate the anxieties about maternity raised in the first half of the play and bring about a happy ending.³ This chapter will advance such readings by arguing that even as the play raises anxieties about uncontrollable female speech and sexuality (anxieties which are never quite put to rest), it warns of the dangers of absolutist patriarchal authority at the levels of both sexual and state politics, a warning perhaps directed at the political persona cultivated by James I. Ultimately, tyrannical attempts to suppress women's speech and influence over their offspring are not only unsuccessful, but actually harmful to the patriarchal family and the state. Thus, although monstrous birth pamphlets published both before and after the play attempt to deny or condemn the formative power of maternal bodies and female bodily narratives, *The Winter's Tale* reveals the dangers inherent in such a project, given women's crucial role in reproducing and shaping the familial relationships, religious institutions, and state politics that make up patriarchal society.⁴

1. Maternal Influence, Monstrosity, and Interpretive Authority in Early Modern England

During the early modern period, beliefs about conception, child-bearing, and child-rearing contributed to the sense of competition between mothers and fathers, emphasizing both the important roles women played in the formation and development of children as well as fears that this female authority would diminish patriarchal control. Competition over the power to shape offspring began at the moment of conception, as illustrated by the medical debates

surrounding the roles of male and female bodies in the creation of a child. Classical theories represented the dominant male body working upon the weaker female: according to Aristotle, male semen determined the form of the offspring while the female body merely provided the matter, and Galenic theory claimed that although both men and women produced procreative seed, male seed was inherently dominant, more potent than the weaker seed of women (Keller 107). However, the practical implications of such theories were not quite as clear-cut as the theories themselves, since simple observation would prove that not all children sprang from their mother's wombs as precise copies of their fathers. Thomas Raynalde's *The Birth of Mankinde* asserts the primacy of the father's role in conception even as it apologetically insists that the mother's contribution to the child's overall development is greater in degree and significance: "[A]lthough that man be as principall moover, and cause of the generation: yet (no displeasure to men) the woman doth conferre and contribute much more, what to the encreasment of the child in her womb, and what to the nourishment thereof after the byrth" (17).⁵ In the 1630s and 1640s, William Harvey raised further complications by claiming (erroneously) that no postcoital mass occurred in the uterus. Prior to Harvey's findings, it was believed that male seed acted upon female seed or menstrual blood to produce an embryo, but if no such mixed substance could be found following sexual intercourse, then the contribution of the male to the conception of offspring became disturbingly intangible. At one point in his treatise on generation, Harvey even suggests the possibility "that the Female is a Stronger party in Generation, then the Male," noting that "amongst Animals, some Females do procreate of themselves without a Male; . . . but the Male never begetteth any thing without a Female" (161-62). As Eve Keller notes, Harvey does not pursue the more radical implications of his theory, instead creating an "elaborate edifice of explanation" in order to "foreclose the possibility of female control in generation" and promote

“male preeminence” (109). Nevertheless, concrete physical proof of the male role in generation remained elusive during the seventeenth century, leaving men to rely on their own uncertain observations and the potentially dubious claims of women for “proof” of their paternity.

As I discuss in chapter 4, individual cases of biological paternity were most often determined by women’s bodily narratives, not the observations of male scholars. Thus, men who had no reason to doubt their wives’ chastity or their children’s paternity were nevertheless placed in the awkward position of having to rest their patriarchal authority on nothing more tangible than their faith that what women said and how they behaved would correspond to the truth of their sexual behavior. Moreover, even a man who felt certain that he was the father of his wife’s child could not be sure that his paternity would translate into his being the dominant formative influence on that child, since the intimacy between a new-born child and its mother (and sometimes other women) was believed to shape and mould the infant physically, mentally, and spiritually in ways unavailable to the father. One such shaping activity available only to women was breast-feeding, which was believed to have a profound formative influence on a child. In *The Nursing of Children* (1612), French royal surgeon Jacques Guillimeau discourages wet-nursing for precisely this reason: “the Milke . . . hath a power to make the children like the Nurses, both in bodie and mind; as the seed of the Parents hath to make the children like them” (Ii4). Although his argument against wet-nursing is fairly conservative, Guillimeau’s observations have radical implications, since he suggests not only that the seed of *both* parents exerts a (possibly competing) formative power over the offspring, but also that maternal breast milk might have “a power” to form children in their mother’s image, “both in bodie and mind.” In *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622), William Gouge writes that “children as have sucked their mothers breasts, love their mothers best” (512), drawing a comparison between children who are

breast-fed by their mothers and those fed by nurses. However, his words also imply a tension between the attachment and affection a child feels for its mother and that which it feels for its father, whose physical bond with his offspring is much less sure than that of the woman who carries it within and feeds it with her body. Like Guillimeau, Gouge emphasizes the importance of maternal nursing by arguing that the infant not only bonds with the woman who feeds it, but inherits her qualities: “Together with the milke passeth some smacke of the affection and disposition of the mother” (512). The father, on the other hand, has no such physical means of passing on his traits to his children.

The physical transmission of identity through breast-feeding was, furthermore, closely linked with the transmission of language and knowledge through female speech.⁶ In *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), Edmund Spenser argues against the wet-nursing of English babies by non-English women, since “[t]he child that sucketh the milk of the nurse must of necessity learn his first speech of her, the which being the first that is inured of his tongue, is ever after the most pleasing unto him insomuch as though he afterwards be taught English, yet the smack of the first will always abide with him and not only of the speech, but also of the manners and conditions” (88). This passage constructs a strong link between breast-feeding and language transmission, and while Spenser does not quite go so far as to claim that the infant imbibes language with a woman’s milk, his use of the word “smack,” which could refer to a distinctive taste or flavor (*OED*), suggests a similarity between the food a child consumes at a woman’s breast and the language it learns there. Moreover, even if an English woman breast-feeds her own child, teaching it the language she most likely shares with its father, the child will also be shaped by the mother’s “manners and conditions,” which might differ widely from those

of the father. The powerful physical, mental, and moral influence that women's bodies and words exert on children would thus unsettle the notion of absolute patriarchal authority.

Even after the intimate physical bond of nursing had been dissolved by weaning, the effects of maternal speech and presence on a child's development could continue to be a point of anxiety, since women were responsible for the early education of their children. Mary Beth Rose points out that, in addition to teaching their children to speak, mothers were charged with instilling in them moral virtues and a sense of right and wrong; as Rose notes, it was a "widely shared Renaissance conviction that an individual's adult character is determined by such childhood interactions [with his/her mother]" (300, 301). Rose further argues that excessive maternal contact was believed to be potentially detrimental to a child's development, since a too-attentive or overly-affectionate mother could prevent her (presumably male) child from identifying with his father and successfully entering the "public, socialized world" (301). Similarly, Mary Ellen Lamb argues that the physical presence and oral narratives of adult women were believed to mark the young boys in their care with an "early effeminacy," which had then to be overwritten by the instruction of male tutors as the boys approached puberty (2). As in the discourse concerning generation and breast-feeding, early modern views of childhood education demonstrated the powerful influence that mothers had on their children's development, an influence which had the potential to obscure or even erase paternal influence if not carefully monitored and circumscribed.

The unavoidable intimacy between women and young children, the necessity for women to carry children in their wombs, feed them at their breasts, and instruct them with their words, created a system in which maternal influence was both desired and feared. Although it was believed that contact with a healthy, virtuous mother would result in healthy, virtuous children,

too much interaction with even the best of mothers could undermine paternal influence, weakening or obscuring a father's relationship with and control over his children. Perhaps in response to this perceived threat to patriarchal authority, the intimacy between women and the children in their care was often depicted as hazardous, the children in danger of suffering physical, mental, and/or moral deformity due to the excessive linked influences of the female body and female speech.⁷ In its most extreme, literalized form, this threat manifested itself in a belief in maternal impression, the idea that a woman's thoughts, words, and actions could alter and even deform her unborn child. A woman startled by a hare, for example, might produce a child with a harelip, and one popular story described a white couple who produced a black child because the mother had the image of an Ethiopian in her mind at the moment of conception (Gowing 131, 133). Such concerns about the power of the maternal imagination to shape a developing fetus were frequently coupled with fears of marital infidelity, since both were ways in which women could potentially trouble paternity. In the story of the white woman who gives birth to a black child, the woman is accused of adultery before Hippocrates clears her with an explanation of the formative power of the maternal imagination; in Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, the Ethiopian King Hydaspes accuses his queen of adultery when she gives birth to a white child after gazing on a picture of Andromeda.⁸

Tales like these, in which a woman is cleared of adultery through the explanation of maternal impression, find their counterpart in texts that warn of women who use the strength of their imaginations to conceal adultery. In *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse* (1636), John Sadler cautions that "the children of an adultresse may be like unto her owne husband though begotten by another man; which is caused through the force of the imagination which the woman hath of her owne husband in the act of coition" (138). An adulterous woman can

produce a narrative of paternity *through* her body without speaking a word, thus rendering any resemblance between a man and his wife's offspring suspect. In the absence of reliable physical evidence of paternity, men must rely on what women say *about* their bodies to confirm "natural" patriarchal authority. They must further rely on the bodies and words of mothers, nurses, and other female caregivers to shape the bodies, speech, minds, and characters of their children after they are born, and to set them on the developmental path to becoming loyal offspring and good subjects. Men thus depend on women to reproduce patriarchal values and validate patriarchal authority through the formative power of their bodies and bodily narratives.

In monstrous birth pamphlets from the early seventeenth century, however, male authors attempt to regain a measure of control over female speech and the bodies of women and their offspring. Although these pamphlets sometimes attribute the birth of a deformed, "monstrous" infant at least in part to the mother's (or, less frequently, father's) misdemeanors of thought, speech, and action, they do not depict mothers as the primary formative influence acting on the fetus. As Fissell points out, "[c]heap-print pamphlets about monstrosity emphasize God's will rather than the defects of the womb" (*Vernacular* 66), and I would argue that these texts displace the social, biological, and discursive competition between mothers and fathers to the spiritual realm by positioning God as a kind of über-patriarch who directs all generation and creates monsters as warnings against sin. It is up to humans to correctly read these warnings and appropriately change their ways, and pamphlet writers see their textual narratives as aiding this process of interpretation and reformation. By depicting God as the primary formative influence on, and male authors as the primary interpreters of, monstrous children, these texts represent the infants as being "fathered" through the combined efforts of God, the pamphlet writers, and in many cases, male witnesses and church authorities. As in classical theories of generation, in

which women are the silent, passive matter upon which the male seed acts to produce a form, monstrous birth pamphlets depict women as vehicles for the transmission of God's word. Male pamphlet writers take the process one step further by translating God's message from the corporeal monstrous body into a printed text, a form that is completely independent of the female reproductive body, and thus completely under male discursive control. By relegating women's words and bodies to secondary status in the formation, development, and interpretation of children, male pamphlet writers, many of whom either are ministers themselves or present the testimony of ministers as evidence, assert a kind of spiritual patriarchal authority over reproduction to counter the socio-biological control of mothers. In doing so, these pamphlets defensively foreclose the possibilities for maternal reproductive influence that medical theories and conduct books leave open.

An example of this assertion of patriarchal authority can be found in I. R.'s *A Most Straunge, and True Discourse, of the Wonderfull Judgement of God* (1600), which narrates a monstrous birth that results from the incestuous fornication of cousins. The pamphlet tells the story of a yeoman's daughter who spurns her respectable fiancé, refusing to "bee ruled by [her] parents and friends, in mariage" (B). Instead, she goes to work as a servant in her uncle's house, and while there has a sexual relationship with her first cousin. She becomes pregnant, "and God in just judgment (to shew his displeasure against mockerie with his holy institution of mariage, and his hatred of the sinnes of whoredom, adulterie, fornication, inceste, and all other uncleannesse) made this proud, this scornfull & unconstant wench, the mother of a monster, and not of an orderly birth" (B-Bv). However, despite this harsh critique of the young woman, the pamphlet makes it clear that the socio-sexual sins she committed were not sufficient in and of themselves to produce the monster she birthed. Instead, the power to create such monsters is

attributed to God, who “is so highly dishonoured, that by the grosse iniquitie of the people, he is provoked to send such monsters, for part of punishment upon us, into the world, that may make us ashamed of ourselves, and the readyer to hate & detest sinne, and by all due meanes, to seeke severe punishment for the same” (A3v). God sends monsters not to punish the relatively petty sins of individuals, but as warnings to all of humanity of the dangerous power of his wrath. God’s power, however, is interestingly qualified here, as the author claims that the birth of monsters is only “part” of the punishment warranted by sinners. Since presumably monstrous births are visited upon only a tiny fraction of transgressors, it is up to the human authority of “magistrates” “to seeke severe punishment” for the rest (A3v). I. R. urges local male officials to collaborate with him in responding to God’s message by exercising their religio-political authority in order to reshape England into a more devout nation. However, before they can do so the signs of God’s anger must be properly reported and interpreted so their causes can be determined, and this requires the intervention of the male author.

Although I. R. describes the young woman’s baby as a “monster, and not . . . an orderly birth,” he exercises a great deal of ordering power when he interprets the birth for the public. In his note “To the Godly Reader,” the author demurs that his story is so strange “that neither mans arte can set out, nor yet the tongue, or penne of man tell of, as it ought to be shewed and set out,” but the text nevertheless demonstrates I. R.’s high level of interpretive control over the narrative (A4v). He lays out the time, place, and circumstances of the birth in great detail, and then he reiterates these details by reprinting the original manuscript account of the birth, which was written “at the appointment of a Gentleman of good credit and worship” (Bv); as with his call to the local “magistrates,” I. R.’s inclusion of the “Gentleman’s” manuscript works to construct a larger patriarchal community to collaborate in interpreting and reforming England’s spiritual ills.

This second account orders the child's deformities into a numbered list, which, beginning at the baby's abnormally elongated head and working down to its webbed foot, neatly describes the various physical manifestations of the mother's sins, thus making these sins legible.⁹ The description of the child's body seems to be the only evidence needed to pass judgment on the crime, since we get no account of a confession from either of the parents, nor any indication that anyone besides the incestuous couple knew of the affair while it was going on. As far as the writer is concerned, the carefully enumerated details of the child's deformity are proof enough that the crimes of incest and fornication were committed, and although he credits God with physically shaping the child, his narrative works to shape readers' interpretation of and response to the birth's significance.

I. R. also takes pains to include information that will testify to the validity of his account, and in doing so he continues to consolidate male socio-religious power over reproduction. As would be typical, the first eyewitnesses at the scene of the birth were women, the three midwives attending the laboring mother. However, the pamphlet is careful to note that these women quickly send for yet another figure of patriarchal authority, "the Minister and Pastour of Colwall . . . who being a zealous man, and a learned Preacher, repaired thither with all speede: and [found] by his owne inspection, and due examination of the persons present at the birth of the saide childe, that it was thus straungely formed and figured" (B2v-B3). By carefully guiding his readers' interpretation of the neatly ordered evidence, attributing his account of the birth to two male sources (the minister's testimony and the manuscript produced under the direction of the "Gentleman of good credit"), and claiming to be acting in accordance with the physically manifested word of God, I. R. orchestrates a collective "fathering" of the monster, and in doing so he challenges the narrative power of the gossip networks discussed in chapter 4 and contains

the formative power of the maternal body. Moreover, the author uses this layered patriarchal authority to pursue his larger project of restoring moral order to English society, which, from his strict Protestant point of view, has been grievously disordered by rampant sexual transgression. In addition to calling on magistrates to punish transgressors more harshly, I. R. expresses hope that his text will work “to pearce the obdurate & stony heartes of great numbers, . . . and to dissuade others from falling” (A3), and after relating the details of the fantastic tale, he delineates how the reader may “make use of it” by attending to his “Christian discourse against al uncleannesse, and all uncleane persons that will not be reformed” (B3). The patriarchal collective thus fathers the monstrous child as an instructively legible narrative, using the female reproductive body as a conduit for the godly, socially formative project of shaping the minds and souls of readers.

Another such instance of collective “fathering” occurs in a pamphlet from 1613 entitled *Strange Newes of a Prodigious Monster*. As in *A Most Straunge, and True Discourse*, the monster in this pamphlet serves as a warning against sexual transgressions, “especially the sinnes of Adultery and fornication, which are ever justly punished by the righteous lawe and justice of God, even upon the Childrens children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate him” (A4v). In this case, the monster is a pair of conjoined twins, a birth defect which, as Julie Crawford notes, serves as an emblem for “the prohibited sexual embrace of the parents,” thus making “‘secret’ sexual transgressions and histories materially legible” (94). However, as in I. R.’s earlier pamphlet, the transmission of God’s “fatherly menaces” and “friendly chastisements” to his people requires authorial mediation, particularly given the rather obscure nature of the sins involved (B3). From the outset, the author takes as his primary subject the critique of “forbidden sinnes” that are “not to be named” (A3). Later, he does name the “sinnes of Adultery and

fornication,” but it remains unclear who exactly has committed these sins. The parents of the monster are described as being “branded,” the mother “with the marke of Basterdy, and from her Parents crimes in Adultery,” and the father by his “lewde carriage and conditions” (B). Whether the mother is herself the bastard offspring of an adulterous relationship, or whether it is she who committed adultery and the monster who is the bastard (or whether both are true), is uncertain, as are the specific moral defects that are marked by the father’s “lewdness.” Since God punished sin “unto the third and fourth generation,” the parents of the monster may be enduring punishment for the sins of their ancestors, not (or not only) for their own.

Because of this uncertainty, the author of the pamphlet is able to translate the incident into a general warning for unrepentant sinners. As in *A Most Straunge, and True Discourse*, the male author assumes the formative narrative authority that might ordinarily belong to women. He frames his authorial role in the language of reproduction, and although this trope of textual production is ubiquitous during the period,¹⁰ the pamphlet’s content gives it special resonance: “I am to deliver as strange a producement of a prodigious birth, as was ever knowne in this part of the world” (A4v). In his production and delivery of the story, the author takes on the responsibilities of the mother and the midwife, who would ordinarily be responsible for introducing a child into the world, and who would have shaping and interpretive power over a child’s body and the bodily narrative of its origins. Even as the author claims to wield his discursive power lightly, leaving it to the “godly disposed” to decide whether the birth he describes is “a punishment of sinnes and offences past, or . . . a true foresignification of some notable event to follow in succeeding times, or both,” he narrows readers’ interpretive options, thus shaping their response to his text (Bv). Clearly monstrous births are a sign from God of *something*, and on the next page the author confidently, and almost casually, reveals what that

something is: “these monstrous and prodigious birthes . . . are not greatly to be marvelled at, if we look but only into the causes of them, which for the most part are our sinnes, and carelesse negligences” (B2). God’s judgment, made manifest through the body of a specific woman and her offspring, is extended to the whole of humanity, and the ability of women to shape and interpret the bodies of children is foreclosed by the shaping power of God and the narrative power of the male author. Moreover, in order to validate his account the author, like I. R., constructs a patriarchal community of godly male authority that trumps the authority of the gossips who would have likely attended the birth, calling on the testimony of “Master William Leigh Bachelour of Divinity, a very worthy and Reverend gentleman, Preacher of the Parish of Standish aforesaid, being also an eye witsesse of the same” (Bv). By the end of the pamphlet, the bodies of women are no longer even the vehicles for the production of monsters, which are described as originating from the “wombe” of the feminized Earth (B3v). The bodies and bodily narratives of women are unimportant, even unnecessary, compared to the formative power wielded by the patriarchal collective on the matter of the natural world.

Patriarchal usurpation of female authority is similarly evident in another pamphlet detailing the birth of conjoined twins: the minister Thomas Bedford’s *A True and Certaine Relation of a Strange-Birth* (1635). A distinguishing feature of this pamphlet is that the author himself claims to have seen the body of the “strange-birth” in person, rather than having heard or read about it from other sources. According to Bedford, he went to the house where the deformed child was born and saw it laid out on a table; he then proceeded to observe and touch the corpse himself, and he uses the knowledge he gained from this examination to explain to the reader precisely how the twins were joined at a shared breastbone (A3v-A4). Furthermore, although he demurs to the learned opinion of the all-male Royal College of Physicians, Bedford

speculates confidently about the organization of the twins' internal organs (A4)—his scientific knowledge, although admittedly that of an amateur, is nevertheless presented as authoritative. Bedford's observations are aided by the attending women, who move and turn the child's body to give him a better view, but he does not rely on women's bodily narratives, even in the matter of the child's quickening. He explains that although he "was about to aske the women whether the mother felt them living in the wombe," he realizes that he can answer his own question, since he can observe that the twins are so fully formed that they must have been alive in the womb. Although the women do confirm that the mother had told them she felt the twins quicken (A4v-B), the mother's first-hand testimony about (and possible influence over) the child in her womb is an unnecessary afterthought, relayed to Bedford by a third party only after he has reached his own conclusion.

The second part of the pamphlet, which moves from the biological details of the first part to an explication of the twins' religious significance, continues to promote patriarchal authority. This second section contains a transcription of a sermon that Bedford delivered to on-lookers at the burial of the conjoined twins; although its original transmission was oral, the print version is presented as a scholarly document, heavily glossed and peppered with scriptural citations and classical references in Latin and Greek. In this way, Bedford exercises interpretive control even over his own words, and he compares "the Workes of God" to "the Word of God," both of which must be parsed by socio-religious authorities such as himself "for our Doctrine and instruction" (B2). Although he admits that others may read "strange-births" differently than he does, he imagines his rivals as natural philosophers, physicians, and astrologers, thus setting up an all-male competition for narrative dominance that strengthens patriarchal authority in general by excluding women entirely (B4v). In addition to excluding women from the interpretive process,

Bedford also minimizes women's roles in the processes of generation and birth. In his description of the creation of wonders such as the conjoined twins he stresses God's formative power, emphasizing that the "markes" of deformity are stamped by "Providence" (B2v), not by the thoughts, speech, or actions of the mother. Bedford also frequently invokes the "hand" and "finger" of God when describing the physical effects of divine power, and in doing so he references the special medical authority of the midwife to touch and handle the female reproductive body, even as he replaces her authority with that of God.¹¹ Indeed, in his description of the birth of the conjoined twins, Bedford positions God as a kind of super-midwife, claiming that the attending midwives were only able to complete the delivery "through Gods mercy and goodnesse" (A3v). As in the two earlier pamphlets discussed above, a patriarchal collective takes the formation and narration of children out of the control of women, but such depictions raise anxieties about the inability of biological fathers to exercise shape their families and offspring. By stepping in to fill the role that biological fathers cannot, the male communities imagined in these pamphlets also set up the potential for patriarchal failure.

The 1615 pamphlet *Gods Handy-worke in Wonders* examines this potential failure in more detail, and in doing so also explores the threatening formative power of women's speech. For the most part, the women in the pamphlets discussed above are conspicuously silent, and emphasis is placed on the transmission of God's word, which is accomplished through the ordering discursive power that the author, often in collaboration with other patriarchal figures, exercises in the production of a printed narrative. In *Gods Handy-worke*, however, one woman's voice is foregrounded, and the anxiety raised by her critique of her husband suggests an explanation for why women's voices are so carefully omitted from many other pamphlets. Part of this pamphlet tells the story of a man who spent all his time and money in taverns and

brothels, and who was frequently scolded by his pregnant wife. During one particularly heated argument, the husband declares that for all he cares, his wife “may beare the Devill of hell,” and his wife responds, “I would I might beare a Devill, so should I once be rid of this woe and miserie” (B). Soon after this exchange, the wife does indeed give birth to a monster with horns, claws, and a tail. The author of the pamphlet divides the blame for this outcome between the parents, but whereas he criticizes the bad actions of the husband, he critiques the wife for her “unadvised words,” which he suggests had an actual formative effect on her child, spoken as they were “so neere” “her time of delivery” (B2). Although the title page attributes wonders such as monstrous births to “Gods Handy-worke,” this particular wonder seems to be equally the product of female speech operating on and through the maternal body, and the pamphlet thus raises the specter of women’s formative discursive power over their offspring, linking it to the patriarchal failure of the father. In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss how *The Winter’s Tale* raises similar anxieties about the formative power of female bodily narratives and the potential failure of patriarchal authority, both familial and political. The play depicts a competition between paternal and maternal control over the formation and interpretation of offspring in which women’s speech is a central concern, but whereas the pamphlets omit women’s speech altogether, or critique it as a disordering force, the play suggests that women’s narratives are crucial to restoring order to a family and a nation that have been fragmented and disturbed by tyrannous patriarchal authority.

2. Bodily Narratives, Patriarchal Authority, and Identity Formation in *The Winter’s Tale*

In Act 4, scene 4 of *The Winter’s Tale* (1611, pub. 1623) Autolycus opens his pack to reveal a selection of print ballads for sale. One of them tells a story of a monstrous birth that

parodies the type of pamphlet discussed above: “Here’s one to a very doleful tune, how a usurer’s wife was brought to bed of twenty moneybags at a burden, and how she long’d to eat adders’ heads and toads carbonado’d” (4.4.261-64). Autolycus’s eager audience of rustics demands to know if the tale is true, and he assures them it is, citing the network of witnessing gossips listed by the text: “Here’s the midwife’s name to ‘t, one Mistress Tale-porter, and five or six honest wives that were present” (4.4.268-70). Many critics have read this parodic allusion to monstrous birth pamphlets and ballads as a reference to the dangerous power of maternal impression and/or to the deceptive power of women’s bodily narratives.¹² Michelle Ephraim, for example, argues “that the usurer’s wife produces mercenary offspring as a result of gazing upon her husband’s money. Her grotesque issue thus testifies to her own greed” (54). However, the gendered negotiation of formative and narrative power in Autolycus’s pamphlet is more complex than such readings have acknowledged, since the object of the usurer’s wife’s “greedy” desire is not money, but adders and toads—it is her husband whose occupation suggests an unhealthy desire for money. Since the wife gives birth to moneybags, and not to snakes and toads, we might read this as a story of *paternal* impression, in which the husband’s desires and social identity overwhelm the mother’s to determine the shape of their offspring.¹³ Moreover, although Ephraim argues that the reference to female witnesses “reminds the audience of the artful narrative authority held by a pregnant woman’s female companions” (54), it is important to remember that the tale is not directly transmitted to the rustics via the voices of women. Instead, it is first written down and set in print, and then orally relayed in an abridged version by Autolycus. As in the pamphlets discussed above, information about the female reproductive body is filtered through the words of men, but unlike many of the pamphlets, this ballad credits women as the original source of the information (or, alternatively, blames them for the spread of

fantastic lies). Thus, the ballad represents the competing claims of men and women for narrative control over the formation and interpretation of bodies and words, a competition that affects the health of both the family and the state in *The Winter's Tale*.

At the outset of the play, Leontes, the king of Sicilia, becomes suddenly suspicious that his pregnant wife, Hermione, has been conducting an affair with Polixenes, his former friend and the king of Bohemia, and that the child she is carrying is the product of this liaison. Immediately following the arousal of this jealousy, Leontes begins to obsess over locating his paternity in the body of his young son and heir, Mamillius, a child “of the greatest promise” who is framed in the opening scene as the dynastic “comfort” and hope of Sicilia (1.1.36, 35). Leontes’s anxious inquiries are framed by the language of paternal ownership: “Mamillius, / Art though *my* boy? / MAMILLIUS: Ay, my good lord. / LEONTES: I’fecks! / Why, that’s *my* bawcock. What, hast smutch’d thy nose? / They say it is a copy out of *mine*. / . . . / Art thou *my* calf? / MAMILLIUS: Yes, if you will, my lord” (1.2.119-27, emphasis added). Leontes claims Mamillius as his own, biologically linked to him through the physical features which, in Leontes’s language of “copying,” make the boy a legible narrative proclaiming his father’s paternity. However, this corporeal narrative cannot stand on its own as evidence, but must be verified by spoken words; Leontes reads Mamillius’s nose as a copy of his own only because “they say it is.” Mamillius responds to his father’s inquiries by implying that the truth of his paternity is subject to Leontes’s own will, but later he, too, invokes the spoken testimony of a third party: “I am like you, they say” (1.2.208). During another exchange, “they” are revealed to be women, whose bodily narratives Leontes believes to be inherently untrustworthy: “they say we are / Almost as like as eggs. Women say so, / That will say anything. But were they false / As o’er-dyed blacks, as wind, as waters, false / As dice are to be wish’d by one that fixes / No bourn ‘twixt his and mine,

yet were it true / To say this boy were like me” (1.2.129-35). Although Leontes implies that women’s claims about paternity cannot be trusted, he also asserts that Mamillius’s resemblance to him is undeniably true, thus putting himself in the odd position of aligning his own ideas with the narratives of women whom he has just categorized as “false.” Despite Leontes’s anxieties about his wife’s fidelity and the unreliability of women’s bodies and words in general, he must acknowledge the influence of women’s discursive authority, even as he attempts to turn to the evidence of his own eyes for proof of his paternity.

Leontes’s obsession with Mamillius’s appearance reveals that he doubts his own formative influence over his son and worries that someone else has determined the shape of his offspring, thus blocking the transmission of his own patriarchal identity. His conviction that Hermione has been conducting a sexual affair with Polixenes and has been impregnated by him might suggest that the competition he fears regarding Mamillius is that of another man. However, Leontes never actually makes this particular accusation. Instead, he frets over the formative influence Hermione herself has wielded over the boy, thus suggesting, as Adelman argues, that “worries about illegitimacy [are] in part a cover for worries about the female role in procreation” (225). However, whereas Adelman claims that Hermione’s relationship with Mamillius traumatizes Leontes by reminding him of the “contamination” of his own masculinity by the “original sin” of the female body (227), Leontes is equally threatened by the power Hermione has to shape their offspring, and thus to define or undermine his patriarchal authority as both a father and a king. Leontes’s accusations of infidelity distract from the fact that, even when a woman was faithful to her husband, her corporeal and linguistic bond with her children worked to consolidate her own control over their physical and mental development, transmitting her own identity to her offspring rather than that of their father. Mamillius’s body thus becomes

the prime site of a parental power struggle in which Leontes attempts to narrate his own patriarchal identity through his connection to his son.

However, Leontes's moment of greatest identification with Mamillius is hedged about by his son's feminine attire, which Leontes himself also wore as a child: "Looking on the lines / Of my boy's face, methoughts I did recoil / Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreech'd, / In my green velvet coat, my dagger muzzled" (1.2.153-56). Although Leontes attempts to read his own "lines"/lineage in Mamillius's face, in order to do so he must travel back to a time when he, like his son, was marked as sexually inexperienced and immature by the color green and a muzzled dagger, and when he likely bore more resemblance to his mother than his father, at least in terms of apparel.¹⁴ Early modern portraiture provides striking evidence of the visual links that clothing could draw between mothers and young children, who were dressed in long-skirted coats or dresses regardless of their sex. In *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (c. 1600-1610), for example, two elaborately dressed women sit side by side in bed, holding their newborn infants. The decoration on the infants' garments is painted to match that of their respective mothers' gowns, thus suggesting that each woman has a distinct identity that she passes on to her child.¹⁵ Similarly, Marcus Gheeraerts II's *Barbara Gamage, Countess of Leicester, and Her Children* (1596) depicts Gamage surrounded by her male and female children, all of whom are dressed in light-colored skirted garments that are remarkably similar to their mother's apparel.¹⁶ This visual echoing demonstrates the power of clothing to construct strong links of identification between a woman and her children, regardless of their gender, and counters attempts made in other portraits to represent dynastic links between fathers and sons.¹⁷

Furthermore, the following scene, in which Mamillius sits close to Hermione and begins to tell her a "sad" winter's tale featuring "sprites and goblins" (2.1.25-26), demonstrates that the

connection between mother and son transcends a superficial resemblance in their clothing. Their linguistic exchange is intimately physical, with Mamillius whispering his story directly into Hermione's waiting ear, penetrating her mind (and thus, via maternal impression, possibly her womb) with his narrative. As Mary Ellen Lamb points out, describing Mamillius's story as a "winter's tale" places it in "a tradition of 'old wives' tales' usually gendered as female" (3), and so the boy's narrative act potentially alludes to an earlier scene of storytelling in which he was the receptive vessel of his mother's (or possibly another woman's) words, which in turn shaped and influenced his own.¹⁸ When Leontes barges onstage to forcibly separate mother and son, he fumes over the influence Hermione has had over Mamillius: "Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him. / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him" (2.1.57-59). Leontes fears that the external "signs" linking him to his son will be undermined by the maternal "blood" within the child, and he associates Hermione's shaping power over Mamillius (whose name derives from the Latin for "breast"¹⁹) with the transmission of maternal traits through breast milk, which during this period was believed to be transmuted menstrual blood. However, despite Mamillius's evocative name and Leontes's references to blood and nursing, which suggest that the boy is an embodiment of biological maternal influence, Hermione apparently did *not* breast-feed her son; the fact that this knowledge does not calm Leontes's anxieties demonstrates that at least in his mind, this particular form of physical intimacy is not necessary for the transmission of maternal influence. Given the scene of physical and verbal closeness between Hermione and Mamillius immediately preceding Leontes's entrance, as well as the early modern link between breast-feeding and language transmission discussed in the previous section, the play suggests that maternal speech can work with and through the maternal body to form the identity of a child. Hermione can shape Mamillius

through discursively-formed corporeal bonds that replace those broken by parturition and wet-nursing, and Leontes fears that his control over his son has been weakened by this combination of physical and linguistic power wielded by his wife. As he struggles to reclaim patriarchal authority by separating Mamillius from his mother and accusing Hermione of having an affair, Leontes conflates adultery and maternal influence, since both threaten to usurp his control over his family and, by extension, the state.

Leontes's accusation of adultery marks a bid for total discursive control over the shape and interpretation of the royal family, but Hermione protests, drawing on her intimate knowledge of her own body and asserting that her bodily narrative ought to be received as authoritative: "I'll be sworn you would believe my saying, / Howe'er you lean to th' nayward" (2.1.64-65).

Leontes, however, refuses to accept her words as true and instead, like the authors of the monstrous birth pamphlets, he makes himself the author of the text that is the female reproductive body, condemning Hermione with the "titles" of "adulteress" and "traitor" in order to "publish" her supposed sexual crime to the world (2.1.95, 89, 90, 99). In order to consolidate his authority, Leontes retreats into his own delusions, rejects anyone who contradicts him, and insists on the primacy of his own speech. In his mind, he is the only one who can see through Hermione's "goodly" "without-door form" to the adulteress beneath (2.1.67, 70), the only one who can smell, see, and feel her physically manifested sin: "You smell this business with a sense as cold / As a dead man's nose; but I do see 't and feel 't" (2.1.152-53). When Antigonus and the other lords protest, Leontes shields himself with his royal authority, indicated by his use of the royal "we," and thus reveals the political stakes of this narrative competition by conflating a father's unilateral control over his family with a king's over his subjects: "[W]hat need we / Commune with you of this, but rather follow / Our forceful instigation? Our prerogative / Calls

not your counsels” (2.1.162-65). His unilateral royal “prerogative” and his patriarchal authority over his family give him what he believes to be the absolute power required to restore order to society, but as M. Lindsay Kaplan and Katherine Eggert note, “disruptions to the social order” in *The Winter’s Tale* are caused “not by the women accused but by their male accusers” (110).

The political implications of Leontes’s false sexual narratives are demonstrated early on in the play, when Camillo advises the king not to divorce Hermione, even if she truly is an adulteress, “for your son’s sake, and thereby for sealing / The injury of tongues in courts and kingdoms / Known and allied to yours” (1.2.336-38). Camillo implies that charges of adultery against Hermione will raise suspicions about Mamillius’s legitimacy, and thus about the security of the Sicilian royal line, suspicions which might weaken Sicilia’s standing in the realm of international politics. Leontes temporarily agrees to this plan, but when he finds that Camillo has fled Sicilia with Polixenes, he assumes that he is the target of a vast political conspiracy involving his advisor, his wife, and his best friend: “There is a plot against my life, my crown” (2.1.48). Fearing that Polixenes is “too mighty, / . . . / in his parties, [and] his alliance” to confront directly (2.3.20-21), Leontes decides that Hermione, who is subject to him both politically and sexually, must be sacrificed so as to restore both his realm and his family to health. The charges leveled against Hermione accuse her of “high treason, in committing adultery with Polixenes, King of Bohemia, and conspiring with Camillo to take away the life of our sovereign lord the King, thy royal husband” (3.2.14-17). Allegedly, Hermione has transgressed sexually and politically by undermining her husband’s “natural” patriarchal authority, both as a father and husband and as a king, and has thus introduced disorder to the family and the state. By charging her alone with treason, Leontes positions himself as the patriarchal authority who must restore order by excising the deformative words and bodies of

women. However, it is Leontes's unruly imagination and tyrannous discourse that prove monstrous, placing his state as well as his family at risk of dissolution, and it is the bodily narratives of women that must repair the damage he has done.²⁰

Although Hermione's imprisonment and "death" effectively silence her until the very end of the play, the gendered competition over the shaping and narration of family and state continues when Paulina, wife of Leontes's advisor Antigonus, steps in to challenge the king's patriarchal authority by defending Hermione's honor and insisting on the legitimacy of the newborn Perdita. Leontes responds to Paulina's challenge to his interpretive authority with a barrage of name-calling, declaring her a "mankind witch," "intelligencing bawd," "callet / Of boundless tongue," and "gross hag" (2.3.68, 69, 91-92, 108). However, Paulina has already decided to assume the identity of the talkative, scolding woman, rehabilitating it as a position of linguistic authority in which she can speak truth to power:²¹ "He must be told on 't, and he shall. The office / Becomes a woman best; I'll take 't upon me. / If I prove honey-mouth'd, let my tongue blister / And never to my red-look'd anger be / The trumpet any more" (2.1.31-35). Moreover, in a perverse way Leontes's epithets invest Paulina with power, particularly when he sarcastically refers to her as a "midwife," thus calling attention to the crucial role the bodily narratives of midwives and gossips played in determining a father's relationship to his child (2.3.160).²² Paulina embraces the narrative authority of the midwife when she insists on Perdita's legitimacy, discursively shaping the child in Leontes's image in an attempt to rescue the royal family and the state from his deformative fantasies: "Although the print be little, the whole matter / And copy of the father—eye, nose, lip, / The trick of 's frown, his forehead, nay, the valley, / The pretty dimples of his chin and cheek, his smiles, / The very mold and frame of hand, nail, finger" (2.3.98-103). Paulina credits Leontes with having imprinted himself on his

daughter,²³ but the fact that she must interpret Perdita's body for the king and assembled on-lookers also calls attention to the way her bodily narrative constructs Leontes's patriarchal identity.

Paulina also subtly suggests that her speech has the power to unmake his identity and authority by threatening him with the label of "tyrant": "I'll not call you tyrant; / But this most cruel usage of your queen, / . . . / something savors / Of tyranny, and will ignoble make you, / Yea, scandalous to the world" (2.3.116-21). Although she (barely) refrains from actually calling the king a tyrant, she implies that, were she to do so, she could wreck his political reputation by determining the "world's" interpretation of his treatment of his wife. When she announces the news of Hermione's "death," Paulina makes good on her threat of calling him tyrant, and she warns him that his own speech is impotent, his prayers for mercy and forgiveness insufficient to undo the harm he has caused: "O thou tyrant! / Do not repent these things, for they are heavier / Than all thy woes can stir" (3.2.207-09). Believing that he has decimated his family and deprived his throne of an heir by causing the deaths of his wife and both his children, Leontes acknowledges that his attempts to seize absolute narrative and formative authority have plunged Sicilia into chaos. He accepts Paulina's chastisement and in fact begs for more, even when his lords rebuke her for the "boldness of [her] speech" (3.2.218): "Go on, go on. / Thou canst not speak too much" (3.2.214-15). In order to restore his family, his state, and his own political reputation, Leontes must acknowledge female discursive authority and submit to it; his redemption can only be achieved through the intercession of women's powerfully formative words and bodies, a notion that provocatively invokes Catholic Marian devotion, and perhaps also the cult of Elizabeth. Acting in this intercessory role, Paulina composes a false narrative

about Hermione's death, and in doing so she purges Leontes of his jealousy and arrogance even as she re-establishes women's role in helping to shape and order the family and the nation.

In addition to forcing Leontes to acknowledge the folly of his tyranny, Paulina orchestrates the reunion that restores the king's family and his state to health, acting, in effect, as a mother or midwife who "delivers" and narrates the play's happy ending. When Cleomenes and Dion urge Leontes to leave off mourning and take another wife, Paulina, knowing that Hermione is still alive, demands to be given full authority over the future shape of the royal family: "[I]f my lord will marry / . . . give me the office / To choose you a queen" (5.1.76-78). Leontes meekly acquiesces, and his use of the royal "we" suggests that the authority he relinquishes to Paulina is political as well as familial: "My true Paulina, / We shall not marry till thou bid'st us" (5.1.81-82). When the king is lured by Perdita's beauty, Paulina prevents the potentially deformative effects of his incestuous desire by reminding him of Hermione, and thus ensures the successful scene of reunion with which the play concludes.²⁴ After the reunion, Paulina acknowledges that the happy ending she has helped to author "[w]ere it but told you, should be hooted at / Like an old tale," but such apparently debased women's narratives/"winter's tales," so intimately associated with the female body and its shaping power, have positively transformed both the royal family and the state (5.3.116-17). In the last words of the play, Leontes asks Paulina to "lead" the company off-stage so that they can relate to each other what has transpired since they were separated, and thus bring all narratives and knowledge to full and perfect completion (5.3.153). Although Leontes has been restored to the head of his family, he still relies on Paulina's narrative authority to lead him, and on women to provide the knowledge he lacks.

In the last two acts of the play, Paulina's formative speech is contrasted with Hermione's silence, which is broken only very briefly at the end of Act 5. Having had Perdita torn from her breast so soon after birth, with "[t]he innocent milk" still in the child's "most innocent mouth" (3.2.100), Hermione would seem to have had little impact on her daughter's development, and critics have thus argued that the end of the play strips the queen of her discursive authority and her physical connection to her offspring. Woodford, for example, argues that in Perdita's case, "an exclusively male nurture," in the form of the Shepherd and his son, replaces Hermione's maternal influence over her daughter's development: "The reunion of Perdita with her mother happens only after the period of nurture has been completed. Hermione is no longer able to shape the character of the daughter who has grown up without her" (191, 194).²⁵ However, there is a great deal of evidence in the play to suggest that Perdita, despite being deprived of the influential presence of her mother's body and speech, is nevertheless formed in Hermione's image. In the first scene in which we see the grown Perdita, she is playing the same role that her mother did in the opening scene, that of hostess to Polixenes. Perdita's noble birth shines through her humble circumstances, and Polixenes senses a disconnect between her manner and her upbringing: "Nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place" (4.4.157-59). This nobility is linked specifically to Hermione by repeated references to Perdita as a queen: Florizel proclaims that "all [her] acts are queens," and Camillo calls her "[t]he queen of curds and cream" (4.4.146, 161). When the truth of her birth is revealed, the proofs used to establish it include Hermione's mantle and jewel, which were left with the abandoned infant, and Perdita's "majesty . . . in resemblance of the mother" (5.2.36-37). Although this is said to be evidence that she is "the King's daughter" (5.2.40), the reunion scene establishes her as "belonging" to Hermione and, to a lesser extent, Paulina. Addressing the

queen, Paulina refers to the girl as “our Perdita,” and Hermione calls her “my daughter” and “mine own” (5.3.121, 123). Even Leontes, when addressing Hermione, refers to “your son-in-law” (Florizel) and “your daughter” (Perdita) (5.3.150, 152). Perhaps the breast milk left in the infant Perdita’s “most innocent mouth” was enough to influence her development, or perhaps Hermione’s connection with her daughter in the womb allowed her to “print [herself] off” in the way that Leontes claims Florizel’s mother “printed off” Polixenes (5.1.125). Regardless, despite Paulina’s previous assurances that the infant Perdita is a copy of her father, by the end of the play it is maternal resemblance which dominates, and Leontes’s patriarchal authority is not the shaping force behind either his newly reunited family or his newly repaired political ties with Bohemia. Instead, Hermione’s formative influence and Paulina’s discursive authority, as well as Perdita’s own romantic relationship with Florizel, work together to bring about the revelation and reconciliation that restore both familial and political health.

Thus, although *The Winter’s Tale* raises the fears of maternal influence that the early seventeenth-century monstrous birth pamphlets attempt to repress, it also demonstrates the crucial role women play in shaping both the family and the nation. In this sense, the play might be read as a critique of James I’s attempts to wield absolute authority over his offspring and, by extension, the state. In *Basilikon Doron* (1599), James I bases much of his argument for his ability to rule on his ability to produce male heirs and discursively shape them into worthy successors; Jonathan Goldberg notes that this type of shaping is the book’s primary goal, since it is meant to make Prince Henry into “an imitation of [James I’s] word” (*James I* 91). As many critics have argued, James I frequently used the politically weighty terms of reproduction to consolidate patriarchal authority by narrating himself as both mother and father to his people, assuming the conventionally maternal duties of feeding and caring for his subjects/children and

thus usurping the formative power of women's bodies and speech.²⁶ Styling himself "a loving nourish-father" to his subjects in *Basilikon Doron* (24), in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) James I similarly claims that it is the responsibility of a king/father "to care for the nourishing, education, and vertuous government of his children" (55). When James I does acknowledge the mother's role in reproduction in *Basilikon Doron*, he describes it as that of a mere receptacle through which a man can reproduce: "remember to choose your Wife as I advised you to choose your servants: that she be of a whole and cleane race, not subject to the hereditary sicknesses, either of the soule or the body: For if a man wil be careful to breed horses and dogs of good kinds, how much more careful should he be, for the breed of his owne loines?" (36).

However, although he reduces even the wives of kings to the level of servants and animals, and depicts offspring as the products of the father's "owne loines" with the mother serving a secondary reproductive role, James I nevertheless raises the specter of maternal influence when he warns against marrying a woman who is subject to physical or spiritual "sicknesses," which she could presumably transmit to her offspring through her body, behavior, or speech. The power of women to shape not only subjects, but also the heirs to the throne, thus threatens the all-encompassing authority of the patriarchal monarch that James I attempts to wield, an authority which is predicated upon a man's ability to claim ownership and control over his children.²⁷ James I attempts to foreclose this potential threat by claiming all parental authority, both maternal and paternal, for himself, but as *The Winter's Tale* demonstrates, patriarchal authority that does not acknowledge the powerful bodies and voices of women could prove tyrannous and destructive. A few decades after the play was written, Charles I's refusal to relinquish power to Parliament, his insistence on the supremacy of his own authority, and the

resulting Civil Wars rendered England a headless monster even before the king's own beheading, thus demonstrating that the country's deformities, like the damage done to Leontes's family and kingdom, could be attributed to absolutist patriarchal authority. To detract attention from this patriarchal failure, Civil War-era monstrous birth pamphlets increasingly portrayed female bodies and voices as the cause of physical and national deformity,²⁸ unlike earlier monstrous birth pamphlets which attempted to diminish and erase women's formative influence. With more and more women actively voicing controversial religio-political opinions, female speech became difficult to ignore or dismiss, and monstrous birth pamphlets therefore made it central to their projects of social critique. However, in shifting the blame for religio-political upheaval away from patriarchal authority, these texts call attention to women's discursive shaping power over the body politic, as well as the bodies of offspring, even as they attempt to criticize it.

3. Monstrous Births and "Fearful Sayings": Maternal Impression and Women's Public Speech

During the 1640s, three pamphlets were published in London that each contained a sensational account of the birth of a deformed, "monstrous" baby. *A Strange and Lamentable Accident* (1642), *A Declaration of a Strange and Wonderful Monster* (1646), and *Strange News from Scotland* (1647), all depict Catholic or sectarian mothers who publicly express non-normative religious and political views, and the deformed infants that result are both the embodiment of the mothers' transgressive beliefs and divine punishment for the women's refusal to respect the boundaries of both the domestic sphere and of dominant religio-political ideology. By linking women's reproductive bodies and their political speech to the formation of monsters, these pamphlets critique the social authority that early modern women derived from the shaping

power of their maternal roles and bodily narratives, and like the earlier monstrous birth pamphlets, these texts attempt to replace maternal power with patriarchal authority. However, in their vivid descriptions and illustrations of the headless or disordered bodies of monstrous children, the pamphlets also raise the specter of patriarchal authority that is at best impotent, and at worst itself deformative. By detailing the monstrous power of women's bodies and speech, the pamphlets thus also call attention to the ways patriarchal authority has failed to keep the body politic healthy and unified.²⁹

The three pamphlets in question exhibit a great deal of paranoia over the power of female speech to influence the development of unborn children, since in all three pamphlets the monstrous births result from women attempting to engage in public debates about religion and politics. The detailed attention to the speech of Mrs. Haughton, the Catholic mother in *A Declaration*, suggests that it is not simply her Catholicism, but also her public engagement in religious debate, that causes her to give birth to a monster. The beginning of this pamphlet asserts that her baby's deformities are due to both "her course of life, and her speeches" (3), and it proceeds to go into detail about the content of these speeches and their publicness: "The woman . . . was a notorious papist, and would many times hold a notable discourse with her neighbors about her religion, . . . she would speak much in defence thereof, and was always very obstinate and would expresse much invective against those godly protestants and others that reproved her" (5). In one of these conversations with her neighbors she speaks the words that supposedly cause her misfortune: "*I pray God, that rather than I shall be a Roundhead, or bear a Roundhead, I may bring forth a Childe without a head.* This was a fearful saying, and taken notice of by divers of her neighbours that heard her speak it" (6). When she gives birth to her baby, its deformities precisely embody her wish.

The women in the other two pamphlets are similarly notable for their “discourse,” “invective,” and “fearful sayings,” which yield similar results, but in these cases, the women are Protestant sectarians who refuse to accept the traditional Anglican baptismal ceremony. In *A Strange and Lamentable Accident*, Mary Wilmore, concerned that her baby would be baptized using the sign of the cross in a “pernicious, popish and idolatrous ceremony,” consults the local minister, who advises her husband to go to a nearby village and consult “one Master Bannard a reverend Divine” (A3). Master Bannard speaks approvingly of using the sign of the cross, and John Wilmore reports this back to his wife, who responds: “I had rather my childe should bee borne without a head, then to have a head to be signed with the signe of the Crosse” (A3). Although her access to church officials is circuitous, likely because of her gender, her words are in clear opposition to dominant beliefs as expressed by male authorities, and this opposition is stated publicly in the presence of witnesses, since the pamphlet claims “it is reported” that she said these words (A3). In *Strange Newes from Scotland*, the mother’s radically anti-authoritarian opinions, including her rejection of Anglican baptism, begin as a (possibly private) wish that is publicly confessed after the birth of the deformed child: “I have often wisht this or some such like judgement might befall me . . . rather then any Child borne of my body should receive those Christian Rites which by the Lawes and ancient Customes of England and Scotland were given Children at the Font, at their Baptisme . . . I did vehemently desire . . . to see the utter ruine and subversion of all Church and State-Government” (4). Although her words take the form of a repentant confession, they are still a public verbal expression of religious and political dissent. In all three pamphlets, the radical beliefs and public speech of the mothers have the power not only to shock their neighbors and families, but to physically shape the children in their wombs.

As Julie Crawford has demonstrated, such pamphlets speak directly and specifically to the increasing involvement of women in the political and religious debates of the 1640s.³⁰ These pamphlets address fears that, like women who were believed to pass their own traits to their children through their bodies and/or speech, Catholic and sectarian women could reproduce their flawed beliefs in the minds and bodies of their offspring during a time of political uncertainty and upheaval, thus deforming not only their children, but society in general. Even before the Civil Wars, sectarian women like those in *A Strange and Lamentable Accident* and *Strange Newes from Scotland* took it upon themselves to disrupt or interfere with baptismal ceremonies in order to avoid the sign of the cross.³¹ During the 1640s and 1650s, these sorts of incidents escalated,³² demonstrating women's ability to shape the rituals through which children entered the religious community, even to the extent of rejecting ceremonial elements approved by male religious and political authorities. The formative control sectarian women exercised over children's spiritual initiation and development, as well as the increasing frequency of female preachers, thus made these women active, visible participants in public religio-political debate. Similarly, as Frances Dolan has argued, attacks on Catholicism during the Jacobean and Caroline periods frequently criticized the authority it made available to women, particularly in their roles as wives and mothers. High-ranking women such as Henrietta Maria were specifically targeted for criticism by religious and social commentators, but Dolan points out that even the most ordinary Catholic mothers were viewed as "dangerously influential, and their contributions to children's education an insidious means of maintaining, even disseminating, Catholicism" (*Whores* 136). *A Declaration* demonstrates these concerns in its depiction of a Catholic mother whose heretical speech deforms her child, and as in the two pamphlets featuring Protestant sectarians, it associates the intersection of religious and maternal authority with the potential for

women to shape both the bodies of children and the body politic through participation in public debate, albeit with disastrous results.

Although these pamphlets emphasize the deformative power of female speech in order to critique women's participation in public religio-political debates, they also attempt to limit the extent of this power by depicting men's discursive authority over the interpretation, and at certain points even the formation, of women's words. As in the earlier monstrous birth pamphlets, Civil War-era pamphlet writers attempt to make patriarchal figures the victors in the gendered competition over the narration of social meaning, but in doing so they raise the specter of patriarchy's potential failure to keep female speech and bodies under male control. In *A Declaration*, for example, the only eye-witness to the monstrous birth is the midwife, Mrs. Gattaker, who immediately tells her story to Mr. Fleetwood, the minister.³³ When Mr. Fleetwood is called upon by a member of Parliament to confirm the rumors of the monstrous birth, he interviews Mrs. Gattaker, but her testimony is not sufficient: "[F]or better satisfaction, Mr Fleetwood caused the grave to be opened, and the childe to be taken up, and laid to view, and found there a body without an head, as the Midwife had said" (7). Unwilling to take the midwife's word, the minister stages the rebirth of the child from the grave so that he himself can be an eye-witness, and although the pamphlet's title page credits Mr. Fleetwood as well as the midwife with having witnessed the event, Mr. Fleetwood's name is listed first. In this way, *A Declaration* depicts the scene of the birth as being primarily witnessed and regulated by a man, whose narrative authority trumps that of the midwife.³⁴ Moreover, at the end of this pamphlet is printed "A Copie of a Certificate under the hand of Mr. *Edward Fleetwood* Minister of *Kirkham* Parish in *Lancashire* concerning the Monster brought forth by Mrs. *Haughton* a Papist, living in that Parish." This "official" document, the pamphlet claims, was brought before the House of

Commons, yet its account of the monstrous birth, unlike the pamphlet's earlier narrative, includes no mention of the mother's speech, although it does condemn her for being a "Popish creature" (8). The certificate, which represents sanctioned male public discourse and is allowed entry into the sphere of political debate, re-narrates the story of the monstrous birth in order to write out the shaping power of women's words.

As in *A Declaration, Strange Newes from Scotland* privileges the testimony of male witnesses, whose words shape the narration of the monstrous birth. The title page of this pamphlet asserts that the birth of the "terrible and prodigious Monster" is witnessed by a group of "spectators." Although the pamphlet never makes clear who these spectators are, the account of the event is "certified by the Minister of the Parish, (a man of gravitie, and of good repute generally; as also by the Church-wardens of the same Parish, and other people of good qualitie and esteeme, and the Relation sent hither to a friend of his, one M. *Obadiah Slingsby*, a pious and a painfull Minister of Gods Word)" (1). It is unlikely that even men of "gravitie" such as ministers and churchwardens would have actually been in the birthing room, since although by the mid-seventeenth century more families had begun to employ male physicians, particularly in cases of emergency births, modesty and custom made most women reluctant to allow men into the birthing room.³⁵ Nevertheless, the pamphlet uses the testimony of men to reassure the reader of its validity, which seems to imply that they were among the "eye-witnesses" to the birth (2). Moreover, although *Strange Newes from Scotland* features a lengthy speech by the mother, in which she details the heretical and seditious beliefs that led to the deformation of her child, the pamphlet works to subtly undermine the shaping power of women's words by attributing her ideas to outside male influences. The mother herself suggests that her subversive views are not her own, but rather that she had been "seduced by Hereticall factious fellowes" (4), a claim

which parallels stories about women startled by hares while pregnant. Although a woman's contact with the sight of a hare or a heretical idea might cause the deformation of her baby, the woman is passively influenced by these sights and ideas, not actively involved in formulating them.

The end of the mother's speech in *Strange Newes from Scotland* is similarly marked by a lack of control. Death cuts her off mid-sentence as she is warning others to avoid her mistakes: "before shee could put a Period to her speech, Death put an Exit to her dayes" (4). The point at which the mother is cut off is notable: she is in the midst of urging onlookers to repent, "lest this Sceane be continued from me to you, and so to your posteritie, till at length this Nation be pestered with as many Serpents as——" (4). Although the woman is clearly meant to serve as a negative example, the notion that her heretical beliefs could be passed down through the bodies and words of other women, thus overrunning the nation with both monsters and sectarians, seems a particularly anxious one, requiring abrupt interruption. At this point, the voice of the male narrator takes over the task of "putting a period" to the pamphlet in a way that will shape and reform the minds and souls of readers: "Thus ended the Tragedie of this afflicted Woman: I would to God it might . . . serve as a meanes to dehort those people, who, though for the present they labour not with the same Births, . . . whose out-sides though they appeare not so horrid to the Eye as this mishapen Monster, I feare their in-sides are hung Round with all sorts of crying sinnes" (4-5). However, the pamphlet's ability to "dehort" sinners (to dissuade them through exhortation) seems weakened by its inability to reliably identify those in need of salvation. The author admits that monstrous births serve as exceptional cases, and that sin that does not manifest itself physically is much more difficult to detect. Instead, the author is placed in the awkward position of asking sinners to self-identify, and thus relinquishing interpretive authority over

them. Although he suggests that invisible sin remains unmanifested only “for the present,” simple observation would prove that monstrous birth is not the norm, even amongst heretics, and the author does not describe other ways these “crying sins” might reveal themselves.

Despite the “period” it puts to the mother’s speech, then, *Strange Newes from Scotland* also raises the uncomfortable notion that other women (and possibly men, too) might spread subversive religio-political speech without the corresponding corporeal punishment visited upon the woman in the pamphlet. Sectarians and recusant Catholics alike might secretly nurture heretical beliefs, and, moreover, they might reproduce these beliefs invisibly in the hearts and minds, rather than bodies, of their children. Such is the case in *A Declaration*, which describes the recusant beliefs not only of Mrs. Haughton, the mother of the monster, but also of her own mother, Mrs. Browne. Although both of Mrs. Haughton’s parents are accused of being “Papists,” only her mother’s speech and behavior are specifically described and critiqued: “her mother . . . would usually call honest men Roundheads and Puritans, and Hereticks, many gentlemen did much use her house, which were suspected to be popish priests” (4, 5). When Mrs. Haughton is introduced, it is as “Mistris Brownes daughter,” and her own words and beliefs mirror her mother’s in such a way as to suggest that they are inherited from her. Mrs. Browne’s speech, however, did not deform *her* daughter, at least not physically, and so it appears that not all outspoken Catholic women bear monsters—they might simply bear new Catholics. Moreover, the pamphlet describes Mrs. Haughton’s recusancy not as a privately held belief, but as something she discusses frequently with her Protestant neighbors. Although in her case her words shape her child, and not the opinions of the other women, the attention given to these conversations reveals a sense of anxiety about the potentially deformative effects such speech might have on the community, or even the nation, as a whole. Speech that is powerful enough to

change the body of a child in the womb might also be powerful enough to change the minds of those who hear it—or read of it in a pamphlet.

Although accounts of religious debate such as Mrs. Haughton's with her neighbors or, in *A Strange and Lamentable Accident*, the mother's with local ministers, are clearly biased against the mothers, they still provide a platform for the circulation of views that diverge from the authors' own. In doing so, the pamphlets raise the idea that what counts as deformative and heretical depends on one's point of view. After all, both the Catholic and the sectarian mothers believe that they are protecting their true religion and their children from the deformative doctrine of, respectively, freakish "Roundheads" and popish superstition. Although the author of *A Strange and Lamentable Accident* claims that "there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptisme, one God and Father of all," the coherence of this unified, patriarchal religio-political body is weakened by the plethora of feminized voices asking "needlesse and unprofitable questions," questions which, for better or for worse, force change on the shape of the body politic (A3v, A4). In order to undermine women's power to shape both their children and their nation through their bodies and words, Civil War pamphlets frame this power as monstrous, and they attempt to bring it under the control of the narrative authority of the pamphlet authors, the divine authority of God, and the religio-political authority of church and state officials. However, this project of suppression is undermined by the circulation of the pamphlets themselves, which further publicize the speeches of the mothers to readers who might be just as likely to sympathize with the women's views as with the views of the pamphlet authors. The pamphlets also call attention to the deformities of a country at war with itself, deformities which patriarchal political and religious authorities were complicit in creating and incapable of healing.

As demonstrated above, Civil War-era monstrous birth pamphlets depict the shaping force of women's words and bodies as powerful, but ultimately destructive. However, these are not the only texts in which women are shown to have a formative influence over the body politic. Female-authored texts from the Civil War period, such as Elizabeth Poole's *A Vision* (1648), Ann Collins's *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1653), Anna Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* (1654), and the anonymous *Eliza's Babes* (1652), depict women's words, which they frequently link to the female reproductive body, as politically and spiritually restorative rather than deformative.³⁶ *Eliza's Babes* serves as a particularly provocative example of this, since the female narrative voice of "Eliza" frames her poems as children, the offspring of her spiritual marriage to God. Like the monsters in the pamphlets, Eliza's "babes" serve as a divine message to England, but whereas the mothers of the monsters were punished for speaking out on religio-political issues, Eliza uses the trope of maternal authority to license her engagement in the debates of the public sphere. In "To the King. writ, 1644," Eliza addresses Charles I, urging him to relinquish his claim to absolute monarchical authority in order to restore the nation to peace: "Do not with war my Babes affright, / In smiling peace is their delight, / My Prince by yeelding won the field, / Be not too rigid, dear King yeeld" (23). Another poem addresses Cromwell in a similar manner and warns him against following in the tyrannous footsteps of the king: "If then from Tyrants you'l us free / Free us from their Laws Tyranny. / If not wee'l say the head is pale, / But still the sting lives in the tail" (54). In these formulations, what poisons the body of the state is not female speech, but male tyranny.³⁷ As in *The Winter's Tale*, absolutist patriarchal authority brings political disorder and confusion which can only be healed by maternal speech. Thus, despite men's fears that female bodily narratives will produce the monsters of adultery, heresy, and treason, and will pervert the properly patriarchal shapes of familial, religious, and state

government, male authority, when pushed too far, becomes an equally disordering and deformative force. Although seventeenth-century monstrous birth pamphlets insist on the necessity of bringing women's bodies and words under the control of patriarchal authority, texts such as *The Winter's Tale* and *Eliza's Babes* are equally insistent on the importance of women's formative power in perpetuating order at the levels of both the family and the state.

In tracing how historical change affected representations of female bodily narratives from 1600 through 1660, I have focused on a period notable for increasing challenges to traditional forms of authority on multiple social levels. I have argued that the female reproductive body and women's speech were particularly fraught subjects of inquiry during this period because women's discursive control over their bodies played into pre-existing and steadily heightening tensions over gender hierarchies and their relationship to the state. In doing so, I have implicitly concurred with literary critics and social historians who argue that early modern England experienced a "crisis of order, focusing on gender relations" that began in the mid-sixteenth century and peaked in the mid-seventeenth (Dolan, *Dangerous* 17). Many of these scholars go on to assert that after the Restoration this crisis passed, and women consequently receded from political discourse. Julie Crawford, for example, argues that after the Restoration, mainstream Anglican commentators worked successfully to minimize the religious force and significance of monstrous and prodigious births in order to "delegitimize both political and religious radicalism and the roles that women played in those movements" (172). Similarly, Frances Dolan asserts that "By 1700, representations of . . . disorderly, violent women receded from the center of popular culture. . . . Less feared, [women] were also perceived as less powerful and dangerous" (*Dangerous* 18).³⁸

However, although women's reproductive bodies may have become less central to public debate during the late seventeenth century, it is important to note, as Mary E. Fissell does, that "female bodies did not suddenly revert to a set of simpler meanings" during periods of relative political stability (*Vernacular* 247). Instead, knowledge about the female reproductive body remained elusive, and women's speech continued to play a large role in unraveling (or further obscuring) its mysteries. The strange vagaries of women's bodies remained a staple of sensational cheap print; in the 1670s, one broadside ballad and a related pamphlet told the bizarre tale of a midwife who, fearing that her childlessness would threaten her professional reputation, feigned pregnancy by wearing a pillow under her clothing.³⁹ Aided by two women who were, ironically, responsible for investigating suspicious births, the midwife obtained the corpse of a stillborn infant that she then tried to pass off as her own during a sham delivery. The subterfuge was ultimately revealed only when other women in the community became suspicious, examined the midwife, and testified that she had not given birth. As critics such as Fissell and Rachel Weil have shown, such secret dealings and women's active shaping of bodily narratives took on political significance during the Warming-Pan Scandal of the late 1680s, when it was alleged by supporters of William of Orange that James II and Mary of Modena's son was, variously, a changeling smuggled into the birthing room as a substitute for their stillborn baby; a bastard fathered by a Catholic priest; or the child of a miller that the royal couple adopted to give credence to a faked pregnancy. In a futile attempt to quell the rumors, female witnesses were called to testify to the validity of the queen's pregnancy and childbirth.⁴⁰ As these examples demonstrate, post-Restoration English society continued to rely on women's verbal and physical performance, busy dialogue, and active silence to understand the female reproductive body. In

this environment of persistent uncertainty, the social significance of female bodily narratives, like Anne Greene in *Newes from the Dead*, stubbornly refused to die.

Notes

¹ See Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions*, 29-50; and J. Crawford, esp. chapter 4.

² Huet, 33-34, 79-80; Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, ch. 7.

³ See Neely, 180-85; Adelman, 233-35; Paster, 278-80; and Woodford, 193-95.

⁴ Like Dolan, I read *The Winter's Tale* alongside early modern pamphlet literature in order to analyze how the play both overlaps with and diverges from other popular representations of maternity. Dolan places *The Winter's Tale* in the context of crime pamphlets describing domestic homicides, arguing that whereas the pamphlet literature fixates most often on murderous mothers, the play emphasizes and even romanticizes the murderous father, who “amplifies and exploits the power available to him[,] but . . . does not overturn social order or gender roles” (*Dangerous* 159). I will argue that the play *does* depict paternal authority as potentially socially disruptive and, unlike the monstrous birth pamphlets I analyze, upholds maternal speech as an ordering socio-political force.

⁵ Thomas Raynalde's translation of Eucharius Rosslin's 1513 German treatise (which itself was based on a third-hand manuscript version of a second-century work by Soranus), was published in at least fourteen editions between 1540 and 1654, making it the most frequently reprinted work of its kind during the first half of the seventeenth century. For more on the publication history of *The Birth of Mankind*, see Keller, 76-80. On the Raynalde's positive valuation of women's role in reproduction, see Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 33-35.

⁶ On early modern beliefs about the effects of breast-feeding on physical development, language, and national identity, see Paster, 197-208; Wall, ch. 4; and Trubowitz, ““But Blood Whitened.””

⁷ Adelman emphasizes the effeminizing threat that the maternal body poses to male children in particular, and argues that many of Shakespeare's plays depict the violent rejection of the female reproductive body as necessary for the survival of masculinity (3-8). As I will argue, however, such a rejection can prove just as dangerous as the “suffocating” body of the mother, since the formative maternal influence that threatens masculinity is nevertheless necessary for the reproduction and legitimization of patriarchal power at the levels of both the family and the state.

⁸ Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, a Greek novel written around the third century AD, first appeared in English in Thomas Underdowne's translation *An Æthiopian Historie Written in Greeke*, which was first published around 1569 and saw four additional publications by the early seventeenth century. On *Aithiopika*'s publication history and the novel as a source for *The Winter's Tale*, see

Reynolds. On sources for the narrative about the black child of white parents, see Fissell, “Hairy Women.” Both of these narratives were frequently referenced by early modern medical treatises dealing with reproduction.

⁹ As J. Crawford notes, the “deformities as a whole give an impression of world-turned-upside-down disorder,” with one detail—the child’s deformed left-hand ring finger, which would traditionally be the wedding ring finger—pointing specifically to the mother’s failure to conform to the conventions of “legitimate, church-sanctioned matrimony” (69).

¹⁰ On the history of this trope, see Maus, 182-98.

¹¹ See, for example, B3, C, C2v, C3.

¹² See, for example, Ephraim, 54; Bicks, 37; Kitch, 58-59; and Reynolds, 446.

¹³ As Rosenfield notes, many of the play’s male characters attempt “to redefine the reproductive process as the production of male cultural authority while eliminating female representational potency” (97).

¹⁴ On the practice of breeching, see Snyder, 2-4.

¹⁵ The painting is held by the Tate Britain. See the image and description of the painting available on the museum website: <<<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=1500>>>.

¹⁶ An image of this painting can be found in Strong, 277.

¹⁷ See also Gheeraerts’s *Anne, Lady Wentworth, Later Countess of Downe, and Her Children* (1596) (Strong 291). On the use of portraiture to affirm patriarchal authority, see Goldberg, “Fatherly Authority.”

¹⁸ See Lamb, esp. 3-6.

¹⁹ See Paster, who argues that Mamillius’s name evokes Leontes’s own traumatic separation from the maternal breast (265).

²⁰ Critics such as Adelman and Reynolds have compared Leontes’s mental “conception” of Hermione’s guilt to pregnancy, and have noted its disordered, monstrous results; see Adelman, 223-24, and Reynolds, 441.

²¹ As Kaplan and Eggert note, “The qualities associated with female transgression in early modern society [such as outspokenness] are . . . presented as valuable; rather than destabilizing the social order, Paulina’s ‘offenses’ serve, ultimately, to restore order and succession to Leontes’s realm” (110).

²² As Bicks argues, Paulina “holds . . . the ‘office’ of midwife by virtue of her testimonial role, one that is intimately bound up with her access to a maternal utterance and a paternal audience” (33), and in this office she plays an “active role” in constructing the “reproductive ‘truths’” that confirm the legitimacy of the patriarchal line (39). I agree with Bicks, but as I will demonstrate, the formative power of Paulina (and Hermione, who Bicks does not discuss at length) is not limited to the confirmation of paternity, but works to shape both the family and the state when patriarchal authority fails.

²³ For a rich interpretation of this passage’s allusions to the mechanics of the printing press, see Kitch, 43n2.

²⁴ As Reynolds notes, the play differs significantly from its source, Robert Greene’s *Pandosto* (1588), in allowing Leontes to narrowly escape the sin of incestuous desire. Reynolds does not note Paulina’s intervention, however, and instead credits Leontes’s ability to “resist an inappropriate reaction” to “his daughter’s resemblance to her mother, [which] calls up an image of Hermione from his memory” (446). I would argue that this image is “called up” much more persistently (not to mention literally) by Paulina.

²⁵ Similarly, Paster argues that “Hermione is visibly altered and diminished by her experience of patriarchal discipline” at the end of the play (279).

²⁶ See Goldberg, *James I*, 142; Perry, *Making of Jacobean Culture*, ch. 4; and Gray, 43.

²⁷ On the rooting of patriarchal monarchy in the “natural” authority of fathers in early modern political theory, see Schochet.

²⁸ In this they resemble the *Mistress Parliament* pamphlets discussed in my chapter 4.

²⁹ Romack argues that misogynist political pamphlets from the Civil War era mark an attempt to expel women’s bodies and voices from the political sphere; see Romack, esp. 224-25. However, such expulsion is rarely entirely successful, and the pamphlets can be read as instead calling attention to the power women have to participate in and influence the religio-political debates that were determining the shape of the nation.

³⁰ See J. Crawford, 114-45.

³¹ See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 124-34. Since mothers were rarely present at their children’s baptisms during this period (Cressy, *Birth* 149), the disruptive women in these incidents were more likely to be godmothers, midwives, or nurses, who perhaps acted on the orders of sectarian mothers, or felt authorized to intervene because of the authority attributed to community women present during the birth of a baby; for more on this gossip community, see my chapter 4.

³² See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 173-80.

³³ For more on the actual events and figures that inspired this pamphlet, see J. Crawford, 140-44.

³⁴ Although Bicks argues that *A Declaration* ultimately upholds the midwife's testimony as "credible and foundational to the construction of certain 'truths'" (109), it is important not to underestimate the ways in which all three pamphlets attempt to overwrite and undermine female speech in order to create what Cressy calls "a hierarchy of validation," under which "men's testimony counted more than women's" (*Travesties* 48, 49). Such attempts suggest that the pamphlet authors viewed women's speech not as negligible, but as invested with significant shaping power, and thus as a threat to patriarchal authority which had to be guarded against.

³⁵ See P. Crawford, 21-22.

³⁶ On the production of the female prophetic voice and its links to the female body, see Trubowitz, "Female Preachers"; and Purkiss.

³⁷ Although Hobby claims that "the Eliza persona . . . demonstrates the freedoms available for women who retire from the public domain and immerse themselves in religious devotions" (55), in the two poems discussed above Eliza uses her maternal voice to authorize her entrance into public political debates. As Semler points out, many aspects of Eliza's poetic demeanor, such as "[h]er strongly independent response to earthly marriage, her relentless outspokenness, authoritarian style of biblical exegesis, brashness in print, and . . . her dangerously enthusiastic and unwomanly embrace of various saintly privileges," could have been viewed as a challenge to traditional forms of patriarchal familial, political, and religious authority (449).

³⁸ Amussen argues that after the Restoration, "the family became less important to social order," and "women's role in family government lost its public significance" (186, 187). Wall agrees that "by the beginning of the eighteenth century, . . . domesticity had largely vanished as a key term in political debates about government and nationality" (16).

³⁹ The story appears as part of *A True Narrative of the Proceedings at the Sessions-house in the Old-Bayly, at a Sessions There Held on the 1st and 2nd of June 1677* (1677), and in *The Mistaken Mid-wife* (1674).

⁴⁰ On the Warming-Pan Scandal and the propaganda that surrounded it, see Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 230-43; and Weil, ch. 3.

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