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The Maternal Imagination

JENIFER BUCKLEY



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Jenifer Buckley

Gender, Pregnancy and Power in Eighteenth-Century Literature

The Maternal Imagination

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Brighton, United Kingdom

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Introduction

§ THE DISCOURSE OF MATERNAL IMAGINATION

What is the discourse of maternal imagination? To begin to answer this question, we must first examine conceptions of maternal imagination itself. In 1714 a doctor named Daniel Turner did just that: he incorporated a chapter entitled “Of Spots and Marks of a diverse resemblance imprest upon the skin of the foetus, by the Force of the Mother’s Fancy” into his treatise on the skin, *De Morbis Cutaneis*. This chapter included an extensive list of examples of maternal imagination, a phenomenon widely understood to be the case in which a pregnant woman’s mind affected her unborn child in some way. In his book, Turner described “the case of a man born without arms, and living to a great age, which was occasioned by his mother’s surprise at the sight of a mendicant, in the same unhappy condition” (1714, 116). Turner further claimed that his belief in this model of maternal imagination had been cemented with the occurrence of the same event in contemporary London, to the wife of “Sir J B”. The case of the one-armed beggar is significant because it functions as an archetype of maternal imagination throughout the eighteenth century and is frequently cited by medical professionals and by popular literature.¹ The tale had social ramifications as individuals who had the misfortune to have malformed or missing limbs were shunned on the basis that their presence might cause local pregnant women to give birth to similarly

deformed bodies. Carolyn Williams describes how deformed beggars “used their unsightliness to extort money” (2011, 23), by threatening to present themselves in front of pregnant women.

The case of the one-armed beggar suggests that women who suffer fright or surprise give birth to misshapen children. However another of Turner’s examples indicates that these principles did not apply to all instances of maternal imagination. He refers to a story,

Of a woman longing to bite the naked shoulder of a baker passing by her, which rather than she should lose, the good natured husband hires the baker at a certain price; accordingly when the big-bellied lady had taken two morsels, the poor man, unable to hold out a third, would not suffer her to bite again, for want of which she bore (as the story goes) one dead child with two living. (Turner 1714, 119)

When compared to the case of the one-armed beggar, the affair of the baker’s shoulder displays a completely different paradigm of maternal imagination. Whereas one woman was frightened, the other had a fierce “longing” or craving.² In the former case, the child is congenitally deformed; in the latter case, the woman gives birth to triplets, one of whom is stillborn. Curiously, while Turner is happy to credit the case of the one-armed beggar and substantiates the report with an example from his own experience, he seems to doubt the veracity of the baker’s shoulder incident when he includes a parenthetical caveat, “as the story goes”. Finally, whereas the woman surprised by the beggar mimetically reproduces what she has seen, the other woman’s body absorbs and creatively interprets the abstract nature of her longing. Despite these considerable differences, both stories are retold over several centuries as classic examples of maternal imagination.³

I include one more of Turner’s examples to underscore the number of variables present in the discourse of maternal imagination. Turner repeats the following story:

An honest woman, who about ten years since, being great with child, and quarrelling with another woman, put her self [sic] into such a passion that she was unable to contain her self; after which falling into labour she was brought to bed of a daughter of courageous and heroick [sic] mind, but her feet and hands contracted as if ready to fight. (1714, 116)

This pregnant woman becomes angry, rather than frightened or full of longing. Turner's phrasing suggests that in this case, the pregnant woman possessed a degree of agency as she "*put her self* into such a passion" (my italics), unlike the involuntary reactions of the women in the case of the one-armed beggar or the baker's shoulder.⁴ Valeria Fenucci (2003, 140–141) has discussed this aspect of the discourse and explored the medico-philosophical debate regarding a woman's conscious use of her maternal imagination. Popular folklore suggested that if a woman deliberately pictured her husband during sex with another man, her infidelity would be hidden, as her maternal imagination would still imprint the husband's image onto the baby, even if he were not the biological father. The story of the angry woman also reveals yet another facet to the discourse of maternal imagination as it describes the way the mother's anger affected the foetus' mental, as well as physical, development.⁵ This idea was historically tenacious and advocated by figures such as the philosopher Nicholas Malebranche and the early man-midwife John Maubray.⁶

Turner's examples indicate the complex nature of the discourse of maternal imagination during the early eighteenth century. Throughout this book I shall be referring to the idea that a pregnant woman could influence the development of her foetus through her thoughts and feelings as "maternal imagination". English writers have employed a range of terms such as maternal imprinting, congenital deformity, maternal flesh-mark, maternal impressions and maternal imagination. I have chosen to use the term "maternal imagination" rather than "maternal impressions" throughout this book because the dramatic eighteenth-century transformation of the word "imagination" is so significant for the period's medicine, fiction and culture.⁷ Eighteenth-century understandings of imagination gradually changed from mimetic to creative, and as I shall go on to explain, the notion of maternal imagination played a role in this shift. "Imagination" is also the earliest and most frequently employed term used by writers of the material included within this book.⁸

I want to demonstrate the way that the apparently distinct instances described above are actually all part of a protean "discourse" of maternal imagination. As I shall discuss in more detail below, examining maternal imagination as a discourse will facilitate a more interdisciplinary examination of the topic, rather than merely localised histories within medicine, religion, folklore or fiction.⁹ Agency, or more specifically, the denial of the human subject as an agent of change, is considered throughout my study as I am interested in the ways that discourse penetrates different

genres, shapes experience, and regulates discursive practice.¹⁰ My argument does not pretend to resolve the complex matter of agency, but rather tests agency through discourse – through my tracing of continuities and transformations across genres and time. This Introduction will outline the state of the discourse of maternal imagination at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in order to provide a point of orientation for later developments. By providing both the critical and historical context, I hope to highlight the value of examining the discourse for literary criticism, eighteenth-century studies and women's history.

The case of the one-armed beggar, the affair of the baker's shoulder and the story of the angry woman are only three of twenty-five examples listed by Turner, each suggesting a slightly different model of maternal imagination. Further examples were reported in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, broadsides, almanacks, popular texts full of monstrous images known as “wonder books”, or passed on through the oral tradition.¹¹ As Turner's examples demonstrate, maternal imagination could take the form of longing, fright, or anger. However other sources maintained that pregnant women could also affect their foetuses for better or for worse with dreams, exercise, or excitement; by deliberately or accidentally fixing their attention upon a certain object or even with a simple yawn.¹² The discourse included any theory or belief that suggested a direct link between the mother's mind and the foetus; for example “chirapsy” constituted the belief that a woman could avoid marking her infant if she immediately wiped clean the part of her body affected by her imagination.¹³ Although examples of maternal imagination were often presented in negative terms of involuntary accidents, there was also a sense that a mother could choose to improve the appearance or character of her foetus. The eighteenth-century midwife Martha Mears published her own pregnancy guide and addressed “the fair sex” with medical advice and directives.¹⁴ Mears encouraged pregnant women to engage in “the delightful recreation of music” (1797, 36) as often as possible for the sake of the baby *in utero*.¹⁵ One might also tentatively include the hypothesis of Jean Astruc, a French professor of medicine, as an advocate of the beneficial effects of prenatal influence. Astruc (1762, 47–48) postulated that a minute image of a woman was sculpted into a concave niche of her womb, which shaped the developing foetus into a likeness of its mother, like jelly in a mould.¹⁶

Clearly the discourse of maternal imagination played a defining role within an extraordinary range of incidents and outcomes. As with all discourses,

knowledge about maternal imagination was generated, shaped and regulated by discrete, localised and period-specific discursive practices. That is to say, a belief circulated by local wisdom in early eighteenth-century Cornwall that maternal dreams could alter a foetus, was a different kind of knowledge from a midwifery text of the 1780s that claimed a sudden shock could destroy the infant embryo. Nevertheless, there were continuities and overlaps between these different types of knowledge across the century. Medical texts offered specialist “knowledge” of the female body and imagination, and yet it was a speculative, fantastical type of knowledge. As contemporary physicians and philosophers admitted, when empirical evidence failed, as it so often did when it came to the female body, one relied upon imagination for alternative explanations.¹⁷ The persistent association of imagination with the female mind and body is therefore at the forefront of this study, as I investigate the appropriation of the discourse for – or against – female agency.

Initially, the notion that a woman’s mind could affect the development of her foetus was encoded into discursive practices generated by medicine and folklore. These were not stable. This was largely due to the increase of print forms and literacy during the eighteenth century, which meant that the notion of maternal imagination appeared in diverse forms, and especially new modes of writing. This book will investigate some of these practices in detail, and the way that they are in dialogue with related discourses and debates such as man-midwifery, politeness, domestic hierarchy, gender roles, and the philosophy of creative imagination. In particular I examine the way that no matter which genre was adopted – whether medical treatise, midwifery guide, news story, novel, poetry or satire – there was a persistent fascination with the threat posed by the mind of a pregnant woman to the foetus.

Michel Foucault’s recognition that discourses generate and articulate power relations will be important for this study, as all of the tropes and rhetorical strategies constituted within the medicine and folklore associated with maternal imagination are consistently preoccupied with gender prescriptions and hierarchy (1979, 30). As emphasised above however, the patterns and structures of this preoccupation are regulated by discursive practice. The following chapters demonstrate the way that the discourse of maternal imagination both stimulates and responds to eighteenth-century discussions of gender, particularly regarding the rise of man-midwifery and marriage. The discourse also stimulates and responds to the gender hierarchy implicit in debates of poetic theory and imagination.

As part of this examination of gender, this study addresses the difficult question of female agency. The concept of maternal imagination is shadowed by the possibilities of female agency due to the vague but insidious notion that the pregnant woman's imagination was a potent and compelling force. The principles of maternal imagination suggested that a woman's mind actively, perhaps malignly, "impressed" the malleable foetus, yet it was unclear to what degree an individual woman might exercise control over this remarkable power. This uncertainty is manifested in accounts of maternal imagination in various ways; attacks upon woman's sinful nature, an anxious emphasis on the fragile mind of the pregnant woman, references to the mysteries of the female body, or a stress upon maternal responsibility. The issue of female agency also arises when commentators considered whether pregnant women manipulated the discourse, especially in fictional cases of maternal imagination. To what extent did women deliberately exaggerate or downplay the threat of their pregnant imaginations? Such questions are linked to the wider debate concerning female agency and the domestic sphere during the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The perspectives that have emerged from this debate during the past two decades have profoundly influenced this study, as the discourse of maternal imagination insistently questions the extent of a pregnant woman's agency.

Recent studies of the concept of maternal imagination often fail to acknowledge the protean nature of the discourse, and here again the concept of discourse is valuable. Frequently discussion is limited to a specific model of maternal imagination, such as the idea that a pregnant woman's pica or craving leads to a birthmark or deformity. As this study will demonstrate, while these simple models do belong to the discourse of maternal imagination, the isolation of particular themes or models obfuscates the systematic nature of a much wider body of knowledge. While I privilege certain identifiable and explicit models of maternal imagination according to dominant trends at different points in the long eighteenth century, I will also suggest that it is vital to take into account the unspoken assumptions that nevertheless have a formative effect on these models. For example, the increased medical emphasis on the pregnant woman as uniquely susceptible to dangerous emotions intersects with an enduring anxiety concerning the real level of control a woman possessed over her imagination.

From the outset then, I wish to stress a persistent dialectic present within the discourse. Almost all eighteenth-century discussion of maternal

imagination manifests an uneasy sense of transgression, as the private area of reproduction, feminine power and female genitalia is exposed. The discourse colonises ever more intimate areas of the female body, simultaneously triumphant and uncomfortable with its progress. I am going to identify a crucial turning point in the early eighteenth century at which the unsayable in relation to maternal imagination becomes a major issue, creating a heightened sense of transgression and uncertainty. “Scientific” knowledge of women’s bodies and prescriptions surrounding it become apparent and increasingly consequential for pregnant women. The pursuit of knowledge of the female body, especially the mysterious processes of reproduction, is within the prevailing structure of eighteenth-century gender hierarchy. A developing awareness of the impropriety of this pursuit silently draws upon and contributes to this strategy. As medical practitioners and researchers stressed the empirical objectivity of their discoveries, they muted both the sensual aspects of an exposed female body and the transgressive nature of their enquiry. This silence functions as loud and imposing dissonance in the discourse of maternal imagination and its role in eighteenth-century gender prescriptions.

Recent studies refer to “belief”, “cultural faith”, the “doctrine” or the “theory” of maternal imagination.¹⁹ Paul Gabriel Boucé refers to maternal imagination as a “para-cognitive concept” in his chapter “Imagination, Pregnant Women and Monsters, in Eighteenth-Century England and France” (1987).²⁰ Boucé acknowledges eighteenth-century confusion when he remarks that “it should be stressed that, in all those controversies and polemics bearing on the influence of the mother’s imagination on the child *in utero*, the concept of *imagination* was never defined precisely” (88). Even leading scholars on the subject often differ in their understanding of the concept, causing definitions of maternal imagination to diverge. An influential article by G S Rousseau, “Pineapples, Pregnancy, Pica and *Peregrine Pickle*” (1971) explores only one element of the discourse, as he views maternal imagination primarily in the form of maternal desire or longing. Marie-Hélène Huet’s excellent monograph *Monstrous Imagination* (1993) has often been cited as the standard text for critical discussion of maternal imagination and is a central point of reference for this study. While Huet’s book provides a comprehensive study of European maternal desire from the Renaissance to the 1990s, my book concentrates on the radical transformation of the discourse in Britain during the eighteenth century. Huet’s emphasis on the centrality of desire as the driving force of maternal imagination differs from Dennis Todd’s

Imagining Monsters: Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth-Century England (1995), which focuses upon early eighteenth-century understandings and anxieties surrounding the concept of imagination. Todd's definition of maternal imagination is slightly wider than Huet's stress upon monstrous desire,

Merely looking at or thinking about an object, of course, would not deform the child. The mother's imagination had to be excited in some fashion: by a surprise or sudden fright, an intense or prolonged affectation or repugnance, or an unsatisfied longing. (46)

Todd describes a broad selection of models for the concept of maternal imagination and considers a range of medical, literary and popular material. However my analysis will extend beyond Todd's strict focus upon the 1720s, and help to situate his findings within a larger narrative of the discursive dispersal of maternal imagination.

Medical historian Philip K Wilson also employs a relatively broad classification of maternal imagination in his two meticulous articles, "'Out of Sight, Out of Mind?': The Daniel Turner-James Blondel Dispute Over the Power of the Maternal Imagination" (1992) and more recently, "Eighteenth-Century 'Monsters' and Nineteenth-Century 'Freaks': Reading the Maternally Marked Child" (2002). Wilson considers the effects of maternal fright, fancy and desire, and is alert to changes in the way that maternal imagination has been perceived over the past three centuries. Wilson's article "Eighteenth-Century Monsters" is particularly helpful as it demonstrates the continuity between the eighteenth-century and twenty-first century discourse of maternal imagination. He considers the anxiety and hope inherent in the idea of maternal imprinting to endure in the present-day Western belief that "a pregnant mother can stimulate the intelligence of her developing fetus by listening regularly to Mozart or other select classical music" (17). Wilson argues that this belief could both suggest positive, intelligence-enhancing implications for the foetus, or guilt for the mother if she failed to put this advice into practice. I propose that this duality is anticipated in discursive practice stimulated by the rapid developments in midwifery during the eighteenth century. One such instance of this, already mentioned above, is Martha Mears' late eighteenth-century recommendation for women to listen to music.

Other historians and literary critics have made significant contributions to critical discussion of the discourse as part of larger studies of related subjects such as pregnancy or women's bodies.²¹ Indeed, within the last decade interest in maternal imagination has prompted a re-evaluation of its discursive effects upon eighteenth-century culture. Lisa Forman Cody's brilliant examination of reproduction in *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (2005) shows the way that belief in maternal imagination helped to shape British identity. Pam Lieske's *Eighteenth-Century British Midwifery* (2007–2009) is an exceptional twelve-volume collection of facsimiles concerning eighteenth-century obstetrics and highlights the contemporary medical reception of the discourse.²² Lieske's collection draws together many of the early eighteenth-century documents published on the subject of maternal imagination and includes both popular and medical sources. In related studies on the body, Barbara Stafford (1997) and Steven Connor (2004) have also discussed the contemporary interaction of cultural and medical interest in maternal imagination.

Although these scholars address different aspects of the discourse, there is a tendency to downplay the complexities of its evolution. Many state that scientific conviction in the concept declined at some stage during the eighteenth century; Mary Fissell explains that "by mid-century, the theory of the maternal imagination had become discredited in scientific discourse" (2003, 67), while Julia Epstein claims "the maternal imagination debate gradually died out, its ideas incorporated in some measure into the science of teratology by the early nineteenth century" (1999, 120). More recently Rebecca Kukla states that "by the nineteenth-century, most (though not all) physicians had strictly speaking, abandoned the theory of maternal imagination" (2005, 69). Others allude to a more persistent popular belief in the concept, but rarely provide any details.²³ Only Huet's study recognises some of the implications of the concept of maternal imagination, as she concentrates on the metaphorical value of its monstrous nature for the artistic process. I aim to provide new evidence to support Huet's assertion that maternal imagination began to feature discursively in Romantic literature and art, to extend my analysis beyond her focus on the teratological implications of the concept, and to create a more nuanced view of the discourse.

This book argues that, far from falling into decline, the discourse of maternal imagination diversified and was subject to adaptation, in dialogue with other discourses, throughout the eighteenth century. My text-based

analysis of maternal imagination will build upon the work of the scholars mentioned above, to show that maternal imagination as a discourse survived and adapted within a changing field of discursive possibilities. The proliferating body of knowledge concerning maternal imagination became more tightly and at the same time more diversely defined by medical professionals, novelists and other commentators. The presence of the discourse continued to be felt in debates concerning the cultures of politeness and sensibility, the politics of gender hierarchy, and theories of reproductive and intellectual creativity. This book intends to enable an understanding of the discourse of maternal imagination in the eighteenth century, which shows its strength, extent and influence for eighteenth-century culture. Through specific case studies, it will explore what the effects of this expansion of the notion of maternal imagination might have meant for eighteenth-century men as well as women, and producers as well as consumers, of the discourse.

The following section will provide a brief overview of several intersecting fields of study. To appreciate the variety and complexity of the discourse of maternal imagination, I will excavate the history of the discourse from classical antiquity to the eighteenth century. As this discourse comprises both popular and elite cultural materials, I shall also briefly contextualise the difficulties involved when the two cultures converge. The discourse of maternal imagination is also inextricably tied to the wider history of imagination, and I shall therefore describe how understandings of imagination evolved over time. This cultural and historical context will be especially important in the later chapters of this book.

§ THE HISTORY OF MATERNAL IMAGINATION

Deformed or marked infants were traditionally believed to be the “monsters” of maternal imagination, brought into existence to function as warnings or evidence of unnatural wickedness.²⁴ Norman R Smith has claimed that “the portentous monster dates back at least to Babylonian-Assyrian cuneiform tablets of 2000 B.C” (2002, 267).²⁵ The specific concept of a mother altering her foetus with her thoughts first appears in a lost classical text attributed to Empedocles (c.490 – 430 BC), who recommended that pregnant women should gaze upon beautiful statues and paintings (Huet 1993, 4–5; 19). Spartans showed their pregnant wives beautiful pictures of Apollo, Castor, Pollux and other gods to encourage strong, good-looking offspring (Stafford 1997, 312). The

belief that visual stimulation or longing could create birthmarks existed throughout different cultures and was termed in different languages as *naevi materni* (Latin), *voglie* (Italian), *envies* (French), and *muttermahler* (German). Traces of the discourse of maternal imagination also appear in later Judaeo-Christian writing; in Genesis (30. Gen. 30: 37–43), Jacob places striped tree branches in front of Laban’s flock during the mating season, in order to create more striped and spotted animals. As I will explain below, this close relationship between religious belief and the discourse of maternal imagination would remain intertwined until at least the eighteenth century.

Focusing more narrowly on the discourse as it appeared in Britain, it becomes clear that belief in maternal imagination persisted throughout the medieval period and Middle Ages. Maternal visions and dreams were credited with the power to affect a foetus. Keith Thomas notes that during the medieval period, images were considered potent even for a non-pregnant person, as images of saints were often credited with miraculous powers (1971, 27). The discourse was consistently employed to explain the birth of “monsters”, who continued to be considered as portentous omens or divine signs. A fourteenth-century manuscript, *The Anonymous Riming Chronicle*, even attributed the origins of Britain to a esoteric version of the maternal imagination when it claimed that a Grecian princess, Albina, landed on the island, ate so much deer that she became lecherous, copulated with the devil and gave birth to giants who became the original inhabitants of Albion (Cohen 1999, 4–50).²⁶

Coupling with the devil or animals was also believed to create monsters during the Renaissance, at least if blame could not be attached to a defective womb. Yet, as Huet declares, “no theory was more debated, more passionately attacked or defended, than the power of the maternal imagination over the formation of the fetus” (6). A flurry of Renaissance texts explored the notion of maternal imagination in graphic detail: Levinis Leminus’ *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (1559, English translation 1658), Pierre Boaistuau’s *Histoires Prodigieuses* (1566, English translation 1569), Ambroise Paré’s *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (1573) and Nicholas Malebranche’s *De la recherché de la verité* (1674). The authors of such texts cited either personal experience or respectable authorities such as Aristotle, Hippocrates, Pliny and Galen as the source of monstrous birth stories. In the mid-seventeenth century, Nicholas Culpeper initiated a new mode of discursive practice with the publication of his midwifery treatise, *A Directory for Midwives* (1651). The treatise unleashed a flood of similar

midwifery guides including the first to be authored by a woman, Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book: Or the Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* (1671).²⁷ Although Sharp's text would not be succeeded by another woman's midwifery guide for over sixty years, it proved that women could produce medical texts – if only regarding specifically female concerns. Unlike ribald broadsides or philosophical texts such as *Des Monstres et Prodiges*, midwifery guides viewed maternal imagination through the lens of prenatal care and advised upon the best practice for avoiding monsters. However the amorphous concept of maternal imagination could lead to disagreements and confusion. While many texts claimed that a woman's desires and thoughts were strongest during pregnancy, others such as Paré, Sharp, and Culpeper, maintained that maternal imagination was at its most potent during the act of conception. Culpeper confidently states:

It is agreed upon by all authors, yea, and truth its self [sic] hath set its seal to it, that the imagination of the mother operate most forcible in the conception of the child; how much better then were it women to lead *contented* lives, that so their imaginations may be pure and clear. (93)²⁸

Culpeper's treatise initiates a medical emphasis upon the crucial role of a mother's imagination for the formation of a child. His text ostensibly aims for the education of other midwives; to provide them with authority and knowledge when they attend pregnant women. A midwife's citation of Culpeper's description of "most forcible" maternal imagination would carry more gravity than generic folktales, gossip or rumour. As we shall see in [Chapter 3](#), the character Grizzle Pickle cites Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* in Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751); however by this period, Culpeper appears rather old-fashioned. The often short-lived impact of medical texts is another complicating factor for the discourse of maternal imagination, as theories could swiftly rise and fall in popularity. Yet Culpeper's recommendation for "*contented*" pregnant women has longevity throughout the medical discourse of maternal imagination. This remark involves the suggestion that, for the sake of the foetus; husbands, family and the local community should treat pregnant women with care and consideration. The recommendation fits with Linda Pollock's claim that "pregnancy was viewed through the prism of miscarriage: as a difficult, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous

condition which, unless tended with care, was destined to end prematurely” (1990, 59).

It is specifically the threat of the mother’s imagination that creates the protective attitude advocated by Culpeper, as the discourse of maternal imagination was inextricably associated with deformity, miscarriage and death. While this threat stressed the importance of a mother’s comfort, it also carried the weight of blame. Particularly during the later seventeenth century, women could be viewed as personally responsible for producing deformed children. Julie Crawford (2005), has observed that during the early modern period, Britons “read such births as messages from God, the causes behind their creation and the forms of their monstrosity often carefully adumbrated to the acts and beliefs of the women who produce them” (2). The question of female agency and just how far a woman could actually control her imagination therefore permeates the discourse. The dominant misogynistic perspective of a mother’s imagination alternately casts the mother as pitifully weak (unable to control herself) or disturbingly powerful (able to alter the human form). Paul Gabriel Boucé has illustrated the damning connotations of the maternal imagination in the following terms:

the pregnant mother appears as the great culprit, the evil scapegoat, much more so than the father. A physically and mentally crippled creature during her pregnancy, she is finally made responsible for any marks or monstrous deformities of her offspring. (1987, 98)

A W Bates (2005, 54) has noted the emblematic nature of deformed children and remarks that an infant born with misshapen hands was thought to be a punishment for the idle ways of its mother. In other words, a pregnant woman’s personal sins could become visible upon the flesh of her child. Scholars have often commented upon this notion of the child as text, as the discourse of maternal imagination casts the child as a unique insight into the hidden thoughts of the pregnant mind.²⁹ Revisionist historians have emphasised the significant role of religion during the Enlightenment, and certainly the idea of female transgression continued to quietly accompany monstrous births during the eighteenth century.³⁰ However, the evidence suggests that, unlike previous eras, primarily religious interpretations of cases of maternal imagination were rare during this period. The many

and diverse cases of maternal imagination included in this study tend to be explained by various medical theories, in contrast to earlier eras.

Reproduction itself is of course a rich area of metaphor and imagery; Elizabeth Sacks (1980) has declared that “the generation metaphor, supreme expression of creativity, is the most accessible of verbal images, possessing a universal appeal which explains its lasting popularity in creation myths” (1). Despite this potential, Sacks argues that employing reproduction as a metaphor for the creative process “became a thorough cliché in belles lettres of the sixteenth century, and already betrayed signs of debasement and decadence in the early years of the seventeenth” (103). Susan Stanford Friedman (1987) has investigated the implications of male reproduction metaphor, arguing that male use of the trope was primarily pejorative, until Romantic philosophy rehabilitated the pen-phallus association to define the creation of great art. Marilyn Francus (1994) has argued that reproductive metaphors of the fertile mother have also been employed negatively throughout history. Her study of the Augustan period suggests that male writers feared the creativity and artistry associated with imagination, which was gendered as female due to the power of the female imagination during pregnancy (839). Toni Bowers (1996) has commented that the Augustan obsession with motherhood originated in the political anxiety that stemmed from the Glorious Revolution. The imagery of monstrous births was undoubtedly used for political purposes during the seventeenth century – such as the increase in reported cases of headless children during the Civil War and after the beheading of Charles I (Crawford 2005). Forman Cody (2005) has remarked that the English press increasingly reported cases of monstrous births and meddling midwives from the 1670s onwards, “nearly all of which had cosmic and socio-political signification” (46).

Although attitudes towards the women who claimed, or were accused of, the experience of maternal imagination were unstable, the discourse itself sustained a certain tenacious longevity. This was perhaps partly due to the fact that the discourse supported general medical opinion that female imagination was the root cause of most ailments, particularly anything attending the female reproductive system (Porter 1999, 233).³¹ As the eighteenth-century progressed, the capricious female imagination would be blamed for other disorders – increasingly as evidence of a weak mind prey to old-fashioned and foolish superstitions. Bernard Capp (2003) has noted that although contemporaries believed that women were more likely to turn to supernatural or superstitious explanation or

help, actual evidence for this belief is inconclusive (363). By the early eighteenth century, most people were thoroughly familiar with the power of a pregnant woman's imagination. On the first page of the initial issue of *The Spectator* in 1711, Mr. Spectator explained the origin of his grave personality,

when my mother was gone with child of me about three months, she dreamt that she was brought to bed of a judge . . . The gravity of my behaviour at my very first appearance in the world, and all the time I sucked, seemed to favour my mother's dream. (Addison and Steele 1711, 1)

The discourse featured in both popular and elite culture as maternal imagination was a phenomenon that could affect women from all backgrounds. In *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978) Peter Burke stressed the variety and interconnection of popular culture, but argued that the "great tradition" of the social elite gradually distanced themselves from the "little tradition" of popular culture during the eighteenth century. Keith Thomas has observed that it is the "huge variation in the standard of living, educational level and intellectual sensibility which makes this society so diverse, and therefore so hard to generalise about" (1971, 5). There was – and is – no such thing as a simple divide between high and low culture, but instead a bewildering variety of rural, urban, religious, and employment groups containing a range of different practices and beliefs, on various levels of the social scale. Eighteenth-century Exeter Anglicans held a vastly different set of priorities to Yorkshire Evangelicals, while London entertainers adhered to a different system of values to that of London apprentices; and although similar attitudes could cross geographical, spiritual and professional divides, there was no uniform popular culture. Moreover culture is rarely static and ideas that might develop rapidly in the metropolis, could progress at a slower rate elsewhere. Burke's argument has subsequently been considerably revised; John Mullan and Christopher Reid have argued that the distinctions between "popular", "vulgar" and "polite" (2000, 2–3) were not clearly delineated in the eighteenth century, and suggest that scholars should tackle the interaction between cultures, rather than search for differences. Similarly Angela Mcshane and Garthine Walker (2010) encourage a replacement of Burke's two-culture argument with a more sophisticated model of varied, competing cultures.

Regardless of social status, the discourse of maternal imagination was widely circulated among men and, particularly pregnant, women. Marina Warner has emphasised the influential role of women in communicating through unofficial channels in “domestic webs of information and powers; the neighbourhood, the village, the well, the washing place, the shops, the stalls, the street” (1994, 33). Even the illiterate could listen to tales of deformed infants or perhaps look at luridly illustrated broadsides, which were largely devoted to reporting and interpreting monstrous births (Smith 2002, 281). Other popular texts also used images to disseminate the discourse of maternal imagination. The anonymous and immensely popular sex guide, *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* (1684), featured a frontispiece that displayed two figures affected by maternal imagination, a hairy woman and a black boy.³² The two figures represent popular cautionary tales regarding maternal imagination; the hairy woman is the daughter of a mother whose frequent viewing of a portrait of John the Baptist dressed in camel skin caused her child to be born completely covered in hair; while the black boy is the offspring of white parents who, during the conception of the child, glimpsed the picture of a black man that hung opposite their bed. Roy Porter has documented the way that *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* was translated, pirated and recycled throughout the eighteenth century and notes that images of the allegedly monstrous children “were all the more conspicuous since they are often the only illustration in the whole book” (Porter 1985, 11). Mary Fissell’s work (2003) on the subtle transformations of the frontispiece describes how these images began in the 1684 *Masterpiece* as rude woodcuts of naked figures, and but were gradually phased out as the century progressed. By the time the 1790s edition of *Masterpiece* was repackaged as *Aristotle’s Works*, the frontispiece depicted a fully clothed woman opposite a seated, clothed gentleman and the black child was completely erased from the tableau. Fissell attributes this radical change partially to the growing culture of politeness and the veneration of ideal maternity, however I would suggest the shift also marks a late-eighteenth century reluctance to acknowledge the persistence of the discourse.

Aristotle’s Masterpiece is a useful source, not only because it visually asserts the theory of maternal imagination with its frontispiece, but because it reflects the confused corpus of reproductive knowledge. Thomas Laqueur has described a pivotal shift in eighteenth-century understandings of reproduction, from “one-sex to two sex”.³³ Laqueur’s thesis suggests that there was an eighteenth-century transformation from understanding all human bodies as essentially the same, to discrete male

and female sexual systems. This shift prompted questions regarding the necessity of female orgasm for procreation, as scientists and philosophers searched for the origin of life. Many natural philosophers advocated the theory of “preformationism”, the idea that the foetus was fully formed in miniature and simply grew in size.³⁴ This theory provoked debate over whether the spark of life originated in the maternal egg as the “Ovists” believed, or whether it was located in spermatozoa as “Spermatists” claimed. Still others, such as William Harvey, argued for “epigenesis”, a theory claiming that the baby grew more complex over time. These discussions were not limited to natural philosophers and physicians; as magic, theology, astrology and medicine were commonly viewed as similar facets of reproductive information. Keith Thomas states that “all the evidence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries suggests that the common people never formulated a distinction between magic and science, certainly not between magic and medicine” (1971, 668) and Alexandra Shepard (2003) has noted that medical texts were not always written by physicians and were sometimes authored by clergymen, civil servants and even lawyers. To be sure, *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* includes astrological projections, religious exhortation, moral philosophy, classical medicine and folklore, and displays the assumption that these subjects interacted with each other. George S Rousseau’s (2004) pioneering work on the imagination during the long eighteenth century argues that separate “literary” and “scientific” discourses did not exist, but were rather intricately bound with each other. Astrology and medicine for example, were complementary studies, rather than two separate areas of knowledge. This can be seen in the way that the early modern discourse of maternal imagination could include both elements of medicine and astrology. The title page of Culpeper’s *Directory of Midwives* describes the author unabashedly as “a student of Physick and Astrology” and included a lengthy section upon conception under certain astrological circumstances.³⁵ Bernard Capp, the foremost historian on the subject of almanacs, has observed that similar instructions were contained in almanac calendars.³⁶ These cheap and popular pamphlets served a variety of purposes, but contain a notably consistent strain of advice regarding how to avoid giving birth to a deformed child. Almanacs combined astrological predictions with omens, recipes for fertility, and images of famous monsters from around the world.

Another popular source that portrays the harmony between astrology and the concept of maternal imagination is a lengthy poem entitled

Callipædia: Or the Art of Getting Pretty Children (1710). Originally published in 1655 by the French Abbé Claudius Quilletus in Latin, it was translated into English at least twice during the early eighteenth century.³⁷ Like *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, *Callipædia's* pronuptialist and pronatalist agenda promoted the best ways of begetting healthy, beautiful offspring. Entwining both astrology and the precepts of maternal imagination, *Callipædia* recommended that couples should avoid conceiving under the auspices of Aries, Taurus, Scorpio and Pisces and to:

Guard well your eyes from monsters and beware
No Aesop or Thersites enter there,
But all diverting sights, but pleasing all and fair.
For when the work of generation grows,
And from the brain a subtle spirit flows,
Which mingling in the womb with genial heat,
Does there the fructifying humour meet,
With arbitrary power it stamps it there,
And binds th' obedient mass the form impos'd to wear.
But then this power is often apt to err,
And oft imprints a harsh rude character (Rowe 1712, 5).

Despite this ominous warning, *Callipædia* also suggests that a woman's imagination could be harnessed as a beneficial force to determine the sex or appearance of a child:

If for a boy you long, a sprightly heir,
Let great Apollo always young and fair
Be ever present, ever entertain
Your minds; or bright Alexis, scornful swain,
By Corydon belov'd, but lov'd in vain:
If on a handsome girl your hopes are plac'd,
Let Venus' form, with every beauty grac'd,
Dwell in the eyes, the spacious fancy fill,
That paints the heav'nly face with matchless skill'. (Oldisworth 1710, 49)

However faith in astrology appears to have declined, at least within the educated classes, during the early eighteenth century, as its near disappearance from the intellectual mainstream testifies (Capp 1979). The decline of belief in astrology coincided with Enlightenment confidence in natural philosophy, experiments and evidence. Rather than gradually

fading with astrology, the discourse of maternal imagination was appropriated and extended by new regimes of scientific and medical endeavour. This was perhaps due to the vigorous enquiries into the nature and processes of the human reproductive system, as described above. The discourse proliferated as the concept of maternal imagination was probed and tested by physicians, natural philosophers, midwives and anatomists. Even though the concept of maternal imagination had become discredited in medicine and tainted by satire by mid-century, the discourse dispersed in fiction and aesthetic theory (Huet 1993, 44–45).

Roy Porter claims that belief in the supernatural did not disappear, but was “culturally repackaged” (1999, 245) for the elite into literature and the arts, culminating in the Romantic movement. Porter’s argument is convincing, particularly in light of the rise of the sublime and supernatural elements in Gothic and Romantic literature towards the close of the century (Clery 1995). Marie-Hélène Huet argues that male Romantic writers, who “reinterpreted art as teratology” (9), appropriated the notion of a monstrous imagination. Huet’s argument supports my thesis that the discourse of maternal imagination proliferated during the eighteenth century. The subject of the next section, the wider context of the eighteenth-century’s relationship with imagination, is closely connected to this proliferation.

§ THE HISTORY OF IMAGINATION

In modern usage, the term “imagination” is synonymous with “creativity”. However although it is often the various branches of the arts that seem to have the strongest connection to imaginative power, investigations into the imagination have stretched into other areas such as science, medicine, education, politics, philosophy and even economics.³⁸ While these disparate disciplines understandably employ rather different methods to explore the concept of imagination, they all point towards the eighteenth century as a pivotal epoch in its history. This is because histories of imagination tend to agree that imagination was understood as a primarily mimetic faculty until the eighteenth century, when it began to be understood as a fundamentally creative power.³⁹ Richard Kearney clearly defines these two different views of imagination:

The human ability to “image” or “imagine” something has been understood in two main ways throughout the history of Western thought - 1) as a

representational faculty which reproduces images of some pre-existing reality, or 2) as a *creative* faculty which produces images which often lay claim to an original status in their own right. (1988, 5)

Historically the discourse of maternal imagination involved both types of imagination. A mother's imagination could function as "representational"; images could be inscribed upon the foetus' body, such as the case of the one-armed beggar, or the Suffolk woman who saw a drop of blood upon her own face and gave birth to a child whose face was marked with a blood-red birthmark (Anon. 1717, 38). Yet the concept of maternal imagination could also sometimes fit Kearney's "creative" definition, as images the mother viewed could be transformed by her individual and unregulated thought-processes. A creative maternal imagination could result in unexpected originality, such as the hairy woman in *Aristotle's Masterpiece* or the story of the baker's shoulder.⁴⁰ The discourse of maternal imagination therefore disturbs any tidy transformation of imagination from mimetic to creative, during the eighteenth century.

John D Lyons posits that creative imagination was active and present during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in *Before Imagination: Embodied thought from Montaigne to Rousseau* (2005).⁴¹ However although René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke developed their separate views upon imagination in the seventeenth century, it was not until the Augustan period that interest in imagination really flourished. Joseph Addison's essays on the *Pleasures of Imagination* (1712) can be seen as a turning point in the history of imagination as they explore the possibilities of imagination as both a representational, and a creative faculty.⁴² Addison's essays stimulated public interest in the subject, and directed the reader towards what Addison termed a "secondary" imagination, which functioned creatively. During the early eighteenth century the idea of imagination as a positive, transformative force gained influence as poets incorporated the notion into their artistic visions. Mark Akenside celebrated it in epic poetic form as part of the divine order, Samuel Johnson mistrusted its awesome power, while the sceptic David Hume took the notion of the mimetic imagination to the furthest extreme and claimed that humans could only experience reality as an imaginative world. As imagination gained importance as a concept it was included as a fundamental component of many aesthetic and philosophical theories. David Hartley placed imagination at the centre of his scheme of association in *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty and his Expectations*

(1749), while Alexander Gerard and William Duff used it to explain genius. Conceiving imagination as either healthy or diseased, eighteenth-century medical experts became fascinated by the various states of a diseased imagination (Rousseau 2004).

It seems clear that by the mid-eighteenth century the imagination was perceived as a faculty of immense consequence and that philosophical focus had gradually shifted from the mimetic paradigm of representation to a stress on imagination's creative powers. This is portrayed most clearly through the German influence upon the history of imagination, notably through the work of Johann Nicholas Tetens and Immanuel Kant. Kant argued that imagining was not merely a reproduction of some other (divine) reality but an original production of the human mind, and ultimately concludes that "imagination thus ceases to be a copy, or a copy of a copy, and assumes the role of ultimate origin" (Kearney 1988, 158). This reversed epistemological hierarchy and placed the newly termed "transcendental", creative, imagination at the top. While the extent of Kant's particular influence upon British thinkers is unclear, the increasing prioritisation of imagination during the later eighteenth century is unquestionable.

As the creative imagination rose in status, it attracted interest from a variety of fields. Certainly philosophers such as Kant and Tetens were fascinated by imagination's possibilities, however many natural philosophers and medical professionals were also drawn into debates and theories.⁴³ Moral philosopher Adam Smith founded his theory of sympathy on a base of imagination, while James Beattie opened his *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1773) with a chapter upon "Memory and Imagination". Religious figures also published sermons on the dangers of unchecked imagination, with forbidding titles such as "The Nature, Uses, Dangers, Sufferings, and Preservatives, of the Human Imagination" (1796) and "Remarks upon the Notion of Extraordinary Impulses and Impressions of the Imagination Indulged by Many Professors of Religion" (1800). Artists and authors too were often abreast of both philosophical and scientific developments in the field. This can be most fully illustrated by the position imagination held within the Romantic movement, as the sign of creative genius.

The Romantic period has the most comprehensive literary histories of imagination. Cecil M Bowra's claim that imagination was the most defining characteristic of the Romantic period was taken for granted in studies of Romanticism for decades (1949). Similarly, Maurice H Abrams' *The*

Mirror and the Lamp (1953) declared that mimetic imagination was overlaid with the “expressive” or creative imagination by the major (male) Romantic poets. However since Jerome McGann’s seminal work, *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), objected to the uncritical acceptance of Romantic self-image and glorification of Romantic imagination, scholars have treated imagination with due caution. Alan Liu’s *Wordsworth, The Sense of History* (1989) employed a historicist and deconstructivist approach of the doubleness of imagination, claiming that there is no imagination, because imagination both denies and engages with history. Arguing that imagination is rooted in denial, Liu’s sophisticated view of its power is rather negative, as he construes it as an evasion of the real. Yet research on Romantic imagination has come full circle, as some scholars seek its (partial) rehabilitation. John Whale’s *Imagination Under Pressure 1789–1832, Aesthetics, Politics and Unity* (2000) examines both negative and positive incarnations of imagination, while Deborah White’s *Romantic Returns* (2005) defends imagination by claiming that it was used more self-consciously than anyone has since recognised.

Critics are divided when it comes to attributing inspiration for the Romantic veneration towards imagination; James Engell’s monograph *The Creative Imagination* (1981) argued that British Romantic artists were inspired by German philosophers, whereas Gavin Budge (2007) claims that German idealism was originally a reaction to the British Common Sense school.⁴⁴ Alternatively Cairns Craig (2007) maintains that British Associationists wielded more influence than either the Common Sense School or the German idealists. Barbara Taylor’s *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (2003) suggests that Wollstonecraft was interested in imagination before Coleridge and the other male Romantics. More recently, Richard C Sha (2012) has illuminated the discursive roots of Romantic imagination in contemporary scientific and medical experiments.

§ THE DISCOURSE OF MATERNAL IMAGINATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The discourse of maternal imagination is relevant to many of the arguments outlined above, and yet is frequently sidelined as a superstition or theory in decline. Nevertheless, the pervasive reach of maternal imagination as it generates, shapes and filters a range of contemporary debates and

discourses, contributes to major cultural narratives. For example the discourse is plainly present in the eighteenth-century debate regarding the rise of man-midwifery. Many historians such as Jean Donnison (1988) and Helen King (2007) have examined the way that the formerly female profession of midwifery gradually came to be viewed as more suitable for men.⁴⁵ Allegedly bringing a calmer, more rational, approach to the task, a man-midwife became generally preferable to a female midwife by the end of the eighteenth century. However before this transformation could occur, the man-midwife had to prove to society that he could be trusted with the handling of a naked woman's body. This issue of decorum was extremely contentious and became the focal point for much anti-man-midwife polemic. Indeed, man-midwives' clinical practice drew particular notice in the wake of Mary Toft's outrageous claims of giving birth to seventeen rabbits in 1726. Chapter 2 offers a new argument about the significance of the Toft affair, to suggest that this is a defining moment within the discourse that signals increased anxiety about the level of female agency. I argue that the Toft episode provided crisis conditions for a discursive effort that would have lasting repercussions, including new discursive forms and even new definitions of maternal imagination. James Blondel's influential denunciation of the concept, published shortly after the Toft affair, generated doubt, debate, and suspicion regarding the level of a pregnant woman's power. The urgent struggle to demarcate maternal imagination and ground it in certainty becomes entangled with the problems of literal and imaginative exposure; of women's bodies, man-midwives, and the boundaries of female agency. Moreover, Blondel's re-definition of maternal imagination into "maternal passion" and "maternal longing" would irrevocably alter the discourse. Both Toft's hoax and Blondel's denouncement illustrate the dispersal of the discourse of maternal imagination into burgeoning debates and newly available print forms.

Chapter 3 investigates the presence of the discourse in the emergent form of the novel during the mid-eighteenth century. Surfacing as persistent novelistic tropes, novels circulate both medical and folkloric discourses of maternal imagination. Following Blondel's re-definition, two tropes of the medical discourse appear in novels of the mid-century: "maternal longing" and "maternal passion". However the discursive residue of folklore is also present – particularly in the case of maternal longing – as traditional tales and beliefs are reworked with new plots and characters. The rhetorical strategies and features of the discourse in the mid-century novel overlap, and yet operate differently to the discursive

practices of the medical establishment. In fiction, the tropes of maternal imagination more explicitly investigate a pregnant woman's agency, responsibility and power over both her foetus and her household. I therefore interrogate to what extent the tropes interact with contemporary debates on domestic power struggles in different types of mid-century fiction. Focusing on Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) as a representative of comic ramble fiction and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition* (1741) as an example of the sentimental novel, I explore the way that novels create a space to discuss the paradoxical power and threat of maternal imagination.

Chapter 4 examines an often-neglected discussion that plays in counterpoint to the discourse of maternal imagination. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) draws upon the role of the father and the discourse of *paternal* imagination. Sterne deliberately invokes the anachronistic paradigm of paternal imagination in order to play with and mock the discourse of maternal imagination. Structuring the novel around the assumption that Walter's imagination has damaged Tristram, Sterne questions the validity of Walter and Tristram Shandy's belief in the theory of paternal imagination. *Tristram Shandy's* overwhelming preoccupation with prenatal influence is countered by Sterne's engagement with the principles of associationism and the implication that one's imagination and opinions are only altered after birth. I argue that in a peculiar merging of the theory of paternal imagination and the theory of associationism, Sterne suggests himself as a cultural, imaginative, father to the reader.

Chapter 5 explores eighteenth-century poetry addressed to or discussing unborn children. The chapter examines the cultural restraints placed upon expectant mothers to voice only positive emotions about their pregnancies and the subversive techniques employed by women writers to express their frustrations. Elizabeth Boyd, Jane Cave, Isabella Kelly and Anna Laetitia Barbauld consider the concept of maternal passion to probe the tensions of late eighteenth-century maternity. This chapter contrasts the approach of these women writers with that of the male poet William Wordsworth, to emphasise the significance of gender for late eighteenth-century commentators on the concept of maternal imagination. As my analysis will suggest, the discourse of maternal imagination not only survived in poetry, but evolved, perhaps partly because its central aspects – maternity, emotion and imagination – were also crucial to the Romantic aesthetic.

Tension between imaginative creativity and reproductive fecundity is the subject of Chapter 6. Karen Harvey has documented the diverse

history of the female body, describing it as frightening and desirable, knowable and mysterious (105).⁴⁶ In contrast, the female imagination has been historically portrayed as unstable and potentially dangerous. The discourse of maternal imagination, with its tendency towards creative fictions, fantasies and delusions, was the epitome of such overly emotional and subjective distortions of truth. The discourse also implied the fragility of female understanding while devolving full responsibility for the outcome of the pregnancy onto the mother.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, Or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) critiques this scapegoat mentality by emphasising Victor Frankenstein's immense burden of guilt regarding the creation of his monstrous child. In this way, Shelley's novel addresses the way that Romantic writers eschewed the problematic elements of maternal imagination such as guilt, shame and fear, while appropriating its valuable creative and transformative qualities.

Overall this book aims to clarify the different ways in which maternal imagination was understood over the course of the eighteenth century and how it effected major developments in medical, social and artistic culture (Chapter 2). I want to particularly emphasise the participation of the discourse in major literary trends, such as the rise of the novel (Chapters 3 and 4) and the emergence of Romanticism (Chapters 5 and 6). I suggest that part of the confusion surrounding the discourse for modern critics has previously lain in an apparent contradiction. While the *concept* of maternal imagination became more rigidly defined, the *discourse* proliferated to become more complex, extensive and far-reaching. New discursive practice meant that the concept of maternal imagination was tightened and re-shaped. This book draws out the way in which tighter definitions of maternal imagination allowed the discourse to seep into a wider variety of issues and debates than has previously been acknowledged. It is the multiplicity of discursive practices underlying and supporting the discourse of maternal imagination that helps to sustain the eighteenth-century's fearful fascination with a woman's mind and body. As the following chapter will explore, the unsayable in relation to this fascination becomes a major issue in the case of Mary Toft and her seventeen rabbit births.

NOTES

1. Robert James' *A Medicinal Dictionary* (1743) gives this example in the definition of "Imagination"; Henry Bracken's *The Midwife's Companion* (1737) gives an almost identical example from his own experience; and

William Smellie (1779, 186–187) uses a similar incident to argue against the idea of maternal imagination in *A Collection of Cases and Observations in Midwifery*. Carolyn Williams (2011, 23–24) also cites two instances of this belief; Sir John Gonson and other Justices of Westminster ordered the arrest of deformed vagrants in case they frightened pregnant women in 1731, and the surgeon Samuel Sharp described a case of a beggar thrusting himself into a pregnant woman’s coach, causing the birth of a one-armed infant in 1765.

2. The correct method of managing longing was not fixed, as although most authorities recommended indulging the woman’s craving, others suggested the item should be withheld.
3. The earliest record of the baker affair I have found is by Levinus Lemnius’ *A Discourse Touching Generation* (1664). The story also recurs in George Alexander Stevens’ novel *The History of Master Edward* (1763). Barbara Maria Stafford has discussed a nineteenth-century print entitled “The Desires of Pregnant Women” in *Album Comique de Pathologie Pittoresque* (1823), which shows a woman trying to bite a butcher’s shoulder. The print also depicts the woman’s husband, whose face features a birthmark in the shape of a rat; a boy with an image of grapes upon his cheek; and two other pregnant women eating fruit, see Stafford (1997, 307).
4. In 1747 the physician John Henry Mauleclerc would controversially claim that “the common opinion is not, that the mother can produce any determinate effect; but that she can *divert* it, by her will, upon occasion” (1747, 40).
5. Nicholas Culpeper had earlier suggested each woman’s specific longing indicated the personality of the child, see *A Directory for Midwives* (1656, 154–158).
6. Preformatist Nicholas Malebranche’s *Recherche de la verite* (1712, 5 editions between 1721–1772) also argued that maternal imagination could affect the child’s personality for life, giving them a ruling passion (see Stafford 1997, 314; Lennon et al. 1997). John Maubray (1724, 66) thought that mothers produced physical and fathers produced mental changes upon the foetus in *The Female Physician*.
7. I have been unable to discover the original coinage of either term, however the Latin word *naevus* can be translated as either “maternal impression” or “birthmark”, which suggests that medical texts, written in Latin, may have first introduced the phrase; see Atherton and Moss (2004).
8. The earliest reference to “maternal mental impressions” is in Buter Lane (1849); the earliest mention of “maternal imagination” I have located is in R U West (1857). However the earliest use of “the imagination of the mother” is Culpeper (1656, 93).
9. See the work of Michel Foucault (especially 1979, 15–35).
10. Foucauldian perspectives and research informs my approach: Margaret A. McLaren explores feminist criticism and the denial of agency in *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (2002); Loizos Heracleous

(2006, 80) has observed that Foucault's position on agency changes subtly between his earlier "archaeological" phase and his later "genealogical" approach, as Foucault develops tacit acceptance of agency through the latter's discussion of the "will". In a recent discussion of Foucault and painting, Michael Kelly (2013) has suggested that Foucault's denial of agency has been overstated.

In addition to the question of agency, critics have also objected to the inconsistencies and inaccuracies within Foucault's theory of discourse, see particularly Andrew Scull's comments (1990) on Foucault's *The History of Madness*. Roy Porter and Colin Jones have also remarked Foucault's tendency for inaccuracies and "hasty universalization from the exceptional case of France" (1994, 4). However Jones and Porter note that this does not negate the value of Foucault's overall aim "to defamiliarise, to expose seemingly natural categories as constructs, articulated by words and discourse, and thus to underline the radical contingency of what superficially seems normal" (1994, 4–5). Gary Gutting provides an excellent summary of why to concentrate upon the contradictions and factual error of Foucault's theories is to miss the point (2005, 39–41) as does David Couzens Hoy (1986).

11. Famous monsters were included in woodcuts of "wonder" books and natural philosophy such as Phillip Melancthon's *Deutung der Czwö Grewlichen Figuren Bapstesels czu Rom und Muchkalbs zu Freiberg ijnn Mejszn Funden* (1523).
12. In Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) Grizzle believes Sally's yawning to be a sign of maternal longing. See also James Robert's *A Medicinal Dictionary* under the definition for "Imagination".
13. This belief is mentioned in both Levinus Lemnius' *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (1559) and Nicholas Malebranche's *The Search After Truth* (1674).
14. Mears paid for the printing of the text herself. She sold the guide from her own house and so did not have to conform to any booksellers' stipulations.
15. Mears claimed that even poor women could follow her instructions, by seeking out the natural music of birdsong.
16. Astruc's theory is less grounded in the discourse of maternal imagination as it explores the woman's bodily influence rather than her mind. However as it involves ideas of foetus formation and the extent of a mother's influence, I argue that it could be considered to draw upon the discourse. Depending upon whether one wished the foetus to resemble the mother, Astruc's theory could indicate either positive or negative influence upon the foetus.
17. Nicholas Venette's popular treatise *Conjugal Love* (1687, 119) argued that women possessed no maternal imagination, but men had used their great imaginations to invent the concept of maternal imagination to explain monstrous births. Richard C Sha (2009) argues that the definitions of imagination in eighteenth-century science and medicine were inescapably *imagined*.

18. It is possible to argue for the deteriorating, or static, position of women in legal, political, and even biological terms during the latter half of the century. Susan Staves argues for the declining legal rights of women in *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660–1833* (1990). Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson's collections suggest that women's public engagement in politics became less acceptable to society during the later eighteenth century in *Women in British Politics 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat* (2000). As the following chapters of this book will demonstrate, eighteenth-century medicine and sentimental culture would combine after 1770 to figure the human female as physiologically weaker and less emotionally stable than her male counterpart. However, the narrative of “separate spheres” has been complicated by historians investigating women's participation in public life outside the home through leisure, work, or philanthropic campaigns.
19. Lisa Forman Cody discusses maternal imagination in terms of “cultural faith” and “belief” in *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (2005, 121; 122); Dennis Todd calls it a “doctrine” in *Imagining Monsters: Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth-Century England* (1995); and Marie-Hélène Huét refers to maternal imagination as a “theory” in *Monstrous Imagination* (1993).
20. Intriguingly this chapter is included within a section entitled “Sex as Discourse”.
21. Clare Hanson's *A Cultural History of Pregnancy* (2004) places the discourse of maternal imagination within the wider cultural framework of pregnancy. Rebecca Kukla (2005), Margaret Shildrick (2011) and Carolyn Williams (2011) also provide similarly compressed cultural histories of the discourse of maternal imagination.
22. Volume 1 contains a large section specifically on the subject of maternal imagination.
23. See Williams (2011), Lieske (2007, 1: 227), Boucé (1987).
24. The term “monster” is frequently used to describe any unusual birth. I follow Philip Wilson's usage and explanation that “both the lay public and the medical community of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries routinely deemed children whose form was somehow marked, disfigured, or deformed as “monsters.” See Wilson (2002, 19 fn. 9) for more detail.
25. Boucé (1987) has also noted that the maternal imagination is present in both the Greco-Latin and Judeo-Christian traditions.
26. Although this is a strange account of the maternal imagination, the Albina myth does depict distorted passion and longing that resolves itself in the production of a child of altered appearance – the myth claims that Albina's giant desires for a man result in her giant offspring.

27. Before Culpeper's *Directory*, only three midwifery guides were published during the sixteenth century. According to Pam Lieske, the *Directory* went through seventeen editions before 1777 and remained popular throughout the eighteenth century (2007, 1:xxvii).
28. Slightly later Sharp specifically noted that "in time of copulation, Imagination oftimes produceth monstrous births, when women look too much on strange objects" (1671, 111).
29. Crawford makes this point in *Marvellous Protestantism* and Kiran Toor (2007) also claims that there is a link between bodies, texts and maternal imagination. Toor argues that the body of the child is "overwritten" by the imagination (258) and Wilson (2002) makes a similar observation in "Eighteenth-Century Monsters".
30. Keith Thomas's classic thesis (1971) argues that the early modern culture of magic gradually became distinct from religion. Later historians arguing for the significance of religion in eighteenth-century life include J. C. D. Clark (1985), Knud Haakonssen (1996) and David Bebbington (2003).
31. In 1761 Bienville, a little known European doctor printed a treatise (translated into English in 1775) on nymphomania and attributed this female disease to the imagination (Rousseau 1982). Similar links between imagination and the female reproductive system would be explored in nineteenth-century examinations of hysteria (Marland 2004).
32. *Aristotle's Masterpiece* went through several transformations, but originally borrowed largely from common folklore, Culpeper's *A Directory for Midwives* (1651), Levinus Lemnius, *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (1559) and the John Pechey, *Complete Midwives Practice Enlarged* (c.1660), which in turn was based on Jakob Ruff's *De Conceptu et generatione hominus et ijs quae circa h{a}ec potissimum censyderantur* (1554), a midwifery manual.
33. Thomas Laqueur's work in this field remains crucial (Laqueur 1990; Laqueur and Gallagher 1987). See Tim Hitchcock (1997) for a clear overview of Laqueur's thesis and Karen Harvey (2004) for challenges to Laqueur's narrative.
34. Other notable scientists such as Spallanzani, Haller and Bonnet believed in preformatism – despite what Forman Cody describes as "quite stunning counter-evidence" (2005, 243). Forman Cody observes how this belief in preformatism largely followed from Charles Bonnet's discovery of parthenogenesis in aphids, which suggested eggs produced life, in the 1740s.
35. See frontispiece to Culpeper's *Directory* (1651). A section in the 1694 edition of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, also included astrological advice on how to get sons rather than daughters (Anon. 1694, 9).

36. Almanacs marked “dog days”, a period during the harvest months of July and August when it was widely considered to be dangerous to have sex, for fear of producing unnatural offspring (Capp 1979, 121). Leading almanac writers such as Francis Moore and George Parker boasted of their twin status as astrologers and physicians (Mullan and Reid 2000, Chapter 4).
37. The two translations are both written in rhyming couplets and essentially offer the same advice, however they differ in style. See Oldisworth (1710) and Rowe (1712).
38. Gerald M Edelman and Giulio Tononi (2001) explore the scientific explanations for the imagination, Laurence J Kirmayer (2006) has investigated the role of imagination in medicine, and George S Rousseau (1982) observes that the belief in a “physical” imagination that existed as a bodily organ, like a heart or kidney, peaked in 1690. Linking ideology and imagination, Alan Richardson (1994) outlines the way in which modern ideas of childhood worked together with the creation of the category of imaginative literature during the Romantic period and John Barrell (2000) has explored the fraught relationship between imagination and politics at the close of the eighteenth century, which was exacerbated by the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the definition of the term. Approaching the subject from a philosophical perspective, Gillian Robinson and John Rundell (1994) have argued that one of the central issues concerning the imagination is its relationship to reason, and that this polarisation began during the Enlightenment and Kurt Heinzelman (1980) questions the imagination-based structure of the economy. It is also worth noting, as Barbara Taylor (2003) does, that historians tend to avoid the imagination, both because its traces are difficult to discern and because it is seen as a faculty that has no place in the theory or reasoned arguments of a thinker.
39. Critics who argue for the eighteenth-century transition from a mimetic to a creative imagination include: James Engell, *The Creative Imagination* (1981); Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953); and Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (1988).
40. The hairy woman is not an exact reproduction of the image her mother gazed upon. Instead she becomes an amalgamation of the confused and unique thoughts of her mother, stimulated by the initial visual image of John the Baptist dressed in camel skin. Similarly, the woman in the baker’s shoulder story does not give birth to a child whose shoulder is missing or disproportionate, but instead produces a stillborn infant.
41. Lyons claims that pre-Romantic imagination still existed before the eighteenth century, although perhaps not under the label of imagination – “For example the development of an “inner” life of the mind, so often supposed to be a spiritual quest motivated by religious aims, is not really so distinct

from the development of the tactical or strategic imagination necessary to the courtier” (Lyons 2005, xiii). Lyons also discusses Madame de Sevigne’s writing to her daughter, noting particularly her attempts to manipulate her own maternal image through use of her imaginative language, however despite this close connection between the maternal role and the imagination, Lyons does not mention the maternal imagination.

42. Engell (1981) has argued that often the history of imagination accuses the late seventeenth-century thinkers of suppressing the imagination, however he notes that this is only in contrast with the investigative attitudes of Addison and his contemporaries.
43. See for example John Haygarth (1800). My Chapter 5 will discuss this point in more detail.
44. Budge makes an excellent point: “nor should it be assumed that great literary achievements always stem from thinking that academic philosophers would agree in finding philosophically significant” (12).
45. See Donnison for details on the transition from female to male midwives and King for an exploration of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century use of the compendium *Gynaeciorum Libri* in obstetric theory and practice.
46. The pregnant body is a particularly confusing state – Harvey claims that “pregnancy was often regarded with disgust and horror” (120), citing the usage of the word “tumour” (121) for the foetus. However Harvey argues against a reductive binary opposition between maternity and sexuality, claiming that in erotica, pregnant bodies could also be portrayed as sexually appealing. I would add to Harvey’s argument that Charlotte Smith represents the pregnant heroine Rosalie in *Montalbert* (1795) as similarly attractive. Harvey’s observations are particularly interesting in view of the fact that erotica writers often showed themselves conversant with contemporary midwifery and medical texts.

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Mary Toft's Performance: Imagining Powerful Pregnancies in Pantomime and Pamphlets

Although it often seems as though the modern world is obsessed with the human body, arguably bodies were even more of a concern in eighteenth-century Britain. Literature of the period is almost fanatically preoccupied with how bodies should appear and behave across a bafflingly nuanced range of public and private contexts.¹ Perhaps it was the startling advances made in medicine during the previous century that prompted renewed interest in the working of the bodies; William Harvey's arguments concerning the circulation of blood in 1628 and Anton Van Leeuwenhoek's discovery of blood cells, micro-organisms and sperm in 1670 were major developments in human anatomy. Meanwhile, in popular culture live human specimens were displayed at "raree shows" and provided exciting and grotesque spectacles for a populace eager to see something out of the ordinary. Consequently, in 1726 when the apparently pregnant body of Mary Toft, a peasant woman from Godalming, appeared to be giving birth to rabbits, she became the focus of the medical profession, the wits, and the general public. As a pregnant woman, her body already inhabited a somewhat grey area between the public and private; the innately private process of reproduction was clearly visible in her physical form. However, Toft's body would become the most notorious eighteenth-century public spectacle of pregnancy as she delivered seventeen rabbits, under increasingly strict surveillance, over the course of several weeks.

This chapter focuses on the significance of Toft and her rabbits for the discourse of maternal imagination, and explores the cultural schism created by her claim that an obsession with rabbit-meat caused her to give birth to a litter of rabbit kittens. Her story draws attention not only to the bodies of herself and her “children”, but to the strength of women’s minds, and in fact forces the dichotomy between female weakness and female cunning to breaking point. With Toft’s hoax, female spectacle, performance and acting became inextricably entwined with the concept of motherhood as topics of cultural debate. As this chapter demonstrates, the Toft affair created a discursive moment which re-focused attention to the unsayable, transgressive and uncertain aspects of the concept and set the agenda for all discussions of maternal imagination for the rest of the century.

§ PREGNANCY AS SPECTACLE

Pregnant women are inescapably visible; the physical evidence of the developing baby announces their condition to all who see them. Of course this is true of any period of human history, however the sight of a pregnant woman on the street perhaps had particular resonance for early eighteenth-century Britons – or at least those who had some kind of access to literary content. Toni Bowers (1996) has noted the way that Augustan culture was obsessed with the concept of motherhood as questions of maternal agency and matriarchal authority emerged as key concerns. Motherhood came to signify multiple shifting functions in much the same way that the concept of paternity and fatherhood was also evolving fluidly during this period. Lawrence Stone’s thesis of “affective individualism” (1977), in which he claims that the eighteenth-century witnessed a new emphasis on emotional and personal intimacy, has been contested over the years, however there is no doubt that notions of family were developing.² These changing ideas about family, and particularly the respective roles of mother and father, were loaded with different connotations and expectations in fiction. Augustan literary mythology produces a number of maternal extremes from murderous Roxanas to the impossibly self-sacrificing virtuous.³ However, such literary representations are, ultimately, merely representations and lack the immediate physicality of a real pregnant woman. Lori Schroeder Haslem has argued that “on the whole, representations of the maternal body in literature tend to elide the literalness of female reproduction” (1995, 438), however this becomes complicated when the mode of literature is drama.

To reach the heart of pregnant spectacle, one must look back a few decades to the late seventeenth century. Restoration theatre witnessed an entirely new spectacle as women were introduced as performers on the stage. The initial high scandal of women onstage is notorious – early actresses such as Nell Gwyn, Elizabeth Barry, and Anne Bracegirdle were known for their risqué reputations as much as their acting talent – yet by the early eighteenth century, advocates of drama emphasised its moral, reforming possibilities. Increasingly, actresses were presented as ladies; perhaps to try and diffuse the idea that women were capable of performance, with its associations of lies, deceit, and cunning.

The introduction of women onstage both gave plays with pregnant characters a new piquancy and also literally brought pregnant bodies onto the centre stage, as parturient actresses could not afford to lose their incomes. Although Lady Wishfort accuses Foible of having the imprudence of a “big-bellied actress” in William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700, 1: 29), eighteenth-century audiences seem to have had little issue with pregnant bodies present on the stage, even when such bodies seemed inconsistent with character or plot. Laura Rosenthal argues that “in general, actresses do not seem to have taken time off during their pregnancies and continued to portray virgins in spite of their gravid states” (2004, 167). Sarah Siddons is perhaps the most famous example: Siddons worked through her seven pregnancies, often until her eighth month, appearing in diverse roles such as Rosalind in *As You Like it* (1603) and Hermione in *The Distress’d Mother* (1712). When David Garrick first sent Rev. Henry Bate to Cheltenham in order to observe the young Siddons in 1775, Bate expressed reservations about her gravid appearance, however Garrick, well-attuned to the demands of the theatre, did not view her pregnant state as an obstacle. Siddons even used her pregnant body to add further nuance to her acting roles, such as in the case of her performance as a five-month pregnant Lady Macbeth in 1794 (Phillips 2013). Helen Brooks (2015) has observed that audiences were familiar with prominent actresses such as Siddons and Dora Jordan working onstage through their pregnancies, as well as lesser known provincial actresses, because eighteenth-century audiences were less concerned with verisimilitude. Pregnant actresses could play virgins, just as ageing actors might play young girls, and plain actors play beauties. Although Peg Woffington’s sister Hannah Pritchard was criticised for playing the starving character Jane Shore when her ample form suggested she had not been hungry for a long time, her plain face did not restrict a long career of playing beautiful characters. Moreover, actresses would often wear

the latest fashions, regardless of whether they were playing a low or historical character, as realism was not considered to be necessary. Indeed, Kimberley Crouch argues that the wearing of fashionable aristocratic dress was one of the elements that contributed to the transformation of the profession's reputation from salacious to respectable.

Many scholars have begun to uncover narratives of acting's conversion into a virtuous profession for women; in the latter half of the eighteenth century figures such as Margaret and Elizabeth Farren, and of course, Sarah Siddons, would come to be associated with virtuous motherhood, as well as talented performers.⁴ Yet the visibility of pregnant actresses onstage has peculiar implications for the concept of maternal imagination as actresses flouted the standard advice for expectant mothers not to exert or excite themselves. One might reasonably expect actresses to attract strong criticism for exposing their unborn children to strong emotions or to the physical demands of the stage. However actresses were not criticised for working; if there were comments, they were generally out of concern over the actresses being in pain or discomfort, rather than any specific criticism regarding maternal imagination. As Helen Brooks notes, there "is no extant evidence as to how contemporaries reconciled the passionate actress with concerns about the power of the pregnant woman's imagination" (23). This suggestive omission highlights the scant references to maternal imagination in drama generally and particularly within eighteenth-century theatre. It as though playwrights were anxious to avoid bringing out the connections between performance, pregnancy and imagination.

Pregnant characters are relatively scarce in Renaissance drama, yet there are a few instances of pregnant characters who explicitly refer to maternal imagination: Win-the-Fight Littlewit in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* feigns longing for a pig so she can get to the fair, John Webster's Duchess of Malfi longs for apricots, Duchess Vanholt craves cherries in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, and Placentia eats coal, lime, hair and soap in Jonson's *The Magnetic Lady*.⁵ Lori Schroeder Haslem has argued that such longings for pigs and apricots are blurred with the pregnant character's voracious sexual appetite, and there is certainly an elision between passion and physical craving in these early modern examples. This merging is one of the difficulties of maternal imagination, as it becomes impossible to judge whether the pregnant woman is feigning a longing or genuinely experiencing physical cravings. Eighteenth-century drama eschews direct references to maternal imagination altogether, perhaps due to an increased

sensitivity surrounding the possibility of a woman feigning or “acting” the part of maternal imagination. The stock “performance” of pregnancy such as resting a hand on the belly, or alluding to a bizarre appetite, might resonate rather differently with audiences when performed by a woman, particularly if she were genuinely pregnant. Eighteenth-century drama therefore shies away from direct mention of maternal imagination; for instance Congreve ventures only circuitous mention when Millamant and Mirabell are haggling over their marriage conditions:

MIRABELL ITEM, when you shall be breeding –

MILLAMANT Ah, name it not!

MIRABELL Which may be presumed, with a blessing on our endeavours –

MILLAMANT Odious endeavours!

MIRABELL I denounce against all strait lacing, squeezing for a shape, till you mould my boy’s head like a sugar-loaf, and instead of a man-child, make me father to a crooked billet. (4. 5. 288–295)

Here Mirabell only refers to physical constraint of the pregnant body, rather than any consequences of Millamant’s emotional state while with child, yet this injunction fits with the typical placement of blame upon the mother for any abnormal pregnancy that was emerging in the eighteenth-century discourse of maternal imagination. Even in plays that featured plots which hinged upon a character’s pregnant state such as George Coleman’s *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) did not confront the issue of maternal imagination. In *The Clandestine Marriage*, Fanny is secretly married to Mr Lovewell and is pregnant at the start of the play. She hides it by dressing “loose and . . . big”, but no mention is made of how she should behave during this sensitive period (1. 2. 13). This is intriguing when one considers the abundance of contemporary midwifery guides published on the subject during the mid-century.⁶

It is possible that there are so few references in drama to the still-popular and prevalent notion of maternal imagination because, as Nora Nachumi observes, actresses had the “ability to portray a variety of fictional characters [which] raised the unsettling possibility that all women could act and appear unlike themselves” (2008, 2–3). Any performance of maternal imagination from an actress naturally suggested the possibility that if a woman could act on the stage as though she craved apples or felt extreme emotion, then perhaps she might do so in real life. The connotations of this idea were extreme: if women could perform the symptoms of

maternal imagination convincingly when they were not in fact afflicted by the phenomenon, then perhaps the phenomenon itself might not be genuine. That is to say, the concept of maternal imagination was a cunning ruse used by pregnant women to exploit their condition. The invisible nature of imagination might give credence to this mistrustful theory – it would be literally impossible for a man to know the truth, for he could never experience this particular process of imagination.

Although this idea might sound somewhat paranoid, contemporary concerns regarding the nature of female emotion, intelligence and restraint add weight to such a conspiracy theory. Uncontrolled feeling has long been associated with the feminine, from Renaissance *hysterica passio* to the passionate heroines of early eighteenth-century amatory fiction. Certainly actresses and female audience members were focal points for discussions of excessive or damaging emotions, since at least Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) observed that women were far more likely to identify emotionally with characters on stage. Yet Brooks notes that actresses, especially in she-tragedies, complicate the notion that all women are freely indulgent of their emotions; "at the same time as contemporary attitudes towards women's passions are reinforced through the dramatic fiction, they are simultaneously brought into question by the control and judgement of actresses over their performing bodies" (2015, 43). For example, Nicholas Rowe's highly successful she-tragedy *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (1714) was written to exploit the acting skills of Anne Oldfield and Mary Porter. By using their skills as tragic actors, "both women challenged the model of weak and irrational femininity which dominated contemporary thinking, and which was foregrounded in the fiction they performed" (Brooks 2015, 50). Oldfield and Porter's talent was showcased by their performances in the "classical" or "rhetorical" style of acting, which emphasised judgement and rationality. For this style, the actress needed to subdue her passions in order to fully harness the power of the rhetorical mode and move the audience successfully. Although deemed an essentially masculine skill, it was nonetheless acknowledged that women could learn this style if taught by exceptionally talented men – famous examples include Elizabeth Barry's tutelage from the John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, and later, Colley Cibber's instruction of Kitty Clive.

Indeed, acting styles and theory were subjects of heated interest during the eighteenth century.⁷ Acting, it was thought, could reveal much about the nature of the body, the emotions, and perhaps even the very soul of

man. The renowned actor David Garrick is only one of many players who “both encouraged and benefitted from a new quasi-philosophical interest in actors as exemplars of controlled behaviour” (Thomson 2004, 3). The numerous treatises upon the subject of acting were not only read by actors, but by authors and general readers – who could then consider themselves accurate judges of performances when attending the playhouse.⁸ As interest in the subject grew both in England and France, two major styles split theorists into “classical” and “natural” camps. The “classical” style adopted a Cartesian model of human physiology and asserted that the body was a machine guided by a rational soul. Charles Le Brun’s *Le Methode apprendre a dessiner le passions* (1696) for example, claimed that as an actor was detached from actual emotion, the actor’s own feelings were irrelevant. Rather than channelling emotion through the body, the actor would control his (or her) emotions and merely tell his body to perform the gesture appropriate to the passion he intended to portray – these were the skills taught to Elizabeth Barry and Kitty Clive.

However an alternative style of acting was rapidly overtaking the classical style in popularity and became known as the “natural style”. Unlike the classical style, “natural” acting required the actress to create the idea of a particular passion – for example, fear – within her mind, and then her body would naturally display the signs of fear. Essentially the actress would reproduce the genuine appearance of fear by artificially inducing that emotion in herself with her imagination. Such an idea is greatly reminiscent of the concept of maternal imagination, where the mother also, although inadvertently, experiences this mimetic process of forming a strong idea, followed by a corresponding physical sign imprinted onto the foetus. The gradual preference for natural acting over the classical style is well documented, although as Paul Goring observes, “the history of eighteenth-century acting shows not so much a rise of naturalism as an ongoing contest between alternative versions of what was regarded as ‘natural’ behavior for a body on stage” (2005, 121). Nevertheless, the rise of the natural style is significant, for it signals the contemporaneous rise of the passions in acting theory. George Taylor’s well-known essay “The just delineation of the passions”: theories of acting in the age of Garrick” (1972), provides a succinct outline of the “Theory of the Passions”, which argued that each passion was accompanied by its own distinguishing facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice. The early acting theorist Jean Poisson noted of Cicero’s rhetorical treatise *De Oratore* (55 BC), “Omnis motus animi suum quemdam a natura habet vultum & sonum & gestum” [“Each movement

of the soul has from nature a certain facial expression, sound, and gesture of its own" (cited in Larlham (2012), 433]. The rise of natural style is meaningful for the discourse of maternal imagination due to its emphasis on the passions and because the style parallels the process of a mother's mind creating a bodily effect upon her infant – naturalism required the actor to start from within the mind and inevitably work outwards to produce a natural physical display.

Arguably the writer Aaron Hill offered the most notable ideas upon the theory of the passions; Hill not only produced a poem on "the Art of Acting" (1746), but also a posthumous *Essay on the Art of Acting* (1753). He stressed that "bodily expression should be produced as a direct mechanical consequence of the actor's mental identification with a particular 'passion'" (Goring 3). In addition, Hill advanced the acting technique where an actor should feel the emotions a character would actually experience in the given situation – or "method acting", as we might call it today. The imagination featured as a critical element of this process; Nora Nachumi states that "Aaron Hill echoes treatises by Aristotle, Horace, Cicero and Quintilian when he insists that actors must first enter into their characters' emotions through their use of imaginative powers" (122). Such a notion is clearly related to ideas of maternal imagination, particularly as Hill recommended that actors view prints and paintings in order to raise emotion, just as it was common knowledge that a pregnant woman should look at beautiful portraits to produce a beautiful infant. For instance, in (1714) Dr Daniel Turner gave the following example:

Soranus, as St Augustine takes notice, has deliver'd that the tyrant Dionysus (however deform'd and hard favour'd himself) that he might have comely issue, would always have a beautiful picture set before his wife in the bedchamber, that by strength of fancy she might conceive that likeness. (1714, 133)

Moreover, Hill's ideas featured language that would not be out of place in a treatise upon maternal imagination; he issued declarations such as "the whole, that is needful in order to impress any passion on the Look, is, first, to CONCEIVE it, by a strong and intent Imagination" (*The Prompter* 1735, 27 June) and "to act a passion well, the actor must never attempt its imitation until *his fancy has conceived so strong an image, or idea of it, as to move the same impressive springs within his mind*, which form that passion, when it is undersigned, and natural" (*The Works* 1753, 339, my italics). In

his 1930s periodical *The Prompter*, produced with William Popple, Hill also stressed the link between imagination and a literally impressive force, arguing that actors needed to firstly bring forth the idea of the passion for their own imagination and then, “its marks, and characteristical Impressions, appear, first, in the face; because nearest to the Seat of Imagination” (*The Prompter* 1735, 26th December). Essentially, as Hill would later argue in his *Essay on the Art of Acting*, actors had to enter into their character’s emotions in order to be truly great; she had to not only display the outward signs of the emotion, but genuinely feel and identify sympathetically with the character. These ideas share similarities with Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith claimed that it was the imagination that helped one to empathise with another person; “we enter as it were into his body and become in some measure the same person with him” (3). Whereas for Smith imagination helped to form sympathy as the basis of morality, for Hill, imagination brought about a multi-interactive process where the actor connected with the character, and therefore successfully with the audience.

It seems likely that Hill’s notions about the passions and acting were developed during the 1720s; as Lise-Lone Marker and Frederick J. Marker argue, “Aaron Hill’s ideas and theories about acting evidently took shape some time before 1731–3” (1975, 417). Earla Wilputte (2014) has traced Hill’s ideas about the passions to his 1720s periodical *The Plain Dealer* when Hill, writing as “Tony Jynge”, describes himself as a “Mind-Midwife” to help deliver women of their unruly passions (*The Plain Dealer* 1724, 23: 1). The piece combines the two ways of dealing with the passions usual to the period; Francis Hutcheson’s recommendation of purging unwanted passions with a friendly intervention or replacing violent passions with softer sentiments. The Mind-Midwife clearly wants its readers to consider the performance of passion in society when he suggests that “anger is a kind of small-pox of the mind” and even invites women to write, in order to root out their passions (*The Plain Dealer* 1724, 23: 1). Indeed, it is the Mind-Midwife’s recommendation that passions be expressed (as it is harmful to keep such emotion bottled up within the mind) provided that this is performed in a controlled manner. The discourse of maternal imagination is present in the very guise of the Hill’s midwife protagonist and drawn in further by the content’s focus on passions and control of the mind. As these ideas were in circulation during the 1720s, a decade which saw not only the miraculous rabbits of Mary

Toft, but also a heated pamphlet debate upon the existence of maternal imagination (which will feature later in this chapter), this emphasis upon passion, mental control, performance and sympathy does not seem coincidental but an expression of serious concerns of the period.

Certainly passions, sympathy, and imagination were examined from a medical perspective during the early eighteenth century. Daniel Turner's chapter "Of Spots and Marks of a diverse resemblance imprest upon the skin of the foetus, by the Force of the Mother's Fancy" in his medical treatise *De Morbis Cutaneis* (1714) showed that during the early eighteenth century, the topic of maternal imagination could be a legitimate field of medical enquiry. A High Churchman Tory, Turner was a respectable surgeon and physician with an honorary degree from the recently-founded Yale University. Although the issue of maternal imagination had been raised in earlier midwifery guides, Turner's methodical treatment of the discourse focused less upon reproduction and more upon the workings of imagination itself. Turner's approach helped to medicalize the concept of maternal imagination; figuring it as an area of interest not only for pregnant women and midwives, but for all who might be interested in the mysterious workings of the human body. As dominant understandings of imagination followed the Aristotelian notion of a faculty that mediated transactions between the body and the mind, imagination was a potentially fruitful area of inquiry for physicians who wished to provide medical reasoning for unexplained physical phenomena.

Of course midwifery guides also continued to sustain discussions of a woman's pregnant imagination. The eighteenth century witnessed the remarkable ascent of the professional man-midwife, which was aided by developing obstetrical knowledge and the reputation of certain key figures. Hill's mocking persona of the Mind-Midwife in *The Prompter* is a clear allusion to the increasing prominence of men in the birthing arena. Although a man-midwife was not typically preferred over a female midwife during the early eighteenth century, he was often called in cases of complicated birth. The practitioner James Douglas built a strong reputation on this basis, a technique that also worked for his successors William Smellie, William Hunter, and Thomas Denman. Oral recommendations were important for man-midwives, however the publication of medical treatises and official pregnancy guides could also help to boost – or injure – both individual and collective professional reputations. Eager to establish the legitimacy of their entrance into the feminine sphere of pregnancy and birth, man-midwives asserted their suitability for the profession with

claims to reason, rationality and educated minds. Despite these claims, the status of the man-midwife was negligible for the first half of the eighteenth century as the suspicion of indecency was almost too strong to overcome. Consequently man-midwives who authored texts, whether intended for the medical profession or the general public, needed to be conscious of their natural disadvantage as potential figures of prurience. In this context, discussion of the mother's thoughts and feelings was perhaps one of the safer areas for a man-midwife to broach.

One of the earliest man-midwives, John Maubray, included a large section upon maternal imagination in his treatise *The Female Physician* (1724). He explained that maternal imagination could take many forms, but longing for a particular object was perhaps the most common:

I very well know that when the Soul is elevated and inflam'd with a fervent IMAGINATION, it may not only affect its own proper body, but also that of another. For the Longing of a Woman that has conceiv'd, acts apparently on Another's Body, when it marks the Infant in her Womb with the Figure or Mark of the Thing long'd for. (59)

Maubray's understanding of longing accords with common and medical opinion concerning a mother's imagination. Craving or longing for an item was considered to be both a symptom and catalyst for the process of maternal imagination, wherein the mother's mind would "mark the infant in her womb". Once longing began, it would "elevate and inflame" the soul by means of the woman's powerful imagination. Feeding on desire, imagination thus became potent enough to alter the foetus. Yet the theory of longing was only one model of maternal imagination; there were several variants that suggested alternative catalysts and processes of imagination. Maubray himself warned pregnant women to be careful of touching fruits or animals as this too could imprint mimetic marks upon the foetus (63). Evidently, although maternal imagination was worthy of medical investigation, it remained an amorphous concept; a fact which was ironically emphasised by early man-midwife's publication of sprawling theories to establish their learning and credibility.

While such medical matters of imagination were being debated by the physicians, by the time of the celebrated actor David Garrick's first appearance in 1741, one could argue that acting had become the twin domain of

the imagination and passions. Certainly Garrick was often at the centre of the naturalist debate concerning whether actors really felt the emotions that they portrayed onstage (Nachumi 117). Borrowing from French sources, contemporary acting theorist John Hill suggested that actors required both agency and control, "more is required than to understand the author perfectly; the actor is to be in some degree an author himself" (1755, 31).⁹ Actresses, as women who could contain and manipulate their passions to affect others, therefore destabilised the traditional notion that women were naturally more emotional and given to uncontrollable flights of fancy. As Daniel Larlham succinctly notes,

For many eighteenth-century theorists, the felt truth of theatrical performance depended not upon the interpretative comparison between onstage and offstage worlds, but upon the mimetic experience of passion, modeled by the actor and undergone vicariously by the spectator. (435)

It is this connection with the spectator, the mid-century attention to creating similar emotions in the audience, indeed the potentially *contagious* power of acting that holds such relevance for the discourse of maternal imagination. This potential power of contagion is particularly suggestive when examining actresses, rather than actors of the period. Brooks notes that the history of eighteenth-century acting has focused almost exclusively upon male actors and male theorists, obscuring the fine details of the early actress and her complex relationship with contemporary models of femininity and maternity. As Brooks suggests, the actress responded to and reciprocally shaped understandings of what it meant to be a woman, not as a marginal figure, but as a significant "site of important cultural negotiations over radically shifting gender roles" (6). Yet the nature of live performance makes it difficult to trace the influence of these women, as their performances were rarely recorded in any detail.

I would like to propose that the most exciting actress and dramatic spectacle of maternity of the period did not appear upon a traditional stage. Mary Toft, the woman who claimed to be giving birth to rabbits, instead appeared not only within a London bagnio, but also the popular press and the imagination of thousands. Furthermore, partly due to her unconventional arena, multiple members of her audience recorded Toft's performances in minute detail.

§ THE TALE OF MARY TOFT

At first glance, the story of Toft's amazing rabbit births seems to be a classic case of maternal imagination. Upon seeing a passing rabbit in the fields, Toft's passionate longing for rabbit meat allegedly caused her imagination to shape the child in her womb as a baby rabbit. However, stories such as Mary Toft's were rare – obviously not every pregnant woman who entertained a craving gave birth to the creatures they longed to eat. The woman in question must surely have a particularly strong faculty of imagination to effect such dramatic changes in her offspring. As Dennis Todd (1995) states,

like childbirth, mental activity was thought of as a movement from the amorphous to the formed [...] To reproduce the true image of nature, one had to do more than merely turn one's attention outward. One had to enter into the real "labour" of thinking, shaping the prime matter of the imagination to bring it to "th' ideal birth" – that is, the birth of the idea'. (202)

Todd articulates the general opinion of the eighteenth-century maternal imagination: raw images in the imagination had to be moulded by the intellect in order to become something true to nature. The majority of pregnant women could not regulate such power and so, as Michel de Montaigne had argued over one hundred years earlier, such women would form an imperfect idea, fail to work their imagination properly, and thus create a monstrous child. In effect, the monsters of antiquity – the boy with a frog's head, the woman covered in hair, the girl with the oyster's head – were the result of a strong, but unshaped, impression in the mother's mind. Consequently, Mary Toft's case was extraordinary among extraordinary births; her story was so remarkable because she produced eerily perfect rabbits, apparently no different in appearance to the common rabbit she had seen in the fields. Toft's imagination was extremely threatening, as it seemed that she had a rare power to shape her impression with perfect mimesis. However, as the news of her astonishing births spread, the details of Toft's story became as distorted as her antecedents' unusual births.

It is unsurprising that, partly due to mangled accounts of the events involved, Mary Toft and her seventeen rabbit births have acquired an almost mythical status. Both eighteenth-century and modern reports display

confusion or inaccuracy with regard to many details of the case.¹⁰ Contradictions in accounts of the affair are common, as writers and artists speculated wildly about Toft's behaviour and body. Contemporary prints such as Hogarth's *Cunicularii, Or the Wise Men of Godliman in Consultation* (1726) and the anonymous cartoon *The Doctors in Labour, or a New Whim-Wham in Guildford* (1727) portrayed Toft as an attractive young woman wearing revealing clothes, whereas John Laguerre's painting depicts a dour-faced matron, clutching an apparently dead rabbit.¹¹ Even eyewitness narratives of the events differ in detail and opinion, revealing perspectives that are informed by medical expertise or ignorance, politics, curiosity and ambition. The tale itself is indeed complicated, however the basic facts are as follows.

Mary Toft (née Denyer) was a peasant woman from Godalming in Surrey, wife to the cloth-worker Joshua Toft and mother of three children. In September 1726 Mary claimed that she had given birth to peculiar forms, that upon investigation looked like the dismembered pieces of baby rabbits. John Howard, the local man-midwife, was sceptical, but became convinced after he personally delivered more rabbit pieces (including a head) from Toft's body. Excited by the discovery, Howard reported the unusual births to the Royal Society, and by November, Toft was inundated with visitors as she gave birth to her twelfth rabbit. Her visitors included various members of the court; Henry Davenant, Samuel Molyneux MP, the Duke of Richmond, the Duke of Montague and Lord Baltimore; as well as figures from the medical profession, such as the Royal Anatomist Nathaneal St. André and Surgeon to His Majesty's German Household, Cyriacus Ahlers. In his thorough analysis of the affair, *Imagining Monsters* (1995), Dennis Todd notes that Ahlers was the only visitor unconvinced by Toft's performances from the beginning. The Swiss émigré and former dancing master St. André, on the other hand, seems to have been completely satisfied that Toft was genuinely giving birth to rabbit kittens.

As Ahlers reported his scepticism to the court, St. André continued to witness Toft's births and dissect the rabbit offspring. Eager to secure respectable professional opinion in favour of the births, St. André invited many eminent physicians to attend Toft's bedside. To enable more convenient visits, Toft was removed to Lacey's Bagnio in London on 29th November. Her residence at the bagnio – an eighteenth-century communal bath-house, where rooms or baths could be taken for a fee – placed Toft both figuratively and literally in the public sphere. Toft's relocation to

the public space of the bagnio was perhaps a deliberate strategy on the part of St. André, as he sought to raise the profile of Toft and therefore also his own rather lacklustre reputation.¹² Celebrated medical figures such as Sir Richard Manningham, James Douglas, and Thomas Braithwaite all attended Toft at the bagnio, however they disagreed with St. André on several key points. As the medical men argued, select members of the public were permitted to view Toft as she lay in convulsions or awaited her next delivery.

Frustrated by his colleague's disbelief, St. André published *A Short Narrative of an extraordinary Delivery of Rabbits* (1726c) on 3rd December. He reported the story that had been related to him by Toft herself, and described an incident that occurred early in her pregnancy, on 23rd April 1726 as follows:

As she was weeding in a field, she saw a rabbit [sic] spring up near her, after which she ran, with another woman that was at work just by her; this set her a longing for rabbits, being then, as she thought, five weeks gone with child; the other woman perceiving she was uneasy, charged her with longing for the rabbit they could not catch, but she deny'd it: soon after another rabbit sprung up near the same place, which she endeavour'd likewise to catch. The same night she dreamt she was in a field with those two rabbits in her lap . . . from that time, for three months, she had a constant and strong desire to eat rabbits, but being very poor and indigent cou'd not procure any. (23–4)

This incident explained the strange rabbit births with the simple logic of maternal imagination, citing three of the usual forms – longing, dreams, and a fixed obsession – to make the matter perfectly clear. Unfortunately on the same day that St. André published his *Short Narrative*, a porter of the bagnio was caught attempting to smuggle a rabbit into Toft's chamber. The following day Lord Onslow submitted several depositions from Toft's neighbours, which observed that Joshua Toft had lately been buying an awfully large number of baby rabbits.

In possession of this evidence, the physicians – lead by Manningham and Douglas – put pressure upon Toft to confess. Toft was resistant, but eventually confessed on 7th December. Toft changed the details of her confession at least three times, casting blame upon herself, Howard, her mother-in-law and a, probably fictitious, knife-grinder's wife.¹³ In all but the very last of her recorded confessions, Toft sticks to the story that her original monstrous birth was caused by longing for rabbits. The final

confession states that Toft actually used medical confidence in her longings to acquire the rabbits necessary for the fraud. She claims, "Mr. Howard desired me to eat rabbits if I longed for them. I got the rabbit, stript it and cut it in pieces" (Douglas Papers D 328). The same confession admits that Toft had miscarried her pregnancy in September and had conveyed pieces of rabbit into her vagina in the hope that she might gain financially from the hoax. Manningham later noted that Toft's womb became inflamed from this insertion of rabbit parts and thus became large enough to fool some of the observers. The infection caused from the insertion of these rabbit corpses gave Toft's performance of "labour pains" extra credibility as she was in genuine pain. Other peripheral factors, such as the fact that Toft was menstruating during some of the "births", also leant authenticity to her story.¹⁴ With the fraud revealed, Toft was sent to Bridewell but was eventually released without charge on 8th April 1727. Despite her ordeal, Toft apparently suffered no permanent physical injury and actually gave birth to another daughter a year later.¹⁵

I have described these events at such length because I want to stress the incredible performance that Mary Toft must have sustained under intense scrutiny for more than three months. Toft was exhibited and examined continually by dozens of respected medical professionals and curious onlookers, yet she was able to achieve a convincing show of labour and pregnancy despite the disadvantages of her inferior status, the improbability of her claims, and considerable physical pain. Toft's performance depended upon her own acting skills and her exploitation of the notions of maternal imagination held by not only the local Godalming midwife, but by aristocrats, the public, and the wider medical profession. The affair signals a turning point for the discourse of maternal imagination as the private matter of reproduction was brought to the forefront of the public imagination in a most startling manner.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Toft's fraud produced a media frenzy. Within a week of Toft's incarceration, Ahlers, Manningham, Douglas and Braithwaite had all published their own accounts of recent events, while the popular press eagerly seized upon the grotesque, sexual and satirical aspects of the affair.¹⁶ Although the accounts published by the medical men were serious and clinical, with full medical titles and interspersed with Latin, the subject matter was so easily rendered sordid. Throughout all of the 'serious' medical accounts, the fact that several respectable physicians were persistently probing between a woman's legs, could not be avoided. Moreover, William Gibson (2007, 579) observes a

rich history of rabbit imagery associated “coney” with vulvas, dating to the jestbook *Gratiae Ludentes, Or Jestes from the University* (1637). This slippage may have arisen from Latin, as “cuniculus” (rabbit-warren) could be confused with “cunnus” (vulva). Certainly in the eighteenth century “coney” was another name for a whore, and “coney warren” was slang for a brothel (Gibson 580). The revelation that Toft had been relocated to Lacey’s Bagnio compounded the opportunity for sexual innuendoes, as brothels were often disguised as bagnios.¹⁷ Even the spelling of the word “rabbit” provided a chance for suggestive jokes, as many of the medical accounts used the spelling “rabbet”. Piper Crisp Davis has remarked that while “rabbit” connoted a small furry mammal, “rabbet” was a carpentry term meaning “a channel, groove or slot” and could be easily sexualised in the context of Toft’s births (2008, 25–26).

In addition to the profusion of medical accounts authored by the men involved, there was a steady stream of “wonder tracts”, jokes, ballads, lewd cartoons, satires, newspaper articles, and prints.¹⁸ By the nineteenth century, “the many pamphlets, tracts and, poems had become quite valuable, and complete collections bound in rabbit skin were sold for fifteen to twenty guineas” (Bondeson 1997, 136). This interest has prevailed until the present day; Toft’s story provides subject matter for poetry, short stories and novels; while Laguerre’s portrait of Toft and the rabbit features as the image for jigsaw puzzles.¹⁹ More scholarly investigations of Toft are readily available – as Pam Lieske comments, “she has become somewhat of a staple at academic conferences, and is a canonical figure in the growing literature about medical curiosities and wonders in early modern England” (2007, II:ix). Indeed Lieske devotes an entire volume of *Eighteenth-Century Midwifery* (2007) to the Toft affair, and provides facsimiles of medical, legal and satirical responses to hoax. Dennis Todd’s monograph *Imagining Monsters* (1995) covers the Toft affair in minute detail, and links the themes of the hoax to contemporary literary works by Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. Ronald Paulson (1996) similarly explores the Walpolean satire common to Hogarth’s prints of both Lemuel Gulliver and Mary Toft.

Evidently, the entire affair made Toft an instant celebrity as writers of all kinds responded to the satirical and sordid literary possibilities.²⁰ Interestingly, Toft herself was not often the target of these satirical efforts and was frequently overlooked in favour of attacks on her medical attendants such as St. André, Manningham, or Douglas. Again and again, popular pamphlets and jokes emphasise the physicians’ incompetence and imply that

men had no business interring with pregnant bodies in the first place. Lisa Forman Cody (2005) has documented the way that the hoax was initially used to criticise the budding profession of man-midwifery, as an illiterate peasant woman was able to fool so many educated men. However she also notes that a generation later, the same story was retold in order to prove that women could not defeat male science since ultimately, the fraud was discovered.

Dennis Todd also stresses the unexpected way that Toft was presented as the least guilty party in the fraud. In his meticulous account of the Toft affair, Todd suggests that satires concentrated upon the physicians' confusion because the fraud brought the issue of identity under the microscope. Todd claims that the case provoked "generalised feelings of collapsing boundaries and disappearing distinctions" and associated the power of a corporealising imagination with danger and transgression (69). Toft's rabbits were evidence that corporeality could overpower the mind, perhaps even that "that the body could annihilate identity" (Todd 1995, 126). Furthermore, Todd argues that attention was deflected from Toft, who was presented as dull and weak by the satirists, because they wished to "deny that she had any power whatsoever" (70). In these cases, the narrative focus shifts from Toft, the star of the tale, to her audience of medical attendants. This seems odd since it was clear to all that she was obviously guilty. Yet the hacks avoided accusing Toft of any wrongdoing, perhaps because this would imply that she had some degree of intelligence, skill or industry, and consequently the print phenomenon left a vacuum that I argue, became filled with the discourse of maternal imagination.

Once the fraud was revealed, doubt and uncertainty surged to the forefront of the discourse – a discourse that was now prominently under both popular and medical scrutiny. Questions concerning power and duplicity became key and new discursive forms emerged to tackle them. The actual story detailed above, rather than the jumbled retellings of Toft's physicians and satirical opportunists, highlights the potential power of a pregnant woman's imagination. It reveals Toft's astonishing aptitude for persuading a knowledgeable audience to believe in dubious events, while her narrative of maternal imagination exploits a certain metatheatricity to emphasise the contagious nature of her tale. By claiming to be a victim of maternal imagination, Toft crafts her own imaginative legend, which impresses itself – and images of her rabbits – upon the public imagination. As Tonya Howe notes, "it important today to remember that she [Toft] did

stand at the center of it all” (2009, 3).²¹ Ultimately Toft’s story is centred upon a consummate actress of the natural style and thus provokes doubt and uncertainty regarding all pregnant women who might claim to experience any form of maternal imagination. I would like to suggest that the satirists avoided targeting Toft herself because, like the authors of early modern drama, they were anxious not to further the connections between pregnant women, acting and deceit.

§ “HARLEQUIN TURN’D IMPOSTURE”

As Todd details at length in his monograph, “the collapse most often referred to in the Mary Toft satires is the collapse of language” (1995, 67) and the attention is most frequently upon confusion, muddled theories and misunderstandings. In fact it is not so much language, as bodies and their expressive capabilities that feature most prominently in the print spawned by the Toft affair. Toft’s body elicited a variety of emotional responses from her spectators and this ability to induce passions in others links her to actresses on the stage. Mary Toft was therefore doubly threatening: before the hoax was revealed she was thought to have a potent imagination powerful enough to shape raw notions into exact corporeal replicas, and after the fraud was uncovered she was still shown to have stimulated lasting passions in her audience. These anxieties are neatly demonstrated in a pantomime, that most bodily of dramatic forms, entitled *Harlequin Turn’d Imposture; Or, The Guildford Comedy* (Rich 1726).

John Rich’s pantomime was written and performed almost immediately after Toft’s confession; an impromptu afterpiece appeared a mere two days after Toft admitted to inserting dismembered rabbit pieces into her own vagina, and a full pantomime was reviewed a week later. Rather unsurprisingly, *Harlequin Turn’d Imposture* was an instant hit as it contained the essential ingredients for a successful pantomime: slapstick, spectacle, animals, topical content, and of course the Harlequin, John Rich himself. Working under the name of Lun, the young Rich had taken over his father’s theatre in Lincoln’s Inn Fields around 1714, although he faced fierce competition from rival theatre Drury Lane. In order to provide his theatre with a unique selling point, Rich started performing as the Harlequin in 1723. An excellent pantomime actor, Rich drew a new audience with his mime and physical comedy; contemporary Thomas Davies observed that “every least motion of his hand or head, or any part of his body, was a kind of dumb eloquence that was readily understood by the audience. Mr Garrick’s action was not more

perfectly adapted to his characters than Mr Rich's attitudes and movements" (1808, 131). Nevertheless, it was not only Rich's performance, but his careful management, that popularised the burgeoning pantomime genre. As "the true heart of pantomime lay in acrobatics, spectacle, song, dance, travelogue, slapstick and special effects" (O'Brien 2004, 103), Rich sought out various attractions to fill his theatre such as "acrobatics, on the rope and off, animal acts of various sorts, and cries of London . . . Maddox, the famous wire dancer, Swarts and his famous dogs in 1717, [and] the bear, the lion, monkey, serpent and ostrich, not to mention the dog and cat, in his much satirized pantomime-raree show, *The Fair* (Rich 1752)" (Sawyer 1972, 95). The story of Mary Toft and her rabbit kittens was therefore a perfect fit for Lincoln's Inn Fields, especially as in Rich's pantomimes, "spectacular transformations happened as a matter of course" (O'Brien 103) and the second section of the show traditionally offered "pantomimists the chance to exhibit the curiosities and novelties of the day and use them as backgrounds for knock-about humor or as subjects for temperate satire" (Mayer 1969, 5). However, apart from Tonya Howe who has commented insightfully on parallels between Toft and the pantomime figure of the Harlequin, scholars of the Toft story have not analysed this 'low' theatrical piece. This is perhaps due to the scanty details of the short text, which provides few particulars and only a few directions for the actors. Nevertheless, the plot itself is highly suggestive.

Although the typical plots of a pantomime were incidental, *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture* is fairly coherent. The curtain rises to reveal three women whispering, apparently engaged in some feminine conspiracy. The Royal Surgeon, Cyriacus Ahlers would have approved of this opening as he believed that Toft, her sister and mother-in-law were trying to dupe the physicians. In his official published account, Ahlers specifically noted that when he first arrived at Guildford, he wasn't allowed to visit Toft allegedly because "too much company should frighten her", yet "several women went in and out as they pleased" (3–4). The pantomime's beginning therefore highlights the uneasiness surrounding female mysteries and alludes to the doubts now surrounding the concept of maternal imagination.

The scene continues as the whispering women reveal rabbits poking out of their aprons, when Harlequin (John Rich) appears "with petticoats on and pretty big-bellied" (Rich 1726, 1–2). As the live rabbits are loosed from the aprons, Harlequin shrieks and faints in a close approximation of Toft's original claims of seeing a rabbit in the fields. After this lively spectacle, the three women call for help while a triple-layered performance unfolds: John

Rich performs Harlequin acting as Mary Toft, who is pretending to be afflicted with maternal imagination. The layers of pretence and deceit involved in this very first scene set the tone for the rest of the piece.

As help arrives, "great concern" (4) is shown to Harlequin-Toft, perhaps to emphasise the allowances made for a pregnant woman's imagination, which many may have begun to question. Harlequin-Toft's husband and a man-midwife arrive at the scene, both of whom are perplexed by her condition. According to *Brice's Weekly Journal*, next "the Audience were unexpectedly diverted with a representation ridiculing the aforesaid imposture; Harlequin, assisted by a man-midwife, being delivered of 4 rabbits, which ran about the stage, and raised such a laughter as perhaps has not been heard upon any other occasion" (1726). After this, the pantomime script directs that the arrival of a large basket of rabbits is greeted by a female attendant "with a great deal of pleasure, as tho' it were to serve the appetite of some craving person" (6). However, it remains unclear whether this apparent pleasure is supposed to be genuine, for the purposes of satisfying Harlequin's craving for rabbit meat, or merely an act to convince the bearer of the rabbit (or the husband, or the man-midwife, or the audience) that Harlequin is really experiencing maternal imagination. More ambiguity is created when the man-midwife invites Harlequin to remove to his lodging: the husband seems worried until he is pacified by the sight of the rabbits, making it uncertain whether he is involved in the deceit (Joshua Toft was in fact part of the hoax) or merely happy that his Harlequin will be sated. The physical nature of the pantomime creates a canvas of possibilities, where it is unclear who is fooling whom.

The scene changes to a bagnio where Harlequin-Toft is presented with an old rabbit, with which she is less than thrilled. While the events in the pantomime thus far follow the real Toft story with surprising accuracy, the next scene twists the facts to fix attention on the performative nature of the hoax.

Harlequin being of a modest temper, hid it [the old rabbit] in her bed-chamber, which being found out, poor Harlequin was brought to confession, but not agreeing there to, they pull off Harlequin's apparel and discover her proper habbet [sic] for which cheat poor Harlequin was committed to Bridewell. (8)

Harlequin-Toft is therefore not arrested for pretending to give birth to rabbits but for being a man dressed up as Harlequin, which "crime" is, after all, the well-established foundation of the pantomime. It is worth

observing that the audience are complicit in this crime and are invited to pity Harlequin's discovery. Thus "Poor Harlequin" is committed to Bridewell for being an actor pretending to be an actress, leaving the matter of the rabbits and maternal imagination up to the audience. Although it would be easy to dismiss *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture* as vulgar entertainment, it highlights the anxieties concerning imagination, pregnant women and performance in ways that were avoided by contemporary wits and medical men. Based in the grossly corporeal, the pantomime nevertheless relied upon the imagination of the audience and as such, reminded the audience of their willingness to participate in excitement of the hoax. *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture* emphasises the contagious nature of imagination when brought forth by great actors and destabilises any certainties about not only the Toft fraud, but also women's bodies and minds.

Turning to the wealth of popular print inspired by the Toft affair, it is possible to detect traces of this anxiety regarding women and performance. Before the hoax was revealed, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the wonderful Coney Warren* (1726c) argued that the "most probable account of this affair, if we set aside miracles is its being done by practice in this Art" (1). The author suggests that rather than employing witchcraft or succumbing to maternal imagination, Toft had studied rabbits and then mimicked their reproductive practices by giving birth to nearly twenty infants. Citing St. Barnard and St Augustine, the author claims that with practice, anyone can train their bodies to perform unusual feats. The most likely explanation for the rabbit kittens therefore, was that Toft had learnt a cunning trick and manipulated her own body. Later, the esteemed man-midwife Dr. Richard Manningham would state that Toft had "artful management of herself" (36), which also seems to point towards the idea of an act or trick. In a sense, both Manningham and the author of *A Philosophical Enquiry* were correct as Toft's power was in the convincing performance of her lie. She was able to act the part so well that even though some doubted her story, she managed to manipulate them for weeks and in some cases, months. This was partly due to the physical evidence that she was able to demonstrate for her spectators. Manningham noted that Toft's body appeared very similar to a woman in labour:

the motions were various, sometimes with very strong throws cross the belly, especially on the right side, at other times with sudden jerks and risings, and tremulous motions and pantings, like the strong pulsations of the heart. (10–11)

Toft was able to maintain this performance for hours at a time, putting on such a good show that even sceptics such as Manningham were tempted to believe that her vagina and uterus behaved like a woman undergoing labour pains. He observed “the *os uteri* to spread a little and grow softer” (21), and also noted that her face flushed and her pulse was often raised. Either Toft was so convincing that her physicians were pressured into admitting that there must be something to her claims, or she had such control over her body that she really could alter its appearance. Certainly almost every medical account mentions that she feigned contractions, rolled her eyes, and experienced violent spasms that her audience claimed was the leaping of the rabbit inside her belly. Even while trying to vindicate his part in the affair James Douglas observed Toft’s performance almost with admiration: “the woman was taken with pains in which all the appearances of those by which a true labour usually begins, which were very exactly counterfeited” (11). Despite her success, Toft may have overplayed her hand: according to Ahlers, her dramatic behaviour – when “she began to squall and roar, and to move the upper parts of her body in a very strange manner” (7) – first made Ahlers suspect the hoax.

When it became clear that Toft’s births were fake, her biggest defender, the Royal Anatomist St. André published a disclaimer in *The Daily Journal* (1726a) and *The Daily Post* (1726b) to “excuse the mistakes made by myself and others . . . please separate the innocent from those who have been guilty *actors* of this fraud” (my italics). Other writers also betrayed concerns about female performance and trickery: the author of *The Anatomist Dissected* lamented “this foul imposture, both by the actors and examiners of it” (Gulliver 1727, 33) and a “Male Physician” clearly wishing to ridicule St. André called him “the Guildford Performer” (*A Letter To a Male Physician* 1726b, 16). Thomas Braithwaite, another eminent man-midwife, made a strong effort to stick to the facts of the case in his account, yet his phrase “but to go on with the show” (87–88) belied his anxiety surrounding Toft’s act.

The issue of performance also arose for the medical men themselves. In all of the accounts by Manningham, Ahlers, and Douglas, the emphasis is not only on observing Toft, but each other. Douglas noted that both Manningham and St. André seemed like they *wanted* to believe in the miraculous births, although he and Manningham had privately agreed that a piece of “membrane” St. André had delivered was merely a pig’s bladder. Meanwhile Ahlers remarked that “I feigned a great compassion for the woman’s case” (13) in order to conceal his suspicions. From their own

narratives at least, it would seem that all of the men observing Toft were acutely aware of their own behaviour and were themselves performing in order to throw the others off guard. It is this uncertainty regarding who to trust or believe that lies at the heart of *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture*, which addresses the impossibility of knowing the true thoughts or feelings of any individual but oneself. As Tonya Howe argues, the pantomime "is not satirising something stable – like the doctor's imperfect knowledge – but rather staging the Harlequin as a sign of impossible knowledge" (8). It is this instability that changes the discourse of maternal imagination as the nature of a pregnant woman's mind and body is left nakedly open to question. Doubt hovers over the discourse from the moment of Toft's confession, provoking a storm of discursive modes that attempt to address it.

§ AN ANTI-IMAGINATIONIST

I have argued that the Toft affair altered the discourse of maternal imagination by drawing unwanted attention to the issue of performance regarding a pregnant woman's imagination, at the same time that acting theorists were exploring the special skills of an actor to control and manipulate the passions. Print responses to the initial story of rabbit births were familiar additions to the discourse as they largely consisted of "wonder" tracts, broadsides, and quasi philosophical-scientific accounts, however responses to the news that the births had been an elaborate fraud prompted different discursive forms. The *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture* pantomime followed a more dignified history of maternal imagination references in drama, however the spoofs and the physician's medical justifications were fresh modes for the discourse. Moreover, from this point all contributions to the discourse of maternal imagination would address, in one way or another, the residual doubt created by Toft's false claims. Satires, poems, semi-medical texts, and later in the century, novels, would all acknowledge the phenomenon's new uncertainty by seeking to deny or prove the legitimacy of maternal imagination itself. This crucial agenda is best illustrated by the appearance of a new discursive form, the (Anti-)Imaginationist pamphlet, four months after the Toft episode.²²

Dr. James Blondel's *The Strength of Imagination In Pregnant Women* (1727) was a popular semi-medical pamphlet which comprised a prolonged attack upon the concept of maternal imagination. Born in 1665, Blondel matriculated at Leiden, where he studied with the influential humanist and physician Hermann Boerhaave, before settling in London.

Modern critics often describe him as a learned figure, at the forefront of his field and possessing the most up-to-date theories.²³ Blondel published *The Strength of Imagination* anonymously in his sixties and committed the entire pamphlet to the condemnation of maternal imagination as “a vulgar error, contrary to sound reason and anatomy” (1727, 1). This pamphlet, aimed at a general audience but enjoying a privileged medical tone, is the first of its kind and therefore opened a new discursive direction. *The Strength of Imagination* was not of course, the first medical discussion published upon the subject of maternal imagination but significantly, it was the first to address a wider audience. That Blondel chose to express his views in the form of the cheap, accessible, and easily circulated pamphlet, rather than with the expensively-bound gravitas of a medical text, is worth noting. A pamphlet written by a physician could function partly as an advertisement of the author’s medical skill, or even as a smear campaign against rival practitioners.

Medicine was a deeply competitive business during the early eighteenth century, as practitioners sought to identify and monopolise specific areas of health as their specialist – and hence profitable – field of expertise. Roy Porter has observed that the reputation of Augustan physicians was conspicuously split into two opposing groups; those who “were seemingly hell-bent on defying [medicine’s] prudential etiquette, indeed its elementary moral code, through shock-tactics, displays of drunkenness, debauchery, avarice and sexual misconduct”, and those who worked hard to present themselves as models of sobriety and intellectual weight (2001, 139). To a certain extent these two groups represented the difference between early modern ideas of medical men as disreputable butchers and swindlers, and emergent notions of the professional gentleman-doctor. The former group comprised of physicians such as John Woodward and John Freind, who embroiled themselves in pamphlet wars, ostensibly about health, but in reality appearing as thinly-veiled attacks on their rivals.²⁴ David Harley notes that “it was always recognised that pamphlet attacks should be written with due decorum . . . but authors found it difficult to restrain their passions. Their reputations and their livelihood were at stake” (1990, 157). Of course aggressive tactics were double-edged, as although a pamphlet might discredit an opponent, in doing so it could portray the author as petty or scandalous. As Adrian Wilson has pointed out, “the printed pamphlet was an intervention in the marketplace” (1990, 9) and could generate or damage business for those involved. James Blondel’s *The Strength of Imagination* negotiates the pamphlet with admirable poise; although he used the form, he avoided any

personal hostility and instead concentrated upon constructing a robust, but reputable, attack upon the theory of maternal imagination.

Blondel's Anti-Imaginationist pamphlet was clearly a rejoinder to Toft's sham claims regarding her longing for rabbit meat. However, among all of the wits and medical men to respond in print, he was the first to deconstruct the concept of maternal imagination. Most responses to the affair considered the explanation of maternal imagination to lend credibility to Toft's claims. As we have seen, St. André was happy to cite maternal longing as a cause for the births. In fact, St. André was later ridiculed for his dancing master past, Swiss nationality and roaming fingers, but not for his faith in Toft's explanation that the rabbits derived from her maternal imagination. An anonymous tract entitled *The Wonder of Wonders* (1726d) noted:

That the imagination has a most prevailing power in conception, and that it sett[sic]s [sic] and imprints upon the infant the characters of the thing conceived is what is readily granted, considering how common it is for the mother to mark the child with strawberries, mulberries [sic], claret, or anything else, from the most trifling accident, and that, even in the latter ripening months after an infant is intirely [sic] formed. (7–8)

In light of the near-silence surrounding the discourse of maternal imagination during, and immediately after the Toft affair, James Blondel's claim that he had written *The Strength of Imagination* "upon the occasion of the Cheat of Goldalming" (1729, i) seems specious. Of course, as many critics have noted, Blondel was not writing in a complete vacuum. After the Toft affair, Daniel Turner had capitalised on the literary zeitgeist – the possibilities of a pregnant woman's imagination – and published a second edition of his chapter 'Of Spots and Marks'.²⁵ Originally published in 1714, Turner's chapter approached the subject of maternal imagination with an intriguing blend of case histories and medical expertise.

It seems clear that Blondel set up his pamphlet in opposition to Mary Toft's physicians, perhaps in an effort to rehabilitate their mutual occupation of man-midwifery, which had been so damaged by the Toft episode. However, Blondel also antagonised Turner, by making clear pejorative references to "Of Spots and Marks".²⁶ *The Strength of Imagination* attacked many of Turner's specific examples in the same chronological order, and as John Henry Mauleclerc later observed, "it is plain, he [Blondel] looks on this chapter, as the most valuable collection, or compleat summary of what can

be said on this side of the question” (1747, 13). The two doctors would conduct a furious debate over the possibility of maternal imagination for the next few years, purely through the form of the (Anti-)Imaginationist pamphlet. This debate demonstrates how the Toft episode extended and complicated the discourse, as well as highlighting the new quest for certainty within the discourse itself. While Turner would claim unequivocally that maternal imagination was a genuine medical phenomenon, Blondel would create a new taxonomy for maternal imagination in an attempt to locate certainty through re-classification.

The Strength of Imagination seeks to provide certainty and shut down the ambiguities regarding the power of a pregnant woman’s imagination that Toft’s case had engendered. The pamphlet opens with the general statement that “imagination is not so malignant as ‘tis commonly represented” (11). This remark launches the core of the pamphlet’s argument, as Blondel primarily objects to the idea that a woman’s imagination might *deliberately* shape the foetus in some way. His choice of the term “malignant” suggests that either the pregnant woman or the faculty of imagination itself, are disposed to cause harm wilfully. His arguments are clear and pragmatic, and seemed designed to leave no room for misinterpretation or doubt. He goes on to compare maternal imagination to outmoded superstitions, astrology, omens and dreams; and suggests that during the nine-month gestation period it would be impossible for the mother to remain completely emotionless. Blondel also observed that maternal imagination functioned as an excuse for clumsy midwives who injured the baby during delivery – “what necessity is there to allege chimerical causes, when there are fingers, and nails, or other tools near at hand?” (19). He claimed that “monsters ought to be less amazing than the wonderful uniformity, that does commonly reign among living creatures of all kinds” (95) and explored the many contradictions of maternal imagination lore. He pointed out that women would have little chance of a normal birth if monsters were allegedly produced both by cravings *and* by hatred of an object; gratified longings *and* disappointed longings; and when beautiful *and* ugly images were beheld.

Moreover pregnant women, Blondel claimed, had no power over their imaginations:

Tis not also in the woman’s power to chuse [sic] a boy or a girl, to have one or two at a birth, to make the child fair or brown, big or small, weak or strong, to resemble the father, or to be like her in features.

If it be granted, that the mother cannot, by strength of imagination, promote or delay conception, how can any body [sic] suppose, without a reflection upon the wisdom of God, that the circumstances of it should be left to her, not so much to do good, in framing a beautiful child, as to disfigure it, and spoil the regular work of nature? (48)

This question built upon knowledge that the average reader already possessed: women could not choose when to become pregnant. The list of direct binaries – “boy or a girl”, “one or two”, “fair or brown”, “big or small”, “weak or strong” – also appeals to the reader in a brisk, matter-of-fact tone that acts persuasively in the context. These plain arguments could be understood by any reader, unlike the frequently complicated (and rather tortuous) explanations for other medical marvels that could be found in *Philosophical Transactions*, the journal of the Royal Society, or in contemporary midwifery guides.²⁷

The commonsensical reasons put forward in the pamphlet were bolstered by Blondel's clear rubric of maternal imagination. Unlike the imprecise outlines of different models employed by Turner, Maubray, Paré and others, Blondel redefined the concept of maternal imagination with strict parameters. As Mauclerc explained, in *The Strength of Imagination* “the Doctor defines very exactly, what this *Imagination* is” (4). Rather than using the vague models of maternal imagination circulating in folklore and even by described by contemporary midwives (see my [Chapter 1](#)), Blondel states almost immediately: “what I deny, is, that the strong attention of the mother's mind to a determined object, can cause a determined impression upon the body of the child” (10–11). In a neat side-step, Blondel admitted that of course there *were* ways in which “the prosperity of the foetus does depend on the welfare of the mother” (10), and listed causes such as sneezing, riding, convulsions, dancing, running, laughing, diet and accidents. He also acknowledged that maternal passion could create adverse effects, explaining that “a sudden surprise, a violent passion of anger, an extraordinary grief, or an apprehension of danger may be the cause of a miscarriage” (10). However, Blondel was at pains to point out that although the mother's strong passions might alter the foetus, there was no chance of the pregnant woman employing her passions for deliberate or specific effect. He declared that “violent passions [...] cannot affect the foetus and produce, *in the sense that I have settled the question*, those strange and unaccountable metamorphoses of its body” (54, my italics). That is to say, Blondel refers the reader back to his earlier statement that the mother's

strong attention cannot have any “determined” effect. Blondel’s “settling of the question” channelled the protean discourse of maternal imagination into distinct categories: false maternal longing, genuine physical injury, and genuine, but non-deliberate, maternal passion. According to Blondel, to believe that a mother’s “strong attention” or longing could affect her child in the way that Toft had claimed, was a “vulgar error”. However to accept that a mother’s excessive activity or passion could injure her foetus *accidentally*, was common sense. Within this reasoning, Blondel’s criteria also made it plain that a woman’s imagination was not responsible for any physical injury, as she could hardly help sneezing or laughing. As a physical injury clearly had nothing to do with the expectant mother’s mind, Blondel’s logic reduced the broad scope of maternal imagination to only one possible form – a mother’s passions could effect some kind of accidental (and damaging) change upon the development of her foetus in the womb. Any other claim to maternal imagination was either biologically impossible or unrelated to the mother’s actual imagination – in other words, maternal longings were always fabricated by the woman, whereas maternal passion *might* be genuine. Blondel made it absolutely clear that his entire argument rested upon this reimagining of the medical discourse:

It is also necessary to prevent superfluous and groundless objections and to make a right judgement in this controversy, to have always in view the state of the question, as it is set down in the first chapter [quoted above]; for ‘tis by the terms of it, that whatever I write against the strength of imagination . . . is to be understood. (1727, Preface)

Intriguingly, Blondel’s careful re-classification of the different types of maternal imagination may have found some inspiration from the very source that it aimed to denigrate, Daniel Turner’s chapter “Of Spots and Marks”. As my Introduction shows, Turner’s chapter included a wide variety of maternal imagination incidents in a diagnostic framework for the first time. Forming part of a medical treatise specialising in the subject of skin, “Of Spots and Marks” provides the reader with an objective overview of the history and various formal characteristics of maternal imagination. Although Turner deploys elements of folklore and history by describing multiple case studies, he approaches the concept of maternal imagination through the lens of “science”, although this is an anachronistic term for the period. Turner includes only the bare facts of each case for the purpose of diagnosis and avoids the minutiae of the grotesque descriptions provided in broadsides and

wonder books. Turner's investigation into the concept of maternal imagination largely obeys the "scientific" methods of his age, for example relating the subject of maternal imagination to the mechanics of imagination more generally. Turner also follows the major trend during the Enlightenment to categorise and label information. He creates a recognisable taxonomy by grouping together case studies of similar effects, such as deformed infants born to mothers with disease or injury, famous monsters, or children born with images of fruit printed upon the skin. Blondel's *The Strength of Imagination* goes a step further and separates false maternal longing, accidental bodily injury and genuine maternal passion into three separate categories.

While both Turner's re-issue and Blondel's pamphlet are clearly responses to Toft's hoax, they also generate new discursive practice for maternal imagination. Both works create an entirely new trajectory in the form of the Imaginationist or Anti-Imaginationist pamphlet. Admittedly heated pamphlet wars between physicians were common during this period; Roy Porter discusses a similar pamphlet debate and explains that "such public vituperations became a hallmark of Augustan medicine" (135), while Bernice Hamilton has argued that "every crisis in development was accompanied by a flood of pamphlets reflecting the clash in aims and ideas" (1951, 142). Nevertheless, the debate regarding maternal imagination acquired a certain notoriety – contributing later to the debate Mauclerc remarked, "Dr Blondel's dispute with Dr. Turner, made no small noise for the time, in the learned world" (i-ii). More (Anti-) Imaginationist pamphlets rapidly followed, initially authored by Blondel and Turner themselves, but also by subsequent medical figures.²⁸

Blondel's redefinition of the phenomenon in an accessible pamphlet form disperses the discourse of maternal imagination. The pamphlet form balances elite medical expertise with a common lexicon, and allows readers other than medical professionals to become familiar with specialist, privileged information. Moreover, the treatise becomes a watershed moment, as Blondel attempts to crush the possibility that a pregnant woman could possess an extraordinarily powerful imagination, and creates a taxonomy of longing and passion. Blondel does not refute the entire discourse of maternal imagination, but merely the possibility that "strong attention of the mother's mind to a determined object, can cause a determined impression upon the body of the child". According to *The Strength of Imagination*, pregnant women's minds and bodies were in fact especially fragile and in need of protection.

The issue of identifying whether a woman truly felt passions or longings, or merely feigned such experiences would become the core debate of the discourse. Mary Toft's elaborate hoax highlighted the potential duplicity of women, the strength of their mental powers, and their ability to perform convincingly. Moreover, Toft's success was mirrored and outdone by the actresses who increasingly appeared on the stage demonstrating a skilful ability to control and channel their passions. I argue that Blondel and Turner – and as their successors – seek to ground the discourse in certainty: to establish whether women's minds were powerful or weak. If "determined" maternal imagination was true, then women's minds must be strong indeed; if they were able to fake cases of maternal imagination, then they must possess dangerous powers of performance and duplicity. However, if as Blondel argued, instances of maternal imagination were accidental, or if the phenomenon was not real, then women were weak, feeble-minded and vulnerable after all. It is because neither Blondel nor Turner is able to definitively answer this question of female power that the discourse continues to evolve throughout the course of the century.

§ CONCLUSION

Mary Toft's rabbits created a discursive moment that would have a lasting impact upon the discourse of maternal imagination. Initially apprehension centred upon the unsettling mimesis of her rabbit births as the exactitude of her creations suggested a powerful and determined female imagination. However once the fraud was revealed, the early disquiet transformed swiftly into more heated responses such as panic, anger and derision. I have suggested that these responses arose partly due to a heightened sensitivity concerning women and performance; during the 1720s not only were actresses newly visible on the English stage demonstrating their ability to act, but new attention was directed to acting theory. The idea of women performers created social anxiety but the notion of a pregnant performer – again, clearly visible in theatres across the country – was even more worrying. Pregnant women only had their word to prove that they were experiencing a case of maternal imagination. If women were capable of controlling their emotions, then perhaps they were only claiming maternal imagination in order to gain special treatment. In addition, performers who manipulated their passions could also induce responses in

others – as Toft's scandal shows, her act spawned contagious hysteria for several weeks.

This chapter has shown that Mary Toft's hoax created a space that became filled with doubt, uncertainty and suspicion. The sheer notoriety and scale of her fraud meant that the idea of maternal imagination would forever be associated with her feminine deception of medical men. On a discursive level, Toft's feigned breeding of rabbits bred new discussions about the notion of maternal imagination, often in unexpected places. While the popular press enjoyed barbs at the medical establishment's expense, John Rich's pantomime *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture* stands out as a crass but revealing exploration of the Toft affair's tensions. Rather than avoiding or trying to remove uncertainty, *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture* instead drew pointed attention to the question of just how powerful a pregnant woman's mind could be. Female conspiracy, doubt, deceit and culpability are all canvassed in *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture's* short performance in a way unique to pantomime's emphasis on the corporeal. The pantomime's strange conclusion suggests that neither Harlequin nor the real Mary Toft were punished for their maternal imagination but instead for disturbing public faith in an illusion in which all willingly participated.

In contrast to *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture's* black, corporeal and often ambiguous comedy, James Blondel chose to address the doubt engendered by the Toft episode in a manner similar to the accounts published by Toft's medical attendants. Writing upon the medical matter of maternal imagination, Blondel employed the popular pamphlet form to reach a wide audience. *The Strength of Imagination* instigated the Blondel-Turner pamphlet war, which in turn opened new modes and rhetoric for the discourse of maternal imagination. Perhaps in response to the unsettling issues raised regarding female performance and conspiracy, Blondel sought to dismiss the pregnant imagination permanently. By denying that maternal imagination existed, Blondel attempted to bring certainty back to the discourse and to re-establish expectant mothers as figures in need of protection.

Yet it seems clear that Blondel's attack upon the concept of maternal imagination simultaneously raised and silenced the threat of female bodies and minds. Certainly Blondel could not escape a certain "vulgar" dialectic present within the discourse, as rude aspects such as female genitalia and unseemly behaviour were constantly circling Blondel's topic, despite his attempts to shut them out. That is to say, in order to refute what Blondel referred to as a "vulgar error", he first had to acknowledge vulgarity and

error had been present. This dialectic would characterise future (Anti-) Imaginationist pamphlets and indeed, formed the basis of the discourse of British man-midwifery. In this way, the monstrous figure of Mary Toft haunted the writings, and presumably the clinical practice, of eighteenth-century man-midwives.

Most significantly, in *The Strength of Imagination* Blondel unveils the new agenda for all contributions to the discourse of maternal imagination post-Mary Toft. An urgent need to address whether the phenomenon was real in order to clarify the power of the pregnant mind becomes one of the key features of discursive activity. Blondel's contribution is so influential in this matter because of his taxonomic classification of maternal imagination into categories of (false) "maternal longing" and (genuine) "maternal passion". With his precise re-definition and separation of the concept, Blondel's categories would greatly complicate the discourse.

Finally, it is worth observing that Blondel's attack was quite specifically staged in the public sphere, outside the elite spaces of the Royal Society or College of Physicians. Philip K Wilson notes that the subsequent pamphlet war between Blondel and Turner "appears to have effectively advertised their names and medical campaigns, which, despite the personal slanders, perpetuated the reputation of both authors" (1992, 82). T C W Blanning has described the bourgeois public sphere as "the medium through which private persons can reason in public" (2002, 8), which neatly encapsulates the nature of the Blondel-Turner debate. Between them, Blondel and Turner exposed the discourse of maternal imagination for a new audience, bringing it into the world of letters, debate and public opinion. As my next chapter will demonstrate, the newly established categories of maternal longing and maternal passion swiftly infiltrated another bourgeois public space: the mid-century novel. The early novel becomes a fertile discursive vehicle, as the discourse of maternal imagination continues to disperse during the early decades of the eighteenth century.

NOTES

1. Paul Goring (2005) has described cultural thinking and writing about expressive bodies as "elocutionary discourse" (6) and identified oratory, sentimental fiction and acting as key elements of this discourse.
2. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (2002) extend the Stone thesis, as does Stacey Oliker (1992).

3. As Bowers observes, it is “a mythology that at once exploits and denies explicitly maternal agencies and subjectivities, especially as these operate in the public world” (4).
4. Some fascinating work investigating the world of eighteenth-century actresses include Kristina Straub (1992), Felicity Nussbaum (2010), Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr (2014) and Helen Brooks (2015).
5. Other prominent pregnant characters include William Shakespeare’s Juliet in *Measure for Measure*, Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* (c.1594) and Hermione in *A Winter’s Tale* (c.1611). There is also, unusually, a lying-in scene in Thomas Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (c.1613).
6. I discuss midwifery guides during this period in Chapter 3.
7. Among many others, Alan Downer (1943) has identified different schools of acting within the classical/natural divide; Paul (2005) has explored the importance of sentiment in oratory theories of the period; Shearer West (1991) has explored the connections between passion theory and acting and William B. Worthen (1984) has examined gesture and feeling.
8. Treatises on acting during this period include Charles Gildon’s *The Life of Mr Thomas Brereton* (1710), Jean Poisson’s *Réflexions sur l’art de parler en public* (1717) Samuel Foote’s *A Treatise on the Passions* (1747) and John Hill’s *The Actor, Or a Treatise on the Art of Playing* (1750).
9. Hill translated and re-worked Pierre Rémond de Sainte-Albine’s *Le Comédien* (1747), which stated that the true feeling of the actor would produce such mimetic outward appearance that the audience would be truly deceived.
10. Although reports of the Rabbit-Woman have alternated between naming her “Mary Toft” and “Mary Tofts”, I am sticking with the Godalming Parish Register spelling of “Toft”. A fake suicide note published after Toft was arrested wrongly named “Ann Toff” as the perpetrator of the hoax and incorrectly reported that she had killed herself in Bridewell, see the anonymous bill, *A Full and True Account* (1726a).
 To add to the general confusion, Toft herself seems to have given at least 3 different versions of the affair, all with very different details (Douglas Papers Special Collection, D 324–328).
 More recently, Jan Bondeson (1997, 124) has mistakenly stated that Toft gave birth to a cat’s head. In fact Toft’s first monster comprised of a cat’s intestines, the backbone of an eel and a rabbit head. Pam Lieske notes that a common and persistent myth about Toft is that each of the rabbits she delivered was birthed whole’ (2007, 2:xi), when they were actually delivered piecemeal. Lieske in turn, wrongly states that Toft apparently had no further children after her imprisonment (2007, 2:xv).

11. Dennis Todd performs an in-depth analysis of Hogarth's print in "Three Characters in Hogarth's *Cunicularii* – and some Implications", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 16.1 (1982), 26–46. Laguerre's painting serves as the frontispiece to *The English Rogue or the life of Jeremy Sharp* (1776).
12. Little is known about St. André, but he certainly seemed to chase notoriety. He voluntarily provided newspapers with details about his life, such as his close relationships with the court and his life-and-death struggle after what he claimed to be a random poisoning incident. Rising from the position of servant to dancing master to George I's Royal Anatomist, he shamelessly courted attention with advertisements of his royal connection. In 1728 he was accused of poisoning his friend Samuel Molyneux (who also visited Toft, see my previous page), after eloping with Molyneux's wife the very night that Molyneux died.
13. According to Toft, the knife-grinders wife appeared just after Toft's initial miscarriage and showed her how to insert rabbits into her vagina, claiming that she could profit by such an action (Douglas Papers, D 325). Karen Harvey (2015) has suggested that the knife-grinder's wife could be a refiguring of Mary's mother-in-law, Ann Toft, as the architect of the entire affair.
14. Toft explained that the flayed rabbit skin was delivered separately to the flesh of the creature because it had been torn apart in her womb the night before. She later confessed, "Mr Howard brought away a piece of skin, and I told him I had pains the night before like the tearing of brown paper. At this time I had my menses which occasioned that skin to be bloody" (Douglas Papers, D 325).
15. "Elizabeth, daughter of Joshua and Mary Toft was baptised 4 February 1727 [1728], being the first child after her pretending rabbit breeding" (Surrey History Centre). As the date is before the change to the Gregorian calendar in 1752, Elizabeth's date of birth is actually 4th February 1728.
16. Toft was sent to Bridewell on 9th December. Ahlers published his account, *Some observations concerning the woman of Godliman* (1726) soon after 9–10th December. Sir Richard Manningham produced *An Exact* (1726) on 12th December. On 16th December James Douglas published *An Advertisement Occasion'd by some passages in Sir R Manningham's Diary lately publish'd* (1726) and Thomas Braithwaite released *Remarks on A Short Narrative of an extraordinary Delivery of Rabbets* (1726).
17. Even when they did not function as brothels, bagnios were often places of assignation and affairs (Cowley 1983).
18. "Wonder tracts" were a shorter version of the seventeenth-century "wonder books" that delighted in unusual, and especially monstrous occurrences. Allegedly based on real-life events, traces of this format can be found in

twenty-first century magazines such as the *Take a Break* franchise, which detail the bizarre or grotesque stories of its readers.

19. See John Whale's poem "Mary Toft" in *Waterloo Teeth* (2010), Clifford A. Pickover's *The Girl Who Gave Birth to Rabbits: A True Medical Mystery* (2000); and Emma Donoghue's short stories, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002). One can buy a jigsaw of Toft's portrait from [Amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Jigsaw-Puzzle-Mary-Rabbit-Evans/dp/B001PR5IPY/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&qid=1371034099&sr=8-6&key-words=mary+toft-productDetails); see http://www.amazon.co.uk/Jigsaw-Puzzle-Mary-Rabbit-Evans/dp/B001PR5IPY/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&qid=1371034099&sr=8-6&key-words=mary+toft-productDetails.
20. Rabbit and hares have since been a popular and bizarrely global choice as the subject of hoaxes. Taxidermists have provided "specimens" of the North American Jackalope (a rabbit with antlers), the Bavarian Wolpertinger (a hare with antlers and wings) and the Swedish Skvader (a hybrid of hare and grouse).
21. I would like to mention special thanks to Dr Howe as well as the staff at the Hunterian Collection, Glasgow University who both helped me piece together the original text of *Harlequin Turn'd Imposture*.
22. James Blondel was the first to use the generic label "Imaginationist" (1729, ix) to describe persons who believed in the concept of maternal imagination in his second pamphlet on the topic. This seems to have been popularly used and is still employed in modern criticism – for example Huet uses the term to refer to the Blondel-Turner debate as the "Imaginationist Quarrel" (1993, 63).
23. Philip K Wilson claims that "Blondel sought to expel from physic what he saw as a folk belief" (1992, 69) and Huet remarks that "Blondel was suggesting a new medical conception, a new metaphoric propagation, capable of destroying the only monster that really mattered: superstition" (65). Todd notes that Blondel advanced the theories of preformationism and pre-existence – the idea that all humans first existed in miniature within Eve's eggs (109–112).
24. John Woodward attacked Freind in his 1718 *The State of Physick: and of Diseases*, arguing against Freind's advocacy of purging as a medical technique. Freind replied in a satirical pamphlet, *A Letter to the Learned Dr Woodward by Dr Byfield* (1719). The "Dr Byfield" of the latter work was a well-known empirical physician, but it was generally recognized that Freind was the author. The mostly anonymous pamphlet debate continued, but included personal attacks upon the figures involved. Like most pamphlet wars of the period, the subject under debate (in this case the benefits of purging) was a veil for another, usually personal agenda.
25. See my [Chapter 1](#).
26. For critics who cite Turner's chapter as the motivation for Blondel's pamphlet, see John Henry Mauleclerc (1747); Huet (1993); and Steven Connor (2004).

27. For an excellent summary of Blondel's arguments see Wilson (1992, 65–67). Admittedly, the second half of *The Strength of Imagination* relies on a more scientific approach as Blondel takes the opportunity to explain his preformatist views. His explanations on this point are clearly outlined, but notably more medical and anatomical than the previous sections. It is as though having communicated his common-sense arguments, Blondel felt the need to support his reasoning through specialist learning to prove his medical authority.
28. Both authors continued to be translated into European language well into the 1760s. Their debate continued until Blondel's death in 1730 and was taken up by others such as Mauclerc. Later contributors to the debate will be discussed in the next chapter.

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“For One Would be Loath to Spoil a Son and Heir”: The Power of Maternal Imagination in Fiction of the Mid Eighteenth-Century

The question of why Mary Toft chose to perpetrate such a bizarre hoax continues to perplex any investigation of the affair. Most scholars suggest that Toft mistakenly believed that her fraud might earn her fortune, although precisely how this was to be achieved remains vague.¹ Yet despite Toft’s failure to profit from her story, there were clear links in the popular imagination – if not in reality – between pregnancy, power, and material gain for a woman involved in a case of maternal imagination. A satirical pamphlet published after the 1720 stock market crash known as the burst of the South Sea Bubble, makes these links explicit. In a section of *Observations on the Spleen and the Vapours* (1721), the pseudonymous Sir James Midriff remarked upon the way that the South Sea Bubble had provoked a number of psychosomatic illnesses amongst the Bubble’s unfortunate investors. Midriff claimed that the female sex, already known for their untameable desires, were the most severely affected by this phenomenon:

The hopes and expectations of most women are too violent to be baulk’d, and when they meet with disappointment, their soft, delicate natures are the least able to bear them; they never fail to occasion great disorder; both in body and mind, let the object be never so trifling. (5–6)

Midriff details the situations of Martha Firkin and Mary Pickle, who were in a “miserable condition” (6) because their respective husbands had

promised them finery – such as a soft bed, an easy chair, a carpet, a china set, a dozen spoons, a silver teapot and soup ladle – but instead lost their savings in the Bubble. G J Barker-Benfield has described the way that consumerism and health were considered to be connected, as shopping for new, exciting items was believed to increase nervous disorder (1992, 28). Firkin and Pickle suffer ill health and marital tension as a result of their disappointed longings, but the pregnant wife of John Tape experiences more unhappy consequences. John Tape's losses caused by the South Sea Bubble meant that his wife "was disappointed of a diamond ring, a new white damask gown and petticoat, and a large silver cup, which she intended against her next lying-in" (Midriff 6). Tape's failure to provide these special items, combined with perpetual rebukes of his wife's advice to invest in the South Sea Company, result in her miscarriage.²

Midriff's pamphlet directly connects miscarriage with the deprivation of material goods, and therefore belongs to the discourse of maternal imagination. Due to the perilous consequences of their longings, sights, dreams and passions, indulging pregnant women with special treatment was an inherent feature of the discourse that could be dated to at least the seventeenth century. This feature is often voiced in popular fiction of the mid-eighteenth century; most infamously in Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures Of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), but also in Samuel Richardson's, *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition* (1741), the relatively neglected sequel to *Pamela, Or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). These two novels include pregnant women who use the discourse of maternal imagination in diverse ways, to procure wealth and power. This chapter argues that many novels of the mid-century engaged with this idea in order to explore shifts in domestic gender relations caused by legal, medical and cultural change. The novels feed upon traditional ideas of maternal imagination in folk wisdom, but also play upon scepticism generated by the Toft affair and medical debate. Consequently the novels tease out the tension between parodies and actual manifestations of maternal imagination.

The contemporary medical community followed James Blondel's re-definition of maternal imagination into two broad types, maternal longing and maternal passion, tending to reject the former notion and accept the latter.³ However novels of the mid-century draw upon the notion that the theory of maternal imagination could be used by women to better their condition. This chapter will suggest that mid-eighteenth century cultural developments were debated and negotiated in fiction through the discourse of maternal imagination. In a close analysis of *Peregrine Pickle* and

Pamela in Her Exalted Condition, I will particularly scrutinise debates regarding midwifery, family law, and a more insidious current of social change. These debates have a reciprocal relationship with the discourse of maternal imagination and expose the wider repercussions of internal discursive shifts. I suggest that fiction of the mid-eighteenth century helps to reconfigure the discourse of maternal imagination as an index of female power and agency.

§ MRS. PICKLE

The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle easily fits into a genre that Simon Dickie has helpfully termed “ramble novels” (2011, 251). The ramble novel comprised amusing incidents – or rambles – usually featuring grotesque or vulgar episodes that did not necessarily instruct or edify the reader. As Dickie notes, “almost nothing was beyond the pale. People of fashion laughed at someone for having a hunchbacked wife or even for producing deformed children” (2011, 85).⁴ Novels happy to joke about deformed children necessarily appropriated the discourse of maternal imagination, although such novels preferred to allude to older folklore, rather than the latest developments in obstetrical knowledge. In fact, one of the ramble novel’s distinguishing features leaned upon folk wisdom; it was customary to introduce the hero by describing the details of his gestation or birth, as these circumstances traditionally indicated the individual’s character (Dickie 2011, 254).

In Smollett’s *Peregrine Pickle*, Mrs. Sally Pickle is notorious for her maternal longings during the gestation of the eponymous hero. Perhaps adopting the name and situation of Midriff’s Mary Pickle, Smollett’s Sally Pickle exploits the possible threat of miscarriage caused by maternal longing, to procure expensive gifts and reorganise the domestic hierarchy. R G Collins (1979) has suggested that Sally’s particular desire for a pineapple is indicative of her desire to induce a miscarriage, as the fruit was infamous for its abortive effects upon pregnant women. However it seems more likely that Smollett’s emphasis upon the pineapple, with its abortive qualities, is designed to underscore the risks of denying a pregnant woman’s desires, particularly considering the ensuing farce. Aileen Douglas has commented that “the plot of *Peregrine Pickle* has more pregnancies, comic and tragic, than any other eighteenth-century novel, and none of them is straightforward” (1995, xxv). Douglas notes that the novel’s pregnancies are linked to the production of heirs and transmission of

property, yet Sally's unreasonable longings indicate that her pregnancy is a more personal opportunity for elevated status and wealth. Alan Bewell has argued that the discourse of maternal imagination could render the pregnant mother "both hostage-taker and negotiator" (1988, 116) as she held the power regarding the appearance, character and successful birth of the child. Bewell describes the case of Win Littlewit, in Ben Jonson's play *Bartholomew Fair* (1631), who claims that she has a longing to eat a pig in order to force other characters to allow her to attend the fair. Intriguingly, the trope of maternal longing becomes a common feature of early novels such as *Peregrine Pickle*. The following section closely examines the two chapters of *Peregrine Pickle* dedicated to the progress of Sally's pregnancy, to portray her self-aggrandising use of the theory of maternal imagination. This will illustrate the way that Sally's exploitation of the theory acknowledges and negotiates the crisis of domestic hierarchy at the mid-century.

The reader knows little of Sally Pickle until she becomes pregnant with Peregrine. However the limited details of her character show her to be resourceful and shrewd; Sally subdues her rather ineffectual husband, Gam Pickle, to take control of her new household. This task is relatively easy, as Gam has long been used to his sister Grizzle managing domestic affairs. It quickly becomes clear that Sally must assert her authority not with regard to Gam, but to Grizzle. The ensuing struggle for power centres upon the "reins of government in the house" (Smollett 1751, 27), as Grizzle's position within the household is usurped by Sally. Smollett's portrayal of this struggle suggests that it is women, rather than men, who conquer and rule domestic space. Ruth Perry (2004) has pointed out that during the eighteenth century, the consanguineal family was gradually replaced by the conjugal union. Sally's usurpation of Grizzle's position as the female figure of authority supports Perry's observation that eighteenth-century novels are frequently occupied with this shift and its consequences.⁵ Significantly, Sally's conquest of Grizzle's domestic role is achieved with direct help of the trope of maternal longing.

George S Rousseau's noteworthy article upon the peculiarity of Sally's longing, "Pineapples, Pregnancy, Pica and *Peregrine Pickle*" (1971), states that pineapples were strongly associated with luxury, due to the expensive methods required to cultivate the fruit. Rousseau observes in a footnote that the total cost of a pineapple, from seed to ripening, was an extravagant £80. Rather than viewing the pineapple's cost as an incidental matter, I read Sally's choice of longing as deliberate emphasis on her expensive taste. Certainly Smollett emphasises Sally's extravagance immediately

after her marriage, when she sets up a gay equipage and increases the housekeeping budget by an extra thousand pounds per year. Pineapples have historically been a symbol of wealth, from the fruit's royal origins in the seventeenth century to the famed occasion when the Duchess d'Abrantès' pineapple was purchased for twenty louis.⁶ By the eighteenth century the pineapple was the ultimate emblem of luxury and frivolous artificiality.⁷ Sally's pineapple is no exception and costs a great deal of time, effort and money. Her sister-in-law, Grizzle, combs the country for three days and nights in search of the fruit, and only gains a pineapple after paying an extortionate bribe to a gardener. As Smollett has informed the reader that Sally is only feigning maternal longing for a pineapple, in order to avoid Grizzle's tiresome and over-zealous care, the expense of the pineapple seems especially wasteful. This careless luxury is highlighted when after Grizzle's extensive efforts, Sally changes her mind.

Although Grizzle's character is designed to exasperate, she is also shown to have good intentions.⁸ Smollett portrays her traditional understanding of maternal imagination; "if her sister's longing was balked, the child might be affected with some disagreeable mark, or deplorable disease" (30). This belief explains why Grizzle goes to such lengths to meet Sally's capricious desires, even the more ridiculous or unreasonable requests. Of course Grizzle's efforts are designed for comic effect, but it is the theory of maternal imagination that justifies the length and detail of the episode. Sally fully exploits Grizzle's faith in maternal longing; as Smollett wryly notes, "her longings were not restricted to the demands of her palate and stomach, but also affected all the other organs of sense, and even invaded her imagination, which at this period seemed to be strangely diseased" (33). Sally preys upon Grizzle's fear of miscarriage and appropriates the privileges of maternal longing to increase expenditure, thus asserting her authority in the Pickle household.

Sally's longing for the pineapple is occasionally cited by scholars of maternal imagination, however she also fabricates maternal longing for several other items. She requests a fricassee of French frogs, prompting Grizzle to undertake an uncomfortable, dangerous and expensive sea-voyage to Boulogne. Stretching credulity, Sally also expresses an inexplicable desire to pull three black hairs from the beard of her irascible neighbour, Commodore Trunnion.⁹ In this particular case, Sally's longing forces the submission of two highly stubborn characters. Grizzle is personally mortified when Trunnion twice calls her a "bitch" (34, 35) and damns her interference. Furthermore, the cantankerous, but kindly

Trunnion himself is severely humiliated when Sally triumphantly plucks hair from his beard with a pair of tweezers. Alexandra Shepard remarks that beard-pulling has historically been a significant gesture and indicated a serious undermining of masculine authority (2003, 146).¹⁰ Sally's longing for beard hair therefore challenges social hierarchy, as well as reordering her own domestic affairs.

Sally's final demand is to use a beautiful porcelain chamber pot belonging to a neighbouring lady. Not only does this longing humble Grizzle, who "shuddered at the first hint, she received of her sister's desire to possess this piece of furniture" (36), but the item itself is a symbol of affluence. G J Barker-Benfield has noted that the china chamber pot was a sign of wealth and success by the mid-eighteenth century, as it was "made of a fine glazed white ware... which now could easily be cleaned and therefore 'shown'" (100). Certainly in *Peregrine Pickle*, the chamber pot's owner "cherished it as a utensil of inestimable value" (36). Sally claims that her desire for this object meant she was unable to "make use of any other convenience, and was threatened with a very dangerous suppression" (36). Needless to say, Grizzle eventually procures the pot.

Sally's longings are characterised by the value and rarity of the object, but also by a tendency to refuse the item once it has been procured with difficulty and expense. Harriet Guest has noted that mid-century economic commentators complained of women who would go shopping, create fuss and disorder for the tradesman of the shop, and then fail to purchase anything (2000, 75–79).¹¹ I suggest that by changing her mind at the last minute after requests for uncommon and costly items, Sally Pickle resembles the female timewasters that Guest describes. Smollett makes it clear that Sally's real pleasure lies in forcing people to bend to her caprice. Her longings create mischief primarily for Grizzle, but also for the people involved in the transactions of the longed-for item. The pineapple gardener, the crew of the ship to France, Commodore Trunnion and the owner of the chamber pot are all affected. Eventually word of Sally's maternal longing reaches Sally's husband, Gam Pickle, and Smollett describes how "Mr. Pickle began to be out of humour at *the expense to which he was exposed* by the caprice of his wife" (37, my italics). Smollett's phrasing allows the sentence to be interpreted in two complementary ways; Gam is unhappy with the literal expense of his wife's antics, and he is also dismayed at the ridicule cast upon him, as the hapless husband of a demanding wife. Smollett's use of the word "exposed" suggests that Gam is not particularly concerned by his wife's dominance within the home, but

is distressed by other people learning of his inconsequential domestic status. Karen Harvey (2012) has persuasively argued that domestic management and expenditure were a vital measure of eighteenth-century masculinity. According to Harvey's thesis, Gam's manliness is called into question when it appears that he has allowed his wife to undermine the Pickle domestic oeconomy. Although Sally prudently puts an end to her longings after her husband's remonstrance, the effect remains, and she is established as the true mistress of the house.

In case the reader has missed the significance of Sally's longings as a strategy to assert her dominance, Smollett repeats events in a less subtle fashion after Grizzle has married Trunnion and believes herself to be with child. Smollett explicitly links maternal longing with expense and female power:

She [Grizzle] knew this was the proper season for vindicating her own sovereignty, and accordingly employed the means which nature had put in her power. There was not a rare piece of furniture or apparel for which she did not long; and one day, as she went to church, seeing Lady Stately's equipage arrive, she suddenly fainted away. Her husband, whose vanity had never been so perfectly gratified as with this promised harvest of his own sowing, took the alarm immediately; and in order to prevent relapses of that kind, which might be attended with fatal consequence to his hope, gave her leave to bespeak a coach, horses, and liveries, to her own liking. (64–65)

Again, the possibility of “fatal consequence” ensures that the pregnant woman's wishes are instantly gratified. However as Grizzle only experiences a phantom pregnancy, she does not truly “earn” the privileges of her longings. Smollett's portrayal of this incident clearly depicts Grizzle to have short-changed her husband, and raises the issue of investing such hope, time and money in a false prospect. The bursting of the Trunnions' auspicious pregnancy bubble returns to the concerns of Midriff's pamphlet and the collapse of the stock market.

As Midriff's pamphlet demonstrates, women were believed to lack self-restraint, causing them to be particularly vulnerable to the seductions of luxury and intemperance.¹² Valeria Finucci has observed that as new groceries became available during the eighteenth century, the interpretation of apparent marks of maternal imagination evolved to correspond with the new goods. She explains, “when the use of coffee became common, a number of newborns were identified as having coffee-coloured

pigment stains” (2001, 57). Literary scholars such as Nancy Armstrong (1987) and Mary Poovey (1985) have posed the argument that eighteenth-century women were encouraged to be economical and observe that conduct manuals advised women – and especially newly married wives – to practice the virtue of frugality. An anonymous mid-century conduct book *The Virgin’s Nosegay* (1744), aimed at the “new married lady”, cautioned:

Remember, that children and fools want everything because they want sense to distinguish or make proper applications: and therefore there cannot be a stronger evidence of a weak understanding, than the making of too large a catalogue of things necessary. (151)

However, in recent years this thesis has been challenged by scholars who suggest that women were actually encouraged to spend, but only while displaying a discriminating consumerism (Guest 2000; Tavor Bannet 2000; Clery 2004). Scholars of money and credit such as Catherine Ingrassia (1998) and Margot C Finn (2003) have observed the way that the preoccupation with careful budgeting was innately linked to anxieties regarding unchecked female sexuality.¹³ Nevertheless as Sally and Grizzle show, when a wife becomes pregnant, the struggle to contain female sexuality becomes largely replaced with a wider struggle for domestic authority. Arguably this is because a (married) pregnant woman’s sexuality is to a certain extent, negated, as she has already secured the promise of a lawful heir. However a pregnant woman’s domestic authority remains negotiable, due to the uncertain nature of such a promise. Feminist critics such as Ruth Perry (1990) argue that during the later eighteenth century, maternity is offered as the opposite of sexuality; however, Karen Harvey (2004) describes how pregnant bodies could be portrayed as sexually attractive in erotica. Harvey’s claim could be extended into fiction, as pregnant characters such as Rosalie in Charlotte Smith’s *Montalbert* (1795) are shown to be sexually desirable, yet Rosalie is the exception rather than the rule. I argue that the pregnant characters of ramble novels lack sex appeal and are not portrayed as particularly desirable. I posit that in these novels pregnancy replaces the power of manipulating male sexual desire with the power of producing an heir – although obviously this only applies to legitimate pregnancies.

Chris Roulston has argued that novelistic presentations of marriage in the second half of the eighteenth century were “part of a cultural awareness that bourgeois marriage was the place where the individual could

develop an autonomy independently of economics” (127). Yet the trope of maternal longing allows a pregnant wife to acquire a larger degree of both personal *and* economic freedom. Although Sally’s pregnancy is perhaps the most well known, there are a large number of fictional pregnant characters that also explicitly manipulate their family and friends. George Alexander Stevens’ *The Dramatic History of Master Edward* (1763) depicts the hero’s mother as a shrewd manipulator of maternal longing. The pregnant Chloe Lywhyddwhuydd “told her husband she longed for a bite or two at his partner Thomas’ nose” (122). Chloe’s husband is unaware that his wife’s request is motivated by petty revenge, as Thomas had accidentally spilt a pint of porter upon her finest dress. Another case of pregnant gratification appears in *Pamela in the High Life* (1741), John Kelly’s unauthorised sequel to Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). Pamela drinks three bottles of wine, and reasons that pregnant women should always be indulged, claiming that “if her appetite is not gratified, the child she goes with will bear the mark of the thing she longed for” (127). These pregnant characters show considerable agency and generally achieve the object of their desires by appropriating the discourse of maternal imagination for their own private purposes. Novelists of the mid-century actively summon the discourse of maternal imagination in episodes such as these. Playing with the satirical residue of the Toft affair, novelists simultaneously employ and parody the folkloric traditions of maternal imagination in order to illustrate female scheming that might disturb the “natural” order. Pregnant fictional characters are often shown to profit from their maternal longings, gaining temporary power and disrupting the domestic hierarchy. The persistent appearance of this trope is arresting when one examines contemporary obstetric opinion upon the subject of maternal longing.

§ MEDICAL PERSPECTIVES: MATERNAL LONGING VS. MATERNAL PASSION

From the 1730s onwards, midwifery and obstetric guides largely continued to adopt James Blondel’s approach to maternal imagination – at least when they mentioned the concept at all. While accidents, sudden shocks or distress were admitted to be dangerous for the development of the foetus, other aspects of maternal imagination wisdom were ignored, subdued or dismissed. Obstetric literature tended to avoid any in depth

discussion of longings for food, drink or objects, dreams, imprinting direct images onto the skin and literal reproductions (such as Mary Toft’s rabbits). Physicians and man-midwives had become wary of the discourse, aware that they might become the next duped St. André figure, targeted and mocked by the press. In 1746 the *Gentleman’s Magazine* featured a story redolent of the Toft affair:

The wife of one Rich. Haynes of Chelsea, aged 35 and mother of 16 fine children, was delivered of a monster, with nose and eyes like a lyon, no palate to the mouth, hair on the shoulders, claws like a lion instead of fingers, no breast-bone, something surprising out of the navel as big as an egg, and one foot longer than the other. – She had been to see the lions in the Tower, where she was much terrified by the old lion’s noise. (cited in Porter 1987, 20fn. 50)

Although the case of the “lion-child” attracted some attention, most physicians and man-midwives refused to be drawn.¹⁴ The Toft affair had taught the medical profession to exercise extreme caution when faced with potential cases of maternal imagination. As examples from novels such as *Peregrine Pickle* illustrate, satires of maternal imagination remained popular during the mid-century period. Indeed, references to medical matters often appeared in novels; Smollett’s later novel *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771) incorporated the various diseases and treatments of Matthew Bramble as a plot device, while many other novelists employed contemporary medical understandings of venereal disease, depression, madness or nervousness in their work.¹⁵ Inevitably, the grosser bodily functions invited particular attention from satirists. An anonymous pamphlet entitled *A Letter to a Little Doctor in Scavenger Square Occasion’d by his Curioys [sic] Dissertation in Latin Concerning a S-rr-v-r-nce Overbaked* (1731) attacked Dr. Robert Porter’s treatise on constipation and used sarcasm and snide jokes to criticise Porter’s pretensions. By a curious coincidence, Porter had addressed his treatise to the Imaginationist physician, Daniel Turner. Although *Little Doctor’s* primary target is Robert Porter, the author cannot resist mocking Turner’s involvement in the Imaginationist argument:

However I shall not go about to extenuate or tarnish the reputation your good neighbour [Turner] may have acquired by any of his writing, and particularly his late learned altercation and bickerings with a learned

brother [Blondel], whether a child was ever born with a cherry on his cheek, or whether he ever bought a custard or a cheesecake with him into this world. (16)

Bodily processes, and especially the issue of maternal imagination, were clearly subjects that permeated the already porous boundaries of medicine and literature. Moreover, the appearance of such topics in fiction was usually heavily tinged with satire and derision. In *Peregrine Pickle* Smollett, both a physician and a novelist notorious for his preoccupation with the human body, treats pregnancy and the notion of maternal imagination in precisely this fashion.

Aileen Douglas has argued convincingly that medical and fictional texts were read by the same audience as both the *Monthly Review* and *Critical Review* – which was edited by Smollett – featured articles upon both subjects. Both journals “commonly abstracted technical scientific work, as well as providing assessments of, and extracts from, recent fiction” (1995, 22).¹⁶ It is probable that most novelists would have been aware of the maternal imagination debate, but the medically-trained Smollett would have been particularly familiar with the concept, not least because he had recently edited William Smellie’s seminal *A Treatise Upon Midwifery* (1751). As George S Rousseau states, “Smollett’s extensive reading in obstetrics in the library of Smellie, and earlier in Dr. James Douglas’s library, would have revealed a wealth of real cases from which to create fictional characters and episodes relating to pregnancy” (1971, 97).¹⁷

The anachronistic appearance of maternal longings in ramble novels is thus not necessarily due to ignorance of the latest developments in medical thought, but perhaps a deliberate attempt to invoke certain older and folkloric associations of the discourse. This could be to cast aspersions on the integrity of a character such as Sally Pickle, or simply for general amusement and ridicule. For instance, the novelist John Hill included an incident satirising the Royal Society’s gullibility in *The Adventures of George Edwards* (1751).¹⁸ Lampooning the idea of maternal imagination, Hill explained that a red-breasted child had acquired its appearance, not from the mother’s touching of a robin’s breast, but when she committed adultery with a servant named Robin. Clearly, any writer of a medical text concerning an impolite subject needed to proceed with the utmost caution, to avoid castigation not only from physicians, but also from literary authors.

The discourse of maternal imagination as it appears in midwifery guides of the period is consequently marked with a kind of guarded uncertainty. Writers struggle between traditional views of portentous births, scientific developments regarding female anatomy, embarrassing associations of the Toft affair, and dawning ideas regarding passion at the forefront of the culture of sensibility. A few physicians committed their pens to keeping the Imaginationist debate alive in Blondel and Turner's mode of polite medicine, however these were an exception to the general rule.¹⁹ The mid-century midwifery guide formed part of rapidly developing discursive practice, with scores of texts published between 1730 and the end of the century. They tend to follow Blondel's lead in emphasising the dangers of anxiety and shock for a pregnant woman, yet in contrast to Blondel's confident tone, there is an unwillingness to absolutely dismiss other forms of maternal imagination. The following section will examine opinions on maternal longing and maternal passion from midwifery texts of the mid-century period.

The experienced and literate midwife Sarah Stone provides a rare example of a midwifery text authored by a woman in *A Compleat Practice of Midwifery* (1737).²⁰ Stone sets herself apart from what she portrays as the superstitious ignorance of other female midwives, with references to thirty years of practice and her own experiences as a mother. Her text, based on over forty case studies, aims to educate female practitioners and avoid the interference of young, inexperienced man-midwives. Although she does not discuss the subject at length, Stone displays a marked ambivalence towards the concept of maternal imagination. Her attitude towards the discourse is curious, as she is eager to present herself as a rational midwife exercising empirical observation, rather than a rural, uninformed woman.²¹

Sarah Stone claims "that a pregnant woman witnessing an abnormal birth will reproduce the same abnormality herself" (21–22) and that "to long for anything in pregnancy and not get it will endanger both mother and child" (74). Stone's language of literal reproduction and longing alludes to traditional beliefs, but her emphasis on anxiety and diet updates the concept of maternal imagination to a post-Blondel definition. Stone stresses the dangers of a troubled mind for a pregnant woman and therefore endorses the notion of maternal passion, however she also employs this logic to support the idea of maternal longing.²² Her phrasing contains the suggestion that if the mother believes in maternal longing, any denial of the longing will create anxiety – and therefore gives rise to a case of

maternal passion. Such ambivalence characterises the transitional nature of the discourse of maternal imagination during this period.

Stone's treatise is highly unusual as female midwives were generally illiterate, and even man-midwives were often unable to publish accounts of their work for financial or practical reasons. However the rising popularity of the man-midwife, who possessed the education, means, and inclination required to see his advice in print, also gave rise to a profusion of male-authored midwifery treatises. Laurence Sterne poked fun at this fashion for midwifery guides in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) when he announced that the inept Dr. Slop “had expressly wrote a five shillings book upon the subject of midwifery” (I: 41). Usually with a focus on the instruments and expertise men could bring to the field of midwifery, these texts are universally eager to demonstrate Enlightenment learning and anatomical knowledge, with the twin aims of promoting the profession as well as their own private practice. With one exception, these treatises either dismiss or ignore maternal imagination as beneath their intellectual concerns.²³ Influential figures such as Fielding Ould and Benjamin Pugh allowed that “the passions of the mind” (Ould 1742, 73; Pugh 1754, 10) could induce a miscarriage, but avoided any in depth discussion of maternal longing. At the same time respected man-midwives William Giffard, Edmund Chapman, Exton Brudenell and Giles Watts all published texts upon the subject of midwifery, but none of them mentioned maternal imagination.²⁴ This reluctance to engage with any theory of maternal imagination contrasts with the extended treatment of the subject by earlier medical writers such as John Maubray, Daniel Turner and James Blondel.

Evidently most midwifery texts did not fully engage with the discourse of maternal imagination during the mid-century. It was possibly too soon after the Toft affair for any medical practitioner to risk his reputation with an extended enquiry into the question. Certainly the satirical treatment of the discourse in novels made it difficult for anyone to forget the ridiculous or salacious details that had tainted the reputation of Toft's physicians. Alternatively, the absence of medical opinion on maternal imagination during this period could perhaps indicate that the belief was so antiquated, that man-midwives simply did not feel the need to address it. I argue, however, that later interest from two of the century's most celebrated practitioners William Smellie and William Hunter repudiates this idea.

As I shall further discuss in [Chapter 4](#), William Smellie was eighteenth-century Britain’s most innovative, well-known and successful man-midwife. In light of Smellie’s training programme, which educated nine hundred pupils in ten years, it is difficult to overestimate his influence. Consequently Smellie’s views on maternal imagination are of some significance as they would have undoubtedly carried weight with a great number of practitioners. Smellie recommended managing the mother’s emotions and superstitions, but acknowledged that this would not be easy. Unlike his contemporary Thomas Young, Smellie did not include a specific section on “the Effects of the Imagination in pregnant women” (1750, 6) in his published lectures. Instead, Smellie gave more general advice regarding the mother’s emotional state. In *A Treatise Upon Midwifery* (1752), Smellie dismissed the power of a mother’s imagination to directly imprint images or distort the foetus’ appearance, but nonetheless underlined the dangers of maternal passion. He warned his students that “anxiety, misfortune, and disappointment, frequently reduce women in labour, to the verge of death” (II: 301). Smellie advised placating the mother with a placebo “to please her imagination” (I: 222) and help to overcome her superstitious beliefs. He described the needless anxiety of mothers who were convinced that their baby would be affected by their maternal imaginings:

I have delivered many women of children who retained no marks, although the mothers had been frightened and surprised by disagreeable objects, and were extremely apprehensive of such consequences. One woman in particular, when three months gone with child, was surprised upon opening the door, by a beggar’s thrusting a bare stump in her face, a circumstance which alarmed her to such a degree, that she made herself and all about her unhappy, being fully persuaded that her child would be born with the same mutilation; and indeed she could scarce be convinced of the contrary, when she felt the child’s arms, after it was delivered. (1768, II: 186–187).

It is interesting to note that Smellie employed the specific example of a beggar’s stump to refute the theory of maternal imagination.²⁵ A contemporary man-midwife Henry Bracken described an extremely similar case involving a one-armed vagrant, however Bracken used the case to *support* the idea of maternal imagination. As we have seen in my Introduction, the example of a one-armed beggar had already been used as “evidence” in Daniel Turner’s chapter on maternal imagination

“Of Spots and Marks”. This example was also selected for special attack by James Blondel in *The Power of the Mother’s Imagination over the Foetus* (1729, 57). The case of the one-armed beggar is therefore a curiously versatile archetype, as it instantly evokes the discourse of maternal imagination and yet can be harnessed to argue both for and against the same theory. The story carries discursive weight due to its historicity, regardless of the point it is used to support. In this way the story of the one-armed beggar resembles the discursive duality of the Toft affair, as it simultaneously confirms and rejects the concept of maternal imagination.

Smellie also noted that mothers might invent stories of maternal imagination *after* the child’s deformity was visible. He observed that, “I delivered a child lately who wanted all the fingers of one hand, a circumstance which was concealed from the mother for several days: and on asking her before she knew of it, she acknowledged that nothing extraordinary had happened to her during her pregnancy” (1768, I: 188). Despite these clear-cut conclusions, Smellie nevertheless included two examples of what he warily framed as maternal longing, although he avoided the term itself. Both cases involved women who longed for a certain food (respectively plums and potatoes (1768, I: 185;186)) and gave birth to children with small tumours resembling such foods. Smellie’s ambivalence is interesting as although he refuted maternal longing to a certain extent, he remained cautious, avoiding an absolute dismissal of the phenomenon. Such evasion on the part of one of Britain’s leading obstetricians demonstrates the uncertainty surrounding the maternal imagination during this period. It seems entirely possible that this uncertainty was a residual effect of the Toft debacle, which had brought lasting humiliation, suspicion and scorn upon the profession of man-midwives.

Smellie’s pupil and lodger, William Hunter exercised a similarly strong influence over the reputation and practice of man-midwifery. In addition to his School of Anatomy, Hunter built an extremely lucrative midwifery practice and attended London’s rich and fashionable pregnant women (Porter 1985b). Lisa Forman Cody has described how Hunter apparently conducted an experiment concerning maternal imagination at the British Lying-in Hospital. He asked the women to write down their thoughts during pregnancy in order to eventually compare their answers with their babies’ appearance.²⁶ Hunter’s experiment shows that the question of maternal imagination was still very much open, even into the 1770s.

It would appear that although every midwife believed that maternal passion could cause problems for the pregnant woman and her baby,

midwives of both sexes and backgrounds were often reluctant to become drawn into any definitive conclusion regarding the possibilities of maternal longing.²⁷ Maternal passion was presented in medical texts as a serious threat; unlike maternal longing, it did not produce ridiculous rabbit births or anecdotes with the potential for symbolism and satire. On the contrary, maternal passion caused harrowing, non-mimetic consequences of still-birth, miscarriage and premature labour. Narrowing the concept of maternal imagination to purely maternal passion in midwifery guides problematises the persistent appearance of maternal longing in contemporary novels. That is to say, novels incorporated a number of maternal imagination forms that were unsanctioned by medical experts, such as longings, dreams and visual stimulants. Longings were casually included as plot devices to identify characters, such the respective strawberry birthmarks in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and the anonymously authored *The History of Charlotte Summers* (1753).²⁸ Maternal dreams fell under a category of maternal imagination that was completely ignored by midwifery treatises, but regularly featured in folklore and novels that entered the discourse. For example Sally Pickle dreams of a delicious pineapple, Mrs. Random dreams that she gives birth to a tennis ball in *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), and Mrs. Ramble dreams that a roe-buck goes its way out of her stomach in *The History of Will Ramble* (1754).²⁹ Yet another category, eschewed in midwifery texts but appearing occasionally in novels of the mid-century, was visual stimulation in the tradition of the hairy woman featured in *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. After her feigned longing to bite Thomas' nose, the character of Chloe Lywhyddwhuydd in *Master Edward* experiences a case of "real" maternal imagination. Hit upon the nose by a playing card featuring the knave of clubs, she falls into labour and gives birth to a child with a curiously knavish character. Although many of these episodes involving maternal imagination are satirical, incidental, or in the case of Chloe Lywhyddwhuydd, a rather strained case of metaphorical displacement, they circulate strong currents of the discourse that simply do not appear in medical discussion of the concept.

These instances of maternal longing in ramble fiction are notable not only for their contrast with contemporary obstetric representations, but also within the history of the novel. Amatory fiction of the early eighteenth century often included episodes of maternal passion, but very rarely referred to incidents of maternal longing or dreaming. Usually pregnant women of amatory fiction invited pity, such as Haywood's Cleomira in *The*

British Recluse (1722). Cleomira admits that “the horrors of my mind had such an influence over my body that it was impossible I shou’d be able to bring a living child into the world” (67) and indeed, her child is stillborn. Even villains inspired sympathy when afflicted by maternal passion; in *The Life and Adventures of Lady Lucy* (1726), Penelope Aubin’s Henrietta falls a victim to her own tricks when she is startled by a murder (which she has accidentally helped to orchestrate). Henrietta “was so ill with the fright she had suffer’d that fatal night that had undone them all, that she was deliver’d of a dead child” (53).³⁰ In contrast, Smollett’s extended and comic exploration of maternal longing begins the first of many novelistic considerations of an older, folkloric tradition of maternal imagination.

The number and variety of maternal imagination models in fiction of the mid-century is notably high. As a literary genre already preoccupied with legal and cultural changes in marriage and family structure, I want to suggest that novels created a space to explore the degree of a pregnant woman’s power. While medical literature seems to limit the concept of maternal imagination, pregnant characters in ramble novels such as *Peregrine Pickle* explicitly draw upon the multiple nebulous ideas that circulated in folklore concerning maternal imagination. In mid-century fiction therefore, there is both more opportunity for a pregnant character to acquire power, as well as a subtle sense of alarm regarding female agency. Maternal imagination appears in a variety of forms in novels of the mid-century, and queries to what extent and cost a pregnant woman should be indulged. Whereas Sally Pickle tests her domestic authority in relation to Grizzle and her general household, other pregnant characters employ the discourse of maternal imagination specifically in dealings with their husbands. Invoking the threat of maternal imagination, a pregnant wife could gain more influence and control of her husband – and therefore of her own social, economic and familial position. With this in mind, I now turn to changes in the legal and social definitions of marriage during the mid-eighteenth century.

§ MARRIAGE

The eighteenth century was a period of great change for the institution of marriage.³¹ Ruth Perry has observed that marriage was increasingly the central method for the transmission of property and the creation of business networks. She states that “marriage was the lynchpin of a system that transferred the sexual, social, productive, and reproductive services of

women" (2004, 196).³² In *A Serious Proposal for Promoting Lawful Marriage* (1750) E Cother lamented this view of women as mere vehicles for property. He provides an anecdote of a disastrous marriage promoted by the guardian of two young women:

Now this Gentleman was one of those wise people, who consider a woman only as a skin of parchment, whereon to engross the conveyance of so much land to one's own use; or as a stained canvass, whereon to continue the family pictures; or as the most legal method of strengthening and securing so much interest in a borough election. (27)

Cother's chagrined tone suggests that this mode of thinking was becoming old-fashioned in certain circles. Karen Harvey has argued that domestic patriarchy underwent a distinct change during this time, as there was a growing emphasis on other members of the family, rather than just the patriarch (2012, 5). This change shifted the balance of power between husbands and wives; a point that recurs again and again in fiction.

Eve Tavor Bannet has commented that "if any event in the eighteenth century qualifies as a watershed for sexual politics and family life, it is the 1753 Hardwicke Marriage Act" (94). The Act stipulated that the marriage ceremony had to be performed under certain specific conditions or the marriage would not be considered legally binding. Significant changes included parental consent for minors under the age of twenty-one, calling of the banns or a special licence, and the use of an ordained Anglican clergyman. The Marriage Act removed any uncertainty for those aware of the regulations, but left the uninformed extremely vulnerable. A poorly educated woman might agree to sex under the impression that she was married to her lover, only to discover that legally, he was under no obligation to support her or any children they might have.

Critics have consistently interpreted the Marriage Act as a means to regulate the production of children and the transmission of property, at the expense of individual women. David Lemmings (1996) reads the Act as a patriarchal "attempt to tighten up the rules at a time when the marriage competition was being played for increasingly high stakes" (358).³³ As Felicity Nussbaum (1995) has argued, legitimate reproduction was part of a wider commerce as the empire required more bodies to people the empire.³⁴ However, Rebecca Probert has suggested that the Marriage Act actually changed very little for women in real terms; she

claims that the sort of man who would seduce and impregnate a woman without marrying her *after* the Act, was the same sort of man who would have been careful to evade any actual verbal contracts *before* the Act (2005, 256).

Probert's general argument is persuasive, yet it fails to take into account the Marriage Act's more insidious legal adjustment to female authority. Lemmings notes that the Act preferred fathers and guardians before mothers when acquiring consent for the marriage license, even if the father were insane or overseas (349). Moreover remarried mothers were not allowed any role in the decision-making process for licensing the marriage of minors. Although the Marriage Act did not technically reduce women's power – mothers had previously had no official control over their children's marriages – it effectively placed the legal powers of sanction or veto with the father over the mother in the majority of situations for which the Act was relevant. When combined with the legal restrictions imposed on female property ownership during the late seventeenth century, these details appear significant. For example, the common law of coverture contributed to a major restriction on female property ownership. Once a woman married, she ceased to be a *feme sole* with her own identity, property and right to make contracts in her own name. As her legal status was subsumed into her husband's, the married woman became instead a *feme covert*, unable to own property, choose her place of residence, sign contracts or retain her own wages. Perry has described the way that common law limited women's inheritance of land, ecclesiastical law reduced women's right to own moveable goods, and women were displaced from profitable labour. Nicola Jane Phillips reasons that equity law acted in some measure to counter these changes, however this response involved a time-consuming and expensive legal process that was certainly not available to all, or even most, women (2006, 39).³⁵ Perry argues that as women were edged out of property ownership or labour, "they were increasingly defined by their capacity for sexual service and reproduction" (35). The restrictions placed on the mother's role by the Marriage Act therefore further diminished the small amount of domestic or familial influence a woman could legally possess.

Feminist interpretations of the longstanding "separate spheres" model have suggested that although women lacked legal power, they could exercise considerable influence within the household. Nancy Armstrong has made strong claims for the power of the domestic woman; "to her went authority over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures,

and kinship relations, and under her jurisdiction the most basic qualities of human identity were supposed to develop" (1987, 3).³⁶ Although the theory of separate spheres has been challenged and significantly revised in recent years, literary writing of the mid-century undeniably engages with the theory through its explorations of marriage and domestic hierarchy.³⁷ E J Clery has observed that Samuel Richardson's novels examine the level of female influence "through the ranks of society and outwards to incorporate ever more complex networks of kinship and private patronage" (2004, 98). As Clery notes however, Richardson's exploration and idealisation of domestic female influence belies the fact that his novels were written for the public sphere. Jane Collier's social satire, *An Essay on The Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* (1753), wryly remarked on the idea of separate spheres and claimed that despite the patriarchal English legal system, women held a large degree of influence. Collier explains that wives exercise true domestic authority, as they possess "interior power, arising from the affection of the person [the husband] on whom they are to work" (9). Collier observes:

The visible power of the husband comes next to that of the parent: for I think it has been determined in our public courts of justice by some unpolite professors of the law, that a husband may exercise his marital authority so far, as to give his wife moderate correction.

How happy it is for English wives, that the source of custom is so much stronger than our laws! How fortunate for them, that the men, either thro' affection or indolence, have given up their legal rights; and have, by custom, placed all the power in the wife!. (45)

Although this section is ostensibly addressed to husbands, the essay as a whole was "written first and foremost for an audience of women in their capacity as wives, mothers, friends, and the mistresses of servants" (Craik 2006, xi). One of the most well-known conduct books *The Lady's New Year's Gift: or, Advice to a Daughter* (1688) by George Saville, Marquis of Halifax, similarly advised newly married wives, "You have more strength in your looks than we have in our laws; and more power by your tears, than we by our arguments" (21).³⁸ Although the actual level of this sphere of female influence can only be anecdotal, the rhetoric is employed frequently enough to form part of the distinctive response to changes in marriage law.

If a wife's feelings could be used as a form of influence over her husband, then pregnancy and maternal imagination could be played as the trump card of emotional blackmail. A pregnant woman could use the danger posed by maternal imagination as a form of imaginary "equity", to redress any, particularly financial, issues in the marriage that she believed to be unfair. The entire period of pregnancy could therefore be envisioned as a nine-month chancery suit, in which the pregnant woman sued for (temporary) separate property denied by common law. Fictional representations of the concept of maternal imagination are often presented in this fashion during the mid-century period.

Pregnant women could potentially wield such power because children were essential to uphold patriarchal law and culture. Alan McFarlane argues that "the central characteristic of marriage in most societies has been that it is entered into in order to have children. Children are seen as wealth and as an expansion of individual and family power and position" (1986, 51). As marriage was indeed generally considered to be a pronatalist affair, pregnancy was the ultimate sign of conjugal success. Linda A Pollock has observed that pregnancy was "a public symbol of intimacy in a marriage and affirmation of the contentment of the two parties involved" (1990, 40). Successful conception was also an indication of the husband's sexual prowess, as common lore claimed that a woman could only conceive if she reached orgasm. Pregnancy was therefore thrice celebrated as a provision of manpower for the nation, and clear evidence of both parties' fertility, as well as showcasing the happiness of the married couple.

Pregnancy provided the perfect opportunity for the wife to put her "looks" and "tears" to good use. A woman could even feign pregnancy in an attempt to gain better treatment. During the early stages of gestation, one relied chiefly on a woman's word to be informed of her condition – as Smollett's character Grizzle and her hyped-up phantom pregnancy illustrates.³⁹ After all, popular wisdom held that women would feign illness in order to visit a spa town or receive special treatment, to the extent that "novels of sensibility suggested that women's nervous illness could be a means of self-preservation" (Barker-Benfield 1992, 32). In a similar vein, the recurring eighteenth-century fashion for women to sport "pregnancy pads" underneath their gowns could indicate that women were aware of a pregnant woman's potential power.⁴⁰ William Alexander's *History of Women* (1779) argued that "about the years 1759 and 1760 every woman, old and young, had the appearance of being big with child"

(II: 180). This ambiguity concerning which women were actually pregnant, could confer the associated power of maternal imagination to all women who had the appearance of being with child.

As Forman Cody observes, "contemporaries believed that pregnancy was an intense and vulnerable state" (2005, 33). The risk of a woman's maternal imagination harming or even terminating the foetus was considered to be a very real threat, especially by those individuals who had a vested interest in a successful birth such as the woman's husband and wider family. A woman might use her pregnancy to gain ascendancy over her husband, or even to assert herself over other women, as Smollett's Sally Pickle does. Later in the nineteenth century, the author Mary Shelley would record a rare victory in her troubled relationship with her step-sister, Jane Clairmont that was a direct result of Mary's own pregnant state. After Jane became almost hysterical, believing that a pillow had supernaturally moved from her bed to a chair, she forced herself to be calmer after hearing that Mary was with child. As Percy Bysshe Shelley records it, "I informed her of Mary's pregnancy, [and] this seemed to check her violence . . ." (1814, 33).⁴¹

Of course medical literature strongly supported the notion that a pregnant woman could damage herself or the foetus with the power of her maternal passion. Midwifery treatises and female health guides of the mid-eighteenth century all stressed the importance of placating a pregnant woman's emotions. The authors of pregnancy guides such as William Buchan and Martha Mears particularly underscored the importance of the father during pregnancy, as they claimed he could soothe the mother, protect her, and alleviate her worries. Mears explained that "this is not making yourself the slave of caprice or female tyranny: it is bearing with the infirmities of your dearest friend: it is preserving a wife and child from certain injury, perhaps from death" (1797, 32). Such advice suggests that the pregnant woman could hold a degree of power, although as Forman Cody remarks, "the common reality of husbands' beating and even murdering their wives during pregnancy indicates how idealised all of these prescriptions were" (2005, 33).

In fiction at least, almost all pregnant women appropriate power through the trope of maternal passion. Although this trope is less obvious and less comic than Sally's Pickle's maternal longing, it is more suited to the sentimental or domestic novel of the mid-eighteenth century. It is also important to recognise that just because the pregnant women of sentimental novels do not make their agenda as plain as Sally

Pickle, this does not mean that their form of maternal imagination is any less effective or profitable. John Kelly's *Pamela in the High Life* (1741) included the trope of maternal passion directly in connection with material gain. When a highwayman attempts to rob Pamela and her pregnant sister-in-law, she calls upon the discourse of maternal imagination and beseeches, "My sister is with Child; pray, Sir, don't frighten her" (249). In light of this information, the highwayman chivalrously excludes the pregnant woman from his robbery and lets her keep her watch. Jane Austen also made use of the trope as a plot device in *Mansfield Park* (1814), when Mrs. Price exploits the occasion of her ninth lying-in to repair the breach between herself and her sisters. Mrs. Price's pregnancy gains her important family connections, baby linen and money, as well as providing the impetus for the entire plot. However the trope could also be used to a pregnant woman's disadvantage, as in *Will Ramble* where Mr. Ramble hides gambling debts from his pregnant wife. Ramble's excuse for the deceit is that the distress caused by knowledge of the debts would cause complications for the pregnancy. In another of Smollett's novels, *Roderick Random*, the hero's mother dies shortly after a premature labour, which was triggered by her obdurate father-in-law's harsh refusal to provide an allowance. Similarly in Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) a minor character named Mrs. Vere gives birth to a stillborn child after her husband's death leaves her at the financial mercy of his relatives. All of these sentimental episodes clearly link the woman's maternal passion to her personal and economic fortune, mirroring the ramble novel's trope of maternal longing. Throughout this burgeoning of the discourse of maternal imagination in literature, the extent of the pregnant woman's agency, responsibility and power is constantly tested and measured.

Pregnant women are rarely the main protagonists in either ramble or sentimental fiction of the mid-eighteenth century.⁴² However there is one notable exception in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition*, as Pamela is pregnant for over half of the novel and in due course gives birth to seven children.⁴³ I argue that Pamela continually makes use of the threat presented by maternal passion to gain authority, material goods and a smoother relationship with her husband Mr. B. Early in *Her Exalted Condition*, Sir Simon Darnford makes the power dynamics of pregnancy abundantly clear when he refuses to allow Polly to visit Pamela. Writing to Mr. B., Darnford exclaims, "What! You are to shew her [Polly], in your lady's case, all the game of a lying in, I suppose"

(Richardson 1741, III: 52). The following section will examine the way that Richardson plays the “game” of maternal passion in *Her Exalted Condition*.

§ PAMELA IN HER EXALTED CONDITON

Samuel Richardson’s first novel *Pamela, Or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) was an unexpected and overwhelming success. Thomas Keymer and Peter Sabor estimate that over twenty thousand copies of the novel had been sold by the end of 1741, in addition to piracies and unauthorised sequels (2005, 20). Richardson’s eagerly anticipated sequel, *Her Exalted Condition*, continues to narrate the heroine’s life in epistolary form as she negotiates the trials and pitfalls of married life with Mr. B. There has been much critical debate concerning Pamela’s character, as Richardson’s ambiguous presentation allows her to be interpreted as either shrewdly manipulative or the model of feminine virtue.⁴⁴ For the purpose of this chapter, I consider her moral character to be genuine. Richardson’s sequel, full of details about high society and idealised maternal duty, seems to be an attempt to mollify widespread cynicism concerning Pamela’s premarital lowness and her potentially grasping nature.⁴⁵ However, due to Richardson’s emphasis on pregnancy’s opportunities for profit, my approach can also be applied in a more sceptical view of Pamela’s motives. This versatility demonstrates Richardson’s responsiveness to a duality inherent in the discourse of maternal imagination, especially when added to the novel’s sensitive negotiation of maternal passion in relation to domestic hierarchy. Throughout *Her Exalted Condition*, the concept of maternal passion is taken very seriously, and yet cannot entirely shed connotations of ignorance, fraud and profit motive.

At the opening of *Her Exalted Condition*, the heroine is pregnant with Mr. B’s potential son and heir. In addition to her own desire for a child, Pamela is keenly aware that producing a legitimate successor to Mr. B’s estate is of the utmost importance. This awareness works Pamela into a high pitch of anxiety for most of her pregnancy. Fortunately for Pamela, her virtuous deeds have provided her with much credit in the household and her anxieties are received with due seriousness. Her husband, friends, family and domestics bow to her every whim in an attempt to placate her fears. The reader is almost immediately presented with an example of this, when Mr. B refrains from arguing with Pamela due to his respect for her pregnant state. Pamela has erred, as she has advised her friend Polly

Darnford not to give her father any more books, because he threw the last one at Polly. Polly's father, Sir Simon Darnford, is outraged at Pamela's insolence and complains to Mr. B, who becomes extremely angry once he learns of his wife's presumption. Yet Mr. B. bites his tongue, "for one would be loath to spoil a son and heir" (III: 44). This statement implies that Mr. B. abstains from chastising Pamela purely because he does not wish any maternal passion to injure his embryonic offspring. He explains, "'tis *well*, said I, 'tis *well* your present condition pleads for you" (III: 45). Pamela thus escapes a severe reprimand due to the threat of maternal passion, as Mr. B is unwilling to do or say anything that might upset her delicate state.

Many critics have studied Richardson's attention to the heroine's continuing power struggles with Mr. B in *Her Exalted Condition*. Felicity Nussbaum has discussed Mr. B's libertinism and Toni Bowers has examined Pamela's wish to breast-feed in terms of power and control.⁴⁶ However it is Pamela's maternal passion that has proved perhaps the most divisive issue for literary critics. Dolores Peters (1981) has claimed that Pamela's morbid anxiety and excessive fear of childbirth is suspiciously exaggerated – and at a glance, this argument seems valid. However Deborah Rogers (2007) counters Peters' argument with graphic accounts of maternal mortality and disfigurement, to show that Pamela's fears are historically justifiable.⁴⁷ Lois Chaber (1996) has similarly demonstrated that pregnancy is saturated with maternal pain and death within Richardson's fictional world. On the basis of the convincing contextual evidence of Rogers and Chaber, I posit that Richardson harnesses the associations of maternal and foetal danger in order to highlight Pamela's deliberate usage of the trope of maternal passion. It is no coincidence that Pamela's power increases with the course of her pregnancy, or that her authority notably wanes once she has given birth. By constantly evoking the possible effects of her maternal passion, Pamela gains temporary consequence and domestic power at least equal to Sally Pickle.

Pamela must make the most of her pregnancy, as this is the only period during which she possesses any real leverage. This is clearly demonstrated in *Her Exalted Condition*, which details Mr. B's diligent attempts to please Pamela during her first pregnancy. As his concessions allow her a sizeable voice in household affairs, Pamela's pregnancy effectively secures her more domestic authority and spending power. Critics of *Pamela* have frequently investigated the heroine's relationship to credit and finance, as Richardson provides minute details of her economic circumstances. Catherine

Ingrassia has claimed that Pamela’s good behaviour provides her character with a store of credit, which is invaluable in her metaphorical role as a domestic stockjobber (1998, Chapter 5). Alternatively, E J Clery argues that Pamela is a legislator of luxury, redirecting male desires “away from self-gratification and towards virtue in the shape of a beautiful woman” (2004, 98). Yet despite this focus on *Pamela*, the heroine’s relation to finance has not been explored in *Her Exalted Condition*. This neglect is curious, as Pamela quickly becomes responsible for all domestic expenditure – as Mr. B remarks, “good wives are but stewards to their husbands in many cases; and mine is the best that man ever had” (III: 238). Karen Harvey has described the way that domestic hierarchy was structured with the servants at the bottom and the wife in the middle as steward to her husband “Oeconomist” (2012, 34). Harvey explains that this structure could create severe tensions between the wife’s expected obedience to her husband and her independent management of the servants. A wife’s pregnancy would further complicate this network of power and authority – it soon becomes clear that Pamela is humoured and pacified when she is with child, because of her health and its economic importance to the family.

Richardson carefully illustrates the way that Pamela’s reproductive value is inherently bound to wider economic concerns. Mr. B’s estate is secured by strict settlement, meaning that the property will revert to his odious relative Sir Jacob Swynford, if Mr. B dies childless.⁴⁸ This is made very clear in the novel when the Pamela describes the family’s discussion of Sir Jacob’s impending visit:

Lady Davers wondered what could bring him hither now; for he lives in Hertfordshire and seldom stir ten miles from home. Mr. B said he was sure it was not to compliment him and me on our nuptials. No, rather, said my Lady, to satisfy himself if you are in a way to cut out his own cubs. Thank God we are, said my dearest friend. (III: 175)

Later, when Pamela’s child is actually born, Mr. B’s tenants are so relieved that they all contribute towards a hundred guinea gilt plate for the baby’s christening. This gift is intriguing as traditionally it was the landlord who played a central role in distributing presents of money, food, firewood or other necessities to his tenants in times of hardship (Broad 2004, 184). Admittedly the christening of a child usually attracted gifts from family members for the mother and baby, yet the gilt plate is inscribed specifically

“in acknowledgement of the humanity and generosity of the best of landlords” (IV: 59). This christening gift is not, therefore, a tender or ceremonial response to a happy family event, but a political gesture. The tenants’ expensive gift emphasises Mr. B’s status as a desirable landlord, and draws pointed attention to the new baby’s social, legal and economic value for Mr. B and the estate.

Although the inheritance trope is common enough in eighteenth-century fiction, it places particular pressure on Pamela to deliver a healthy baby. This pressure partly derives from the fact that Pamela has brought no dowry to the marriage save for her “capacity for sexual service and reproduction” (Perry 2004, 35). Pamela herself is alert to this private and public pressure, commenting that “a childless estate might lessen one in the esteem of one’s husband” (III: 299). It is perhaps partly this pressure that creates Pamela’s extraordinarily potent maternal anxiety. She continually refers to the possibility that she will die in childbirth and declares that “I know nothing of the matter! – Only, that I am a sad coward, and have a thousand anxieties, which I cannot mention to *any body*” (III: 297, my italics). By acknowledging the fact that she apparently cannot mention her apprehensions to anybody, Pamela actually communicates her “anxieties” very clearly to her friends and the reader. This paradox is repeated in her behaviour outside her letters, she reveals that Mr. B is aware of her fear as “he sees my apprehensiveness, at times, though I endeavour to conceal it” (III: 313). Naturally it is Pamela’s very attempts to “conceal” her worry, which draws Mr. B’s attention to her developing case of maternal passion.

Although Pamela’s fears are perhaps understandable due to her youth and inexperience, it is her unusually cultivated character that produces her extreme anxiety. Morbidly sensitive, Pamela complains of “a sudden disorder and faintishness”, “severe pangs” and “vapourish habits”, until merely seeing a midwife is enough to make Pamela “ready to sweat with terror” (III: 263; IV: 43; III: 310; IV: 56). This attitude can be linked to Sarah Stone’s assertion that a mere belief in maternal longing could produce the disastrously real effects of maternal passion. Dr. William Buchan would later note this anxiety paradox in his influential text *Domestic Medicine* (1769). Buchan claimed “thus the sex often fall a sacrifice to their own imaginations, when there would be no danger, did they apprehend none” (141). Given the painful exigencies of eighteenth-century childbirth outlined by Chaber and Rogers, this advice appears alarmingly disingenuous. Buchan’s statement indicates the prevalent

attitude towards female passion as a distorted, imperfect and potentially dangerous force that, rather ironically, defined women as ideal models of sensibility and feeling. As a result, Pamela's extreme sensibility renders her more vulnerable to maternal passion than a normal pregnant woman. She herself realises this vulnerability and laments "it may be that I am the weakest and most apprehensive of my sex – it may be I am!" (III: 299).

Despite the real or imagined danger that Pamela depicts herself to be in, there are certain benefits to her delicate, pregnant state. Presenting herself as especially weak and vulnerable, Pamela's proclivity for dangerous maternal passion earns her certain freedoms.

§ PAMELA'S PROFITS

As Pamela's lying-in approaches, she makes explicit use of the language of maternal imagination. Emphasising her wish to see her friend Polly Darnford, Pamela relies upon the warning connotations of the term "longing" to achieve her desire:

This it is that makes me wish and long as I do, for the company of my dear Miss Darnford. O when shall I see you? When shall I? -To speak to my present case, it is *all I long for*; and, pardon my freedom of expression, as well as thought, when I let you know in this instance, how early I experience the *ardent longings* of one in the way I am in.

But I ought not set my heart upon any thing that is not in my own power, and which may be subject to accidents and the control of others. (III: 306, original emphasis)

Pamela's playful, yet pertinent, references to pregnancy longings and her remarks on her own powerlessness and "accidents", are designed to invoke the dire consequences of disappointed cravings. Although apparently striving for a tone of levity, Pamela's language belongs to the discourse of maternal imagination and carries threatening associations. Throughout the novel Pamela often gently reminds others of her precarious state in this way.

Despite her wifely status as merely the "steward" to Mr. B's "oeconomist", Pamela's pregnant condition allows her to intervene in matters of oeconomy. She advises her husband not to buy a title, as she believes that such a purchase would suggest that they are trying to compensate for her originally low social class. She become very involved in Mr. Williams' perplexity concerning the acceptance of two livings offered to him

simultaneously. Mr. B is about to good-humouredly chastise his wife for her presumption, however his awareness of her delicate condition prevents him. He reassures her, "I must not carry my jest too far upon a mind so apprehensive as I otherwise might be inclined to do" (III: 204).

In *Pamela* money and gifts feature heavily in the narrative as Mr. B attempts to barter with Pamela for her virginity. Mr. B's early present of "two suits of fine flanders lac'd headcloths, three pair of fine silk shoes [. . .] several ribbands and topknots of all colours, and four pair of fine white cotton stockens, and three pair of fine silk ones; and two pair of rich stays, and a pair of rich silver buckles" (19) are naively accepted by Pamela at first, however she later refuses these items when she realises they are to be bribes for her virtue. Similarly, Mr. B's "contract" offers explicitly jewels, property, money and security for her parents, in exchange for Pamela's body. The incessant itemising of Mr. B's offers emphasises Pamela's economic power, despite her apparent physical vulnerability. Once Pamela and Mr. B are married, he treats her generously; she acquires his mother's diamonds, an allowance of two hundred pounds per annum, and numerous presents of clothes and money. Yet as the wife of Mr. B, Pamela is dependent on his continuing generosity; she has no bargaining chips left to urge her wishes, other than his alleged constancy and love. Arguably, it is only when Pamela becomes pregnant that she regains the ability to bargain with Mr. B.

In Richardson's sequel, Mr. B. provides Pamela with "large sums . . . for charitable uses" (IV: 47), which she lends to Mrs. Jervis and gives to the poor. Towards the end of her pregnancy, Pamela's fears reach breaking point, as she is terrified of giving birth. In an effort to distract and comfort her, Mr. B provides Pamela with much care, attention and presents. Mr. B converses on obliging topics, busies her mind with lessons, hires both a female and male midwife, and promises exciting excursions "when the apprehended time shall be over" (III: 313). (Of course, once the baby is born, Mr. B reneges on these promises, as he becomes entranced by the seductive Dowager Countess.) Later in the marriage, Pamela reveals Mr. B's "kind promise, that he would, for every dear baby I present him with, take an excursion with me afterwards, in order to establish and confirm my health" (IV: 298). After leaving for Paris and touring the continent for two years, Pamela then successfully uses her pregnant condition to return to England, "I begged and prayed I might not have another little Frenchman" (IV: 308). Clearly both Pamela and Mr. B view pregnancy as a form of transaction, and both are aware of the importance of Pamela's mental and physical health to the contract.

Perhaps the most significant reward gained from Pamela's first pregnancy is security for her aged parents. The Andrews' debt and poor circumstances are a source of concern for Pamela; in the very first letter of *Pamela*, she encloses four guineas for her parents to "pay some old debt with part; and keep the other part to comfort you both" (12). Of course Pamela's parents derive some benefit from her union with Mr. B; Mr. Andrews is given the use of a horse, some fine clothes and twenty guineas upon his first visit to the estate, and fifty guineas is sent after the marriage "to pay your debts, as far as they would go" (354). However, Pamela's phrase "as far as they would go" suggests the Andrews' financial security still remains uncertain. In the end, it is Pamela's first pregnancy that resolves the Andrews' debt and secures them a permanent income. In response to Pamela's frequent complaints regarding her maternal anxiety, Lady Davers writes to Mr. B and advises him to secure an income for the Andrews:

Give her this assurance in some legal way; for as she is naturally apprehensive, and thinks more of her present circumstances than, for your sake, she chooses to express to you, it will belike a cordial to her dutiful and grateful heart; and *I do not know if it will not contribute, more than any one thing, to make her go through her task with ease and safety.* (IV: 44, my italics)

Lady Davers' specific mention of Pamela's "task" – her pregnancy – indicates that the threat of maternal passion is her chief inducement in recommending this course of action. It is surely significant that Pamela acquires the power to maintain her parents, not when she becomes Mr. B's wife, but while she holds the trump card of maternal passion.

Pamela's successful receipt of gifts, time and travel are always connected in some way to the dangers posed by maternal imagination. It is not clear whether Pamela deliberately complains of her fears in order to procure her wishes, however Richardson maintains a link between personal gain and pregnancy throughout the novel. This ambiguity is part of the discourse of maternal imagination, as it is precisely the uncertainty about the phenomenon that creates concern. An episode in the novel suggests that this ambiguity is intentionally constructed and sustained by Richardson. When Sir Jacob Sywnford visits the estate, he is tricked into believing that Pamela is the unmarried daughter of Countess C -. Crudely inquisitive, he comments on her pregnant appearance and causes Pamela much embarrassment. Pamela describes

how Countess C – comes to her rescue, “I looked a little silly; and my new mamma came up to me and took my hand: why Jenny, you are dress’d oddly today! What a hoop you wear! It makes you look I can’t tell how!” (III: 218). Pamela’s swollen body is therefore explained by her hooped petticoat, which gives her the appearance of pregnancy. Erin Mackie (1997) has explored the way that the hooped petticoat carried certain literary connotations of luxury, fashion and illegitimate pregnancy.⁴⁹ *The Spectator* claimed that this dress had become fashionable when devious women persuaded their friends to wear hoops so that their own illegitimate pregnancies might go unnoticed (Mackie 1997, 137). Richardson’s reference to the hoop thus invokes the notorious ambiguities of a woman’s body and emphasises the fact that one is dependent on a woman’s word. The inclusion of the hoop is also loaded with associations of expense and consumerism, linking Pamela’s pregnancy once more to the idea of material gain.

It is clear that Pamela profits from her pregnancies both financially, and in terms of domestic power. At the end of Volume III, Mr. B becomes aware of this power shift and reasserts his authority:

I know, my dear love, that this is a time with your sex, when saddened with your apprehensions, and indulged because of them, by the fond husband, is needful, for both their sakes, to watch over the changes of their temper. For ladies in your way are often like encroaching subjects; They are apt to extend what they call their privileges, on the indulgence shewn them; and the husband never again recovers the ascendant he had before. (III: 355)

This overt acknowledgement of the “privileges” allotted to Pamela helps the reader to retrospectively make the connections between Pamela’s pregnancy and her gratified requests. Moreover, Mr. B specifically identifies pregnancy and maternal passion as the site of a domestic power struggle between husband and wife. Mr. B’s speech signals the fact that, like Gam in *Peregrine Pickle*, he begins to resent the expense to which he is exposed by the caprice of his wife. His subsequent flirtation with the Dowager Countess can be read as a response to Pamela’s “encroaching” of his power and authority, as he keeps the affair secret until after the birth of his son. Mr. B.’s speech and actions demonstrate the fact that regardless of how much power a pregnant woman might acquire, such power was only temporary.

§ THE CONSEQUENCES OF MATERNAL PASSION

Richardson incorporates the trope of maternal passion in *Her Exalted Condition* and uses it to explore a wife's limited opportunity to exercise domestic power. While Mr. B. regains some control and Pamela successfully survives the birth of a healthy son, their negotiation of the trope magnifies their conjugal power struggle. Richardson therefore portrays Pamela's first pregnancy as a kind of test for the newly married couple, as they struggle for domestic authority. Pamela certainly profits from her pregnancy, as Mr. B is reluctant to displease her in any way for the sake of the foetus – and therefore also for the sake of his reputation and the future of the estate. In this way, Pamela's experience is much closer to the longings of Sally Pickle, than the maternal passion of other sentimental novels.

Both Smollett and Richardson spotlight the power a woman might accrue merely through the discourse of maternal imagination. However while Smollett uses Sally's longings in a satirical representation of maternal imagination, Richardson's portrayal of Pamela's maternal passion forcibly reminds the reader of the real dangers for pregnant women. Richardson is sympathetic to the female burden of pregnancy and yet also manifests the cultural attitude that women are rendered naturally weaker and less stable by their passions. His participation in the discourse of sensibility therefore contributes to the cultural strain of pregnancy, pre-emptively marking out all pregnant women as likely victims of their passions. This view of the pregnant woman comes to dominate fictional representations of maternal imagination as novels show women who are assailed by their own destructive natures.

Although the trope of maternal passion is present throughout *Her Exalted Condition*, the risks and dangers associated with the trope are alluded to, but never fulfilled. In contrast, much subsequent fiction dwells on the realised effects of maternal passion, as women experience miscarriages, stillborn infants, or die in childbirth. There is a lingering sense that, for married pregnant women, maternal passion could be a potential excuse to reorganise domestic hierarchy, however sentimental fiction of the later eighteenth century generally tends to showcase the vulnerability, rather than the agency of a pregnant character. Novels such as John Hill's *The Adventures of Lady Frail* (1751) include the deadly consequences of maternal passion for unmarried or immoral women. Lady Frail betrays

Miss **** by arranging her seduction by Mr. C. The unhappy fate of Miss **** is soon made clear:

[B]ut after some time, proving with child by Mr. C, her terrors of the consequence impaired her health, and at length threw her into a miscarriage, under which, very happily for herself she forfeited a life that could only have been a scene of continued torment to her. (137–138)

Similarly Edward Kimber opened the second volume of his novel *The Juvenile Adventures of David Ranger* (1756, 7) by describing how the character Leonora gave birth to a sickly child due to her anger at Davy's abandonment. Leonora explains that her son soon died because he "had been bred with so much anxiety" (II: 7).

These two examples of maternal passion fulfil Pamela's worst nightmares. However as they both take place outside of wedlock, neither pregnant woman has the power to bargain with the father. Such female vulnerability also applied to extra-marital pregnancy, as the autobiographical account of Lady Frances Vane, included within *Peregrine Pickle*, attests. Vane's "Memoirs of a Lady of Quality" were interpolated into Smollett's novel and boosted initial sales (Spector 1994, 99). Within her memoirs Vane describes the death of her child, which she believed was caused by maternal passion:

Immediately after I had taken possession of my wretched apartment, I was constrained by my indisposition to go to bed, and send for necessary help; and in a few hours a living pledge of my love and indiscretion saw the light, *though the terrors and fatigue I had undergone had affected this little innocent so severely*, that it scarce discovered any visible signs of life. (466, my italics)

Lady Vane's apparently true story reinforces the notion that overwrought maternal passion could have disastrous effects. In fact, Vane's memoirs, located within a novel, interweaves fiction with fact, and her case of maternal passion complicates the earlier representation of Sally Pickle's maternal longing. While Grizzle's anachronistic belief that Sally will be mimetically marked with the image of a pineapple invites ridicule, Vane's genuine case of maternal passion suggests that a real woman holds a more subtle and complex connection with her foetus.

Towards the end of her prolific career, the novelist Eliza Haywood also emphasised the fatal effects of maternal passion. Like Richardson,

Haywood employed the trope to illuminate the power struggles of newly married couples. However Haywood's presentation of marriage is often unorthodox, such as in *The Invisible Spy* (1755), which depicts a clandestine marriage between Mutantius and Aristella. Published after the Marriage Act, *The Invisible Spy* portrays the vulnerability of Aristella, who is not publicly acknowledged by her husband. Aristella becomes concerned that her status as a secret wife will have economic consequences for her unborn child and argues:

You know I am far advanced in my pregnancy; – perhaps too of a son; – and can you support the thoughts, that an infant, born the lawful heir of your estate and name, shall be saluted, on his first seeing light, with the odious title of spurious offspring, – a bastard? (93–94)

However although Aristella employs the rhetoric of maternal passion, it is to no avail, as unlike Mr. B. or Gam Pickle, Mutantius does not desire an heir. Deprived of her only tool, Aristella is forced to remain unacknowledged until her sisters discover her heavily pregnant state. Maternal passion strikes as she is unable to bear their accusations and insults, which brings death to herself and the unborn child.

A less dramatic, but nonetheless tragic circumstance is described in Haywood's popular novel, *The History of Betsy Thoughtless* (1751). Harriot Truworth and her unborn child die because her complaints are believed to be exaggerated maternal passion and are not taken seriously. Lady Loveit explains:

My poor sister was seized suddenly ill; as she was supposed to be pregnant, her complaint at first was taken no other notice of than to occasion some pleasantries which new-married women must expect to bear; – but she soon grew visibly worse; – was obliged to be carried down stairs, and put directly to bed. The next morning she discovered some symptoms of a fever, but it proved no more than the forerunner of the smallpox, of which distemper she died, before her danger was apprehended, even by the physician (565).

Harriet's death is a direct consequence of the trope of maternal passion. Her symptoms are unheeded because those around her believe that they are merely the phantoms of maternal anxiety. In sharp contrast to the comical escapades of maternal longing within ramble novels and Pamela's

unrealised fears, Haywood's inclusion of ruinous and life-threatening instances of maternal passion suggest that the trope should be taken seriously. As I will explore in [Chapter 4](#), medical texts of the later eighteenth century would increasingly stress the severe consequences of maternal passion for both the mother and the child.

§ CONCLUSION

In a recent monograph, *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity* (2012), Marilyn Francus observes the discrepancy between the mid-eighteenth century's establishment of domestic and maternal ideology, and contemporary texts "that spectacularly failed to fulfil that ideology (24)". Francus asserts that there are very few positive representations of living mothers in eighteenth-century literature. I would add to this argument that, despite considerable pronatalist pressure to produce children for the nation, to assert one's fertility, or secure inheritance, there are very few positive representations of pregnancy in literature after the mid-century period. The comic, mimetic longings of pregnancy are replaced with either modest silence, or destructive passion. This transition in fictional representations of maternal imagination is swift, I suggest, partly because it directed the threat of maternal imagination inwards to the woman herself, rather than posing any danger to male laws, finance and culture.

It might be tempting to suggest that male and female novelists treated the topic of maternal imagination according to their respective genders. Certainly the women writers examined in this chapter tend to provide examples of destructive maternal passion, which perhaps highlight the dangers of ignoring or obstructing a pregnant woman's desires. However Samuel Richardson and other male authors also portray sympathetically the dangers of maternal passion. The division between cautionary tales of maternal passion and satiric depictions of maternal longing is not so much gendered, as it is determined by genre. Sentimental authors, whether male or female, incline towards a sympathetic treatment of maternal imagination, whereas the ramble novel more often features cynical accusations of feminine manipulation. Yet even these distinctions are fluid, due to the ambiguous nature of maternal imagination itself. An undercurrent of mercenary opportunism is contained within Pamela's seemingly genuine fear of maternal passion, while the very real threat of miscarriage is present beneath the most ludicrous of Sally Pickle's

longings. This troubled dualism exists throughout the concept of maternal imagination, but is especially prominent in novels of the mid-century, perhaps due to the renegotiation of gender relations in law and culture during this period.

Whether feigned or genuine, the tropes of maternal longing and maternal passion provide pregnant characters of the mid-century with a narrative that would otherwise be absent. Even characters like Pamela, who exercise model pregnant behaviour with care, caution and sensibility, must conspicuously exhibit exaggerated symptomatic behaviour in order to claim agency and a certain degree of authority when pregnant. The fear surrounding the extent of this agency sustains the novel's employment of the discourse of maternal imagination, as it draws on and perpetuates both fear of disproportionate female privilege, and fear of injuring “a son and heir”.

In *Her Exalted Condition*, Samuel Richardson's encyclopaedic style touches almost every aspect of maternal imagination. By keeping the various aspects of the discourse present throughout the novel, Richardson opens rich possibilities for future novelists. The potential permutations of Pamela's pregnancies are suggested each time she asks for a favour or dwells on her fears. This new literary discourse of maternal imagination is quite different to previous monster tales, Toft satires, medical information or even the brief examples included within earlier amatory fiction.⁵⁰ Certainly writers after Richardson develop particular aspects of Pamela's situation; comic novelists like Smollett emphasise manipulative opportunism, while Sheridan and sentimental authors highlight female helplessness. Eliza Haywood explores the importance of an interested male audience for any performance of maternal passion, as Aristella and Harriot Truworth die when their male partners underestimate the dangers of pregnancy. It is however significant, that no matter how these different writers approach the subject, all novelists after Richardson appropriate the discourse of maternal imagination to explore the power of the pregnant woman in one way or another.

The novel form actively invents a space to explore a pregnant woman's power – a topic almost unmentioned in folklore and medical texts, and as we saw in [Chapter 2](#), eschewed in eighteenth-century drama. The tropes of maternal longing and maternal passion fuel this discourse of maternal imagination in fiction. These tropes also inform and draw on related discourses of domestic authority, consumerism

and, ultimately, female power. Again and again these tropes underscore the simultaneous authority and vulnerability of the pregnant woman. Although women often triumph in novels of the 1740s and 50s, during the latter half of the eighteenth century pregnant women are frequently subdued by the vulnerability of their reproductive bodies. The trope of maternal longing largely disappeared with the rise of sensibility, which produced novels that increasingly stressed the debilitating effects of maternal passion. This stress contributed to a culture that idolised femininity as delicate, refined and sensitive. While fiction of the mid-century such as *Peregrine Pickle* and *Her Exalted Condition* had implied that female domestic power was rooted in false perceptions of feminine vulnerability, later novels denied female agency on the basis that women were actually too innately weak to even desire authority. Maternal passion thus absorbs and contributes to a cultural perspective that assumes a woman does not possess the rational intellect necessary to wish for, or achieve, power. As Haywood's portrayal of Harriet Truworth suggests, the discourse of maternal imagination is easily used to dismiss or undermine a pregnant woman. This foreshadows similar twenty-first-century practices where female authority can be effectively undermined by references to their reproductive systems, and ideas or beliefs can be attributed to pre-menstrual tension or the menopause.

The discourse of maternal imagination in novels of the mid-century is always centred on the power of the pregnant woman, whether in the form of Sally Pickle's ridiculous longings, or Pamela's more subtle fears. Richardson and Smollett stress that their pregnant characters are not impeded by their emotions, and in fact are astute enough to capitalise on their situations. Although one might retrospectively wish to assign a proto-feminist agenda to this stress, it is more likely that these representations worked to consolidate suspicion and distrust around the female mysteries of pregnancy; perhaps even spawning the cultural backlash that put pregnant women in their intellectually fragile place. Yet it is important to recognise that such representations necessarily involved an acknowledgement of female ingenuity, women's management of their limited spheres, and a shrewdly rational application of imaginative equity. When contrasted with the helpless pregnant women of later eighteenth-century fiction, these qualities are brought into sharper focus. Evidently whereas previous discursive practice such as monster tales or medical treatises were concerned with the power of a pregnant woman's imagination, novels instead measured the power of her wits.

NOTES

1. Dennis Todd takes Toft’s confessions at face value and claims that “the hoax was solely motivated by money” (1995, 4). Alternatively Lisa Forman Cody suggests that Toft was a compliant, rather than cunning, woman, who followed instructions from her mother-in-law or other relations (2005, 130). Toft’s confessions vaguely indicate that she hoped to profit from the affair, but are to be taken lightly as they are clearly given under severe mental and physical pressure.
2. It is implied that Tape invested because his pregnant wife’s advice was not to be ignored, due to the nature of her condition, however the pamphlet does not explicitly state this.
3. As I have outlined in Chapter 2, Blondel did not count physical injury (damage arising from physical shocks to the body) as part of the theory of maternal imagination.
4. Vic Gatrell (2006) also comments on a lively eighteenth-century culture of coarseness and exuberance.
5. Tony Tanner (1979) argues that marriage forms an essential structure of the novel, Christopher Flint (1998) has noted the interacting histories of the family and the novel and Chris Roulston (2010) explores the subject of marriage as the cornerstone of the bourgeois novel.
6. See Chapter XI of Laure Junot (1895). After spending a night caressing the pineapple, the duchess decided that she didn’t want it after all – rather like Sally Pickle. Fiction also often highlighted the expense of the fruit; in Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1802), Adeline cannot afford the two guineas for Glenmurray’s pineapple. Matthew O Grenby (2004, 137) points out the use of a pineapple in George Walker’s novel *The Vagabond* (1799), which demonstrates the importance of hierarchical economics.
7. Frances Burney employs the pineapple’s association with luxury and frivolity when the heroine of *Evelina, or a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778) visits Cox’s Museum and views a mechanical pineapple that opens to reveal mechanised singing birds.
8. Grizzle later takes care of Peregrine when Sally has inexplicably rejected him and denied that he is her son.
9. The term “beard” also had bawdy connotations as it was frequently used to describe female pubic hair, see Karen Harvey (2004, 97). Hair also connoted lust, see Mary Fissell (2003).
10. Shepard explains that the meaning of these gestures – marks of defiance and humiliation – was more important, than the actual pain of the act. See for example Regan’s plucking of Gloucester’s beard in William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of King Lear* (3.7.30–34).

11. Erin Mackie (1997, 80) also observes irritation surrounding window-shopping in issue 336 of *The Spectator*.
12. Catherine Ingrassia (1998) has argued that reckless stock-jobbers were characterised as feminine and hysterical. Ingrassia, Mackie, and E J Clery (2004) present Lady Credit as the (disproportionately blamed) female face of public borrowing and ruin and Mary Poovey (1985) has argued women were often portrayed as consumers rather than contributors.
13. Finn argues that control of female sexuality was conflated with virtuous credit dealing (2003, 12). Elizabeth Kowalski-Wallace also observes that the obsession with controlling women's spending was connected to the control of female sexuality, and discusses the managing of the wife's energy, as well as finances (1991, 134–135).
14. The only physician to cite the case of the lion child is John Henry Mauclerc (1747).
15. For details see Linda E Merians (1996), Allan Ingram and Michelle Faubert (2005), and Ann Jessie Van Sant (1993).
16. Aileen Douglas discusses this crossover in regard to Smollett's use of the body.
17. Dr. James Douglas was of course one of the principal figures in the Mary Toft case, see my [Chapter 2](#).
18. Hill's attack was probably motivated by personal resentment as he had been rejected for membership of the Royal Society.
19. See Mauclerc's pro-Imaginationist treatise *Dr. Blondel Confuted*; Isaac Bellett's Anti-Imaginationist pamphlet *Letters on the Force of the Imagination in Pregnant Women* (1745, translated into English 1765); Giovanni Fortunato Bianchini's Anti-Imaginationist *An essay on the force of imagination in pregnant women: addressed to the ladies* (1772); and Benjamin Bablot's Imaginationist *Dissertation sur le pouvoir de l'imagination des femmes enceinte* (1788). All but Bablot's text were available in English, however the debate had lost momentum in Britain after Turner's *The Force of the Mother's Imagination upon the Foetus in Utero Still Further Considered* (1730).
20. Compared to the dozens of treatises written by men, there are few midwifery guides authored by women. In addition to Stone's text, notable female-authored midwifery guides include Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book: or the Whole Art of Midwifery Discovered* (1671), Elizabeth Nihell's *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery* (1760), Margaret Stephens' *Domestic Midwife; or the Best Means of Preventing Danger in Childbirth, Considered* (1795) and Martha Mears' *The Pupil of Nature* (1797).
21. Stone practiced in Bridgewater, Taunton and Bristol.
22. Stone essentially argues that disappointed longing will stimulate fierce disappointment or anger, therefore giving rise to a case of maternal passion.

She provides a full case study of a woman who suffered because she strongly craved a certain food (73–75).

23. Henry Bracken's personal anecdote (1737), is the only exception I have so far discovered. He explains

a neighbour of mine bore a child, who had no fingers upon one hand. I had the curiosity to enquire, if the mother had not (during her pregnancy, and at what particular time of it) been frightened by some Beggar without fingers, and I found she was, by a Fellow who came about begging alms, and the first thing he did at every house, was to put his lame frightful hand in, without shewing the rest of his body". (40)

For William Smellie's story of a one armed-beggar, see my next page.

24. See William Giffard's *Cases in midwifery* (1734) which was printed by Samuel Richardson; Edmund Chapman's *An Essay on the Improvement of Midwifery* (1733); Exton Brudenell's *A New and General System of Midwifery* (1753) and Giles Watts' *Reflections on Slow and Painful Labours* (1755).
25. See my footnote 23 of this chapter.
26. Hunter's experiment showed that women's thoughts did not impact on their foetus. Forman Cody cites an anecdote related to Charles Darwin by his grandfather Erasmus Darwin, who knew Hunter reasonably well (Forman Cody 145). Incidentally Erasmus Darwin believed in the notion of paternal imagination, the subject of my next chapter.
27. Mauclerc and Bellett are obvious exceptions to this statement, but are exempt by the nature of their (Anti-)Imaginationist discursive practice.
28. Joseph is identified by the strawberry birthmark on his breast, caused by his mother's longing for the fruit. Jenny Jenkins in *The History of Charlotte Summers, The Fortunate Parish Girl* (anonymously authored, but sometimes attributed to Sarah Fielding, 1753) has the same mark.
29. Dreams were certainly considered to contain powerful forces – in 1637 Maglene d'Auvermont from Grenoble claimed she had dreamt of sex with her faraway husband and become pregnant. She was initially believed in court and her son declared legitimate, although this was later contested (Finucci 2003, 52–55).
30. Aphra Behn's the *The Dumb Virgin* (1700) is highly unusual in its presentation of more outlandish forms of maternal imagination. Behn features transfigurative and literal forms in her main characters; Belvideera is deformed through her mother's fear of pirates, and Maria is born mute due to her mother's silence during pregnancy. Behn's character Dangerfield has a mimetic birthmark (a bloody dagger), which is less common than episodes of maternal passion that result in dead

foetuses. However, mimetic birthmarks do occasionally recur later in the century; in addition to the birthmarks mentioned on my previous page, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Theodore has a bloody arrow birthmark. Charlotte Lennox's *Euphemia* (1790) is unconventional as she blends maternal passion with mimetic marks in the story of Edward, who is marked with the image of a bow and arrow due to his mother's fright of Native Americans carrying those weapons.

31. It has been argued that the eighteenth century was the period in which families moved from a public model to a more private, loving model (Stone 1977; Trumbach 1978). Stone's thesis of affective individualism can certainly be argued to be present in novels, however several critics have argued that this was not the case in reality (Davidoff and Hall, 1987).
32. Erica Harth (1988) also emphasises the connection between capitalism, trade and money.
33. Tavor Bannet argues that the Marriage Act was concerned with how to best manage population in order to increase Britain's wealth (2000, 102–105).
34. See also Perry (1990) and Donna T Andrew's related study (1989), which investigates the pronatalist motivation behind the founding of charitable institutions that focused upon pregnant women or young children, such as Lying-in Hospitals.
35. Philips claims that the process was not as expensive as other critics have suggested. Despite this, I argue that the fact women had to resort to equity law at all demonstrates their inferior legal status.
36. Armstrong claims that these characteristics of female definition came to be the predominant way of defining all humans by the end of the eighteenth century.
37. For the argument that women were active in the public see the seminal study by Davidoff and Hall, which claims "public was not really public and private was not really private despite the potent imagery of "separate spheres" (1987, xvi). Extensions of the argument include Amanda Vickery's important article "Golden Age to separate Spheres?" (1993), Elizabeth Eger et al. (2001), and Elaine Chalus and Hannah Barker (1997). Harriet Guest (2000) charts a narrative of gradual change and incremental progress in gender roles during the period and Julie Peakman (2004) looks at the assumptions concerning normative sexual behaviour. Charlotte F. Otten (1992) shows women in the public sphere via print; Lawrence E. Klein (1996) questions the need for such binary oppositions inherent in the "domestic thesis"; for an argument relevant to my concerns of reproduction in this book see Lisa Forman Cody (1999) who has described how man-midwives brought female reproduction into public discourse. For more detail on male activity in the domestic sphere see my Chapter 4.

38. This conduct book went through several editions during the eighteenth century and the above excerpt was quoted in other conduct texts, see *The Virgin's Nosegay* (142) under the heading “To a New Married Lady”.
39. Forman Cody explains that women knew they were pregnant by signs that only they could interpret or feel (2005, 44). Pollock remarks that women were usually able to diagnose themselves with some accuracy (1990, 45).
40. Forman Cody finds evidence that women wore pregnancy pads in 1753 and 1793 (2005, 203–204). Dror Wahrman also notes this trend (2004, 67). Vic Gattrell (2006, 367) discusses 1790s prints mocking the fashion such as “The Pad Warehouse” in *Bon Ton Magazine* (1793).
41. This incident occurred on 7th October 1814 (M Shelley 1814, 33).
42. Marilyn Francus notes that “good” mothers are denied a narrative in eighteenth-century fiction. She explores “the erasure of mothers and motherhood from the cultural landscape in eighteenth-century Britain, in terms of the inability to depict the ideal domestic mother and of the recognition and displacement of maternal dissent” (2012, 18).
43. To avoid any confusion of Richardson’s sequel with other, unauthorized, sequels such as John Kelly’s, I will henceforth refer to *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition* as *Her Exalted Condition*. In the interest of simplicity, I will refer to *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*, as *Pamela* where necessary.
44. Ever since the novel’s first publication, “Pamelists” have claimed that the heroine is genuinely virtuous, and “Anti-Pamelists” have argued that she merely feigns virtue in order to achieve her mercenary ends. See Catherine Ingrassia (2004), and Keymer and Sabor (2005).
45. As Anna Laetitia Barbauld would later comment, *Her Exalted Condition* was “less a continuation than the author’s defence of himself” (1804, i: lvii), and perhaps by extension, a defence of his heroine.
46. Felicity Nussbaum (1995) discusses Mr. B and his championing of polygamy and Toni Bowers (1995) argues that in *Her Exalted Condition* Mr B. succeeds (whereas in *Pamela* he is defeated by Pamela’s virtue) because his desires are legitimized by their marriage. In a somewhat tangential, but related article, Bonnie Blackwell (1998) has read *Pamela* as an engagement with the man-midwife debate, viewing Pamela as the pregnant woman, Mr. B as the man-midwife and Mrs. Jewkes as the old-fashioned female midwife.
47. See especially Rogers’ Chapter 4 for formidable details of common eighteenth-century maternal injury such as bladder-vaginal fistulas. Marilyn Francus (2012) also paints a vivid picture of Hester Thrale’s wearisome and draining pregnancies in her Chapter 2.
48. By the early eighteenth century many landowners were using strict settlement as it ensured that the family estate would, in each successive generation, remain in the hands of the eldest son. Strict settlement limited the

heir's interest in the property to that of a life tenant, as it was automatically entailed onto the next eldest son.

49. The hoop petticoat first appeared in 1708 as an artificial, formal and uncomfortable mode of dress. See Kimberly Chrisman (1996) for more details.
50. For examples of the way in which the concept of maternal imagination was treated in fiction before Richardson see earlier in this chapter. The remaining chapters of this book will examine the discourse of maternal imagination in novels (and other forms of literature) after Richardson.

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“’Tis My Father’s Fault”: *Tristram Shandy* and Paternal Imagination

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they had begot me; had they duly consider’d how much depended upon what they were then doing; – that not only the production of a rational Being was concern’d in it, but that possibly the happy formation and [temperament] of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind. . . . (Sterne, I: 1)

The above extract is the notoriously interrupted opening to Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767). It describes the circumstances of Tristram’s conception and is periodically referenced in the narrative as Tristram employs the episode to explain subsequent events. The novel’s beginning in *flagrante* is usually explained as evidence of Sterne’s scandalous daring, however it has a more obvious bearing on a novel that continually invites the reader to explore the origin of life and opinions. As Tristram introduces himself, he also introduces the idea that his “formations and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind”, were dependent upon his parents’ imaginations during sex; that in the act of conceiving a child, both mother and father were “equally bound” to mind their thoughts.¹

Eighteenth-century debate over the concept of maternal imagination focused on the power of the mother’s thoughts and feelings. Yet as Sterne’s opening paragraph shows, there is a neglected narrative that operates in counterpoint to this discourse, featuring the role of the father

and the possibility of *paternal* imagination. The father’s imagination had been sometimes thought to affect the foetus at the point of conception, and to be capable of marking the child with a resemblance of the father’s thoughts during sex. Considering the heated disputes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concerning the nature of male and female reproductive roles, it seems remarkable that both contemporary commentators and modern scholars rarely mention this notion of paternal imagination.

This chapter aims to explore the model of paternal imagination, and other theories of foetal formation, incorporated into the narrative of *Tristram Shandy*, in order to explain how Sterne shows belief in such systems to be dangerous. Employing the concept of paternal imagination as a Trojan horse, Sterne implicitly critiques the flaws and discrepancies present within the discourse of maternal imagination. With due recognition of Melvyn New’s point that recent critics acknowledge the novel’s open narrative while still imposing “strategies of closure and clarity in their own writing upon it” (2006, 192), I want to avoid any insistence that my reading is the only or definitive way to understand Sterne’s work. This chapter instead seeks to emphasise Sterne’s treatment of paternal imagination in order to highlight its significance for the discourse of maternal imagination and eighteenth-century paternity.

§ “TIS MY FATHER’S FAULT”

In the above excerpt from [Chapter 1](#) of the novel, Tristram’s parents are allegedly “in duty equally bound” to mind their respective imaginations during the sexual act. This is unusual, even within the eighteenth-century discourse of maternal imagination, which was typically only concerned with the influence of a mother’s thoughts and feelings during pregnancy. Acting powerfully at the moment of conception, rather than at any particular point during gestation, imagination is initially figured in *Tristram Shandy* as an equal force from both parents. However, as the novel continues, the reader discovers that, for Tristram’s father Walter, the power of a father’s imagination far outstrips that of the mother’s.

Sterne’s opening paragraph is especially significant for this study because it immediately announces the novel’s participation in the discourse of maternal imagination. Many literary critics have carefully considered this initial section of *Tristram Shandy*. John Paul Hunter has

convincingly argued that “the account of Tristram’s conception received, from the first, a disproportionate emphasis” (1989, 174) in a detailed discussion of Tristram’s potential illegitimacy.² Hunter suggests that Tristram’s uncharacteristically firm account of the night of his conception belies an anxiety that Walter is not his father; claiming that “he [Tristram] mouths Walter’s platitudes with approval, as he does not elsewhere” (179). In a related study Elizabeth W Harries (2009) discusses the Shandy males’ sexual anxiety that banishes women to the margins. As will become evident, Harries’ work is pertinent to the concerns of this chapter as it subjects Sterne’s slippage between misogyny and the exposure of anti-feminist cultural views to critical examination. Although Harries does not discuss the discourse of maternal imagination, I maintain that Sterne surveys it from both misogynist and feminist perspectives. Like many other critics, Harries begins her study with the quotation included above. She claims that the novel’s preoccupation with sex is firmly established by the farcical opening scene and argues “*Tristram Shandy* begins with a joke that structures the whole novel” (111). With a different approach Melvyn New (1994) has explored Walter’s love of systems, potency and power. He too, begins his examination of the novel with an analysis of the opening lines. Although New does not use the term “paternal imagination”, he describes Walter’s theory of foetal formation: “the necessary concentration of effort in order to ensure the potency of the homunculus is an effort to establish his own role in the procreative process as not merely central but all-encompassing” (47). New therefore illustrates the extreme, indeed “all-encompassing”, significance that Walter places on his theory of paternal imagination. Although Hunter, Harries and New employ different methodologies, all three scholars credit the introductory paragraph with high structural and thematic importance.

Previous studies of obstetrics and imagination have often assumed that Sterne’s novel entertains the concept of maternal imagination, but commonly elide the distinct concepts of maternal and paternal imagination together. In *Imagining Monsters* Dennis Todd mentions the novel as a celebrated literary example of the concept of maternal imagination, while Philip K Wilson groups Tristram Shandy with Martinus Scriblerus and Peregrine Pickle as fictitious characters affected by their mother’s imaginations (Todd 1995, 105; Wilson 1999, 131). Paul Gabriel Boucé briefly recognises the need to differentiate between maternal and paternal imagination in the novel and argues that it might “be contended that the whole of Tristram Shandy’s (apparently) melancholy tale of pre- and

post-conception woes is but a fictive illustration of the father's imaginative powers (or abruptly thwarted potency by Mrs. Shandy's untimely liminal question) at the crucial time of seminal ejaculation" (1987, 98). Building on Boucé's observation, I argue that Sterne emphasises the detrimental effects, not of paternal imagination, but of Walter's faith in the concept. I propose that Sterne deliberately overstates and returns to the moment of Tristram's conception in order to mock Walter's belief in this anachronistic theory.

Sterne shows clearly that Walter has a strong faith in the power of a father's imagination. In the extended passage entitled "My Father's Lamentation", Walter blames Tristram's misfortunes on the original incident of paternal imagination and declares:

Unhappy Tristram! Child of wrath! Child of decrepitude! Interruption! Mistake! And discontent! What one misfortune or disaster in the book of embryotic evils, that could unmechanize thy frame or entangle thy filaments! Which has not fallen upon thy head, or ever thou camest into the world – what evils in thy passage into it! – What evils since! – produced into being, in the decline of thy father's days – *when the powers of his imagination were waxing feeble*. . . (IV: 266, my emphasis)

This passage specifically blames the father's "feeble" imagination for all of the failings of Tristram's life. It also depicts the foolish stubbornness of Walter's beliefs, as his staccato vehemence and repeated exclamation marks appear labored and undermine his point. The hyperbolic language is unconvincing, particularly as the reader is thoroughly acquainted with Walter's eccentric character at this stage in the novel. This passage signals to the reader that belief in paternal imagination is one of Walter's "hobby-horses". The trope of the "hobby-horse" – certain obsessions that consume each character's imagination – recurs throughout the novel, but paternal imagination is perhaps Walter's most sustained and injurious ride.³ Walter is clearly upset and disturbed by his suppositions, and therefore demonstrates the way that faith in a foolish theory can be more damaging than the principles of the theory itself.

Walter not only attaches profound significance to the notion of paternal imagination, but also rather unwisely teaches his son to believe in the concept. This results in yet more unhappiness for Walter, as Tristram excuses his own flaws by attributing them to his father's faulty paternal imagination.⁴ As Tristram makes clear from the outset, the father plays a

critical role in the creation of his offspring; "You have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused *from father to son*, &c. &c." (I: 5, my italics). Tristram even blames the digressive nature of his narrative on the character bestowed upon him by Walter's interrupted ejaculation:

But '*tis my father's fault*; and whenever my brains come to be dissected, you will perceive, without spectacles, that he left a large uneven thread, as you sometimes see in an unsaleable piece of cambric, running along the whole length of the web. . . . (VI: 417, my italics)

This facetious statement can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly Tristram's remark can be taken at face value, as a genuine avowal of his belief that Walter permanently affected the formation of his character with his paternal imagination. With such an explicit damning of his father, Tristram is free to abdicate all responsibility. Alternatively, one can read the comment as a sarcastic pronouncement on the folly of his father's beliefs. The somewhat flippant metaphor of Tristram's brain as a piece of cambric is followed by a Latin quotation misattributed to the Italian physician Jerome Cardan, which can be translated as "How much more careful then should we be in begetting our children".⁵ Thus excused, Tristram uses the explanation as a reason to "begin the chapter over again" (VI: 417), which seems to imply that all false starts can be remade.

Whether Tristram follows his father's belief in the theory of paternal imagination or not, there is no doubt that Tristram resembles Walter greatly. Although the numerous hints and double-entendres might suggest Tristram's illegitimacy, the main thrust of the narrative clearly emphasises the profound similarities between Walter and Tristram.⁶ Sterne frequently provides moments of dry mockery, as Tristram seems oblivious to the fact that his many observations on his father's idiosyncrasies apply equally to himself. Tristram makes comments such as "my father was a gentleman altogether as odd and whimsical in fifty other opinions" (II: 129), and is seemingly unperturbed by the irony of his statement. Similarly, Tristram notes that Walter "was an excellent natural philosopher, and much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters" (I: 7), immediately after having detailed the imaginary journey of a homunculus. Both Walter and Tristram impose their own logic onto the reader, resolutely refusing alternatives and insisting that their reasoning is infallible; both have issues with fertility, whether

through interrupted sex or impotence; and both, as I shall discuss in more detail later in this chapter, underestimate Elizabeth Shandy. Furthermore, both characters attempt to author texts that are doomed never to be finished – although Tristram is sceptical about Walter’s efforts to write the *Tristra-poedia*, the narrative of *Tristram Shandy* echoes some of its more futile aspects. I would therefore like to suggest that Sterne encourages the reader to view Tristram as Walter’s legitimate son, who might equally either adopt Walter’s theory of paternal imagination for himself, or critique it in a Walter-esque fashion.

Sterne clearly mocks the concept of paternal imagination by consistently ridiculing claims that Tristram is doomed because of his father’s distracted ejaculation. Even if Tristram genuinely believes that his life has been tainted by his conception, the reader is not encouraged to trust Tristram’s point of view. As Tristram and Walter are portrayed as eccentric, unwise, and more than a little silly, their apparent faith in a “father’s fault” undermines the entire concept of paternal imagination. Such repeated mockery seems rather strange, as the theory of paternal imagination had never been particularly popular. The theory existed as part of the discourse of maternal imagination, as it sporadically circulated in philosophical and medical enquiries – and presumably (albeit untraceably) in folklore and the oral tradition – but the theory was rarely mentioned in any detail. The following section will briefly examine the common characteristics shared by theories of paternal imagination.

§ PATERNAL IMAGINATION

Paternity is more physically difficult to discern than motherhood. Whereas women acquire visibly larger bellies that display their identity as expectant mothers, as Rosemary Mander states, “the changes that the father experiences are not visible” (2004, 6). This issue of visible or invisible change lies at the heart of the theory of paternal imagination, as although a father might not be able to alter his own appearance, he might be able to affect the development of his offspring. If the theory were true, it could have serious implications for paternity and inheritance, as a man would be able to more easily identify whether the child who called him father was really his own progeny. It is quite possible that Sterne himself was personally interested in this issue as he and his wife found it difficult to conceive a healthy child. (Sterne suffered from syphilis and could have been aware that this condition affected his wife’s pregnancies).⁷

Compared to the high volume of unusual births attributed to the theory of maternal imagination, references to any concept of paternal imagination are scarce. It is also perhaps worth mentioning that authors who did advocate the power of paternal imagination are often notable for their unorthodox views. References to a father's imaginative role occasionally appeared in philosophical or medical texts, but the subject was not a popular area of scientific enquiry. Unlike the more mainstream theory of maternal imagination, the idea of a father's powerful imagination did not commonly feature in broadsides or newspapers. The most comprehensive collection of informal knowledge regarding sex, *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, did not refer to the power of a father's imagination at all. Nevertheless, when a father's imagination *was* articulated, it was irrevocably linked with the moment of conception.⁸ Professor of Medicine at the University of Louvain, Thomas Feyens (Fienus), argued strongly for the power of a mother's imagination in his influential text on imagination, *De Viribus Imaginationis Tractatus* (1608), but suggested that imagination itself operated most powerfully during the moment that new life was created.⁹ This logic offered the possibility that a father's imagination might also influence the foetus. Feyens' contemporary, the physician, scientist and philosopher Fortunii Liceti claimed that while "the father's imagination can affect him during the sexual act, the woman's is always at work, after copulation and during conception, when the fetus is formed" (cited in Huet 1993, 15). (Liceti himself had been a seven-month premature baby, and survived only due to his own father's ingenious makeshift incubator (Bates 2005, 78)). Although Liceti's statement claimed that the maternal imagination was more potent and had more time to act, it still allowed that a father's imagination might affect the formation of the foetus. Indeed, within *Tristram Shandy*, Walter admits sadly that the trouble began at conception, "'tis too melancholy to be repeated now, – when the few animal spirits I was worth in the world, and with which memory, fancy, and quick parts should have been conveyed, – were all dispersed, confused, confounded, scattered, and sent to the devil" (IV: 266–267). Sterne spends much of Volume I reiterating this point, such as when Walter mournfully laments, "my Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into this world" (I: 7). This statement persists in the idea that Walter's confused state of mind at the point of conception was of far more significance to Tristram's character than the subsequent nine-month period of gestation in Elizabeth Shandy's womb.

The man-midwife John Maubray affirmed in *The Female Physician* (1724) that "not only the conceiving woman, but the copulating man, may effect the same thing; if he should imprudently set his mind on such objects, or employ his perverted imagination in that way" (369). It is however, worth bearing in mind that Maubray entertained a number of unconventional theories; he argued that maternal imagination did not only affect human women, but also female beasts and birds. Maubray insisted upon the dangers of imagination and its potential to cause deformities, claiming that while the mother's imagination affected the physical formation of the foetus, paternal imagination could influence the baby's character and mental qualities (56). He was perhaps most famous for his assertion of the existence of "sooterkins", which he described as monstrous creatures that were sometimes born to Dutch women. (Why Dutch women in particular were susceptible to sooterkins, Maubray declined to comment). He explained that sooterkins were "a monstrous little animal, the likest of any thing and shape to a Moodiwarp [a mole], having a hook'd snout, fiery sparkling eyes, a long round neck, and an acuminated [pointed] short tail, of an extraordinary agility of feet" (375).¹⁰ Maubray's description was enhanced by his claim to have personally delivered a woman of a sooterkin, however he was unable to provide evidence as, somewhat conveniently, the creature had dashed itself into the fire. Rather predictably, Maubray's sooterkin claims became a focus of satire immediately after the revelation of Mary Toft's hoax in 1726.¹¹

Although Maubray may have supported somewhat unusual theories, his claims for the concept of paternal imagination were unambiguous. Referring to paternal imagination in the same sentence as the concept of maternal imagination suggested that the father's thoughts and feelings during conception were as formatively influential as the mother's during pregnancy. However not all, or even most, man-midwives were convinced of the power of paternal imagination. Within the heated Imaginationist debate, fathers' imaginations were rarely mentioned. In 1729 James Blondel tersely remarked that "several good authors have formerly pretended that the imagination of the male, as well as of the female in any kind of living creatures, does contribute to the colouring of the foetus, as appears by Pliny" (8). Blondel was willing to devote two pamphlets to his theories disproving maternal imagination, and yet this brief comment is the only reference to any paternal influence on the foetus. Although the Imaginationist debate continued into the 1760s, no contributor to the discourse remarked further on the theory of paternal imagination.

There is one more eighteenth-century figure who made a significant contribution to the theory. Erasmus Darwin was a physician, inventor, poet, father of eleven children, unorthodox thinker and founding member of the Birmingham Lunar Society. Although Darwin's work on the theory of paternal imagination was not published until the end of the century, several decades after the publication of *Tristram Shandy* and Sterne's death, his ideas are worth taking into account as they include principles based on the claims of ancient authorities such as Aristotle and Galen. Furthermore, as no other English text places such significance on the possibilities of paternal imagination as *Tristram Shandy*, it is possible that Sterne's detailed attention to the theory in some way influenced Darwin's later thinking on the topic. Darwin had worked on building a nosology (medical encyclopaedia) since the 1770s, however he refrained from publication as he feared that some of the more radical views expressed might injure his reputation and medical practice. When he finally published his nosology *Zoonomia* (1794–1796) during the 1790s, it was declared by the *Monthly Magazine* to be “one of the most important productions of the age” (cited in Garfinkle 1955, 379–380). The two volumes of *Zoonomia* won popularity with both critics and general readers, were published in America, and translated into French, German, Spanish and Italian. David Clifford has termed the book a “medical treatise interspersed with personal observations on philosophy, the natural world and vignettes from Dr Darwin's own life and those of his neighbours around Lichfield” (2004, V: 307). Yet *Zoonomia* encompasses even more than this; it is a philosophical investigation into life, a collection of case studies, a nosology, an evaluation of human reproduction and evolution and a cultural history. Most importantly for this study, *Zoonomia* contains a lengthy chapter on the subject of human generation, in which Darwin explicates his theory of paternal imagination.

Literary scholar Sam George has argued that Darwin's poetry, such as *The Botanic Garden* (1789–1791), subversively championed female sexuality by personifying plants and flowers (2007, 115). Darwin refashioned botany – an acceptably ‘feminine’ pursuit – by describing the sexual reproduction of flowers and characterising the female of certain species with overtly sexual behaviour, desire and promiscuity. However, within *Zoonomia*, some of Darwin's theories regarding the female role in sexual reproduction contain suggestions that women are the more sterile, passive sex. For example, he confidently asserted that “impotency much seldomer happens to the male sex than sterility to the female sex”, which implicitly

blamed women for infertility (II: 310). Throughout *Zoonomia*, females are portrayed in medical terms as weaker, passive and lacking the powers of men. The penultimate chapter “Of Generation” fully adopts this view, as it describes the female role in reproduction as secondary to the central male input.

“Of Generation” promotes the Aristotelian view that women were merely a nidus or nest for the foetus, and claimed that the origin of life, the living “embryon-animal” (I: 480), existed solely in the sperm of the male parent.¹² Darwin explained that it was impossible for a mere “nest” to have an imaginative influence on the developing foetus and claimed,

it would appear, that the world has long been mistaken in ascribing great power to the imagination of the female, whereas from this account of it, the real power of imagination, in the act of generation, belongs solely to the male. (I: 520)

Following Blondel’s argument in *The Strength of Imagination in Pregnant Women*, Darwin allowed that the woman could injure the foetus during gestation with poor nutriment or an inadequate uterine environment, he noted that these were physical, rather than mental influences. All imaginative influence therefore, derived exclusively from the father – a point that may well have been remembered by Mary Shelley, who would later acknowledge Darwin as an influence on the writing of *Frankenstein* (1818).¹³

Like previous supporters of the idea of paternal imagination, Darwin pinpointed the moment of conception as the most influential. He argued that when men beget sons it was because they were thinking of their own form during sex and this was “proved” by the fact that there were more men than women in the world because “the general idea of our own form occurs to every one almost perpetually” (I: 520). Alternatively, when a daughter was conceived, the father had been thinking of the woman as he ejaculated – Darwin suggested that this was why “male children most frequently resemble the father in form, or feature, as well as sex; and the female most frequently resembles the mother, in feature and form, as well as in sex” (I: 520). Darwin’s theory of paternal imagination is part of his larger and revolutionary perspective on the subject of evolution and human life, which many critics link to his celebrated grandson Charles Darwin and his work.¹⁴ However, while the gender implications of Darwin’s nosology are not his main focus, they are of significance for the

discourse of maternal imagination. By emphasising the role of the father, and particularly paternal imagination, in the reproductive process, Darwin limited the agency, power and threat of the mother, and her maternal imagination.

Darwin's denial of maternal imagination is perhaps explained by his perception of raw female imagination as destructive. Within *Zoonomia*, and elsewhere in his writing, Darwin betrays an anxiety regarding the strength of the unbridled female imagination. The long section "Of Reverie" in *Zoonomia* centres on a vignette of a seventeen-year-old girl who has such a hyper-sensitive imagination that she repeatedly falls into hallucinogenic reveries so powerful that she can neither see nor hear anything around her (I: 221–222). Even in the chapter "Of Generation", which strongly downplays the possibility of maternal imagination, Darwin admits that a mother's imagination could affect her nutritive particles. Although this would result in a detrimental *physical* effect on the foetus' uterine nutrition, rather than the purely *imaginative* and formative influence of the father, this theory corresponds with the idea of maternal passion espoused in midwifery guides. Darwin suggested that a mother's "perpetual anxiety" or fear could harm the foetus, because her emotions might affect the quality of the fluid that protects and nourishes the baby, the *liquor amnii* (I: 522). Even Darwin then, perhaps the most forthright proponent of the theory of paternal imagination, allowed that a woman's imagination might influence the infant in some way, albeit negatively. In his later education treatise, *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797), Darwin advised the careful cultivation and supervision of young women's vulnerable imaginations. He argued that left unchecked, a girl's imagination could cause her harm. Interestingly, considering accusations that novel-reading inflamed the imagination, Darwin advocated the reading of certain novels. He remarked that "it is difficult to draw the line of limit between novels, and other works of the imagination; unless the word novel be confined to mean only the romances of love and chivalry" (34), and provided his own recommendations at the end of the treatise. Unsurprisingly, *Tristram Shandy* was not included in Darwin's recommended reading for young women, however it is almost certain that he was familiar with Sterne's novel. In *Zoonomia*, Darwin directly referred to the text when discussing the best remedies for grief. He asserted that, "in the first hours of grief the methods of consolation used by Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy*, is probably the best" (II: 372).¹⁵ Indeed, notwithstanding their different

forms and context, Darwin’s chapter “Of Generation” is curiously similar to Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, as they are both predominantly concerned with the theory of paternal imagination, and yet are seemingly unable to completely rule out the possibility of a forceful female imagination.

Despite his careful reasoning and detailed examples, Darwin’s theory failed to revolutionise the general medical stance on imagination in relation to foetal development. Labelled as a dangerous radical thinker during the conservative backlash against the French Revolution in the later 1790s, Darwin’s works, both medical and literary, were increasingly treated with disdain and suspicion. In 1798 the Scottish metaphysician Thomas Brown observed that the notion of paternal imagination was impossible due to Darwin’s own arguments throughout the rest of the nosology. Darwin had argued that there was a connection between the images a man’s eyes received at the point of conception and the form of the material he ejaculated, however Brown claimed that “the sympathy [between vision and semen] cannot be traced to any of the laws of life, inferred in *Zoonomia*” (451). Yet Darwin remained convinced and actually altered the third edition of *Zoonomia* in 1801 to credit paternal imagination with even more power. This edition revised the statement that monstrous births could be the result of an inadequate uterine environment and argued that all monstrous births were the result of paternal imagination.¹⁶ For Darwin, the moment of conception was key to the theory of paternal imagination, as it was the only point of contact between the father and the foetus.

Tied to conception, the idea of paternal imagination also appeared in the corpus of beliefs and theories regarding reproduction more generally. As we have seen, Darwin’s theory of paternal imagination was closely related to debate over the respective roles of men and women in the reproductive process. If men were the creative origin of life, then it followed that their imaginations were similarly potent. In fact, the positive associations of male generative influence had proved tenacious for centuries. Dominant theories of reproduction attributed the origin of new life to man, and it thus followed implicitly that male imagination would have an impact upon offspring. Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen had all claimed that man was the progenitor and allocated the woman’s contribution to reproduction as a secondary role (Williams 2011, 17; Tuana 1983, Section 3). Eve Keller (1999) has demonstrated that even William Harvey’s revolutionary claim that all animal life originated from the

mother's egg, was presented in terms of masculine authority. Keller's argument alludes to the important fact that "science" often reflected what the (male) scientists expected to see or conclude. Thomas Laqueur and Catherine Gallagher (1987) have discussed the political, economic and cultural importance of gender to eighteenth-century understandings of reproduction, while Londa Schiebinger's pithy reminder that "science is a product of society" (1993, 8) warns against privileging scientific discovery over deeply held cultural beliefs and social structures. Science could be harnessed to prove that the "natural" order of society was indeed correct. In 1677 the Dutchman Anton van Leeuwenhoek's discovery of animalculi ("little animals") and homunculi ("little men") living in spermatozoa confirmed the general assumption that life was a male gift. Sterne's description of Tristram as a tiny, but perfectly formed, homunculus is a clear reference to the extraordinary images that accompanied Leeuwenhoek's theory in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*.¹⁷ Carolyn Williams has noted that Sterne ridiculed the theory of animalculism by exposing Walter's foolish enthusiasm for it, but does not comment on the same strategy regarding Walter's exaggerated faith in the concept of paternal imagination (21). Indeed as I remarked at the start of this chapter, almost all critics are silent on the subject of Sterne's specific and extended inclusion of this concept.¹⁸

If paternal imagination acted at the moment of conception, as its advocates believed, then its force was bound up with the life-giving properties of the male orgasm. This logic contained the suggestion that paternal imagination was a positive power, rather than the primarily injurious, monstrous workings of maternal imagination. In an analysis of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) Valeria Finucci has stated that there is "a palpable difference between paternal and maternal imagination vis-à-vis the formation of the fetus' features" (2001, 58). Whereas the father is able to perfectly transmit an image to the foetus, a mother's confused and wayward imagination produces a distorted or poor reproduction of what she sees upon her offspring. Ambrose Paré had described a notorious instance of this kind of distorted maternal imagination in *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (1573). Paré reported that a Frenchwoman suffering from a fever was advised to hold a frog as a remedy for her illness. Still clutching the frog, the woman had sex with her husband and conceived, however the baby was a monstrous amalgamation of human and frog-like features. A woman's maternal imagination was therefore figured in this story as monstrous, or at least

inaccurate. Finnucci cites Tasso's belief that contrary to such destructive maternal power, "thanks to the high quality of men's fantasy, children tend to reproduce the virtue and the beauty conveyed in the father's mind at the moment of conception" (2001, 48). As Finucci observes, while a mother usually damages the foetus, "a father's imagination can improve on a child's genetic baggage" (2001, 58). Paternal imagination was thus closely aligned with procreation as a vital, positive and, even beatifying, force. And yet Walter's paternal imagination is consistently characterised as negative and debilitating. I suggest that this is part of Sterne's Trojan horse technique, as he transfers the predominantly negative slant of the discourse of maternal imagination to the theory of paternal imagination.

Tristram explains that, as a homunculus he was a poor specimen, due to the disturbance and consequent inattention of his father at the moment of ejaculation. Therefore Tristram's journey to the womb and his subsequent growth was impeded by a nervous temperament; he was particularly "prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies" (I: 7). Tristram's fancies were not the effect of the traditional longings of a mother afflicted by maternal imagination, but instead a result of the aftershock caused by the distraction of the father's "animal spirits" (I: 5).

Critics of *Tristram Shandy* often read the presentation of the impact of Walter's imagination on Tristram as unquestionable fact; however although Tristram often seems to share his father's faith in paternal imagination, the novel does not offer a simple endorsement of the theory.¹⁹ John Paul Hunter observes that "He [Tristram] makes himself, to justify Walter, more of a failure than he is" (182). This implies that Tristram, and certainly Sterne, does not fully credit the theory of paternal imagination. I argue that Sterne caricatures the theory of paternal imagination and fuses it with the discourse of maternal imagination. The following section will illustrate the way that Sterne consistently mocks the idea of paternal imagination by showing that all of Walter's worst decisions regarding Tristram originate with his idiosyncratic belief in this theory. Again and again, the reader is shown that while the theory of paternal imagination is almost certainly flawed, it is Walter's obstinate belief in its power that creates lasting misery for himself, his wife and his son. As I shall go on to discuss, this negative characterisation of the theory carries implications for the discourse of maternal imagination.

§ “TIS KNOWN BY THE NAME OF PERSEVERANCE
IN A GOOD CAUSE, – AND OF OBSTINACY IN A BAD ONE”:
WALTER’S BELIEF IN PATERNAL IMAGINATION

Perhaps the most peculiar feature of Walter’s faith in paternal imagination is his stubborn belief that he can somehow rectify the damage he believes he has caused to the foetus. Pained by his role in Tristram’s conception, Walter tries to correct his mistake by exerting some influence over the birth. He tries to both insist on the presence of man-midwife Dr. Slop and to persuade Elizabeth Shandy to have a caesarean section.²⁰ Critics of the novel have avidly discussed the implications of Walter Shandy’s insistence on the presence of a man-midwife.²¹ With the advantage of viewing *Tristram Shandy* as active in the discourse of maternal imagination, I argue that Walter’s negotiation of the decisions involved in labour and birth is a foolish attempt to right the wrongs allegedly caused by his paternal imagination. It is as though Walter believes that he may still be able to exercise some form of prenatal influence. Sterne clearly shows Walter trying to literally mould the baby before – or even during – its exit from the womb. Unfortunately, like the initial conceptual moment of paternal imagination, Walter’s choices regarding the birth are dangerous, ineffective or counterproductive. His efforts to limit or reverse the effects of his paternal imagination are therefore portrayed as more damaging to the foetus than any momentary distraction during ejaculation.

Walter gives a lengthy list of reasons as to why he feels that Elizabeth should be attended by Dr. Slop. He explains that because he will be blamed if the birth goes wrong, he wishes to spare no expense and hire a “scientifick operator” (I: 41). He also believes that travelling to London to be attended by a fashionable man-midwife is frivolous, and that women should not be allowed to believe that they are in charge. These detailed justifications are rambling, tangential and curiously unconvincing. Sterne provides a clue as to the real reason for Walter’s insistence on Elizabeth’s lying-in at Shandy Hall and the hiring of Dr Slop, when he remarks that Walter has a certain personality trait, which is “known by the name of perseverance in a good cause, – and of obstinacy in a bad one” (I: 41).

This description of Walter’s character is ostensibly provided in order to explain his wish that Elizabeth give birth at Shandy Hall, yet the narrative’s continual pull towards the disaster of Tristram’s conception suggests that the reader has had a much earlier introduction to Walter’s obstinacy. J Paul Hunter notes that the birth of Tristram becomes the second of five

principal episodes of the novel: Tristram’s conception, birth, christening, nose-breaking and circumcision. As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that – for Walter at least – the latter four episodes are pre-determined by the initial calamity of Walter’s paternal imagination at conception. The theory of paternal imagination therefore acts as the fundamentally structuring principle for the narrative, as every event or opinion in Tristram’s life is coloured by his father’s interrupted ejaculation. For example, Walter’s real reason for controlling the birth of Tristram can be traced to a determined desire to ‘fix’ his earlier mistake. However, Sterne does not wish the theory of paternal imagination to go unchallenged. In Volume I, Tristram warns the reader of “my father’s many odd opinions... the singularity of my father’s notions [and how]... his judgement, at length, became the dupe of his wit” (I: 49). Tristram here explicitly asks the reader to decide on the validity of Walter’s claims and to read between the gaps in the narrative.

Walter’s preference for a man-midwife is not particularly unusual for the period – a male practitioner attended Sterne’s own pregnant wife as a matter of course.²² As we have seen from [Chapter 2](#), man-midwives in the early part of the eighteenth century had to work against their negative reputation as butchers, frauds or seducers. However, the lessons of the Toft case and the Blondel-Turner mode of polite medical debate were swiftly embraced by leading man-midwifery figures such as the Scotsman William Smellie. The work and influence of Smellie during the 1740s and 50s significantly transformed the perception of male practitioners. Smellie had both practical experience and the benefit of a short time of study in Paris.²³ He revolutionised midwifery by teaching the practice to hundreds of eager male students, who attended a series of lectures and practised on a working model of a woman in labour to develop their theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The students could also visit wards and patients to gain valuable experience.²⁴ Many of Smellie’s pupils later travelled to work in the provinces, which helped to familiarise far-flung communities with the concept of man-midwives and to spread knowledge of London obstetrical practices. Smellie also compiled an extensive guide to the subject, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* (1751), popularised and refined the use of forceps, and gave detailed lectures. Translated into French, German and Dutch, *Theory and Practice of Midwifery* became a classic obstetric text and opened up the previously mysterious, exclusively female experience of birth to the masculine public sphere. Lisa Forman Cody claims that William Smellie exemplified the cross-gender qualities

that gave man-midwives an edge over their female competitors (152). Smellie presented himself as sensitive to female delicacy, yet also strong and rational in his distinctively male knowledge of female bodies. Smellie's success, compassion, and training of hundreds of man-midwives ensured that by the 1760s, man-midwifery had become a more respectable profession. Although man-midwives were not yet allowed to join the Royal College of Physicians, hiring a man-midwife was eminently fashionable – in 1766 Queen Charlotte employed the renowned William Hunter when she was expecting her fourth child. Of course Hunter was obstetrician to the elite; he was pre-booked to attend appointments with women of family and fashion. In this respect Hunter differed from Smellie, who had been rather lower down the social scale. Forman Cody explains that "as a rough-mannered Scot" (174), Smellie could not easily win over an elite clientele. Smellie therefore created his own professional opportunities and attended marginalized pregnant women such as beggars, wanderers, single mothers, and other members of the indigent poor, in order to teach students.²⁵ Both Smellie and Hunter were London-based and thus quite different to a rural emergency practitioner such as Dr. Slop, who might be called to a difficult birth at the last moment.²⁶

Walter's decision to hire Dr. Slop fails to take into account some of the lingering concerns surrounding man-midwifery. To begin with, Dr. Slop is clearly no Smellie or Hunter. Slop demonstrates a worrying degree of forgetfulness, ineptitude, and roughness, while displaying none of the cross-gender qualities that Forman Cody suggests raised Smellie to prominence.²⁷ Moreover as John Tosh has argued, the introduction of a man-midwife into the house effectively usurped the father as the male organiser of childbirth. Tosh states that in the early modern period the mother was rigidly secluded and "the father was the central figure in the social drama of childbirth, celebrating with family and friends, arranging the baptism and hiring a wet-nurse" (1999, 81). However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the mother and her fashionable man-midwife were centre-stage. Critics of man-midwifery recognised this displacement and appealed to fathers to reinstate their rights. For example Phillip Thicknesse's pamphlet *Man-midwifery Analysed* (1763) argued that French morals had corrupted Britons into believing man-midwifery was acceptable. Attacking prominent figures such as Smellie, Thicknesse claimed that employing a man to attend a woman's matter was offensive and indecent. *Man-midwifery Analysed* took the form of "a letter addressed to all men in general and to all married men in particular"

(1;21).²⁸ Thicknesse admonished the men of Britain and called for them to banish any thoughts of hiring a man as a midwife, arguing that man-midwives would seduce and pervert vulnerable women. By this token, Walter’s method of managing the birth brings into the house the very figure that will be most likely to eclipse the father’s influence over the baby’s entrance into the world.

An important consequence of Slop’s involvement is the crushing of Tristram’s nose. In addition to positive paternal imagination during conception and a meaningful name, Walter believes that a good nose is of paramount importance to an individual. With visions of strong, large noses for his child, Walter spends many anxious hours determining the safest method for delivering a child without crushing its head. Yet his careful planning leads only to catastrophe when misplaced faith in Dr. Slop breaks the bridge of his newborn son’s nose. The bawdy overtones of Tristram’s squeezed infant nose are emphasised when Tristram insists that “by the word Nose, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word Nose occurs, – I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less” (III: 197). Of course this statement, as Tristram is well aware, merely has the effect of associating the word “nose” with the phallus. (This particularly sexual chain of association resembles Elizabeth Shandy’s association of clocks with conjugal activity). Additionally, the continual substitution of nose for penis in *Tristram Shandy* alludes to traditionally paired birthmarks on both body parts. Steven Connor (2004) stresses that oracle books, which were used to decipher birthmarks, consistently paired any moles located on the genitals and nose (98). Nose-penis jokes are therefore obliquely connected with birthmarks, which in turn belong to the discourse of maternal imagination. As Tristram’s damaged nose is an indirect result of Walter’s belief that imagination failed during Tristram’s conception, the nose-penis connection is further enhanced.

Even in the midst of his discourse on noses, Walter remains defiantly oblivious of any lewd connotations. Moreover, he seems unaware that his choice of a man-midwife, in distinct opposition to his wife’s preference for the local female midwife, has other, more unsavoury, connotations. Despite the efforts of respectable practitioners such as Smellie and his contemporaries, man-midwifery was still tinged with more than a whiff of scandal. Printed accounts of the profession continued to emphasise cuckolded husbands and prurient man-midwives, providing opportunities for sexual jokes and innuendo. Real-life cases of women seduced

by their man-midwives became notorious; Henry Bracken was a Lancaster man-midwife who was found guilty in a fornication case in 1734, when he was accused of seducing his patient. Similarly '*The Man midwife Unmasqu'd* (1737) satirised the real case of Dr. Morley who had seduced one Mrs. Biker.²⁹ Elizabeth Nihell famously attacked the immodesty of Smellie and man-midwives generally in *A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery* (1760). She was horrified at the impropriety of a man-midwife "touching" a pregnant woman and questioned, "will the husband be present? What must be the wife's confusion during so nauseous and so gross a scene?" (232). An anonymous pamphlet stridently entitled *The Danger and Immodesty of the Present Too General Custom of Unnecessarily Employing Man-Midwives* (1772), claimed that husbands had become too complacent. The author observed that "young men of fashion" married without love and therefore sought their sexual gratification outside the home. He further argued that husbands actually relied on the titillating arts of the man-midwife to render women susceptible to extra-marital affairs (3). These men "would of course readily risk their wives' purity being contaminated, rather than be disappointed in the pleasure of seducing the wives of their acquaintance, through the preparatory assistance of the Men-midwives" (4). It is therefore notable that there is little mention of man midwife-patient seduction or titillation in *Tristram Shandy*, especially considering Sterne's propensity to the bawdy. In fact, only two muted references to the seductive man-midwife occur; when Toby remarks that "my sister, I dare say, does not care to let a man come so near her ****"; and when Dr. Slop himself puns on the cuckold meaning of Walter's discourse on "horn-works" (I: 89; II: 98). Walter's unease and annoyance during these two references displays an unwillingness to be reminded of the sexual connotations of the man-midwife. Certainly Dr. Slop is portrayed as a bumbling grotesque, rather than a charismatic gallant, although presumably this would only increase Elizabeth's distress if he really were to attempt an attack on her virtue. It certainly seems likely that an eighteenth-century reader would be alert to Walter's lack of concern for his wife's exposure to a man-midwife. Walter's attitude to Slop serves to highlight Walter's desperation to repair his faulty paternal imagination, as he has forgotten Elizabeth in the gestation and birthing process. Walter's short-sighted naiveté (or selfishness) and lack of consideration for the mother mean that his efforts to prevent accidents during the birth are just as unsuccessful as his efforts during conception.

Another astonishing example of unconcern for Elizabeth is apparent in the caesarean section episode. Although the employment of a man-midwife was reasonably commonplace for the middling sort in the later eighteenth century, elective surgery was certainly not. Yet Walter wishes Elizabeth to give birth via the process of caesarean section, a surgical process that no mother would survive until 1793. Such an eccentric wish can only be explained by one of Walter's madcap theories. Following other philosophers, Walter believes that the soul of man is located in or about the medulla oblongata.³⁰ However, Walter has his own "Shandean hypothesis" (II: 132) about the way that the soul and intellect are developed and argues that "the subtilty and fineness of the soul" (II: 132) depended on the treatment it received upon first leaving the womb. Walter is terrified that Elizabeth's exertions during childbirth will crush and misshape the child's intellect, as he believes she has already injured the intellect of their first son, Bobby, in this way. Sterne probably found inspiration for Walter's "Shandean hypothesis" in Dr. John Burton's *Letter to William Smellie, M.D., Containing Critical and Practical Remarks Upon his Treatise* (1753).³¹ Although Burton did not claim that the child's soul was in the cerebellum, he argued that labour created powerful compressions, which produced convulsions that could be fatal to the infant. He stated that:

Let the force of the mother's effort, that propels the child, be ever so strong or weak, the cerebellum will, in such proportion, become pressed; because action and re-action are, in this case, equal; whence it follows, that the more the head is squeezed, or resisted by the bones of the pelvis, the more the brain is forced towards the cerebellum, and the abovementioned mischiefs will ensue. (123)

Tristram notes that Dr. Slop had similarly "scattered a word or two in his book . . . tho' not with a view to the soul's good in extracting by the feet, as was my father's system, – but for reasons purely obstetrical" (II: 136). Like Burton and Slop, Walter suggests that a podalic (feet first) delivery would partly mitigate the dangers of the mother's pelvis, however Walter takes this logic even further and claims that a caesarean section would eliminate the danger of mutilating the infant's soul completely.³² In his eagerness to spare any injury to the child, Walter sees his wife as a faulty vehicle that must be corrected. This is demonstrated in Tristram's ironic report of his father's speech: "the laws of

nature will defend themselves; – but error – (he would add, looking earnestly at my mother) – creeps in" (II: 130). To justify his theory, Walter explains to Toby:

all the children which have been, may, can, shall, will or ought to be begotten, come with their heads foremost into the world: – but believe me, dear Toby, the accidents which unavoidably way-lay them, *not only in the article of our begetting 'em – though these in my opinion, are well worth considering*, – but the dangers and difficulties our children are beset with, after they are got forth into the world, are enow, – little need is there to expose them to unnecessary ones in their passage to it. (III: 147, my italics)

This statement explicitly links Walter's extreme interest in Elizabeth's prenatal and birth arrangements to his botched paternal imagination. His speech conveys regret for the unfortunate moment of paternal imagination during conception when he refers to "accidents . . . not only in the article of begetting". Eager to positively influence the foetus subsequent to its allegedly disastrous initial formation, Walter applies his imagination to a solution. When he decides on the method of caesarean section, he makes the procedure sound quite routine, however caesarean sections were only undertaken in the direst of circumstances. Although he seems oblivious to the "dangers and difficulties" for the mother in this procedure, Elizabeth is horrified by Walter's proposal. Walter's reasoning prioritises the baby's "passage" to the point where he appears happy to have his wife unnecessarily cut open, merely to avoid a minor and very unlikely mishap. This betrays Walter's loftily abstract and theoretical approach to the birth, without consideration for his wife's well-being. Such an extreme measure shows Walter's anxiety for the integrity of the child's body during birth, but also his lack of understanding regarding the real exigencies of labour.

Walter's apparent callousness is based in his flagrant distrust of the women living in the Shandy household.³³ In an important article, "Mrs Shandy's 'Lint and Basilicon': The Importance of Women in *Tristram Shandy*" (1981), Leigh Ehlers has meticulously explored how Walter's suspicion of women is a major factor in Tristram's various accidents. Walter is particularly resentful of Elizabeth's pregnancy and bitterly explains to Toby that "from the very moment the mistress of the house is brought to bed, every female in it, from my lady's gentlewoman down to the cinder-wench, becomes an inch taller for it; and give themselves more

airs upon that single inch, than all their other inches put together.” (IV: 255). In light of Walter’s desperate attempts to correct what he believes to be his faulty paternal imagination, this resentment perhaps articulates his jealousy regarding the woman’s prolonged and more intimate contact with the foetus. The notion that pregnancy provides women with a degree of actual or illusory authority also relates to the issue of female power and domestic hierarchy discussed in my [Chapter 3](#).

Walter also resents Susannah’s self-importance when she replies enigmatically to his inquiry regarding Elizabeth’s labour and blames her “leaky” (IV: 258) mind for losing Tristram’s intended name of Trismegistus. As Walter believes “that there was a strange kind of magick [sic] bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impress’d upon our characters and conduct” (I: 47), Tristram’s misnaming is a further serious blight on his son’s life. The specific charge that names “impress’d upon our character and conduct” is closely linked to Walter’s belief in the concept of paternal imagination, whereby the father retains an almost mystical power to alter his offspring. Such language signals that Walter views the naming of his child as a potential remedy for his poor conception and also links to the idea of male inheritance. When Tristram is accidentally baptized with the wrong name, Walter views this as utterly catastrophic, as “he had the lowest and most contemptible opinion of it of anything in the world, – thinking it could produce nothing in *rerum naturá*, but what was extremely mean and pitiful” (I: 50). Tristram repeats this information and asks, “will not the gentle reader pity my father from his soul?” (I: 51). This rather insidious question highlights Walter’s folly and shows the way that Tristram has been negatively affected by his father’s premature disappointment. As with so many elements related to Walter’s hobby-horse, Tristram is not actually affected by the name “Tristram”, but by his father’s belief that the name is unlucky.

Walter’s unwise meddling in the process of childbirth and Tristram’s christening is rooted in the conviction that his paternal imagination has detrimentally affected the foetus. This conviction motivates some of Walter’s most foolish decisions, as he tries to compensate the child’s poor beginning with a safe delivery and a name with positive “magick bias”. Ironically Tristram’s mind and body are far from improved by Walter’s interventions. According to prevalent midwifery guidelines, Tristram could be harmed by the maternal fright and anxiety caused by Dr. Slop and the threat of a caesarean. He is then badly injured by Slop’s application of the forceps to his nose and psychologically bruised by Walter’s horror regarding the incident of misnaming. In this way Sterne

highlights Walter's folly with the implication that Walter's erroneous beliefs have left more permanent marks on Tristram than any model of parental imagination.

§ ELIZABETH SHANDY

After detailing the extensive emphasis on Walter's paternal imagination, it might seem incongruous to turn to Tristram's mother. After all, Elizabeth is notoriously marginalised during the eponymous hero's conception, gestation and birth. Although much of the first four volumes of Sterne's idiosyncratic novel are devoted to the *ab ovo* details of Tristram's origins, Elizabeth Shandy is largely screened from the reader's view. Silenced by her husband and later confined upstairs to undergo the messy business of childbirth, Elizabeth is bizarrely absent from the novel's representation of the key prenatal and neonatal stages of her son's life. Compared to the prominence of Walter's periodic attempts to reassert his paternal authority, Elizabeth barely features in the narrative. This absence, I contend, is precisely what the novel forces the reader to acknowledge.

Over the last few decades Elizabeth Shandy has been critically re-evaluated as a subversively feminist character. Leigh Ehlers has claimed that Elizabeth possesses the restorative and fertile powers that elude the Shandy men. She argues that Elizabeth's practical and proactive reaction to Tristram's circumcision – while the Shandy males dither – is only one instance of many that emphasise Elizabeth's superiority. Ehlers claimed that by ignoring women, the Shandy men are predictably unable to access unique and essential female qualities. Ruth Faurot has similarly claimed that Elizabeth is a wily and assertive woman, who deliberately frustrates her husband throughout the novel. Bonnie Blackwell has convincingly suggested that although Tristram, Walter and many of the male characters are dismissive towards Elizabeth, Sterne is sympathetic to her situation. Blackwell claims that “the novel sets about noisily to compensate for Elizabeth Shandy's silences” (2001, 102), as by removing Elizabeth from the prescriptive sentimental spectacle of female suffering, her experience is not reduced to a mere paradigm. This section of the chapter supports the idea that Elizabeth is deliberately silenced in order to draw more attention to her actions. When compared with Walter's multiple ostentatious attempts to rectify the influence of his faulty paternal imagination, the muted nature of Elizabeth's maternal activities acquires a

pointed significance. As she is not afflicted by a stubborn belief in any particular theory, Elizabeth does not feel called to any drastic course of action. Throughout the novel it is Elizabeth who in fact shapes and cares for Tristram, despite his accusations of maternal foolishness, absence and inadequacy.

Tristram rarely allows that his mother has contributed directly to the life or opinions of her son and frequently sidelines her throughout the narrative. Sterne chooses not to describe Elizabeth's personality or appearance explicitly, in contrast to the extensive treatment of Walter, Toby or even peripheral characters such as Yorick and Trim. Instead, the details of Elizabeth's character are left for the reader to deduce. Sterne emphasises the necessity for detective-style reading when Tristram admonishes the reader for not realising "*that my mother was not a Papist*" (I: 51). He points out the reader's supposed inattention by exclaiming "I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct inference, could tell you such as thing" (I: 51). The notion that Sterne has planted clues, or "direct inference", regarding the character of Elizabeth Shandy is deliberately invoked at this early point in the novel. Moreover, Tristram's berating tone belies the fact that his "direct inference" was actually quite obscure. By stating that "It was necessary I should be born before I was christened" (I: 51), Tristram wants his reader to understand that he was not to be baptised *in utero* by injection with Slop's "squirt", an obstetric tool to be used for christening the baby if it were about to die. In a footnote, Tristram explains that this practice is a Roman Catholic fashion, and as he did not undergo this procedure, his mother could not be a "Papist". The existence of such abstruse clues suggests that the reader must read carefully to appreciate the subtleties of Elizabeth's role in the novel.

It may seem perverse to insist on Elizabeth's importance, when she is so systematically removed from the central events of the narrative. Physically hidden for four volumes upstairs in the Shandy home, Elizabeth is effectively silenced after her initial disastrous question, "have you not forgot to wind the clock?" (I: 6) during her monthly sexual encounter with Walter. A casual reading of the text might suggest that, aside from that infamous question, Elizabeth hardly uses her voice to great effect, even when she is permitted direct speech. Yet Sterne often invites the reader to scrutinise the gaps in Tristram's narrative. This can be clearly perceived when Elizabeth

mildly agrees with Walter's musings on the subject of putting Tristram into breeches:

- We defer it, my dear, quoth my father, shamefully. –
 I think we do, Mr. Shandy, – said my mother.
 – Not but that the child looks extremely well, said my father, in his vests and tunicks. –
 – He does look very well in them, – replied my mother. –
 – And for that reason it would be almost a sin, added my father, to take him out of 'em. –
 – It would so, – said my mother: – But indeed he is growing a very tall lad, – rejoin'd my father.
 – He is very tall for his age, indeed, – said my mother. –
 – I can not (making two syllables of it) imagine, quoth my father, who the duce he takes after. –
 – I cannot conceive for my life, – said my mother –
 Humph! – said my father.
 (The dialogue ceased for a moment.) (VI: 395)

I have quoted this conversation at length as it is the protracted duration of the dialogue that reveals Elizabeth's satirical tone. Critics have focused on Elizabeth's role in the "Bed of Justice" scene; for example Melvyn New emphasises the ironic distance and fertility of Elizabeth's language as she largely repeats her husband's words. Indeed New asserts that Elizabeth's part in this conversation shows her as "a splendid satirist who has taken the full measure of Walter Shandy" (1994, 99).³⁴ Ehlers has also highlighted this passage as indicative of "the novel's critique of pure "male" reasoning" and the less obtrusive, but more effective presence of female practicality (64). She explains that while Walter painstakingly researches the history of breeches, Elizabeth sacrifices her place on the Grand Tour in order to actually knit some breeches for her impractical husband. For related reasons, I argue that the Bed of Justice conversation holds particular meaning for the parental roles of Mr. and Mrs. Shandy. Although she appears to merely echo or agree with Walter, her silences, omissions and choice of repetition are comically significant. Elizabeth's comments on Tristram's stature and her allusion to his conception refer to the expected similarities between parent and child.³⁵ While the exchange returns the reader to the issue of Tristram's much-debated paternity with its references to conception and resemblances, it also draws attention to the undervalued role of Elizabeth's maternity. Clearly Elizabeth can conceive, despite her exclamation, as otherwise the Shandys would not be having the

conversation at all. This discussion then, is perhaps indicative of Elizabeth's position in the novel as Sterne invites the reader to surmise precisely what Elizabeth leaves unsaid. Yet one must also note the echolalic nature of Elizabeth's responses.³⁶ As she repeats Walter's words, Elizabeth provides a verbal model of the paternal imagination that haunts all of Walter's decisions. That is to say, while Walter deliberates over Tristram's breeches, he is also thinking of the moment at which he believes his paternal imagination failed. As he discusses the matter with his wife, his thoughts and speech are imprinted onto Elizabeth in inadequate and shortened form. This resembles the way that Walter thinks his paternal imagination formed the infant Tristram inadequately because of the disturbed moment of ejaculation. This curiously mimetic conversation therefore alternately highlights both the words that Elizabeth echoes, as well as the words she actively silences, depending on whether the reader adopts Walter's point of view.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes obvious that Elizabeth's silences are enforced by the misogynist theories and speculations of the Shandy men. For example Walter is deeply concerned that his son has been christened Tristram "against the wills and wishes both of [his] father and mother, and all who are a-kin to [him]" (IV: 294) and seeks advice on how to rectify the situation. As the matter is discussed over dinner, another dinner guest, Kysarcus, puts an argument forward. "If the wills and wishes, said Kysarcus, interrupting my uncle Toby, of those only who stand related to Mr. Shandy's child, were to have weight in this matter, Mrs. Shandy, of all people, has the least to do in it" (IV: 294). Delighted with Kysarcus' claim "that the mother is not of kin to her child" (IV: 295) Walter embraces the logic that in law things only descend, rather than ascend, and therefore while a child is related to its parents, the parent is not related to the child.³⁷ Walter is "hugely tickled with the subtleties of these learned arguments" (IV: 298), perhaps because the notion of reduced maternal importance leaves a space for augmented paternal influence. However, the convoluted arguments of this claim only highlight the selective nature of parental influence, as Walter conveniently forgets "not only what indeed is granted on all sides, that the mother is not of kin to her child – but the father likewise." (IV: 298). This is perhaps expressed most succinctly by Yorick, who explains the consequences of a mother being of no relation to her child. He reminds Walter that if "Mrs. Shandy the mother is nothing at all akin to him – and as the mother's is the surest side – Mr. Shandy, in course, is still less than nothing" (IV: 297). (Some fifty years later, the writer Elizabeth Hamilton wryly observed that families always exaggerated or suppressed maternal or paternal relations

according to their preference. She remarked that if the mother's background was insufficiently illustrious, then the father's pedigree was loudly traced in the figure and character of the offspring, "but if it be by the blood of the mother that their self-consequence is to be augmented, how infinitely is the connexion [sic] between mother and child increased!" (1817, 184)). Walter later suggests that as a mother is under the authority of her husband, her influence is necessarily determined by the father's influence. As he explains this theory to Toby, Walter makes it clear that "the offspring, upon this account, is not so under the power and jurisdiction of the *mother*... *she is not the principal agent*" in reproduction (V: 352–353). These arguments reassert Walter's male role as the family's progenitor and his position as head of the household, but also indicate an underlying anxiety regarding female influence and authority.

The marginalisation and subversive rehabilitation of maternal influence is curious considering Sterne's personal experiences with maternity. Obviously his wife's delivery of stillborn and sickly children was a source of deep unhappiness for both parties. Sterne's relationship with his own mother Agnes was ambivalent at best, and underwent a serious breach when Agnes requested funds during crucial periods of Elizabeth Sterne's lying-in.³⁸ Given the Sternes' private experience of infant mortality, Laurence Sterne felt that such an action was particularly insensitive, although fortunately both mother and child survived.³⁹ Ian Campbell Ross has suggested that the fictional Mrs. Shandy is coldly uninvolved in Tristram's life in an articulation of Sterne's feelings towards his own mother. However, Elizabeth Shandy is named after Sterne's wife Elizabeth, not his mother Agnes. Moreover Elizabeth Shandy is only lacking in warmth for the inactive reader, as once the reader begins to question Tristram's assumptions and prejudices, it becomes clear that she is a tender and influential mother.⁴⁰

Elizabeth's quiet influence can be seen in direct relation to one of Walter's schemes for the improvement of Tristram, in the writing of the *Tristra-poedia*. As the adult Tristram observes, "the misfortune was, that I was all that time totally neglected and abandoned to my mother" (V: 338). Elizabeth is not given a voice at all in this chapter; instead Tristram has filled his sentiments with negative verbs to convey his childhood disappointment at his father's negligence. However, taken in the context of the chapter, which is solely a description of Walter's irrelevant and pointless compilation of the *Tristra-poedia*, the observation manifests irony. In the context of the chapter, and indeed the novel as a whole,

Tristram’s statement suggests that while Walter is busy with his doomed antidotes to paternal imagination, Elizabeth is quietly, but consistently, exerting her own powerful maternal influence. I will discuss the nature of Elizabeth’s influence in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Tristram’s choice of negative vocabulary is significant, as it indicates that he has inherited his father’s predilection for strong paternal input. Elizabeth’s contributions are continually dismissed, derided or characterized as “misfortune” by the Shandy men. As I shall explore, despite the repeated exaggeration of Walter’s influence, Elizabeth is often held responsible for mishaps and misfortunes. Other mothers in the novel are seen as having a similarly negative influence, which frequently draws on the discourse of maternal imagination. For example Walter describes the Roman Emperor Marcus Antoinius’s son, Commodus: “I know very well, continued my father, that Commodus’ mother was in love with a gladiator at the time of her conception, which accounts for a great many of Commodus’ cruelties when he became emperor” (V: 373). Later in the novel, when Walter loses his temper with Toby, he asks forgiveness and blames his own mother for his inherited quick passions, “Brother Toby, said he, – I beg thy pardon; – forgive, I pray thee, this rash humour which *my mother gave me*” (II: 101 *my italics*).⁴¹ That is to say despite his faith in the theory of paternal imagination, Walter refers to the concept of a powerful, if primarily injurious, maternal imagination. These hints indicate that despite the novel’s beleaguered claims for paternal imagination, the concept itself is only one point of the syncopated rhythm of Sterne’s improvisation on the theme of maternal imagination.

§ “WHAT A TEASING LIFE DID SHE LEAD HERSELF, AND CONSEQUENTLY HER FOETUS TOO”: ELIZABETH’S MATERNAL IMAGINATION

The character of Elizabeth Shandy deftly negotiates the discourse of maternal imagination. *Tristram Shandy* manifests the discourse in a number of ways; employing the language and tropes of maternal imagination, engaging with the notion of female agency and responsibility during pregnancy, and linking Elizabeth’s character to notorious cases of the discourse. Elizabeth’s duties as a wife and pregnant woman are directed by the idea of maternal imagination and, as I shall discuss below, she is implicitly associated with the Mary Toft case. Throughout the novel

Elizabeth's tendency to freely exercise her thoughts, emotions, and imagination, are indirectly, but consistently, played upon. Walter and Tristram both hold Elizabeth responsible for many of Tristram's flaws, and cite her uncontrolled maternal imagination as the cause. However, as these accusations are made alongside the recurring, exaggerated, claims regarding the force of Walter's paternal imagination, it would seem that Sterne distrusts the idea that a woman could influence her foetus with mere thoughts and feelings. To avoid culpability for what he believes to be his ruinous moment of paternal imagination, Walter falls back on the notion that a mother should be held responsible for an unprepossessing infant. Sterne thus keeps both models of parental imagination open, while he pokes fun at Walter's faith in discredited theories. In order to make sense of this, one must first take into account the numerous ways that Sterne engages with the discourse of maternal imagination in the novel.

In comparison with the stress on Walter's imagination there is only sporadic and oblique mention of the concept of maternal imagination in the novel. That is to say, Sterne reverses prevalent impressions of the discourse by prioritising the less popular theory and downplaying the dominant model. The most obvious example of maternal imagination is of course during the conception of Tristram. Elizabeth's distraction during Tristram's conception is framed as doubly destructive, as she is not only distracts herself, but also diverts Walter from his efforts with her question about winding the clock. Elizabeth's mind, wandering into thoughts of her husband's other Sunday duties, maternally imprints an obsession with interruptions and time onto the foetus, which is clearly shown by Tristram's digressive writing style. Her lack of interest in sex with Walter also suggests that Tristram's dimmed fortunes are less a result of Walter's diverted animal spirits, and more the consequence of Elizabeth's unfulfilled sexual satisfaction (New 1994, 47). Certainly Walter's attitude to conjugal relations, his decision to wind the clock and sleep with his wife on a monthly basis to avoid being "plagued and pester'd" (I: 9), implies the dully dutiful, rather than passionate nature of their sexual activity.

Sterne makes it clear that unlike Walter's paternal imagination, the effect of Elizabeth's maternal imagination is not limited to the moment of conception. Tristram reveals that during her pregnancy Elizabeth was blamed for not cultivating "calmness and serenity of mind" (IV: 267), the mental qualities required to ward off any dangerous longings or passions. Walter accuses his wife of entertaining a private resentment regarding her

lying in at Shandy Hall and of indulging her passions during their arguments over the choice of midwife. According to the logic prevalent in contemporary midwifery texts, such maternal emotion could certainly be one of the factors contributing to Tristram's poor health. Walter discusses the matter with Toby:

What a teasing life did she lead herself, and consequently her foetus too, with that nonsensical anxiety of hers about lying in town? I thought my sister submitted with the greatest patience, replied my uncle Toby – I never heard her utter one fretful word about it – She fumed inwardly, cried my father; and that, let me tell you, brother, was ten times worse for the child – and then! What battles did she fight with me, and what perpetual storms about the midwife – There she gave vent, said my uncle Toby. (IV: 267)

In a moment of temper, Walter thus blames Elizabeth's maternal imagination for Tristram's misfortunes. This accusation mocks Walter's faith in his own paternal imagination, as he has consistently announced its power throughout four volumes. The statement shows how the discourse of maternal imagination means that Walter may easily turn from his apparently rigid belief in paternal imagination. This passage also draws mocking attention to a key aspect of the discourse of maternal imagination, as it indicates the way that mothers are trapped by the concept of maternal passion. Elizabeth is doomed either way; if she submits then she will be accused of nursing resentment, if she argues, then she will be blamed for stirring up her passions. Sterne therefore satirizes the idea that the concept of maternal imagination could be a ubiquitous explanation for all birth defects, and with Walter's quickly abandoned faith in paternal imagination, also suggests that the theory is merely an excuse to scapegoat the mother.

The spectre of maternal imagination looms large over the character of Elizabeth, even when she is not actually pregnant. Walter seeks to assert his influence over the foetus even before it has been conceived, dictating the terms, location and manner of the birth. To prevent a false alarm or any abuse of maternal imagination, Walter has included a particular clause in his marriage contract. It stipulates that Elizabeth may lie in at London, but if her pregnancy turns out to be a false alarm, her London privileges would be forfeited during the next pregnancy. Elizabeth does in fact claim

a pregnancy that proves to be unfounded and thus when she becomes pregnant with Tristram, he is delivered at Shandy Hall. Tristram explains:

But I was begot and born to misfortunes; – for my poor mother, whether it was wind or water, – or a compound of both, – or either; – or whether it was simply the mere swell of imagination and fancy in her; – or how far a strong wish and desire to have it so, might mislead her judgment; – in short, whether she was deceived or deceiving in this matter, it no way becomes me to decide. (I: 38)

One might be forgiven for reading Tristram's statement as sympathetic to his "poor mother", as it appears to excuse her mistake with the long list of possible vindications. However, this passage is sandwiched between two of Tristram's rueful complaints concerning his broken nose, which he perceives to be an indirect effect of Elizabeth's false alarm. Tristram's equivocal statement comes immediately after his description of the article in the marriage contract and his opinion on the matter; "I have ever thought it hard that the whole weight of the article should have fallen entirely, as it did, upon myself" (I: 38). The passage is then followed by Tristram's assertion that "I was doom'd, by marriage articles, to have my nose squeezed as flat to my face as if the destinies had actually spun me without one" (I: 38). Tristram clearly lays the blame for his complicated birth on his mother and assigns the outcome of the whole episode to her phantom pregnancy. I suggest that Tristram sarcastically doubts whether his mother really believed she was with child and conveys his suspicions to the reader with the discourse of maternal imagination. The "mere swell of imagination and fancy . . . a strong wish and desire" is clearly the language of maternal imagination and carries implications of female manipulation. Elizabeth may deny that she knew it was a false pregnancy on the very basis of longing and desire that lies at the heart of maternal imagination, as she can claim that yearning for a baby may "mislead her judgment". By questioning whether Elizabeth was "deceived or deceiving in this matter", Tristram overturns any assumption that she was innocently mistaken. Tristram thereby hints that his mother is the kind of manipulative, profit-seeking female discussed in my previous chapter. As a result of these accusations and insinuations, the events leading up to Tristram's conception and birth are imbued with the connotations of maternal imagination.

It becomes vital at this point to separate Tristram's opinion from Sterne's. Sterne uses Tristram's lack of sympathy for his mother to highlight the inevitability of maternal blame. Tristram holds his mother responsible for his injured nose, however the reader's consciousness of the Shandy marriage contract, which has been cited in full, tedious, legalese, is a reminder that it is Walter's actions – his marriage article – which forced Elizabeth to lie-in at Shandy Hall. When Tristram declares that his nose was as flat as if "the destinies had actually spun me without one", the reader is reminded that if Tristram really had been born without a nose, his mother's imagination, rather than "the destinies", would most likely be called to account for the defect.

A final small, but significant, facet to Elizabeth's discursive relation to the idea of maternal imagination is her association with the case of Mary Toft. Bonnie Blackwell has found compelling evidence for the argument that Elizabeth's character is thoroughly "imprinted by the legendary tale of the Rabbit Breeder of Godalming" (2001, 97). Elizabeth's connection to the eighteenth-century's most well known and fraudulent example of the maternal imagination is the finishing touch to Sterne's critique. As Blackwell explains, Elizabeth Shandy's maiden name was "Mollineaux", which closely resembles the name of the courtier Samuel Molyneux, who first attended Toft on behalf of George II. After Molyneux's death in 1730, his wife *Elizabeth Molyneux* married Nathaneal St. André, the physician notorious for being Mary Toft's biggest dupe. (This marriage was awash with scandal as Molyneux's widow eloped with St. André the very night that her husband died of suspected poisoning. Her choice of second husband, the self-important, gullible and ridiculed St. André, who had been hired to treat her first husband's illness, was unconventional to say the least. The marriage permanently injured the reputation of both parties; Lady Elizabeth lost her post at court attending Queen Caroline and St. André was unable to find work.) Blackwell also observes that Sterne refers specifically to Richard Manningham, the physician who helped to uncover Toft's fraud. Part of the reason that Elizabeth wishes to hire the female midwife Mrs. Wood, is because she has discovered that "the famous Dr Manningham was not to be had" (I: 41). The recycling of these significant names in a novel that emphasises the importance of names, serves to establish Elizabeth Shandy's relation to the discourse of maternal imagination. In support of Blackwell's argument, I would like to suggest that Sterne deliberately makes the reader work hard to uncover these allusions and hints. For example, he does not use the name of Mary

Toft herself, but of those figures associated with her case. This subtlety places *Tristram Shandy* within the discourse of maternal imagination, yet allows for a certain flexibility. By the 1760s Toft's name was too heavily saturated with the associations of her fraud to provide any credibility for the notion of maternal imagination. Citing Toft directly would therefore shut down the novel's consideration of parental imagination and render Sterne's sophisticated critique redundant. However, by skilfully skirting direct and scandalous references to Toft, Sterne both raises and doubts the concept of maternal imagination; similar to the way that Walter's warped insistence is both a proposal and a mockery of the theory of paternal imagination.

Sterne's allusions to the culture of blame generated by the discourse of maternal imagination suggest that he encourages a challenge of this perspective. Given the novel's persistent stress on a father's role in a child's life, Walter's accusations and the traces of Mary Toft imprinted upon Elizabeth's character seem spurious. The ease with which Walter and Tristram switch to accusations of maternal imagination seems to demonstrate the expedient nature of the discourse, or at least the part of the discourse that channelled blame and responsibility. In the next section I argue that *Tristram Shandy's* subtle references to maternal imagination and the over-determined emphasis on the concept of paternal imagination, draws attention towards the variables, ambiguities and discrepancies within the discourse of maternal imagination.

§ ALTERNATIVES TO IMAGINATION

Sterne's skepticism and mockery of foetal formation theory is not limited to the models of paternal and maternal imagination. Walter's faith in paternal imagination is undermined, not only by his overstated claims and blaming of Elizabeth's imagination, but also by his occasional reference to a belief in astrology. In conversation with the innocent Toby and commonsensical Yorick, Walter shows that in moments of stress, he vacillates between Imaginationist and astrological theories.

A system that peaked during the seventeenth century, astrology could be used for the reading of one's future, as well as the interpretation of birthmarks and monsters. Paul Gabriel Boucé has noted Sterne's inclusion of astrology as a potential explanation for Tristram's development in the womb. He remarks that "Sterne had already poked fun, mixed with probable *double entendre* when he had Walter Shandy explain to a

bemused Uncle Toby his less than entirely successful procreation of Tristram" (1987, 97). Boucé is referring to a conversation that takes place just after the unfortunate occasion of Tristram's accidental circumcision:

– there has been certainly, continued my father, the duce and all to do in some part or other of the ecliptic, when this offspring of mine was formed. – That, you are a better judge than I, replied Yorick. – Astrologers, quoth my father, know better than us both: the trine and sextil aspects have jumped awry, – or the opposite of their ascendants have not hit it, as they should, – or the lords of genitures (as they call them) have been at *bo-peep*, – or something has been wrong above or below us. (V: 348)

The conversation resembles Walter's earlier apostrophe on Elizabeth's maternal imagination, as it lists a number of variable causes. The three coordinating conjunctions "– or", imply that Walter pauses in order to rack his brain for a more comprehensive clause to allow for a larger number of possibilities regarding Tristram and his astrological fate. In the same way that Elizabeth cannot avoid the responsibility for her imagination, Walter portrays astrology as inescapably accountable for Tristram's misfortunes. During especially difficult times, Walter clutches at astrology as an explanation for terrible events. For example when Tristram's nose is broken by Slop's forceps, Walter is overwhelmed:

Confusion! Cried my father, (getting up upon his legs a second time) – not one single thing has gone right this day! Had I faith in astrology, brother, (which by the bye, my father had) I would have sworn some retrograde planet was hanging over this unfortunate house of mine. (III: 186)

In such episodes of "confusion", Walter desperately grasps any theory he can remember at the time. Despite his excessive claims for the strength and significance of his paternal imagination, in moments of truth Walter reveals that his opinions on foetal formation rather fluctuate. Tristram's parenthetical interjection conveys to the reader what Walter cannot admit, and emphasises Walter's uncertainty.

Walter can perhaps be partially excused when reaching for astrology as an explanation for his, and particularly Tristram's woes. Astrology and theories of maternal/paternal imagination were often conflated, as in Claude Quillet's poem *Callipædia, Or the Art of Begetting Lovely*

Children (1655), which was translated and reprinted well into the eighteenth century. According to the *Callipædia*, Tristram's early March conception would be the reason for his unlucky progress through life.⁴² Yet while the poem relied heavily on astrological signs and lore, it also spent a sizeable amount of time advising parents to gaze upon beautiful objects, lest they produce ugly children.⁴³ Sterne's inclusion of astrology as one of Walter's "back up" explanations therefore perhaps mocks the way that theories of foetal formation coalesced. Often overlapping, and with so many contradictory explanations within each system – think of those coordinating conjunctions – it becomes impossible to "prove" any theory as incorrect.

At different times and to different degrees, Walter seems to believe in theories of paternal or maternal imagination, and astrology. Each theory is exposed by Walter's panicked and unfaithful reliance, as he overlaps and confuses the variables that render them suspect. Confusingly, Sterne both deploys and satirises the principles of each theory at different points in the novel, which perhaps means that no single theory of prenatal influence is presented as the real origin of Tristram's life and opinions.

Yet arguably, Sterne offers a genuine explanation for Tristram's character with the inclusion of John Locke's theory of associationism, as expressed in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).⁴⁴ Appearing frequently throughout the narrative, Locke's theory that sense impressions leave indelible associations on the mind rivals, to a certain extent, Imaginationist and astrological theories. However, it is worth bearing in mind that Walter himself does not make strong claims for the theory of associationism or its effect on Tristram. Unlike astrological or Imaginationist theories, the principles of associationism stress the blank canvass of the mind at birth.⁴⁵ Locke argued that associations were developed after the child had left the womb, during early childhood, or in later life. The theory of associationism therefore conflicts with Walter's stubborn belief in prenatal influence. Yet Tristram makes multiple references to Locke's theory throughout the novel, suggesting the possibility that his father's emphasis on the early stages of life is misguided.⁴⁶ The theory is perhaps most memorable in connection with Toby's refusal to murder a fly and its extraordinary impression on Tristram.

I was but ten years old when this happened; –but whether it was, that the action itself was more in unison to my nerves at that age of pity, which instantly set my whole frame into one vibration of most pleasurable

sensation; – or how far the manner and expression of it might go towards it; – or in what degree, or by what secret magick; – a tone of voice and harmony of movement, attuned by mercy, might find a passage to my heart I know not; – this I know, that the lesson of universal good-will then taught and imprinted by my uncle Toby, has never since been worn out of my mind...I often think I owe one half of my philanthropy to that one accidental impression. (II: 100)

This extract shows that Tristram himself considers the theory of associationism, or as he terms it “accidental impression”, to be a potential explanation for the more favourable aspects of his character. Tristram believes that witnessing Toby’s benevolence has affected his own behavior, causing Tristram be more inclined to philanthropy. The frequent references to Locke’s principles thus acquire a pointed emphasis, as associationism and Toby have exerted a more positive influence on Tristram than his father and the supposed workings of paternal imagination. Tristram himself suggests this connection, unprompted by his father – and yet he has clearly inherited his father’s fondness for coordinating conjunctions. Tristram’s conspicuous list of variables calls to mind his father’s tendency to present loopholes and ambiguities in relation to his favourite theories. One wonders if Tristram has unwittingly acquired this habit of Walter’s because he has been continually exposed to his father’s train of association.

Of course *Tristram Shandy* itself is arguably one long demonstration of associationism. Cairns Craig (2007) has suggested that the novel makes extreme use of associationist principles through a model of conversation; the narrator speaks to the characters and the reader, the characters speak to each other, the novel speaks to the reader, and all of these conversations rely on certain associations. Judith Hawley (2009) observes that “*Tristram Shandy* contains many hints that [Sterne] thought Locke’s theories questionable or even insane” (37), but adds that “Sterne also demonstrates their explanatory effectiveness” (45). It follows that while Tristram may parody the principles of associationism, he uses these same principles in the opening paragraph of the novel. This paragraph describes Tristram’s *ab ovo* beginning, in a way that deftly marries associationism paradoxically to both conception and failure, and applies throughout *Tristram Shandy*. Craig points out that Walter’s associations of detrimental names and noses with failure actually cause the outcome that he fears – if Walter did not try to prevent an unfortunate name or crooked nose, the baby Tristram would

be left alone to thrive. I argue that this is also true of Walter's predominant belief in the theory of paternal imagination, as all of Tristram's misfortunes can be traced to – or associated with – his father's obsession with the moment of conception. Following on from this, Tristram's implicit support of associationist principles, and hence ongoing impressions, merit closer examination, especially in the context of eighteenth-century expectations of paternity.

§ "SO LITTLE POWER DOES THE BARE ACT OF BEGETTING GIVE A MAN OVER HIS ISSUE": THE PATERNAL ROLE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

As we have seen, Walter's theories of foetal formation are archaic, flawed or to a degree interchangeable. The novel's digressive structure and disproportionate emphasis on trivial episodes seems to argue that no one event is responsible for the development of an individual. Tristram's references to the theory of associationism contain the implication that continuing impressions, rather than one pivotal, prenatal moment, have formed his life and opinions. Building on this idea, I suggest that Walter's obsession with shaping of his son during the stages of conception, pregnancy and early childhood emphasises his neglect of sustained paternal guidance. Walter's seeming unawareness that his paternity is an ongoing role is particularly striking when considered alongside eighteenth-century expectations of fatherhood.

During the early modern period, blood was no proof of a strong familial tie. The seventeenth-century French philosopher Nicholas Malebranche had claimed that children resembled their parents largely because they spent more time with them than with other people. The consanguineal connection helped, but did not dictate this affinity – Malebranche asserted in *The Search after Truth* (1764–1765) that servants might resemble their masters, and courtiers might grow like their kings, for the same reasons (167). Furthermore John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) declared "so little power does the bare act of begetting give a man over his issue, if all his care ends there, and this be all the title he hath to the name and authority of a father" (328). Locke contended that merely conceiving a child did not automatically grant paternal power to the father, in an argument that looked towards the importance of early impressions and the theory of

associationism. This stance opposes Walter’s emphasis on paternal imagination as the most important element in the formation of an infant. Locke’s argument instead goes on to underscore the importance of continued care, affection and attention for a father to earn his paternal title.

This attitude continued to prevail into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has often been observed that eighteenth-century notions of family were rather different to modern understandings (Tadmor 2001). “Family” denoted those individuals who resided under the same roof; they did not have to be biologically related. A patriarch could therefore be said to “father” servants, pupils, apprentices, or any other young person of a formative age living in the same space, as well as his own children, if he had any. Lyn Broughton and Helen Rogers (2007) state that “until the mid-eighteenth century, the male head of the household was regarded as a father figure for all its members, whether or not he was their biological parent” (8). This was particularly important during the 1650–1740 demographic drop, when almost half of Britain’s landowners failed to produce a male heir. In such precarious circumstances, surrogate father figures were clearly necessary. Brian Mcree (1998) claims that novels of the early eighteenth century frequently deal with this critical failure of the male line, although the period he studies falls short of including *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne’s novel however, clearly engages with concerns of family inheritance and male failure.

The rise of sentimental culture concurrent with, and partially generated by, the publication of *Tristram Shandy* during the 1760s contributed to the general perspective that fathering involved more than “the bare act of begetting” (Locke 1690, 328). It was not the circumstances of conception that mattered, but the father’s love, attention and education of the child after it had left the womb. Popular notions of paternity did not suggest that a father’s influence depended, as Walter Shandy believed, on the nature of the man’s sperm at the point of conception. Instead advice literature emphasised the role of the father in a child’s life as a kindly, but authoritative, guardian and teacher. Many sources instructed fathers to take a greater interest in domestic life; in 1762 William Buchan’s popular health guide *Domestic Medicine* maintained that men and women should be equally involved with their offspring. He explained that “the mother is not the only person concerned in the management of children. The father has an equal interest in their welfare, and ought to assist in everything that respects either the improvement of the body or mind” (56).⁴⁷ The idealisation of the loving

father can even be traced in portraiture of the period; Kate Retford (2006) explains that compositionally the father "was increasingly pictured as absorbed and engrossed in the well-being of his dependents" (115). The father was literally more central in the picture, rather than depicted as separate to women and children of the household. Jean Jacques Rousseau also proselytised the benefits of domestic life in *Emile, Or On Education* (1762). He suggested that the father should be profoundly involved with his children and scolded men who claimed that business and the public sphere monopolised their time (48–49). He argued that men had a moral obligation to provide decent citizens for the state, and that these well-principled citizens had to be engendered, fed and instructed by fathers, as well as cared for by mothers. Using a sentimental tone, he claimed that domesticity was its own reward; "when the family is lively and animated, the domestic cares constitute the dearest occupation of the wife and the sweetest enjoyment of the husband" (46).⁴⁸

Paternal influence in these accounts, was clearly not dictated by biological ties, but by the father's care and attention to the child after birth. John Tosh has observed that, by the nineteenth century, fatherhood was an essential component of hegemonic masculinity; fathers were required to spend time at home in order to provide a strong male role model for sons who might otherwise become feminised from too much contact with female family members (2005, 70). This scenario is increasingly being perceived as pertinent to the eighteenth century as well. Over the last two decades, arguments challenging the theory of separate spheres have recognised that women were not solely confined to the home and men were deeply invested in the domestic sphere as marital partners and nursing fathers.⁴⁹ Eve Tavor Bannet has proposed that modern critics misread the meaning of terms such as "domestic", "private", and "public", and claims that "in the eighteenth century, the word domestic was still applied to men as well as women, arguably to men more properly than to women" (2000, 127). She observes that eighteenth-century men were encouraged to supervise children's health and education, which had been too long left to the "weaker" minds of the female sex. Tavor Bannet explains, "male ideologues therefore tried to naturalize men's paternal affections and to magnify their dignity and public importance in order to persuade men to take them on" (125).

More recent research such as Karen Harvey's *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2012) demonstrates the way that a prevalent discourse of oeconomy

enforced the idea that men should be involved in domestic matters and how their household authority was in fact an integral feature of their masculinity, by examining the evidence of commonplace books, letters and autobiographical narratives written by eighteenth-century men. Her research clearly indicates that males were not expected to eschew the domestic sphere. As Tosh succinctly states, "the point is that men operated at will in *both* spheres; that was their privilege" (2005, 71).

Within this culture of idealised paternal involvement in a child's life, Walter's claim that his son's entire future is based on paternal imagination is strangely anomalous. It is true that Walter does try to carefully educate and shape Tristram, however he is motivated by a desire to rectify his distraction during Tristram's conception, rather than by the belief that a consistent paternal role is instrumental for Tristram's identity. Walter's efforts to father Tristram during his childhood are repeatedly shown to be ostentatious and farcical, rather than loving or effective. This not only reflects poorly on Walter's manhood, but also injures Tristram physically and psychologically.

The most obvious example of Walter's failed opportunity to nurture his son is his writing of an educational guide, the *Tristra-poedia*. Tristram observes that his father "had lost, by his own computation, full three fourths of me – that is my geniture, nose and name, – there was but this one [i.e. education] left" (V: 336). Walter's dedicated compilation of the *Tristra-poedia* could be described as the kind of domestic, careful fathering advocated by Rousseau and Buchan – however he spends so long writing the book, that he misses Tristram's childhood. While Walter writes the *Tristra-poedia*, the boy Tristram matures under the supervision of Elizabeth and other members of the household. This pretentious display of sentimental fathering is therefore empty of any real meaning or genuine paternal influence.

Walter fails to fulfill his role as a good father, not only by his own idiosyncratic standards of paternal imagination, but also according to the emerging principles of eighteenth-century sentimental culture. He is, according to my account, an inadequate specimen of fatherhood. I propose that while Tristram attempts to excuse or explain his father's shortcomings, he is also determined to avoid the same mistakes. Tristram's implicit endorsement of the theory of associationism conflicts with his father's set of beliefs regarding prenatal formation, yet the very principles of association continually lead him back to Walter's misguided notions and

his own conception. I want to suggest that the ironies of this relationship are fully exploited by Sterne as he incorporates various paternal elements into his narrative strategy. The penultimate section will demonstrate the way that Sterne appropriates certain aspects of the theory of paternal imagination, sentimental fatherhood and associationism to become a positive, cultural father to the reader.

§ LAURENCE STERNE: CULTURAL FATHER

Although in the field of medicine paternal imagination was an even less credited concept than the theory of maternal imagination, it was gaining currency in certain creative circles. Writing contemporaneously with Sterne, but on German aesthetics, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing rejected the power of maternal imagination in preference of a masculine, artistic imagination in *Laokoon, Or, On the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766). Lessing had almost certainly read *Tristram Shandy*, as he is listed as one of the subscribers to the novel. Moreover, William Holtz (1966) has argued that “in Lessing’s theoretical treatise on the arts, his *Laocoon*, we find concepts important in understanding *Tristram Shandy*” (199).

Susan E Gustafson (1993) explains that Lessing viewed maternal imagination as corrupt, requiring a corrective through male production of beautiful art and statues.⁵⁰ These works of art, imaginative offspring of the male mind, would intervene with the faulty, pregnant imagination by filling the woman’s mind with attractive images. In other words, the beauty of art created by men acted to recuperate female imagination and thereby produce beautiful children. An instance of this process can be identified in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, when an unnamed Ethiopian Queen views the white virgin Sabra in a painting of St. George. The black queen’s imagination is possessed by this image and causes her to give birth to the beautiful, white and virginal character Clorinda.⁵¹ As Gustafson elaborates, “the task of masculine imagination is to preclude the corporeal monster, the fragmented, misformed body generated by the mother’s susceptible imagination and fragmented body. Beautiful bodies are not created by biological mothers and fathers but by *cultural* fathers” (Gustafson 1092). This notion links back to my previous discussion of eighteenth-century paternity as a life-long, cultural role, rather than a biologically-dependent position based on “the bare act of begetting” (Locke 1690, 328).

As Sterne's novel so stylishly demonstrates, Tristram experiences both a physical and intellectual birth. Sterne consistently mocks Walter's preoccupation with Tristram's physical origins, and suggests that Walter should be far more concerned with the formation of his son's opinions. This is arguably an analogy for the author-reader relationship. I suggest that Sterne wants his readers to become aware that, although they have already been *physically* born, they will not experience their *imaginative* birth until they finish reading the novel. Reading *Tristram Shandy* is a more "pre-natal" experience than reading any other text; it is preoccupied with obstetrics, as well as theories of prenatal formation and influence. It also actively adopts a parental role, by guiding the reader's intellectual birth. Despite his satirical presentation of the theories of paternal and maternal imagination, Sterne seems to enjoy the rich relationship between writing, imagination and reproduction. Lessing reasoned that art could intercede with a pregnant woman's deficient imagination in order to perfect her mind and produce beautiful babies. Following this logic, Sterne presents his imaginative offspring *Tristram Shandy* as a corrective to any deficiencies in the imagination of the reader. In this sense Laurence Sterne intervenes and imaginatively "fathers" the reader through the mediation of *Tristram Shandy* and Tristram Shandy. Throughout the novel, the character Tristram adopts a playfully paternal tone towards his readers; he corrects their mistakes, teases their expectations and steers them towards his preferred conclusions.

It is perhaps desirable, even necessary, for Tristram to adopt this paternalistic role. The process of reading novels or romances was a still a controversial issue, as it was believed that unregulated minds could be malformed by reading the wrong kind of material. Women were especially at risk, as their unruly female passions might become inflamed by wanton reading. Again the discourse of maternal imagination becomes pertinent; readers are in this context equivalent to helpless foetuses, as they helplessly absorb objects or feelings. In fact a popular conduct book *The Complete Woman* (1753) made a direct parallel between reading and maternal imagination:

As Mothers, upon viewing some extraordinary object, often leave the marks thereof upon their infants, why should we not believe that the lascivious stories in romances may have the same effect upon our imagination, and that they always leave behind them some spots upon the soul?⁵²

Tristram's careful "fathering" of his readers might therefore be intended as a counter-measure against the "maternally" harmful effects of novel-reading – although of course his propensity for digression, bawdiness and inflammatory scenes renders his paternal solicitousness heavily ironic.

Sterne is careful not to spoon-feed his readers, and like a good father, makes them cultivate their reasoning faculties. Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne presumes upon the reader's alertness to his various clues, red herrings and false starts. Early twentieth century-critics such as Victor Shlovsky acknowledged these narrative devices, which awaken the reader to the necessity for careful and active reading.⁵³ As I have discussed above, the reader must decipher Elizabeth's significance and penetrate Walter's true motivations throughout the novel. The reader is also required to exercise a creative literary imagination, which is quite different from the concept of paternal imagination. As Tristram explains when preparing the reader for the marbled page:

I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without much reading, by which your reverence knows, I mean *much knowledge*, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unraval [sic] the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one. (III: 204 original emphasis)

Tristram Shandy is full of instructions for the reader to become involved, to variously "throw down the book", shut the door, stand up, or draw a character. Helen Ostovich (2006) has observed the way that Sterne draws his readers into a conversation that "might more properly be called dispute" (171), as he questions, entices, soothes and quarrels. Howard Anderson (1971) has remarked on Sterne's insistence that the reader become involved in the imagining of the novel's story. He states that the reader is irresistibly drawn to read the story in an active way because "Tristram Shandy begins to make us aware of reductive limits that our imaginations have imposed upon a new experience. He makes us doubt the adequacy of our own imaginations" (966).⁵⁴ Such doubt is bound with the challenge to nurture and develop one's imagination in new creative ways. Sterne demands that the reader "read, read, read, my unlearned, read" (III: 204), or in other words, to read and then re-read carefully. The novel thus allows the reader to look past

Walter's strained claims for various theories of character formation and to be educated by Sterne, the true father figure of the novel.

Due to Sterne's requests to share in-jokes and exercise reader imagination, *Tristram Shandy* is often categorised as a belated example of learned wit.⁵⁵ However, this alone does not explain why the novel relentlessly returns to the notion that the reader is an equal creator, rather than a consumer of the narrative. Take Sterne's famous invitation to the reader to share evenly the burden of writing by exercising his imagination. Early in Volume II Tristram declares:

the truest respect which you [any author] can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.

For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own. (II: 96)

Thomas Keymer (2006) has argued that Sterne's repeated invitations to imagine are actually a critique of similar invitations by previous novels and are overridden by the narrator's dictatorial tone. He explains that just after this very invitation to imagine the aftermath of Dr. Slop's fall from his horse, Tristram does not allow the reader any room for imagination but instead guides him through each step of the process. However, while Keymer's sophisticated reading explores *Tristram Shandy's* rightful place in the novelistic tradition and learned wit, it does not account for Sterne's paternalistic relation to the reader. By self-consciously guiding the reader's imagination, Sterne employs the text as a creative intervention according to the logic of *Laokoon*. That is to say, in a pointed reversal of Walter's priorities, Tristram paternally guides his reader-children's imaginations, instead of becoming obsessed with his own. Sterne's playfulness is therefore both an example of learned wit and a strategy deployed in order to develop the reader's imaginative agility. In this way Sterne suggests ways to form an engaged, imaginative and informed response to the text.

Sterne's paternal guidance is established early in the novel when Tristram urges the reader to exercise their imagination, albeit within certain parameters:

You may conjecture upon it, if you please, – and whilst your imagination is in motion, you may encourage it to go on, and discover by what causes and

effects in nature it could come to pass, that my uncle Toby got his modesty by the wound he received upon his groin. – You may raise a system to account for the loss of my nose by marriage articles [...] These, with fifty other points left yet unravelled, you may endeavour to solve if you have time; – but I tell you before-hand it will be in vain [...] The reader will be content to wait for a full explanation of these matters till next year. (II: 136)

Sterne thus leaves his reader free to attempt to solve the “unravelled” points of the first two volumes and goads the reader with the declaration that “it will be in vain”. The reopening of the many unanswered questions of the novel so far, in the final paragraph of Volume II, is surely a tease designed to spur the reader’s imagination, despite the instruction to desist. Yet the final sentence of Volume II reasserts Sterne’s paternal role in the author-reader relationship as he promises that all will eventually be revealed. His tone resembles a kindly parent, who wishes the child to attempt the problem, before he provides the answer. In fact, notwithstanding Sterne’s encouragement of the reader’s creative faculties, disingenuous self-criticism, and his apparently deferential modes of address such as “Sir”, “Madam”, “Your worship” and “Your reverences”; it is abundantly clear that the author, not the reader, is in supreme control of this reading experience. (This is illustrated early in the novel when Tristram chastises the reader in a somewhat paternal fashion: “you must have a little patience [...] keep your temper” (I: 11). The instruction is quite galling when one considers the temperamental and provoking nature of the narrative). This notion recurs throughout Volume VII as Tristram tries to outrun Death, by fleeing to France. Frightened by the pursuit, he nevertheless admits, “But courage! Gentle reader! – I scorn it – ‘tis enough to have thee in my power” (VII: 438). This suggests that despite appearances, Tristram is the patriarch of the novel, while the reader takes the position of child or dependent. Consequently, the reader is slowly trained to respond to Sterne’s style and is moulded by his intellectual fathering, perhaps rather more so than by the paternal imagination of a biological father, the form of the reader’s soul in the medulla oblongata, or the shape of the reader’s nose.

Finally, the novel’s preoccupation with Tristram’s ability to beget his own children emphasises both Sterne’s and Tristram’s vicariously paternal roles. The suggestion that Walter’s foolish beliefs have left Tristram infertile runs throughout the novel. Has Tristram’s virility somehow been affected by his father’s ineffectual paternal imagination, his

inauspicious name, his crushed "nose", or his accidental circumcision? If this is the case and Tristram is unable to have natural offspring, then fathering his readers is Tristram's only way to attain a paternal – and therefore masculine – role. The fact that he does not follow his own father's insistence on the importance of paternal imagination, and instead consistently invites his readers to exercise their own imaginations, is significant. For Sterne, the concepts of paternal and maternal imagination are dangerous, and should be replaced with the steady influential guidance of cultural fatherhood.

§ CONCLUSION

The novel's paternal guidance of the reader's imagination is a practical demonstration of Sterne's critique of the discourse of maternal imagination. Mocking the detrimental effects of Walter's belief in various theories of foetal and character formation, Sterne highlights the amorphous nature of the discourse and its many omissions, contradictions and discrepancies. He positions himself in a paternal role towards his readers in a way that counteracts Walter's theories of paternal imagination, maternal imagination and astrology. Significantly Tristram's mind and body are more clearly marked by Walter's hobby-horsical obstinacy concerning the anachronistic concept of paternal imagination, rather than the phenomenon itself.

Figuring the idea of paternal imagination as primarily negative, Sterne spotlights the way that maternal imagination has been forced into an unforgiving role of responsibility. By showing Tristram as allegedly doomed from the start as a result of his father's imagination, Sterne implicitly challenges the popular notion that an expectant mother should be blamed for an imperfect child. Neither Tristram nor a pregnant woman can free themselves of the negative connotations of their relationship to imagination. By contrasting an unusual and steady claim for the power of paternal imagination with sudden scapegoating of Elizabeth's imagination, Sterne further emphasises the culture of blame at the centre of the discourse of maternal imagination. As the various theories regarding an individual's identity coalesce, the discourse of maternal imagination is shown to be an easy, misogynist excuse for character flaws. A narrative of guilt overshadows even the suggestion that Elizabeth temporarily acquired more power on the occasion of her phantom pregnancy, as Tristram laments that he has paid the price for her actions with a broken

nose. The novel's heavily implied derision of foetal formation theories steers toward the conclusion that imagination is the least of the Shandys' problems. As the novel progresses, it becomes abundantly clear that Tristram should not concern himself with the problems posed by his parents' imaginations, but with the physical threats of forceps, window sashes and consumption.

Despite the emphasis on Elizabeth's silent strength and practicality, and the implicit criticism of the misogynist aspects of maternal imagination, one cannot describe Sterne's treatment of the discourse as feminist. I have suggested that Sterne intends the reader to infer that Elizabeth is a capable mother, however Sterne's technique of omission and oblique reference is problematic. The indirect presentation of Elizabeth highlights her eighteenth-century "feminine" qualities; apparent submissiveness, private domestic influence, quiet resolution under pressure, invisibility and silence. This is the flip side to Sterne's critique of the discourse of maternal imagination, as Elizabeth is denied the protective power that the discourse bestows on parturient women. Her marginalised status contrasts sharply with the agency of pregnant characters such as Smollett's Sally Pickle, or even Richardson's Pamela. It seems that in a novel that disparages the threat of maternal imagination, pregnant women have no cause or space to voice their thoughts. Whether viewed from the perspective of Walter, Tristram or even Sterne, Elizabeth Shandy lacks agency.

While Sterne ridicules the notion of paternal and maternal imagination, he also celebrates the creative, literary imagination as an endless source of fertility. This distinction between the more mimetic precepts of maternal imagination and the abstract creativity of aesthetic imagination is an early indication of the Romantic understanding of imagination. Yet as Sterne's chaotic network of associations portrays, reproduction and literary imagination were strongly linked. Sterne's invitation to creatively read and imagine is couched within a parental framework, and his self-conscious ability to alter the reader's thoughts and feelings before imaginative "birth" perpetuates the characteristics of prenatal Imaginationist theories. In short, Sterne engages the principles of associationism in order to improve the reader's mental agility, but cannot resist using the rich analogy of paternal imagination for the process.

Sterne bypasses the reader's physical birth in order to shape the reader's imagination, which anticipates the aesthetic theory developed by Wordsworth and other figures of Romanticism. Certainly in the later self-images of many

male Romantic writers, the disparate features of monstrous maternal imagination, tortured paternal imagination and literary creativity were conflated.⁵⁶ My final two chapters will investigate such developments concerning literary self-image and parental imagination in poetry, culture, and aesthetic theory of the later eighteenth century.

NOTES

1. Although disentangling the character of Tristram Shandy and that of the author Laurence Sterne is notoriously difficult, this chapter will refer to Tristram as the main focaliser and Sterne as an omniscient narrator who frequently satirises or challenges Tristram's views. For more detail on the mistaken elision of Tristram and Sterne see Jeffrey Williams (1990, especially 1037).
2. Hunter suggests that Toby or Yorick might be Tristram's father, but concludes that the novel teasingly raises the issue without resolution.
3. The very concept of Sterne's hobby-horse is remarkably akin to the model of paternal or maternal imagination, as one particular idea or emotion takes hold of the parent's mind. This parallel is further embellished by the physical marks that the Shandy men leave, as a result of their respective hobby-horses. While Tristram's body is marked by his father's fixation with noses and midwifery, Uncle Toby's fascination with recreating the Siege of Namur transforms the bowling green. Tristram's own hobby-horse is his autobiography and he leaves unusual marks upon its pages.
4. Ruth Marie Fautot (1970) suggests that Tristram blames his mother for his own ill health and cites a passage addressed to his mother in Volume 5 "you have left a crack in my back, – and here's a great piece fallen off before, – and what must I do with this foot? – I shall never reach England without it" (V: 331). However, I believe the passage is ambiguous as Tristram here addresses "Madam", which could refer either to his mother (whom he discusses in the previous sentence) or to the reader (whom he has also addressed as Madam earlier in the text).
5. The quotation is actually from the French physician Jean Fernel (Sterne, 675 n. 1).
6. Tristram is conceived and born within eight months – "as near nine calendar months as any husband could in reason have expected" (I: 10) – and various details, such as the embarrassing *bend sinister* on the Shandy coach, indicate Tristram's doubtful lineage.
7. Elizabeth Sterne had at least one stillborn child and a daughter who died a day after birth. Ian Campbell Ross states that "exactly how many children were born to Elizabeth Sterne is not known. What is certain is that only one would survive beyond the first weeks of life" (2001, 118). Campbell

speculates that Sterne took the deaths hard and perhaps blamed himself for his wife's inability to bear a child.

8. Classical myth featured Zeus giving birth to Athena from his head and Dionysis from his thigh, however these were cases of divine surrogacy rather than paternal imagination.
9. Feyens' *De viribus imaginationis tractatus* (or *On the Forces of Imagination*) mainly relies upon the authority of Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but also includes a wide range of ancient, medieval and early modern writers, including Galen, Avicenna, Marsilio Ficino and Pietro Pomponazzi. Debate regarding when exactly a mother's imagination acted most forcefully dated to at least the sixteenth century; see my [Chapter 1](#).
10. This strange idea is preceded by Colio Malespini's translation of a Spanish text by Antonio Torquemada in 1597, which claimed Neopolitan women were afraid to give birth because little animals resembling frogs were delivered before the baby (Finucci [2003](#), 56).
11. Publications such as the anonymous *A Letter from a Male Physician* ([1726](#)) and Philaethes' *The Sooterkin Dissected* ([1726](#)) place blame upon Maubray for inspiring Toft's hoax. However, due to Toft's illiteracy, it is highly unlikely that she would have learned of such a specific case.
12. Carolyn D Williams ([2011](#)) discusses gender roles and the medical history of reproduction.
13. In Shelley's Preface to the 1831 edition, she referred to the "experiments of Dr. Darwin" (8) in which a piece of vermicelli moved with voluntary motion. Clearly, Darwin's ideas and theories had some influence on Shelley's tale of a creature with only one (male) parent.
14. Michael R Page describes Erasmus and Charles as "working in an intellectual tradition of evolutionism" ([2012](#), 2) and Desmond King-Hele ([1986](#), [1999](#)) also shows Charles' debt to his grandfather's ideas.
15. Toby's method of consolation was to mutely comfort Walter with his presence, rather than with an excess of words.
16. For more details see Anne Mellor ([1987](#)).
17. In fact these images were not sanctioned by Leuwenhoek and served as a form of advertisement rather than scientific evidence. Despite this, the drawings of sperm as tiny men were irrevocably linked to Leuwenhoek's theory.
18. The only exception I have so far uncovered is Boucé ([1987](#)); see earlier in this chapter.
19. For Walter's failures of masculinity see Andrew Wright ([1969](#)). Dennis W Allen ([1985](#)) argues that Walter's impotence is rooted in language, and notes that throughout the novel language and reproduction are intrinsically linked, Frank Brady ([1970](#)) also explores Walter's impotence in connection to his endless theorizing, and Hunter ([1989](#)) says that

Walter may not even be Tristram's father. From an opposing view, Wilfred Watson (1947) argues that Walter Shandy's Filmerian, patriarchal logic is successful.

20. Slop's name seems wilfully and comically vulgar, however it is worth bearing in mind that the real-life leading obstetricians in mid eighteenth-century Britain and France were named Dr. Leake, Dr. Smellie and Dr. La Touche.
21. See respectively Arthur H Cash (1982); Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (1990); and Bonnie Blackwell (2001).
22. Campbell Ross (2001) see Chapter 4 for details on Elizabeth Sterne's pregnancies.
23. Born in 1697 in Lanark, Smellie was apprenticed to an apothecary and possibly also taught by the Glaswegian surgeon John Gordon. Smellie practiced as an apothecary in Lanark, gaining crucial experience in midwifery as local midwives called him in when they had difficulties. From 1737 onwards he concentrated on midwifery.
24. This was of more practical use than the long (and expensive) Oxbridge route one required to qualify as a physician. Smellie copied the design of the birth machine – a mechanical woman that simulated labour – from one he had seen used by M. Gregoire in Paris. It was a hooped, weaved machine with real bones, levers and leather pouches. The womb was a glass carafe with a doll squeezed inside – the idea was for the students to pull out the doll with forceps whilst someone (presumably Smellie) operated the levers to make the model simulate the movements of a real mother. For more detail of Smellie's and other midwives' obstetrical machines see Pam Lieske (2011).
25. Smellie's strategy had the extra benefit of treating impecunious women who would otherwise have had no assistance with their labours. Although his clientele may have been less fashionable, Smellie was equally, if not more, successful than Hunter in terms of professional merit and reputation.
26. Adrian Wilson (1985) describes eight potential pathways for man midwives depending on whether they were emergency or pre-booked practitioners, rural operators or fashionable urban accoucheurs.
27. Cash (1982) argues that Slop can be identified with John Burton, Smellie's less successful rival.
28. Later John Blunt's *Man Midwifery Dissected* (1793) was addressed to Alexander Hamilton but also continually appealed to husbands not to employ man midwives.
29. See Jean Donnison (1988, Chapter 2) for details. Mrs. Biker died in a mad house shortly afterwards and the husband was awarded £1000 in damages. Surprisingly both Bracken and Morley continued their practice after the accusations with a reasonable degree of success.
30. The medulla oblongata is the lowest section of the brainstem, anterior to the cerebellum.

42. Children conceived under the auspices of Pisces (February 19th – March 20th) were destined to be born sickly, stunted and malformed. As the poem explains,

The watery Pisces, fill’d with nauseous brine;
To sickness and to impotence incline:
Nor birth, no product of this sign can please,

But dwarfs start up and a Pygmean race (Oldisworth 1710, 36–37).

43. See my [Chapter 1](#).
44. Much has been written about Sterne’s inclusion of John Locke and his work. Whereas previously Locke’s influence was taken for granted, and opinion is still divided over whether Sterne was a disciple or critic of Locke, from the late twentieth century some critics have suggested the possibility that Sterne’s reputation as an expert on Locke is undeserved. Among those who recommend that readers exercise caution when considering Locke’s significance in *Tristram Shandy* are Duke Maskell (1973), W G Day (1984), Peter M Briggs (1985), J T Parnell (2006) and New (2006).
45. Sterne alludes to the idea of a blank canvas when he leaves an empty page for the reader to sketch a picture of the Widow Wadman in Chapter 38 of Volume VI (VI: 422).
46. For example the episode of Dolly and the misapplied thimble (II: Chapter II), or another where Walter tries to explain the theory of associationism to Toby while Mrs. Shandy is in labour (III: Chapter XVIII).
47. Other medical men agreed – Alexander Monro, Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh University, also believed in the strong paternal role, although he differentiated between the sexes; forming educational societies for his sons and publishing *An Essay on Female Conduct* (c.1760) for his daughter.
48. Conduct writers also encouraged men to become more involved in paternal activities; see especially James Fordyce (1777) and Thomas Gisborne (1795).
49. Regarding men in the private sphere, Shawn Lisa Maurer (1998) provides a clear outline of the fallacy of “separates spheres: and emphasises the interaction between public and domestic sphere and Matthew McCormack (2005) has discussed male domesticity in regard to politics. See also Karen Harvey (2012, 1–8) for a useful summary of separate spheres debate and its relation to men in the domestic space.
50. Although Gustafson uses the term “feminine imagination”, her description of a pregnant and potentially monstrous imagination falls under my rubric of maternal imagination.
51. Clorinda’s white appearance, produced maternal imagination, is disastrous for her mother as she has to hide Clorinda and find a black infant to replace her. However, Clorinda’s whiteness is also portrayed as part of her unique beauty.

52. Jacques Du Boscq's *Du La femme heroique ou les heroines compares avec les heros, en toute sorte de vertus* was first reprinted in England in 1632 and was reprinted throughout the seventeenth century. The quote is from the first English translation, *The Complete Woman* (1753, 17).
53. Victor Shlovsky's influential 1921 article on Sterne's plot stylistics examined the way that Sterne "prepares the groundwork for erroneous assumption" (33) to play with his reader's errors.
54. Ostovich (2006) also emphasises the active role of the specifically female reader.
55. See for instance Donald R Wehrs (1988), Parnell (2006) and Hawley (2009), who argues that Sterne combines traditional learned wit and modern learning.
56. Although Huet does not discuss paternal imagination as a separate theory, she argues that the monstrous power of maternal imagination was appropriated by male Romantics to become the model of artistic creation; see Huet (1993, esp. 126–128 and the chapters of Part II). Similarly Andrea Henderson (1996, Chapter 4) notes that in Percy Bysshe Shelley's metaphors of monstrous fatherhood in *The Cenci*, Count Cenci's fathering resembles both his role as an artist, shaping events around him, and Shelley's own production and manipulation of the play.

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“I’ll Repress the Rising Anguish/Till Thine Eyes Behold the Light”: Passionate Responsibility in Maternal Poetry

By the second half of the eighteenth century the subjects of passion and imagination were of growing interest to the intellectual community; physicians, philosophers, and literary writers were intrigued by the potential of the human mind. This would have particular consequence for the genre of poetry, as pure feeling and creativity were increasingly reified as the most desirable attributes of the poet. Poetry became increasingly identified as the perfect vehicle for imagination; as Maureen McLane succinctly observes, for the Romantic writers, “poetry emerges as the discourse of imagination” (2000, 30). Poetry is, therefore, one of the most fruitful branches of literature for discussions of imagination during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Yet studies of maternal imagination rarely include any examination of eighteenth-century poetry, even though certain poems not only participate in, but also diversify, the evolving eighteenth-century discourse of maternal imagination.¹ To help rectify this oversight, this chapter explores a rewarding sub-genre of poetry that looks exclusively at the thoughts and feelings of expectant mothers. I have therefore grouped poems that primarily feature mothers who address or discuss their foetuses under the rubric of “maternal poetry”. These poems are usually written by a mother-poet to her unborn foetus, recognise the cultural pressure of maternal duty, and include concerns for the foetus’ well being. As this chapter will demonstrate, due to maternal poetry’s

distinctive focus on the pregnant woman and her state of mind, exploration of this sub-genre has illuminating value for my investigation of the discourse of maternal imagination.

I shall employ the terms "maternal passion" and "maternal imagination" interchangeably in this chapter, as the concepts of maternal imagination and maternal passion became synonymous during the later eighteenth century. Maternal poetry seldom uses either term directly, however it typically engages with the discourse through an emotional depiction of the mysterious and intimate relationship between the pregnant woman and her foetus. The experience of parturition is commonly celebrated by the poet, however hints of more ambivalent maternal emotions occasionally appear: fear of giving birth, profound anxiety concerning the outcome of the pregnancy, or an unease or bitterness regarding the high level of responsibility for the infant. As eighteenth-century culture increasingly glorified maternity and stressed maternal duty, such feelings became more and more problematic. Yet instead of silencing these awkward issues, the cult of sentimental motherhood seems to have brought the tensions of pregnancy into sharper focus for some writers of maternal poetry. I wish to propose that the sub-genre persists as a vehicle for the implicit expression of transgressive maternal emotions such as fear, pain, anxiety, and resentment, under a veil of devout thankfulness and superficially willing self-sacrifice.²

This chapter will explore five examples of maternal poetry; Elizabeth Boyd's "On the Death of an Infant of five Days old, being a beautiful but abortive Birth" (1733), Jane Cave's "Written a Few Hours before the Birth of a Child" (1782), Isabella Kelly's "To An Unborn Infant" (1794); Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "To A Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible" (c.1795), and William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" (1798). Including this latter example of a maternal poem written by Wordsworth allows for a comparison of his approach as a male writer, both with the female poets above, and with previous male commentators on the subject of maternal imagination. The discourse of maternal imagination flows through the work of these poets, to produce diverse sympathetic, literary or aesthetic effect. I intend to show that the concept of maternal imagination appears in all five poems as an acknowledgement of, and part of a subversive challenge to, the notion that a mother was solely responsible for the outcome of her pregnancy. Examining these poems in chronological order, this chapter charts the substantial impact of shifting understandings of imagination and the cult

of motherhood on the discourse of maternal imagination, as well as the discourse's traffic with emerging ideas of Romanticism.

§ MATERNAL POETRY

The tradition of maternal poetry dates from Anne Bradstreet's "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" (1678) and possibly earlier, although evidence is scarce due to the private nature of the material.³ Several critics have investigated maternal poetry, particularly from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century period. Alan Richardson has isolated the "maternal convention" poems of women, which he identifies as "marked by a unique attentiveness to the infant's body, the dangers involved in birthing it and the trouble in nurturing it, and the bond between child and mother" (1994, 11; 12). Pamela Hammons (1999) has studied the related mode of child-loss poetry during the seventeenth century; observing that women's physically creative abilities were often conflated with their intellectually creative powers, to negative effect. Focusing on the eighteenth century, Jerome McGann has claimed that "child literature" (1996, 65) is a sub-genre of the literature of sensibility and noted the implications of a mother literally speaking for her as-yet voiceless infant. McGann argues that this empowers the mother-poet as she is able to explore her creative impulses through the metaphors of reproduction. Paula Backscheider makes a similar point when she comments on the struggle between domestic and literary life for many eighteenth-century women poets. She suggests that this conflict is sometimes surmounted when women poets use their domesticity – including their maternity – as poetic content (2005, 378). Stuart Curran (2002) has also remarked that poetry was an acceptable form of self-expression, like needle-work or drawing by the late eighteenth century, which perhaps accounts for the increasing number of published maternal poems.

Maternal poetry frequently emphasises the burden of pregnancy and the fear of injury to either the mother or to the foetus. In a seminal article, "Colonizing the Breast" (1990), Ruth Perry notes that by the mid-century "in literature, maternal sentiment began to emerge as an emotional force capable of moving a reading public, understood as the sign of an innately moral and uniquely female sensibility" (117).⁴ This unique sensibility was paradoxically a pregnant woman's strongest weapon and her most vulnerable feature (see my [Chapter 3](#)); it enabled a pregnant woman to articulate her feelings and desires, but was simultaneously fettered by

fear of the power of those feelings. Constrained by sentimental and social convention, these poems use a language of maternal tenderness to hint at the unfair anxiety caused by maternal imagination. My previous chapters have demonstrated that an internal discourse of a woman's potential threat towards her foetus underlies any discussion of maternal imagination. This is supported by the fact that as the eighteenth century progressed, any positive effects of a woman's imagination – for example to shape the baby into a more attractive or pleasant individual – were more and more deeply buried within the discourse. As an almost exclusive concern with the dangers of maternal imagination developed, maternal blame and responsibility were underscored.

Related to maternal poetry is the mode of child-loss poetry, which often drew on the discourse of maternal imagination. Early examples include Mary Carey's "Upon ye sight of my abortive birth ye 31th of December 1657", Katherine Phillips, "On the Death of my First and Dearest Son, Hector Phillips" (1667), Mehetabel Wright, "To an Infant Expiring the Second Day of Its Birth" (1733) and Elizabeth Boyd, "On the Death of an Infant Five Years Old" (1733). Pamela Hammons argues that cultural convention dictated that women who authored child-loss poetry should express a strong degree of guilt and self-blame. Part of this guilt centred on a pregnant woman's conduct and, as I shall show, inevitably engaged with the discourse of maternal imagination. The mid-century poet Elizabeth Boyd described the death of her new-born son in the language of miscarriage, which distinguishes her verse as an example of both child-loss and maternal poetry. This is clear in the title of the poem "On the Death of an Infant of five Days old, being a beautiful but abortive Birth" (1733).⁵ Boyd's language of miscarriage is peculiar, as her infant was not premature or stillborn, but a baby carried and delivered to full term. Despite this, Boyd refers to her lost child as a kind of unfinished foetus when she describes him as "an Embryo, An abortive Boy" (line 5). This language draws on the discourse of maternal imagination as miscarriage is figured as its ultimate threat. Boyd's framing of her loss in terms of maternal imagination is indicative, as it suggests that she feels she is responsible – or perhaps has been explicitly blamed by others – for her infant's death. This is juxtaposed with the customary attribution of a beautiful, healthy boy to the father. Boyd notes that when her child was first born, the boy possessed "The Father's form all o'er/the Father's face" (line 12). Hammons has observed a similar "self-flagellating directness" (31–32) in Gertrude Ashton

Thimelby's child-loss poem "On the death of her Only Child" (c.1650), which praises the father for her son's good qualities and blames the mother for his untimely death.

However, Boyd combats this gendered division of blame. The discourse of maternal imagination shapes any discussion of "an embryo" or "abortive boy". Boyd's awareness of the discourse emphasises the unique mother-child bond, and she closes the poem by arguing that only a mother can fully appreciate the loss of a child.

Oh! could the stern-soul'd Sex, but know the Pain,
Or the soft Mother's Agonies sustain,
With tend'rest Love the obdurate Heart would burn,
And the shock'd Father, Tear for Tear return. (1733, lines 19–22)

Boyd invokes the special connection between a mother and child during pregnancy. She desires the unmarked, "obdurate" father to share the special mother-infant bond, including the power and responsibility of maternal imagination. Father and mother matching "tear for tear" not only suggests equal responsibility, but also carries a certain ambiguity due to the different meanings of the word "tear". It is uncertain whether Boyd wants the father to weep with her, or literally suffer the tearing pain of childbirth. In either case, Boyd argues for joint responsibility for both the positive and negative outcomes of a birth.

During the fifty years following Boyd's "Abortive Boy", the cult of motherhood increasingly placed more emphasis on suffering maternal duty. Jane Cave's *Poems on Various Subjects Entertaining, Elegiac, and Religious* (1782) contained no less than four poems for her unborn child. Perhaps the most poignant of these poems is entitled "Written a Few Hours before the Birth of a Child". Addressed to God, this prayer in the form of a poem declares, "I ask not life, I ask not ease,/but patience to submit" (115: lines 5–6). This statement enters into the discourse of maternal imagination as even though she is clearly apprehensive of the birth, Cave is determined to calm her mind and keep her passions under control for the sake of the infant. In the curiously defiant concluding stanza however, Cave makes one final request:

One wish to name I'd humbly dare,
If death thy pleasure be;

O may the harmless babe I bear
Haply expire with me. (lines 13–16)

This closing thought takes the logic of maternal imagination to its ultimate conclusion. If Cave is responsible for a maternal-foetal connection, then when her life ends, the infant must also die. This disquieting end to the poem refocuses attention to the painful and threatening nature of the mother-infant bond, and its dual influence. Cave notes that the baby might die with her, but this knowledge accompanies the fact that the baby itself would be the original cause of the mother's death. The tense finale of the poem therefore stresses the mutually dangerous physical connection between a mother and child. It is difficult to discern whether Cave herself placed faith in any notion of maternal imagination. Another of her maternal poems seems to refute the cultural belief in maternal passion; in "To My Dear Child", Cave observes that although she suffers "new emotions" and "strange forebodings", the infant is one "whose mind's unspotted, spirit pure/As happy (doubtless) as obscure" (117–124, lines 10; 14; 3–4). Despite this, Cave seems to have believed that a mother's surroundings during lying-in were important as in 1787 she travelled to her home town of Brecon for the birth of her son Thomas (Schürer 2013, 418). This ambiguity also occurs in "Written A Few Hours". On the surface Cave's poem expresses a stoicism grounded in religious hope of an afterlife, yet her morbid wish for her infant to accompany her beyond the grave disturbs any simplistic reading of the poem as piously resigned.

Boyd and Cave's poems are both acutely aware of the "pain, or agony, or death" (Cave, line 9) awaiting the pregnant woman. The fate of the pregnant woman is shrouded in uncertainty as she cannot guarantee that her painful experience will be rewarded with a child, or even be assured of her own life. "Abortive Birth" and "Written a Few Hours" emphasise this uninviting feminine scenario; they labour the point that pregnant women are uniquely helpless, for protection they must rely on God, the often "obdurate" (Boyd 1733, line 21) male sex, and the caprice of their own mysterious bodies. Both poets implicitly suggest that women are not in control of their pregnancies and are therefore not to blame for any unwanted outcomes. As the notions of imagination, motherhood and maternal imagination undergo profound transformations over the course of the century, related challenges to maternal responsibility appear more stridently in poetry of the 1790s.

§ IMAGINATION AND MATERNAL IMAGINATION LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CULTURE

The following investigation of the discourse of maternal imagination in poetry is necessarily informed by a broader understanding of the eighteenth-century transformation of imagination. As I outlined in my Introduction, interest in the power, nature and qualities of a specifically *creative* imagination acquired increased momentum during the long eighteenth century. Artists, writers and philosophers investigated the creative possibilities of imagination, while physicians and scientists were drawn to imagination as a means of explanation for a variety of phenomena. This fascination with the potential of imagination reached new heights during the later decades of the eighteenth century, as creativity came to be celebrated as the pinnacle of human genius and the core of Romanticism.

Richard C Sha (2009, 2012) is the latest in a succession of recent critics to argue that despite the long trend within Romantic criticism, which tends to focus on imagination in historicist or ideological terms, the Romantic imagination was in fact a fundamentally physiological concept.⁶ This was due to the ways in which imagination was understood in medicine and science during the late eighteenth century; there was a strong emphasis on diseased or corrupt imagination, especially in regard to conditions such as greensickness, nymphomania, hysteria, melancholy, hypochondria, madness, religious enthusiasm, and maternal passion. Sha's recent work on understandings of imagination in the 1790s has emphasised the importance of contemporary science.⁷ Arguing that Romantic writers themselves struggled with the concept of imagination, Sha stresses the negative, unwanted forms such as diseased, deluded or maternal imaginations. He states that "scientists were obsessed with the effects of the imagination on the body – the power of imagination alone to cure disease" (2012, 215).

Experiments repeatedly showed that imagination was at the heart of all peculiar events, as only imagination was powerful enough to effect physiological changes. Roy Porter has explained that imagination was a useful tool for the eighteenth-century physician, as a soothed imagination could help to cure the patient by inspiring confidence and optimism (2001, 24). Indeed the physician John Haygarth used placebos to prove that imagination could be used as a cure and published his findings in a treatise, *On the Imagination as a Cause & as a Cure of*

Disorders of the Body (1800). The respected man-midwife Thomas Denman declared that in many cases, particularly concerning the mysteries of the female body, "where our senses have failed to procure evidence, the imagination hath been called to our aid" (1788, 156).⁸ Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Lavoisier investigated the phenomenon of mesmerism at the behest of King Louis XVI, only to conclude that mesmerism did not exist – all physical effects had been caused by imagination. Such investigations claimed that some individuals possessed more potent or susceptible imaginations than others, but rarely possessed the ability to control them. This argument located diseased imagination in the susceptible, but unrestrained, bodies of women and the lower classes, while also elevating potent, but controlled, imagination as a rare and special power reserved for men of genius.

The concept of a diseased imagination was naturally relevant for the evolving discourse of maternal imagination. Many still believed in the power of a pregnant woman's longings and leading man-midwives confidently advised that a woman's passions could effect material change.⁹ By the late eighteenth century, pregnancy guides counselled the pregnant woman to avoid any inflammation of her passions. This was because in midwifery treatises and medical texts of the 1790s, maternal imagination was generally understood to take the form of maternal passion. Maternal longing was largely perceived as an old wives' tale, but a mother's extreme passion was acknowledged to have a direct effect on the foetus. Such opinion had been relatively stable since the mid-century, although man-midwives towards the end of the century were more forthright in their judgements. Whereas William Smellie's opinions on longings had been ambivalent, by the 1790s, the new leading man-midwife in London, Thomas Denman, was able to dismiss longings with conviction.

Of that depravity of the appetite, which in pregnancy has usually gone under the name of *longing*, the instances recorded in books, and formerly reported in conversation, are incredible, and too absurd to deserve, or at least, at this time, to require a serious refutation. (1788, 256)

The majority of man-midwives agreed with Denman, and the medical texts of Alexander Hamilton, Edward Foster, John Leake and David Spence unanimously declared that the longings of pregnant women had little or no effect on the foetus. A celebrated natural philosopher – also, confusingly, named William Smellie – utterly dismissed longings as an idea

“too contemptible and too ridiculous” (1790, 133), but allowed that pregnant women’s passions could deform or maim their children.

Despite this broad agreement in medicine, it is unlikely that the elite intellectual views of medical professionals held much influence over the general population. Medical writers knew that popular lore concerning longings still circulated, but all they could do was continue to refute it. Hamilton explained:

Although at present the idea of the imagination of the mother having the power to produce marks on the body of the child, does not universally prevail as it did formerly; yet many people, judicious and informed in other respects, still seem to favour this opinion. (1792, 190)

However, generally speaking, the literate would have been aware that, in medicine, longings were regarded as nonsense and passions were considered harmful. The most prominent man-midwife of the 1780s and 90s, Thomas Denman, certainly took this position.

It is useful to examine Denman’s life in some detail as he was regarded as the foremost figure of his profession and exerted considerable influence on the opinions of both male and female midwives. Born in 1733, Denman was originally a ship’s surgeon before attending William Smellie’s lectures (the man-midwife, not the natural philosopher) and launching into an eminent obstetric career. He gave his own midwifery lectures and became the official physician accoucheur to Middlesex Hospital (the first general hospital to have lying-in wards) in 1769. After William Hunter’s death in 1783, Denman assumed the status of the leading man-midwife in London and obtained the first licentiate in midwifery from the College of Physicians. Denman steadily published medical treatises, the most successful of which was his obstetric guide *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery* (1788), which ran through seven editions. He made significant contributions to the field of midwifery, which are still recognised today.¹⁰ Two hundred years after his birth Denman was regarded with great respect and commemorated as “the most distinguished and esteemed of British obstetricians” (“An Eighteenth-Century Obstetrician” 1933, 206).¹¹

Denman’s immens success brought him fame, wealth, and respect in ways that would have been unthinkable for man-midwives during the first half of the eighteenth century. A member of polite society, he became part of a tight network of respectable physicians, poets, and playwrights of the

period. One of Denman's daughters, Sophia, married the physician and pathologist Matthew Baillie, who also happened to be the brother of the poet and dramatist Joanna Baillie. Coincidentally, Denman's predecessor as the principal man-midwife in London, William Hunter, had been the Baillies' uncle, and had actually schooled Matthew Baillie in medicine.¹² Unlike earlier man-midwives such as John Douglas or even William Smellie, men such as Denman and Hunter were accepted as part of London's intellectual elite. Hunter after all, had socialised with renowned figures such as Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson, Hester Thrale, Charles Burney, Joshua Reynolds and his fellow Scotsman, David Hume (Porter 1985). As well as the Baillies, Denman also held a connection with the writer Anna Laetitia Barbauld, as his son, Thomas Denman Jr. attended her school in Palgrave, Suffolk.¹³ Denman Jr. clearly made an impression on Barbauld as she composed a poem for him to read aloud, "Lines to be Spoken by Thomas Denman, on the Christmas before his Birthday, when he was Four Years Old". The fondly indulgent tone of this poem suggests that Denman Jr. was something of a favourite with Barbauld. Denman's association with significant medical and literary names suggests a thriving intellectual community, and this is further supported by the fact that Denman, Joanna Baillie and Anna Barbauld all shared the same publisher, Joseph Johnson.

Denman's familial connection with literary figures and his professional influence as a pre-eminent London man-midwife render his opinions on maternal imagination of singular importance for this period. In *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery* he suggested that maternal longing had initially arisen to ensure that all pregnant women were treated with due tenderness and that historically, "a general conviction did take place, that some consent of an inexplicable, and perhaps divine nature, not to be defined or illustrated, really existed" (1788, 257). Unfortunately, female fear of producing monsters and stillbirths meant that its original purpose became overshadowed. Denman stated that when physicians realised that faith in maternal imagination created more distress than comfort for the woman, they worked to reveal the concept as false. Denman concluded that "at the present time, and in this country the term longing is seldom mentioned, except among the lowest class of people" (258).

Denman's use of the word "consent" to describe a physical connection follows contemporary medical thought regarding the sympathetic nature of the body. Clare Hanson has observed that the term was popular in medical writing during this period, as theories of "irritability" and "sympathy"

argued that certain body parts or mental states were related or “in consent” with each other (2004, 23–24). The irritability of the womb was particularly thought to affect other parts of the body, causing symptoms of pregnancy such as swollen breasts and nausea. This medical use of the word perhaps derived from its Latin origins, which could be literally translated as “feel together”.¹⁴ The term “consent” is intriguing as it contains connotations of agreement or permission between two individuals. In terms of maternal imagination, this logic suggests that the foetus voluntarily allowed the mother’s thoughts to change its shape, or perhaps the mother permitted her body to transmit the passions she experienced. In either case, the term “consent” suggests some sense of responsibility regarding the transmission of maternal imagination in medical discussion.

Although Denman dismissed longing in a medical sense, he recommended that longing in pregnancy be indulged lest it produced extreme passions. He explained that this part of maternal imagination was all too real and had the power to harm the foetus:

In the passions we may then discover sources of danger, and disturbance in the parturition of women, from which animals are wholly exempt; and the observation is so general, that care is universally taken to prevent the communication of intelligence to women in, or about to be in labour, which can either distress, or much agitate them. (12)

Denman’s position on maternal imagination was therefore clear: longings were absurd, but should be indulged in case they led to passions, which had harmful effects. His views would have influenced other physicians and man-midwives, as well as his own patients. Martha Mears, the author of a popular midwifery guide entitled *Candid Advice to The Fair Sex* (1797) evidently regarded Denman as an authority, even though she disliked man-midwives as a rule. Mears cited Denman’s recognition that maternal longing could prove harmful and concluded “I truly assert, that I never had a stronger conviction of the indisputable influence of longings, and of the physical necessity of paying a serious regard to them, than on finding Dr. Denman obliged to make so plain a concession in their favour” (62). While foetal damage resulting from longings remained controversial, with the aid of Denman’s influence, the effects of passion in a pregnant woman were largely accepted as fact in the medical community. Denman clearly states that the woman’s passions are “sources of danger, and disturbance” (12) and could endanger the life of both mother and child. This returns to the idea of

consent and sympathy, as well as gesturing towards the anachronistic notion that a mother's disturbing inner secrets would be blazoned across the flesh of her child.

Conviction in the notion of maternal passion intersected with the cult of motherhood that developed during the second half of the eighteenth century. As maternity became idealised as the pinnacle of sympathy and femininity, the suggestive links between pregnancy and emotion served to emphasise the mother's somewhat unnerving levels of sensibility. As the concept of maternal passion was enlisted to reinforce the uniquely influential role of the mother, imaginative literature utilised the model of maternal passion to the point where it became considered a sentimental cliché.

In novels of the mid-century, it was usually minor characters that suffered from maternal passion and its consequences of deformity, miscarriage or maternal mortality.¹⁵ However, many late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century novels feature protagonists who are afflicted with disastrous maternal passion. Sibella in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy; Or The Ruin on the Rock* (1795) and Adeline in Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1805) both give birth to dead children due to their agitated minds. The character Laura in Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher* (1798) and Agnes in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) both suffer extreme distress that causes them to give birth to sickly babies who die shortly after birth.¹⁶ These cases of maternal passion borne by a principal protagonist are in addition to, rather than instead of, the usual plethora of secondary characters that are conveniently dispatched by maternal passion.¹⁷ One mention of the phenomenon within Jane Austen's personal correspondence characteristically subverts sentimental convention. She caustically remarked, "Mrs. Hall of Sherbourn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing [sic] to a fright. – I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband" (1798, 17). Austen's wickedly humorous satire of an event that should evoke sympathy perhaps alludes to the notion of maternal imagination as a tired sentimental device.

As many literary critics have noted, 1790s fiction is particularly rife with missing, mad, sentimental, perfect, corrupt, dead, afflicted and unwanted mothers.¹⁸ Ruth Perry has explained a nostalgic peculiarity of the sentimental motherhood cult, which peaked during this period.

Just when motherhood was becoming central to the definition of femininity, when the modern conception of the all-nurturing, tender, soothing,

ministering mother was being consolidated in English culture, she was being represented in fiction as a memory rather than as an active present reality. (2004, 336)

Yet despite the absence of the mother in 1790s fiction, children are consistently shown to share either physical or personal similarities with their biological mothers. Positive physical resemblance to the mother is a regular feature of late eighteenth-century novels, as daughters are frequently recognised as inheriting their mother's beauty to an eerily precise degree. Plots and happy conclusions are often reliant on a daughter's uncanny resemblance to her mother, such as in Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Charlotte Smith's *Celestina* (1791).¹⁹ Heroines of gothic fiction such as Emily in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) have usually lost their mothers, but inherit their excellent qualities. These fictitious examples differ significantly from the treatment of maternal passion in obstetric publications such as Denman's. While Denman emphasised the dangers of miscarriage, authors such as Burney, Smith and Radcliffe underscore the positive, beneficial and beautiful nature of a mother's impression on a child's face or character. Other novels take issue with the idea of maternal influence, portraying transgressive mothers and the unjust assumption that their children will inherit "bad" qualities. Mary Hays' *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) and Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791) are well-known examples of this trope. Presenting a convincing case of "nature over nurture", Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) shows the anti-heroine Victoria to have inherited her mother's evil tendencies. Although Hays, Inchbald and Dacre draw attention to the general notion of maternal inheritance rather than the specific concept of maternal imagination, the boundaries between the two are blurred. As details of the pregnancy are omitted in each case, it is impossible to determine whether the heroines are drawn from their mother's natural maternal template or shaped by the workings of maternal imagination. The former argument could be persuasive *because* the authors omit the phase of pregnancy, however due to the various and imprecise understandings of maternal imagination, the discourse seeps into wider debates of maternal inheritance, influence and duty.

Fiction of this period therefore acknowledges the belief that a pregnant woman could pass on a range of characteristics to the child during gestation, regardless of whether or not she became the child's primary carer after birth. This belief is consistent with Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace's

claim (1991) that maternal responsibility was stressed during this period in pregnancy guides.²⁰ Linda A Pollock has similarly observed that "prescriptive writers placed the main responsibility for pre-natal care on the mother" (1990, 49). As well as monitoring their diet and activities, mothers needed to responsibly restrain their emotions during pregnancy, in order to produce good children. The trope of maternal transmission shows that mothers were increasingly held responsible for the outcomes of their pregnancy.

The presence of the discourse of maternal imagination in fiction of the 1790s reflects a growing interest in perinatal influence of a mother on her infant. As Denman's midwifery guide shows, medical opinion supported the idea of a special mother-child bond that originated in prenatal maternal passion. Midwifery guides discussed the bond in physiological terms of "sympathy", "irritability" and "affect". However, it is Denman's word "consent" that most accurately reflects the medical emphasis on maternal responsibility, as it underscores the sense of agreement between a mother and foetus (Hanson 2004, Chapter 1). The term "consent" implied a natural physiological contract between mother and infant, which concurred with contemporary ideas about the sacred nature of the maternal bond. Ludmilla Jordanova has remarked that the plates of man-midwife William Hunter's obstetrical atlas, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures* (1774), "convey an almost oppressive intimacy between mother and child, an intimacy ceaselessly expressed in medical writings of the period" (1999, 198). Writing of Romantic period maternity Julie Kipp (2003) has argued that authors employed maternal imagery to promote the idea of "pure" love "as mutuality, exchange, a kind of interactive dependence" (10). Even trends in portraiture reflected this new intimacy; requests were made for poses that depicted the mother and child interacting, with affectionate cuddles and fond gazes (Retford 2006). Such portraits were often displayed anonymously, with titles such as "a lady and her child", rendering the portrait as an exemplar for all loving mothers and their children.

Kowaleski-Wallace observes that during this period "the maternal" was something quite different from individualised maternity (1991, 15).²¹ Certainly the concept of a generalised maternity was useful polemic for the tense skirmishes in British politics during the aftermath of the French revolution. During the 1790s the focus for Francophobia shifted from the

effeminate fop to the sexually voracious woman as “revolutionary France came to be represented through various figures of female debauchery” (McDonagh 2003, 98). Very often these females were associated with bad mothering or even child murder. A mutable ideal, maternal figures could suit a variety of purposes and be employed for opposing principles – for example both as “Marianne”, the symbol of the new French republic, and as mother “Britannia”, the benevolent face of British conservatism. John Barrell (2006) has marked the use of the mother figure in loyalist images of the 1790s, where the plump and industrious British matron is usually contrasted with a starved Frenchwoman, surrounded by sickly or dead children. Barrell observes how the images of diligent British mothers are intended to represent Britannia and British freedom, as well as the suggestion that such freedom is built on the hard work of conscientious mothers (esp. 228–235). Julie Costello (1998) has described the way that the concept of benevolent maternity was employed in the work of economist-philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. Hume epitomised the ideal of sensibility in the image of his own self-sacrificing mother, and in a similar move, Smith invoked benevolent maternity as a perfect example of sympathy. Costello notes that for both thinkers, “the mother-child bond becomes a model for aestheticized human relations” (175). The concept of maternal imagination may have played an attendant role in this model, even though the bond is assumed to be post-birth, as both feature the special powers of empathy and extreme emotion. This politicisation of motherhood was related to shifting constructions of gender, as maternity was increasingly identified as the essential quality of femininity. In *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s* (2000), Angela Keane elucidates the way that any woman who defined herself as a subject outside of motherhood or beyond the domestic sphere, stripped herself of femininity and automatically erased herself from the nation (3).

The discourse of maternity during the 1790s was clearly both insistent and multi-faceted. Medical literature, fiction and national polemic provide some idea of the severe responsibility of the pregnant woman to protect her foetus and the anxieties that this responsibility raised. Of course pregnant women had always contended with the anxieties of pregnancy and literate women had often articulated these fears in the form of poetry since at least the late seventeenth century. Yet the conspicuous absence of mothers in fiction, midwifery guides’ attention to passion, and examples of maternal poetry, indicate that the mother’s burden intensified during the 1790s.

§ MATERNAL POETRY IN THE 1790s

As the poetry of Boyd and Cave illustrates, maternal poems often stressed the responsibility of the mother to protect the foetus, even if it meant agony or death. The subtle challenges to this notion revealed in “Abortive Birth” and “Written a Few Hours” foreshadow the difficulties involved in any expression of anxiety, fear or dissatisfaction with the state of pregnancy. Indeed, by the end of the century, increased cultural pressure greatly complicated any negative feelings surrounding motherhood. This section will examine two very different instances of maternal poetry published during the 1790s.

Isabella Kelly authored eleven novels and a small volume of poetry, which included the piece “To An Unborn Infant” (1794). This poem contained an overt discussion of a mother’s anxiety regarding maternal passion and childbirth, as she fears that her powerful emotions will harm her developing foetus. Following the tradition of earlier women poets, Kelly directly addresses her unborn child in her own, anxious maternal voice. (In the Preface to the collection Kelly claims that her poems are autobiographical when she explains that most of the poems “are founded on circumstances merely personal” (iv)). Midway through the poem it becomes clear that Kelly fears for the safety of the baby in the womb. More specifically, the father’s – largely unexplained – absence has created such strong emotions in the mother that the infant’s health is at risk. She speaks directly to the child:

Though thy father is imprisoned,
Wronged, forgotten, robbed of right,
I’ll repress the rising anguish,
Till thine eyes behold the light. (lines 13–16, *my italics*)

Struggling to contain her maternal passion, Kelly acknowledges the ever-present dread created by her awareness of the discourse of maternal imagination. She insists that her child “share not thou a mother’s feelings” (line 21), in case the child becomes adversely affected by maternal passion. In accordance with the recommendations of contemporary man-midwives such as Denman, she subscribes to the idea that a pregnant woman should remain calm and suppress any extreme emotion. Kelly thus painfully represses her “rising anguish” and illustrates the suffering of a woman agitated by maternal passion.

“Unborn Infant” is a good representative of the 1790s status quo regarding maternal imagination in literary writing. It accords with Denman’s influential acceptance of maternal passion and earlier examples of pregnant women writing to their infants. The poem also shows Kelly’s shrewd awareness of the literary marketplace as it appeals to fashionable sympathies and the late eighteenth-century glorification of motherhood. As Kelly struggled to support her own children financially, it is likely that her tale of maternal self-sacrifice and suffering aimed to capitalise on the popularity of late eighteenth-century sentimental poetry. However, Kelly’s rapid publication of multi-volume novels soon after the release of *A Collection of Poems and Fables*, suggests that it was not particularly lucrative. The collection eventually ran to a second edition in 1807, however it did not match the success of Kelly’s fashionable Gothic novels such as *Joscelina, or the Rewards of Benevolence* (1798), which claimed the Duke and Duchess of York, and the Duchess of Devonshire among its subscribers. As a popular Gothic novelist, Kelly would have been sensitive to literary trends such as the trope of maternal passion. “Unborn Infant” foreshadows Kelly’s later employment of maternal passion in *Joscelina*, when the pregnant Mortimore Jackson (also known as Mrs Clayton) discovers her marriage is a sham.²² In extreme distress, she refers to the concept of maternal passion: “what then were the horrors of my condition! The agonies of my soul! – My infant shook within me . . .” (1798, 74). Fortunately, as with the case related in “Unborn Infant”, Mortimore eventually finds enough psychological strength to protect her innocent foetus.

Maternal poetry, addressed to an unborn child and voicing fears and anxiety, is fairly consistent throughout the century, but seems to intensify during the period of the 1790s. The poems examined so far in this chapter reveal the state of pregnancy not from a medical point of view, but from the perspective of the mother herself. Amanda Vickery’s evaluation of female correspondence from the period shows that literate women eagerly wrote to each other about their pregnancies and often referred either seriously or in jest to the possibility of maternal imagination (1998, 87; 98–100). However, the maternal poetry of Boyd, Cave and Kelly, aimed at a wide readership, engaged more fully with public discourses on maternity. Such engagement was double-edged as women poets were both enabled and restricted by their gender when discussing the experience of motherhood. Women could lay special claim to the sensibility created by the maternal bond, but were also vulnerable to threats towards

that bond, such as maternal passion or mortality. They were also bound by the assumptions of eighteenth-century patriarchy; women were expected and encouraged to suffer, endure and love their children unconditionally. To complain excessively of maternal perils was to show evidence of one's unfitness for motherhood.

Part of this peculiar bind was the fact that these women were writing autobiographically, and to their own foetuses. The personal nature of their poetry made it difficult to break cultural convention and express criticism regarding the various burdens of motherhood, as any negative opinion would reflect upon the author's own maternal qualities. This cultural straitjacket grew tighter towards the end of the eighteenth century, as mothers were increasingly idealised as benevolent martyrs. Stuart Curran (2002) notes that although the fictional mothers featured in novels of the period are often inadequate, poetry more often elevates romanticised maternal figures. Such tributes were usually addressed to the real-life mother of the poet and were careful to portray her in a sentimental, self-sacrificing light.²³ David B Ruderman (2008) makes the important point that poets who write about their own children produce particularly unstable and distorted representations of the infants, because the poets are also writing about themselves.²⁴ It may follow that poems about gestation or parturition composed by poets without this autobiographical element may have had more scope to depart from normative ideas of maternal feeling.²⁵ Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "To A Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible" (Barbauld c.1795) for instance, seems to pose a clearer challenge to maternal convention than previous examples of maternal poetry.²⁶ Barbauld does not seem to have experienced pregnancy herself and addresses the poem to a foetus of another woman.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld composed "Invisible Being" for her heavily pregnant friend, Frances Carr. Maternal poetry is typically addressed to a foetus through the voice of the mother, however Barbauld's poem is an ode to both mother and foetus. The poem's subject matter necessarily enters into the discourse of maternal imagination, using self-conscious language in lines such as "She longs to fold to her maternal breast" and "But far the most thy anxious parent longs/On thy soft cheek a mother's kiss to lay" (lines 21; 15–16). The use of the term "long" refers the reader to traditional longings of maternal imagination, which is encouraged by the blazoned "breast" and "cheek" of the mother and child, to suggest the areas that might be marked by maternal longing. Yet significantly Barbauld

uses this vocabulary not to highlight a pregnant woman's vulnerability, but to emphasise the lack of any physical connection between the mother and child in the poem. In other words, the general tenor of "Invisible Being" moves away from the usual hazards of maternal passion and absolves the mother from responsibility, blame and guilt.

As the poem is not voiced from the mother's perspective, but from the viewpoint of an interested observer, there is more freedom to frame the pregnant body with rather unconventional vocabulary. The womb is imagined as a "living tomb", while the speaker encourages the foetus to "Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!" (lines 20; 29). Such language challenges the idea of what Denman termed "consent" between mother and foetus. As discussed above, medical "consent" described a physical connection between body parts, or in the case of pregnancy, between the bodies of mother and foetus. Barbauld's incitement for the foetus to aggressively burst through the "doors" of the mother's vagina strongly indicates that she views the foetus and mother as two separate entities. One could argue that the line "fed with her life through many a tedious moon" (line 24) encourages a physical merging of mother and infant. However, this plaintive description of a parasitic relationship serves to emphasise the mother's division from her foetus through an exaggerated sense of "tedious" duty to another party. Julie Kipp (2003) argues that "Invisible Being" emphasises how a woman can lose her sense of identity during pregnancy, as Barbauld observes that the woman and foetus are both held captive within the pregnant body. The distinction between the mother and the foetus is certainly blurred in lines such as "Part of herself, yet to herself unknown" (line 22), however the entire poem is in one sense, an effort to disentangle two individuals, for the "invisible being" to make itself visible. The poetic voice consistently urges the foetus to make "haste" – the word is used four times – and leave the mother's body. The poem therefore clearly separates the active foetus from the impotent mother and emphasises the independent identities of both "beings".

Andrea K Henderson (1996) has commented on the negative tone of the poem in a direct comparison with Isabella Kelly's description of a passive foetus in a symbiotic pregnancy. Henderson claims that the pregnancy in "Invisible Being" shows both foetus and woman to be involved in a struggle for power. She argues that Barbauld's foetus already possesses power inside the womb but "the mother seems to want to keep it close in order to claim its power for herself" (36–37).²⁷ However, although the poem

reiterates the separation between mother and foetus, this separation emphasises not power, but rather a denial of maternal "consent".²⁸ In contrast to other maternal poems, Barbauld eschews any notion of maternal imagination and makes it clear that the foetus is impervious to any unwanted influence in the second stanza of the poem:

What powers lie folded in thy curious frame,–
Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!
How little canst thou guess thy lofty claim
To grasp at all the worlds the Almighty wrought! (lines 5–8)

In this "locked" state, the foetus has no interaction with the mother. The lack of consent contests the dominant discourse of maternal imagination and absolves the mother of responsibility. It does not matter whether the mother is shocked, afraid or delighted, as inside the womb, the infant is unconnected to her thoughts.

Barbauld is relatively free to stress the uncomfortable physical aspects of pregnancy for the mother, as she is not writing directly about her own experience. She also claims autonomy for the mother and foetus and denies any harmful physiological connection (which incidentally, was the same argument used by James Blondel to deny the possibility of maternal imagination in 1727). That said, Barbauld also follows sentimental convention to a certain extent. Although she emphasises the mother's powerlessness, frustration and discomfort during pregnancy, she also celebrates the baby according to cultural convention as a "precious pledge of happy love" (line 3). Perhaps to avoid any criticisms of an unfeminine or unnatural attitude, Barbauld repeatedly dwells on the postnatal rewards of pregnancy for the mother. "Invisible Being" emphasises that once the baby is born, the mother will be able to see, kiss and love the baby's form – essentially, "she only asks to lay her burden down,/That her glad arms that burden may resume" (lines 17–18). The final stanza makes it clear that maternal love is not questioned:

If charmed verse or muttered prayers had power,
With favouring spells to speed thee on thy way,
Anxious I'd bid my beads each passing hour,
Till thy wished smile thy mother's pangs o'erpay (lines 33–36).

The closing words of the poem emphasises that the hardships of pregnancy are ultimately “overpaid” by the birth of the baby in a culturally appropriate expression of maternal sentiment. As befits a poem written for a pregnant friend, “Invisible Being” thus strikes an appropriate balance of sympathy towards the mother’s anxious and uncomfortable state, with the anticipated joy of the child’s arrival.

Barbauld’s balance between cultural critique and convention was a tactful response to her friend’s condition, as well as perhaps deriving from a keen awareness of her own authorial persona. As a woman writer, a Protestant Dissenter with strong political views, and the mistress of a prestigious boys school, Barbauld was necessarily conscious of her public image. Jon Mee (2003) has noted that as a female advocate for political and religious reform, Barbauld could very easily be dismissed as an emotional woman of sensibility or enthusiasm.²⁹ This was certainly the case of Barbauld’s radical feminist acquaintance, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose dramatic life story undermined her political legacy for more than a century. Despite Wollstonecraft’s call for women to exercise reason in her writing, nineteenth-century and more recent critics have focused on her own tendency towards impulsive and emotional action.³⁰ The more detached perspective of “Invisible Being” could therefore be a deliberate choice to avoid extreme emotion or disproportionate sensibility. It was certainly not that Barbauld was unaccustomed to writing via a maternal persona, as her enormously successful series of reading lesson books, *Lessons for Children* (1778), were penned in the character of “Mother”.³¹ *Lessons for Children* grew out of Barbauld’s zeal to educate her own adopted son Charles, and “launched Barbauld on a new career as a star of infant education” (McCarthy 2008, 192).

It is feasible that Barbauld would have had reservations regarding the notion of maternal imagination, as her passion for decent, liberal education emphasised the development of an individual throughout his or her entire life, rather than during embryonic gestation. This view is very reminiscent of Sterne’s position in *Tristram Shandy*, one of the many novels with which Barbauld was familiar as a voracious and avid reader.³² Barbauld’s belief that education was crucial for the formation of a person was perhaps, like Sterne, connected to her understanding of the theory of associationism. Such ideas were no doubt partly due to her Dissenting background and close affiliation with Joseph Priestley, the political radical, Dissenter, chemist and brilliant tutor at Warrington Academy, the institution at which Barbauld’s father also taught. Barbauld’s own formative years

were strongly influenced by Mary and Joseph Priestley, whom her most recent biographer suggests that she idealised “as alternative ‘parents’” (McCarthy 2008, 70). Among his other many achievements, Priestley developed David Hartley’s Associationist text *Observations on Man* (1749) “to become the cornerstone of Unitarian [Dissenting] educational thought in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (Watts 1998, 35). Like Hartley, Priestley believed that all intellectual and moral capacities were reducible to external impressions, which originated from a benevolent God. Associationist principles were therefore central to Priestley’s, and later Barbauld’s, mission of a liberal and useful education, as they believed that the differences between people were not innate, but the result of education.³³ This belief, partially founded on the theory of associationism, was inimical to the concept of maternal imagination, and perhaps provides a reason for Barbauld’s subversive denial of the concept in “Invisible Being”.

During the later eighteenth century heated discourse and theories on education emerged amid much controversy. The very notion of universal literacy and schooling was considered radical, bordering ridiculous. Yet as the unprecedented spate of educational treatises demonstrates, there was considerable debate concerning appropriate education for specific demographic groups such as women or the lower classes.³⁴ As critics have recently explored, educational controversies concerning social class and gender reached an apex during the reactionary 1790s period.³⁵ Alan Richardson has remarked that “an intense concern with education finds its way into Romantic-era writings of all kinds” (1994, 4). He notes, for example, that the novel shows a marked shift from the presentation of fixed characters, to a stress on the influence of education:

Whereas the earlier novel tended to dispose of childhood expeditiously (Tom Jones grows from two to four in two paragraphs) and to stress an inherited character or “disposition” over experience and training, the Romantic-era novel more often reflects the notion, stated with typical assurance by Godwin, that “the characters of men are determined in all their most essential circumstances by education”. (1994, 7)³⁶

Evidently the theory of maternal imagination belonged to the earlier novel and the notion of an “inherited character or disposition”. Barbauld’s subversion of the concept of maternal imagination might therefore implicitly deny the idea of innate character and promote the formative influence of education. Certainly one might claim that any rejection of the concept

of maternal imagination during the *fin de siècle*, could be indicative of participation in the wider contemporary debate between “nature” (innate character) and “nurture” (education).

Barbauld weaves the sentimental conventions of glorified motherhood around a central critique of culturally inflated maternal responsibility. The poem allows that pregnant women must suffer the physical burden of pregnancy in order to reap the blessing of “new life” (lines 1; 11), but quietly refutes the notion that a woman’s every move and thought might alter the foetus. Ultimately, “Invisible Being” suggests that the physical travail and high sentimental expectations of pregnancy are difficult enough, without the cultural pressure of maternal passion.

I have shown that maternal poetry has a history of subversive critique against the culture of maternal blame inherent in the concept of maternal imagination and exacerbated by the culture of dutiful, martyr-esque motherhood. Barbauld’s specimen of maternal poetry is perhaps the most explicit disruption of the notion of maternal blame, as she argues that a mother and foetus are mentally and physically separated during gestation. According to Barbauld’s poem, a mother cannot – and should not – be blamed for the outcome of her pregnancy. The issue of maternal responsibility also features strongly in William Wordsworth’s “The Thorn”, the only male-authored poem I explore in this chapter. Wordsworth’s gender has a discernible impact on his deployment of the notion of maternal passion, and his approach to maternal blame differs in several significant ways to the maternal poems explored thus far.

§ “SAD CASE FOR SUCH A BRAIN TO HOLD/COMMUNION WITH A STIRRING CHILD”: THE THORN

The discourse of maternal imagination contributes to Wordsworth’s exploration of maternity, passion and imagination in “The Thorn”. The presence of the discourse is most usefully approached via a branch of feminist literary criticism that has analysed extensively the treatment of the feminine and the maternal in Romantic poetry. Margaret Homans (1986), Anne Mellor (1988) and Marlon Ross (1989), among others, have noted that the canonical male Romantic poets appropriated feminine qualities such as empathy and sensibility into their authorial personas and their writing.³⁷ Mellor’s influential edited collection of essays *Romanticism and Feminism* (1988) investigated the collective tendency of the “Big Six” male poets to adopt the “dual strategy of deifying the male

ego even as it cannibalized the attributes of the female" (Mellor 1988, 7). This branch of feminist criticism has particularly noted the male poet's identification with the mother in order to, as Alan Richardson puts it, "colonize the feminine" (1988, 13).

Since Richardson's charge of "colonization" in the 1980s, numerous critics have investigated the way that major male figures of Romanticism generated strong links with the maternal.³⁸ As Romantic ideology prized empathy and emotion, it almost inevitably touches discourses of maternity; especially the discourse of maternal imagination, with its powerful maternal bonds of sympathetic "consent". Friedrich Schlegel's statement that "women have less need for the poetry of poets, because their very essence is poetry" (c.1799, 253) illustrates the Romantic propensity to idealise the abandon of "feminine" passion and imagination. Undoubtedly the passions of women and mothers feature strongly in William Wordsworth's poetry and have been the subject of much critical discussion. Scholars have commented on Wordsworth's tendency to avoid static categories of gender; for example Thais E Morgan argues that Wordsworth "both preserves and crosses fixed boundaries between femininity and masculinity" (1994, 3).³⁹ While not all research in this area agrees completely with the "colonization" thesis, Wordsworth's refusal to settle gender boundaries undeniably facilitates his frequent use of mother figures, and the themes of maternity and natality.⁴⁰ To list just a few examples, mothers are central to "The Sailor's Mother", "The Emigrant Mother", "Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman", "The Mad Mother", "The Matron of Jedborough and her Husband", "The Idiot Boy", and many significant passages of "The Prelude". Joshua Gonsalves has observed that Wordsworth incorporates extreme maternal passion into his own personality "as a mother-like vulnerability" (2007, 122). Wordsworth's (1802) Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* prioritises a specifically maternal passion, by describing it before any other type of passion, and many critics have commented upon his fascination with prenatal experience.⁴¹ Alan Richardson remarks that "In the 1805 Prelude Wordsworth . . . begins to shift his focus to "earliest" infancy, gesturing towards a pre-natal rather than bodily source of power" (1994, 41–42). Maureen McLane (2000, 184) and Andrew Bennett (1999, 96) have both separately noted Wordsworth's imagining of prenatal existence in "Ode. Intimations of Immortality". As I shall go on to discuss in more detail, the central role of the mother in "The Thorn" has also attracted critical attention. Employing an appropriately reproductive

metaphor, the Romantic scholar Susan Wolfson has recently described the poem as "a determined impregnation of the poetry, a powerline to passion that Wordsworth infuses from the grid of bereaved mothers and bereft females" (2010, 139). Despite such extensive research on maternity, the specific concept of maternal imagination has not yet been examined in relation to Wordsworth's poetry. I wish to build on feminist research that claims male poets assimilated maternal qualities to consider Wordsworth's deft engagement with the notion of maternal imagination in "The Thorn" and how his adaption of the discourse differs markedly to the maternal poems authored by women.

"The Thorn" is written from the superstitious perspective of a loquacious individual, whom Wordsworth later described as "a Captain of a small trading vessel" (1800, 593). This relatively detached observer speculates on a woman's motivation for returning to a certain rural spot, and cites local rumour that the woman, Martha Ray, has buried her own child there.⁴² The "Captain" narrator reports the rumour that the pregnant Martha was driven insane when she was jilted by her lover, Stephen Hill. The Captain openly refers to maternal imagination when he remarks:

Sad case for such a brain to hold
 Communion with a stirring child
 Sad case, as you may think, for one
 Who had a brain so wild! (lines 144–147).

The discourse of maternal imagination thus shapes Wordsworth's narrative, as he alludes to the notion that the pregnant woman will transmit unwanted qualities to the foetus, or even terminate the pregnancy through her violent emotions.

The two short lines, "Sad case for such a brain to hold/Communion with a stirring child", powerfully evoke the discourse of maternal imagination. Martha's brain is in direct "communion" with the infant in her womb, which suggests that they share an emotional and perhaps physical connection. The particularly Christian connotations of the term "communion" also invoke "Holy Communion", the part of the Eucharist rite that follows Jesus Christ's instructions at the Last Supper. The process of Holy Communion involves the imagining of bread and wine as Jesus' body and blood, which mirrors the idea that Martha's imagination links her body and blood to the "stirring

child". This is significant considering the strong seventeenth-century belief that maternal blood and imagination were the only two prenatal ways in which a mother passed on her own characteristics to the child (Crawford 2004, 83). The sacrificial message of Holy Communion (intended to remind participants of Jesus' death) also suggests the physical sacrifices of a pregnant woman. Even without the religious connotations, Wordsworth's lexical choice "communion" evokes ideas of fellowship and shared emotions, which suggests how useful he, and other Romantic writers, may have found the notion of maternal passion. Indeed, the paradigm emphasised communication between two minds and bodies, the entangling and separation of two identities. In a comment that could be equally applied to both maternal and Romantic imagination, Jan Goldstein argues that "strictly speaking, the late eighteenth-century recognition of the perils of imagination qualifies as a problematization of the self" (2005, 9). As this section shall explain, the limits of the self are tested in Wordsworth's poem through the specific paradigm of maternal imagination.

To a certain extent in "The Thorn", Wordsworth follows the conventions of maternal poetry; a mother addresses her foetus, she expresses her sense of responsibility for the infant's welfare, and there is even explicit reference to a case of maternal imagination. Nevertheless, Wordsworth breaks with convention when he introduces the specifically male narrator of the Sea-Captain. Unlike most women writers of maternal poetry, Wordsworth himself had obviously never experienced pregnancy. Wordsworth is therefore doubly protected from the personal charge of being an unfit mother by his own gender and that of his poetic narrator, and has more scope to suggest that others should be called to account for the tragedy. The Sea-Captain narrator places responsibility for the jilting and Martha's subsequent insanity onto Stephen Hill when he cries: "O me! Ten thousand times I'd rather/That he had died, that cruel father!" (lines 142–143). The poem is often thought to be part of Wordsworth's residual guilt about Annette Vallon, whom he left pregnant in France, which might account for the poem's suggestion that mother, father and society are to blame for the tragedy (Gill 2003). Certainly the Captain draws attention to the fact that maternal sorrow is exacerbated by cultural blame. Even though there is no evidence, "all do still aver/The little babe is buried there" (lines 240–241).

Wordsworth also disrupts the conventions of maternal poetry in an unusual adaption of maternal imagination. The Captain narrator repeats

“Farmer Simpson’s” conjecture that, in direct opposition to the typically negative maternal imagination, the foetus has actively and positively influenced the mother whilst *in utero*. He explains:

That in her womb the infant wrought
About its mother’s heart, and brought
Her senses back again:
And when at last her time drew near,
Her looks were calm, her senses clear. (lines 150–154)

This idea was extraordinary.⁴³ Martha had not only lost her mental faculties, but had been physically suffering from the shock of her lover’s betrayal, as the Captain informs the reader, “A cruel, cruel fire, they say/Into her bones was sent:/It dried her body like a cinder” (lines 129–131). Consequently the report that “her looks were calm, her senses clear” suggests that the foetus has somehow managed to cure both her physical and mental ailments, in a total reversal of the idea of harmful maternal passion.⁴⁴ This information is far from reliable – based on a conjecture from an unknown farmer, reported by an unreliable narrator – however it serves to combat a purely negative view of Martha’s maternal imagination. Similar to Barbauld’s representation of an independent and separate infant in “Invisible Being”, Wordsworth claims an active role for the foetus. However, unlike Barbauld’s challenge to maternal responsibility, which is conveyed through a denial of the physical connection between the mother and infant, Wordsworth manipulates the notion of the mother-child bond to suggest it might have positive effects.

Despite the singularity of this idea, Gavin Budge is the only critic to date who has recognised the foetus’ unusually energizing influence (2013, 60–62). Budge has observed the strangely restorative powers of the foetus in “The Thorn” and views the poem as part of Wordsworth’s interest in “Brunonian medicine”, a system devised by the Edinburgh doctor John Brown. Brunonian medicine categorised all diseases into two kinds; the sthenic (understimulated) and the asthenic (overstimulated), or in other words, disease caused by an excess or deficiency of excitement. The former type of disease was to be treated with debilitating medicine and the latter with stimulating medicine. Asthenic conditions were harder to cure than sthenic diseases as the original stimulant could not be completely withdrawn for fear of subjecting the patient to shock. The Brunonian doctor therefore had to either wean the patient from the original stimulant, or

substitute a milder alternative. Budge casts Martha's pregnancy as a Brunonian mild stimulant, which distracts from, and thus cures, the original stimulant of sthenic insanity. Although Budge's detailed discussion of Martha's cure is convincing, I would like to suggest that this new model of maternal imagination also prefigures other forms of imagination in the poem that are particularly related to Romantic visions of empathy and the natural world.

Despite the narrator's lack of substantial facts regarding Martha's history, he is absurdly precise about the exact location of the thorn, pond and heap of moss that she visits.

Not five yards from the mountain-path,
This thorn you on your left espy;
And to the left, three yards beyond,
You see a little muddy pond
Of water, never dry;
I've measured it from side to side:
'Tis three feet long and two feet wide
And, close beside this aged Thorn,
There is a fresh and lovely sight,
A beauteous heap, a hill of moss,
Just half a foot in height. (lines 27–36)

Such exact detail regarding distance and measurements seems ludicrous and somewhat tiresome, however for different reasons the landmarks are of great importance to Martha, the Sea-Captain narrator and the reader. Stephen Parrish's ground-breaking reading of the poem as a dramatic monologue maintained that the precise description of the landscape's natural features provide a basis for the narrator's superstitious imagination to run wild. Parrish argued:

When a credulous old seaman catches sight in a storm of a suggestively-shaped tree hung with moss and later crams his head with village gossip, then his imagination can turn the tree into a woman, the brightly-coloured moss into her scarlet cloak, and the creaking of the branches into her plaintive cry, "O misery! O misery!" (1957, 159)⁴⁵

Albert S Gérard (1979) disagrees with this interpretation, as the one fact in the poem that the narrator seems certain of, is that he has seen Martha Ray in a scarlet cloak on the hill. In yet another reading, Phillip Martin claims

that the phallic form of the thorn and the pregnant shape of the mossy mound have a metaphorical purpose, and are used to represent the absent father and infant. Despite their differences, these readings of the poem share the idea that Martha's maternal sorrow is part of, or reflected in, the landscape surrounding the thorn. Geoffrey Hartman (1987) has argued this point persuasively, noting that the absorption of people and their stories into the landscape is a common Wordsworthian theme.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Richard E Matlak (1990) and more recently, Alan Richardson (2011), have underscored Wordsworth's interest in the view of a symbiotic relationship between mind, body and natural surroundings, which was popularised in Darwin's *Zoonomia*. I want to explore this notion to suggest that the discourse of maternal imagination flows through Wordsworth's Romantic representation of the landscape in the poem. This creates the impression that (particularly maternal) passion can effect physiological transformations in unexpected ways: from foetus to mother, from mother to landscape, and from poetry to reader.

Martha's presence in the mountain landscape continually evokes her lost infant, as the narrator repeatedly insists that the hill of moss is "like an infant's grave in size" (line 52). As the poem continues it becomes clear that the mossy hill is believed to contain the child's body – and regardless of whether this is true, Martha's occupation of the spot shows her personal association of the moss with her child. At first the mound is described as green, white and red with "all colours that were ever seen" (line 39), but the Captain later claims that it appears red. David Simpson has remarked that "in many of Wordsworth's poems, the 'first sight' produces either confusion or misreading, and must be corrected by the second look", and this is certainly the case with "The Thorn" (1982, xviii). The reader needs to reread the poem in order to realise the important visual link between Martha and the moss. Towards the end of the poem the Captain declares that "I've heard the scarlet moss is red/With drops of that poor infant's blood" (lines 221–222), but visually, the crimson of the moss would link the mound to Martha's scarlet cloak described earlier. The scarlet colour could even evoke the red blood of Martha's physical connection or "communion" with her infant. Stanzas four and five draw attention to the "vermillion dye" (line 44) and "scarlet bright" (line 46) colours of the moss, which, as Parrish has pointed out, would make the red mound similar in appearance to the hunched form of Martha, sitting wrapped in her red cloak. However, whereas Parrish's argument claims that the Captain's heated imagination transforms the moss into a mirage of Martha's

body, the poem's discursive context of maternal passion indicates that Wordsworth actually uses the red moss to emphasise a suggestive visual connection between Martha and the landscape.

The blood-red moss again refers the reader to the physiological connection between mother and foetus. It implies that Parrish's claim that Martha figured literally as a moss-covered tree, and Martin's argument that the moss symbolises Martha's pregnant belly, do not go far enough. I contend that the poem's discursive preoccupation with maternal passion shows that Martha's habitation and association with the spot, combined with perpetual viewing of her own scarlet cloak on the chilly hillside, has marked the moss red with the strength of her imagination. Such an extraordinarily novel idea is made possible by Wordsworth's earlier testing of the maternal imagination paradigm, when he presented Martha's foetus curing her insanity. The infant's unexpectedly restorative powers are suggestive of potent raw passion and how it contains the potential to effect unprecedented physiological change. Moreover, unlike the representation of maternal passion in medical and fictional texts, these changes are not always negative. Firstly the foetus's powers are restorative; it actually calms and soothes Martha's mind and body. Secondly, Martha's woe, instead of producing a deformed infant, assumes the form of the beautiful, scarlet moss. In fact a more careful perusal of the poem plants this idea quite early, in stanza four, when the Captain initially describes the moss.

And mossy network too is there,
As if by hand of lady fair
The work had woven been,
And cups, the darlings of the eye
So deep is their vermillion dye. (lines 40–44, *my italics*)

Martha, the "lady fair" it is implied, has indeed woven the moss, not literally, but through the power of her imagination.⁴⁷ To further stress this link, Wordsworth connects the vermillion colour of the moss to "the darlings of the eye", evoking popular models of maternal imagination, in which the mother's eyes were believed to be a conduit to the foetus' malleable form. (Such visual imprinting was key to cases such as the hairy woman or the black boy of anecdote and popular mythology). Ultimately the moss illustrates the way that Martha's passion has literally stained the landscape, similar to a mother's imagination marking her foetus. This interpretation of the poem follows Elizabeth Fay's observation

that the most important Romantic trait is “a great confidence in the ability of the human *imagination* to create connections between the inner mind and the outer world of nature” (1998, 10).

Wordsworth’s recurring theme, that Martha’s tale is somehow etched into the scenery, lays a foundation for the strange notion that imagination has physically transformed her body and her immediate surroundings. Not only has Martha coloured and shaped the moss with her maternal passion, but the entire spot is marked with her story and imagination. The Captain invites the reader to “gladly view the spot,/The spot to which she goes” (lines 91–92), as “Perhaps when you are at the place/You something of her tale may trace” (lines 109–110). Susan Wolfson claims that the fertile association between the landscape and Martha’s loss is due to the Captain’s narrative and argues that “his own story has been impregnating the spot with her [Martha’s] history” (2010, 134–135).⁴⁸ Yet within the fictional world of the poem, it is not the Captain’s retelling, but Martha’s own presence on the hillside that brands the landscape with her loss. The moss would be stained with her passion, even if the Captain did not record it. In a related observation, Cynthia Chase notes Wordsworth’s link with landscape and infants in the later poem “Lines: Written with a Slate-Pencil” (1800, later entitled “Inscriptions” in 1815). When a “hillock of misshapen stones” is described with the metaphor “a rude embryo”, Chase argues that “for an instant the hillock is personified as a rude child, or, rather, foetus” (1990, 63). This claim mirrors the notion that Martha’s hillock has, in a sense, *become* her foetus and demonstrates that Wordsworth entertained this extraordinary idea for some time after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth’s foray into maternal poetry and responsiveness to the concept of maternal imagination accords broadly with Richardson’s observation that Romantic male writers “colonized” feminine attributes. Wordsworth’s maternal poem encompasses concerns of the genre; the peculiar bond between mother and child, the effects of prenatal passion, and the crushing burden of cultural guilt for the mothers of unsuccessful pregnancies. However, unlike the women writers examined in this chapter, Wordsworth’s gender means that he is not as severely restricted by potential autobiographical readings of his poem, which allows him to stray with relative impunity from sentimental and generic convention. This frees the discourse of maternal imagination; through its traffic with Wordsworth’s focus on physiological imagination (rather than maternal guilt), the discourse disperses and mutates. I suggest that Wordsworth employs the form

of the maternal poem and joins the discourse of maternal imagination not to confront the issue of maternal responsibility for deformed, miscarried or stillborn infants, but as part of an exploration of his own burgeoning concerns about passion, the supernatural, nature, and creative imagination. The discourse therefore reinvents itself through its fruitful meeting with these Romantic concerns in Wordsworth's poem.

In a later "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1802) Wordsworth claims that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (598) and seems to particularly desire the poet to possess the traditionally feminine traits of sympathy, passion and tenderness. (Although Wordsworth genders the Poet as male in his paratext, Wolfson (1994) has suggested that this is in order to compensate for the stigma generated by the necessary feminine attributes of the ideal poet.) Through the subject matter of a distraught pregnant woman in "The Thorn", Wordsworth's interest in the passions inevitably intersects with the discourse of maternal imagination. This is borne out through the physiological power of grief and love over Martha, the landscape, the narrator and the reader. This extraordinary paradigm transports the reader to the early eighteenth-century and wilder ideas about maternal imagination; to exotic or prophetic monsters, to frog-boys and rabbit births. From this point on (stanza 14), the poem includes supernatural and bizarre events such as ghostly voices (stanza 16), a reflection of "a baby and a baby's face" (228) in the pond (stanza 21) and a localised earthquake (stanza 22) when villagers attempt to dig up the moss.

The poem's supernatural elements have long puzzled critics. Twenty years later in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) Samuel Taylor Coleridge claimed that Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* were to be of a specific class of poem; intended "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, [sic] and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural" (7).⁴⁹ (There is no room for the discussion here, but there has been much investigation into the collaborative nature of *Lyrical Ballads* and the precise nature of Wordsworth and Coleridge's mutual influence.)⁵⁰ Michael Gamer has explained the supernatural elements of "The Thorn" by claiming that the ballad is an anti-Gothic parody, and therefore had crossover appeal to Gothic and anti-Gothic tastes, depending on the reader's interpretation of the poem. However, when applied to "The Thorn", Coleridge's explanation illuminates the way the concept of maternal imagination is discursively inescapable for Wordsworth's exploration of maternal loss. The discourse spreads itself

through Martha’s pregnancy, maternal passion and the transformative powers of imagination with traces of the unexplainable and the supernatural, due to its long history of the fantastic and the peculiar, such as the lion-child or the hairy woman. Wordsworth’s vision of imagination as an awesome, terrible, and almost miraculous force thus meets and breeds with existing ideas of maternal passion and physiological imagination. The cries of maternal woe upon the air, the baby’s face in the pond, and the earth tremor caused by a threat to the moss, also renew pity and sympathy for Martha’s plight. Perhaps most significantly, these spectral occurrences stress the impression her predicament has made on the surrounding area.

Mary Jacobus has observed that “in one way or another all the ballads of 1798 concern the workings of the imagination” and certainly the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* contain ideas about passion and imagination that can also be found in 1790s scientific and medical texts (1976, 233). Wordsworth’s familiarity with Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia* (1794–1796) is well established and critics have linked poems such as “Goody Blake and Harry Gill”, “The Mad Mother” and “The Idiot Boy” to Darwin’s nosology.⁵¹ This is also true of “The Thorn”, which, like *Zoonomia*, refers to the potentially metamorphic power of imagination. The reader not only views Martha’s unusual maternal imagination, but also is encouraged to perceive the effects of imagination on the landscape. With spectral images and sounds linked to the baby, Wordsworth demonstrates that imagination was a force so powerful as to appear supernatural. This reading of the poem is supported by Wordsworth’s later comment concerning imagination more generally; “I wished to draw attention to the truth, that the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous” (1802, 611–612).⁵² Certainly in “The Thorn”, the landscape is featured as a sympathetically malleable, responding to passion with physical empathy. Martha’s connection to the landscape can be compared with the maternal-infant bond, which Denman had described as “some consent of an inexplicable, and perhaps divine nature, not to be defined or illustrated” (1788, 257). Within this context, the more supernatural elements of the poem are not supernatural at all, but a demonstration of the material effects of imagination. The poem’s original focus on the specific concept of maternal imagination thus looks out toward a wider, more creative and Romantic imagination.

Some of the less metaphysical aspects of the discourse of maternal imagination may have also attracted the notice of Wordsworth for use in this particular poem. The obsessive single-mindedness and lower, folkloric, connotations of maternal longing are arguably echoed by the somewhat vulgar Captain-narrator's repetitive mode of expression. Coleridge later singled out "The Thorn" to complain about its superstitious narrator and pointedly declared that "it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity" (1817, 48). Wordsworth himself in "Note to the Thorn" argued that the repetition carried a "consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language" (1800, 594).⁵³ Consequently, when trying to convey "impassioned feelings...there will always be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character" (1800, 594). To illustrate his point, Wordsworth quotes a description from the Old Testament concerning the moment that the woman Jael kills the commander Sisera; "At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell; where he bowed there he fell down dead" (Judges, 5: 27). Although Wordsworth focuses primarily on the deficiencies of language, this quotation also carries the same implications of powerful and threatening femininity that are present in "The Thorn". Wordsworth's use of insistent repetition in the poem is a deliberate technique to ensure that his readers' minds "are impregnated with passion" (1800, 593), even though they may not be familiar with the poem's particular ideas or style.

There are alternative interpretations of Wordsworth's usage of repetition. Wordsworth may have been alerted to the usefulness of repetition by Robert Lowth's eighteenth-century reading of Hebrew poetry through the figure of pleonasm (repetition with slight variety).⁵⁴ Jane Stabler (2001) claims that Wordsworth may have adopted the idea of repetition from Joseph Priestley's 1777 lectures on Oratory and Criticism. Priestley claimed that strong sensations could be associated with particular words, as single words could evoke entire scenes. Wolfson (2003) argues that the technique of repetition is part of Wordsworth's sophisticated craft. She maintains that meter in *Lyrical Ballads* often reflects poetic content; the chattering woman in "Goody Blake and Harry Gill", or the loquacious narrator of "The Thorn".⁵⁵ As Wordsworth's use of language in the "Note" such as "impregnated" and "craving" evokes the discourse of maternal imagination, perhaps the repetition of the poem's central elements – Martha's misery, the thorn, the moss – could replicate the

insistent obsessive passions associated with a pregnant woman. The discourse of maternal imagination thus runs theoretically in the "Note" and performatively in "The Thorn", through Wordsworth's use of craving, passion and repetition. The reader might therefore experience the repetition of single-minded passion through the poem's meter, in addition to Wordsworth's explicit comment on man's awareness of language as an inadequate vehicle of expression.

In "The Thorn" the discourse of maternal imagination intermingles with a lofty Romantic vision of transcendent emotion and imagination, which could support the argument that male Romantic poets appropriated feminine attributes in their poetry. This is not so much a sinister cannibalisation of the feminine, as a fertile dialogue with a pertinent and suggestive discourse. The privilege of his gender enables Wordsworth to bend the rules; he not only critiques the notion of sole maternal blame more explicitly than any previous maternal poet, but also manipulates assumptions and expectations. With the addition of a male narrator, Wordsworth is further freed from the self-justification of the female maternal poets, as the concept of maternal blame is filtered through an outsider's perspective. Moreover, by reversing the paradigm to show the non-gendered foetus restoring Martha's sanity, Wordsworth arguably offers an alternative form of imagination that is neither overtly masculine nor feminine. Conversely, the discourse renews itself through Wordsworth's consideration of physiological imagination and maternal emotions, subtly underlying the conception of Romantic imagination.

It is clear that Wordsworth approaches the subject of maternal imagination rather differently to previous male commentators. He does not issue medical explanations in the manner of (Anti-)Imaginationist tracts, or echo the warnings found in midwifery manuals. Nor does he satirise the possibilities the discourse created for female agency like a male mid-century novelist. Wordsworth's entrance into the discourse of maternal imagination is sympathetic and closer to that of the women writers of maternal poetry, yet differs, by highlighting the transcendent awe due to the power of imagination. Although Wordsworth adapts traditionally feminine territory such as the subgenre of maternal poetry and the discourse of maternal imagination, his experimentation with these areas to a certain extent sheds the usual gendered implications. I would like to suggest that "The Thorn" assimilates and adapts both the negative and positive connotations of maternal imagination, that at once colonises and emancipates selected aspects of the discourse. However, Wordsworth's

sophisticated dialogue with this discourse – generated and sustained by both men and women – is problematic, not least due to the complexity of maternal imagination as a concept. While the associations of passion, supernatural occurrence and transformative power might appeal to Wordsworth, the taint of feminine responsibility and monstrous transformation is perhaps too strong for a simple adoption of the maternal. Yet although “The Thorn” is the only poem of Wordsworth’s to refer explicitly to a form of maternal imagination, the concept survives discursively throughout Romantic appropriation of the maternal. The discourse also regenerates through its interaction with Romantic emphasis on the physiological power of the human mind when agitated by extreme passion.

§ CONCLUSION

The discourse of maternal imagination during the eighteenth century was profoundly affected by increased cultural emphasis on the mother-child bond, idealised maternal martyrdom and the rising importance of imagination. As maternal poetry portrays, women writing of their unusual, sickly, or stillborn infants were restricted by the sentimental conventions of the genre, yet created ways to question the degree of maternal culpability. Superficially focused on pain, blame and death, the maternal poetry of Boyd, Cave and Kelly nevertheless subversively challenges notions of sole maternal responsibility for the foetus. Throughout all three poems, the concept of maternal imagination is harnessed in a discreet protest against the culture of maternal guilt. It seems clear that by the 1790s the discourse of maternal imagination focused on two major factors: passion and responsibility. Medical literature, political rhetoric and even fiction perpetuated the notion that mothers were victims of extreme passion, and yet were somehow expected to restrain and control such passion. While maternal poetry continued to function as a vehicle for women to express their anxiety concerning this burden, its autobiographical nature limited opportunity for any real challenge to the notion that a woman was ultimately responsible for the well-being of her foetus.

Consequently, the maternal poems included in this chapter are characterised by the tensions of both observing and defying the cultural convention of maternal blame. Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “Invisible Being” perhaps contains the sharpest exploration of these tensions by a woman writer, with a denial of any harmful link between mother and foetus. Barbauld’s poem attempts to free her friend, and by implication,

all pregnant women, from the distress of maternal passion and responsibility. Read in the context of her Dissenting and Associationist educational agenda, the poem's rejection of the concept of maternal imagination is part of a much wider debate between innate influence and education. This intriguing connection requires much more space than the present study admits, however I will observe that the tendency to prioritise education still placed the burden of responsibility on the mother, as she was figured as an infant's earliest "teacher".⁵⁶ In addition to the "nature" versus "nurture debate, Barbauld's "Invisible Being" is notable among the maternal poems studied in this chapter for its more vociferous approach to the uncomfortable aspects of pregnancy. Barbauld presents the pregnant woman as a long-term sufferer, at the mercy of her body and dependent on the whim of God and her own unborn infant for release. Barbauld was perhaps at more liberty to discuss such counter-cultural, awkward views because she had not personally experienced full term pregnancy.

As a male poet, Wordsworth is even freer to criticise the disproportionate responsibility placed on the pregnant woman. While the women poets only allude to the notion of maternal imagination as part of a wider culture of maternal blame, Wordsworth directly addresses the concept with apparent relish. Comparatively uninhibited by his gender to protest the idea of sole maternal culpability, Wordsworth holds the mother, father, and society responsible for the typically negative model of maternal imagination. He blames Martha's overheated passion, but also Stephen Hill for causing Martha's distress, and the villagers for exacerbating her sorrow. This feminine model of imagination is however, not merely for the purpose of partially vindicating pregnant women. The discourse of maternal imagination converses with Wordsworth's interest in the immense power of the passions to promote an emerging physiological imagination. In Wordsworth's text, the notion of maternal imagination is less mocked (as in the Toft satires or mid-century novels) or feared (as in medical accounts of maternal passion), and more viewed in awe as an erratic and fearsome force.

This view of imagination links the maternal discursively with Romantic creativity, within the overall vision of Romanticism. Like the creative imagination prized by Romantic writers, maternal imagination was bound up with sympathy, passion and physiology. Lacking clear boundaries, both forms of imagination were preoccupied with translating or transmitting images and emotions. However, unlike maternal imagination, which generated anxiety,

guilt and shame for the pregnant woman, creative imagination was a cause for celebration and praise. This was perhaps because the creative imagination was viewed as a carefully crafted tool for the production of great art, whereas an unruly pregnant imagination had been perceived as more haphazard and dangerous since James Blondel’s re-definition of the concept (see [Chapter 2](#)).

The discourse of maternal imagination clearly survived until at least the end of the eighteenth century in maternal poetry. Vestiges of contemporary and ancient ideas are also assimilated into Romantic ideology; maternal figures are invested with special, perhaps supernatural powers, and passion has the ability to transform matter. When contrasted with the four women writers, Wordsworth is shown to have more license to challenge convention by querying sole maternal responsibility and extending his horizon from individual experience to a larger (Romantic) vision. This license is almost certainly accorded by his status as a male writer who would never have to discuss a personal experience of pregnancy. The contrast between the women writers and Wordsworth suggests the gendered issues that arise when writing about imagination during the later eighteenth century, particularly as Wordsworth adopts a feminine sub-genre and assimilates a female phenomenon. I have discussed the influence of the discourse of maternal imagination on Wordsworth and suggested that the attractions of extreme passion, destructive feeling, the supernatural and psychosomatic imagination outweighed the negative connotations of deformity, death, blame and responsibility. It seems possible that Wordsworth was more able to discard or challenge these negative connotations, and that the discourse was able to renew itself at this key moment, at least partly because of Wordsworth’s gender. Ultimately Wordsworth is able to access the danger and power of maternal imagination in a way that was culturally unacceptable for women authors of maternal poetry. I want to suggest that this distance from the experience of actual pregnancy might be problematic for Romantic female writers, who must appeal to passion in order to produce great works of art, but according to medical prescription, ought to shun passion if they become pregnant. My next chapter examines Mary Shelley’s exploration of these tensions between abstract poetic imagination and genuine maternal passion in *Frankenstein*.

NOTES

1. Claude Quillet’s *Callipædia: Or The Art of Getting Pretty Children* (1710, see my [Chapter 1](#)) is occasionally mentioned, yet the *Callipædia* was originally written during the seventeenth century and contains anachronistic views

that were deemed vulgar and unfashionable after James Blondel's *The Strength of Imagination In Pregnant Women* (1727, see my [Chapter 2](#)).

2. Although I do not have space to discuss the poem in any detail, Elizabeth Hands' "On the Author's Lying in" (1789) is an example of a poem written expressly about the fear of childbirth.
3. See Lois A. Chaber (1996) for details on this tradition and Pamela's death-in-labour letter to Mr. B in Samuel Richardson's *Her Exalted Condition* (1741). Messages to unborn children can also be found in prefaces, farewell letters and conduct books.
4. Perry argues that this attitude was employed to bind women into the maternal role and produce the nation's workforce.
5. This is a separate poem to the previously mentioned "On the Death of an Infant Five Years Old" (1733), also by Boyd.
6. See my [Chapter 1](#). Mark S Lussier (2000) describes the emergence of "physical criticism" in the past twenty years that is occupied with the exchange between literature and science. In a statement key to this chapter, Gavin Budge observes that "late eighteenth-century medicine was fully prepared to accept that mental states could have real, physical effects on the functioning of the body" (2013, 50–51). With specific reference to Wordsworth, Cynthia Chase (1990, 50–77) discusses the materiality of language and Peter De Bolla (2010, 49) says we must also be aware, as Wordsworth was, of the "thingliness" of words, the bodily process of writing and physicality of poetics. Alan Richardson (2011, xiii) also points out that Wordsworth came of age during a time when the materiality of the mind was being asserted by avant-garde thinkers such as Erasmus Darwin and Joseph Priestley, while Michael R Page (2012) traces the rich interchange between science and the literary imagination and argues that Wordsworth advocated the merging of poetry and scientific endeavour in his [Chapter 2](#).
7. This chapter is indebted to Sha's insightful and detailed research on the Romantic imagination.
8. Denman is discussing menstruation, but his words also apply to the broader mystery of women's bodies.
9. For example the physiognomist Johann Lavatar (1794, 115) advocated the possibility of maternal longing, and man-midwife William Perfect (1784) was unwilling to dismiss the idea, citing a selection of possible maternal imagination cases. As I will discuss in more detail below, most man-midwives gave credence to the theory of maternal passion.
10. Denman was the first physician whose authority made inducing premature labour in cases of narrow pelvis and other conditions (in which the mother's life is imperilled by the attempt to deliver at the full time) general practice in England. This practice is still observed today.

11. The writer Ernest Gray based his fictional character “John Knyveton” on Denman; see *Man midwife: The further experiences of John Knyveton M. D. late surgeon in the British fleet during the years 1763–1809* (1946).
12. In a further illustration of the close-knit London sphere of medicine, William Hunter had been the pupil and lodger of James Douglas, the physician who had uncovered Mary Toft’s fraud in 1727.
13. Thomas Denman Jr. later acquired eminence when he became Lord Chief Justice of England.
14. “Con” meaning “together”; “sentir” meaning “to feel”.
15. Richardson’s *Pamela in Her Exalted Condition* is the exception rather than the rule, see my [Chapter 3](#).
16. Although these two characters could be described as secondary to the main plots, Laura is at the centre of the narrative for a large portion of Smith’s novel and I read Lewis’ Agnes as one of the six main protagonists of *The Monk*, along with Ambrosio, Raymond, Lorenzo, Antonia and Matilda.
17. A prominent example includes Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), which portrays the maternal passion of the secondary character Miss Emily Watkins.
18. See Jill Campbell (2008), Julie Kipp (2003), Susan C Greenfield (2002) and Eleanor Ty (1993).
19. Susan Greenfield explores this trope more fully (2002, [Chapter 1](#)). She cites other novels that have plots which rely explicitly upon the mother-daughter resemblance such as Elizabeth Helme’s *Louisa or the Cottage on the Moor* (1807), Agnes Maria Bennett, *The Beggar Girl and her Benefactors* (1797) and Clara Reeve, *Fatherless Fanny* (1811).
20. Mercy Canon (2008) also demonstrates that these guides, such as William Buchan’s *Advice to Mothers* (1803), recommended a “hygienic motherhood” that reconceptualised women’s bodies as a safe nurturing space for the infant – as long as the mother adhered to certain rules.
21. Mary Jacobus (1992) makes a similar point about the semiotics of the maternal breast in French imagery and literature of the post-revolutionary period, emphasising the discrepancy between maternal iconography and the role that actual mothers played in the organisation of the revolution.
22. Mortimore is imbued with maternal associations as she is named after her godmother Joscelina Mortimore, who also happens to be the heroine’s mother.
23. Jordanova (1999, 217) also says that late eighteenth-century women’s poetry contains a striking amount of pregnancy and birth, and conveys a passionate identification with the babies.
24. In a discussion of Samuel Taylor and Sara Coleridge, Ruderman explains the “distortions and confluents that tend to arise in these moments [of poetry]

- because encountering an infant, especially one's own, means encountering in the present a material image of one's past and one's futurity" (2008, 20).
25. Although this line of argument suggests an essentialist approach, I am not claiming that women who personally experienced pregnancy wrote about it differently than women who were childless *because* of their bodily experience. However I do suggest that the eighteenth-century reading public were alert to such biographical information and that this would have affected the style and content of maternal poetry.
 26. Barbauld's childless neighbour and fellow Unitarian, Joanna Baillie, also presented a case for more maternal autonomy in "A Mother to Her Waking Infant" (1790). However this poem is not included in my discussion as Baillie's poem is addressed to a new-born child, rather than a foetus, and is thus occupied with concerns other than maternal imagination. Similarly Mary Robinson's "Sonnet. To My Beloved Daughter" (1791) also addresses an adult daughter, rather than a foetus.
 27. Henderson does not fully explain what kind of power this is, although she suggests that the poems "represent the baby as having rights to an inheritance that it nevertheless has to roughly demand from a hostile world" (37).
 28. As Barbauld originally composed the poem for her friend Frances Carr, it seems unlikely that she would wish to imply that Carr was seeking to wrest power from her unborn child.
 29. Mee observes that Barbauld overcompensated, employing restraint so well that "Eighteenth Hundred and Eleven" was criticised not for being too enthusiastic, but for being too distant (2003, 210–211). Daniel E White (2006) agrees that as a Dissenting woman, Barbauld was particularly vulnerable to accusations of overly feminine sensibility, see especially his chapter 2.
 30. See Claire Tomalin (1974) and Sylvana Tomaselli (1995).
 31. Although Barbauld did not have any biological children, she adopted her nephew Charles and acted as a surrogate mother to the boys at her husband's school for many years (McCarthy 2008).
 32. For details of Barbauld's attitude to reading see McCarthy (2008, 39) and also for direct reference to her knowledge of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* (565 n.2).
 33. Obviously Priestley was not the only, or even most prominent, advocate of Associationism, however it is likely that his perspective influenced Barbauld due to their early paternalistic relationship. Influential figures who argued for the theory of associationism include Richard Payne Knight, Abraham Tucker, Archibald Alison, Thomas Belsham and Erasmus Darwin. Coleridge and Wordsworth were initially attracted to the theory, but later largely abandoned associationist ideas.
 34. Educational theorists of the period span a wide range of conservative, liberal and radical perspectives. Notable figures include, but by no means are

restricted to: William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Day, Catherine Macaulay, Sarah Trimmer, Maria and Richard Edgeworth, Hannah More, and of course, Anna Barbauld.

35. See Stephen Bygrave (2009, esp. [chapter 4](#)) William Stafford (2002) and Richardson (1994).
36. I would like to point out that even a strident educationalist such as William Godwin experienced conflict regarding the debate of nature versus nurture. He admitted that, although easily erased, "at the moment of birth man has really a certain character, and each man a character different from his fellows. The accidents which pass during the months of pericpency in the womb of the mother, produce a real effect." See Godwin (1798, 42).
37. Anne Mellor and many of the contributors to her collection (1988) claim that Romanticism is about fluid boundaries and the blurring of male and female. In contrast Philip Cox says that adoption of feminine traits could "be read as possessing a positively deconstructive force and a potentially powerful political subtext" (1996, 14–15).
38. For selected research on major male Romantic figures and the maternal see: Barbara Gelpi's research (1992), which draws upon psychoanalytic theories to focus on the themes and imagery of maternity running throughout Shelley's writing, Mellor's discussion (2001) of the significance of the mother and lure of the feminine creative imagination for John; and Jennifer Davis Michael's comments (2007) on William Blake's use of womb-like spaces and cannibalisation of the feminine. Examinations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's deeply suggestive poem "Frost at Midnight" in relation to a usurpation of the maternal are of particular relevance to my study as Coleridge was Wordsworth's collaborator, see U C Knoepfelmacher's brief but valuable summary (1998, 21) and more recently, Julie Carlson (2002).
39. See also Susan Wolfson (1994).
40. Critics who acknowledge Wordsworth's ambiguous gender boundaries but challenge the idea that his adoption of the feminine is primarily negative include Judith W Page (1994) and Tim Fulford (1999).
41. This section was deleted in the 1836 Preface, as were any references to poems with mothers as protagonists.
42. Martha Ray was a real person and the mistress of John Montagu, the debauched Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, but had nothing in common with Wordsworth's Martha. She died in 1779, shot by a disappointed lover. Wordsworth's use of her name for a figure of maternal passion is particularly interesting, as she was the mother of his friend Basil Montagu. Coincidentally Ray was attended by the obstetrician William Hunter, whom I discuss in this chapter and in my [Chapter 4](#); see Roy Porter (1985).

43. Later in “The 1805 Prelude” Wordsworth returns to this idea, although he does not make it clear whether he is discussing pre- or postnatal influence:

From early days,
Beginning not long after that first time
In which, a Babe, by intercourse of touch
I held mute dialogues with my mother’s heart,
I have endeavoured to display the means
Whereby the infant sensibility,
Great birthright of our being, was in me
Augmented and sustained . . . (“The Prelude”, 281–287)

44. Although in earlier periods pregnancy had been considered a cure for green-sickness or oversensitive nerves, by the early nineteenth century, medical texts increasingly viewed pregnancy as a potential source of insanity. See John Connolly, *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* (1830), Thomas Arnold, *Observations of the Nature of Insanity* (1806) and Sir William Ellis, *A Treatise on The Nature, Symptoms, Causes and Treatment of Insanity* (1838).
45. Frances Ferguson (2010) takes issue with Parrish’s reading.
46. McDonagh (2003) and Ferguson (2010) also discuss the landscape as protective of Martha.
47. I concur with Wolfson, who notes that Wordsworth is “busy gendering ‘the spot’” in lines 41–42 (1994, 43).
48. Similarly Alexander Regier has convincingly suggested that “for Martha Ray the words [“O Misery”] are tied to the spot to which she needs to return in order to repeat her dirge . . . As readers we are in a comparable position. We return to the poem as to a mysterious spot” (2010, 78).
49. This claim has been shown to be quite far from the truth, as the actual compilation of *Lyrical Ballads* was much more haphazard, see Michael Gamer (1999, 93).
50. Some major works on this subject are: Thomas McFarland’s *The Symbiosis of Coleridge and Wordsworth* (1972); Lucy Newlyn’s *Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Language of Allusion* (1986); Paul Magnusson’s *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (1988); Gene W Ruoff’s *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Making of Major Lyrics* (1989); Richard E Matlak, *The Poetry of Relationship* (1997). (Nicholas Roe) (1988, 232), also particularly points out the crossover in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s theories of imagination during 1795–1797.
51. James H Averill (1976) argues that Wordsworth used *Zoonomia* for many poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. Similarly Richard Matlak (1990) has shown *Lyrical Ballads* owes its inner-body imagery to Darwin’s bio-medical understanding of

a "physiologically-based mental system in *Zoonomia*". In a related perspective, Gavin Budge (2013, 53) argues that Wordsworth's poetry and poetic theory c.1798–1805 engages with Darwin's medical philosophy and adopts some ideas, but chiefly rejects Darwin's overall intellectual position.

52. This refers specifically to "Goody Blake", but it is part of a larger justification for the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, which includes "The Thorn".
53. The prophetess Deborah promises Barak that she will deliver his enemy, Sisera, through a woman. This prophecy is fulfilled when the woman Jael murders Sisera with a hammer and tent peg.
54. My thanks to Judith Hawley for pointing out this possibility.
55. Adela Pinch (1996) also describes this technique in her analysis of Goody Blake.
56. Mitzi Myers (1987) has argued that the refashioning of motherhood redefined female roles (at least in middle and upper classes) in terms of pedagogical and maternal power and helped women writers to establish a more authoritative public voice. Alan Richardson has contested Myers' view and states that women writers who cast themselves as maternal figures were pursued by the idea that they were "potentially dangerous strongholds of the irrational" (1994, 169). This dichotomy is a continuation of the tension between stereotypes of the mother who wielded a powerful imagination and the fragile pregnant female assailed by her uncontrollable passions.

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Romantic Imagination and Maternal Guilt in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

At a place called Grasly in Nottinghamshire, three miles from the town of Nottingham about the latter end of April, this year of our Lord one thousand six hundred sixty and eight. A certain woman an inhabitant of that place fell in travail and after three days space of time, (in which interim she endured great torments and excessive pangs not to be uttered and can only be expressed by imagination) at last she was delivered of a strange and uncouth monster [...]

First its head was long and sharp, proportioned after the fashion of a sugar loaf [...]

In the second place it had no nose at all [...]

The third circumstance wherein it was remarkable, was that it had eyes like a fish, nothing comparable to those of other children.

It had eight fingers upon its hand [...]

It had two ears long and ponderous, hanging down like the ears of a hound.

And lastly, all along down the back of it was long black hair quite contrary to human nature (*Strange Monster* 1668, 2–3).

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. [...]

His limbs were in proportion and I had selected his limbs as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more

horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight, black lips. (Shelley 1818, 86)¹

The first extract above is taken from an anonymous seventeenth-century booklet entitled *The Strange Monster* (1668) reporting the recent birth of a congenitally deformed child. Although no direct mention is made of the concept of maternal imagination, it is implied that the unusually long and painful labour of the mother – which “can only be expressed by imagination” – is linked to the “monster’s” ugliness. The tone and detail of this melodramatic account is related discursively to reports of maternal imagination, such as *A Declaration of a Strange and Wonderful Monster* (1646) and *Prides Fall, Or A Warning for All English Women* (1700), both of which blame the mother for monstrous births.² The second extract is a well-known passage from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), which describes Victor Frankenstein’s shocked abhorrence on first viewing the result of his experiment to create human life artificially. Taken together, one can clearly see that Shelley’s description assumes the itemised litany of defects recorded in *The Strange Monster*, which is an exemplar format of most early modern publications concerning extraordinary births and the discourse of maternal imagination. This chapter will demonstrate the way that Shelley continually draws on the language, conventions, and legacy of the discourse of maternal imagination throughout *Frankenstein*. Shelley enters into this self-conscious discursivity to critique the concept of maternal imagination and to censure the associated culture of maternal guilt.

The two extracts share a number of intriguing similarities: they both highlight the month of the monster’s arrival, observe the emotional or physical pain of the respective “labour”, and itemise each feature of the monster in detail. Both refer to the “proportions” of the monster in question, and even share an emphasis on fishy, watery eyes, as well as plentiful black hair. The anonymous author of *The Strange Monster* perhaps assumes that his readers will take the explanation of maternal imagination for granted, however Victor Frankenstein explicitly refers to the imaginative gestation of his creature when he remarks on his deliberate selection of the creature’s body parts. Marie-Hélène Huet argues that Victor represents a mother afflicted by maternal imagination as he has chosen features for the creature that should be “beautiful”, but prove to be distorted versions of his original vision (1993, 132).³ I concur with

Huet, as Victor's mistake is clearly the mistake of an overly imaginative mother, who has been captivated by a beautiful image only to transmit that image, in flawed form, to her developing foetus. The lustrous dark hair of Victor's creature echoes the "long black hair" of *The Strange Monster* and evokes a popular history of similarly monstrous and hairy babies. The hair is perhaps even a reference to the ancient story of the hairy woman, born to a mother who became transfixed by a painting of John the Baptist dressed in camel skins. Shelley's initial description of the monster is therefore of key importance, as Victor's immediate response to the "birth" of his child replicates the sensationalistic reports of babies produced by the imagination of the mother. Victor's "maternal" horror and guilt builds to a crushing sense of responsibility, which clearly summons the discourse of maternal imagination. The rest of the novel plays on this discursive link as it calls Victor to account for the offspring of his fevered imagination.

In the extract, Victor's horrified, first-person response to monstrous birth underlines his overwhelming sense of personal responsibility. Whereas the chapbook's mention of the mother's "torment" during labour helps to elicit sympathy for her predicament, Victor's immediate admission of guilt with the declaration "*I had selected his features*" (Shelley 1818, 86, my emphasis) encourages the reader to hold Victor responsible. Despite the chapbook's blatant and morbid fascination, its numbered list of abnormal features creates a more detached perspective, perhaps in order to lend credibility to its claims. Certainly later midwifery guides and medical texts would also attempt to recreate this type of reserve (in spite of the obvious vulgar aspects), particularly following the Mary Toft incident. However, Victor's ghoulish description of his creature's attributes is provided in passionately pejorative terms such as "scarcely covered", "horrid" and "shrivelled", as his guilty conscience emphasises the grotesque elements of his creation. Despite a shared first-person perspective, Victor's sense of self-blame is presented in a more shocking and visceral manner than the female maternal poets of my previous chapter, who conveyed guilt through a recognised – and more culturally acceptable – language of sentimental self-sacrifice. As I will go on to explain, Victor's gender is key to Shelley's singular presentation of maternal guilt.

One can only speculate whether Mary Shelley believed in the doctrine of maternal imagination, although given that she produced the darkly monstrous story of *Frankenstein* during her daughter Clara Everina's gestation, it seems arguable that she did not believe that a mother's imagination could

alter the foetus. Shelley's potential lack of faith in the concept of maternal imagination might even suggest the motivation for her critique in *Frankenstein*, as she condemns a culture of guilt that she may well have viewed as being based on a fallacy. Indeed, the novel's long section on the creature's education at the De Lacey hovel reminds the reader that Shelley was the daughter of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, two staunch advocates of the influence of education over innate character. One cannot help but wonder if Shelley's inclusion of both the effects of Victor's maternal imagination and the effects of the creature's education are an extension of her parents' debate regarding natural and nurtured individuals. Like Anna Barbauld's poetry discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the very suggestion of the concept of maternal imagination alludes to such debate.

I contend that Shelley's appropriation of the discourse of maternal imagination in *Frankenstein* shows her sensitive response to a culture that held the mother directly responsible for unusual births.⁴ My fresh approach to the text relies on my separating out conception and gestation, distinct phases that are sometimes elided in critical analyses of the novel. I argue that Shelley's keen appreciation of the difference between these two phases has been overlooked, despite its centrality to the novel. This final chapter will demonstrate the way that Shelley incorporates traditional lore concerning the theory of maternal imagination that dates to at least the sixteenth century, as well as newer ideas circulating in contemporary discourses of maternity. This sophisticated composite model emphasises the fact that for women of the early nineteenth century, the threat of maternal imagination was more troubling than ever before.

§ *FRANKENSTEIN'S* CRITICAL HISTORY

Many literary scholars have singled out Victor's traumatised description of his gruesome creature in their interpretations of the novel. Graham Allen (2008, 50) has noted the way that Victor psychologically dismembers the creature by focusing on his individual parts, rather than his appearance as a whole. He suggests that this passage symbolises the way that Victor reduces the creature to its physical deformities, rather than viewing him as a conscious being. In a discussion of ugliness in the novel Denise Gigante has similarly suggested that "Victor's description takes the form of what might be called an 'anti-blazon'" as attractive features are "sutured together" with monstrous qualities (2000, 570).⁵ She argues that this is indicative of reality forcibly rejecting Victor's fantasy of artificial

creation, as the creature's flowing hair cannot hide its shrivelled face or gigantic form. David E Musselwhite has suggested that Victor's description shows "the Monster resists, or rather transcends gender designations" (1987, 60); distinguishing the creature's black hair and white teeth as "feminine", and the straight lips and musculature as "masculine" features.

Intriguingly, a critic who directly relates *Frankenstein* to the concept of maternal imagination neglects to examine the discursive significance of Victor's initial depiction of his creature. Alan Bewell's article "An Issue of Monstrous Desire: *Frankenstein* and Obstetrics" (1988) argues persuasively that Shelley appropriated the model of maternal imagination to justify the production of her own imaginative and monstrous text. Bewell closely links antenatal care to the novel and proposes the feminist argument that maternal imagination is an active, passionate force that confers power on the pregnant woman. However, this line of argument seems more fitted to the purposeful and shrewd use of maternal imagination in fiction of the mid-eighteenth century, as I have detailed in [Chapter 3](#). My approach is closer to Marie-Hélène Huet's seminal work on monstrosity and maternal imagination. In her fascinating chapter on *Frankenstein* and the erasure of the father, Huet carefully traces the significance of maternal imagination in Shelley's novel. She argues that the creature is Victor's flawed attempt to recreate his mother's image. Discussing the above quotation of Victor's first reaction to his creature she explains:

Frankenstein has thus produced the *eikastiken* [mimetic] art of the monstrous mother, that is, art without interpretation, without proportion or the necessary betrayal of the model that makes *phantastiken* [creative] object unfaithful to nature but at the same time aesthetically beautiful. (132)⁶

In other words, Victor's maternal imagination has caused his experiment to go horribly wrong. Huet's logic is compelling and of key importance for my own argument which concentrates on the cultural consequences of maternal imagination for the mother. My approach differs from both Bewell and Huet, as I argue that *Frankenstein* is an exploration of the guilt complex inherent in the discourse of maternal imagination. Although Victor is a man and technically the creature's "father", Shelley attributes to his character nineteenth-century maternal qualities such as disordered passions, weakness, and guilt. I suggest that Victor's emotional sufferings invite the reader to evaluate a cultural attitude that condemns

the psychosomatic power of maternal imagination, even as it celebrates the male, poetic imagination. While Victor and his creature primarily represent a mother and child, the entire novel enters into the discourse of maternal imagination to critique a cultural legacy of maternal culpability.

My method borrows elements of feminist criticism, which, when applied to *Frankenstein*, has often drawn heavily on Shelley's family history.⁷ Biographical readings of the novel have been well established since Ellen Moers' essay "Female Gothic" in 1976 connected the novel to Shelley's own experiences of pregnancy.⁸ Moers' essay claimed that "*Frankenstein* is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination, I am convinced, by the fact that she was herself a mother" (90).⁹ Whereas Moers argued that the novel explores dread, fear and anxiety as previously unacknowledged maternal responses to birth, I view Victor's guilty "maternal" reaction as a specific engagement with the discourse of maternal imagination. It is tempting to align Victor's self-reproach with Mary Shelley's tragic connections with maternal mortality, illegitimate pregnancy, and neonatal death. Shelley scholars such as Anne K Mellor (1988) have since analysed the case of Shelley's premature daughter, who was born on 22nd February (1815), only to die twelve days later. As Moers' essay earlier implied, it is likely that Shelley's daughter would have possessed the features common to premature babies, such as jaundiced eyes and skin, which are included in her later descriptions of Frankenstein's creature.¹⁰ Shelley's journal entry a week after her daughter's death stoically remarked on her "foolish" tendency to grieve over the death of her first child:

S. [helley] H.[ogg] & C. [laire Clairmont] go to town – stay at home net [sew] and think of my little dead baby – this is foolish I suppose yet whenever I am alone to my own thoughts & do not read to divert them they always come back to the same point – that I was a mother and am so no longer. (1815, I: 69)

Shelley's grief is poignant, yet repressive. Her attempt to censor or belittle her anguish with the use of the word "foolish" even suggests a criticism of her indulgence in staying at home to mourn, instead of going out with the others. This story of repression and private grief is mirrored throughout *Frankenstein*, as Victor feels unable to share his fear, guilt or sorrow with any member of his social or familial circle.

Critics such as William D Brewer, Elisabeth Bronfen and U C Knoepfmacher have investigated Shelley's attitude towards her distant father, the death of her mother in childbirth, a life-threatening miscarriage, and at least four other pregnancies.¹¹ It is certainly possible that Shelley's experiences of pregnancy informed her contribution to the discourse of maternal imagination. Many critics note the reproductive language Shelley employed in the "Introduction" to the 1831 edition, as she refers to the novel as "my hideous progeny" and "the offspring of happier days" (1831a, 10).¹² Although of course pregnancy has always proved to be a period of anxiety, whether for the mother, foetus, or both; early nineteenth-century medical, social and political pressure reached new heights. As Chapter 5 has illustrated, the fin de siècle fermented anxiety surrounding pregnancy and motherhood, which was almost always accompanied by the treacherous threat of maternal passion.

Shelley was undoubtedly very familiar with the theory of maternal imagination as monstrous births still fascinated the public; Percy Shelley was certainly interested enough to record "a woman supposed to be the daughter of the Duke of Montrose who has the head of a hog" (1814, 54). She had also read Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Darwin's theory of paternal imagination in *Zoonomia*.¹³ As a young woman who was almost constantly pregnant from the ages of sixteen to twenty-three, it is likely that she was well versed in cultural beliefs regarding the notion of maternal imagination. Although her journals do not mention any pregnancy literature, given Shelley's voracious appetite for reading, she may also have perused advice on pregnancy and lying in.

The following section will argue that *Frankenstein* voices the idea that the cultural guilt increasingly attached to the theory of maternal imagination was unfair. Ultimately Victor cannot share his anguish with anyone because he knows that they will blame him for the creation of the creature, in the same way that Shelley felt "foolish" for mourning the sickly infant that popular and medical opinion would blame her for producing. Although Victor attempts to abdicate responsibility for his creation, as the sole parent, Victor is forced to assume the blame that was typically assigned to the woman's maternal imagination.

§ VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S MATERNITY

The fact that Victor is male arguably serves to highlight his curiously maternal role, as he carefully nurtures and protects his child until he is able to bring it forth into the world. Victor's gender has been an issue for

many, particularly feminist, approaches to the novel, which tend to focus on his character as the embodiment of male Promethean arrogance, Romantic egotism, and the usurpation of the female.¹⁴ However, the ambiguous boundary between the representation of Victor's experiment and actual sexual reproduction complicates these readings. Victor Frankenstein effectively becomes a mother when he nurtures a developing being of his own creation, and then brings it into the world alive. His "pregnancy" is also indicated by cultural factors, such as a physical decline into the nervous state that was believed to designate a healthy foetus.¹⁵ Thus Victor's statement that "my person had become emaciated with confinement" (83) is loaded with connotations of the expectant mother, physically drained by the baby and enduring the traditional "confinement" of the ninth month of pregnancy. Shelley emphasises the shift from Victor's usually robust frame to a vulnerable and nervous body; Victor claims that "every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree; a disease that I regretted the more because I had hitherto enjoyed the most excellent health, and always boasted of the firmness of my nerves" (89). Victor's painful nervousness evokes the "irritability" contemporary obstetricians linked to pregnant women. In *A Cultural History of Pregnancy 1750–2000*, Clare Hanson explains that "the physiological changes which take place in pregnancy were understood at this time primarily in terms of 'irritability', a term which, when applied to the organs of the body, denoted an excessively or morbidly excitable condition" (2004, 23–24).

Presenting Victor as pregnant fundamentally alters Shelley's depiction of Victor's passion and uncontrolled imagination during this period of the creature's construction. As discussed in my previous chapter, passion and imagination are encouraged in Romantic ideology as marks of genius, however in a pregnant woman these same faculties are stigmatised as extremely dangerous. Victor's obsession with creating life, his "resistless, and almost frantic impulse" (83), is therefore not a laudable Romantic quest for discovery, but the indulgence of a violent passion that can only end in a deformed or dead foetus. Ignorant of the consequences, Victor allows his imagination to dominate his actions. As Victor states, "I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my *imagination*" (84, my italics).¹⁶ Bewell comments on this statement of Victor's unrestrained imagination and relates it to the novel's portrayal of literary imagination, as well as its discursive links to unregulated passion in pregnant women.

I argue that as an indulged Romantic egotist, Victor is unused to repressing his emotions – tellingly he finds the impulse to continue “resistless” – and only discovers after his “pregnancy” that rampant imagination and passion is doomed to produce a “miserable monster” (86–87). After he realises that his imagination has created a monster, Victor acknowledges his former carelessness and declares “I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed” (121). He belatedly understands that “a human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity” (84). This echoes the advice provided in midwifery guides such as John Grigg’s *Advice to the Female Sex in general, Particularly those in a State of Pregnancy or Lying In* (1789), which warns against “incautiously disturb[ing] the minds of persons in a state of pregnancy or lying in” (104), as this could imperil the lives of both mother and child. Bewell has observed this parallel between Victor’s remark and the advice of many midwifery and female health guides, which stressed the importance of regulating minds and bodies during pregnancy. He explains, “where normally a woman’s behavior was guided by moral, religious, familial, and economic restraints, pregnant women found themselves – then, as now – the subject of intensive medical scrutiny and advice” (1988, 107). However, while Bewell notes the similarities between Victor’s consuming passion and the notion of maternal imagination, he does not comment on the related significance of Victor’s intense emotional turmoil *after* the creature has been “born”. The novel emphasises the guilt and self-loathing experienced by Victor after he has created his creature. He explains, “I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe” (119).¹⁷ Shelley dwells insistently on Victor’s pain; from the moment of the creature’s awakening Victor experiences “the bitterness of disappointment” (87), falls prey to grief and fear until “remorse extinguished every hope” (121), and eventually becomes fatally possessed by self-destructive revenge. These painful emotions are all rooted in Victor’s guilt complex, as he realises after the event that his untamed imagination has unleashed an abnormal child on the world. Victor’s sufferings – whether the reader sympathises with them or not – hold the narrative together, from Walton’s initial description of an emaciated traveller, to Victor’s tale of horror, to the interpolated story of the creature’s sufferings, which both result from and cause Victor’s torment.

§ CONCEPTION, GESTATION AND REPRESSION: THE EXPERIENCE OF MATERNAL IMAGINATION

In modern popular culture the Frankenstein myth has become associated with the moment of birth and the first signs of monstrous life, usually with the sudden twitching of a stitched-on hand.¹⁸ The conception, gestation and birth of the creature are thus blurred together in the popular imagination. This is in sharp contrast to Shelley's division of Victor's metaphorical "pregnancy" and her emphasis on the construction – or "gestation" – of the creature.

Even critical analyses of the novel sometimes elide the distinct phases of conception and gestation. For example when Mellor claims that Mary Shelley was mortified by her inability to think of a story because she "identified the inability to conceive a story with a woman's inability to conceive a child" (1998, 54), she merges the moment of conception with the nine months of pregnancy.¹⁹ Mary Shelley had three times proved she was perfectly capable of *conceiving* a child before finishing *Frankenstein* in May 1817, however at that stage in her life she had only experienced one successful full term pregnancy.²⁰ In fact Shelley used the difference between conception and gestation as a metaphor for the creative process. She described how her role in the writing of *Frankenstein* was to mould the rough materials already presented to her, and explained:

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (1831, 8)

This description tallies with the reproductive roles for men and women in sex manuals such as *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, as well as older sources that are studied by Victor Frankenstein such as Paracelsus (Hartman 1993, 65–67). Men provided the "substance", that is, the creation of life; while women spent the months of pregnancy nurturing and shaping the substance until it was ready to be born. Victor Frankenstein is careful to distinguish between these separate processes; at first he boasts that "I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (81). Creating life is in fact Victor's prerogative as a man – as we saw in [Chapter 3](#), men were believed to initiate new life at the point of conception. (In fact Paracelsus declared

that a woman was not at all necessary for human reproduction, and claimed that a womb could be substituted for a sealed glass filled with horse manure (Tuana 1983, 147)). However, after some hesitation, Victor also adopts the female reproductive role by putting the materials together to *shape* life, as if he was a mother gestating the foetus. Punning on the difference between conception and gestation, Victor remembers that “although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it, with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles and veins, still remained a work of *inconceivable* difficulty” (82, my italics).

Shelley returns to this critical separation in the 1831 Introduction, when she describes Percy Shelley’s involvement in the novel. Shelley explains that “I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling to my husband, and yet but for his incitement it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world” (1831a, 10). This gendered distinction returns the reader to the roles of sexual reproduction as Percy incited or conceived the story’s possibility, but Mary shaped and developed its final form.

It is therefore important to emphasise that *Frankenstein* does not concentrate on the traditional male role of initiating life, but on the consequences of an unrestrained imagination during pregnancy. Victor’s emotional torment is repeatedly shown to originate in his thoughtless actions both during the creation and subsequent abandonment of the creature. He is guilty of indulging his imagination and passions, without considering the effect this will have on his child. In this respect, Shelley contributes to a long tradition of guilty mothers who regret their actions; such as the didactic examples of sentimental and Gothic literature, and the women who write poems to their embryonic, newborn or deceased children described in Chapter 5. Of course throughout eighteenth-century discourse on maternal imagination there exists a prevailing anxiety about pregnancy and who (or what) might be to blame for any problems or anomalies. Due to the multiple narrators and ambiguous conclusion of *Frankenstein* the reader is invited to judge the extent of Victor’s guilt, by determining how far a mother could – or should – control her imagination.

Differences between the original 1818 text and Shelley’s revised 1831 edition emphasise Shelley’s interest in this question. The alterations to the 1831 edition are largely to Victor’s childhood, and build a fuller picture of his young parents and Elizabeth Lavenza. In this later edition Victor’s mother, Caroline Beaufort, is treated with extra care and attention after

her father's death and rescue from poverty. Immediately after her marriage to Alphonse Frankenstein – and during the most obvious period to expect the conception and gestation of a child – Caroline is indulged with an extended holiday in Italy, Germany and France. Victor relates that “everything was made to yield to her wishes and her convenience . . . to surround her with all that could tend to excite pleasurable emotion in her soft and benevolent mind” (1831b, 35). Victor is born in Naples during this period and he emphasises that he was a happy child because born to happy parents; “I was their plaything and their idol, and something better – their child” (1831b, 35). The message is clear: under Alphonse's care, Caroline's “soft” pregnant mind was given only “pleasurable emotion” and therefore she produced a happy, emotive child. Victor's revised origin story draws new attention to the possibility that pregnant women are not entirely in control of their imaginations and require aid from their families, and particularly their husbands, to help prevent any accidents. Interestingly in the most recent cinematic version of the story, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* directed by Kenneth Branagh (1994), Caroline Beaufort dies in childbirth after breaking maternal imagination guidelines.²¹ Heavily pregnant with William, Caroline dances energetically with Victor, while Madame Moritz refers to maternal imagination by remarking that the baby will now be fond of dancing. Adhering to the novel's attitude to maternal imagination, if not the novel's plot, Branagh's film portrays Caroline's pregnant mind and body as too “soft” for this exertion. The dance causes a disastrously early labour, leading Caroline to sacrifice her life to save the child's.

In both versions of Shelley's novel, when Caroline contracts smallpox, her dying wish resembles the sentiments expressed by anxious pregnant women writing to their unborn children. She asks Elizabeth, her adopted daughter, to assume the maternal role for the household and comfort the family after her death; “Elizabeth, my love, you must supply my place to your younger cousins” (72). Dutiful Elizabeth takes this role extremely seriously, as the reader discovers when she believes she is responsible for little William's death, “O God! I have murdered my darling infant!” (100). She makes this exclamation when she recalls that she allowed William to wear a valuable miniature of his mother, and believes it to have been the motivation for the murder. Eventually the reader learns that this was not the case, as it was in fact William's claim to the name of Frankenstein that provoked Victor's creature to strangle the child. Yet even before this information is provided, Elizabeth's words dramatically

overstate any possible role she may have played in William's death. In neither scenario is Elizabeth accountable – she is obviously not to blame either for an opportunistic thief or the rage-fuelled violence of the creature – yet as the maternal figure she is automatically required to assume responsibility for the child. William is not “her” infant, and she has clearly not “murdered” him, but her guilty words depict a specific maternal culpability, despite her powerlessness. (Significantly Alphonse, the child's father, expresses sorrow rather than guilt over William's murder.) Elizabeth's exaggerated perception of her guilt perhaps carries echoes of the mother accused of destroying her child through her wayward maternal imagination.

Victor, more justifiably, feels increasingly guilty about William's death, but for various reasons tries to hide and repress his emotions. He is far less successful than the female characters of *Frankenstein*, who work hard to repress their unruly feminine emotions. When Elizabeth inherits Caroline's maternal role, she represses her sadness to support the rest of the family – Victor claims that “since the death of her aunt, her mind had acquired new firmness and vigour” (73). Significantly Victor comments that “I never beheld her so enchanting as at this time, when she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself” (73). Victor also remarks on Justine's fortitude in more extreme circumstances, when she is unfairly sentenced to death; “Justine assumed an air of cheerfulness, while she with difficulty repressed her bitter tears” (116). Notably both women repress their feelings specifically to save Victor any distress, whereas his later efforts to hide his own sufferings are unsuccessful.

Before the construction of the creature Victor is heedless of how his emotions are perceived. The reader is aware that Victor wears his heart on his sleeve as M. Krempe teases him about his archaic studies, often asking Victor “with a sly smile, how Cornelius Agrippa went on?” (79). This malicious joke is the result of Victor's very first conversation with Krempe, when he revealed that his knowledge of natural philosophy was restricted to, what Krempe termed “exploded systems, and useless names” (75). The fact that this joke continues for two years implies that Victor reacts strongly to Krempe's remarks. However, after the creature awakes, Victor suddenly understands the necessity of controlling extreme emotion; he immediately tries to suppress his horror by going to sleep. He goes on to deny his feelings of distress and guilt by hiding the nature of his experiment from his best friend Henry Clerval,

and keeping the existence of the creature a secret, even when Justine's life depends upon it. His emotions, unused to being contained, erupt in violent fevers and illnesses.²² After the deaths of William and Justine, Victor describes his attempts to disguise his suffering, but his misery is easily detected by his father, who "endeavoured to reason with me on the folly of giving way to immediate grief" (119). Unable to adequately repress his remorse, Victor remembers that "I could only answer my father with a look of despair, and endeavour to hide myself from his view" (120). Victor's failure to curb his extreme emotions is a pointed critique of his earlier carelessness during his "pregnancy", but also represents the impossibility of truly suppressing intense emotions such as grief or guilt. Shelley shows such devastating emotions to consume the individual, who has no choice but to endure. As a maternal figure, Victor portrays the pregnant woman's tripled distress; he writhes under painful emotions, struggles to repress them, and then feels remorse for experiencing them at all, in an endless cycle of maternal guilt. Eventually Victor realises the importance of at least *appearing* emotionless, even when he is physically unwell. When he is suspected of Henry Clerval's murder he relates that, "I was ready to sink from fatigue and hunger; but, being surrounded by a crowd, I thought it politic to rouse all my strength, that no physical debility might be construed into apprehension or conscious guilt" (200). By the time he actually learns of Clerval's death, Victor damages his mind in order to repress his anguish; "by the utmost self-violence, I curbed the imperious voice of wretchedness, which sometimes desired to declare itself to the whole world" (211). Shelley's choice of the word "self-violence" suggests that emotions perhaps should not be repressed as they could destabilise a person's mind – a possibility that is further suggested by Walton's initial depiction of Victor as an unhinged wanderer whose "eyes have an expression of wildness, and even madness" (58). This is important if we read Victor as a maternal figure, as the misery he suffers on account of his abnormal "child" is vastly increased by a circular self-torture of guilt and repressed guilt. Consequently, although Victor's treatment of his emotions is back-to-front for a theory of maternal imagination (he should have controlled his emotions during pregnancy, not afterwards), his intense psychological turmoil suggests that passion and emotion are impossible to restrain.²³ Victor's lack of success implies that if he – a rational, intelligent and gifted male – cannot control his passions, a fragile pregnant woman is helpless when in the grip of a disordered imagination.

§ THE CREATURE

If Victor represents the maternal victim of misdirected blame in cases of maternal imagination, then it would follow that his creature represents the deformed or dead child of such cases. Certainly the creature is repeatedly described as monstrous and malformed; in an analysis of the creature's ugliness Denise Gigante observes that "he not only fails to please, he emphatically displeases" (2000, 566). The creature is also technically born "dead" as his body is comprised of body parts stolen from corpses. These links to the monstrous and the dead connect Victor's creature to the deformed and stillborn children of maternal imagination. Furthermore, like the innocent foetus marked by its mother's imagination, the creature is not to blame for its monstrous appearance.

The creature's innocent and benevolent state of mind at the point of his awakening prompts questions regarding the nature of deformity. There is some debate regarding perception of the relationship between deformity and character during this period. Philip K Wilson's article "Eighteenth-Century 'Monsters' and Nineteenth-Century 'Freaks': Reading the Maternally Marked Child" (2002) argues that in eighteenth-century medical and popular texts, blemishes were not viewed as an indication of the person's character, but in the nineteenth century deformity came to be seen as a reflection of the evil within. On the other hand, Simon Dickie has noted that eighteenth-century "novelists were beginning to experiment with idealized deformed characters, whose deformity became a mark of virtue" (2011, 89) and cites characters such as Henry Fielding's Amelia (*Amelia* 1751), Sarah Scott's Harriot Trentham (*Millenium Hall* 1762) and Burney's Eugenia (*Camilla* 1796). *Frankenstein* seems to adhere to the trend Dickie observes, as although all humans receive the creature as a hideous demon, Shelley stresses his innate virtue and benevolence.

Shelley continues to draw parallels between a maternally marked baby and the creature as the novel progresses. Marie-Hélène Huet has argued that the creature is an uncontrolled, flawed reproduction and reflection of Victor's desires, in a close replica of maternal imagination. She suggests that Victor harbours a forbidden passion for his dead mother, and this monstrous desire is discovered through the hideous form of the creature, Victor's dream of Elizabeth transforming into the corpse of his mother, and Elizabeth's death. Although my reading of the creature differs from Huet's in several ways, it seems clear that the creature shares many similarities with a child affected by maternal imagination. Early in the

creature's interpolated narrative Shelley places him in a dark hovel, in which he must curl his eight-foot frame awkwardly to fit inside. Imagining the creature crouched into a forced fetal position, it is easy to agree with Mary Poovey's description of the creature's shelter as a "womb-like hovel" (1980, 337).²⁴ This parallel between the creature and a foetus is further developed as Shelley allows the creature to share the emotions of the inhabitants of the larger building to which his hovel is annexed. The creature inside the "womb" is linked to the De Lacey family who dwell in the "mother" building, as he peers through a chink in the wall. In a model of maternal passion, where the baby shares the mother's emotions, the creature feels what the De Laceys feel; as he recalls, "when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys" (140). Shelley later describes the creature as "an abortion"; a term that carried a slightly different meaning to modern usage. When the creature declares that "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on" (245), he uses the word "abortion" as synonymous for miscarriage, rather than a deliberate termination.²⁵ This language further connects the creature to the abnormal offspring of maternal imagination, as maternal passion was believed to be a contributing factor in cases of miscarriage.

Of course the creature is more than a distorted imprint of Victor's maternal passion or longing, and critics have claimed his symbolic significance for a range of issues.²⁶ Most relevant to my own enquiry, are approaches to the novel that view the creature as the embodiment of imagination, such as Irving Massey's assertion that "the monster is the imagination" (1976, 129), as well as perspectives that read the monster in more than one way. For example Mary Poovey has advocated the idea that the creature is a projection of the monstrous, self-assertive female artist, but also acknowledges that he is "a symbolic projection of Frankenstein's imagination" (1980, 337). This section of the chapter suggests that the creature not only represents a maternally marked child, but also embodies the very power of maternal imagination itself. As Victor realises much too late, the creature acts as the incarnate force of his own maternal imagination, leaving blemishes and death on the objects of Victor's love and attention.

Firstly, it is important to identify which types of imagination Shelley employs in the novel. Her use of the word is liberal and ranges from associations with ambition, to fancy, fear and insanity.²⁷ In the 1831 Introduction the psychosomatic connotations of literary imagination are invoked in Shelley's search for a suitable ghost story; as she explains, she wanted "one

which would speak to awaken the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart” (1831a, 8). However, it is the moment that Victor first catches a glimpse of the creature, on the outskirts of Geneva during a storm, which alerts the reader to Shelley’s depiction of a dangerous and corporeal imagination. Victor only has to *imagine* that the creature has murdered his brother, before his body is dramatically affected by the idea; “no sooner did that idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth; my teeth chattered, and I was forced to lean against a tree for support” (104).²⁸ Shelley’s portrayal of imagination here is closely linked to the psychosomatic power of maternal imagination, one of the unpredictable forms of imagination featured in *Lyrical Ballads*. Victor’s teeth even chatter with the force of his frightful imagination, just like Wordsworth’s character Harry Gill whose teeth “chatter, chatter, chatter still”, after his imagination becomes possessed by the curse of Goody Blake (1798, 37–40, line 4). Shelley emphasises imagination’s corporealising strength when Victor claims that he only had to imagine the creature responsible to make the idea “true”. Victor exclaims that “he [the creature] was the murderer! I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact” (104). Although the uncanny aspects of the literary imagination are also invoked at this point in the novel, there are also strong overtones of the parental bond when Victor describes “the filthy daemon *to whom I had given life*” (104, my emphasis). His recognition of the creature and the physiological effect this revelation has on his imagination is therefore connected to both notions of Romantic and maternal imagination.

Shelley consistently associates the creature with the ability to create physical marks. In an allusion to the notion of maternal dreams, Victor has a prophetic nightmare the night that he bestows life on the creature. This dream is couched in the language of maternal imprinting and death. Victor rushes to greet Elizabeth:

I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms.(86)

In the dream, Victor’s eager passion marks Elizabeth with “the hue of death” and, like the foetus of an imaginative mother, “her features appeared to change”. This dream contains the first suggestion that Victor’s imagination

is capable of corporeal powers, although his love only results in deformity and death. The fact that Victor experiences this dream on the night of the creature's awakening also indicates that the creature is somehow connected to the extremes of Victor's imagination and passion.²⁹ As if to stress this point, once the creature has awoken, Victor becomes much more wary of his ability to create or imprint. Elizabeth and Clerval both ask for letters in Victor's own handwriting, but he is clearly reluctant to once again unite his thoughts with physical marks.³⁰

Later Victor knows the creature is responsible for various murders through his *modus operandi* of strangulation, which leaves his signature black marks on the victim's neck. Shelley is careful to repeat this detail for each murder, starting when Alphonse Frankenstein discovers his son "stretched on the grass livid and motionless: the print of the murderer's finger was on his neck" (100). At the time of the murder William had been wearing a miniature of his mother around his neck, however the gruesome evidence of the creature's unforgiving hands has replaced this maternal mark. This substitution of beauty for blemish, further suggests that the creature is the living embodiment of Victor's uncontrolled maternal imagination. Like the mother afflicted by maternal imagination, Victor – through the creature – has obliterated any other influence on the child's development, by replacing natural parental influence with distortion and death. The pattern is repeated as the creature seeks to destroy any person loved by Victor. After William, Clerval is the creature's next victim and again, is literally marked with creature's touch: "he had apparently been strangled; for there was no sign of any violence, except the black mark of fingers on his neck" (201). The creature's mark is also discovered on Elizabeth Lavenza's dead body, after her screams bring Victor rushing to her bed. He reveals that "the murderous mark of the fiend's grasp was on her neck, and the breath had ceased to issue from her lips" (220), which connects the physical marks on Elizabeth's body to the other bodies touched by the creature. Elizabeth's death is perhaps most strongly linked to the model of maternal imagination; like a mother who feels physical pain before the foetus has miscarried, Victor *feels* Elizabeth's death before he receives visual evidence that she has been murdered. He recalls that "my arms dropped, the motion of every muscle and fibre was suspended; I could feel the blood trickling in my veins, and tingling in the extremities of my limbs" (220). Although the black marks are evidence of murder, these fingerprints are also closely linked to Victor's state of mind, in the manner of the typical birthmarks of maternal imagination. The black

hand-prints are linked figuratively to Victor's increasing realisation that the murders are his fault because they are the accidental by-product of his own actions. Initially Victor is delighted that "so astonishing a power [to create life was] placed in my hands" (82), however he later repeats his regret that such a monster is "the work of my own hands" (105, 172). When building the female creature he declares that "my heart often sickened at the work of my hands" (191) and later curses the creature with the exclamation "Cursed (although I curse myself) be the hands that formed you!" (129). As if to emphasise the association, the creature places his monstrous hands in front of Victor's eyes, to scornfully spare him the grotesque sight of his own creation and declares "Thus I relieve thee, my creator" (129). However, the sight of the creature's "hated hands" (129) only seems to enrage Victor further, perhaps because he is reminded of his accountability in choosing and assembling the creature's body parts together in the first place. This stress on Victor's association with his own hands and the creature manifests another link between Victor's mind and the corpses of his friends; gruesomely stamped with handprints, the marks identify his belief that "they all died by my hands" (210).

Of course William, Henry Clerval and Elizabeth are not foetuses, any more than Victor is a pregnant woman. Yet all three victims who are physically marked by the creature are infantilised, in the same way that Victor's character is consistently portrayed as maternal. Shelley begins the string of murders with the death of the child William, erasing previous parental influence and linking the creature to the destruction of early life. Henry Clerval is a fully-grown adult, yet his fondness for stories and imagination, his ignorance of the creature, and his innocent delight in novelty during the trip to England suggests an infantilisation of his character – particularly in contrast with Victor's increasingly despondent worldliness.³¹ This presentation also applies to Elizabeth, who remains childishly innocent and pure, despite her attempts to acquire maternal or marital gravitas. These infant-like victims are the most vulnerable to Victor's rogue imagination, which is why, unlike Justine or Alphonse Frankenstein, they are directly marked and murdered by the creature.

Victor's unfailing surprise at the discovery of each murder is intriguing. Despite a reasonably recognisable pattern of black marks of strangulation on his loved ones, he never identifies the creature's logic. Each murder is preceded by Victor's attempt to hide or run from the creature, in an attempt to suppress or deny the creature's very existence. William is killed after Victor abandons the creature after its awakening, Henry Clerval is

discovered after Victor sails away from the creature in Scotland, and Elizabeth Lavenza is murdered during Victor's fruitless search for the creature in the wrong place. Victor's failed efforts to outrun the creature could be an analogy for a pregnant woman who attempts to suppress or hide from her maternal passion. Although she might try to repress or avoid her maternal imagination, it always catches up with the foetus in her belly – or in Victor's case, with William, Clerval and Elizabeth. In fact Victor's mistaken belief that the creature is hunting himself, rather than Elizabeth, perhaps extends this analogy. Believing himself to be at risk, Victor is like a pregnant woman who fears for her own safety, rather than concerning herself with the foetus. Consequently Victor never recognises the real victims of imagination, until they are marked and it is too late.

With no one left to kill but Victor himself, the creature leaves further taunting marks in the form of messages on tree barks. Scoffing words such as “my reign is not yet over” (228) underscore the fact that Victor has absolutely no control over this creature, which represents his destructive maternal imagination. Curiously the creature provides him with food and aid on their journey to the Arctic, although Victor prefers to believe that the food he receives is the work of kind spirits. However, one wonders whether leaving Victor the gift of a hare is a further taunt on the part of the creature, as the most common superstition associated with maternal imagination was the belief that a pregnant woman who ate a hare, would give birth to a child with a hare-lip.³²

The final piece of evidence that suggests the creature is maternal imagination incarnate is the fact that the creature brings physical change and death to Victor himself. In 1976 George Levine maintained that “almost every critic of *Frankenstein* has noted that Victor and his Monster are doubles” (14) and this statement still applies to modern studies of the text. However, it is perhaps more accurate to claim that the creature deliberately shapes Victor's appearance and actions. Mentally crippled by the creature's vengeance, Victor gnashes his teeth (58) and becomes possessed by the ruling passion of revenge. The monster has also indirectly marked Victor's physical appearance, as the reader learns when Walton initially rescues him from the ice, “his body [was] dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering” (58). These elements render Victor akin to his creation in a similar inversion of the model of maternal imagination to Wordsworth's supernatural representation in “The Thorn”. Ignored by his maker, the creature abuses the power of imagination and indiscriminately harms those around him.

§ FRANKENSTEIN AND THE DISCOURSE OF MATERNAL IMAGINATION

I have so far argued that *Frankenstein's* two main protagonists participate intensely in the discourse of maternal imagination; Victor is the guilt-ridden mother of an abnormal child, whereas the creature alternates between representations of an innocent monster offspring and a hellish incarnation of maternal imagination itself. This interpretation of the text is supported by the frequent discursive links to maternal imagination that pervade the narrative.

The very subtitle of the novel, *The Modern Prometheus*, refers to the shaping of human beings. In Ovidian myth, Prometheus created man from a pliable mixture of fire, mud, divine energy and water, thus moulding him into the shape of the gods. As John Dryden's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* explains:

Whether with particles of Heav'nly Fire
The God of Nature did his Soul Inspire;
Or Earth, but new divided from the Skie,
And, pliant, still, retain'd th' Æthereal Energy:
Which Wise Prometheus temper'd into paste,
And mixt with living Streams, the Godlike Image cast.
Thus, while the mute Creation downward bend
Their Sight, and to their Earthy Mother tend,
Man looks aloft; and with erected Eyes
Beholds his own Hereditary Skies.
From such rude Principles our Form began,
And Earth was Metamorphos'd into Man (1717, lines 101–112).

Ovid's account of man's creation creates the impression that humans were initially of a "pliant", supple form as Prometheus cast his image from "paste". The subtitle therefore contains the idea that man is a malleable creature and can be shaped and altered. On the other hand, the myth offers an alternative explanation to the concept of maternal imagination, as it suggests that woman plays no part in the shaping of new life. The subtitle therefore operates as a paradoxical reminder and disclaimer of the conventional notion of maternal imagination, which is mirrored throughout the content of the novel.

The simultaneous expectation and dismissal of the idea of maternal imagination can also be found in the young Victor Frankenstein's keen

interest in the work of Pliny, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. Huet has commented on Victor's interest in these writings, which contain various theories of monstrosity and generation, in support of Shelley's exploration of the theory of maternal imagination in the novel (1993, 131). However, as Monsieur Krempe points out, these "useless names" (75) and their theories were greatly outmoded.

Frankenstein also employs the incident of Justine's wrongful accusation to explore the cultural implications of maternal imagination. The chief "proof" of her guilt is the miniature of William's mother found upon her person. This maternal marker associates Justine both with the vulnerability and innocence of a deformed infant, as well as the undeserved guilt of an imaginative mother. She is overwhelmed by circumstantial evidence, but like the mother affected by maternal imagination, she can only rely upon "the character I have always borne" (110). Josephine McDonagh has argued that during the Romantic period, character was beginning to take precedence over physiological evidence in maternal matters such as infanticide. She cites William Hunter's influential text, *Uncertainty of Signs of Death in a New Born* (1784), which recommended that judges enquire into the infanticide suspect's moral character and background, rather than concentrating on physical evidence.³³ Until her accusation, the reader knows little of Justine, however Shelley carefully stresses that Justine is Caroline Frankenstein's substitute as Elizabeth mentions that "her mien and her expressions continually remind me of my dear aunt" (95). Justine is therefore a maternal figure in the Frankenstein household; Elizabeth describes how Justine particularly loved William and "acted towards him like a most affectionate mother" (112). When Justine is wrongfully blamed for the disfigurement and death of "her" child, Shelley seems to invoke the injustice of the theory of maternal imagination. Justine's false confession is also significant as she demonstrates that social, religious and cultural pressure can manipulate a grief-stricken and vulnerable woman into believing herself guilty, even if she is innocent.

Other incidents in the novel figure in the discourse of maternal imagination, with references to events and texts discussed earlier in this book. As Victor famously observes, "it was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils" (85), connecting the 'birth' of the creature with other notorious births affected by maternal imagination. Mary Toft's rabbit births began in November 1726, while Tristram Shandy was also born in the month of November.³⁴ (The 1831 edition (39) also emphasises Victor's natural character and "temperature" over

the influence of education, with the same sentiments and language as Sterne's opening paragraph to *Tristram Shandy*). Mary Shelley was herself born in November, and Mark Rubenstein (1976) has suggested that the creature's discovery of his formation in Victor's notebooks echoed Shelley's experience of reading about her own conception in her parents' correspondence. Other phrases and similes also appear to allude to famous cases of maternal imagination, such as the instance when Victor sees Clerval's corpse and wishes he had also died. He asks, "of what materials was I made, that I could thus resist so many shocks, which, like the turning of the wheel, continually renewed the torture" (203). This language, questioning the "materials" of his body and the effect of "shocks" already suggests a link to the discourse of maternal imagination, but the description of torture by the wheel recalls Malebranche's oft-repeated tale of the pregnant woman who watched a man broken on the wheel and subsequently gave birth to a child with broken bones (1674, 115–16).

Critics often focus on Victor's abortive attempt to build a female mate for the creature. Mellor argues that Victor's destruction of the female creature is akin to "a violent rape" (1988, 120), however it could be argued that the whole process of the female creature's construction appears more like a miscarriage. The creation of the female is like a second, fear-filled, pregnancy, as Victor is haunted by the possibility of another monstrous birth. His description of the task as "a horrible curse" (189) is reminiscent of old folklore regarding maternal imagination, which claimed a mother inadvertently cursed her offspring with deformity due to her sins. Tormented by doubt, fear and guilt, Victor's anxiety reaches a climax when he becomes perplexed by the possibilities of a female creature. Fearing "a race of devils" (192), Victor's extreme passion, provoked by fear of another monster, causes him to destroy the female, just as a pregnant woman's passion, rooted in fear of a monster, could cause a miscarriage. Shelley establishes a direct causal link between Victor's passion and the destruction of the female; "I thought with a sensation of madness of my promise of creating another like him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (193). Again, the novel displays an implicit connection with the idea of maternal imagination, and the damage such a theory could inflict.

Many scholars have studied Shelley's language and narrative style in relation to reproduction. Waxman, among others, examines the deliberate language of maternity employed by Victor and Walton to describe their ambitious projects (1987, 20–21). Mellor claims that specific dates within

Walton's frame-narrative link the novel to Mary Shelley's birth in 1797, as well as her pregnancy with her daughter Clara Everina, who was conceived and born as *Frankenstein* was being written (1988, 54–55). Similarly Bewell has noted Shelley's obstetric pun on the word "dilate" (1988, 120) in the 1831 Introduction and Huet has argued that Shelley's Chinese-box narrative is modelled on the theory of emboitement, which maintained that the entire future human race existed in Eve's ovaries (1993, 142–143). Such analyses support the idea that Shelley dissipates concerns of sexual reproduction into the very language and structure of the novel. The discourse of maternal imagination evolves and mutates in *Frankenstein*, as Shelley references traditional beliefs and tales, but also criticises recent medical and cultural emphasis on maternal passion and responsibility.

The inherent merging of narrative and reproductive matters serves to highlight the elision between the literary and maternal imagination. The key, corporealising power of maternal imagination is often incorporated into the characters' Romantic, creative imaginations, such as when the young Elizabeth invents imaginary friends. Victor remembers that "the world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own" (66). This statement suggests a blurring of maternal and literary imagination; as a female, Elizabeth should control her unruly thoughts, lest she one day "people" the world with monstrous children born of an overactive imagination. However, as she is occupied with the "aerial creations of the poets" (66), Elizabeth can also encourage her powerful imagination to create and receive artistic visions. Although the reader will never know if Elizabeth's creative imaginings would have affected her capability as a mother, as a failed maternal figure Victor later shows the complete collapse between the imaginary and the real. Captain Walton anxiously observes that:

He enjoys one comfort, the offspring of solitude and delirium: he believes that, when in dreams he holds converse with his friends, and derives from that communion consolation for his miseries, or excitements to his vengeance, that they are not the creations of his fancy, but the real beings who visit him from the regions of a remote world. (234)

This mental "offspring" depicts a complete breakdown between Victor's imagination and reality, which closely resembles the process, which was

believed at the beginning of the eighteenth, to imprint confused maternal perceptions onto an infant's malleable form. Such inability to distinguish between the real and the imaginary implies both the precarious possibilities of his overwrought maternal imagination, and the extraordinary power of the newly developed Romantic genius. In the 1831 Introduction, as the acknowledged female author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley encourages a conflation of these implications and claims Romantic creativity interwoven with a romanticised maternal imagination. She retrospectively claims a childhood imagination akin to Elizabeth's that is imbued with both literary and maternal associations, "I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age than my own sensations" (1831a, 6). A powerful female imagination in this literary context is, if not free, then more socially acceptable than an imagination that deforms and destroys innocent infants. Yet Shelley still depicts her literary imagination in terms of the maternal as she "peoples" her imaginary world. Such language continues to entwine the discourses of reproduction and imagination well beyond the nineteenth century, and suggests that a woman's imagination is never discursively free of the maternal.

§ CONCLUSION

At the turn of the nineteenth century both fictional and medical texts were rife with the notion that a woman was inherently responsible for any problems in her pregnancy. Advice to pregnant women dictated that they should exercise – but not too much, that they should have a vegetable diet – with a little meat, and that they should be cheerful – but not excessively so.³⁵ Sentimental novels and poetry overflowed with plaintive women who bewailed their regret over inadvertently or unavoidably deficient pregnancies. Combined with natural psychological reactions such as guilt and grief, to an abnormal pregnancy, the weight of cultural blame becomes doubly oppressive. Such was the unforgiving form of maternal imagination during the early nineteenth century.

Shelley's 1831 "Introduction" suggests a key to *Frankenstein* when she describes the tales which prompted Lord Byron to propose that each member of the Villa Diodati party in Geneva write a ghost story.³⁶ The story that Shelley recalls most clearly is "the tale of the sinful founder of his race whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of

promise" (1831a, 7). This tale has strong similarities with the concept of maternal imagination as it blames only one parent, in this case the father, for the destruction of the child. Yet it is not Victor Frankenstein's paternal imagination that falls under scrutiny in the novel as Shelley eschews any comment on Victor's state of mind at the moment of the creature's conception. In fact the true moment of conception is deliberately debatable: does Victor devise his experiment as a result of his mother's death, is the creature inspired by lightning or the teachings of the ancient alchemists, is his work truly begun under M. Waldman, or could the creature's awakening be interpreted as his conception? Such numerous possibilities make clear that there is no definitive moment that could be attached to Victor's paternal imagination. Instead Shelley invites the reader to view these incidents as part of the creature's gestation period, within which Victor's hapless maternal imagination wreaks chaos. It is as a maternal figure therefore, that Victor receives guilt, blame and punishment for his reproductive imagination.

Mary Shelley critiques the culture of maternal blame through Victor Frankenstein's blindness to the discourse of maternal imagination. Unfortunately for Victor, ignorance is no excuse, and his story is shaped by the postpartum guilt of a woman who has given birth to a child believed to have been affected by maternal imagination. Oblivious to the consequences, Victor becomes a mother without first acquainting himself with imagination's dangers for a prospective mother. The result of such carelessness becomes apparent through his child's deformity and vice, for which Victor is held solely responsible. Victor becomes plagued by the guilt of his maternal imagination and therefore suffers the fate of the nineteenth-century pregnant woman. This unjust and prolonged suffering is juxtaposed in the novel with Shelley's adoption and portrayal of the creative and physiological Romantic imagination. Organic and fluid, the creative imagination's finest quality is its ability to bring ideas to life. Victor's creative imagination climaxes when he literally gives life to his theories in the form of the creature. This feature of creative imagination is precisely the aspect of maternal imagination that brings deformity, destruction and guilt to the unwary mother. Shelley's substitution of maternal imagination for what Victor mistakes as his creative imagination, highlights the way that cultural responses to human and artistic progeny are deeply gendered. The mother of a deformed child can expect to receive the cultural pressure of guilt and responsibility. This guilt spills over into any creative offspring such as *Frankenstein*, as the discourse of maternal imagination has overwhelmingly characterised female

imagination as negative – which is perhaps one of the reasons why the novel was initially published anonymously. A father however, is acknowledged for happy births and is praised in reproductive terms when he creates successful art: he is imaginatively fertile and has conceived a brainchild. In creating a male character who carries the burden of maternal imagination, Shelley unwraps the implications of this unfairly gendered, discursive exchange. She invites sympathy for Victor’s maternal suffering, stressing the isolated position of the “guilty” mother. Critiquing the predominant Romantic assimilation of the positive, physiological creativity of maternal imagination, Shelley also condemns Victor’s male egotism for literally appropriating female reproductive powers. In this way Victor Frankenstein inhabits the cultural role of imagination for both sexes; as although he is a man, he pays the female price for creative imagination.

NOTES

1. I have chosen to use the 1818 edition of Shelley’s novel as it is closer to other texts dealt with from the Romantic period.
2. The mother of *A Declaration of a Strange and Wonderful Monster* gives birth to a headless child after thinking and declaring that she would rather give birth to a headless child than a cursed Roundhead. The mother of *Prides Fall* gives birth to a two-headed child due to her vanity, as she continually looks in a mirror.
3. I will discuss Huet’s observation in more detail later in this chapter.
4. As I shall go on to discuss, my reading of the novel owes a large debt to feminist scholarship of *Frankenstein*. For an excellent overview of the extensive feminist criticism of the novel see Diane Long Hoeveler (2003).
5. Gigante argues against Slavoj Žižek’s aesthetic theory that claims ugliness is excess and says in *Frankenstein*, Shelley posits the creature as an aesthetic impossibility, as a lack, absence or blank, and the “positive manifestation of ugliness” (2000, 567).
6. Huet describes the distinction between Plato’s definition of “*eikastiken* art, exact in all dimensions, devoid of interpretation, and semblances produced by *phantastiken* art, in which the artist selects the best possible proportions to produce a beautiful work of art” (24–25).
Clare Hanson also discusses the possibility that *Frankenstein* is about the “potentially destructive power of an inadequate uterine environment” (2004, 49), but this is less directly connected to my study as she does not link her theory of epigenetic development to maternal imagination. Nevertheless Hanson does show that Shelley depicts fear that a negative action of the mother’s will harm the child within the womb. Barbara Frey

Waxman (1987) discusses Victor Frankenstein's "pregnancy" in essentialist terms and therefore does not consider the potential cultural implications of maternal imagination discourse.

7. It is worth mentioning that Mary Shelley's parents were significant figures in literary and philosophical history; her father William Godwin was a radical political thinker, philosopher-atheist and novelist; her mother Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneering feminist and writer. After Mary's birth caused puerperal fever and the subsequent death of her mother, Godwin remarried a widow named Mary Jane Clairmont, who already had two children. At sixteen Mary eloped with the young – and already married – poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and travelled in Europe accompanied by her step-sister Claire Clairmont. This scandalous decision resulted in two illegitimate pregnancies for Mary, however neither offspring of these pregnancies would survive for long.
8. See for example Marc A. Rubenstein (1976), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979).
9. Musselwhite (1987, 62–65) disagrees with this statement and in an interesting approach reads Victor's creation of the creature not as pregnancy, but as masturbation.
10. See the opening quotation in Moers (1976) which describes the appearance of newborn babies.
11. William D Brewer (2001) explores the links between Shelley's and Godwin's understanding of the mind and the passions, as evidenced in their texts; U C Knoepfelmacher (1979) argues for the autobiographical implications of omnipresent fathers and absent mothers; and Elisabeth Bronfen (1994) explores an autobiographical approach. Ellen Moers (1976) also emphasised the fact that Shelley was frequently pregnant and surrounded by illegitimate pregnancies during the writing of *Frankenstein*; her step-sister Claire Clairmont was carrying Lord Byron's child Allegra, Percy Shelley's first wife Harriet committed suicide whilst pregnant with another man's baby, and Mary Shelley's half-sister Fanny Imlay committed suicide after the discovery that she herself was illegitimate. In a more holistic approach Margaret Homans (1986) combines biographical detail with Lacanian theory and argues that the story of Frankenstein's pursuit and subsequent neglect of the object of his desire – the creature – is a mirror of Percy's treatment of Mary Shelley; Mary Jacobus (1982), among others, counters this position and argues against reducing *Frankenstein* to biology or biography. Bewell also objects to overly biographical readings with the argument that "Mary Shelley's experience of pregnancy and loss was not simply a biological matter, but also a social and discursive event" (1988, 107). Huet (1993) observes that biographical readings of *Frankenstein* erase Percy Shelley and the figure of the father from the text, as they overstate Mary

Shelley's model of monstrous motherhood. Bette London (1993) makes a similar point when she claims that feminist theory overlooks the fact that both protagonists of the novel, Victor and the creature, are not mothers, or even women.

12. Mellor in particular, has linked the novel's preoccupation with pregnancy and birth to Shelley's description of her inspirational waking nightmare of "the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together" (1831a, 9.) Mellor writes "this dream economically fuses Mary Shelley's myriad anxieties about the processes of pregnancy, giving birth and mothering" (1988, 41.), and Barbara Frey Waxman has compared Victor's experiment with the double-edged experience of a pregnant woman:

His ambition is not dissimilar to a first-time pregnant women's pride and grandiose hopes for her unborn child, as western culture frames those feelings; she is intimately linked to the creative process, and she may fantasize that she is carrying the next leader of the nation, the savior of a people. Yet even the first-time pregnant woman's rosy hopes are not unalloyed with fears: that she may miscarry, that she may not survive the labor and delivery, that the child will be stillborn, and that she is carrying a malformed child or even a non-human being, a "hideous progeny". (1987, 19)

13. Although Shelley does not record reading *Tristram Shandy* until January 1818, it is likely she would have been familiar with its content.
14. Waxman (1987) sees Victor's experiment as a poorly conducted pregnancy; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar saw the novel as a grotesque parody of a woman's reproductive role in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979); Robert Kiely (1972) discusses Victor's usurpation of woman; and Esther Schor calls *Frankenstein* "the century's most blistering critique of Romantic egotism" (2003, 2).
15. Amanda Vickery notes this belief in the letters of late eighteenth-century women; "ill health in the pregnant mother was long seen as a good omen, proof of a thriving foetus within" (1998, 100). Linda A Pollock also argues "a healthy mother, rather than being a cause of satisfaction, could be a disquieting indication that the foetus was not thriving" (1990, 46).
16. Victor himself, though he is not conscious of it, therefore attributes the creation of the monster specifically to his imagination, in the same way that a woman's birth of an abnormal child would be attributed to her maternal imagination.
17. The above quotation is made in reference to the deaths of Justine and William, however at this point in the novel Victor supposes, rather than knows, that the creature is responsible. Consequently his remorse applies less to his assumption that the creature is a murderer, and more to the original instance of creating the creature's life.

18. James Whale's (1931) film *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff as the creature, is the most famous cinematic representation of the creature's awakening. When the creature's hand first twitches, Frankenstein, played by Colin Clive, shrieks the line, "it's alive!" This scene is repeated in Whale's 1935 sequel *The Bride of Frankenstein* and within both parodies and serious responses to Whale's original film. In the most recent Hollywood incarnation of the novel, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) directed by Kenneth Branagh, the first sign of life in the creature – played by Robert DeNiro – is also a convulsive twitch of the hand. The movement of the creature's hand is mixed in popular culture with Mary Shelley's 1831 account of the creature's awakening, which described "signs of life . . . uneasy, half-vital motion" (9).
19. Mellor also confuses conception with gestation when linking Victor's experiment to Darwin's theory of paternal imagination. As Chapter 4 shows, the theory of paternal imagination pinpointed the moment of imagination to conception. Mellor mistakes Victor's long period of fevered imagination during the creature's construction for the moment of conception. (1987, esp. 299).
20. After the death of Shelley's unnamed daughter, William was born on 24th January 1816. Clara Everina was not born until 2nd September 1817, several months after the completion of the novel.
21. As early as 1727 James Blondel remarked that the child might suffer from the mother's actions, "by dancing, running, jumping, riding" in *The Strength of Imagination In Pregnant Women Examin'd And the Opinion that Marks and Deformities in Children arise from Thence Demonstrated to be a Vulgar Error* (1727, 10).
22. Victor's initial illness after the creation of the creature is followed by a lingering melancholy after Justine's execution, an attack of madness after the death of Clerval, nervous distress during his engagement to Elizabeth, and fainting and fever after her murder.
23. If, instead of his back-to-front treatment, Victor had guarded his imagination correctly, his creature would perhaps have been created with fewer monstrous aspects.
24. Victor's laboratory has also been compared to a womb.
25. However, it is worth noting that Percy Shelley inserted this word. See Anne K Mellor (2003).
26. Feminist scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) and Gordon D. Hirsch (1975) have identified the creature as female. Poovey (1985) and Barbara Johnson (1987, esp. 144–154) have seen the creature as the woman writer. Others have read the creature as representative of revolution or social upheaval, see Lee Sterrenberg (1979) and Martin A Danahay (1993). Joyce Zonana (1991) reads the creature as representative of both Adam and Eve. Many critics view the creature as Mary Shelley's alter ego, for

example U C Knoepfelmacher (1979) argued that Shelley split her identity into the characters of the aggressive monster and the sweetly yielding Elizabeth. Anne Mellor (1988) has also claimed that Shelley identified strongly with the monster-child, as although Percy Shelley's revisions are frequent in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's voice is strongest in Volume II of the novel, which contains the monster's narrative.

27. Shelley uses the word "imagination" twenty-six times in both the 1818 and 1831 texts.
28. This idea strikes Victor in view of the mountains Jura, Mont Blanc and the Môle. Huet notes that "mole" was also a condition related to pregnancy; shapeless body (1993, 136).
29. Homans reads this dream as a critique of the phallogentric attitude that brings the creature to life, as it omits the female and is therefore the equivalent of killing Elizabeth and Victor's mother (1986, 103). I agree with Hanson's reading, which instead of focusing on male desire and fear, views the dream in terms of *female* desire of creating life and *female* fear of maternal failure (2004, 50).
30. This is also shown through Victor's unwillingness to make a female creature, which I shall discuss in more detail below.
31. E J Clery has examined the androgynous aspects of Clerval's character and suggested that his persona is "strangely mutable" (2004, 131). I wish to extend the possibility that Clerval represents "a utopian androgyny that transcends normal distinctions of gender" (Clery 2004, 131) to a representation that allow his character to be read as both an adult and an impressionable infant.
32. There are many references to this "cause" of harelips such as *Aristotle's Masterpiece* (1717, 24) and Nicholas Culpeper (165, 122).
33. It was thought that if the baby had been born alive, its lungs would float in water, if it had been stillborn, the lungs would sink. Hunter claimed that this test, so often used in infanticide cases, was unreliable. Incidentally, the test had also been used on the bodies of Mary Toft's rabbits in 1726.
34. The creature's deformed appearance and "watery eyes" (86) imply his Piscean conception, see my [Chapter 4](#).
35. William Moss (1800, 360) argues for several pages about the necessity of exercise but stipulates that "exercise may be begun with and continued during the whole time of the pregnancy, or when, and as long as, it will be acceptable, and can be borne with ease and pleasure". John Grigg prescribes hardy women "full" meat diets, but stresses that delicate women should restrict themselves to vegetables (1789), 93. Almost all midwives stress the importance of a cheerful disposition but warn against exciting the passions of a pregnant woman.

36. These ghost stories are usually cited as a French translation of a German collection by Jean Baptiste Benoît Eyriés, *Fantasmagoriana, Ou Recueil d'histoires d'apparitions, de spectres, de revenans, fantômes &c* (1812).

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Afterbirth: The Discourse of Maternal Imagination After the Eighteenth Century

Similar to the baby developing within the pregnant woman, the discourse of maternal imagination is complex and continually evolving, yet embedded inside a deceptively simple exterior. The discourse is subject to a set of anxieties concerning pregnancy; both society and the pregnant woman harbour apprehensions regarding the invisible, yet deeply personal, nature of gestation. For centuries, perhaps millennia, the basic concept of maternal imagination could be defined simply as a pregnant woman's thoughts or feelings affecting the outcome of her pregnancy. The discourse however contained a wide variety of variables such as positive and negative, mental and physical, mimetic and creative changes to the foetus. By the mid-eighteenth century we see the development of a taxonomy of passions and longings, as well as appearing in associated discourses concerned with the position of women, the power of imagination, and reproduction. Although not strictly recognised as a form of maternal imagination because it did not take place during pregnancy, towards the end of the eighteenth century the potential power of a mother's imagination *after* she had delivered the baby grew to be a source of anxiety, as evidenced through related debates concerning children's education and early associations. In some ways Mary Shelley's adaptation of the concept of maternal imagination resembles Frankenstein's monster; a stitched-together body of folkloric, medical, political, cultural, and literary parts, that were simultaneously alive and dead. Various mutations

of the discourse dispersed into newer debates regarding education, responsibility, and, of course, power.

As Foucault (1979) observed, discourses of all kinds are preoccupied with power. The evolution of the discourse of maternal imagination during the long eighteenth century is preoccupied with a consistent fear of underestimating the power of a pregnant woman's mind. During the latter end of the Stuart period popular lore emphasised the dangers of pregnancy and suggested that a mother's sins or accidental experiences could be etched on her malleable foetus, and yet most sources allowed that maternal imagination could also operate in a positive way. Not only could an expectant mother potentially sculpt her baby into a more attractive or personable child as the *Callipædia: Or the Art of Getting Pretty Children* (1710) suggested, but the threat of maternal imagination might work in a pregnant woman's favour as she could use her vulnerability as a cultural or domestic weapon. However this attitude became embroiled with anxiety due to the actions of the peasant Mary Toft, as she exploited her miscarriage to try and increase her status, wealth and reputation with the rabbit hoax. Not only did apprehension surrounding the power of a woman's mind grow with each perfect rabbit that Toft delivered, but once the fraud was revealed, fear concerning female performance and a woman's ability to control her passions added to a collective sense of humiliation and alarm. To date, I have found no evidence of an eighteenth-century play that refers to maternal imagination, a fact that suggests social desire to avoid bringing attention to the potentially performative aspects of pregnancy. On the other hand, novels and satires evince various stories of female manipulation as a form of self-preservation during the potentially vulnerable period of pregnancy, although these instances usually disparage the woman involved. As the eighteenth century progressed, the notion of a woman actively using maternal imagination as a bargaining tool came to be replaced with the idea of mothers' weakness and delicacy during pregnancy. The twin cultures of sensibility and politeness served to silence narratives of maternal imagination that did not depict the woman as physically, and more significantly, mentally, vulnerable. Pregnancy itself becomes highly specialised and rarefied within discourse, it could be discussed euphemistically by poets or within "scientific" and medicalised discursive practice.

By the later eighteenth century, the power of a pregnant woman's imagination could only be shown through the absence of effect, as a only a strong-minded woman could curb her naturally wayward passions

and produce a normal, unblemished infant. Although this supposition condemned mothers of any abnormal birth as weak; conversely, it also credited the majority of mothers with a firmness of mind. Therefore, even while maternal guilt and suffering were increasingly prevalent features of the discourse, the implications of this logic contributed to the wider valorisation of maternity. Moreover the dominant narrative of guilt could not completely overwrite the vestiges of alternative versions of maternal imagination that still circulated; these remnants served to continue, resurrect, or disperse particular aspects of the discourse. Across the genres I have examined there is evidence of resistance, whether in the form of challenges to assumed knowledge, gentle mockery or more serious criticism.¹ The discourse invigorates itself at key moments, often through crisis conditions or a form of resistance, to diversify and reproduce over time. Nevertheless, it is clear that by the end of the eighteenth century the idea of maternal imagination was associated most strongly with weak or transgressive women who had little to no control over their thoughts or feelings. As such, the discourse increasingly perpetuates the notion that virtuous women should be reproductively, rather than imaginatively, creative.

Horror, fear and morbid curiosity of maternal imagination continues into the nineteenth century, featuring in literature, the popular imagination and medical warnings to pregnant women. In 1824 the famous dwarf Caroline Crachami, also known as the “Sicilian Fairy” explained her size with reference to maternal passion, stating that a monkey had frightened her mother during her pregnancy (Porter 2001, 55). The discourse surfaces in Gothic literature such as E T A Hoffman’s “Mademoiselle de Scudery: A Tale from the age of Louis XIV” (1819), Walter Scott’s *Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Birthmark* (1843), and Oliver Wendell Holmes’s *Elsie Venner, A Romance of Destiny* (1861).² The physicians Benjamin Fordyce Barker, John Brown and J W Ballantyne all advocated the theory of maternal imagination, while in 1897, John Tennant suggested that maternal imagination could cause epilepsy in the child. Harriet Ritvo has noted that “in the absence of abusive treatment or other physical suffering, speculative doctors were apt to fall back, albeit without full confidence, on the mother’s mental impressions” (1998, 157).

I conclude with an evaluation of the way that the eighteenth-century dispersal of the discourse of maternal imagination continues to hold implications for on-going ideas concerning pregnancy and creativity. Scholars of

maternal imagination generally agree that traces of the discourse endure, although opinion varies in regard to the precise nature or effects of these traces. Philip Wilson has charted the negative character of maternal imagination into the twentieth century; as late as the 1970s, communities in North America claimed that smoking during pregnancy produced a black baby, while viewing a horror film would turn the foetus into a monster (Snow et al. 1978, 729; 731). Wilson notes that this responsibility of prenatal care falls upon the mother, in a continuation of the anxiety implicit in models of maternal imagination. Alternatively Rebecca Kukla argues that the positive influence of the mother has become increasingly relevant for modern prenatal care. She notes the possible physical and mental improvement of the foetus if the mother takes folic acid supplements and pipes “Mozart into the womb” (2005, 23).³ Regarding maternal imagination and creativity, Marie-Hélène Huet discusses the still-current notion that a work of art is the unique offspring of a monstrous imagination (1993, 125). I concur with Huet’s argument, which is particularly illustrated in novels that deploy the dark menace of a mother’s imagination such as Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967) and Clare Clark’s *The Nature of Monsters* (2007), as well as in science-fiction horror films such as Ridley Scott’s *Alien* series (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2012, 2017).⁴ The representation of the mother in works such as these alludes to the threatening, unpredictable power of the maternal in connection with prenatal influence. This has links with the misgivings of female agency portrayed in mid-eighteenth century novels, and also a suspicion of gestation in Gothic literature that arguably begins with *Frankenstein*.

Perhaps the most predominant trace of the discourse of maternal imagination is a cultural attachment of guilt to pregnant women. Psychologist Anne Walker describes common maternal reactions to a miscarriage or abnormal birth,

In the first month after miscarriage, between 20% and 50% of women are significantly depressed. High levels of anxiety are also common as are intrusive experiences such as nightmares, flashbacks and unwanted memories, and feelings of guilt. (2002, 309)

These traces of maternal shame and responsibility have been partly shaped by the eighteenth-century discourse of maternal imagination. This is perhaps because current and eighteenth-century midwifery advice concerning maternal imagination share striking similarities. A story reported

by the BBC in June 2013 described The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' (RCOG) recommendation for pregnant women to avoid certain common household chemicals (Roberts 2013). The RCOG report suggested that pregnant women should not expose themselves to, among other items: tinned food, shower gel, air fresheners, new cars, non-stick frying pans, sunscreen and ready meals. The long list of prohibited items is reminiscent of James Blondel's medical observation in 1727:

'tis granted that the child may suffer by the distempers of the mother, by several accidents, as great falls, and blows she receives, by the irregularity of her diet, and of her actions, by dancing, running, jumping, riding, excess of laughing, frequent sneezing and all other agitations of her body... That a sudden surprise or violent passion of anger, an extraordinary grief, or an apprehension of danger may be the cause of a miscarriage. (1727, 10)

Both reports place extreme pressure on the pregnant woman to eschew activities or items in order to protect her foetus, and yet fail to recognise the impossibility of such advice. This is a clear mark of the discourse of maternal imagination; the reports both address anxiety by apparently empowering the mother with knowledge, while inevitably stimulating more alarms with the information. Like eighteenth-century midwifery guides, the RCOG report implies that despite her apparent vulnerability, the pregnant woman faces a choice as she has the ability to deny her own comfort for the good of her child. This formulation is problematic, as it contains the suggestion that the ideal pregnant woman demonstrates her strength with self-sacrifice and conformity. The RCOG's report is permeated with the late eighteenth-century discourse of maternal imagination, as it binds the pregnant woman in a paradox of fundamental responsibility.

Imagination is still haunted by reproductive language and assumption. One can possess a "pregnant imagination", endure the metaphorical agony of imaginative "labour", "deliver", "nurse" or "give birth" to an idea, while a substantial intellectual project is often identified as the creator's "baby". However this terminology alludes to gendered reproductive roles and carries different burdens for men and women. Such language has become so commonplace that the associations of pregnancy and childbirth have become partially obscured. Nevertheless, in this accepted language of imagination a woman's creativity is weighed down with cultural implications and expectations of her reproductive role. This is one of the more insidious ways that the

discourse of maternal imagination continues to influence popular perceptions of creative imagination with prescriptive gender hierarchy. My study of the discourse helps to reconstruct the interplay between female reproductive and intellectual creativity, and suggests that both men and women should be aware of its latent consequences.

Pregnant women were, and are, subjected to the scrutiny of society, physicians, and their own anxieties. The discourse of maternal imagination interrogates a spectrum of female agency through the dialectics of fear, sympathy, knowledge, humour and guilt. The long view across the eighteenth century to the present day makes it possible to see that pregnant women are still provided with prescriptive choices that subtly denote their limited agency. As my book shows, this has been partly generated by eighteenth-century discursive practices of maternal imagination. By the same token, the language of creative imagination cannot seem to escape the reproductive physiology of the maternal mind. In apt correspondence with the very principles of eighteenth-century maternal imagination, it is difficult to separate out imagination from its relationship with the reproductive female body. As I have argued, this vexed relationship has, and will, continue to shape notions of pregnancy and creativity, making it imperative to forge more space between imagination and the maternal.

NOTES

1. The exception is drama, where mention of maternal imagination quietly dies, perhaps due to the sensitive implications of female performance outlined in [Chapter 2](#).
2. The villain of Hoffman's story is obsessed with jewels due to his mother's fascination with them in pregnancy; Scott's novel attributes James I's aversion to swords to an episode where his pregnant mother is threatened; in Hawthorne's short story Georgiana's small red facial birthmark has discursive links to the red fruit birthmarks discussed in (Anti-)Imaginationist treatises; the heroine of Elsie Venner is like a snake as her mother was terrified by one while pregnant.
3. Wilson views this same recommendation regarding Mozart with more suspicion and argues that while the mother's actions may lead to benefits for the foetus, by implication her lack of action can have detrimental effects; see my [Chapter 1](#).

4. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) might also fit into this category as the eponymous character has a birthmark that is interpreted differently by various characters. There is also some suggestion that Sula's unconventional life is in some way related to her family's maternal tradition of transgressive women.

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