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Narrating Pregnancy and Childbirth: Infanticide and the Dramatization of Reproductive Knowledge

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Abstract: In early modern England, infanticide was a crime overwhelmingly associated with women. Both popular texts and legal records depict women accused of infanticide as mothers acting against nature. These figures, however, do not often appear in the period's drama. Instead, early modern drama includes fictionalized mothers who kill their children beyond infancy and into adulthood. By eschewing portrayals of neonaticide and the trials associated with it, the drama highlights a dependency upon female characters' verbal narratives of the reproductive body that reinforces pregnancy's unstable epistemology. I argue that the flexibility of this epistemology allows women, whether female characters in drama or historical women on trial, to distance themselves from the crime of infanticide by reconstructing narratives of both pregnancy and childbirth. Sharing rhetorical devices with the testimonies of women accused of infanticide, dramatic mothers such as Videna in *The Tragedie of Gorboduc* and Brunhilt in *Thierry and Theodoret* linguistically sever the biological ties between mother and child, thus disrupting conventional portrayals of reproduction. These parallel strategies position the reproductive female body as a site of resistance to the legal mechanisms designed to interpret it.

Keywords: pregnancy; maternity; infanticide; childbirth; early modern gynecology; drama; reproductive knowledge; women on trial

1. Introduction

In early modern medical texts, the link between women and reproduction is most clearly evidenced in the focus on the womb; midwifery manuals and women's healthcare texts alike dedicate a substantial amount of space to uterine functioning.¹ Depictions of the uterus and imagined renderings of the fetus *in utero* speak to a significant interest in not just understanding, but also visualizing the womb. Often referred to as the matrix, the womb was theorized both as a "point of origin or growth" ("[matrix, n.](#)" 2018) as well as the "mater" (mother) where such growth occurred ("[mater, n. 1.](#)" 2018). With its centrality to reproduction, but a resistance to easy, clear visualization, the womb confounded definitive interpretation. This challenge was particularly apparent in attempts to discern pregnancy—a status supposedly marked with outward signs, but which most often relied upon a woman's interpretation of her own body. In *The Birth of Mankind*, one of the most popular midwifery manuals of the period, Thomas Raynalde includes a chapter entitled "How it can be perceived if a woman is pregnant or not" where he describes signs such as the cessation of menstruation, the

¹ Eve Keller argues that the potential for agential subjectivity within medical books focused on women "gets undercut, subsumed in the functions and diseases of the womb" (Keller 2007, p. 97). John Sadler, for example, identifies the purpose of his women's healthcare book, *The Sick Woman's Priuate Looking-glasse*, as an "aide and benefit women" in "view[ing] the nature, cause, signes, prognosticks, and cure of all uterine diseases" (Sadler 1636, p. A5v). Similarly, Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* includes separate chapters to address the symptoms and diseases of the womb (Culpeper 1651).

hardening of the breasts, longing for things that she did not used to, and a general tightening up of the womb (Raynalde [1560] 2009, p. 192). Some of these signs are outwardly visible, while others—such as the closing of the womb—depend upon a woman’s perception of what is happening within her body. He describes conception, for example, as the point when “the [pregnant] woman feeleth her matrix very fastly and closly shut” (ibid.). In this formulation, assessment of pregnancy depends upon what a woman chooses to say (or not say) about her body—a method for discerning pregnancy that cannot be verified by an external (male) observer. Even in its outwardly visible signs, pregnancy does not conform to a singular configuration. In England’s first female-authored midwifery manual, Jane Sharp takes this into account in her list of fourteen signs of pregnancy with which she includes this caveat: “The rules are too general to be certainly proved in all women, yet some of them seldom fail in any” (Sharp [1671] 1999, p. 102). Sharp acknowledges the difficulty in determining pregnancy in her suggestion that all women’s bodies manifest signs of conception differently.

The ambiguity of the pregnant body makes interpreting it a difficult task, one that does not always produce definitive results. The limits of this task are particularly evident in attempts to determine pregnancy retroactively, a situation that occurs during infanticide trials in which women are examined for signs of former pregnancy and childbirth. When these women are formally interrogated, their words are checked against the testimonies of others as well as the physical evidence of their bodies. The verbal construction of pregnancy thus exists in tension with its physical assessment, which drama attempts to resolve through narrative resolutions intended to engineer the legibility of the reproductive female body. By examining representations of women whose reproductive status is central to their crime, this essay establishes a link between the construction of pregnancy on stage and in courts, where the fact of pregnancy must be known to reach a legal resolution. Specifically, I look to portrayals of women accused of infanticide who use knowledge (or lack of knowledge) about pregnancy to assert their innocence. These cases often involve women constructing certain narratives about their bodies and then having those bodies physically examined to verify their words. As Sara Luttfriing points out, however, it is important to pay attention not only to what women say about their bodies but also what they do *not* say: “knowledge about pregnancy persistently hinges on what information women are willing to reveal” (Luttfriing 2016, p. 117). For women to maintain interpretive control over their bodily narratives, then, they must strike a careful balance between sharing and withholding information. In this way, the courtroom serves as a performative space where a woman’s defense depends upon enacting a specific reproductive status.

Dramatic portrayals that signal the performative nature of pregnancy outside of the theater and within the context of the legal system call attention to the complex array of discourses that shape the illegibility of the reproductive female body; the dramatization of a legal performance highlights early modern expectations about the pregnant body’s behavior and appearance, demonstrating that the formal assessment of such conventions actually reinforces the practical difficulties in successfully interpreting pregnancy—a status of central significance to cases of infanticide and child murder. As Frances Dolan has pointed out, the domestic crimes committed by women that occurred least frequently but garnered the most attention were murder and witchcraft, with special attention given to the murder of husband, master, or infant (Dolan 1994, p. 3). The crimes of such murderous women were often the subject of sensationalized news stories and presented in broadsides, pamphlets, and ballads.² Because other crimes and current events were often turned into drama, it seems plausible

² Numerous scholars have addressed the representation of true crime and sensationalist literature in early modern England, from ballads and pamphlets to plays and news stories. It is not surprising that there are multiple theories concerning their popularity. In his examination of domestic tragedies from 1590–1607, Peter Berek calls attention to the way that plays representing true crimes in general and murder in particular are often concerned with issues of social mobility and tend to feature anxiety of female sexuality. See (Berek 2008). Katherine Craik claims that many early modern authors believed in literature’s ability to have a moralizing effect on readers, with accounts of crimes thus regarded as potentially having a positive impact. Her argument, however, is based mostly on texts aimed at elite audiences. See (Craik 2007).

to assume that infanticide would have had a similar level of representation on the public stage.³ In her work on early modern representations of child murder, however, Betty Travitsky explains that although one would expect to find a great deal of overlap between popular texts and plays, the drama does not actually portray child murder with the same frequency that it was reported elsewhere; even when the drama includes child murder, it is not necessarily by women, and it is not neonatal infanticide.⁴ Instead of engaging with true crime reenactments of infanticide, early modern drama includes fictionalized portrayals of mothers killing their children beyond infancy and into adulthood. In these plays, female characters disavow biological motherhood in order to linguistically construct and control reproductive narratives.

By forgoing portrayals of neonaticide and the trials associated with it, the drama highlights a dependency upon female characters' verbal narratives of the reproductive body that emphasizes the unstable epistemology of pregnancy. This dependency upon oral narration is doubly reinforced by the difference between the biological sex of the player and the gendered performance of a female character; in forgoing bodily examinations, the plays insist upon the significance of language as a prosthetic indicator of the reproductive body. Looking to mothers such as Videna in *The Tragedie of Gorboduc* (Norton and Sackville [1565] 1971) and Brunhalt in *Thierry and Theodoret* (Beaumont and Fletcher [1621] 1905), this essay explores what it means for women to deny responsibility for the murder of their children by linguistically severing the biological ties between mother and child, thus disrupting conventional portrayals of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. Although Videna and Brunhalt murder their adult children, and thus are not guilty of neonatal infanticide, they employ rhetorical strategies that are similar to women's testimonies in infanticide trials. These mothers go to great discursive lengths to describe why the children in question are not their own, reconstructing narratives of reproduction in order to explain pregnancy or childbirth as something else. These shared discursive situations speak to the difficulties in assessing the reproductive body and emphasize the significance of controlling narratives about that body.

Women on trial in these kinds of cases rely upon a narrative reconstruction of their bodies to establish their reproductive status. Representations of knowledge and ignorance about the female body demonstrate the difficulties of its formal assessment, from women themselves as well as from observers. The multiple ways that pregnancy can be read, understood, interpreted, and described to others actually allows women to (re)construct narratives about their reproductive bodies. In doing this, they maintain some level of control over their bodies in the male-dominated legal system. When juries of matrons were called upon to examine women for pregnancy, for example, their verdicts were never questioned: they were always taken as fact.⁵ Clearly, the courtroom was a space in which women's knowledge about the female body could overrule what men knew (or thought they knew) about pregnancy. The legal context for women accused of capital crimes—both for "real" early modern women as well as their representations in drama—becomes a formal space for negotiating the epistemology of pregnancy. These cases and their dramatic representations show that while the legal process (with its need for a verdict) eventually requires that the pregnant body be rendered legible, the ambiguity of the pregnant body exposes the constructed nature of this specific reproductive status.

³ Some examples of drama based on real crimes include: *Arden of Faversham* (1592); *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599); *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601); *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607); *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607); *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608); *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621); *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634).

⁴ The infanticide featured in *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607) and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), for example, are both based on the same account of Walter Calverley, who was executed in 1605 for killing his children and stabbing his wife.

⁵ In her work on juries of matrons in late medieval England, Sara Butler points out their verdicts were final. There are no recorded cases of their decisions being overturned; in fact, some women were granted stays of execution for years at a time on the grounds that the jury of matrons had originally declared them to be "quick with child." See (Butler 2017).

2. Murderous Mothers, Bastardy Statutes, and Infanticide Trials

Infanticide trials speak to the ambiguity of attempting to define pregnancy and in successfully identifying a formerly pregnant body, either by the woman in question or those called upon to pass a conviction. Eliding the process of examining a woman about suspected infanticide on stage underscores the sheer difficulty in reading the reproductive body successfully, as well as the reliance upon a woman's narrative about that body. In cases of neonatal infanticide, women could claim that alleged infanticide was not murder because what appeared to be pregnancy or childbirth was actually something else. Portraying this on stage could present epistemological problems because it calls attention to the fact that women can narratively construct their bodies in a way that makes the certainty of physical legibility impossible. Nevertheless, forgoing the dramatic portrayal of neonaticide and the trials associated with it does not necessarily solve the epistemological problem of knowing the pregnant body. Even though plays with child murder do not necessarily depend upon whether or not female characters are or have been pregnant, they demonstrate the ways that women can use narratives of reproduction (including conception, pregnancy, and childbirth) to preemptively deny accusations of infanticide. In fact, this muddying of epistemological clarity is exactly what occurs in the representation of murderous mothers. These figures create rhetorical situations in which infanticide is simply not possible, because they rewrite the conventional script for understanding pregnancy and childbirth.

Of course, not all murderous mothers are the same, ranging from the female characters that go to the countryside to abandon their children to the more malevolent renderings of the Medea figure. In *The Witch*, for example, Francisca leaves town as a pregnant maid and returns childless, a process described succinctly by her lover, Aberzanes: "You can swell a maid up / And rid her for ten pound" (2.3.113–14).⁶ Though not technically murder, paying someone to take an infant does not necessarily guarantee its survival. Other portrayals depict neonaticide as entirely within the realm of possibility; there are times when mothers with murderous intentions *do* get close to fully enacting their plans. In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora decides that she must kill her newborn son and replace him with another because his skin color threatens to betray her infidelity. Within the space of just 20 lines, the nurse enters with the newly-delivered infant and explains that, because it is "joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue", Tamora commands Aaron to "christen it with thy dagger's point" (4.2.66.70).⁷ This plan is ultimately thwarted when Aaron intercedes to save the life of his son, despite the nurse's rebuttal that the child must die because "the mother wills it so" (4.2.81). On the other end of the spectrum, mothers may express their wish for retroactive infanticide. In *Richard III*, the Duchess of York laments her "accursed womb, the bed of death" for the monstrous birth of her son Richard (4.1.53).⁸ When Richard confronts her for trying to interrupt his plan of action, she describes herself as "she that might have intercepted thee, / By strangling thee in her accursed womb" (4.4.137–38). The Duchess further explains to Richard, "A grievous burthen was thy birth to me" (4.4.168). She thus sees her womb as a place that engendered evil; as such, she expresses the wish for her own body to have earlier aborted the monstrous threat now posed by her fully-grown child.

Despite the variations in the representation of these mothers' intentions, the topic of child murder in both dramatic and nondramatic texts usually "reveal[s] strong fear and hostility towards women" (Travitsky 1993, p. 63). This hostility is particularly directed towards mothers. Janet Adelman explains maternal hostility in general in terms of the relationship between female sexuality and maternal sexuality in which the womb is configured as responsible for contamination at the site of birth: "original sin becomes literally the sin of origin" (Adelman 1992, p. 24). The womb is powerful and dangerous, giving mothers the ability to disrupt or significantly direct dramatic action. A clear example

⁶ All citations from *The Witch* refer to (Middleton [1778] 1986).

⁷ All citations from *Titus Andronicus* refer to (Shakespeare 2008b).

⁸ All citations from *The Tragedy of Richard III* refer to (Shakespeare 2008c).

of the lasting impression of maternal power is evidenced in the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra* in which Cleopatra refers to the poisonous asp as “my baby at my breast” (5.2.308).⁹ Here, Cleopatra’s maternity is signaled by and written onto her body—even when the figure of a nursing child has been replaced with that of a poisonous snake. The asp-assisted suicide is an act that Cleopatra orchestrates, one that allows her to maintain control over fate. Adelman suggests that Cleopatra’s suicide can be understood as “the great generative act of the play” (Adelman 1992, p. 183). Indeed, Chris Laoutaris argues that by constructing her death in a manner that imitates a mother in childbirth, Cleopatra’s agentive maternal power secures her immortalization: “It is because she dies as a mother that she will be remembered as a queen” (Laoutaris 2008, p. 259). As figures with control over significant aspects of reproduction, mothers in drama are often portrayed with an uneasiness surrounding their control over areas of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. Childbirth, in particular, is seen as a moment for potential deception. The secrecy of women within the birthing room, for example, “raises threats of false attribution of paternity, substitution of children, and infanticide” (Ostovich 1999, p. 105). The birthing process itself becomes a site of male anxiety because it cannot be interpreted with definitive clarity: “the woman herself is no longer contained; she has created something within herself that is outside of the control, and perhaps even the understanding, of men” (Karpinska 2010, p. 438). It is not surprising, then, that dramatic portrayals of murderous mothers reflect an uneasiness with and suspicion of women’s control over reproduction.

Beyond portraying fears of (malevolent) maternal power, however, I contend that mothers associated with child murder are shown as actively cultivating this representation in order to create a preemptive defense against accusations of infanticide. Making claims about having inhospitable wombs or insisting that their alleged children are unnatural creations, they sever ties between biology and motherhood, disrupting conventional narratives of conception, pregnancy, and birth. By turning the children into perversions of nature, the mothers in these plays remove infanticide as a possible label for their actions—they cannot be guilty of committing infanticide if there is no child to kill. Whether or not this actually works is another matter; what I am concerned with here, however, is the fact that such self-fashioning persists in the dramatic portrayals of murderous mothers. Although neo-natal infanticide is not represented in the drama, female characters rhetorically disavow biological motherhood, thus allowing them to commit metaphorical infanticide.

The fashioning of metaphorical infanticide draws upon the legal context of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England in which women increasingly faced convictions related to both bastardy and child murder. The bastardy statutes of 1576 and 1610 coincided with new laws concerning relief for the poor and were meant to relieve parishes of economic burdens. Mark Jackson suggests that the concealment of pregnancy and secrecy of birth are understandable effects of the social stigma of bastardy, noting that single women might have been looking for a way to escape the “hostility and accusations of rate paying neighbors” (Jackson 1994, p. 66) particularly because giving birth to a chargeable bastard was punishable. These limited options provide a context in which it makes sense that “in the period between 1600 and 1624, early modern England saw an explosion of convictions for bastardy in which women were either hanged or imprisoned” (McNeill 2007, p. 80). Along with bastardy convictions, trials for infanticide also increased during this period, with the nature of the proceedings for these convictions changing as well. Prior to the mid-sixteenth century, church courts had jurisdiction over infanticide. The crime was not a capital offense, and punishment was usually limited to penance. Starting in 1576, bastardy cases shifted away from the church and into secular courts (Jackson 1996, p. 30). Regulations concerning infanticide increased and eventually the crime was treated as a homicide and a capital offense (Dolan 1994, p. 128). Specifically, neonatal infanticide (the killing of an infant within 24 hours of birth) was seen as in need of regulation and associated with “social and sexual disorder” (ibid.). However, Elizabethan and Jacobean statutes concerning bastardy

⁹ All citations from *Antony and Cleopatra* refer to (Shakespeare 2008a).

and infanticide were largely motivated by economic concerns—attempting to control birth rates and to make parents responsible for illegitimate children that would otherwise be provided for by local parishes. This suggests that authorities may have been inclined to turn a blind eye to instances of infanticide because murderous mothers would have been relieving the taxpayers from supporting bastards. Peter C. Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull have noted that the harshness of these laws may have actually motivated infanticide and encouraged the concealment of pregnancy; indeed, they contend that the number of women indicted for infanticide between 1576 and 1650 increased by 225 percent (Hoffer and Hull 1981, p. 8).

As such indictments continued to multiply, the parliaments of 1606–1607 and 1610 debated infanticide bills and in 1624 passed the first legislation that solely dealt with the killing of bastard children. Entitled, “An Act to prevent the destroying and murdering of Bastard Children”, the 1624 statute made it a crime for single women to conceal the body of a dead child.¹⁰ According to the statute, it did not matter “whether it were born alive or not”; what mattered, instead, was if the body “be concealed”. If it turned out that a woman did conceal the death, “the said Mother so offending shall suffer Death, as in the case of murther, except such Mother can make proof by one Witness at the least, that the Child (whose death by her so intended to be concealed) was born dead”. Infanticide is here defined not necessarily by the act of killing of a child, but rather by the act of concealment. The statute concludes by describing that the justices present at the parliament, “taking notice of the frequency of Murthering of Bastard Children, by their Lewd Mothers” call for the statute to be enacted, printed, and posted through the city, parish churches, and the liberties. This order thus portrays itself as a necessary corrective to what is represented as a large number of women murdering children and hiding their bodies.

Regardless of its underlying motivations, the passage of the 1624 statute resulted in an increase in infanticides prosecutions. However, there is not enough evidence concerning incidences of neonatal infanticide to draw definitive conclusions about the number of deaths and scholars construct differing narratives based on the evidence that they do have. Hoffer and Hull claim that “over 25 percent of all murders heard in the early modern English courts . . . were infanticides” (Hoffer and Hull 1981, p. xviii). Contrastingly, J.S. Cockburn asserts that neonatal infanticides were not very common (Cockburn 1991, pp. 70–106). We simply cannot know for certain, for example, how many women successfully concealed a miscarriage or an infanticide if they were not brought to trial for it. Despite being unable to draw definitive conclusions based on this evidence, the increase in regulations concerning the “murdering of bastard children” and the court records we do have make it clear that infanticide became a crime increasingly associated with women. According to Hoffer and Hull, “90 percent of all murderous assaults by women were directed at infants” (Hoffer and Hull 1981, pp. xviii–xix). In other words, women were not convicted of murder nearly as often as men, but when they were, it was usually in association with children and infants. Arlie Loughnan succinctly explains the gendered nature of infanticide: “In its restriction to women, infanticide is this rare instance of overt gendering of the legal subject—gender differences, which are more often implicit in legal doctrines and practices, are made explicit on the face of the law of infanticide” (Loughnan 2012, p. 202). Pamphlets and ballads depicting the murderous mother, cruel mother, and the unnatural mother speak to the popular representation of figures accused of infanticide—notably, women acting against nature.¹¹ Indeed, this is exactly how they are portrayed in the drama.

¹⁰ All citations from the 1624 bastardy statute refer to (Corporation of London [1624] 1680).

¹¹ Frances Dolan has pointed out that although the numbers show that women were not committing the most crimes, their crimes were often sensationalized in a manner that captured the public’s imagination. Cases of husband/master-murder, infanticide, and witchcraft were reproduced in a variety of popular forms, including ballads, pamphlets, broadsides, and drama. See (Dolan 1994, pp. 3–4).

3. Rewriting the Pregnancy Narrative: Accusation, Evidence, and Refutation in Infanticide Trials

Even though the standard narrative associated with the 1624 statute pinpointed concealment as the crime, it still had to be proven with evidence, and women were not hanged for concealment alone (Walker 2003, p. 151). Because of the difficulties both in obtaining and evaluating concealment as evidence, there were various other methods for assessment. Until it was eventually repealed in 1803, women found ways to defend their claims outside of the strict language of the statute.¹² Beyond proving that she had prepared for a birth and/or that the child was born dead, a woman on trial for infanticide had two other options for pleading innocence: she might deny that a birth had happened by claiming that she was never pregnant in the first place, or she might plead that she was unaware of her own pregnancy. In both of these pleas, narratives of pregnancy play a critical role in how women refute charges and plead innocence. A plea based on the complete denial of pregnancy, for example, depends upon the idea that a woman has more knowledge about her body than those who testified to her alleged pregnancy. Claiming to be unaware of one's own pregnancy, on the other hand, hinges upon the difficulties in reading the reproductive female body. Presenting a lack of knowledge, then, was actually a form of agency, as it provided women with an opportunity to reject the accusation of intentional murder. In order for women to successfully reclaim a specific narrative about their reproductive bodies, they needed to understand how pregnancy conventionally signified and then successfully explain those signs as something else. As this section will demonstrate, the creation and navigation of reproductive narratives played out in a variety of contemporary discourses, including published texts, such as pamphlets and plays, as well as in official legal records. Although legal records were not as readily available, the depictions of infanticide and child murder contained within depositions and assize records share rhetorical features with the reproductive narratives in the popular literature.

The English criminal legal system operated by accusation, usually on the initiative of the victim (Sharpe 1994, p. 107). In infanticide cases, a woman would be brought to trial usually because someone else had discovered the body of a dead infant. An examination of the woman in question could include a range of types of evidence, including a physical assessment of the woman's body, the verbal testimony of community members, and a search of the woman's residence and surrounding area. These methods for assessment—though often difficult to prove definitively—seem to have been understood at a more popular level. As Jackson points out, the depositions of neighbors in infanticide trials show that “witnesses and suspects possessed a working knowledge of the main issues involved both at common law and under the statute, and that they were well aware of the significance of the signs of live- and still-birth, of the preparation of child's clothes, or of failing to call for help at the delivery” (Jackson 1994, p. 72). It stands to reason, then, that women on trial would also possess an understanding about the legal assessment of pregnancy, thus providing an opportunity to control their own reproductive narratives. In other words, evidence that could be used to suggest guilt had the potential to be reconstructed to refute certain accusations.

Women facing such charges and looking to prove that they had not given birth relied upon the uncertainties surrounding pregnancy and the ambiguity of the reproductive female body to explain the pregnancy as something else. Descriptions concerning the size and shape of a woman's stomach were a consistent factor in infanticide cases, particularly in determining whether or not a woman was recently pregnant. Neighbors might comment on the gradual increase in the size of a woman's stomach that was then followed by a sudden flattening out. In the case of Susanna Vailes, for example,

¹² Initially there were a lot of prosecutions based on the 1624 Act, but “the Act came to be observed with less and less strictness” and was eventually mostly dismissed (Loughnan 2012, p. 206). The Act was criticized for its severity, haphazard application, and its reliance upon evidence that increasingly seemed less useful—concealing the birth of an illegitimate child was simply not enough to prove intentional murder. The statute was eventually completely reformed in 1803, at which point the mother was no longer responsible for the burden of proof. Instead, like in other felonies, the prosecution was responsible for the evidence (McLaren 1984, pp. 129–35).

neighbors noted “her body to be much grown” and that she “was of late very big-bellied, and now was grown very swampe again” (Gowing 2003, p. 140). The explanation for such a change is of a pregnancy followed by birth; however, as one witness noted, even this is not entirely certain and adds a qualification: “think she is with child, but durst not ascertain it” (ibid.) The assumption of pregnancy based on belly size seems to follow an expected logic about the reading of pregnancy—a growing stomach implies a growing fetus. But, as this witness explains, pregnancy does not always register in a consistent manner and it could signal something else. This uncertainty allowed women to present alternate explanations.

Women refuted claims about the changing size of their bodies in a variety of ways, ranging from claims about illness to wearing additional clothing. Jane Browne’s testimony provides a typical example of the association between stomach size and illness: “the reason her belly was so great was that she had ill keeping and ill lodging and went wet of her feet which put up her belly” (Examination of Jane Browne 1674, as cited by Gowing 1997, p. 96). Swollen bellies could be explained as colic, wind, or dropsy. When brought to trial for infanticide, Mary Goodenough was accused of concealing her pregnancy by leaving town and traveling while nearing childbirth. When she was in town long enough to be observed, witnesses described her pregnancy as that which “she also conceal’d under pretence of sickness” (Anonymous 1691–1692, sig. A1r). Women might also explain swelling as a normal symptom of their menstrual cycle. Gertrude Law, when examined in court, said that she was “much swelled in her body by reason that for the space of eighteen weeks before that time she had not had the benefit of nature after the custom of women” and said she had not delivered a baby (as cited by Gowing 1997, p. 98). Although the cessation of menstruation seems like a straightforward sign in the determination of pregnancy, Cathy McClive has argued that early modern medical theories about menstruation and reproduction demonstrate an ambiguous relationship between the two (McClive 2002, pp. 209–27).

Women sometimes eschewed a bodily explanation completely and said that they were simply wearing more clothing because of a change in weather. In *The Bloody Mother*, the accused Jane Hattersley is described as being extremely skilled in hiding multiple illegitimate pregnancies and subsequent births before she is caught and brought to trial: “she deceiu’d many, for she so cunningly blinded the eyes of people, in the time that her sinne must needs appeare, with loose lacing, tucking, and other odde tricks that she vsed, that to the very instant minute of her deliuerie, none could perceiue she was with childe” (Brewer 1610, sig. A4v). Hattersley kept her pregnancy secret by disguising the shape of her body with clothing; the actual moment of delivery was perhaps when she could no longer hide it.

If witnesses were not around for the moment of birth, they were often left guessing about a former pregnancy—like with Mary Goodenough, who left town with a swollen belly and came back with a flattened one. Thus, although changes in belly size provided one method for discerning pregnancy, assessment of a recent pregnancy could also involve searching a woman’s body, including the inspection of a woman’s breasts for evidence of lactation. While the Jury of Matrons officially carried out this task, women sometimes informally examined each other on their own: “with no official prompting women asked to see each other’s breasts, or squeezed them without asking” (Gowing 1997, p. 91). In these scenarios, breasts were inspected for “fresh milk”, the presence of which was believed to indicate a recent pregnancy and subsequent childbirth (ibid.) It was also believed, however, that women could have milk in their breasts even if they had never been pregnant (ibid., n. 19). Sometimes the presence of milk was attributed to menstruation or another aspect of a woman’s specific reproductive cycle. To make matters even more confusing, women would sometimes describe their bodies as having particular traits—such as the production of breast milk—that they simply attributed to their unique (but normative) experience of their own bodies. Even when milk was found, then, women still had options for explaining its presence and lactation could be explained as a bodily process connected to menstruation. In early modern medical theory, the link between menstruation and breast milk was explained through a belief in a series of veins that connected the womb and breasts (Churchill

2012, p. 124). Ultimately, the presence of “fresh milk” could be used as evidence of pregnancy in order to accuse a woman of recent childbirth followed by infanticide; at the same time, however, it could be reinscribed into a woman’s personal narrative concerning her particular bodily experience and as something entirely distinct from pregnancy.

In addition to the assessment of women’s bodies for signs of recent pregnancy, juries would look to evidence of the event of childbirth within her residence as well as in the testimonies of those who claimed to have witnessed the birth in some capacity. Women’s sheets, for example, would be examined for stains that might result from recent childbirth. Again, this evidence could be attributed to something other than childbirth, such as menstruation. When questioned about her bed linens, for example, Jane Browne claimed that the stains on her sheets were from “the common course of nature with other women that have no children” (Examination of Jane Browne 1674, as cited by Gowing 1997, p. 96). A search of the home would also invariably include a search for the body of the dead infant. Even with this seemingly indisputable evidence, however, women could still deny these convictions. In *The Unnatural Mother*, Elizabeth Kennet is accused of killing her infant after bones are discovered in her fire, but Kennet claims that the bones are simply from the lamb that she had for dinner the night before. Although she eventually admits that they are the bones of her infant, she has a defense for her actions: “she own’d she burnt her child, but withall alledging it was a Monster, by having of two Heads, and she was asham’d the world should see it, which made her do what she did” (Anonymous 1697, sig. 1). Kennet’s first defense—disguising the infant’s remains as something else—does not work; nevertheless, she maintains that a monstrous birth forced her to kill what was not really a human child. Although lining up the bodies of dead infant and living mother seems like a sound method for retroactively confirming pregnancy, women still attempted to rewrite what seemed like the birth of a child as something else entirely. Even if they did not go so far as to claim that the child was actually a monster, they may refer to what had come from their bodies as “scapes”, “slips”, “gristle”, or “shapeless lumps.” In such cases, women asserted their innocence based upon the fact that what their bodies produced was not an infant.

As these examples demonstrate, women could take evidence assembled against them from various stages in the reproductive process and present it as indicative of something other than pregnancy. One significant stage that allowed for further flexibility in the narration of pregnancy occurred about three months after conception—the moment of quickening. A woman might even admit that she had conceived, but that she never actually gave birth to a child. In this situation, a number of signs could point to a potential pregnancy, but a woman could insist that what seemed like childbirth was actually something else. Women were able to maintain at least some authority over this narrative because they were the only ones who could detect when the child had quickened, understood as the moment in which the fetus made its presence known to the mother (Gowing 2003, p. 122). It was thought to occur approximately 90 days after conception and, until the nineteenth century in England, was also believed to be when a child attained its soul (Eccles 1982, p. 153). Losing a fetus before this moment, then, would not be abortion or infanticide, and a woman could plausibly say that although something had been growing inside of her, she was never technically “with quick child” in a way that would allow for punishment under infanticide statutes. Pregnancy was confirmed “internally and tactilely, with only the mother able to confirm that quickening had happened” (Wiesner-Hanks 2008, p. 84). The ways in which early moderns conceptualized the stages of the pregnancy can be seen in the post-trial summaries of cases that involved pleading the belly.¹³ It was possible to find, for example, that a woman was “with child” but “not with quick child”. An indicative example of this is demonstrated in a case where three women had pleaded the belly, each with a different result: “a Jury of Matrons being empannell’d they found the first to be with Child, but not Quick; the Second with Quick Child, and

¹³ In early modern England, women convicted of capital offenses could use “plead the belly” as a way to postpone punishment until after childbirth. See (Edgar 1632, p. 207).

the Third not with Child" (*Old Bailey Proceedings Online* 1714). The difference between the verdicts for the first and second women (both "with child") demonstrates the flexible status of the pregnant body.

This flexibility exists not just for those determining the reproductive status of the women, but also for the women whose bodies are being assessed. A telling example comes from the case of Anne Peace, a single woman for whom a neighbor's complaint about her "very suspicious and lewd life" led to a search of her home. Neighbors went to her house and discovered both the body of a dead infant and that Anne Peace had "fresh milk" in her breasts. Anne Peace's testimony includes a portrayal of the various stages of conception, emphasizing the fact that although at a certain point she realized that she was "with child", it was never actually viable. Peace describes herself as "feelinge her selve very Sickly & troubled in her Body, beeing then with Child as she Confesseth did then & there Coure downe to make Watter, And then & there with very much payne, she was delivered of a man Child dead & still born, beinge than about the halfe birth And likewise sayth and doth Confesse that she never Felt the said Child alive or Stirr in her said body Nether did she desyre any help of wemmen att the delivery of the said Child, not afterwards did make the same knowne to any" (Examination of Anne Peace 1659, as cited by [Gowing 2004](#), p. 49). Her account combines various aspects of the identification of pregnancy that I have so far discussed: She at first confuses the signs of conception with illness, and the birth event comes as a surprise even after admitting that she is pregnant. After the stillbirth, she maintains that she was never aware of the child being alive within her body. Before she gives this evidence, however, she claims that the alleged child was a thing "like a gristle" but "what it was she could not tell" (*ibid.*) It is only later, when she provides her testimony, that the "thing" becomes a child—but, significantly, an unquickened child. The changing nature of her story speaks to the ambiguous and confusing nature of pregnancy, both for those assessing it and those accused of hiding it.

The use of quickening to evaluate pregnancy represents a fraught solution to the complex problem of interpreting the specific reproductive stages of a woman's body. As I have shown through my explanation of evidence in infanticide trials, the assessment of pregnancy was consistent only in its lack of definitive certainty. Women accused of infanticide thus worked to recast what seemed like bodily evidence of their pregnancies as something else—their swollen bellies could be attributed to illness or extra clothing, and milk in their breasts could be defended as an aspect of menstruation. The ability to describe the workings of the reproductive female body as so many different things allowed women to construct a particular narrative of pregnancy. Linguistically, then, women were able to control narratives of conception, pregnancy, quickening, and childbirth. This was a complicated site for resistance, however, because woman's words were often met with skepticism and the need for additional assessments. In short, the ambiguity of pregnancy allows for two possible defenses, both of which depend upon claims concerning specific knowledge—or lack of knowledge—about the reproductive female body.

4. Infanticide and the Dramatization of Reproductive Knowledge

In this section, I examine how the flexibility of this epistemology allows female characters in drama to distance themselves from the crime of infanticide by reconstructing narratives of both pregnancy and childbirth. Although written over half a century apart, *The Tragedie of Gorboduc* ([Norton and Sackville \[1565\] 1971](#)) and *Thierry and Theodoret* ([Beaumont and Fletcher \[1621\] 1905](#)) both feature mothers who deny responsibility for the murder of their children by rhetorically severing the supposedly inherent biological ties between mother and child, thus disrupting conventional portrayals of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. With long speeches that detail how and why the children in question are not their own, the mothers' words here are similar to women's testimonies in infanticide trials, where narrative reconstructions of pregnancy and reproduction were used to explain what seemed like pregnancy or childbirth as something else. In historical trials of infanticide and staged portrayals of murderous mothers, narrating pregnancy is particularly significant for women attempting to repudiate charges either by describing their pregnancy as something else, or claiming a lack of awareness about the status of their reproductive bodies.

Gorboduc has been described as a precursor to *King Lear*, and the catalyst that drives the plot is much the same: Gorboduc is the King of Britain and decides to divide his kingdom between his two sons, despite warnings from his wife and his lords. This inevitably leads to conflict between the brothers, strife within the kingdom, and culminates in the deaths of both sons as well as Gorboduc and his wife, Videna. Although Videna plays a key role in the death of her son Porrex, she is adamant that she is not responsible and supports this position with her rhetorical rejection that he is her son, going so far as to reconstruct the narrative of his birth so that she was never pregnant with him in the first place.

From the outset, Videna explains her disapproval of Gorboduc's plan in terms of how it will affect Ferrex, her oldest and favorite son. Dividing the kingdom equally between the brothers will elevate Porrex to the same status as Ferrex—something that Videna wants to stop from happening. When the brothers turn against each other and Porrex murders Ferrex, Videna immediately plots her revenge. The first scene of Act 4 is entirely dedicated to Videna explaining that Porrex is *not* her son, that it is impossible for her to have given birth to him, and that he is essentially a changeling child. Videna's speech can be separated into three distinct claims, all of which build towards a rejection of Porrex as her own flesh and blood. She first describes Porrex as false, a traitor to "kin and kind" (4.1.31).¹⁴ She then questions whether it is possible for Porrex, who supposedly shared a womb with Ferrex, to have turned against his own brother. Finally, she concludes that Porrex cannot possibly be of their kin and kind, denying her own involvement in his birth. In the end, her revised narrative clarifies that he is not her child and that, because of this, she can kill him without it being considered the murder of her own offspring.

Immediately after she describes Ferrex as her beloved child and the joy of her life, she turns to a very negative description of Porrex: "O hateful wretch!/O heinous traitor both to heaven to earth!" (4.1.27-28). She casts Porrex as Ferrex's opposite and takes this characteristic to the extreme by describing Porrex as being antithetical even to the concept of a familial relationship: "Traitor to kin and kind, to sire and me,/To thine own flesh, and traitor to thyself" (4.1.230-31). To portray Porrex as a traitor to his family repositions him so that he is not of their "kin and kind" but something separate. She does, however, admit her own contribution to his conception when she refers to her womb as the place "where thou in dismal hour receivdst life" (4.1.52). Nevertheless, she expresses disbelief and outrage that one womb could produce two such opposite beings, and she later goes on to revise her body's role in his birth.

Videna concludes her speech with nearly 20 lines dedicated solely to creating and then emphasizing the distance between herself and Porrex. It is important to note that she does not simply defend her hatred for Porrex by reminding the audience of his murderous actions against Ferrex. Rather, she takes care to explain her anger in a way that depends upon rejecting a biologically-based connection between mother and child. She begins by questioning her position in his birth: "Shall I still think that from this womb thou sprung?/That thee I bare? Or take thee for my son?/No, traitor, no; I thee refuse for mine" (4.1.63-65). She quickly answers her own questions here, refusing him as her son and denying her body's complicity: "Never, o wretch, this womb conceived thee,/Nor never bode I painful throes for thee" (4.1.67-68). She then refers to him as a "changeling" and reiterates that he is "not [her] child", thus emphasizing that he cannot possibly have come from her womb; there is no way that he could be her child and she his mother (4.1.69). Instead of issuing from her womb, she contends, Porrex is a "monster of nature's work,/ [who] never suck'd the milk of woman's breast" (4.1.71-72). She here relies upon language that was often used against monstrous mothers and deflects it by directing it towards Porrex. Videna provides numerous possibilities for Porrex's birth throughout this entire speech, ranging from him being a changeling child, to being nursed by a tiger, to being

¹⁴ All citations from *Gorboduc* refer to (Norton and Sackville [1565] 1971).

monstrously bred by nature. Each of her explanations for his conception, birth, and upbringing further severs a biological connection between them.

At the end of her speech she simultaneously rejects Porrex as her child while underscoring her position as Ferrex's mother: "Dost thou not know that Ferrex's mother lives,/That I loved him more dearly than herself?/And doth she live, and is not venged on thee?" (4.1.79–81). She here contrasts her own position as Ferrex's mother with a reminder that she is not Porrex's mother. By the end of this speech, she has created a discursive separation between herself and Porrex and is thus ready to have him killed. Even though it seems that she is taking the same traitorous actions of which she has accused Porrex, she has fashioned Porrex's birth so that he is no longer her kin; therefore, she can kill him without being a monstrous mother—or even, quite simply, a mother. By rewriting conception and birth, she rewrites familial and filial ties as well.

In the following scene, Videna's response to Porrex's crime is immediately contrasted to Gorboduc's. Although Gorboduc also accuses Porrex of having committed an unnatural act in which he "swerv[ed] from kind", Gorboduc does not reject him as his son (4.2.15). By calling him an "accursed child" and giving him a chance to defend his actions, he insists upon the familial bond that Videna entirely denies (4.2.142). Whereas Videna uses the language of monstrous motherhood and monstrous birth to place herself in a separate category from her son, Gorboduc accepts Porrex as his child, reinforcing the idea that even a badly behaved son remains his child. Videna's response, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of child murder because she defines Porrex as anything *but* her child.

As Videna's speech demonstrates, defenses for any type of child murder often rely upon a distinction between the bodies of mother and child that, which when taken to the extreme, creates a situation where the crime of infanticide is impossible because the woman in question never gave birth to a child in the first place. To make this rhetorical move, a woman's narrative must either describe the alleged child as not human (whether that means it is a monstrous birth or simply another bodily form, such as congealed blood or a tumor), or that she was ignorant of having been pregnant or entering childbirth in the first place. Although Videna does not plead ignorant to either pregnancy or childbirth, she does fashion Porrex's birth into a monstrous one, claiming that she could not possibly have created such a child. In refashioning infanticide as the murder of someone who is not her child, Videna's words have much in common with popular portrayals of murder mothers and women on trial who create situations where they rejected both motherhood and a biological connection to the child. In these cases, child murder is defensible because it is not a child that has been killed. Like the women on trial for infanticide, Videna is performing this narrative for an audience; her speech at the end of Act 4 is meant to explain that because she has written herself out of the birth narrative, the proposed murder of Porrex is not a murder of her child. In cases of historical neonaticide, of course, this recasting occurs fairly soon after the alleged moment of birth. For Videna, however, this is a delayed rewriting of the birth event where she goes back to conception, pregnancy, and birth in order to make a full-grown child into someone who has no familial connection.

Although Videna's speech is meant to persuade the audience of her justification in what she has now identified as something other than child murder, she does not actually try to convince other characters either of the monstrosity of Porrex's birth or that she rejects the idea that he was born of her womb. Her entire explanation, however, hints at the power that comes with controlling bodily narratives. Such control is more thoroughly explored in *Thierry and Theodoret*, where Queen Brunhalt engages with a more direct manipulation of her reproductive narrative by convincing one son that she was never even pregnant with the other, thereby inciting fratricide.

With Brunhalt's husband dead, her two sons each oversee different kingdoms. She initially resides in France, ruled by her older son Theodoret, but later moves to Austrasia, ruled by Thierry. This move is sparked by her own interest in turning the brothers against one another as she searches for a position of power within their kingdoms. The play begins with an incident between Brunhalt and her son Theodoret that incites her to plot his death. Theodoret criticizes his mother for living what

he sees as an immodest, licentious lifestyle and informs her that he is sending her to a monastery for ten days. Brunhalt is displeased with this verdict and invokes her status as a mother in order to dissuade Theodoret from his decision. When Theodoret refuses to give in to Brunhalt's insistence that her various maternal sacrifices are worthy of more respect, Brunhalt proclaims her desire to turn against her own motherhood. Addressing herself, she asserts:

From this accursed hour, forget thou bor'st him,
Or any part of thy blood gave him living,
Let him be to thee an Antipathy,
A thing thy nature sweats at, and turns backward. (A3r)¹⁵.

Brunhalt here severs the maternal tie that she previously attempted to emphasize in order to persuade her son to be loyal to her. To do this, she first commands herself to forget the role she played in giving life to her son, comparing the current "accursed hour" to the one in which she gave birth to him. She bids herself to remember the present betrayal of her son so that she may forget that she birthed him and that her own blood gave him life. She refers to Theodoret as an "Antipathy", suggesting that she and he are naturally incompatible—a concept that is at odds with conventional representations of maternal relationships. Brunhalt thus purposefully turns against what seems natural as she asserts that she and her son are "naturally" at odds with one another. She positions herself as being in control of this representation, and she continues to use the portrayals of pregnancy, maternity, and childbirth to influence those around her.

After setting up the unnaturalness of her relationship to Theodoret, she muses upon her course of action against him: "Throw all the mischiefs on him that thy self,/Or woman worse than thou art, have invented,/And kill him drunk, or doubtfull" (A3r). Brunhalt vocalizes her intention to "kill him drunk, or doubtfull" because her son has accused her specifically, and women generally, of various licentious activities. She decides to take such accusations and turn those "mischiefs" toward her own son, threatening his death as well. The interactions between Theodoret and Brunhalt, and her own explanation of how she will reject the child that she no longer views as her own, show that she is aware of a discourse of maternal self-sacrifice that is at odds with turning against one's child. This is similar to the portrayal of infanticidal mothers as unnatural—but here Brunhalt attempts to reverse this representation in her declaration that the very existence of her son is naturally incompatible with her own desires.

Although she curses the hour that Theodoret was born, Brunhalt—characteristic of other murdering mothers in early modern drama—does not actually commit neonatal infanticide. She does, however, have both of her children killed. This does not bode well for her reputation, and she is characterized throughout the play in terms of her failed motherhood and frequently reminded by others that her actions do not conform to maternal expectations. The play begins, for example, with her son Theodoret accusing her of being "so bad a mother" that she has lost "a mother's name" (A2r). After Brunhalt has Theodoret killed, Thierry also questions her maternal status by accusing her of forgetting the name "mother" and wonders if she has lost the natural aspects of motherhood that he thinks she should possess. In these repeated reminders about what it means to be named as a mother, Thierry and Theodoret place Brunhalt in a category that she continually rejects. Similar to Videna, this rejection is driven by her own desire to reformulate her kinship group in she is no longer a mother and Thierry and Theodoret are no longer her sons. Brunhalt uses her own past experiences of pregnancy, supposed miscarriage, and birth to construct a particular narrative about her own reproductive history, which in turn allows her to control certain events around her.

The significance of Brunhalt's ability to manipulate narratives of reproduction is particularly evident in her defense for Theodoret's murder. After she admits to being responsible for Theodoret's

¹⁵ All citations from Thierry and Theodoret refer to (Beaumont and Fletcher [1621] (1905)). Although Philip Massinger was not listed on the original title page, the current critical consensus includes him as a contributor to the play

murder, Thierry asks: “Wh[i]ther did nature start, when you conceiv’d? / A birth so unlike woman? Say, what part/Did not consent to make a son of him” (C4r). Thierry here struggles to understand at which point, from conception to birth, Brunhalt refused to accept and treat Theodoret as her son, an act he identifies as unnatural. Brunhalt responds by forcing Thierry to question his own knowledge about his sibling: “Ha, ha, a son of mine! . . . My son, thy brother?” (C4r). She then continues to explain that Theodoret was not, in fact, her child. Although her husband had badly wanted an heir, it took her three years to conceive and resulted in a miscarriage that occurred when she was out alone riding her horse. Brunhalt claims that when she fell from the horse she “lost both [her] child and [her] hopes”, which drove her to steal an “unlucky brat” from the gardener and raise it as her own (C4r). She reassures Thierry that he was born naturally, after she had taken the changeling child. Thierry is quick to accept her version of events and even praises Brunhalt for her decision to have him killed—he was not, after all, a rightful heir. Later, when Thierry announces his intention to marry Theodoret’s daughter, the possibility of incest forces Brunhalt to admit that the story of Theodoret’s birth was false and that he was not actually a changeling child. Thierry no longer knows what to believe, and Brunhalt relies upon this inability to definitively verify narratives of pregnancy and childbirth—particularly when there are no witnesses—in order to get what she desires.

After it is confirmed that Brunhalt has poisoned Thierry, the descriptions of her actions resonate with critiques based not on her being a bad woman, but being a bad mother. Invectives hurled against her include: “toad, viper . . . unnatural parricide, cruel, bloody woman”, “dogfish, leech, caterpillar”, “monster”, “mother of mischief”, and “murdering mother . . . malicious mother” (D10r, E1v). These descriptions clearly emphasize the ways that other characters have categorized Brunhalt as a monstrous mother. Indeed, this list of names recalls the titles of popular texts concerning infanticidal mothers, such as *The Bloody Mother*, *The Unnatural Mother*, or *Deeds against Nature*, and *Monsters by kinde*. All of these texts reinforce the idea that the act of child murder is entirely at odds with nature. In *A Pittillesse Mother*, for example, Margaret Vincent is described as a “Mother who by nature should have cherisht them [her children] with her own Body . . . but she more cruell then the viper, the invenomd serpent, the snake, or any Beast whatsoever, against all kind, takes away those lives to whom she gave first life” (Anonymous 1616, sig. A3v). Because of Margaret’s unnatural actions, the writer describes her as a “Creature not deserving Mother’s name” (ibid., sig. A4r). Brunhalt, however, has her own opinions about what she should be called and why, and how it relates to “natural” motherhood. In response to the accusations that she has forgotten what it means to be a mother, Brunhalt emphasizes the aspects of maternity that have been used against her throughout her experiences as a woman. Although she recognizes that following her own will has ultimately led to her downfall, she exits the play by addressing the unfairness of this and what it has cost her to be labeled as a mother:

Preach not to me of punishments, or feares,
 Or what I ought to be, but what I am,
 A woman in her liberall will defe[at]jed,
 In all her greatnesse crost, in pleasure blasted,
 My angers have bin laught at, my ends slighted,
 And all those glories that had crownd my fortunes,
 Suffer’d by blasted vertue to be scatter’d,
 I am the fruitfull mother of these angers,
 And what such have done, reade, and know thy ruine. (E2r)

Brunhalt here describes how her rejection of the restrictions placed upon her as a mother allowed her to control reproductive narratives and thus put her own plans in action. Perhaps instead of thinking of her only in terms of being a biological mother, then, we should think of her as she does—a more abstract version of motherhood, related to the suffering that she has undergone as a woman trying to achieve certain things for herself. Although Brunhalt has achieved motherhood in the sense that others want to emphasize—the biological production of children—she thinks of her position as a mother in terms of the plans she has labored over. By referring to herself as “the fruitfull mother of these

angers”, Brunhalt identifies what she been most successful at reproducing—the anger that women experience when they are told that being good, virtuous mothers is natural. As a mother, Brunhalt is not supposed to seek glory or have self-motivated ambitions. Rather, she should have lived a virtuous life through good deeds and decisions concerning her children instead of seeking power via attempts to alternately elevate or destroy her sons. By subverting these expectations, Brunhalt demonstrates the discursive power of a woman’s role in relaying knowledge about reproduction. She uses her own past experiences of pregnancy, supposed miscarriage, and childbirth to construct a particular narrative about her own reproductive history, which in turn allows her to control certain events around her.

Obviously, Brunhalt and Videna are not identical to the infanticidal mothers in the historical record; they cannot be understood simply as dramatic renderings of the women accused of infanticide that were discussed in popular literature, recorded in legal documents, or singled out as the subjects of the 1624 bastardy statute. However, they are representative of the type of murderous mothers found on stage in early modern England—female characters that are described as unnatural perversions of maternity and who use the defensive strategies available for women on trial. In response to such negative portrayals, characters like Brunhalt and Videna manipulate the language of monstrous reproduction to make their children seem like the aberrations of the nature—and in so doing create a way to justify child murder. Like the real women defending themselves against infanticide, these characters rewrite certain aspects of the reproductive narrative to support their claims that they are not mothers, sometimes from the point of conception and pregnancy all the way to childbirth and child-raising. Plays that feature murdering mothers rely upon linguistic maneuvering to create a preemptive defense against infanticide by reconfiguring the events of conception and pregnancy in order to either deny that they happened or to construe the child as unnatural and monstrous. All of this careful rhetorical rewriting is done in the service of separating the bodies of mother and child so that they are no longer linked by biology, thus creating a situation in which what might later be labeled as infanticide is not an accurate description, whether that is because she has rejected the child as her own, was perhaps never pregnant, and/or did not give birth to the “child” in question. For women defending themselves against accusations of infanticide, the illegibility of the pregnant body and the ambiguity of its attendant reproductive stages of conception and childbirth enable a degree of narrative resistance. This is seen particularly well within the drama, where representations of pregnancy pleas and infanticide are bound up in the narratives that female characters construct and reconstruct about their reproductive bodies. These constructions depend upon an epistemology of pregnancy that is flexible and able to encompass both contradiction and complexity.

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