

Hidden Mothers and Poetic Pregnancy in Women's Writing (1818-present day)

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Abstract

This thesis investigates representations of the pregnant body in works by women writers in the period from 1818 to the present day, tracing the multiple connections between the actual bodily experience of pregnancy and its use as metaphor for literary production. Setting a diverse corpus of work by women poets and novelists in dialogue with medical constructions of the pregnant body – from eighteenth-century anatomical atlases to contemporary ultrasound images – it offers a provocatively feminist contribution to the field, by defining ‘poetic pregnancy’ as a fertile, corporeal and important variant on the childbirth metaphor. In so doing, it both explores women's writing as a site of resistance to the objectification of the pregnant subject by medical discourse and traces the ways in which this might also challenge traditional constructions of the dominant male canon.

Chapter I explores the early stages of pregnancy, from Consummation to Quickening, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* (1857). By examining Barrett Browning's poet-heroine as a pregnant subject, it considers the gestation of the book/baby in relation to nineteenth-century theories of ‘maternal impressions’. Chapter II, on Miscarriage, begins by conceptualising the nineteenth-century female body underneath the corset, before investigating what happens when the girdle is unclasped and the waistline is dropped during the early twentieth century, by uncovering the non-reproductive, ‘mis-carrying’ silhouette of the flapper in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936). Chapter III identifies and explores the phenomenon of ‘Ultrasound poetry’ written by contemporary women poets such as Kathleen Jamie, Pat Borthwick and Leontia Flynn, a phenomenon spawned from twentieth- and twenty-first century developments in New Reproductive Technologies. This chapter analyses two particular characteristics of the ultrasound poem: firstly, the conjuring of an

unspecified, atavistic past; secondly, the emergence of the futuristic and spectral foetal spaceman. Chapter IV, on Labour, moves back to the nineteenth century, by examining Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*. Situating the text in terms of its medical and scientific context – the rise of the man-midwife and the entry of the anatomised headless image of the pregnant torso into popular medical discourse – this chapter offers a fresh way of reading *Frankenstein*, not only as a 'birth myth', but as a text engaged with the increasingly medicalised pregnant body.

This thesis's structure thus replicates thematically the rounded shape of the pregnant belly, offering a critical re/membering of the pregnant subject that foregrounds both the embodiment of pregnancy and its metaphorical significance for these women writers. Overall, it argues that the pregnant body, which is often Gothicised, obscured and made spectral in representations, is also resistant, disruptive and potently corporeal. The metaphor of poetic pregnancy, like the childbirth metaphor, is not fixed and singular, but comprised of metaphorical matrices, which generate multiple meanings.

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Introduction

The Conception of the Pregnant Subject

I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,
With matrices in body and in brain?

– Amy Lowell, 'The Sisters'¹

Jacques-Pierre Maygrier's nineteenth-century illustrations of the stages of pregnancy exemplify the conception of the pregnant subject in medical discourse: headless, disrobed and presented in a manner that suggests that pregnancy involves a set of several clearly demarcated stages of physical growth and expansion (Fig. 1). Precisely rendered, these images show the model's body at each trimester.



Fig. 1²

¹ Amy Lowell, 'The Sisters' (1922), in *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, ed. by Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 21-26 (pp. 21-22).

² Jacques-Pierre Maygrier, Plate XXV, 'Histoire de la grossesse. Etat naturel, 3 mois, 6 mois, 9 mois', in *Nouvelles démonstrations d'accouchements. Avec des planches en taille-douce, accompagnées d'un texte raisonné, propre à en faciliter l'explication* (Paris: Béchét, 1822[-27]), p. 73. Image available from Wellcome Images.

The abdomen, once clearly defined and muscular in its pre-pregnant state, becomes swollen and rounded; the navel protrudes and the breasts appear enlarged, their nipples pronounced and uncovered. Maygrier's illustrations are reminiscent of the dissected pregnant torsos found in William Hunter's eighteenth-century atlas, which follow a similar realist aesthetic.³ Hunter's 1774 *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures*, intended as a teaching tool for the medical reader (primarily the professional man-midwife and obstetrician), is comprised of a series of images of dissected pregnant torsos, at various stages of gestation. Hunter employed the Dutch artist Jan Van Rymdyk to illustrate these specimens, placing emphasis on capturing what could be seen, rather than upon what the medical gaze expected to see.⁴ Hunter's pregnant specimens are all taken from real mothers who died suddenly during childbirth. Their corpses are rendered in immaculate mimetic detail, but they too are headless and amputated at the thigh, or simply represented as womb-vessels for the stillborn child.

Unlike Hunter's bodies, however, Maygrier's torsos are intended to represent the living pregnant body, rather than a body arrested in its pregnant development due to sudden death during childbirth. From the identical positioning and uniform presentation of these bodies, we can assume that the pregnant subject depicted is the same woman in all four images. Her identity is anonymous, but firmly rooted in her reproductive capacity. Each

³ William Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi: Tabulis Illustrata [The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus: Exhibited in Figures]* (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1774). Hunter's atlas is discussed further in Chapter IV (Labour).

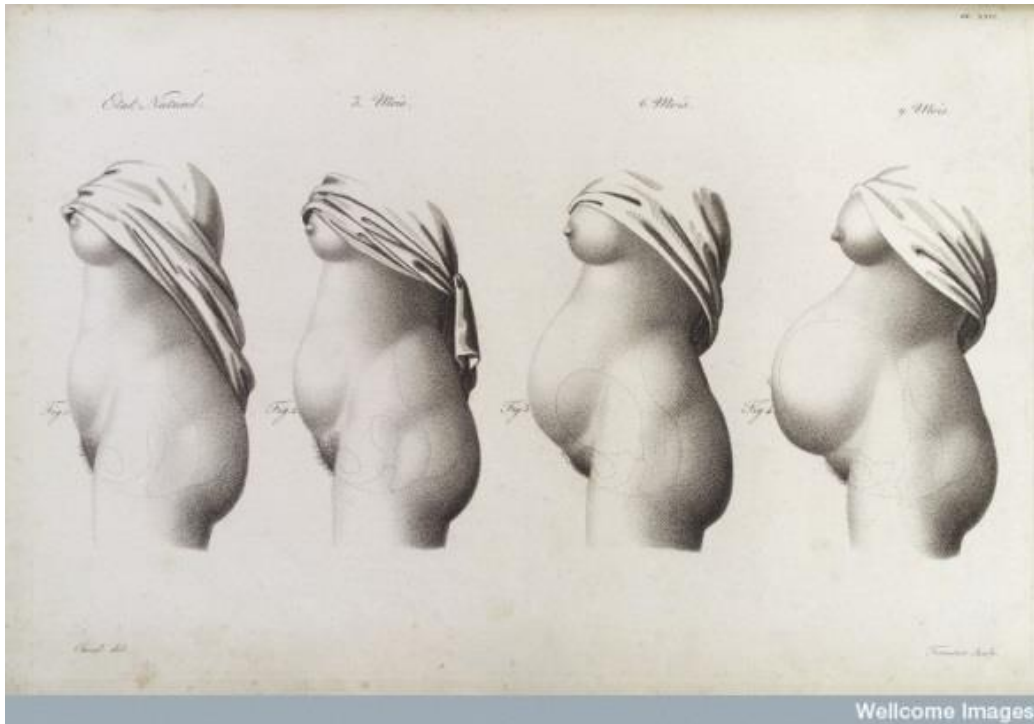
⁴ This is in line with Enlightenment principles of achieving systematic knowledge of nature through the application of reason. In her obituary of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays characterised the Enlightened 'vigorous mind' as containing 'a spirit of enterprise, a passion for experiment; a liberal curiosity, [which] urges them to quit beaten paths, to explore untried ways, to burst the fetters of prescription, and to acquire wisdom by an individual experience'. See Mary Hays, 'Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft', *The Annual Necrology*, 1797-98 (1800), p. 411, quoted in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. by Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. xv.

image is therefore a snapshot of her pregnancy at a particular trimester, a temporal marker allocated and given significance by medical discourse.⁵ Another similar image in Maygrier's work depicts the pregnant subject's body in profile, so we can view her increasingly protruding abdomen in all its drama (Fig. 2). If her body appears changed in the first set of images, this second set intensifies the difference in size from her non-pregnant silhouette to her full-term silhouette through its composition.⁶ Were this final image not surrounded by others showing its precedent stages, it might seem shocking. It renders the pregnant subject as surprisingly large and corporeal – perhaps even grotesquely so, to her medical readers.⁷ This woman is with child, her uterus distended and full to bursting.

⁵ Clare Hanson points out that, 'despite the development of obstetrics in this period, many of the clinical aspects of pregnancy were little understood'. She notes in particular that the perceived duration of pregnancy during the eighteenth century was not exact; the law assumed that pregnancy lasted nine calendar months or forty weeks but this was subject to debate. See Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 46. According to the OED the etymology of 'trimester' comes from the French noun *trimestre* and Latin adjective *trimestris*. Its earliest use is in 1821, when it refers to a journey of three months. In 1916 it is used specifically with regards to pregnancy. See 'trimester, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 11 June 2015].

⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a silhouette as '[a] portrait obtained by tracing the outline of a profile, head, or figure by means of its shadow or in some other way, and filling in the whole with black; an outline portrait cut out of black paper; a figure or picture drawn or printed in solid black.' Although, strictly speaking, these images are *not* silhouettes, I use the term here because it resonates with later arguments, particularly the pregnant silhouette discussed in Chapter II (Miscarriage). Positioning these images as examples of the pregnant silhouette emphasises the ways in which pregnant subjects have been defined, shaped (and shaded or obscured) against a background of various contextual material, including medical discourse and fashion. Indeed, as Chapter II explores, pregnant silhouettes also comprise '[t]he contour or outline of a garment'. Furthermore, paying the pregnant subject critical attention allows us to move beyond - and fill out - another meaning of silhouette, '[a] slight verbal sketch or description in outline of a person'. See 'silhouette, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 11 June 2015]. Iris Marion Young, meanwhile, foregrounds the pregnant subject's experience of looking at, and touching, her silhouette: 'I turn to the side and stroke the taut flesh that protrudes under my breasts.' See Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *On Female Bodily Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 41-61 (p. 54).

⁷ Mary Russo's work on the grotesque female body – particularly, the 'grotto-esque' space of the womb – is explored further in relation to *Aurora Leigh* in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening). See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

Fig. 2⁸

The pregnant abdomen at full term has been long established as a source of both fascination and anxiety.⁹ For instance, according to Margrit Shildrick, the pregnant body is 'leaky' and uncontainable, and it is for this very reason that it has been considered monstrous and threatening.¹⁰ Simultaneously invulnerable and uncontrollable, the potency of the pregnant body – and the potential contamination of its leakiness – renders it horrific and compelling:

[I]n particular, the pregnant body is not one vulnerable to external threat, but actively and visibly deformed from within. Women are out of control, and contained, unpredictable, leaky: they are, in short, monstrous. [...] The pregnant body itself is always a trope of immense power in that it speaks to an inherent capacity to problematise the boundaries of self and other.¹¹

⁸ Jacques-Pierre Maygrier, Plate XXVI, '*Histoire de la grossesse. Etat naturel, 3 mois, 6 mois, 9 mois*' (Side view), in *Nouvelles démonstrations d'accouchements*, p. 74. Image available from Wellcome Images.

⁹ For instance, Lori Schroeder Haslem explores the ways in which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century representations of pregnancy and birth so often reveal anxiety and fear of the monstrous female body in 'Monstrous Issues: The Uterus as Riddle in Early Modern Medical Texts', in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (2011; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 34-50.

¹⁰ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 16-17.

¹¹ Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 31.

Indeed, there is something about the pregnant body at full term that is particularly disquieting – it is a troublingly *vocal* body that 'speaks'. Shildrick's argument suggests that the pregnant body elicits anxiety because it has the capacity to confound definitions of identity all on its own. Since the pregnant body disrupts the division between self and other, containing the bodies of both mother and baby, when it is at full term it is at its most corporeal and disturbing. The gravid uterus is close to the crowning moment of childbirth, the moment at which mother and baby are both connected and imminently separable.¹²

The pregnant subject's depiction in Maygrier's text thus makes her palatable for a medical readership being educated in the science of professional male midwifery. Made an object, classified, categorised and safely bound in these pages, she is anonymous and silent, valued only as a specimen text, a means of conveying through visual representation what pregnancy is. The drama of her physical transformation, which creates a second subject, a child, is exhibited in a mode that allows the medical professional to look at and within the female body directly in ways that he could not necessarily examine a living pregnant patient.¹³ Effectively immobilised by the sheet that is knotted around her upper thighs, this woman is represented as both growing and suspended in this growth, both modestly covered and obscenely exposed. Her legs are shrouded and bound, but the same material has been pulled up in order to reveal her abdomen, upon which the artist has outlined faintly the womb and foetus within. In this dressing of her body by draped, voluminous material which nevertheless exhibits parts of it, she also resembles a classical statue – the

¹² For further discussion of this in relation to the pregnant subject, see Chapter IV (Labour) and my Conclusion (Afterbirth). Though my analysis is literary rather than psychoanalytic, this discussion also relies on Julia Kristeva's highly influential notion of 'the abject'. If, according to Kristeva, the abject occurs at the 'place where meaning collapses', the pregnant body is surely inherently abject. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

¹³ Examining the pregnant patient during this period involved the doctor or *accoucheur* touching her body through or under her garments, with his gaze averted. This was known as 'the touch' and was subject to contemporary satire. Clare Hanson discusses this further in *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, pp. 16-17.

Venus de Milo, goddess of love and associated with sexual desire and fertility.¹⁴ Indeed, the similarity of Maygrier's images to the Venus de Milo suggests that he was deliberately articulating and reproducing for his reader the classical conventions of this representation of the female body, a mode that carried considerable cultural cachet. Such classical images of the female body also appear in eighteenth-century 'anatomical Venuses'. These were elaborate wax models of women that could be opened up to reveal their internal organs, and sometimes included a model foetus. They were naturally coloured, had eyebrows, eyelashes and hair, and were usually displayed reclining seductively, on silk or velvet cushions. Sometimes they wore jewellery, showcasing a femininity both idealised and sexualised. Elaine Showalter notes that the Venuses 'simultaneously evoke an abstract femininity, equate knowledge with looking deeply into the body and emphasise women's reproductive destiny'.¹⁵ Again, this emphasises the medical impulse to look within the female body.¹⁶

Dramatised as not only object but artefact, Maygrier's treatment of the female pregnant subject exemplifies her experience at the hands of medical discourse throughout the nineteenth century and in recent history. The rise of the professional man-midwife and the obstetrician – informed by rationalist Enlightenment principles and keen to look within the pregnant subject's body – resulted in the silencing of the pregnant subject.¹⁷ Made

¹⁴ The Venus de Milo was discovered in 1820 on the island of Melos, and presented to Louis XVIII by the Marquis de Rivière. It depicts the goddess as arrested in time, holding her legs together as fabric drapery falls over her hips. Her torso is uncovered, showing her breasts and abdomen. The statue became instantly famous, and was donated to the Louvre in 1821.

¹⁵ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 128.

¹⁶ This is explored further in Chapter III (Ultrasound). In *Sexual Anarchy* Showalter also emphasises the erotic potential of the anatomical Venuses, and suggests that the image of the female body which they represent recalls Pandora's box (p. 128). The motif of Pandora's box – as a dangerous and transgressive embodied female space – appears in some ultrasound poetry, as I examine further in Chapter III (Ultrasound).

¹⁷ As Hanson shows in *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, from the mid-eighteenth century the field of obstetrics developed significantly (p.14). Childbirth became increasingly medicalised and this coincided with the rise of professional man-midwives, figures whom Ornella Moscucci calls 'carriers of rational, scientific expertise'. See Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 50. I explore these themes in relation to *Frankenstein* in Chapter IV (Labour).

simultaneously the object of beauty and of study, the muse and the specimen, the pregnant subject (as object) was demystified and disempowered. She became pathologised, was rendered nakedly vulnerable, immobile and mute – quite something for the body that *disquiets*. Indeed, this treatment is confirmed in the written accounts of pregnancy found in manuals intended to educate both the medical and lay communities. In his *Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy, from The earliest Stage to The Period of Quickening* (1829) John Morley highlights the apparent (negative) influence of the uterus on the brain and the resulting necessity of ‘more than ordinary forbearance’ on the part of friends, attendants and also, presumably, the expectant father:

When we consider the close sympathy which at all times exists between the uterine organs and the brain, it is not surprising that the nervous system should be considerably influenced by pregnancy: During this period it seems to be unusually susceptible of almost all kinds of external impressions; hence circumstances, which at other times would be regarded as trifling, and excite but little attention, are often now productive of fear and alarm; the temper is more irritable, and the disposition less patient and gentle than natural; there are occasionally depression of spirits and disposition to melancholy.¹⁸

This account depicts the effect of pregnancy on the female brain as almost exclusively detrimental; women must be protected from their own self-sabotaging ‘natural’ bodies, and most importantly, the developing foetus must be protected from his or her mother’s nervous system and susceptibility to external influences.¹⁹ The male doctor, then, holds significant power and responsibility over the health of mothers and their unborn children. His expert opinion counts for everything, while the mother’s is worthless, as indicated by Dr F. Winckel’s *Text-Book of Obstetrics* (1890).²⁰ Winckel argues that in determining

¹⁸ John Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy, from The Earliest Stage to The Period of Quickening. With a Physiological Explanation of the Physical and Mental Changes Produced by the Impregnated Uterus upon the System of the Mother* (London: S. Highley, 1829), p. 13.

¹⁹ The theory of ‘maternal impressions’ – whereby the mother’s imagination can impress upon her unborn child’s body, usually resulting in deformity – is further discussed in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

²⁰ John Morley’s account is symptomatic of a much wider medicalisation and pathologisation of the female body during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Theorists such as Foucault have shown that during this

pregnancy '[m]ovements of the child are a certain sign, when they are confirmed by an experienced examiner, but the statements of the patient have no value'.²¹ Identifying a pregnancy was tricky before diagnostic tools such as X-ray and ultrasound; women relied on the experience of internal touch known as 'quickening', the feeling of the baby stirring within the womb.²² This privileged the pregnant subject's account over that of her doctor or midwife. However, medical discourse made the pregnant subject a passive object rather than an active subject. Pathologised as a body requiring diagnosis and treatment, rather than support and a mode of expression, the pregnant subject found herself speechless and alienated, made spectator in relation to her own body and rendered as a corporeal vessel for the unborn child.

Even in the early twentieth century, the pregnant subject's voice was considered inadequate. Grantly Dick Read published his influential work on 'natural childbirth' throughout the 1930s and 40s. His ideas encouraged mothers to give birth instinctively, supported by sympathetic and understanding medical professionals who were entreated to treat childbirth as a natural process, rather than a cause for intrusive medical intervention. However, Read's texts still covertly privileged the male medical professional over the female pregnant subject:

I shook hands with my baby before his pelvis and legs were born, and while he was still a dusky, crying blue. I heard the first snort he made before he cried at all and if I could put into words the swelling feeling of joy and pride and self-fulfilment

period the body and sexuality became a 'medical and medicalizable object'. See Michel Foucault, 'The Repressive Hypothesis' from *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 301-29 (p. 323). As Foucault discusses in 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', scientific developments during the eighteenth century were considerable, and included the opening of the first maternity hospital in London in 1745, the increasing medicalisation of the family, and the superseding of the child over its parents. Significantly, the female reproductive body became an increasingly medical problem, requiring diagnosis and treatment. See *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 273-289.

²¹ Dr F. Winckel, *A Text-Book of Obstetrics Including the Pathology and Therapeutics of the Puerperal State Designed for Practitioners and Students of Medicine*, trans. by J. Clifton Edgar (Edinburgh and London: Young J. Pentland, 1890), p. 109.

²² This is discussed further in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

which enveloped me at that moment, I think it would make the greatest poetry in the world.²³

This account from an anonymous mother, quoted in Read's book among other testimonials, emphasises both the poetic sensibility of the individual concerned and her lack of ability to express it properly. The joy and self-fulfilment of successful natural labour, which allows the pregnant subject to greet her son before he is fully born, is presented as an end unto itself. Here the pregnant subject speaks, but only to express her inadequacy as a speaking subject.

It seems that there is something inexpressible about childbirth; it transcends poetic representation, and the only person qualified to express this feeling is by the same qualification unable to make poetry of it. The uterus and the brain are closely connected, after all. If this mother were able to put into words her feelings at the moment of birth, it would surely make 'the greatest poetry in the world'. Though her language is poetic ('a dusky, crying blue', 'the swelling feeling [...] which enveloped me') it is also self-effacing. However, the very fact of this impulse demonstrates some resistance to the objectification of the pregnant subject and illustrates an unexpected merging of poetic and medical discourse. Significantly, these hints of resistance are encountered in the pregnant subject's own words and linked with literary expression – specifically, with poetry. This suggests that the pregnant subject's poetic voice can challenge medical constructions of her as an object because there is something about poetic language that opens up multiple meanings and interpretations. Poetic language, it is implied, is as slippery and 'leaky' as the pregnant body itself. Like the pregnant body, its potency stems from its capacity to move between and insinuate itself into various discourses. It too is troublingly 'vocal'.

²³ Grantly Dick Read, *The Birth of a Child: Obstetric Procedure in Normal Childbirth for those who attend Women in Labour* (London: Wm. Heinemann Medical Books Ltd, 1947), p. 84 (emphasis in the original).

This thesis seeks to identify and examine such dialogues between medical and poetic discourse. By situating texts about pregnancy in poetry and prose alongside examples of medical discourse, it undertakes both to value and to amplify the pregnant voice, and thereby seeks to explore women's writing as a site of poetic and political resistance to objectification.²⁴ Its methodology, therefore, is provocatively (though not essentially) feminist.²⁵ My project addresses the following research questions: How have women writers represented the pregnant subject since the beginning of the nineteenth century? Can the childbirth metaphor offer a credible model for female artistic creativity? (Chapters I and IV) How does the pregnant silhouette – dressed, disrobed, exposed – figure in representations of the female reproductive body? (Chapter II) What is the relationship between looks within the pregnant body by medical discourses of pregnancy and self-examination in pregnant female literary production? (Chapter III) What does this reveal about contemporary constructions of the literary canon? Women's bodies have traditionally been represented as pathological entities. Like some of the writers included in this study, I intend to reconfigure conventional medical discourse in order to throw the pregnant subject into stark relief. The structure of the thesis reflects this: I use trimesters as temporal markers of women's encounters and representations of pregnant experience, but privilege women's experiences over such medical definitions of pregnant stages.

²⁴ My corpus comprises texts as diverse as *Frankenstein* (1818), *Aurora Leigh* (1857), interwar novels such as *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) and contemporary poetry by Kathleen Jamie, among others. These texts offer a look into the female literary canon as first established by second-wave feminists, who began paying Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Mary Shelley critical attention in the 1970s and '80s. In this thesis, I position Jamie and other contemporary poets as the 'natural' literary 'daughters' of these writers, concerned as they are with pregnancy and birth as both poetic and lived experiences. These authors are identifiable as middle-class and white; however, they are by no means the only writers dealing with pregnancy and childbirth. Lucille Clifton, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, for instance, write extensively on these themes, and may be viewed from a postcolonial perspective – which is, sadly, beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁵ Essentialism identifies women inextricably with their female (and reproductive) bodies. This has come under much deserved scrutiny by feminists due to its narrowness in defining women as subject to their biology, notions that reproduce earlier androcentric and sexist perspectives perpetuated by, for instance, medical guidebooks such as those mentioned earlier. For further discussion of this, see Susan Stanford Friedman's article 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (1987), 49-82.

My chapters therefore are themed according to the following stages of pregnancy: From Consummation to Quickening, Miscarriage, Ultrasound and Labour. In short, they correspond with the temporal progression of pregnancy depicted in Maygrier's illustrated pregnant torsos. However, by centering my chapters around stages of pregnancy as defined and represented by a selection of women writers since the early nineteenth century, I hope to circumvent the compulsion to examine pregnancy as comprised of male-defined phenomena, which may be pathologised and therefore controlled by medical discourse. Rather, my approach permits a more thematic, holistic method; it also avoids privileging an androcentric literary tradition since all the writers I include in my analysis are women.²⁶ In so doing, this thesis both explores women's writing as a site of resistance to the objectification of the pregnant subject by medical discourse, and ascertains how this might challenge the androcentric assumptions behind what Read's anonymous maternal subject calls 'the greatest poetry in the world' (i.e. that of the dominant male canon). Setting a diverse body of work by women poets and novelists in dialogue with medical constructions of the pregnant body – from eighteenth-century atlases to contemporary ultrasound images – the aim of this thesis is to invite new ways of listening to the pregnant subject. Rather than look at the pregnant subject, it seeks to refocus our gaze in order to reassess our

²⁶ More recently, male writers have written about pregnancy sensitively and comprehensively, sometimes through a female protagonist or narrator. For instance, in poetry, Simon Armitage has written movingly about his partner's miscarriage, 'Roadshow'; Kevin Young's 'Crowning' details the final moments of birth; David Dabydeen's long narrative poem, *Turner*, telling the story of a still-born (or nearly still-born) child of a slave and a slave-trader captain, uses pregnancy and birth imagery throughout to respond to William Turner's celebrated painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying*, and focus on the hidden reality of Turner's painting: the drowning African slave. In prose, Chris Bohjalian's novel *Midwives* deals with a mother and daughter's experiences (as midwife and obstetrician, respectively) of holistic and medicalised birth, while Ian McEwan's *Saturday* includes a detailed description of a pregnant poet, seen through the eyes of her brain-surgeon father. See Simon Armitage, 'Roadshow', in *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus the Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 40; Kevin Young, 'Crowning', *The New Yorker* (February 23, 2009), <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23/crowning>> [accessed 10 August 2015]; David Dabydeen, *Turner* (Cape, 1994; repr. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2002); Chris Bohjalian, *Midwives* (London: Vintage, 1998); Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

subject position and see through her eyes. The pregnant subject is a speaking and poetic subject in these representations.

My first chapter explores the early stages of pregnancy, from Consummation to Quickening, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* (1857).²⁷ This text is placed first because of its importance to second-wave (and subsequent) literary feminist criticism; Barrett Browning famously looked for poetic 'grandmothers', but was herself remembered as a literary grandmother by feminist critics such as Ellen Moers, Dorothy Mermin and Marjorie Stone, who positioned her as a significant figure in their reimagined, female-centred canon.²⁸ By examining Barrett Browning's poet-heroine as a pregnant subject, I explore the notion of poetic pregnancy – that is, pregnancy that has metaphorical significance, since it draws a conceptual link between the birth of the book and the birth of the baby. Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora's book is described in terms that suggest an unborn child; comprised of nine books, structurally the verse-novel explicitly references the nine months of pregnancy and at the end of the text Aurora's book is born. Barrett Browning also shows an obsessively detailed interest in the female reproductive body. *Aurora Leigh*'s landscapes, spaces and imagery evoke the permeable, leaky and bloody female body. This is a body that births both metaphorically and physically, that grows, develops and quickens. It is therefore a powerful poetic body, a body that has a unique ability to create art which holds a distinct advantage over male artistic bodies. In this chapter I also examine medical and 'medico-social' texts about 'maternal impressions', the theory that the maternal imagination may impress upon the unborn child's body.²⁹ D. H. Jacques' 1859 book *Hints*

²⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), ed. by Margaret Reynolds (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

²⁸ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (London: Women's Press, 1978); Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

²⁹ Clare Hanson calls 'medico-social text[s]', the type of text that 'established relationships between and explored the imbrication of medical knowledge and social issues'. See Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, p. 51.

Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty, a text intended for a general readership, emphasises the creative force (and potential danger) of the maternal imagination.³⁰

My second chapter, on Miscarriage, begins by exploring the nineteenth-century female body underneath the corset, before investigating what happens when the girdle is unclasped and the waistline is dropped during the early twentieth century. By outlining the context of fashion history and thus paying attention to what covers and uncovers the female body, I draw a thematic link between the notion of the bound body and the body that fails to carry a pregnancy – or, indeed, deliberately 'drops' one. In this chapter I examine medical texts from the late nineteenth century, such as Alice B. Stockham's *Tokology* (1883) and texts on fashion, such as Madame Roxy A. Caplin's book on corsetry (1856).³¹ I consider Leigh Summers's argument about corsetry and the invisibility of the pregnant female body, the invention and advertisement of the 'gestation corset', and use this to situate and interpret both *Aurora Leigh* and later abortion narratives from the early twentieth century.³² The emerging prominence of the flapper silhouette during this period, after the corseted hourglass silhouette of the nineteenth-century female body, allows us to explore the pregnant body as a closed/clothed body in women's writing. The flapper's is a non-reproductive silhouette that resists gendered categories of identification. As interwar texts such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) show, the pregnant subject drops her waistline, her book and her unborn

³⁰ D. H. Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty; Showing How to Acquire and Retain Bodily Symmetry, Health, and Vigour, Secure Long Life, and Avoid The Infirmities and Deformities of Age* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1865 [1859]). This text is also an American text, dedicated to the 'Wives and Maidens of America'. I treat it here as a western text relevant to dominant Victorian medical constructions of maternity.

³¹ Alice B. Stockham, *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman* (1883; rev. edn New York: R. F. Fenno & Company, 1911); Madame Roxey A. Caplin, *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body* (London: Darton and Co., 1856).

³² Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001).

baby.³³ The feminine silhouette, as I will illuminate here, has a profound and sometimes unexpected impact on the pregnant subject.

My third chapter, on Ultrasound Poetry by contemporary women poets, examines the phenomenon of looking within the female body, a gaze commandeered by medical discourse due to twentieth- and twenty-first-century developments in New Reproductive Technologies. Beginning by looking at X-ray and a poetic response to this by Emily Culverhouse in 1897, I then examine the rise of the ultrasound scan as a diagnostic tool for pregnancy.³⁴ Contemporary poets such as Kathleen Jamie, Pat Borthwick and Leontia Flynn represent their experiences of undergoing an ultrasound scan during pregnancy in order both to re-appropriate the gaze and to explore its often troubling implications.³⁵ This is the chapter that most obviously engages with politicised ideas of power and control surrounding medical intervention during pregnancy. It identifies two particular trends in women's writing about ultrasound: firstly, the somewhat incantatory or magical nature of watching sound that harkens back to an unspecified, atavistic past; secondly, the haunting and spectral figure of the futuristic foetal spaceman. It thus explores ideas about listening and looking within women's bodies, and how this affects the construction of the poetic, pregnant subject.

My fourth and final chapter on Labour moves back to the beginning, by examining the earliest text in this thesis, Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*.³⁶ I situate the novel in terms of its medical and scientific context – the rise of the man-midwife, surgical intervention during childbirth, the entry of Hunter's atlas and the headless image of the pregnant torso into popular medical discourse – and invite a fresh way of reading

³³ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) ed. by Rachel Bowlby (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Rosamond Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936; London: Virago, 2006).

³⁴ Emily Culverhouse, 'Photography Up To Date – And Beyond It' (1897), in *Elizabeth Fleischmann: Pioneer X-Ray Photographer*, ed. by Peter E. Palmquist (Berkeley: the Judah L Magnes Museum, 1990), pp. 31-34.

³⁵ Kathleen Jamie, *Jizzen* (London: Picador, 1999); Pat Borthwick, *Swim* ([n.p.]: Mudfog, 2005); Leontia Flynn, *Profit and Loss* (London: Cape Poetry, 2011).

³⁶ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831), ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

Frankenstein, not only as a 'birth myth' (as Ellen Moers called it) but as a text thoroughly influenced by and responding to the increasingly medicalised pregnant body.³⁷ I argue that the novel itself has been delivered in ways that suggest engagement with medical developments. For instance, I examine both Percy Shelley's Preface to the 1818 edition and Mary Shelley's Introduction to the later revised text of 1831. While Percy Shelley presents a labouring reader, who has to get to the very corporeal blood and fibres of the text, Mary Shelley's introduction simultaneously downplays her role in producing this 'hideous progeny' and draws attention to the Romantic model of artistic creation that it subverts. By focusing on Shelley's 'other mothers' in the novel (Margaret Saville, Victor Frankenstein, Elizabeth, Justine Moretz, Caroline Frankenstein and the aborted female creature) I show that not only is this a text that evokes multiple readings, but it also reveals something significant about the process of birthing a book itself. Indeed, my final chapter is simultaneously my end and my origin story: I argue that *Frankenstein* shows us the 'birth' of a new mode of women's literature about pregnant subjectivity, as well as spawning a significant body of second-wave feminist criticism (Ellen Moers among them) that both take into account bodily experience and emphasise the importance of reading reproduction as a metaphor for female artistic creativity.³⁸

By uncovering how medical discourse has diagnosed, examined, obscured and exposed pregnant experience, and foregrounding its interrelationship with poetic discourse, my research revises and contributes to existing scholarship on maternity and in the fields of feminist theory and cultural history. I take 'poetic discourse' to mean a category of language

³⁷ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976; repr. London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 92.

³⁸ In *A Cultural History of Pregnancy* Hanson points out that Ellen Moers was the first critic to read *Frankenstein* as a 'birth myth', but that others such as Mary Jacobus, Barbara Johnson, and Alan Bewell have also read the novel in terms of its representation (or elision) of the reproductive female body. Hanson herself argues that *Frankenstein* 'considers the potentially destructive power of an inadequate uterine environment' (p. 49).

within texts that is 'poetic' or operates 'poetically' – in a metaphorical, nuanced, or self-aware manner that interrogates the notion of subjectivity and the lyric 'I' irrespective of literary genre.³⁹ The women writers included in this study often experiment with genre categories, as we see in *Aurora Leigh*, a 'verse-novel', and in *Orlando*, part biography, part novel. Similarly, *Frankenstein*, though an epistolary novel, is rich with densely layered language and imagery, which not only serves to create a Gothic horror story, but explores the notion of creativity and birth in multiple registers – allegory among them. Likewise, 'poetic discourse' is not confined to literary texts, as the previously discussed example from Grantly Dick Read's book shows. I therefore take an approach that positions many different texts alongside one another as companion pieces that may be read in fertile and thought-provoking ways. This approach to texts as cultural artefacts is very much modelled upon recent work in the field of pregnancy in the medical humanities, such as Clare Hanson's *A Cultural History of Pregnancy* (2004), which compares literary works with contemporary medical sources and documents. I quite often include excerpts from what Hanson calls 'medico-social text[s]'.⁴⁰ This allows my project to investigate and probe questions of what kind of meanings may be transmitted between medical and poetic discourses, and what implications this might have for women writers.

Similarly, work in the field by scholars such as Ornella Moscucci, in *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (1990), Barbara Duden in *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (1993) and Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature* (2011) all have provided

³⁹ Foucault's definition of discourse emphasises both its potential power and its slipperiness as 'not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire – it is also the object of desire; and since, as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.' See Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (Boston, London, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 48-78 (pp. 52-53).

⁴⁰ Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, p. 51.

invaluable insight into the pregnant subject in texts, not only through their medical expertise but in their imaginatively creative approaches towards textual analysis.⁴¹ Duden, for instance, is a historian of the body who is interested in the ways in which the modern foetus and the woman have ‘shaped each other’, and reads this shaping through the lens of early modern and modern history, using both textual evidence and anecdote to flesh out her narration.⁴² She argues that there are ‘two stories to be told’:

One is the story of what can be seen by physicians, artists, and women themselves. It deals with woman as her flesh and being is, or can be, exposed to the gaze. More subtly, it is the story of what can be imagined as long as we keep to the sense of image as that which could be seen. The other is the story of touch and vision, which grope in the darkness beneath the skin.⁴³

My work, though similarly interested in the ways in which the pregnant body has been subjected to the medical gaze and is shaped, dressed and exposed, is not so much concerned with the foetus’s groping in darkness beneath the skin, as with the person to whom that skin belongs. My project seeks to explore the pregnant subject’s reimagining of her reproductive body in the face of intrusive looks by physicians and writers both. This involves a dialogue between subject and object which often finds its place in poetic expression. As this thesis will show, the pregnant subject destabilises categories such as subject and object; indeed, she sometimes withdraws into that darkness beneath the skin precisely in order to question what can be seen, imagined and touched. Her story – sampled through the stories of the pregnant subjects in the texts I explore – is one that this thesis tells.

⁴¹ Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (2011; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴² Duden, *Disembodying Women*, p. 5.

⁴³ Duden, *Disembodying Women*, p. 8.

In terms of subjectivity and the body, Iris Marion Young's article 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation' (1983) and Margrit Shildrick's work have provided useful theoretical frameworks for my analysis; indeed, I am indebted both to Young's definition of 'split subjectivity' and Shildrick's notion of the 'leaky' female body.⁴⁴ Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature Of Their Own* (1978) and Isobel Armstrong's work on women's poetry in the field of literary studies have also informed this thesis's investigation by providing an illuminating corpus that is seminal in its mapping of a female literary tradition from the nineteenth century onwards.⁴⁵ Similarly, Emma L. E. Rees's recently published *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (2013) offers a lively look at the female body in relation to cultural contexts, the visual arts and literature; her attention to the language of the female body (which takes into account etymology and motifs such as the *vagina dentata*) has also provided a model for approaching the diverse texts included in this thesis.⁴⁶

This project, however, is neither a cultural history of the pregnant subject nor a history of the representation of pregnancy in literature. Its approach (unlike Hanson's study) is circular, rather than chronological. By moving through identified stages of pregnancy, avoiding a strictly delineated chronology and ending at its beginning with *Frankenstein*, it aims to replicate thematically the rounded shape of the pregnant belly. It also introduces fresh terminology for exploring the pregnant subject's encounters with literature, particularly poetry. The notion that the lyric 'I' might be substantially different for the pregnant poet and the traditional male poetic subject, for instance, is one that recurs

⁴⁴ Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation'; Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics*; Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*.

⁴⁵ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1976); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978; repr. 2003); Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993; repr. 1996).

⁴⁶ Emma L. E. Rees, *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

throughout this thesis. This has led to my use of the 'pregnant pronoun' to describe the lyric 'I' that is fundamentally aware of its fluid, liminal state – of its simultaneous subject/object position and its encompassing of the 'Other' (or foetus) within the self (or '(M)other'). Rather than reinforce the unified masculine position of the traditional form of lyric poetry, this specific use of the lyric 'I' by women poets opens up the possibilities for multiple meanings, and dissonances, all of which highlight their individuality as subjects.

The Lyric 'I' As Pregnant Pronoun

Poetic treatments of pregnancy by women writers act as a counter to the medicalised view of the pregnant subject. Lyric poetry is highly concerned with the individual's experience of themselves as the subject in relation to the world. However, the lyric 'I' has traditionally been constructed as a unified, coherent and distinctly male subject position.⁴⁷ In the 1802 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, Wordsworth defines the Poet as 'a man speaking to men: a man [...] endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind'.⁴⁸ This suggests that the poet-speaker holds a particularly privileged and powerful position. He is able both to articulate his self and comment upon this subject position self-consciously. His interest lies in the world around him, but also, crucially, how this impacts upon his individuality. Indeed, Wordsworth wrote of 'the fluxes and refluxes of the mind', suggesting that the mind itself *circulates* with ideas,

⁴⁷ Isobel Armstrong explores this in 'A Music of Thine Own': Women's Poetry – an Expressive Tradition?', in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993; repr. 1996), pp. 318-377. Though 'lyric' is a contested term, most definitions of lyric poetry emphasise the central importance of the male speaker/subject. For further discussion, see David Duff, 'The retuning of the sky: Romanticism and lyric', Chapter VII in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. by Marion Thain (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 135-55. Women poets, however, by their very existence undermine this assumption.

⁴⁸ William Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 241-72 (p. 255).

just as blood circulates the body.⁴⁹ According to this model, the subject is a permeable entity, whose poeticism lies in his ability to manage and express these thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Lyricism, therefore, is inextricably linked with the notion of sensory investigation and expression – in short, the body. This is a different notion of the ‘permeable’ subject discussed in the first part of this introduction; while the pregnant subject’s body ‘leaks’ into the world around her, this version of lyricism suggests that it is the world that permeates the poetic subject. Marion Thain develops this argument in relation to Victorian lyricism as practised by Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s husband.⁵⁰ Thain argues that Browning’s interest in the psychology of poetic subjects in his dramatic monologues results in ‘lyric pathology’:

To read Browning’s interest in the psychology of pathological poetic subjects as commentary on lyric might be to recognise not only the gendered and social politics of his dramatic monologues, but also a pathologisation of what the lyric transaction has come to appear in a totalised print poetics.⁵¹

Thain notes that during the mid-nineteenth century the lyric became increasingly concerned with the body – and the sick or ailing body at that. Women, meanwhile, were represented as the preserved and deathly love object.⁵² What Thain describes as the ‘lyric transaction’

⁴⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ in *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 247. This definition of lyric poetry does not differentiate between the mind and body; rather, it links the two. This suggests that Romantic lyricism disrupts Cartesian dualism. This is an Enlightenment model which separates the mind (the *res cogitans*) from the corporeal body (the *res extensa*). See René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method for Guiding One’s Reason and Searching for the Truth in the Sciences*, in *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. by Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 2003). Descartes wrote that ‘this self – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is completely distinct from the body [...] and even if the body did not exist the soul would still be everything that it is.’ (pp. 24-25). Young later uses this vocabulary in order to describe the pregnant subject’s experience: ‘[t]he integrity of my body is undermined in pregnancy not only by this externality on the inside, but also by the fact that the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux’. See Young, ‘Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation’, p. 50.

⁵⁰ Marion Thain, ‘Victorian lyric pathology and phenomenology’, in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. by Marion Thain (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University press, 2013), pp. 156-17.

⁵¹ Thain, ‘Victorian lyric pathology and phenomenology’, p. 162.

⁵² Thain, ‘Victorian lyric pathology and phenomenology’, pp. 163-65.

here is the central transaction that arguably occurs throughout lyric poetry: the imagined dialogue between the poetic speaker (the self) and his addressee (the female other). Thain argues that this transaction had become 'sick' by the nineteenth century; she suggests that the poetic subject and object had arrived at 'deadlock'. No longer capable of meaningful dialogue, the poetic speaker and the deathly female object of his affections had arrived at the dramatic monologue, a form explored and wielded by Browning at length. Indeed, Browning's dramatic monologues highlighted and satirised the sickness of his male speaker, whilst showing the female objects of his affections as powerless victims.⁵³ A famous example of this is Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess', in which the speaker (a Duke) recalls his last wife, in a story disturbingly familiar: he is like Bluebeard, murdering his wives as soon as they disappoint him. Such representation of the female subject as pathologised object in Victorian lyric poetry corresponds with wider cultural representations such as those found in medical discourse.⁵⁴

Thain's assertion that the 'lyric pathology of the mid-century resulted in a focus on the body that had the potential to provide a route out of that deadlock [between self and other]' suggests that for the male speaker pathologisation may have been a way of connecting with the world, that the body itself may speak its pathology and, in so doing, can overcome unproductive and deathly stasis. For 'pregnant poetry', however, lyric poetry is not so much about connecting to the 'lyric other' as an extension of the self, but as both separating and connecting the other *within* the self: the unborn child or foetus. The pregnant poet is conspicuously not in stasis; she is continuously developing, in 'flux'. Whereas a male poet such as Browning pathologises his speaker in order to highlight the 'sickness' of a unified lyric 'I' subject position, a female poet such as Elizabeth Barrett

⁵³ Robert Browning, 'My Last Duchess' in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 25-26.

⁵⁴ For further discussion, see Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

Browning writes against both this sickness and the canon formation that privileges and enables it.⁵⁵ She uses the 'pregnant pronoun'. The 'pregnant pronoun', split between maternal and foetal subjectivities, is a conspicuously framed challenge to the assumed maleness of the traditional lyric 'I'. Wielding the lyric 'I' affords the female poetic speaker power hitherto denied: the power to articulate her own subjectivity, just like any other poetic speaker. The frame of the lyric poem also allows the poet to acknowledge and comment upon her existence (and the poem's existence) within cultural frameworks, frameworks that encompass and reproduce constraints such as the assumed maleness of the lyric 'I' and the notion of the self-effacing, silent pregnant subject.

My definition of the 'pregnant pronoun', a key idea for this thesis, relies upon Iris Marion Young's notion of pregnant subjectivity. Young's definition turns upon the pregnant subject's sustained mutability. Though the pregnant subject is a constant throughout history – women have always conceived, carried a pregnancy, quickened, miscarried and given birth – the pregnant subject herself is not constant. She is conspicuously subject to change; she experiences her subjectivity as continuously in flux, developing as her pregnancy develops, from day to day. In her seminal essay 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', Young describes the pregnant subject as 'decentred, split, or doubled in several ways':

She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her body self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Barrett Browning's verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh*, shows the development of a female poet. I explore this in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

⁵⁶ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', p. 407.

According to Young, this experience of pregnant embodiment renders the subject's 'I' as fluid, familiar, strange and uncanny.⁵⁷ The quickening of the foetus within her womb is experienced as other and not other, because even as it belongs to this new, developing child-subject, it is felt by the mother exclusively whilst her body too is growing beyond its previously established limits. The pregnant subject not only takes up space, but increases this space marginally, day by day, month by month. Her body's boundaries continually shift, making it difficult to establish where her 'I' begins and ends. As Young shows, this compromises self-location; the pregnant subject thus experiences her body self-consciously, both immediately and remotely, as if at a distance.⁵⁸

Kate Clanchy's poem, 'One, Two', the first in her collection *Newborn* (2004), presents a moment of realisation that corresponds closely with Young's self-location.⁵⁹ In it, Clanchy's speaker looks at a photograph of herself, 'caught' bending to tie her shoelace in a church doorway. In the photograph she is in the early stages of pregnancy, acutely aware of being the object of the gaze: 'smiling/ downwards, pinkly/ self-conscious' (ll. 7-9). She tells her child (to whom the poem is addressed) that he is 'perhaps ten cells old', a temporal measurement both vague and precise (l. 18).⁶⁰ Retrospectively, though in the present tense, Clanchy's

⁵⁷ The term 'uncanny' is defined by Sigmund Freud in 'The 'Uncanny'', in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 339-76.

⁵⁸ The notion of the splitting, decentring and doubling of the self – the inherent 'otherness' of pregnant embodiment – is the material of the Gothic, and this will become increasingly important as this thesis progresses. The pregnant subject thus is inherently Gothic, experiencing her body as herself and other simultaneously. For an introduction to the Gothic subject, see Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) and for the female Gothic (hysterical) subject in particular, Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁵⁹ Kate Clanchy, 'One, Two', in *Newborn* (Picador, 2004), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ Looking at – and within – the pregnant subject is a key concern for medical discourse. The pregnant subject's gaze (according to Young) is unfocused – or rather, focused on her internal and external body, as well as the world around her, simultaneously. Her gaze challenges straightforward notions of the relationship between subject and object; this is the reason for sustained attempts by medical discourse to look within her body via specula, X-Ray, ultrasound and foetal photography (further explored in Chapter III on Ultrasound). The poetic object of lyric poetry – a position traditionally occupied by women – is similarly looked at and represented in terms of a male gaze.

speaker describes her body and movements, and the unborn child's corresponding growth within her 'nerveless places':

In the humid space beneath
my dress, my body is bent
in the small effort of buckling,

the sag of my stomach briefly
leant on my thigh,
and, at the crux, in the press

of my nerveless places, you
are putting me on, easily,
the way a foot puts on a shoe.

(ll. 19-27).

The speaker's experiences of foetal growth are apparently limited by her body. She cannot feel quickening at this stage of pregnancy – it is too early – yet knows that her actions and movements are matched by her unborn child, out of sight and sensation: 'you/are putting me on, easily' (ll. 25-26). With the present participle 'putting' and the qualifying adverb 'easily', the speaker realises that the foetus is gaining agency and developing into a separate subject. This moment of realisation results directly from an action identical to the one that Young purports: the speaker's simultaneous focus on her abdomen and her head. Clanchy's speaker both watches and feels herself complete 'the small effort of buckling,/ the sag of my stomach briefly leant on my thigh' (ll. 21-23). Clanchy therefore renders her expectant mother simultaneously passive and active, her subjectivity both split and centred by her pregnancy. As Young argues, '[p]regnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body'.⁶¹ The 'pregnant pronoun' allows the subject to speak back to the medical discourse that has previously silenced her, to express

⁶¹ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', p. 49.

her 'nerveless places', places of darkness before sensation. This alludes to the womb, that internal and unknown female space that is apparently beyond representation in Clanchy's poem.⁶² It is inhabited by the equally unknown emerging subject, the foetus.⁶³ Clanchy's poem illustrates the pregnant body's permeability in action, showing the speaker engaged with the creative process of subjectivity, pregnancy and poetry.

Iris Marion Young's argument firmly roots this creative process in the experience of pregnant embodiment. The pregnant subject is therefore constructed as actively involved in childbearing, rather than entirely subject to involuntary changes:

For the pregnant subject, [...] pregnancy has a temporality of movement, growth, and change. The pregnant subject is not simply a splitting in which the two halves lie open and still, but a dialectic. The pregnant woman experiences herself as a source and participant in a creative process. Though she does not plan and direct it, neither does it merely wash over her; rather, she is this process, this change.⁶⁴

This notion of the pregnant subject as not only 'split' but knowingly split, in dialectic with its two parts and all they may represent (the literary mother and her daughter, the pregnant woman and her foetus), opens up the possibility that the birthing body may be both literal and metaphorical.⁶⁵ This categorisation of the female body as temporally fluid, its positioning of the pregnant woman *as* change and therefore as continuously and conspicuously breaching boundaries and mending them, reframes what Shildrick calls the anxiety of 'corporeal engulfment'.⁶⁶ Not only, therefore, is the pregnant body threatening in terms of its corporeal horror – its abject nature – but also in terms of its 'creative process'. The pregnant body, made from matter, can also create *literary* matter, and this makes her inherently threatening: 'she is this process, this change' (my emphasis). Such creation is

⁶² This reinforces Kristeva's notion of the womb as an abject space in which 'meaning collapses'. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.

⁶³ This thesis will examine poetic treatments of this unknown space as diverse as Barrett Browning's 'grotto' in *Aurora Leigh* (in Chapter I) and the lunarscape of the ultrasound poems in Chapter III.

⁶⁴ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', p. 54.

⁶⁵ This too offers a way out of Thain's 'deadlocked' subject/object division.

⁶⁶ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*, p. 16.

unplanned and undirected, and recalls classical ideas about the conception of poetry via the muse. Indeed, the classical model of the muse as a means by which poetry is reproduced is a theme which will be taken up and explored in this thesis.

The Muse as Mother

Traditionally, the female muse nurtures or mediates poetic authority for the male poet. In Ancient Greek poetry, the Muses spoke or sang *through* the poet, suggesting that the body is a physical barrier that must be crossed and passed through in order to write poetry.

Hesiod, for instance, introduces the Muses in his *Theogony* as the divine voices of art:

The ready-spoken daughters of great Zeus had this to say,
And gave me a staff that they had plucked, a branch of flowering bay,
A wondrous thing! and breathed a god-inspired voice in me,
That I might celebrate the things that were and that shall be;
And bade me hymn the race of those who always are, the blessed,
But make my song be always of themselves, both first and last.⁶⁷ (Il. 29-34)

According to Hesiod, the Muses are ‘ready-spoken’, with much to say. Their relationship with the poet is both divine and intimate; the Muses’ unified ‘voice’ is ‘*breathed*’ into the poet (l. 31, emphasis added). Indeed, the verb ‘inspire’ means ‘to breathe’ and ‘to animate’.⁶⁸ The Muses’ mouths approach the poet’s in a divine kiss, intended to make him celebrate the past, present and the gods – but ‘always’ too, ‘themselves’. This suggests that the Muses are powerful speakers and that the poet is a mere vessel for the poetry which belongs to them and is about them, from beginning to end.

The notion that poetic inspiration is both air and liquid, ‘breathed’ in and absorbed through the mouth, resonates interestingly when we think of the foetus in utero, floating in amniotic fluid in symbiosis with its mother. In this configuration, the maternal body both

⁶⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. with introductions by Catherine M. Schlegel and Henry Weinfield (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), ll. 29-34 (p. 24).

⁶⁸ ‘inspire, v.’, in *OED Online*, <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 11 June 2015].

produces and sustains poetic life. Simultaneously muse-mother and poet, the pregnant subject conceives both a poem and the child-poet, the book and the baby. She disrupts the subject/object dualism by her very existence as a pregnant poetic subject. Hesiod writes that the Muses 'pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and then the words will stream/ Out of his mouth like honey, and people will look to him' (ll. 83-84). The substance of poetry, then, is sweet and organic. It stems from the natural world and issues from the poet's mouth in an abundance of ambrosial milk and honey. The Muses are leaky subjects and they make the poet leaky too. The classical notion of artistic conception is one in which these abstract bodily fluids mingle and 'stream' out from the divine Muse via the poet's 'tongue'. The Muses are in a sense vampiric, animating the Poet's creative power so that he may in turn, reanimate them. The exchange of poetic fluid is mutual, with the power balance weighted towards the Muse. This corresponds with the coexistence of mother and foetus; both exist in symbiosis, though the mother is the complete subject.⁶⁹

Romantic configurations of the male artist and female muse posit a version of conception which undermines the muse's maternal agency. In *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that during this period the muse was often depicted as a dead or dying beloved, who gave both body and life to her poetic lover.⁷⁰ Artistic conception, occurring when the poet takes possession of his muse, thereby drawing from her the poetry already present within himself, requires him to reanimate her deathly body. In metaphorical terms, the muse is a mere vessel for his creative ejaculation.

⁶⁹ Current legal definitions of personhood in the UK do not recognise the foetus as a subject until it is born, though debates about abortion have often centred upon if and when *during pregnancy* the foetus should be considered an individual subject. For further discussion of this, see Chapter II (Miscarriage).

⁷⁰ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, p. 365. Bronfen's examples of literature that show this muse/poet relationship are mostly Victorian and modern; however, Romantic examples include Wordsworth's 'Lucy poems' in the *Lyrical Ballads*, and Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. See William Wordsworth, 'Strange fits of passion have I known', 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways', 'A slumber did my spirit seal', 'Lucy Gray', 'Three years she grew in sun and shower' in *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 153-54, pp. 161-63, pp. 198-99; John Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by John Barnard (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), pp. 184-85.

Bronfen notes that the power of the muse weakened due to this shift: '[a]s such she becomes a figure for the poet's peculiarly own poetic powers, mothering genius that is innate rather than inspired.'⁷¹ Bronfen suggests that the muse 'mothers' genius, but that this 'mothering' is passively nurturing rather than actively creative. This results in the boundary between the poet and the muse, the self and the other, becoming clearly delineated – and the act of poetic conception becoming one of possession rather than exchange.

Romantic constructions of the muse further suggest that the poet not only 'sucks' the inspiration out of the muse, but that both it and she were his to begin with. This suggests the model of the parasitic foetus who draws sustenance from his mother's body at her expense.⁷² '[R]eanimated,' Bronfen writes, 'the beloved muse is under the poet's control and [...] with her body obliterated in the course of such a translation into a trope she serves as an emblem for his projections'.⁷³ This violent obliteration of the muse's body – the means by which she confers divine inspiration and poetry – suggests that the female body itself is a site of poetic struggle. In order to emphasise his autonomy, the Romantic male poet dismembers his muse and then 'reanimate[s]' her. He is a Gothic figure; like Victor Frankenstein, he assembles and then aborts a female body.⁷⁴ His metaphor, as Friedman argues, typifies the male childbirth metaphor in that it renders the muse-mother without embodiment and the metaphorical pregnancy as purely figurative, a 'brain-child'.⁷⁵ He makes the literal reproductive maternal body figurative; his muse becomes a maternal 'trope'.

⁷¹ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, p. 364.

⁷² See Clare Hanson for further discussion of the parasitic (and other) models of pregnancy in *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, pp. 8-10.

⁷³ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, p. 365.

⁷⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 119.

⁷⁵ Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor', pp. 55-58.

Re-membering the muses' mother, Mnemosyne, however, provides a counter to this shift in agency by returning our focus to maternal origins. Bronfen argues that the classical narrative of poetic conception relies upon Mnemosyne:

As mother of the muses, Mnemosyne is also the mother of the source of poetic authority itself and as such the point of origination to be invoked in the poetic act. She is the powerful agent whereby the gap is closed between any poetic endeavour and a timeless source of memory, even though her voice can exist only in absence, as the point of origination, simultaneously put under erasure and articulated in the daughters who repeat and indirectly represent her.⁷⁶

Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, has nine daughters. These daughters are the Muses and their divine power comes from her maternity. Though Hesiod emphasises that the Muses are also the daughters of Zeus, it is Mnemosyne who gives them their 'immortal song' (l. 68). Silent and absent, yet present both at 'the point of origination' and in the poetic act itself, Mnemosyne is the hidden mother at the heart of all poetic conception. When exploring the nature of poetic conception, rather than focus our attention on the artist-muse relationship, perhaps we should search for Mnemosyne and the mother-daughter relationship. Unlike the male poet, Mnemosyne's daughters do not dismember her body. Mnemosyne conceived, birthed and nurtured her daughters, and they in turn 'articulate', 'repeat' and 'indirectly represent' her. Though hidden, she is nevertheless present. All invocations addressed to the muse also invoke her mother. This metaphor of creativity is invaluable for thinking through ways in which we may identify and explore how different women writers – in their exclusion from the dominant male canon – have formed dialogues with one another across the historical span of the past two centuries. Locating the mother(s) whose absent presence is repeatedly summoned by her creative daughters is part of the labour of

⁷⁶ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, p. 363.

this thesis, which aims to place the idea of poetic pregnancy in the context of broader debates about female literary creativity and its traditions.

Hidden Mothers: Metaphors of Female Creativity

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf stated that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'.⁷⁷ Taking a singular 'woman' (later reimagined as 'Judith Shakespeare') as her example of the figure of aspiring female author, Woolf's essay self-consciously and playfully imagines the circumstances of her creation – or lack thereof – throughout history. Women, Woolf argues, 'have burnt like beacons' as the muses of literature written by men, but have otherwise featured little in terms of literary history until relatively recently: '[i]maginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history'.⁷⁸ Part of the reason for this absence is childbearing; the labour of mothering 'thirteen children', for instance, makes for neither economic independence nor intellectual freedom. Woolf suggests that maternal time is strictly defined in ways from which men are exempt: 'the nine months before the baby is born. Then the baby is born. Then there are three or four months spent in feeding the baby. After the baby is fed there are certainly five years spent in playing with the baby'.⁷⁹ Woolf's language here, satirical, playfully simple and repetitive, underlines her later argument about literature; men work in sentences that are 'unsuited for a woman's use'. '[T]here was no common sentence for her [the woman writer's] use', she repeatedly argues.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 76.

⁷⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 24.

⁸⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 76-77.

Furthermore, Woolf's metaphors throughout the text firmly emphasise the embodiment of literary creation. Books are repeatedly described as potentially 'twisted and deformed', as bodies to be shaped by the hands of the woman writer: '[t]he novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands'.⁸¹ Indeed, Woolf writes, '[t]he book has somehow to be adapted to the body'.⁸² This suggests that the mother-author has a fundamental role to play in the creation of a text. The book must adapt to *her* body, just as readers must learn to read work by women writers and women writers learn to bear books. Great works of literature, meanwhile, rely on the existence of literary tradition, which poses a problem for women writers, since their tradition is at best, unrecorded: 'masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people.'⁸³ Woolf's essay suggests that mothers must be conjured from their absence in literary history – they must be remembered and *re-membered*. The female novelist is on her own, creating art despite her circumstances and despite an apparent lack of literary mothers. Indeed, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, while declaring that she had no literary 'grandmothers', used pregnancy as a metaphor for artistic creation in *Aurora Leigh* (1857): 'The book lived in me ere it lived in you; I know it closer than another does,' says Aurora.⁸⁴ However, the female writer is still compelled to think back *through* her mothers – note the similarity to Hesiod's phrase here – she is still determined to both identify her multiple maternal forebears and to use their bodies as a kind of mental channel. The very fact that Woolf inserts mothers – and their

⁸¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 51, p. 70, p. 77.

⁸² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 78.

⁸³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 66.

⁸⁴ Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, VIII. 271-72 (p. 517). In a letter to Mr Chorley Barrett Browning famously wrote 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none'. See *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by F.G. Kenyon, 2nd edn (London: Smith Elder, 1898), p.232 (7 January 1845).

bodies – into her argument suggests that female writers do indeed identify their literary mothers by the very action of their thinking.

Therefore, I would argue that literary mothers are not so much absent, but *hidden* – and evidence of this appears in more than one cultural artefact. For instance, in nineteenth-century photographs now known collectively as ‘hidden mothers’, women held their babies still in their laps whilst they themselves were shrouded in cloth (Fig. 3).⁸⁵ The silhouette of the mother would then be cropped out of the finished picture by framing the image, positioning the child at its centre. Made both ghostly and an irrelevant object by the covering of her body, the hidden mother may be read as a deathly, threateningly supernatural figure. She is the companion image to the headless disrobed torsos of Maygrier’s book – that other staple of maternal visual representation. Like Maygrier’s torsos, the hidden mother is anonymous and faceless. She cannot speak and is identifiable only by her role as mother. Indeed, the post-partum body of the hidden mother is so shrouded that we cannot make it out at all. If the pregnant body in Maygrier’s torsos reduces female identity to its reproductive capacity, distended womb and lactating breasts, then the post-partum hidden mother is rendered invisible and disembodied. Her embodiment has been transferred completely to her child, who sits proudly upright only because she holds her there – the function of the hidden mother is to support and make still the wriggling baby who cannot sit upright by herself.

⁸⁵ For images of hidden mothers, see Linda Fregni Nagner, *The Hidden Mother* (Mack and Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, 2013).

Fig. 3⁸⁶

Rendered virtually invisible, but always in the background, these hidden mothers mirror the figure of the maternal female in Victorian women's poetry.⁸⁷ My thesis argues that illuminating the parallels – and, indeed, disparities – between poetic and medical discourse reveals the 'hidden mothers' beneath their shrouds. By enacting Woolf's search for mothers, therefore, this thesis sets out to reveal the impact of the mother in women's

⁸⁶ Image from Linda Fregni Nagler, *The Hidden Mother*, repr. by *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2013/dec/02/hidden-mothers-victorian-photography-in-pictures?CMP=fb_gu> [accessed 11 June 2015].

⁸⁷ Of course, due to the invisibility and anonymity of the women in these images, we cannot be sure that they were in fact the mothers of the children – some may well have been nursemaids or other servants. However, all 'hidden mothers' – biological or otherwise – occupy the space of maternal embodiment, and it is this embodiment with which this thesis is concerned.

writing, by including her as a *pregnant* subject. For thinking back through the mothers requires an imaginative leap that combines knowledge of the body with that of the mind. Woolf's image is both visceral and metaphorical; if we think back *through* the mothers, then we approach the generations of women writers who have come before us via the body from which we were born.

Woolf's metaphor transgresses the female body's boundaries; it implies that in finding our literary mothers we must first 'embody' them empathetically and imaginatively. This, of course, raises the spectre of essentialism. In her article 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', Susan Stanford Friedman argues that 'women writers have often risked the metaphor's dangerous biologism in order to challenge fundamental binary oppositions of patriarchal ideology between word and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body'.⁸⁸ This suggests that the childbirth metaphor has particular potency in the hands of female writers.⁸⁹ Though perilous in its possible essentialism, the childbirth metaphor is one which may give rise to a powerful, even prophetic, 'womb-based art'.⁹⁰ Indeed, though it at first appears to reinforce Cartesian dualism by aligning the pregnant body with the female artist and the pregnant mind with the male, Friedman's argument emphasises the metaphor's 'literal falsehood' as a way out of this perceived deadlock:

Paradoxically, the childbirth metaphor that reinforces the separation of creation and procreation in a male text becomes its own opposite in a female text. Instead of contributing to the reification of Western culture, the female metaphor expresses a fundamental rebellion against it. It represents the defiance of historical realities and a symbolic reunion of mind and body, creation and procreation. The female metaphor establishes a matrix of creativities based on woman's doublebirthing potential. [...] The metaphor's literal falsehood remains the same as it does in a male comparison. Babies are never books. But the

⁸⁸ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (1987), 49-82 (p. 51).

⁸⁹ Friedman also discusses the childbirth metaphor as used by male writers for their literary 'headbirths' (pp. 55-58).

⁹⁰ Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', p. 72.

reader's awareness that the metaphor features a woman changes how the biological and historical resonances work.⁹¹

Babies, Friedman argues, are never books. However, according to Friedman, the absurdity of this comparison is what makes the metaphor work for women. Female subjects have 'doublebirthing potential'; they have the capacity to both create and procreate. Female authorship, then, is fundamentally rebellious, and women's birth metaphors cover what Friedman calls a continuum of experience.⁹²

There is not one single childbirth metaphor, therefore, but a matrix of metaphors, that exist along a continuum. For example, at one end of Friedman's continuum, women writers such as Elinor Wylie and Margaret Mead use the childbirth metaphor to confirm the patriarchal separation of creativities, writing 'into their analogies a belief that procreation and creation are mutually exclusive'.⁹³ At the other end, Anais Nin pursues a 'womb-based art' and Lucille Clifton writes about the birth of a child and a poem.⁹⁴ Pregnant embodiment is inherently varied, individualised and challenging. It opens up, rather than shuts down, creative responses to the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. This thesis is concerned with exploring these matrices, and though it acknowledges the metaphor's literal falsehood, it contends that babies and books are often presented in thematic dialogue with one another, just as female writers respond to one another.⁹⁵ Indeed, this notion of matrices encompasses various literary mothers and sisters; the women writers included in this thesis can be considered as both thematically and historically 'related'. Each demonstrates trends in women's writing along Friedman's continuum. Each explores the alignment between the book and the baby; the female subject in their texts is pregnant with both.

⁹¹ Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', p. 58.

⁹² Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', p. 66.

⁹³ Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', p. 67.

⁹⁴ Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', p. 72-75.

⁹⁵ Significantly, the original meaning of 'matrix' is 'womb'.

It is here that the language and form of women's writing becomes significant; as Friedman notes, '[w]ords about the production of babies and books abound with puns, common etymologies, and echoing sounds that simultaneously yoke and separate creativity and procreativity.'⁹⁶ Throughout this thesis I use etymology as a point for imaginative leaping; ventriloquism's origins in 'speaking from the belly' is one such example.⁹⁷ Approaching women's writing from this perspective – looking for echoing dialogues, moments at which the pregnant subject does indeed 'speak from her belly' – also allows me to consider the pregnant subject as she exists in a variety of genres. The form of the book (whether poetry, prose or verse-novel) and the form of the body are inextricably linked, and can be explored in order to tell us something significant about the corpus of women's writing. The question of whether women's writing about pregnancy forms a matrix, despite the stylistic differences between various texts separated by cultural and historic contexts, will be a key concern for this thesis. The metaphor of the pregnant and birthing body is one that simultaneously moves backwards and forwards; it recalls the pregnancy of one's mother and anticipates the birth of one's child. Choosing a wide range of texts, from *Frankenstein* to contemporary women's poetry, and organising them in terms of the stage of pregnancy they represent, allows this work to think back through the mothers and look forward to their literary daughters.

⁹⁶ Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', p. 52.

⁹⁷ See Chapter III (Ultrasound).

Chapter I

From Consummation to Quickening: the Pregnant Poet in Elizabeth Barrett

Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

The fourth month ended and I looked forward most anxiously to signs of quickening. I felt something [...] which made me lift up my eyes and thank God. So there was something, whether it was my child or not – Caroline Clive⁹⁸

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), is a text fundamentally important to ideas of poetic pregnancy. Written in the first person, *Aurora Leigh* is both epic poem and *Künstlerroman*, charting the poetic development of its heroine, Aurora. Significant not only because it presents an unapologetically female poetic subject amid a male-dominated nineteenth-century poetic canon, Barrett Browning's text also configures and explores an explicitly maternal poeticism. *Aurora Leigh* draws a conceptual link between the birth of the book and the birth of a baby. Autobiographical and self-titled, Barrett Browning's verse-novel shows the development of the poetic subject into a *maternal* poetic subject, the mother of a 'book'. Indeed, throughout *Aurora Leigh*, the book is described in terms that suggest an unborn child: 'The book lived in me ere it lived in you; / I know it closer than another does,' Aurora states.⁹⁹ Structurally, the text forcibly references the nine months of pregnancy; *Aurora Leigh* is divided into nine books, at the end of which Aurora's book is born. This suggests not only that Aurora's book is continually transforming, but that it is *transformative*. It impacts upon both the material of the text and the pregnant poet's development. Its form is hybrid and innovative; occupying spaces between poetry and prose, between poetic subject and object, pregnant poet and unborn book, Barrett Browning's verse-novel defies straightforward categorisation.

⁹⁸ Caroline Clive, *From the Diary and Family Papers of Mrs Archer Clive* (1801-1873), ed. by Mary Clive ([n.p.]: Butler and Tanner, 1949), pp. 133-34 (2 September 1841).

⁹⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), ed. by Margaret Reynolds (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), VIII. 271-72 (p. 517). All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

Indeed, the structural importance of *Aurora Leigh* as a text pregnant with meaning also reflects its position in terms of women's poetry and feminist criticism. *Aurora Leigh*'s place in the western literary canon has been subject to critical debate. Since its initial publication *Aurora Leigh* has met with various critical responses, though in the twentieth century it was neglected until feminist scholars such as Ellen Moers, Dorothy Mermin and Marjorie Stone reinvigorated its study from the second-wave literary criticism of the 1970s onwards.¹⁰⁰ Such critics highlighted the text's transformative function. Barrett Browning, Stone writes, 'not only "steals" fragments from the classical and Christian fathers who establish her authority. She also submits these fragments to a gynocentric metamorphosis, anticipating the textual practice of modern women poets'.¹⁰¹ This positions Barrett Browning as dismembering and reanimating paternal textual bodies (both classical and Christian) in order to produce a 'gynocentric' text, a term introduced by Elaine Showalter in her essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' and subsequently taken up by other 'gynocritics'.¹⁰² In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter positions Barrett Browning as among the first generation of nineteenth-century 'feminine novelists', who broke new ground as 'female role innovators'.¹⁰³ Indeed, she argues that *Aurora Leigh* was one of the few autobiographical discussions of the 'feminine role conflict' – that is, the conflict between established

¹⁰⁰ In her 'Critical Introduction' to the text, Margaret Reynolds comments that '[f]ew works can have suffered the extreme range of reaction which characterizes the criticism devoted to *Aurora Leigh*: from enthusiasm and exultation typified by the assessment of the author's friends and acquaintances, to the grudging acknowledgement of contemporary reviewers, through a period of dismissal and exasperation in the first half of the twentieth century, to the regeneration initiated by feminist criticism in which *Aurora Leigh* becomes "the feminist poem" radical in its celebration of the centrality of female experience". See Margaret Reynolds, 'Critical Introduction', in *Aurora Leigh*, pp. 1-77 (p. 2). Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (London: Women's Press, 1978); Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Marjorie Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

¹⁰¹ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 153-54.

¹⁰² Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985; repr. London: Virago, 1986), pp. 125-43.

¹⁰³ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978; repr. 2003), p. 19.

definitions of acceptable femininity (comprising marriage and motherhood) and writing.¹⁰⁴

This positions Barrett Browning as a literary mother for subsequent generations of women writers to follow, reinforcing a model of literary influence. Having famously declared 'I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none', Barrett Browning subsequently becomes a Muse, the mother (or 'grandmother') of a twentieth-century feminist poetics. My reading of *Aurora Leigh*, however, complicates this model by suggesting not only that Barrett Browning is a 'grandmother' to a feminist poetics, but that her model is one of maternal creativity. By rewriting the woman poet as pregnant with her book and the Muse as mother, Barrett Browning's text looks forward, as well as to the past.¹⁰⁵

Aurora champions the female capacity to produce art and the desire to 'understand/ That life develops from within' (II: ll. 484-85). Though the text requires us to 'sex' *Aurora*, a consummate virgin, in order to read her as a pregnant creative subject, its language and structure position it as unambiguously maternal. *Aurora Leigh*'s landscapes, spaces and imagery evoke the permeable, leaky and bloody female body. As will be explored, this is a body that births both metaphorically and physically, that grows, develops and quickens.¹⁰⁶ The text thus shows the female reproductive body to be powerfully poetic, 'pregnant' with *Aurora*'s book, the 'life [...] within'. This foetal-book is both of the poet's making and matures in its own right. *Aurora Leigh* thus suggests that women poets are best suited to negotiating poetic identity; their constant transformation as female (and potentially pregnant) subjects enables them to balance somewhere between the active pen and the passive vessel for inspiration.¹⁰⁷ Rather than privilege the Romantic notion of the Muse,

¹⁰⁴ Showalter, *A Literature Of Their Own*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ Barrett Browning's text therefore encapsulates the aim of this thesis, which is to look both backwards, 'through the mothers' (to use Woolf's phrase) and forwards.

¹⁰⁶ Quickening, as already noted in the Introduction, is the experience of foetal movement by the mother, and will be explored later on in this chapter.

¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the prefix 'trans' carries the meanings 'across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another' and 'beyond, surpassing, transcending'. The Muse *trans*-forms meaning; her formations or incarnations themselves are unstable, destabilising and

which identifies the male poet and his pen with procreativity and the female muse with the inscribed text his creative act produces, this looks back to and rewrites a classical model of poetic conception. Simultaneously mother, muse and poet, the pregnant subject recalls the classical exchange of fluid inspiration.¹⁰⁸ I will argue that, in *Aurora Leigh* Barrett Browning submits received, dominant representations of women to 'metamorphosis', representations which include the figure of the Virgin or Madonna, a knowing subject whom Barrett Browning depicts both in *Aurora* and in *Marian Erle*.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, *Aurora Leigh* not only deals with the poet as pregnant subject, but with the mother as the subject of poetry. As I will explore, Marian Erle's maternity makes her an idealised Virgin, granted knowledge and articulate agency. Marian and Aurora form a matriarchal family unit, with Aurora providing a home for Marian and her child. Marian's voice, at first experienced second-hand through Aurora's account, becomes a first-person narrative. Rather than be framed as a victim of divine lust in line with classical texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Barrett Browning's

transforming. Applied to women poets, this model for creativity becomes maternal, incorporating both the divine and figurative, and the blood and rhythms of female bodily experience. See 'trans-, prefix', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 8 June 2015].

¹⁰⁸ Joyce Zonana argues that in *Aurora Leigh* Barrett Browning fully integrates the muse and poet through Aurora's metaphorical maternity: '[I]n her nine-book poem of self-portrayal, Aurora undergoes a healing gestation, giving birth anew to the mother with whom she can finally identify herself. In recreating her mother in herself, Aurora becomes a fully embodied, earthly muse. But first she must experience division and disembodiment, becoming what her culture calls "heavenly"'. See Joyce Zonana, 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics', in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 53-74 (p. 61).

¹⁰⁹ Different possible representations of the feminine, which include the Madonna, are encapsulated by Aurora's description of her mother's portrait:

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,
A still Medusa with mild milky brows
[...] or anon

Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords (l: ll. 154-60).

Zonana argues that 'Aurora does not so much penetrate beneath the "masks" of womanhood as incorporate them into herself. Muse, Medusa, Madonna, Psyche and Lamia need no longer be opposed as conflicting aspects of the female.' See Zonana, 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics', p. 64.

raped mother is not denied the power of speech.¹¹⁰ Instead, Marian Erle shows pregnancy – whether real or metaphorical – to be a precondition of poetic creation. She is the other maternal poetic subject of the text.

Aurora Leigh's particular concern with the transformation of the female body from virgin to mother also focuses on the pregnant subject's experiences of consummation and quickening: Aurora's poetic consummation (examined in the first part of this chapter) and 'quickening inner life' in Book I (l. 1027) and Marian's rape (in Book VI: ll. 1203-18). These occurrences (poetic and otherwise) confirm the subject's knowledge of her condition, and take place in its earliest stages. Quickening, the mother's sensation of foetal movement, particularly is a mode of knowledge that is distinctly maternal and transformative; at the time of *Aurora Leigh's* publication, quickening (as reported by the mother) was perceived as the only reliable method of determining pregnancy.¹¹¹ Indeed, Barrett Browning's framing of Aurora's book as a foetal-text that quickens similarly privileges maternal knowledge over dominant masculine assumptions about women and poetry.¹¹² Such assumptions, of course, return us to the notion of the sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of female creativity, childbirth and art and the ways in which this concept has been circulated.

Medical discourse from this period particularly pathologises the reproductive female body, not simply as requiring care and diagnosis, but in terms that suggest its anxiety-provoking capacity for embodying the dangerous female imagination. John Morley, for instance, represents the pregnant subject as intellectually incapacitated by her body: '[w]hen

¹¹⁰ The transformed are often victims, rendered passive and inanimate or animal and speechless. The story of Callisto, transformed into a bear, is one such example. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A.D. Melville, with an introduction and notes by E.J. Kenney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), ll.384-554, pp. 36-40.

¹¹¹ Though practitioners had been examining women's urine for centuries, it was not until the twentieth century that reliable pregnancy testing kits became available. The Stetten Museum offers a fascinating insight into this history. See Sarah A. Leavitt, 'A Thin Blue Line: The History of the Pregnancy Testing Kit', Stetten Museum, Office of NIH History (2003) <<http://history.nih.gov/exhibits/thinblueline/index.html>> [accessed 16 August 2015].

¹¹² As I will explore later, Aurora's cousin, Romney, for instance, argues that women cannot be poets (ll: ll. 220-25).

we consider the close sympathy which at all times exists between the uterine organs and the brain, it is not surprising that the nervous system should be considerably influenced by pregnancy.¹¹³ 'During this period', he continues, women are 'unusually susceptible [to] almost all kinds of external impressions' that can cause 'fear and alarm', irritability, depression and melancholy.¹¹⁴ Though Morley discredits what he calls the 'superstitious' view of 'mental impressions' during pregnancy, he does argue that pregnant women are more susceptible to 'painful intelligence' and that this may have a detrimental, sometimes even fatal, effect on the foetus.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, maternal impressions or 'naevi materni', marks (usually considered deformities) apparently inscribed upon the body of the baby by the strong imaginative influence of its mother, are ideas that appear in the medical discourse of this period, as well as in earlier texts.¹¹⁶ Indeed, I argue that the phenomenon of 'maternal impressions' illustrates the ways in which poetic sensibility can be conflated with, and diagnosed as a symptom of, pathologised pregnancy. The pregnant imagination, as I will discuss, might generate monsters. Furthermore, the notion that a pregnant woman could alter or damage the physical appearance of her unborn child simply by thinking suggests that the dialogue between literary and medical discourse was an exchange and circulation of ideas – sometimes even a struggle between different kinds of texts describing the same thing – rather than a simple case of influence. Just as Morley outlines the susceptibility of the

¹¹³ John Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy, from The Earliest Stage to The Period of Quickening. With a Physiological Explanation of the Physical and Mental Changes Produced by the Impregnated Uterus upon the System of the Mother* (London: S. Highley, 1829), p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy*, p. 13.

¹¹⁵ Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy*, p. 44.

¹¹⁶ Morley outlines the history of maternal impressions in a lengthy footnote to the main body of his discussion, including both Biblical quotation (the story of Jacob's cattle, who "'conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ring-streaked, speckled and spotted'", from Genesis 30. 37-39) and an article published in 1827: "'A woman gave birth to a child with a large cluster of globular tumours [...] exactly resembling our common grapes; and with a red excrescence from the chest, as exactly resembling the wattle of a turkey-cock. On being questioned [...] she answered, that whilst pregnant she had seen grapes, longed intensely for them, and constantly thought of them; and once was attacked by a turkey-cock.'" See Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy*, pp. 44-45.

mother to 'impressions', Barrett Browning shows the foetal-text as formed and 'impressed' upon by Aurora's imagination.

Whereas Aurora takes quickening as a sign that her poetic creation is flourishing, Morley's thoughts on quickening undermine the pregnant subject's knowledge. Quickening, Morley writes, 'is commonly understood [as] the first sensation which the mother has of the motion of the child. But it is perhaps more correctly defined as consisting in the impregnated uterus rising out of the pelvic into the abdominal capacity'.¹¹⁷ Though Morley later clarifies that the changing position of the uterus and the 'fluttering' motion of the foetus cause quickening, he asserts his authority as a medical man of scholarship over the pregnant subject's account, thereby redefining quickening for his readership.¹¹⁸ Such responses to the pregnant subject can be aligned with contemporary views of the woman poet, considered an 'exotic oddity' who transgressed prescribed roles for women by creating unsanctioned books, rather than (or as well as) babies.¹¹⁹ My analysis of both *Aurora Leigh* and medical texts from this period illustrate the anxieties attendant on poetic pregnancy, revealing the relationship between the literary texts and medical texts that describe the spaces of the female reproductive body as resembling a permeable membrane, rather than an impenetrable barrier. By examining *Aurora Leigh*'s representation of early pregnancy, and accounts of the pregnant imagination in such medical texts, I hope to illuminate these connections in order to better understand the pregnant poet as a figure of nineteenth-century femininity – a knowing, imaginative and creative subject, who may be written, read and 'sexed'.

¹¹⁷ Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy*, p. 26.

¹¹⁸ Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy*, p. 27. Morley's text was intended for a medical readership.

¹¹⁹ Margaret Reynolds, 'Critical Introduction', p. 4. Barrett Browning had a child in 1849, a son who was named Robert (and called 'Pen'). Other nineteenth-century women writers who had children include Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865). However, Jane Austen (1775-1817), George Eliot (1819-1880), and the Brontë sisters were all conspicuously childless.

Sexing the Virgin: Aurora's Consummation

Aurora's 'life [that] develops from within' is not an immaculate conception of the kind favoured by Christian theology. Barrett Browning's first book outlines the circumstances of this artistic conception, as well as the moment it occurs, revealing that although Aurora remains physically a virgin, the creation of her book is by no means sexless. Barrett Browning identifies her protagonist first as a daughter and then as a lover. *Aurora Leigh* begins by foregrounding writing as a means of constructing identity through returning to and examining one's childhood self. Aurora tells us that she has 'written much in prose and verse/ For others' uses' (I: ll. 2-3) and now writes this autobiographical poem for her 'better self/ As when you paint your portrait for a friend, [...] To hold together what he was and is' (ll. 5-8).

Barrett Browning's designation of Aurora's 'better self' as masculine is telling. It suggests that Aurora desires to be read as a powerful, rational and masculine subject. By having Aurora acknowledge that her 'better self' is like a male companion, Barrett Browning gives the reader an instantly recognisable paradigm for artistic conception: the male poet and his female muse. However, Aurora's femaleness provides an image of the poet that ultimately disrupts this construction. The 'better self' is both the self that writes poetry and the recipient of that poetry. 'A man's within me', Aurora later writes (VII: l. 230). This suggests a model of creativity that absorbs and transcends gender binaries. Though apparently setting up a traditional configuration in which the male 'friend' keeps a self-portrait of his female companion in a drawer as a romantic token and 'looks at it/ Long after he has ceased to love' her (I: ll. 6-7), this small moment also subverts this configuration, since it blurs the boundaries between subject and object, male artist and female muse. The

poet is a hermaphrodite subject, able to move between and beyond masculine and feminine modes of creativity.¹²⁰

Aurora's autobiography enables her companion to remember his past and current selves, 'who he was and is' (l: l. 8). It physically 'hold[s] together' his identity (l. 8). Barrett Browning's verb phrase here suggests that maintaining the self is an intensely visceral process. It requires the subject to 'hold' himself as though he were holding someone else – an action which is reminiscent of the female pregnant body itself. Because the female pregnant body 'hold[s] together' mother and child, holding things together would seem to be an inherently maternal act. Gazing upon the image of a female body in meditation or contemplation enables the subject to adopt this maternal posture as his own.¹²¹ It also suggests that the mother figure is a source of creative power that enables the gazer to alter his own identity. Aurora's friend keeps the portrait in a drawer – a domestic, enclosed space, perhaps in the desk at which he writes, or beside his bed, where he sleeps. This is an intimate space. Yet it suggests too that the subject requires 'holding together' – that his identity is fragmented and can only become whole with the absorption of the female maternal image. The male subject therefore is positioned in relation to the mother's body. Her reproductive capacity both threatens and enables his creative production.¹²²

'Holding together' also evokes the intertwining of female and male bodies during intercourse. Such an intimate positioning of the poetic subject and object suggests that the notion of sexual activity (and its absence) is very much at the heart of poetic creation. It is

¹²⁰ Indeed, Aurora's transvestism anticipates Virginia Woolf's concept of the androgynous mind, which will be discussed in Chapter II (Miscarriage).

¹²¹ This is reminiscent of the way in which one would pray to an image of the Virgin and Child. I discuss the figure of the Madonna later on in this chapter.

¹²² A notable example of this occurs in Philip Sidney's Sonnet I of *Astrophil and Stella*: 'Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes, /Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite: /"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write."' (ll. 12-14). See Philip Sidney, Sonnet I, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, 5th edn (New York and London: Norton, 2005), p. 213. By linking body and brain – and, furthermore, ascribing the bodily process of childbearing solely to the male brain in terms of poetry – Sidney effectively alienates women from their bodies.

significant, then, that Aurora's first encounters with Romney, whom she describes as a 'sort of friend' (l. l. 512), mark the shift which takes place when she stops identifying herself as a daughter and begins identifying herself as a poet and lover. Previously preoccupied with her lost mother, father and her education in England (far from her native Italy), Aurora's focus alters when she begins a courtship with Romney that is only half-realised:

I used him for a friend
 Before I ever knew him for a friend.
 'Twas better, 'twas worse also, afterward:
 We came so close, we saw our differences
 Too intimately. (l. ll. 547-51)

The noun 'friend' in relation to Romney appears repeatedly in Barrett Browning's verse; its repetition becomes euphemistic. This implies that the young Aurora does not comprehend the full meaning of this word, and that the older, mature Aurora applies it in retrospect in order to highlight the possibilities and pitfalls of language for a novice poet. Similarly, one may read this moment as a consummation because it positions Aurora and Romney 'too intimately' (l. 551). There is a keen sense of the 'before' and 'afterward' here: a moment of knowledge has been reached from which Aurora and Romney can never return. The moment of consummation itself appears embedded between these lines – in the line break's hesitation before the half line 'I used him for a friend' perhaps (l. 547), or at the colon at line 549. This crisis point, which is touched upon but never fully comes to rest, seems highly orchestrated. It draws the reader into an intimate relationship with the text, and we become so close that we can only see the intricacies of sexual difference: the inner workings of Aurora's conception. Like Aurora, we find ourselves intimately involved with Romney's influence, without any preliminary warning. It seems that his sex entitles him to proclaim women as chaste 'Madonnas' and men as poets (ll. ll. 220-25) and Aurora immediately sets

about proving him wrong.¹²³ Ironically, by doing this she makes him the father of her book; she gives his words credence, including them and their intimate 'differences' in her book. She becomes pregnant with poetry. The text's spaces, as I will next examine, reveal how this poetic pregnancy develops.

Aurora's Intimate Chamber

In her 1976 study of the cult of the Virgin Mary, Marina Warner recounts a personal experience which resonates particularly in relation to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaces of female imaginative conception in *Aurora Leigh*. As a Catholic schoolgirl, Warner was used to worshipping at 'the grotto of the Virgin', a section of the crypt underneath the chapel where, arranged around a statue of the Virgin, were rosaries and 'a grotto [...] made from chunks of cork oak'.¹²⁴ Warner recalls how this enclosed, buried space for reflection and prayer, simultaneously public and private, 'bit deep into our imaginations'.¹²⁵ Indeed, so influenced was she by the grotto of the Virgin, that Warner created her own:

I was no exception when, secretly and with intense excitement, I made myself my own grotto. Finding a rhododendron bush so old that its dusty dark green foliage framed a hollow chamber, I used to crawl in during breaks and after study hours and kneel to pray. 'Holiness', as we called it, was natural, a part of living as simple as drawing breath.¹²⁶

Warner's imagery here places the grotto at the centre of a uniquely female experience. Like her contemporaries, Warner illicitly finds and makes her own personal grotto among the rhododendrons in the school grounds, a place for retreat and reflection. This is a creative space and a forbidden one; Warner's language suggests both sexual excitement and

¹²³ This is quoted in full and further explored later on in this chapter.

¹²⁴ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976; repr. Picador, 1985), p. xx.

¹²⁵ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. xx.

¹²⁶ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. xx.

auto-eroticism. Her pubescent subject takes a visceral delight in her relationship with the Virgin, remembering the secret 'intense excitement' of this first creative experiment.

Warner both enters and emerges from a womb-like space contained and concealed by the wild rhododendron bush; the landscape of the grotto resembles the female genitals.

As Mary Russo points out, the grotto and the notion of the grotesque female body are inextricably linked:

The word itself [...] Evokes the cave – the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral. As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body.¹²⁷

Russo continues to explore the grotto as a place associated with the grotesque feminine – the container of blood, tears, vomit, excrement and other bodily 'detritus'.¹²⁸ Indeed, she argues that '[t]he images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abject from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek [...] The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing'.¹²⁹ This suggests that the female body itself poses a challenge to classical norms – the kind Stone argues that Barrett Browning is rewriting in *Aurora Leigh*.¹³⁰ The grotto-esque is therefore highly disruptive and even iconoclastic. It allows the female subject to explore creative possibilities hitherto unknown and undefined, which would account for Warner's excitement at discovering and constructing her own grotto.

Making one's own grotto appears in this light as a shared yet intensely individual part of growing up. It involves a deliberate retreat into a 'hollow chamber' framed by foliage –

¹²⁷ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

¹²⁸ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p. 2.

¹²⁹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p. 2.

¹³⁰ Stone, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 153-4.

an ancient, womb-like space for contemplation and prayer, in which the female pubescent subject is able to reach an understanding of 'holiness'. 'Holiness' in this instance conveys a spiritual and physical connection with one's Holy Mother, though this is never specified. Instead, Warner implies that the individual female subject will arrive at an understanding of the identity of her spiritual mother, and by extension, an understanding of herself, only by constructing her own grotto. Arriving at female adulthood thus becomes a self-authoring act which draws upon maternal influence but ultimately requires 'poetic parturition' (my term). In order to become a fully-realised adult subject, the virgin must make something new of her mother's 'chamber'.

Aurora's grotto is conspicuously *not* her mother's chamber, however. This is the space that Aurora occupies in the house created by her maiden aunt:

I had a little chamber in the house,
As green as any privet-hedge a bird
Might choose to build in, though the nest itself
Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws; the walls
Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight
Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds
Hung green about the window which let in
The outdoor world with all its greenery. (l: ll. 567-74)

Although it appears fecund and 'green', this grotto is conspicuously childless. Yet the promise of nest eggs remains even though 'the nest itself/ Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws' (ll. 569-70). These materials lack the lush fecundity of the outdoor world, though they are the materials from which nests are built. Barrett Browning's original manuscript draft had Aurora exclaim of her entrapment in this 'dead' nest far more explicitly. She described the room as 'As green as where a bird would choose to build/ In a privet hedge, the intimate nest being made/ Of dead leaves all the same – and so with me!'.¹³¹ Here Barrett Browning suggests that despite appearances ('all the same') the

¹³¹ This quotation is taken from the first draft manuscript of *Aurora Leigh* at Wellesley College (l: ll. 568-70), and is quoted in *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds, p. 185.

'intimate nest' is a sterile one, comprised of 'dead leaves'. The double meaning of the phrase 'all the same' also indicates that the leaves are uniform in their shape, texture and lifelessness. The grotto associated with the maiden aunt is infertile.

Were Aurora to create her own nest in the model of her maiden aunt's, then it would be just like all other virgin grottos: childless. Aurora's desire to write poetry thus represents a desire to create meaning out of the living matter of language, and by doing so to separate herself from this model of feminine existence which only *appears* to be fertile. According to Showalter's definition of the 'feminine role conflict', Aurora's aunt would be in a strong position to become a literary woman, since she is unmarried.¹³² However, Aurora's aunt positions herself against the notion of the woman poet, as shown by her reaction to Aurora's aspiration.¹³³ The maiden aunt figure is surplus in the family unit; she has no children of her own and is called upon to foster Aurora. Her infertility, therefore, refers to both body and mind – physical and metaphorical pregnancy.

With regards to Aurora, however, the final version of these lines is not quite so bleak. Aurora's 'intimate nest' is not comprised of completely dead leaves, but of leaves which are *coloured* 'dead-brown'. Their outward show belies their inward promise, and Aurora actively occupies and describes this space, altering meaning as she does so. Indeed, the greenness of Aurora's chamber is especially striking. It establishes a visual continuation between the external natural world and the inner imaginative space, but even as it does this

¹³² Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 23.

¹³³ Aurora's aunt thinks that her aspiration – and rejection of Romney's marriage proposal – is both unwise and ridiculous:

'What stuff!' she answered; 'are they queens, these girls?
They must have mantles, stitched with twenty silks,
Spread out upon the ground, before they'll step
One footstep for the noblest lover born.' (II: II. 576-79)

In light of my analysis in Chapter II (Miscarriage), which considers the ways in which the pregnant subject is covered and uncovered by her clothed silhouette, it is interesting that the aunt's objections are made in the language of material, fabric and clothes. This demonstrates that clothes are fundamental to constructions – and deconstructions – of femininity.

it also enforces their separation for a young woman such as Aurora. The 'pure green' furnishings, for instance, actually heighten the difference between the internal domestic space and the landscape, since they are man-made and not organic. The appearance of fertility, therefore, does not necessarily result in imaginative fertility. Although the window 'let in/ The outdoor world' (l: ll. 573-74), the curtains provide a thick barrier of fabric, in folds which also enclose Aurora's 'straight / Small bed' (l: ll. 572-73). The chamber is comfortable but stifling, and the bed admits a single female only. There is no room for sexual intimacy; this is a spinster's chamber. Aurora's confinement in this chamber and subsequent escape is described in terms which evoke the maternal body. Her direct address to the reader with the second-person pronoun 'you' (ll. 575, 577) both confines the poetic subject and reader in the grotto and indicates Aurora's command of language:

You could not push your head out and escape
 A dash of dawn-dew from the honeysuckle,
 But so you were baptized into the grace
 And privilege of seeing... (l: ll. 575-78)

We are forcibly detained in these lines, unable to 'escape'. However, Barrett Browning's syntax compels us to choose actively how exactly to interpret this confinement. We can read these lines as conveying the inability of the subject to escape by focusing on the first stressed syllable of 'you could not' (l. 575). This interpretation is initially the most striking; Barrett Browning's modal phrase has the force of an imperative, and emphasises the difficulty of 'escape'. Yet there is also the sense that the female subject must attempt this escape as a rite of admission into spiritual maturity and the Church. In order to 'see' the 'grace' outside, the subject must be 'baptized' by the 'dawn-dew'. This is a Virgin's chamber as well as a spinster's, and though apparently containing and enclosing Aurora, it also provides her with a framework from which to emerge and begin transforming meaning. In this respect it provides a grotto not unlike that envisaged by Warner. Indeed, particularly when read with Warner's grotto in mind, the imagery of Aurora trying to push her head out

of this chamber, and in so doing becoming covered with liquid secretions, evokes childbirth. The female poetic subject cannot 'push' her 'head out' and experience the natural world without becoming 'baptized' by the 'dawn-dew' – liquid secretions from the sky and foliage (ll. 575-76). Aurora's emergence through the window of her aunt's chamber, head first, is rather like the crowning of a child – the moment at which the head presents itself at the opening of the birth canal during labour.

The maiden aunt thus resists straightforward reading. Though Aurora's aunt is explicitly non-maternal – in fact, she can be considered an 'anti-maternal' subject given her expressed dislike of Aurora's mother – she functions here as a surrogate mother.¹³⁴ She is a Madonna too, a virgin subject who unexpectedly becomes a mother to Aurora. Her virginity disrupts the established model of maternal genealogy; instead of passing through her mother's body in order to birth herself as a poet, Aurora leaves the home via her aunt's chamber. Aurora cannot enter the world outside without first passing through her aunt's leaky but infertile body. The notion that poetic 'mothers' beget poetic 'daughters' in a straightforward lineal model of heritage is thus shown to be flawed. Rather than being reproduced by her maternal predecessor, the poetic daughter must create something new out of the infertile chamber that she has inherited.

Reading the maiden aunt's chamber in terms of Warner's grotto thus suggests a model for female creativity which can be applied to women's poetry. By simultaneously looking back through the maternal line and forward to potential future children, the grotto space explicitly evokes reproduction as a metaphor for such creativity, but the nature of this

¹³⁴ Aurora's aunt hated her mother:

For she, my aunt,
Had loved my father truly, as she could,
And hated, with the gall of gentle souls,
My Tuscan mother, who had fooled away
A wise man from wise courses, a good man
From obvious duties, and, depriving her,
His sister, of the household precedence. (I: ll. 339-45)

'grotto-esque' chamber also encompasses disruptive and 'grotesque' versions of femininity such as the virginal maiden aunt – versions that resist the childbirth metaphor. Warner's rereading of the Virgin is particularly radical because dominant paradigms for thinking through the relationship between maternity, sexuality and creativity traditionally pronounce the idealised mother – exemplified by the Virgin – free from such concupiscence and creativity. Whilst sexual desire is characteristic of the transgressive woman (an Eve), creativity is traditionally reserved exclusively for male authors, who often use the metaphor of childbirth to explain their artistic conception.¹³⁵ In Christianity and in culture more generally, the Virgin is represented as simultaneously maternal and sexually pure. She conceived Christ without sex – a central paradox which makes her miraculous but also subject to debate. Declared exempt from bodily corruption and decay both in life and after death, the Virgin provides an idealised model of motherhood which has become 'an effective instrument of [...] female subjection' because it positions mothers as mere vessels for offspring generated by fathers and thereby unsexes them, making them safe.¹³⁶

Barrett Browning presents an absent mother and a 'hidden' one in *Aurora Leigh*.¹³⁷ The maiden aunt, suspended between patriarchal ideals and a rejection of those ideals – a liminal figure both defined by her unmarried status and refusing such definition – is Aurora's 'hidden mother'. She provides a model of femininity that Aurora must both reject and affirm in order to become a female poet. Aurora pushes her way out of the chamber, but

¹³⁵ For further discussion of this, see Susan Stanford Friedman's article 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', in *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (1987), 49-82.

¹³⁶ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 49. Warner is not alone in this conclusion. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the cultural emphasis placed upon virginity reveals male anxiety about both the intactness and the potency of the virgin body: 'A virgin body has the freshness of secret springs, the morning sheen of an unopened flower, the orient lustre of a pearl on which the sun has never shone. Grotto, temple, sanctuary, secret garden – man, like the child, is fascinated by enclosed and shadowy places not yet animated by any consciousness, which wait to be given a soul: what he alone is to take and to penetrate seems to be in truth created by him'. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 186.

¹³⁷ As discussed in the Introduction, the nineteenth-century photographs known as 'Hidden Mothers' shrouded the maternal subject, thereby 'cropping' and removing her from the picture of her child.

she also follows (against her aunt's explicit instructions) that aunt's example of spinsterhood. In *Aurora Leigh*, the active labourer in this particular birth is the daughter rather than the mother. It is Aurora who wants to 'push'. Aurora wishes to escape via the window, an unsanctioned, illicit route, rather than the door. Indeed, the door of her chamber would lead Aurora further into the house itself, an embodiment of her aunt's ideas about female life and education, and a space that is entailed upon the male heir, Romney. It seems that Aurora's desire to leave the house – to be out amid the natural, if refined, English garden – represents an instinctive rejection of nineteenth-century ideals of femininity that situate the woman in her chamber.¹³⁸ Barrett Browning allows her protagonist the freedom and ability to aspire to the world outside the home.

Poetic Passion: The Rape of the Madonna

Throughout *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora's maternal imagination is a powerful poetic force. Having 'pushed' her way out of her aunt's house, Aurora writes and publishes her book, a text that we identify as synonymous with Barrett Browning's. Indeed, *Aurora Leigh* itself is proof of the maternal imagination's influence, showing the transformation of Aurora from a virgin daughter into a poet. Her self-birth through her aunt's leaky chamber has allowed her to enter the public sphere of literary discourse. However, her cousin Romney insists that women are characterised by the 'personal and passionate'; this is the reason, he insists, they cannot be poets (II: I. 221). While Romney's use of the term 'passionate' raises questions about established representations of women and how they may be rewritten by the woman poet, Aurora's success shows that passion is both a positive creative influence and effect of poetry. Here, I explore the concept of 'poetic passion' with regard to both Aurora's book

¹³⁸ For instance, Coventry Patmore locates the ideal 'angelic' woman firmly within the home in his *The Angel in the House: Together With the Victories of Love* (1854), intro. by Alice Meynell (London: Routledge, [n.d.]).

and Marian Erle, the fallen woman and mother in the text. The figure of the Madonna-creator, the virgin who births, is a disruptive one – but also remarkably fertile for thinking about poetry.

Romney's argument about 'passionate' women maintains the Cartesian division between body and soul, emphasising the inherent embodiment of women as opposed to the intellectual rigour of men.¹³⁹ It is therefore unsurprising that Romney views women's 'personal and passionate' selves – in short, their bodies – to be unsuited for the intellectual rigours of poetic life. According to this configuration, pregnancy and childbirth can be considered a consequence of 'passionate' sexual desire, and result in painful physical transformation. Women, essentially 'personal and passionate', do not write poetry: they become mothers. Indeed, their maternity is reinforced by Christian theology. Etymologically, 'passion' connotes pain and religious suffering as well as emotion, madness and sexual desire.¹⁴⁰ It is a term associated with the suffering of Christ, who martyrs himself upon the cross for the benefit of all humanity. Meanwhile, the pain of childbearing is part of Eve's punishment for her original sin and something that the Bible tells us all women must experience: '[i]n sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'.¹⁴¹

Childbirth, then, is a 'passionate' enterprise in this sense. However, according to Christian doctrine, the Virgin Mary did not experience the pain of childbirth.¹⁴² Subject to a divine conception, she was made exempt from concupiscence and consummation, and subsequently the 'sorrow' of labour pains. Indeed, according to Warner, Mary's virgin body

¹³⁹ The gender of the Cartesian subject proved problematic for eighteenth-century commentators. As Clarissa Campbell Orr argues, 'the Cartesian moment was not unambiguously good for women. Concentrating on intellectual equality made biological difference problematic, and tended to privilege celibacy over sexual activity or fulfilment.' The traditional association of the mind with masculine rationality, and the body with feminine instinct, was difficult to overcome. See Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'Championing Women: Early Enlightenment Feminisms', in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. by Barbara Taylor and Sarah Knott (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 351-56 (p. 354).

¹⁴⁰ 'passion, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 9 June 2015].

¹⁴¹ Genesis 3. 16.

¹⁴² Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 45

remained intact, 'seamless' and 'unbroken' even after the birth of Christ.¹⁴³ Aurora, positioned as the virgin poet by Barrett Browning, also remains intact after her self-birth. Her 'passion' both refers to and transcends corporeal pain. The association of women with 'passion' in *Aurora Leigh* suggests that religious suffering and sacrifice beget poetry, and that this may be configured in surprising ways. The fallen woman, for instance – someone who has indeed suffered corporeal 'passion' – becomes a suitable topic for poetry. Marian Erle's story of enforced prostitution, rape, pregnancy and birth is the central narrative of Aurora's book. *Aurora Leigh* thus rewrites the Passion of the male child by highlighting instead the Passion of his mother, a condition given both religious and poetic significance.¹⁴⁴ Aurora's book thus has the potential to shock and be monstrous; it explores and overturns nineteenth-century assumptions about women's sexual conduct, at least to the extent that it presents the fallen woman as a redemptive Madonna, a woman who in a metaphorical sense remains inviolable and virginal even after her rape.

Marian Erle's transformation into an idealised Madonna, however, is not without cost. Marian is 'murdered' by this violent consummation and becomes a spectral, 'undead' figure. When Aurora encounters her in Paris after a long unexplained absence, she initially assumes that Marian is another sinful fallen woman (of which there are apparently many). She correctly identifies Marian's child as illegitimate, and immediately believes that Marian has been seduced. Barrett Browning shows this to be symptomatic of middle-class female attitudes towards working class unmarried mothers. Indeed, upon discovering her pregnancy, Marian's new female employer forces her to leave (VI: ll. 70-74). The truth of Marian's conception, however, leads Aurora to question these assumptions. She discovers

¹⁴³ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 73.

¹⁴⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert argues that 'Barrett Browning suggests that the female creativity "holy" Marian and reverent Aurora share can transform the most heinous act of male sexual brutality, a rape, into a redemption'. See Sandra M. Gilbert, 'From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', in *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 24-52 (p. 42).

that Marian was abducted, drugged and then raped by a stranger. Barrett Browning represents Marian's voice in the first person, allowing her to articulate her own, violent and unwanted 'self-birth':

'You feel?
 You understand? – no, do not look at me,
 But understand. The blank, blind, weary way,
 Which led, where'er it led, away at least;
 The shifted ship, to Sydney or to France,
 Still bound, wherever else, to another land;
 The swooning sickness on the dismal sea,
 The foreign shore, the shameful house, the night,
 The feeble blood, the heavy-headed grief,...
 No need to bring their damnable drugged cup,
 And yet they brought it. Hell's so prodigal
 Of devil's gifts, hunts liberally in packs,
 Will kill no poor small creature of the wilds
 But fifty red wide throats must smoke at it,
 As HIS at me .. when waking up at last ..
 I told you that I waked up in the grave. (VI: ll. 1203-18)

This account of Marian's rape is powerful, particularly since it does not represent the act of rape itself, but the effect that it has on the victim. The rape itself is beyond representation: it cannot be seen and replayed for the reader, and it cannot be appropriated as a voyeuristic experience. There is no implied consent and nothing sensual about this moment: this is no seduction. Placed on board a ship and sent to an unknown destination, Marian was rendered physically weak by seasickness and the trauma of her abduction. There was, she comments pointedly, 'no need' for her to be drugged also: she was sufficiently incapable of resistance. Marian commands understanding from Aurora, rather than observation, since her own journey to motherhood was 'blank' and 'blind' (l. 1205). Understanding, therefore, and the imaginative work it requires, is necessarily important in this excerpt. Barrett Browning's alliteration and sibilance ('shifted ship', 'shameful', 'swooning sickness', 'heavy-headed', 'no need', 'damnable drugged') as well as assonance ('foreign shore', 'drugged cup', 'feeble [...] grief/ [...] need') foreground the significance of rhythm and metre in attaining this understanding. Marian's words are undeniably *poetic*: she speaks in iambic pentameter,

in a sophisticated register somewhat incongruous with her class and sex.¹⁴⁵ Barrett Browning thus gives the fallen woman not only a voice, but poetic sensibility. Unexpectedly articulate, stylised and persuasive even after her ordeal, Marian demonstrates the power of maternity in fashioning the poetic subject.

Barrett Browning's account of Marian's conception also uses Gothic imagery, lest we forget the horror of this particular consummation. Marian's rape occurs in a liminal space – somewhere unknown and 'foreign' (l. 1210) that seems to have been reached via metamorphosis (a 'shifted ship', l. 1207). Indeed, Barrett Browning's metre suggests a breaching of boundaries at two moments during this excerpt. Lines 1208 ('Still bound, wherever else, to another land') and 1214 ('Of devil's gifts, hunts liberally in packs,') both contain eleven syllables rather than the ten of iambic pentameter. 'Still bound' suggests simultaneous stasis and movement; Marian has been physically restrained or 'bound' to stop her from running away, but she is also locked into a journey that seems interminable.¹⁴⁶ There is the sense, too, that Marian's journey will take her into an uncharted, unknown space ('wherever else'). In line 1214, meanwhile, Barrett Browning uses the image of hellhounds in pursuit, emphasising the fear experienced by Marian during the rape. This is also an allusion to the classical figure of Cerberus, particularly as depicted by Hesiod. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld, has fifty heads.¹⁴⁷ Traditionally depicted as consuming living flesh (in order to let the dead pass to the underworld) Cerberus is here conflated with Marian's rapist, whose consuming, smoking

¹⁴⁵ This technique has previously been used to disrupt expectations in other texts. For instance, Shakespeare's 'savage' character in *The Tempest*, Caliban, famously speaks in blank verse when describing the beauties of the island. See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by David Lindley (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), III. 2. 127-35 (pp. 187-88).

¹⁴⁶ This is reminiscent of Coleridge's traveller in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. His central figure is locked in an interminable journey, forced to tell his tale of struggle and redemption. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 9-35.

¹⁴⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. with introductions by Catherine M. Schlegel and Henry Weinfield (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), II. 310-12 (pp. 32-33).

red throat is the first thing that she sees when she regains consciousness. This signifies Marian's transformation from a living subject to an (un)dead one: 'I waked up in the grave' (l. 1218).

Indeed, Marian repeatedly states that she has been 'murdered' and is 'dead' (VI: l. 771; l. 813). However, dead subjects do not speak; here Marian articulates what should be unspeakable. Her maternity has made her 'undead'. She survives her rape purely as a maternal subject, and the resulting child is innocent despite this conception. Indeed, since Marian was rendered a passive receptacle for her child due to unconsciousness during the rape itself, there is a possibility of reading this pregnancy as an 'anti'-immaculate conception of sorts, a Gothic re-imagining of the immaculate conception. Marian's conception is immaculate in the sense that she did not participate willingly in the sexual intercourse that caused her pregnancy; indeed, she did not participate at all, but was rather violated by her rapist whilst kept prisoner. The implications of this conception, arrived at through a violent, unrepresented act, are disturbingly familiar. Marian, like her namesake, was visited and impregnated with a male child, whom she later calls 'God's miracle' (VI: l. 822). However, the rapist (as previously discussed) resembles more a demonic figure, or classical deity. Simultaneously destructive and formative, Christian and classical, this representation of the act that makes a fallen woman challenges nineteenth-century notions about virginity and rape. It positions the fallen woman as a blameless victim, able to achieve grace. Marian Erle transforms from a victim into a Madonna. The conception of her child is nothing short of miraculous:

[...]I'm dead, I say,
And if, to save the child from death as well,
The mother in me has survived the rest,
Why, that's God's miracle you must not tax,
I'm not the less dead for that: I'm nothing more
But just a mother. (VI: 819-24)

Marian's maternal self, '[t]he mother in me', once submerged or buried beneath other components of identity, has become exposed since the rape. It has survived abuse, abandonment and 'death'. There is no explanation of the cause of this survival except for divine intervention. Marian, like the Virgin, has been chosen by God to be mother to a male child. Her maternity saves this child from death in a similar way that Christ's Passion saves humanity.

Barrett Browning thus reiterates and subtly alters the Christian story to suggest the Madonna's active resistance to dominant representations. Marian casts aside religious iconography; when the peasants give her a Catholic icon, an image of Mary to wear around her neck, she throws it into a nearby ditch:

The charitable peasants gave me bread
And leave to sleep in straw: and twice they tied,
At parting, Mary's image round my neck –
How heavy it seemed! as heavy as a stone;
A woman has been strangled with less weight:
I threw it in a ditch to keep it clean
And ease my breath a little, when none looked;
I did not need such safeguards (VI: ll. 1254-61).

For Marian, the image of the Virgin threatens strangulation. Hung about her neck like a millstone or an albatross, it is presented as a well-meaning but flawed attempt to safeguard the errant maternal subject.¹⁴⁸ She is anxious about 'keep[ing] it clean', as though its proximity to her body could tarnish or corrupt it. According to Barrett Browning's presentation, Marian is not merely a passive vessel but a survivor, and her words matter. Indeed, her words 'save' her child (VI: l. 820). She casts the idealised maternal image into the ditch, and not her self. Her body's potential corrupting influence, meanwhile, ceases to

¹⁴⁸ Coleridge's storytelling sailor, whom Barrett Browning evokes and reworks in Marian Erle, had to wear a dead albatross around his neck as punishment. Unlike the Mariner, however, Marian Erle's burden is not deathly. Though presented as an 'undead' figure, her child – her punishment – is associated with life. She casts aside the image of the Virgin, rather than the albatross.

matter. In fact, its fallenness is her safeguard. Her (un)death suggests that she has been transformed into a powerful, transgressive and Gothic female subject whom none can harm.

Marian's chamber is a significant space in this transformation. Like Aurora's chamber, it is both familiar and unfamiliar. However, small and bare as a coffin and exposed to prying eyes, this is far from the private lush space of Aurora's maiden aunt's chamber. This fallen Madonna's chamber is tomb-like:

'Twas a room
 Scarce larger than a grave, and near as bare:
 Two stools, a pallet-bed; I saw the room:
 A mouse could find no sort of shelter in't,
 Much less a greater secret; curtainless, –
 The window fixed you with its torturing eye,
 Defying you to take a step apart
 If peradventure you would hide a thing.
 I saw the whole room, I and Marian there
 Alone. (VI: ll. 551-60)

Marian's chamber is tortuous. Exposed to scrutiny and poverty, she sleeps in a space that is fitting to her (un)death. Aurora, positioned as the spectator, examines this chamber from the inside – meaning that she also occupies the position of fallen woman, albeit briefly. She too is made temporarily immobile by the window's 'torturing eye' (l. 556). Observation means control in this chamber; its 'curtainless' window offers no privacy or security (l. 554). Marian is never unwatched and apparently can have no secrets.

However, this chamber also contains Marian's son, hidden beneath a blanket. Protected from the sun's glare, he is full of life. Compared with a fruit, a pomegranate and a rose, this baby is presented as all that is desirable to consume and look upon, 'warm and moist with life/ To the bottom of his dimples, – to the ends/ Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face' (VI: ll. 567-69). In Christian iconography, the pomegranate is associated with the Passion of Christ. Indeed, this image of Marian's son recalls Botticelli's paintings of the Madonna and Child, *The Virgin and Child with a Pomegranate* (c. 1480-1500) and *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (c. 1487). In the first of these, the Madonna is shown demurely holding her

infant son, who gazes up at her and clutches a pomegranate. He raises the seeds to show her, perhaps for her to taste (Fig. 1). In the second painting, the motif of the pomegranate is repeated, although here the Madonna and Child are surrounded by six angels, and the Child raises his hand in blessing (Fig. 2). Both Virgin and Child appear solemn, conveying the suffering to come.



Fig. 1¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Sandro Botticelli, *The Virgin and Child with a Pomegranate*, [Tempera on wood]. The National Gallery, London (1480-1500).

Fig. 2¹⁵⁰

However, the pomegranate's Christian allegory can also be set in contrast with its classical origins. The allusion to the pomegranate (VI: l. 566) also links Marian with Persephone, the Greek goddess abducted and raped by Hades, and subsequently forced to spend a portion of the year in the underworld.¹⁵¹ In this myth, it is Persephone's consumption of pomegranate seeds that causes her repeated cyclical return to the underworld and the arrival of winter. She is the daughter to Demeter, goddess of the harvest and fertility, and it is her disappearance into the underworld that causes her

¹⁵⁰ Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (*Madonna della Melagrana*), [Tempera on panel]. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (1487).

¹⁵¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V. 322-578, pp. 109-16.

mother's infertility.¹⁵² Indeed, Barrett Browning's configuration of the Madonna gazing upon her child is reminiscent of Persephone consuming the pomegranate:

She leaned above him (drinking him as wine)
In that extremity of love, 'twill pass
For agony or rapture, seeing that love
Includes the whole of nature, rounding it
To love...no more, – since more can never be
Than just love. Self-forgot, cast out of self,
And drowning in the transport of the sight,
Her whole pale passionate face, mouth, forehead, eyes,
One gaze, she stood: then, slowly as he smiled
She smiled too, slowly, smiling unaware,
And drawing from his countenance to hers
A fainter red, as if she watched a flame
And stood in it a-glow. 'How beautiful,'
Said she. (VI: ll. 599-612)

Barrett Browning here uses the metaphor of drinking wine, a liquid substance associated both with visceral pleasure and with the blood of Christ. Her Madonna consumes her child in simultaneous pleasure and pain, 'agony or rapture', an experience that costs her selfhood.¹⁵³ Indeed, Marian's drinking leads to 'drowning'; transported by her passion, her subjectivity is deconstructed into a blazon of body parts and features. We gaze upon her 'face, mouth, forehead [and] eyes' at the same time as she gazes upon her child's features (l. 506). The mother and child mirror each other. The child smiles, and Marian smiles too, unconsciously 'drawing' from his body her own expressiveness. Such gazing – 'one gaze' in

¹⁵² This resonates particularly with Aurora's maiden aunt, positioning her as an infertile Demeter and Aurora as her seduced daughter, Persephone.

¹⁵³ There is more than a little of the 'undead' Marian Erle in Bram Stoker's 'bloofer lady' in *Dracula* (1897): 'we saw a white figure advance – a dim white figure, which held something dark at its breast. The figure stopped, and at the moment a ray of moonlight fell between the masses of driving clouds and showed in startling prominence a dark-haired woman, dressed in the cerements of the grave. We could not see the face, for it was bent down over what we saw to be a fair-haired child.' See Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. By Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal (New York and London: Norton, 1997), p. 187. When Aurora first searches for Marian, she resolves to 'dig' her up with the help of the authorities:

The police
Shall track her, hound her, ferret their own soil;
We'll dig this Paris to her catacombs
But certainly we'll find her, have her out,
And save her (VI: ll. 384-88).

fact – unites Aurora, Marian and the reader (l. 507). It transforms Marian's body and mind through a metaphorical consumption of the child's blood, and thus potentially has the power to transform the reader's perspective also. Interestingly, the previous presentation of the unnamed rapist's exposed throat also implies that he is potentially vulnerable to the Gothic subject. By offering a way of looking at the maternal subject that mirrors and repeats her look, Barrett Browning suggests that Marian Erle's 'passion' is powerful and even deadly. She 'holds together' various readings. A figure of suffering and sacrifice, maternity, transgressive sexuality and even vampirism, Marian provides Aurora with an unsettling focus for her book.

Meanwhile, Aurora's power as both a passionate and a poetic subject effectively sidesteps Romney's attempts to categorise her. Her book gives her financial and intellectual freedom, and allows her to highlight the shortcomings of his philanthropic enterprises.¹⁵⁴ It also means that she avoids the physical trials and constrictions of marriage and childbearing, at least for the duration of *Aurora Leigh*. Having escaped the Madonna's chamber and the house, Aurora is free to enter its walls as mistress, accompanied by a newly-humbled and blinded Romney, at the end of the book.¹⁵⁵ The poetic imagination is maternal; Aurora's passionate, maternal body is tied inextricably to her creative labours. Though virginal, Aurora does articulate her desires. These desires, ostensibly for poetic inspiration and creation, nevertheless are described in terms of sexual fulfilment and pregnancy. For instance, in Book I Aurora describes the corporeal experience of receiving poetic inspiration

¹⁵⁴ These include attempting to marry Marian Erle, a marriage that does not go ahead due to her disappearance. Barrett Browning's grotesque descriptions of the London poor in the church, however, make it clear that Romney's attempt at such philanthropy is misguided (See IV: ll. 538-601).

¹⁵⁵ This is reminiscent of Rochester's blindness in *Jane Eyre* (1847). See Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margaret Smith, with an intro. and revised notes by Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 431.

as a divine abduction by the gods of Ancient Greece. Subsequently, Aurora experiences metaphorical pregnancy:

O life, O poetry,
 – Which means life in life! cognisant of life
 Beyond this blood-beat, passionate for truth
 Beyond these senses! – poetry, my life,
 My eagle, with both grappling feet still hot
 From Zeus's thunder, who hast ravished me
 Away from all the shepherds, sheep, and dogs,
 And set me in the Olympian roar and round
 Of luminous faces for a cup-bearer,
 To keep the mouths of all the godheads moist (I: ll. 915-24).

According to this configuration, poetry 'means life in life'; it is and is *beyond* a 'blood-beat' within the female body itself. This correlates poetic creativity with human reproduction; 'life in life' encapsulates the symbiotic relationship between the maternal subject and unborn child. The unborn-poem knows and identifies life beyond the body, but it is also contained within the body. It is metaphorical and corporeal; it is other to the body, part of the divine and mythological, and it has rhythms which correspond to organic blood flow and heartbeats. The poetic imagination holds meta-sensory power, yet the poet is reminded of her body even as she is removed to the 'Olympian roar' of classical literature. Zeus's eagle has 'ravished' the speaker and made her a servant to the gods. This alludes to the myth of Ganymede, the beautiful boy abducted by Zeus (via his eagle) and forced to become a cupbearer at Olympus. Ganymede's inclusion reminds us of Aurora's 'better self', the self that makes the poet a hermaphrodite subject.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the homoeroticism of Ganymede's ascent to immortality is complicated by Aurora's gender, just as the meaning of 'passion' is complicated by its different application to feminine and masculine subjects. For men, passion connotes self-sacrifice for a greater purpose ('Passion') as well as sexual desire. For women, divine abduction means pregnancy.

¹⁵⁶ See my earlier discussion of I: ll. 5-8.

Divine abduction, and its pregnant consequence for the female subject, both mythologises female artistic conception and problematises it. 'Ravished' explicitly connotes rape, and in classical literature the rape of mortal women often results in offspring who are monstrous demigods. The notion that this is a metaphor for women creating poetry is provocative. A violent sexual attack on the female poet highlights her physical vulnerability rather than her strength; this is an uncomfortable, violent poetic that renders women passive vessels for divine masculine intervention. Moreover, it echoes classical and eighteenth-century ideas about the sublime, that name for the physical and psychological effects of beauty, horror and terror that came to be so influential during the Romantic period and subsequently in the nineteenth century. Both first-century CE Greek critic Dionysius Longinus and eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke (who translated Longinus's work) gendered the sublime experience, designating it as a masculine form of power that 'ravishes' its feminine listener.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, Burke wrote of the male subject's encounter with the sublime (in the landscape of the 'gloomy forest' and 'howling wilderness') as a 'grand and commanding conception' that stemmed from terror 'lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction'.¹⁵⁸ The sublime landscape, therefore, is sublime precisely because it threatens violence – specifically, sexual violence. Burke genders the sublime as dangerously masculine, and his oppositional category, 'the beautiful', as passively feminine.¹⁵⁹ This positions men as creative orators and women as passive objects of beauty, though it does suggest that experiencing the sublime threatens to emasculate the male subject. However, according to Burke it is precisely this

¹⁵⁷ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 10.

¹⁵⁸ Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 2nd edn (1759; repr. Menston: Scolar Press, 1970), pp. 112-14.

¹⁵⁹ Philip Shaw notes that 'in Burke, the sublime is a virile masculine power, one that is contrasted with its passive feminine counterpart, the concept of the beautiful'. See Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 10.

threat that affords the sublime experience its poetic grandeur. It is the risk of being overwhelmed bodily and spiritually that categorises the sublime.

In *Aurora Leigh* Barrett Browning rewrites the notion that only men can experience 'grand and commanding conception'. Ironically, it is the idea of 'ravishment' that she reproduces for this purpose; this creates a tension between physical and figurative ravishment.¹⁶⁰ Unlike Marian, Aurora's pregnancy is the result of divine *seduction*, and this notion allows the poetic subject creative agency, placing her somewhere between passivity and active agency. This acts as a counterpoint to her previous 'consummation' with Romney, suggesting that poetry necessitates spiritual as well as physical consummation. Aurora's exclamations (especially her repetition of the vowel sound 'O' in the first lines of the previous excerpt, l: l. 915) implies that she submits to, and even takes pleasure in, this divine intervention. Indeed, Aurora's 'O's suggest that initially at least, this 'ravishment' renders her beyond language. Yet ultimately it gives her descriptive power – the power to represent Marian Erle, for instance.

Significantly, however, Aurora's task is to minister to the *mouths* of the gods. Like the Muses, the female poet is concerned with approaching another's mouth in a divine kiss, pouring dew upon the tongue and thus keeping this orifice 'moist' (l. 924). Though the image of the moist godhead is sexually charged, it disrupts the gendered identification of the Muse and poet in this instance. The moist mouth may be simultaneously feminine and masculine; the mouths of both Muse and poet meet in a kiss.¹⁶¹ It suggests sexual excitement and consent to poetic consummation, as reinforced by Aurora's repeated,

¹⁶⁰ Joyce Zonana argues that 'Marian's rape serves as a crucial counterweight to Aurora's idealized visions of divine rape and must be considered in any attempt to understand them'. Indeed, she continues, 'Marian's experiences of literal rather than figurative rape show Aurora that her own [divinely ravished] figures but weakly represent the truth she claims to perceive. Marian teaches in her own body the terrible cost of separating spirit and flesh'. See Zonana, 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics', pp. 69-70.

¹⁶¹ For discussion of the classical Muse and poet, see my Introduction.

apparently joyful exclamations in this excerpt. It also suggests the transference of bodily fluids, and perhaps even infection as well as impregnation. When the poet is female, she is both inspired and inspiring: she exchanges bodily fluids with the gods. She is like Mnemosyne and her daughters, the Muses. Her offspring may be threatening: they might speak *through* other, male poets. She might give birth to monstrous, powerful beings far from the safe landscape of the pastoral idyll. Worse still, she might return to the 'shepherds, sheep and dogs' one day (l. 921). Her personal and passionate self proves difficult to categorise and contain, and thus is anxiety-provoking. Such a lack of containment, juxtaposed with the apparently impervious virgin subject, means that the 'personal and passionate' female poet is simultaneously leaky and impregnable. Her imagination is both maternal and virginal. It is capable of producing monsters. The notion of monstrous creation brings me back to medical representations of the maternal imagination, which will be next examined in this chapter.¹⁶²

Maternal Impressions: Through the Blood

Nineteenth-century ideas about the monstrous maternal imagination can be situated in terms of anxieties about 'maternal impressions' or 'nævi materni'. The perceived influence of the pregnant woman's imagination was considered particularly powerful and dangerous for her unborn child. Transmitted 'through the blood' and uterine fluid, the maternal imagination could have a serious impact on the child's physical being.¹⁶³ It could make a physical impression or 'mark'; it could shape, mould, alter and deform the unborn child. Most troubling for nineteenth-century physicians was the notion that the mother's

¹⁶² Indeed, the issue of monstrous creation is reanimated again in Chapter IV (Labour), with its discussion of *Frankenstein*.

¹⁶³ '[T]hrough the blood' is a phrase used by George H. Napheys when discussing the influence of the maternal mind upon the unborn child in his medical textbook for the lay reader, *The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife, and Mother* (Philadelphia: George Maclean, 1869), p. 158.

imagination could create something monstrous and degenerative from an otherwise perfect *tabula rasa*, the father's child.¹⁶⁴

Socio-medical texts about maternal impressions, like *Aurora Leigh*, show that the pregnant subject has the capacity to influence the growing unborn child through her imagination, a faculty inextricably connected with her womb. Indeed, medical writer D. H. Jacques' book *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty* (1859) explains that after the moment of conception, the father ceases to have any significant influence on the developing foetus:

Direct paternal influence ceased with the generative act. Whatever the father does henceforth to impress his own image, or that of some ideal form, upon his unborn child, must be done through the mother. Her soul is the governing principle which determines its final character and configuration. Every thought which passes through her mind; every emotion, no matter how transitory; every impression from external objects affects, in a greater or lesser degree, the fetal being. Intense grief, violent anger, or uncontrolled terror may cause its destruction or mar irretrievably its symmetry, both of character and form.¹⁶⁵

Jacques emphasises the effect of intense, uncontrollable maternal emotions on the developing foetus, from the perspective of the father, a figure ultimately rendered impotent by pregnancy. The father, it seems, is keen to 'impress his own image' upon the unborn child. This reiterates an old anxiety about inheritance; we know who our mothers are, but we cannot be sure of our fathers, having only our mother's words to confirm or deny

¹⁶⁴ This had been a pressing anxiety for centuries before Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh*, and indeed, is another example of a largely masculine response to the muse-like configuration of the maternal body actively mediating the father's meaning. Mazzoni's study explores in depth the history of maternal impressions and its relationship with quickening in both literary and theoretical texts. See Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002).

¹⁶⁵ D. H. Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty; Showing How to Acquire and Retain Bodily Symmetry, Health, and Vigour, Secure Long Life, and Avoid The Infirmities and Deformities of Age* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1865 [1859]), p. 59. This text is also an American text, dedicated to the 'Wives and Maidens of America'. I treat it here as a western text relevant to dominant Victorian medical constructions of maternity.

paternity.¹⁶⁶ Jacques' solution to this uncertainty involves the father making his mark on the unborn child through its mother. He must use her as a conduit for his own ideal, and this is done by making an impression on the highly impressionable pregnant subject. This is a physical – if not a violent – act. It involves pressure, impact and force 'transmitted from one thing upon or into the surface of another, and the effect of this'.¹⁶⁷ The pregnant subject is inherently vulnerable to all external stimuli, and the unborn child is vulnerable in turn to its mother's emotional responses to these. The father thus must dominate all other external stimuli; he must in his own way make a 'mark' upon the pregnant subject.

Ironically, though Jacques' account emphasises the vulnerability of the pregnant subject, it also positions her as powerful. Her soul, Jacques tells us, is the 'governing principle' in pregnancy. He thus both confirms and undermines Cartesian dualism, which states that the soul and body are distinct and separate entities.¹⁶⁸ According to the theory of 'mother's marks' or 'nævi materni', whatever passes through the pregnant subject's mind is also impressed upon her unborn child in its physical features. In most cases, this influence is negative, causing 'marks or blemishes, extending sometimes to absolute deformity'.¹⁶⁹ Significantly, however, Jacques also uses the metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, suggesting that the unborn child is a text upon which its mother writes:

In accordance with the same law, all impressions, emotions, passions, and mental states of which the mother is the subject, are inwoven with the very texture of the unborn being.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ As Angela Carter writes in *Wise Children*, "'Father" is a hypothesis, but a "mother" is a fact'. See Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 223. This, of course, is before the DNA testing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

¹⁶⁷ 'impress, v.1', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 9 June 2015]

¹⁶⁸ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method for Guiding One's Reason and Searching for the Truth in the Sciences*, in *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. by Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 24-25.

¹⁶⁹ Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, p. 59.

¹⁷⁰ Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, p. 59.

'Text' derives from 'weaving' – a distinctly feminine creative activity.¹⁷¹ Although he uses the passive tense to describe the process of weaving, Jacques positions the mother as the subject rather than the object of this enterprise. She has agency and if we apply these words to poetic creation, she holds the lyric 'I'. However, as in Iris Marion Young's configuration, this subjectivity is 'split' since it also encompasses the developing unborn child, a being who is other and marked by the pregnant subject.¹⁷² Yet mother and child are also linked; if the mother's subjectivity is split then it is also 'inwoven' with the child's so that the two are inseparable. Subjectivity is 'woolly', comprised of textual fibres which may be separated and woven together for different effects. According to Jacques, the most desirable of these effects is beauty – and he uses this in its classical sense, to mean a philosophical position of harmony. The most undesirable of these effects, in turn, is deformity. Deformity – as we know from classical examples that extend from the Medusa to the Minotaur – is dangerous.

Jacques also uses the new technology of photography as a metaphor in his discussion of the maternal imagination.¹⁷³ This is significant because it suggests that the image of the mother's soul is transferred faithfully onto the body of the 'unconscious' embryo despite the intervention of the father. The 'photographer', that master of the new art that represents real, still life, merely positions the equipment in

¹⁷¹ 'Text' and weaving are etymologically related. See 'text, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 8 June 2015]. This is borne out in literature. For instance, in classical mythology the three Fates spun, measured and cut the thread of life. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope delays her suitors by weaving (and unpicking) a shroud. See Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Walter Shewring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), ll.76-157, p. 14.

¹⁷² Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *On Female Bodily Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 41-61. This is discussed previously in the Introduction.

¹⁷³ The imaging of the mother's body by the new technology of the camera anticipates the X-rays of the late nineteenth century, and the ultrasound scans of the twentieth century. This is explored further in Chapter III (Ultrasound).

the correct place. It is the 'sensitive paper', and the lens through which the light passes inside the camera, that captures the image:

The sensitive paper in the camera of the photographer repeats not more certainly the lines thrown upon it by the graphic pencils of light, than the unconscious embryo does the images, whether of beauty or deformity, reflected from the maternal soul.¹⁷⁴

This suggests that maternal impressions are 'certain' and thus unavoidable. The maternal soul is reflective, indiscriminately mirroring scenes and thoughts of beauty or deformity. This to an extent *deflects* maternal agency, repositioning it unexpectedly. For if the unborn child is a *tabula rasa*, then its mother is the camera that permits it to be written upon, and the father is the 'photographer' who decides which image to capture. Both are part of a complex and symbiotic system: the camera encases the paper, the lens and the light, and the photographer both holds and looks through the camera at what he hopes to capture. The completed photographs, of course, require developing – and the photographer will not know exactly how they will look until they are chemically processed. Again, the mother mediates the image.

The Permeable Poet

Jacques uses a further metaphor that emphasises the fluid permeability of the mother-unborn relationship, which echoes *Aurora Leigh's* treatment of the female body as a leaky landscape. When read in conjunction with Jacques' imagery, Barrett Browning's text (the publication of which predates Jacques' by two years) transforms her poet-heroine into a maternal subject capable of impressing her image on the unborn-poem. 'Vital fluid' and its transfusion through maternal and infant bodies informs maternal impressions.¹⁷⁵ This model is more compelling than the previous models outlined by

¹⁷⁴ Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, p. 60.

¹⁷⁵ Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, p. 60.

Jacques because it highlights the corporeal nature of pregnancy. During pregnancy, the maternal subject transfers the 'vital fluid' that circulates through her system to her permeable unborn child's body:

While in the womb of the mother, the child is, as it were, a part of herself – a branch growing upon the parent stem. The vital fluid which circulates through her body, in obedience to her intelligence and the law of her organization, permeates its body also, developing it in the likeness of the model set up in her soul.¹⁷⁶

Jacques does not specify the exact nature of this 'vital fluid'; it could be blood, semen or menses according to historical conceptions of the reproductive body. Indeed, perhaps it can be made to signify any or all of these fluids: Jacques's use of the term is indiscriminate. He distinguishes between body and soul, however, by telling us that the 'vital fluid' circulates in obedience to the mother's mind. This suggests that maternal impressions are processes that are not entirely unconscious. Though involuntary, the impression itself is made at the maternal imagination's behest.

The unborn child, meanwhile, comprises part of the maternal subject's identity. Jacques uses a natural metaphor to describe this relationship. If the mother is the tree, then her unborn child is a growing branch. This metaphor also evokes the model of genetic and material inheritance. 'Family tree' diagrams show us our ancestors and children; they record the names of mothers and fathers, although they show the paternal line of inheritance that makes it difficult to trace maternal ancestors.

In Jacques's metaphor, however, the father is temporarily absent. In the context of Jacques's thoughts on maternal impressions, the father is important – he at least must recognise the influence of the mother in mediating his ideal image upon the unborn child –

¹⁷⁶ Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*, p. 60.

but he is not part of this particular tree. The 'vital fluid' of semen has already played its part in conception; it is the mother's uterine fluids that now hold the most potency.

Barrett Browning's symbolism is powerfully reverberant in light of Jacques' metaphor. For instance, the lime-tree in the opening book of *Aurora Leigh* suggests both regeneration and knowledge:

[...]The moon came,
And swept my chamber clean of foolish thoughts.
The sun came, saying, 'Shall I lift this light
Against the lime-tree, and you will not look?
[...]
Then, something moved me. Then, I wakened up
More slowly than I verily write now,
But wholly, at last, I wakened, opened wide
The window and my soul, and let the airs
And out-door sights sweep gradual gospels in,
Regenerating what I was. O Life, (l: ll. 654-66)

Aurora's awakening involves the intervention of the personified moon and sun. The moon, ever a symbol of feminine mutability and reproduction, arrives in Aurora's chamber and expels unwanted, superfluous matter. This suggests menstruation; Aurora has become a sexually mature and thus threatening menstrual subject.¹⁷⁷ Yet the sun, associated with masculinity, follows the moon and points out the lime tree that lies beyond the chamber. The Tree of Life, representing the state of being before the Fall, is a tree forbidden to Adam and Eve, along with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (which bears the fruit that tempts Eve and that when consumed causes the Fall of humanity).¹⁷⁸ However, here Barrett Browning presents Aurora's awakening as a spiritual cleansing.

Integral to this is Aurora's experience of metaphorical foetal movement or quickening. In this excerpt something unspecified – which turns out to be the book –

¹⁷⁷ According to de Beauvoir, menstruation makes the subject menacing and 'Other': '[t]he little girl, not yet in puberty, carries no menace [...] But on the day she can reproduce, woman becomes impure, and rigorous taboos surround the menstruating female'. See de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 180.

¹⁷⁸ The fruit of knowledge also suggests the pomegranate, and the Persephone myth discussed earlier.

moves or quickens within her, and this realisation of her poetic pregnancy allows the gospel truth to enter her soul. Aurora's body thus becomes a conduit for external and divine impressions; she opens the window and lets the 'airs' in (l. 664). This again evokes the classical Muse who *breathes* inspiration into the poet. Aurora both receives and transmits such inspiration. Her maternity means that she has a symbiotic relationship with the Muse, and in turn with her unborn-poem. This excerpt precedes the previous one discussed; this suggests that it is the activation of the maternal imagination that causes the awakening of 'passion' in the female poet. The passionate body becomes more significant as the unborn-poem quickens. For Aurora, self-birth results in the awakening of the maternal imagination. Barrett Browning configures this spiritual awakening as the moment at which Aurora realises she is pregnant with poetry.

As Aurora becomes aware of her poetic capability, she develops further symptoms of metaphorical pregnancy. This shows that not only do maternal impressions affect the unborn poem-child, but that the growth of its 'inner life' affects the maternal body:

The inner life informed the outer life,
Reduced the irregular blood to a settled rhythm,
Made cool the forehead with fresh-sprinkling dreams,
And, rounding to the spheric soul the thin,
Pined body, struck a colour up the cheeks
Though somewhat faint. I clenched my brows across
My blue eyes greatening in the looking-glass,
And said, 'We'll live, Aurora! We'll be strong.
The dogs are on us – but we will not die.' (l: ll. 1058-66).

Here Barrett Browning shows us the positive influence of poetic pregnancy. Aurora, physically weakened with grief for her father and the upheaval of moving from her native Italy to the passionless home of her maiden aunt, convalesces when her maternal imagination becomes active. Her unborn-poem has a calming influence on her body: it regulates her irregular heartbeat, cools her fever, returns colour to her cheeks and makes

her gain weight.¹⁷⁹ This is enacted in the excerpt's metre. Line 1059 (describing the 'settled rhythm' of Aurora's blood) is irregular and *unsettled*, comprising fourteen syllables unlike the iambic pentameter that Barrett Browning otherwise uses. Similarly, Aurora looks in the mirror with 'greatening' eyes; her pupils dilate as though in sexual pleasure or surprise, or perhaps because suddenly she is able to see herself clearly (l. 1064). This sight – so important to the theory of maternal impressions – is continually strengthening, as suggested by the present participle 'greatening'. This too provides an irregular rhythm, implying the development of something beyond strict linguistic or artistic control. Aurora appears to recognise that her subjectivity has been doubled, addressing herself with the plural pronoun 'we' (ll. 1065-66). Her soul contains a developing poem, and this restores our heroine to tentative health through the movement of vital fluid. Indeed, Aurora's soul becomes 'spheric' – the shape of a pregnant belly at full term (l. 1061). Both body and spirit are rendered strong by this inner life.

Maternal permeability is a concept that Cristina Mazzoni explores in *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory* (2002). Including in her discussion theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Mazzoni suggests that the maternal body is a disruptive entity that threatens established boundaries and binaries because of its permeability.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, for Mazzoni, this mirrors the permeability of language itself. Her discussion of the term 'impressions', for instance, points out that the word's multiple meanings and associations enact her argument about the permeability of the maternal body:

[W]ith their ambiguous meaning of both surface and depth, brevity and length, impressions evoke the fluidity necessary to any prolific discussion of maternity: maternity with the outside of its big belly and the depth of its placenta and uterus, maternity as a swollen exterior and a growing interiority, but also

¹⁷⁹ Alternatively, this initial emaciation and illness could be explained by the 'morning sickness' common to early pregnancy.

¹⁸⁰ Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*, p. 96.

maternity as birth, that never-ending moment of passage between the inside and the outside to the point that the two concepts, ultimately, make little sense.¹⁸¹

This collapsing of the boundaries between interiority and exteriority questions the logic of categorising the maternal body in terms of ‘the inside and the outside’ in the first place. The pregnant body is continually developing and increasing its boundaries for all of the time that it is a pregnant body. Conspicuously visible and also invisible (or at least partially hidden), it makes a lasting impression but is also transient; it is impressed upon and it is impressive. It transcends linear definitions of time and suggests something more cyclical.¹⁸²

Birthing a child, though, is *not* ‘never-ending’. Labour is a process with birth at its conclusion.¹⁸³ However, the idea of maternity is more nebulous – and the notion of poetic maternity is even more so. The maternal body includes the menstrual body, and the menstrual body is cyclical; it repeats its leakiness in the passage of blood and uterine matter from the inside to the outside.¹⁸⁴ Poetic pregnancy is a state of imaginative becoming and may indeed be ‘never-ending’ for the female poet, continuing long after her book has been published. Self-birth – that is, the development of the self-conscious subject – may also continue indefinitely. ‘I *am* born’ (emphasis added) asserts Aurora when explaining her poetic vocation to her aunt, using the present tense:

‘But I am born,’ I said with firmness, ‘I,
To walk another way than his, dear aunt.’ (II: ll. 580-81)

Aurora’s dialogue with her maiden aunt is significant as it shows the female poet interrogating received wisdom from both women and men. Aurora chooses neither to

¹⁸¹ Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*, p. x.

¹⁸² Julia Kristeva’s ‘Women’s Time’, expands this notion of specifically female experiences of time by distinguishing between linear ‘masculine’ time and ‘women’s time’. Again, this is reminiscent of Persephone’s experience of time spent both in the world and the underworld, which causes annual seasonal change. See Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time’, trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs*, 7. 1 (1981), 13-35.

¹⁸³ I explore labour as a process of pregnancy in Chapter IV (Labour).

¹⁸⁴ Though, again, the menstrual cycle does not continue indefinitely: it ceases after the menopause.

marry Romney nor to become a spinster like her aunt. She chooses to be a mobile subject, walking the path of the female poet – which apparently excludes marriage and homemaking, at least at this point in *Aurora Leigh*. She states her position with ‘firmness’, suggesting a certain irrepressibility and unimpressibility. A ‘firm’ body is a young body. Muscled and strong, it can regain its form after being impressed upon – even after childbearing. Aurora’s aunt, meanwhile, points out the practical flaws in this plan: “‘You walk, you walk! A babe at thirteen months/ Will walk as well as you,’” (ll: ll. 582-83).¹⁸⁵ Aurora wishes to walk in a never-ending moment of passage, just as Mazzoni’s argument outlines over a century later. However, as a Madonna and a daughter Aurora has much to learn. If time is cyclical and all-encompassing, then Aurora is both a maternal subject and an immature thirteen-month-old child, walking unsteadily for the first time.

Quickening: Moving with the (M)other

Aurora’s dialogue with an older maternal subject also foreshadows twentieth-century theoretical explorations of the daughter in relation to her mother, such as Luce Irigaray’s ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other’.¹⁸⁶ Irigaray uses quickening as a metaphor to describe maternal relationships between female subjects; however, this has its roots in much older understandings of this stage of pregnancy. Quickening, the movement of the fetus felt by its mother that usually begins during the second trimester, was previously taken to diagnose pregnancy, in combination with other symptoms such as the cessation of menstruation and morning sickness. This emphasised the importance of exclusively maternal knowledge: quickening could only be experienced at first hand by the pregnant

¹⁸⁵ The child’s first lunar year is thirteen months long. The babe at thirteen months also thus evokes the lunar/menstrual cycle.

¹⁸⁶ Luce Irigaray, ‘And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other’, trans. by Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs*, 7.1 (1991), 60-67.

subject. Indeed, the nineteenth-century medical writer Pye Henry Chavasse's description of what quickening feels like relies on reports from pregnant women:

The sensation of 'quickening' is said by many ladies to resemble the fluttering of a bird; by others it is likened to either a heaving, or beating, or rearing, or leaping sensation, accompanied sometimes with a frightened feeling. [...] The more frequent description a lady, when she has *first* 'quickened,' gives of her feelings, is, that it is more like 'the flutterings of a bird;' when she is about another month gone with child – that is to say, in her sixth month – that it more resembles 'a leaping in the womb', or, in the expressive language of the Bible, 'the babe leaped in her womb'. The difference of the sensation [...] might in this wise be accounted for: the child between four and five months is scarcely old enough, or strong enough, to leap – he is only able to flutter; but [...] in the sixth month [...] the child is stronger, and he is able to leap: hence the reason why he at first flutters, and after a time leaps!¹⁸⁷

Here Chavasse takes his language from the maternal reports of quickening, which are figurative rather than literal, comprising of 'fluttering' and 'leaping' sensations. His repetition of these phrases, and inclusion of Biblical quotation, emphasises the commonality of this maternal language. Quickening is represented as unmistakable, engendering descriptions that link together pregnant women as a community who can relate to one another through these terms. However, Chavasse surreptitiously asserts his medical authority over these accounts. He genders the unborn child as male, and emphasises his varying strength and activity, thereby offering a scientific explanation for the phenomenon.¹⁸⁸ The pregnant subject's descriptions of quickening, therefore, are framed in terms which reinforce dominant masculine representations of women.

Irigaray's essay, however, written after the modern pregnancy test, reintroduces quickening for a twentieth-century audience in order to highlight the struggle that the female subject undergoes to differentiate her subjectivity from her mother's. Her speaker,

¹⁸⁷ Pye Henry Chavasse, *Advice to a Wife on the Management of her own Health and on the Treatment of Some of the Complaints Incidental to Pregnancy, Labour, and Suckling With an Introductory Chapter Especially Addressed to a Young Wife* (12th edn, London: J. and A. Churchill, 1877), p. 119.

¹⁸⁸ Napheys similarly notes that 'a skilled accoucheur is capable of recognising [quickening]'. See Napheys, *The Physical Life of Woman*, p. 141.

balanced precariously between childhood and womanhood, enacts the female subject's movement in relation to the maternal body. Both 'stir' in tandem; their movements illustrate the permeability of female identity, and suggest that the daughter always identifies herself in relation to her mother:

I feel this something moving inside me. It enters me, leaves me, comes back, leaves again. I make this movement all by myself. No one assists. I have a home inside me, another outside, and I take myself from the one into the other. And I no longer need your belly, your arms, your eyes, or your words to return or to leave. I am still so close to you, and already so far away. It's morning, my first morning. Hello. You're there. I'm here. Between us so much air, light, space to share with each other.¹⁸⁹

Irigaray here links the bodily function of breathing with the quickening of the pregnant subject's womb. Here, however, Irigaray conflates the 'moving inside me' of the mother's quickening with the unassisted breathing of the daughter. The internal 'home' – the uncanny space of the womb – is found inside both mother and daughter.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, because the daughter also has a womb 'inside' her, the space of her mother's womb becomes 'outside', or other to herself. The daughter finds that she can function independently of this space, and can return or leave as she chooses. The daughter's first moments involve her situating and repositioning her subjectivity in terms of the fluidity of her womb. There is distance and space between the mother and the daughter, but there is also mutual recognition and a sharing of embodied experience. Mother and daughter breathe the same air.

Irigaray's daughter also describes the experience of breastfeeding in terms that emphasise permeable subjectivity. This follows a psychoanalytic model that configures

¹⁸⁹ Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other', p. 61.

¹⁹⁰ The uncanny, rooted by Freud's seminal essay in the maternal space of the womb, haunts the maternal subject. Both 'homely' (*heimlich*) and 'unhomely' (*unheimlich*), the pregnant womb houses an 'other' within the self. See Sigmund Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 339-76 (pp. 366-68). This notion will be re-examined in relation to ultrasound poetry in Chapter III (Ultrasound).

the maternal subject and her infant as inseparable subjects before the mirror stage of development.¹⁹¹ However, the daughter subject also reacts against this model. Her repeated use of the forward slash produces compound phrases such as 'me/yourself', 'my/your' and 'yourself/me', phrases that simultaneously link and separate the daughter and mother. Indeed, this repeated breaking and remaking of the subject suggests continuous exchange and renegotiation of liquid nourishment:

You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you. I'd like to see you while you nurse me; not lose my/your eyes when I open my mouth for you; have you stay near me while I drink you. I'd like you to remain outside, too. Keep yourself/me outside, too. Don't engulf yourself or me in what flows from you into me. I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the other, or the other in the one. So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each other – together.¹⁹²

Here the daughter expresses her desire for separate togetherness. She consumes her mother's milk but does not want either her mother or herself to be consumed by this nursing. Again, Irigaray balances the division between self and other, outside and inside, the singular subject and the conjoined subjects. Nursing is a mutual sensory experience for mother and daughter: both taste, feel, listen and see each other. It is difficult for the daughter to speak when her mouth is filled with mother's milk, but the dialogue between the two subjects shapes them.¹⁹³

Barrett Browning's text and its repeated evocation of the classical Muse's exchange of bodily fluids and inspiration can be read alongside such notions of permeability in particularly fruitful ways. The pregnant body, self-contained and containing an 'other' whom

¹⁹¹ See Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-6.

¹⁹² Irigaray, 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other', p. 61.

¹⁹³ This also corresponds with Cixous's argument about women writing 'in white ink' in 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. See Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875-893 (p. 881).

it protects by being spheric and impenetrable, is permeable on the *inside*. The unborn child is a *tabula rasa* to be inscribed by its mother's imagination, but that imagination is also given physical substance. Aurora Leigh's 'soul' is 'spheric' while her body is diminishing to thinness, but the soul also forms a model for the body to follow (l. 1061).¹⁹⁴ 'We'll live', Aurora exclaims; 'We'll be strong' (l. 1065). 'We' in this instance not only refers to Aurora's body and soul, but also to her maternal self and her poetic pregnancy. In pregnancy, the mother's body feeds the child's. Nutrients, oxygen, hormones and other life-giving chemicals and compounds are all transferred to the foetus via the blood, placenta and umbilical cord. The placenta, an organ attached to the lining of the uterus during pregnancy, provides both a link and a separation between the mother's blood supply and the foetus. Waste products from the foetus (carbon dioxide, for instance) are also transferred by the placenta from the foetus's blood supply to the mother's for disposal, and protective antibodies are passed via the placenta to protect the foetus from bacterial and viral infection. Chemicals in the mother's system (most notably in contemporary culture, nicotine and alcohol) can permeate the foetus's circulatory system via the mother's. This positions the mother as powerfully responsible for her unborn child's health – a notion that can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering, since scientific fact in this instance reinforces maternal responsibility for the outcome of pregnancy. However, this model also gives the mother exclusive knowledge of the unknown uterine space on a level below consciousness.

Barrett Browning uses the motif of quickening throughout *Aurora Leigh* to evoke Aurora's developing poetic knowledge. In *Aurora Leigh*, quickening is not limited to the womb. Indeed, it circulates throughout the text in relation to both reading and to the

¹⁹⁴ This complicates the gendered Cartesian model of male/mind and female/body.

production of ideas. Aurora's books have foetal heartbeats. When the young Aurora discovers her father's library, she feels the book 'beat' from within her bedchamber:

The first book first. And how I felt it beat
Under my pillow, in the morning's dark,
An hour before the sun would let me read! (l :ll. 841-43)

The book quickens in the private, darkened space of the bedchamber. It is situated under Aurora's pillow, near her head. This is her inheritance from her father, and fittingly, it affects her head. Indeed, elsewhere she describes the heartbeat in terms of being situated in her brain ('My heart beat in my brain', l: l. 961). The verb 'quicken' appears recurrently throughout *Aurora Leigh* and the adjective 'quickening' appears twice. Aurora describes her desire to write poetry as '[m]y quickening inner life' (l: l. 1027) and emphasises the impossibility of its concealment:

[...] But I could not hide
My quickening inner life from those at watch.
They saw a light at a window now and then,
They had not set there: who had set it there?
My father's sister started when she caught
My soul agaze in my eyes. (l: ll. 1026-31)

Aurora is always watched when in her aunt's house. Subjected to ocular scrutiny from external observers, she cannot hide her poetic pregnancy, even at its earliest stages. Her soul blazes at unexpected intervals, just as a light left burning at a window generates speculation. Its origin is unknown and it is startling; Aurora's maiden aunt starts in fright when she catches a glimpse of it. Here the division between the unseen and unknown, and the known and seen, is disrupted. Though Aurora's soul is seen in motion, its quickening is difficult to identify. 'They', though unspecific, refers to Aurora's main watchers, Romney and her aunt. Her movements become ghostly; she haunts her aunt's house, lighting candles and then moving on. Romney and her aunt find it difficult to believe that Aurora would be capable of such haunting, hence the rhetorical question 'who had set it there?' (l. 1029).

Since maternal impressions are received through sight and transmitted 'through blood', Aurora's luminous soul and quickening unborn-poem reveals her power as a poetic subject very early on in Barrett Browning's narrative – indeed, far earlier than actual foetal movement would take place. Aurora's maternal knowledge, then, 'quickens' and keeps moving throughout *Aurora Leigh*.

Mazzoni views quickening as an alternative model of thinking that sidesteps binary categories. The kind of knowledge produced by quickening, she argues, collapses the established boundaries between body and soul, and self and other:

I would propose that another alternative to the binary thinking of both patriarchal and feminist science can be found in the kind of knowledge produced by quickening. Rather than simply reversing the historical privileging of the mental over the corporeal, quickening is an explicitly sexualized knowledge that stages a sexed corporeality as constituting and constituted by a particular subjectivity: the pregnant woman's. Knowledge, in this scenario, is intrinsic and unique to the mother's self, body and psyche, for in this union alone can she hold contact with the fetus.¹⁹⁵

Mazzoni here argues that quickening produces knowledge that is intrinsic and exclusive to the pregnant woman's subjectivity. She experiences a 'unique' union that the masculine subject cannot. Mazzoni suggests that what she terms as the staging of 'sexed corporeality' – that is, the performance of the body as a moving, sexually active entity – both forms and is informed by the pregnant woman's sense of self. The knowledge of the unborn child that quickening produces has its origins in the sexed female body. The sexed body is a transgressive, threatening body. It is also, through quickening, a *thinking* body – and a thinking body, Mazzoni argues, makes the pregnant subject a mother:

The uncanny, visceral interoception of an otherness within the self is a fracture merging the otherwise irreconcilable dualities generated by quickening: power and surrender, knowledge and ignorance, choice and fate, fullness and emptiness, words and silence. Impressiveness and impressionability. Quickening becomes an interrogation of the moral boundaries between self and other as well as between mind and body, autonomy and responsibility, subjectivity and ethics. With its emphasis on the fetus's otherness, quickening effects a break between

¹⁹⁵ Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*, p. 68.

the mother and fetus that allows the emergence of the pregnant woman as a thinking and knowing subject separate from the fetus that makes a mother of her.¹⁹⁶

According to Mazzoni, it is the very embodiment of quickening that makes otherwise irreconcilable qualities merge and work together. For instance, since quickening signifies pregnancy, the mother knows her unborn child from the way that it moves within and touches her – a knowledge that is hers alone and that is mediated through her body.

Yet quickening also heightens the *unknown* for the mother; it emphasises the separateness of the foetus's subjectivity and 'otherness' since it happens involuntarily. It is to an extent autonomous, unpredictable and separate from the mother's body, even as it is contained within it. 'Interoception', Mazzoni's term for describing the process of quickening, evokes the containment and intervention of 'interception', the origination of 'inception', as well as the noun 'interoceptor', referring to 'any sensory receptor which receives stimuli arising within the body'.¹⁹⁷ Quickening therefore has the capacity to both hold and prompt multiple linguistic meanings and echoes; its simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity makes it 'uncanny'. The uncanniness of pregnancy, and quickening specifically, is something that Mazzoni locates as integral to maternal identity. This suggests that the female body itself is inherently uncanny, and the promise of quickening *haunts* the pregnant subject. Pregnancy occurs before quickening, but quickening is expected and anticipated. When it occurs, quickening effectively 'splits' the subject from within, and confronts her with undisputed knowledge of her pregnancy. Such knowledge is startling, particularly when considered in relation to *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning's use of quickening in a virginal subject is particularly troubling because it hints at illicit and illegitimate sexual knowledge.

¹⁹⁶ Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions*, p. 91.

¹⁹⁷ 'Interception, n.', 'inception, n.', and 'interoceptor, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 8 June 2015].

The Madonna is a knowing figure, though this knowledge (as I next discuss) is by no means certain. This final section will examine Romney's definition of women as 'Sublime Madonnas' (II: l. 223), foregrounding the sublime as something that *cannot* be known.

The Sublime Madonna

Barrett Browning uses the motif of the Virgin in order to explore and subvert Victorian ideals of femininity, ideals that were modelled upon the Virgin. Indeed, in accordance with dominant nineteenth-century representations, Romney insists that women can never be poets:

– Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and chaste wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you, – and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind. (II: ll. 220-25)

As Romney's words suggest, women were expected to be simultaneously maternal and 'chaste', 'sublime' and 'enduring'. Though we receive Romney's words through an ironic lens comprised of both Barrett Browning's authorship and Aurora's narrative (meaning that the reader knows already that Aurora is a poet), they nevertheless are powerful. Romney's position is fundamentally essentialist and necessarily universalising; he identifies Aurora with all other women: 'Women as you are' (l. 220). However, Barrett Browning conspicuously does not insert the caesura (between 'Women' and 'as') that would give grammatical clarity to Romney's words and reinforce the sense that his identification of Aurora is precise and authoritative. She instead suggests that Romney has conflated Aurora with (mis)conceptions about her gender. The line break that follows places emphasis on the adjective 'mere' (l. 221), implying that Romney is both prejudiced and fundamentally misguided. Aurora's retelling implicitly undermines his linguistic ability, insinuating that his

poetic skill is received and stale, rather than fresh and innovative. Furthermore, the adjective 'sublime', coupled with the collective noun 'Madonnas', undermines Romney's dominant position. The notion of the sublime is one that is both complicated and precarious in this context. Simultaneously dangerous and divine, the 'sublime Madonna' potentially can be both ravished and *ravisher*, positioning her as a fluid, troubling subject.

Romney's 'sublime Madonnas', therefore, are highly ironic. His imagining follows the dominant Romantic masculine model, suggesting that the sublime is an object to be absorbed and made a means of poetic transcendence by the male gazer. The Madonna is, after all, a meditative figure. She is subjected to contemplation, appeal and prayer; she is objectified in iconography. Yet the sublime also inherently resists such objectification. Involving both confrontation and willing subjugation, sublime ravishment, as discussed previously, fits into this category of experience. What exactly constitutes the sublime experience is subject to debate – it is fundamentally unknowable and as unstable as the meanings generated by the Madonna. In *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning counters Romney's argument by highlighting the unexpected similarities between the 'sublime Madonna' and the female poet. Aurora and Marian are both Madonnas and poetic figures, and refuse to adhere completely to the object position they are allocated. Aurora's sublime Madonna does not allow Romney to consolidate his position as a unified scopic subject. In fact, she challenges him, exposing the flaws in his enterprises and his sensibilities. He becomes, by the end of the book, blind; his views on women have been obscured by the woman poet.

The concept of an explicitly maternal sublime reconfigures the poetic subject as a powerful mother, but also highlights the precariousness of her situation. The creative conception and birth of multiple 'Madonnas' who are able to form together a female poetic tradition, expressing a specifically female 'sublime' bodily experience, offers a new interpretation of what it might mean to be a poet. Poetic pregnancy is embodied and

bloody and uncertain, but the maternal poetic subject 'know[s] it closer than another does' (VIII: ll. 271-72). The final outcome of this is a book that drains the female poet of her 'life-blood':

I set myself to art! What then? what's done?
What's done, at last?
Behold, at last, a book.
If life-blood's necessary, which it is, –
(By that blue vein athrob on Mahomet's brow,
Each prophet-poet's book must show man's blood!)
If life-blood's fertilising, I wrung mine
On every leaf of this, – unless the drops
Slid heavily on one side and left it dry. (V: ll. 351-58)

The female poetic subject, drained of her blood, becomes undead – a liminal, powerful and transgressive figure. Dangerously iconoclastic, she presents the prophet Mahomet (one of many prophets that appear in *Aurora Leigh*) as a parenthetical figure who cannot quite believe that women too can produce art. The vein at Mahomet's temple throbs; his body's blood shows on the surface of his head. The need to 'show man's blood' becomes the showcasing of woman's blood, as Aurora uses hers 'on every leaf' of her book. The image of the blood and book sliding heavily evokes the moment at which the baby 'slides' out of the birthing body, an intensely visceral image that reinforces the link between book and baby. The outcome is uncertain, however; Aurora cannot predict where exactly the drops of her blood will fall. Writing poetry is an act of faith; the poet-mother is unable to determine the outcome of her poetic pregnancy. Such precariousness recalls the moment at which Aurora aborts her foetal-book during the drafting process (III: ll. 245-48), which will be explored in the next chapter. Aurora's poetic pregnancy, from its consummation to its quickening, like most early pregnancies, is insecure. The fact of Romney's speech occurring during the second book, after its conception but before a diagnosis of pregnancy could have been firmly established, then, highlights the inherent instability of early pregnancy and its metaphorical counterpart. This, as will be next examined, is a theme that is taken up

not only by Barrett Browning, but her twentieth-century literary daughters, Virginia Woolf and Rosamond Lehmann.

Chapter II

Unclasping the Girdle: Writing Pregnancy Loss

I am filling the room
with the words from my pen.
Words leak out of it like a miscarriage.
– Anne Sexton¹⁹⁸

In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poet-heroine describes the home as a place of sanctuary and personal freedom, a place where she can 'breathe large' by shedding her clothes and underclothes, by loosening her tightly arranged hair and by unclasping her girdle:

And I breathe large at home. I drop my cloak
Unclasp my girdle, loose the band that ties
My hair... now could I but unloose my soul!
We are sepulchred alive in this close world,
And want more room.¹⁹⁹

The world, described here as 'close', is a place of Gothic imagery and impending death – a place where 'we' (women poets such as Aurora, and women more generally) are 'sepulchred alive' (V: l. 1040). Barrett Browning's adjective 'close' suggests that the world is a stifling and enclosing space for women, whereas the home is a place that can be occupied actively, by writing. This configuration rewrites the trope of the Victorian 'Angel in the House', which has long designated the world at large as an active masculine space and the home as an idealised, passively feminine one.²⁰⁰ In their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that 'almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men's houses' both figuratively ('locked

¹⁹⁸ Anne Sexton, 'The Silence', in *The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, ed. by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), pp. 180-81.

¹⁹⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), ed. Margaret Reynolds (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), V. 1037-41 (p. 400). All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

²⁰⁰ Coventry Patmore's influential depiction of the idealised 'Angel' arguably haunts much of women's writing about the home, as well as feminists' analyses. See Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House: Together With the Victories of Love* (1854), intro. by Alice Meynell (London: Routledge, [n.d.]).

into male texts') and literally.²⁰¹ By focusing their analysis on the imagery of enclosure and escape, Gilbert and Gubar point out that much of nineteenth-century women's literature, and indeed, the work of their twentieth-century descendants, demonstrates anxieties about women's spaces. These spaces are invariably Gothic, from 'haunted garrets' to 'coffin-shaped beds', positioning the home as a deathly prison for the female subject.²⁰² Indeed, according to Gilbert and Gubar, '[d]ramatizations of imprisonment and escape are so all-pervasive in nineteenth-century literature by women that we believe they represent a uniquely female tradition in this period.'²⁰³ However, in this particular excerpt from *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning remakes the home as a place of artistic freedom and creation rather than as a confined and confining space.²⁰⁴ This space is where Aurora writes her most important book, that creative product of her body which is described throughout *Aurora Leigh* in terms of poetic pregnancy.

Aurora's foetal-text has a heartbeat and gestates or 'develops from within' her body (ll: ll. 485).²⁰⁵ By writing – or *birthing* – this book, Aurora anticipates Virginia Woolf's seminal 1929 essay, 'A Room of One's Own', in which she argues that women require their own lockable room and an independent income in order to become successful writers.²⁰⁶ Linking the production of the book with its literary mother's body, Woolf states that '[t]he book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so they do not need long hours of uninterrupted work.'²⁰⁷ Woolf's argument suggests that the

²⁰¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 83.

²⁰² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 84.

²⁰³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 85.

²⁰⁴ As I discuss in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening), not all spaces in *Aurora Leigh* are quite so productive. The maiden aunt's chamber, for instance, is an infertile space to be negotiated and escaped.

²⁰⁵ See Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening) for my analysis of Aurora's foetal-text.

²⁰⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2000).

²⁰⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 78.

foetal-book should fill the space of the womb/room, and that this space should belong to the individual woman writer. Aurora, however, states that women 'want more room' than that afforded by the home. She implies that they also need more *bodily* space, since bodies are the 'rooms' that enclose their souls.²⁰⁸

In this excerpt, Barrett Browning shows that the first important task that Aurora accomplishes upon entering her home is to undress. By scattering her clothes and underclothes, and by loosening her hair, Aurora provocatively shows the reader her body – though this body is located between the lines of text, rather than described explicitly. We are invited to imagine Aurora in her underwear, and not just *in* her underwear, but stepping *out* of it. She is either a slattern – content to fill her domestic environment with crumpled clothes simply dropped to the floor – or confident that her housekeeper will reorder such disorder and return the clothes to their proper places.²⁰⁹ Aurora's body is also a virgin body, since at this point in the narrative she is unmarried. However, her virginity highlights rather than decreases her potential sexuality. Aurora is not only rebellious, but self-eroticising. Her sexuality is unclasped and unloosed, shaken out and scattered. The girdle or corset, as Jill Fields comments in *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality* (2007), forms part of a system of foundation garments that are simultaneously 'private and sexualized, yet essential to the shaping of the publicly viewed silhouette [...] critical to

²⁰⁸ Barrett Browning's use of the term 'soul' has Cartesian resonance. I discuss this in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

²⁰⁹ She is also implicitly rewriting the trope of 'disorderly' undressing in erotic men's poetry, such as Robert Herrick's 'Delight in Disorder':

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness;
A lawn about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distraction;
An erring lace, which here and there
Enthrals the crimson stomacher (ll. 1-6).

See Robert Herrick, 'Delight in Disorder', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, 5th edn (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 355.

making bodies feminine.’²¹⁰ By unclasping her girdle Aurora unlooses and discards the public and proper spectacle of her femininity. She draws attention both to the sexualised underpinnings of this spectacle and the physical sensuality of the female body underneath.

The issue of femininity, then, is central to Aurora’s place in (and displacement of) her home, her clothes and her body. It is irrevocably linked with her ability to write, and thus her identity as a woman writer. According to dominant nineteenth-century constructions of femininity, women were not supposed to be writers. Robert Southey, for instance, famously wrote a letter to Charlotte Brontë which stated that ‘[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation.’²¹¹ Southey’s ‘proper duties’ included primarily marriage and motherhood – the valuable, ‘proper’ creation of pregnancy as opposed to improper ‘recreational’ or poetic pregnancy. The woman writer, therefore, was not only a seemingly impossible spectacle, but a transgressively unfeminine one. The foetal-text is an unfeminine creation according to these foundations. Birthing it does, after all, make Aurora unclasp her girdle and lose her public and proper image. As my following analysis makes clear, the question of pregnancy – and pregnancy loss – is inextricably caught up with such foundations. For, potentially contained in the female body, within the home, clothes and the internal space of the womb/room, is both the foetus and/or the foetal-text. The dressed female body both conceals and reveals

²¹⁰ Jill Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 2-3.

²¹¹ Brontë’s response, also notorious, was both sarcastic and caustic: ‘In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble anyone else with my thoughts. I carefully avoid any appearance of preoccupation and eccentricity, which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits...I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them.’ See Letter from Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë, March 1837, and Brontë to Southey, quoted in Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (1994; London: Vintage, 1995), p. 65. Notice how Brontë emphasises the private space of the home and its residents – whom we know also included her sisters Anne and Emily Brontë, both unmarried authors. Interestingly, there has been some debate about the cause of Charlotte Brontë’s death, with a possibility (though rejected by Gordon) being hyperemesis gravidarum (severe morning sickness). See Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, pp. 312-13.

its fertility; Aurora's shedding of garments is an act of disclosure as well as rebellion. When the girdle is unclasped, we see what is hidden beneath it. When the body is loosened, what is contained within may be lost.

This chapter examines what happens when the girdle is unclasped and what it means for women writers, from the corseted nineteenth century to the dropped waistline of the early twentieth century. By exploring the nineteenth-century female body underneath the corset in *Aurora Leigh*, in Alice B. Stockham's medical text, *Tokology* (1883) and in Madame Roxey A. Caplin's book on corsetry (1856), I show that the feminine silhouette has a profound and sometimes unexpected impact on the pregnant subject.²¹² I then move on to explore later miscarriage/abortion narratives from the early twentieth century, and draw a thematic link between the notion of the bound body and the body that fails to carry a pregnancy – or, indeed, deliberately 'drops' one. During this period, the public female silhouette – the shape of femininity – changed significantly. Women had both worn and discarded corsets; they had dropped their waists and put on trousers; they had raised hemlines and experimented with fashion. The emerging prominence of the flapper silhouette, after the corseted hourglass of the nineteenth-century female body, allows us to explore the pregnant body as a closed/clothed body in women's writing.

As interwar texts such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) show, the flapper silhouette is a non-reproductive silhouette that resists gendered categories of identification. The pregnant body underneath these clothes is similarly resistant to its maternity; Woolf's pregnant poet, Orlando, drops her book, while Lehmann's writer Olivia, aborts her unborn child. As I explore, Woolf's and Lehmann's pregnant subjects are shaped as reproductive, artistic and feminine figures.

²¹² Alice B. Stockham, *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman* (1883; rev. edn New York: R. F. Fenno & Company, 1911); Madame Roxey A. Caplin, *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body* (London: Darton and Co., 1856).

As clothed subjects, both occupy spaces which draw thematic links between the room and womb, language and bodies, the feminine form and the textual form, and the book and the baby. Form, then, is a key term for my analysis, both in terms of the shape of the female body and the shape of the text. The text's corporeality – encompassing its structure, language and genre – can be linked both to formal experimentation and to the changing female silhouette. Indeed, these women writers demonstrate a continuous exploration of the room that such literary forms allow them. This is apparent in Barrett Browning's nineteenth-century verse-novel, but becomes increasingly obvious in the experimental narrative style of Woolf's and Lehmann's fiction.

'Straps, buckles, laces and bones': What Makes a Woman

The fashionable female silhouette in the mid nineteenth century emphasised the reproductive organs: a full, bell-shaped skirt and tightly fitted bodice accentuated the hips and breasts, and corsets were worn underneath the dress in order to create and maintain this silhouette (Fig. 1).²¹³ Femininity, thus defined by reproductive capacity, is a quality that Aurora feels it is necessary to shed when she enters her home – the private space in which she creates her foetal book. In her analysis of underwear, Fields argues that 'as the first layer of clothing, they [undergarments] are also the last barrier to full disclosure of the body.'²¹⁴ The dressed female body is a 'closed' body existing in a 'close world'; ironically, the publicly viewed feminine silhouette helps neither actual nor artistic reproduction. Disclosure of the body, or at least the body's sexual organs, is necessary for sexual intercourse and conception to take place. The 'closed' body is a childless one; in order to

²¹³ Dress reform, to which I will return, resisted this popular silhouette by advocating looser clothing for women.

²¹⁴ Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality*, p. 3.

become pregnant the body needs to be *disclosed*, its coverings removed and opened up.²¹⁵ Underwear needs to be stepped out of, taken off, or moved aside. As the excerpt from *Aurora Leigh* indicates, this may be difficult – particularly so for women writers – when there is so little room in the world for them to occupy. Corseted women, as Barrett Browning's words suggest, 'want more room' (V: l. 1041). Corsets compress and displace the internal organs, moulding the body to a fashionable silhouette. They alter female margins and measurements. Aside from identifying her as female (and thus as unsuited to artistic creation according to dominant nineteenth-century ideas about the woman writer), Aurora's feminine body is a body that is inaccessibly corseted, constrained and perpetually breathless. Aurora finds it difficult to breathe, and breathing is a function central to the poet-muse relationship.²¹⁶ Breathing is about transmitting and receiving poetic inspiration: it allows the poetic subject to speak.²¹⁷ Barrett Browning thus suggests that the viewed feminine subject finds it difficult to speak in a public forum because she is always corseted – she is always short of breath.

²¹⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'disclose' as '[t]o uncover and expose to view (anything material); to remove a covering from; to reveal, allow to be seen.' See 'disclose, v.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 31 July 2015].

²¹⁶ I discuss the notion of the muse breathing inspiration into the poet in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

²¹⁷ Breathing is also about staying alive, which suggests that the lack of breath experienced by the female subject here is not only aesthetic, but existential.

Fig. 1²¹⁸

The notion of the space of the female body and what may be contained or ‘sepulchred alive’ within it also provides a way of thinking about pregnancy. The uterus is, after all, the ‘room’ that the unborn child inhabits. The source or seat of ‘the uncanny’, that which is both familiar and unfamiliar, deathly and living, the uterus encloses the foetus for the duration of pregnancy. Indeed, Freud’s seminal essay states that the uterine space is fundamentally uncanny:

To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness – the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ ‘Present Fashion’, in Caplin, *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*, p. 24.

²¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The ‘Uncanny’’, in *Art and Literature: Jensen’s Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 339-76 (pp. 366-67).

This suggests that the unborn child is effectively buried or ‘sepulchred alive’ within the womb/room/tomb. The fact that individuals cannot remember intra-uterine existence – they reconstruct the repressed memory as a ‘phantasy’ – reinforces the idea that they were indeed buried alive for the duration of their mother’s pregnancy. Unborn existence is precarious, and its similarity to being buried alive is deeply unsettling because we know that being buried alive results in the subject experiencing what it is like to breathe inside the body’s final ‘room’, the coffin, before they die. This notion, as Freud points out, is ‘terrifying’; the pregnant body provokes fear since it raises the spectre of a ‘phantasy’ that endangers the individual subject. The gender of this subject, significantly, is male; Freud refers primarily to the effect that the concept of the uncanny womb has on his male patients. The individual who is buried alive knows exactly what awaits his corpse: decay and corruption in a suffocatingly closed space beneath the earth, without hope of rescue.²²⁰

Freud’s argument that life’s origins are not only deathly but lascivious, meanwhile, can be read alongside the Romantic poet-muse relationship, as discussed by Elisabeth Bronfen in *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992). In Freud’s model of psychoanalysis, the individual subject is a male one, who desires to possess and thus appropriate the powerful and deathly space that belongs to his mother. Bronfen’s exploration of the trope of the deathly female body in relation to the Romantic muse – the female beloved, transformed into a source of poetic inspiration by her death and then possessed and reanimated by the male poet – suggests that this narrative becomes disrupted

²²⁰ Moreover, it is not simply being buried alive that terrifies the individual, but being buried alive by mistake – being mistaken for a corpse in the first place. The deathly origins of life throw the subject into crisis. This fear resonates with the notion that pregnancy is difficult to determine, particularly if the shape of the gravid uterus and the foetal movement contained within it are disguised and constrained by clothing. Indeed, the uncertainty of the pregnant body, continuously expanding and breaching its boundaries, makes it abject according to Julia Kristeva’s definition. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). I discuss this concept further in Chapter IV (Labour).

by women writers. Women poets, Bronfen argues, hover between 'cultural complicity and critique' of this model of authorship since they cannot articulate themselves 'entirely devoid of cultural fictions of femininity'.²²¹ Cultural fictions of femininity in the nineteenth century include the idealised domestic image of the mother, a woman partly identifiable by her proper feminine silhouette.²²² The female poetic subject therefore is doubly constrained – by her womb and room. Though she transgresses such ideals by refusing marriage and motherhood, Aurora wears her corset in public. She allows her body to be sepulchred in an act of complicity that also suggests rebellion, since it houses a metaphorical pregnancy rather than a real one. Aurora engages in what Bronfen calls 'moments of uncanny duplicity [...] since explicitly and self-consciously writer and written dead feminine body occupy the same site'.²²³ The poetic mother shares the anatomy of the deathly female muse envisioned by a dominant masculine poetic.²²⁴ Sepulchring this body in deathly stasis according to the world, whilst privately exposing its creativity at home, calls for such duplicity. Aurora is

²²¹ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 396, p. 404.

²²² Nineteenth-century guidebooks for women certainly reinforce this, by often including advice on female dress alongside information on childbearing. For example, William Buchan's *Advice to Mothers* outlines what women should wear and avoid during pregnancy (i.e. stays), while S. Pancoast's *Ladies Medical Guide* gives detailed descriptions (including illustrations) of the ideal female form, and advice on hairstyles that includes recipes for dyes and mixtures to promote growth. See William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers, on The Subject of Their Own Health, and on the Means of Promoting the Health, Strength, and Beauty, of their Offspring* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1803), pp. 18-19; S. Pancoast, *The Ladies' Medical Guide: A Complete Instructor and Counsellor, Embracing A Full and Exhaustive Account of the Structure and Functions of the Reproductive Organs; the Diseases of Females and Children, with their Causes, Symptoms and Treatment; the Toilet considered in reference to Female Health, Beauty and Longevity, etc., etc., etc.* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Company, 1875), pp. 356-58, pp. 465-521. In the early twentieth century, dress reformer and doctor Anna Galbraith similarly gives advice on dress, arguing that dress, particularly the corset, is the 'fundamental cause of woman's physical deterioration'. See Anna M. Galbraith, *Personal Hygiene and Physical Training for Women* (Philadelphia and London: W. B. Saunders Company, 1911), pp. 240-70. Helene E. Roberts' analysis of the construction of the Victorian feminine clothed body also reveals that proper femininity was defined by dress, though her straightforward reading of the corset as 'submissive-masochistic' is questionable. See Helene E. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman', *Signs*, 2.3 (1977), 554-69 (p. 557).

²²³ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 405.

²²⁴ I discuss the deathly female muse in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

both writer and woman, pregnant with poetry and a virgin, acknowledging her womb/tomb as the seat of generative power and entrapped within it.

According to the dominant masculine configuration, authorship necessitates the death of the feminine. Indeed, Bronfen argues that this is the reason that death in childbirth appears as a prolific poetic theme:

[A]uthorship, as the production of symbolic textuality, requires the death of the feminine, and all the values belonging to this cultural paradigm. This may explain why death in childbirth is such a poetic theme. For here the explicitly sanctioned feminine form of authorship, the creation of a child, falls together with the actual death of the feminine body.²²⁵

This positions pregnancy and childbirth as the 'sanctioned feminine form of authorship', which nevertheless causes maternal death. Indeed, the very notion of pregnancy's representation in fiction calls forth immediate corporeal punishment for the mother, who often dies during or shortly after childbirth.²²⁶ Bronfen interprets this as a response to the doubly generative power that the pregnant female body threatens. Its potential literary authorship, both unsanctioned and unfeminine, prompts a recurrent death motif in representations. Though Bronfen's account refers specifically to the death of the mother in literature (who is survived by her infant), the phrase 'death in childbirth' can also be applied to foetal death or miscarriage.²²⁷ The writing of pregnancy loss, as will be explored in this chapter, offers a slightly different look at the deathly pregnant subject. If women writers are, like Aurora Leigh, 'sepulchred alive', then their representations of miscarriage remind us that no one – woman or foetus – can survive being buried alive interminably. The possibility

²²⁵ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 404.

²²⁶ Examples of this in nineteenth-century literature include works by both men and women, such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848). Unmarried mothers in literature often die in childbirth – such as in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874).

²²⁷ Indeed, *Aurora Leigh* conspicuously does *not* represent maternal death in childbirth, even for its most likely candidate, Marian Erle.

of pregnancy loss, and the precariousness of pregnancy itself, weighs heavily on these subjects.

Pregnancy was a dangerous business, particularly in the nineteenth century. Miscarriages often happened at home, without medical aid or intervention.²²⁸ Furthermore, corseted women sometimes experienced miscarriage *because they were corseted* – at least according to some nineteenth-century medical guidebooks. Alice B. Stockham, for instance, one of the first female doctors and an influential figure both in medicine and in the late nineteenth-century dress reform movement, wrote in detail about the consequences of a particular kind of corsetry known as ‘tight-lacing’. In *Tokology* (1883) she argues that tight-lacing ‘lays siege to the child-bearing citadel’ of the female body and that ‘[t]he corset should not be worn for two hundred years before pregnancy takes place’.²²⁹ Significantly, having given a detailed account of miscarriage (or ‘spontaneous abortion’) Stockham states that one of its common causes is a ‘[l]ack of room’ – the result of tight and heavy clothing.²³⁰ This echo of Barrett Browning’s words resonates with the idea that women writers both desire and lack room for their bodies and themselves. Both poetic and physical pregnancy is a precarious business, therefore, partly because dressed women’s bodies are compressed into a space that is too small for healthy foetal/textual development. This is startlingly illustrated in Anna

²²⁸ The terms ‘miscarriage’ and ‘abortion’ were often used interchangeably in the nineteenth century, but in this chapter I use them in the contemporary twenty-first century sense, according to NHS guidelines: miscarriage is the spontaneous loss of a pregnancy during the first 23 weeks, the main indication of which is vaginal bleeding and abdominal cramping; abortion is the medical process of ending a pregnancy (via chemical or surgical intervention), carried out (in the UK) in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. Non-medical abortions – induced miscarriages which happen illicitly in the home – render the home a forbidding and a forbidden space.

²²⁹ Alice B. Stockham, *Tokology: A Book for Every Woman*, p. 109, p. 107. Emphasis in original.

²³⁰ Stockham, *Tokology*, p. 244. Stockham’s description of a miscarriage is as follows: ‘The liability to abortion is more frequent at the beginning and during the third month. It is usually preceded by occasional loss of blood, which rarely is excessive at first, but in from three days to three weeks increases in frequency and quantity until it may absolutely amount to haemorrhage. The first symptom in some instances is a violent chill. In such cases soreness, heat and pain are soon located in the pelvis and the flowing may be deferred for a few days. One may have continuous pain, more or less severe, until the embryo is expelled; or it may come up at irregular intervals from day to day for some two or three weeks, there being such complete intermissions that the patient hopes each time that all danger is over, and that gestation may be completed.’ See Stockham, *Tokology*, p. 243. This is one of the most detailed accounts that I have come across in medical texts – including those from the twentieth century.

M. Galbraith's figure of the compressed, tightly-laced female torso, which shows the deathly bones of the female subject's interior (Fig. 2).

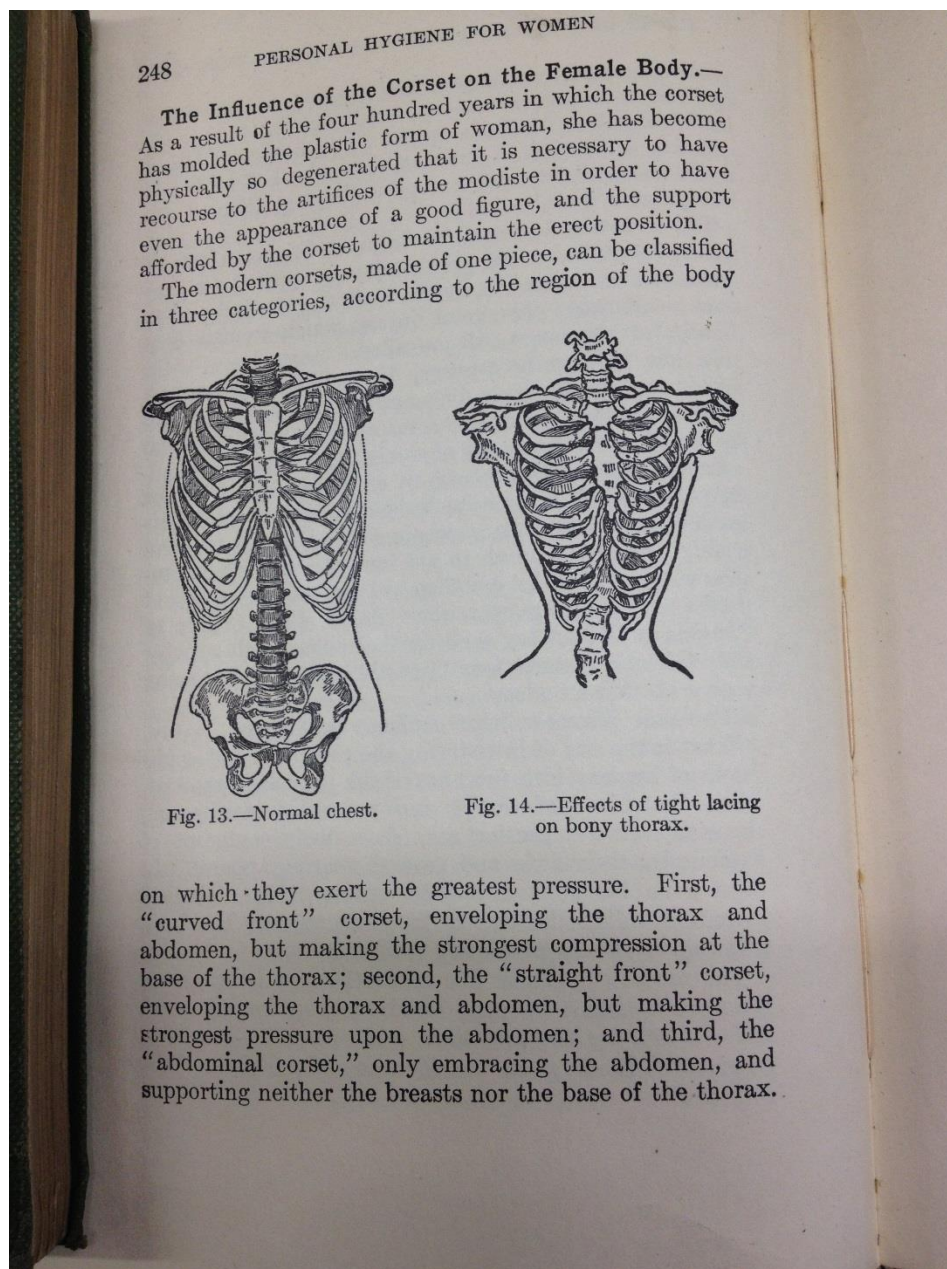


Fig. 2²³¹

Barrett Browning's contemporary, corsetière Madame Roxey A. Caplin, also warns of the dangers of tight-lacing in her book *Health and Beauty; or, Corsets and Clothing* (1856): 'Among

²³¹ Galbraith, *Personal Hygiene and Physical Training for Women*, p. 248.

the numerous causes [...] of this accident [abortion], related in the works dedicated to this special subject, there is one which, although common, is unnoticed – *the tendency of the corset to press downwards!*'.²³² Sufficient physical compression of the pregnant abdomen – such as that provided by corsetry – could indeed cause miscarriage.

Caplin's point that this cause of miscarriage is 'common' yet 'unnoticed' also raises the possibility of deliberate abortion, and is borne out by evidence that suggests that women sometimes corseted themselves both to conceal their pregnancies and to induce miscarriage. In *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (2001), Leigh Summers devotes an entire chapter to 'Corsetry and the Invisibility of the Maternal Body'.²³³ She argues that, by suppressing quickening and placing pressure on the abdomen (inducing the expulsion of 'unnatural blockages'), the corset 'offered a method of contraception that was possibly more effective than patent nostrums, safer than mechanical abortion and without the legal and moral repercussions of that operation'.²³⁴ Summers positions such actions within the larger context of nineteenth-century societal expectations, developments in medicine and the legal system, and fashionable dress – all of which conspired to render the pregnant body invisible.²³⁵ The pregnant body manifested all that was potentially transgressive about women:

²³² Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 58. Emphasis in original.

²³³ Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), pp. 37-62.

²³⁴ Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 51. William Buchan (1803), John Morley (1829) and Pye Henry Chavasse (1877) also all warn of the dangers of suppressing quickening through corsetry. See William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers*, pp. 18-19, pp. 70-80; John Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy, from The Earliest Stage to The Period of Quickening. With a Physiological Explanation of the Physical and Mental Changes Produced by the Impregnated Uterus upon the System of the Mother* (London: S. Highley, 1829), p. 19; Pye Henry Chavasse, *Advice to a Wife on the Management of her own Health and on the Treatment of Some of the Complaints Incidental to Pregnancy, Labour, and Suckling with an Introductory Chapter Especially Addressed to a Young Wife* (12th edn, London: J. and A. Churchill, 1877), pp. 124-25, pp. 217-18.

²³⁵ For instance, Summers comments on how even nineteenth-century medical discourse concerned explicitly with maternal corsetry effectively renders the mother invisible by focusing on the foetus's wellbeing. See Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 44. This argument continues to resonate in light of feminist responses to New Reproductive Technologies such as IVF and ultrasound. See Chapter III (Ultrasound) for further exploration of this. Valerie Steele, however, questions Summers' straightforward acceptance of medical discourse. See Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 67-68.

Paradoxically, while reproduction was considered the cornerstone of the Victorian family, and while post-partum motherhood was frequently exalted, the expanding 'public' female body indicated female indiscretion and an affront to public decency. The expanding physical pregnant body was the literal transgression of constructed feminine ideals that denied female carnality and demanded female passivity and virgin status.²³⁶

Here the pregnant body provides evidence of sexual desire and activity; though it has been disclosed within the private space of the home, its demonstration of female sexuality is a public spectacle.²³⁷ Furthermore, as Summers points out, the pregnant body is an 'expanding' body. Not only does it take up too much room, but it continues to grow and transforms into what Summers calls the 'post-partum lax abdomen'.²³⁸ The post-partum body, then, is dangerously 'lax'. No longer virginal in its shape and elasticity, it is a 'fallen' body that takes up more room than is deemed desirable or proper by nineteenth-century mores. Corsetry provides a way of managing the space taken up by this transgressive female body.

Concealing pregnancy for as long as possible via tightly-laced corsetry enabled women to retain their virginal small-waisted appearance and 'a few extra weeks or even months of freedom in the face of taboos which demanded their invisibility'.²³⁹ Indeed, Summers asserts that such pregnancy taboos were widespread and 'intense', demanding that pregnant women conceal the evidence of their sexual activity; middle-class women (such as Aurora) who found themselves pregnant were advised to stay out of public sight by avoiding social gatherings such as parties, balls, concerts and public transport.²⁴⁰ Aurora, after all, laments the 'want' of room not just for the female body, but for the soul.²⁴¹ Though the

²³⁶ Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 42.

²³⁷ This can be linked to the crinoline, an undergarment which took up considerable room, which I discuss later on in this chapter.

²³⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 42.

²³⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 38.

²⁴⁰ Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 38.

²⁴¹ This term is used by Descartes to denote the mind. I discuss Descartes' mind (soul)/body dualism in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

body can be undressed, the soul is still confined according to societal mores and expectations.²⁴² Corseting oneself while pregnant, according to Summers, involved a complex negotiation of various discourses, including the warnings afforded by medical practitioners such as Stockham, widespread pregnancy taboos and notions that the female body was inherently weakened and so specially fitted ‘maternity corsets’ were necessary for safe and successful pregnancy.

Maternity corsetry is especially interesting, since its design attempts to reconcile two competing narratives about the closed/clothed body: on one hand, corsetry as a hazardous demonstration of female weakness and fashionable vanity; and on the other hand, a necessary precaution, as women’s bodies, by this time already constrained for ‘*two hundred years before pregnancy takes place*’ (at least) were considered too weak to support themselves.²⁴³ Indeed, the attitudes towards corsetry and the pregnant body that Summers highlights are both complex and contradictory, suggesting that it must have been almost impossible for the nineteenth-century woman to choose an indisputably correct method of furnishing her ‘room’. Summers’ analysis of maternity corsets emphasises the materiality of this foundation garment:

Straps, buckles, laces and bones on maternity corsetry throughout the century worked to contain and imprison the unruly, fecund body, giving it the appearance of taking up less space, of appearing less ‘offensively’ pregnant. The design of the corset possibly reduced both the body’s ability to expand and certainly the ability to move about with ease, thereby hindering its liberty in both private sphere and public arena.²⁴⁴

Summers’ language suggests that the maternity corset was designed specifically to imprison the deviant female body: it ‘contain[s]’, ‘imprison[s]’ and ‘hinder[s]’ its liberty. The pregnant

²⁴² Chavasse recommended the ‘psychic corset’ as an alternative to the physical one – ie. remaining within the home to hide the pregnant body from public view. See Chavasse, *Advice to a Wife*, p. 9.

²⁴³ Stockham, *Tokology*, p. 107.

²⁴⁴ Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 42. Here Summers discusses Amesbury’s maternity corset.

body is thus effectively criminalised; its unruliness flouts the social rules that expect it to be a still, immobile body in both public and private spaces.²⁴⁵ In order to achieve this feat, the garment itself is engineered out of a variety of materials, which are combined to form a complex engineered structure. 'Straps, buckles, laces and bones' are all required in order to restrain the otherwise unrestrainable pregnant body. These materials both encase and stand in for the female body's components. Bones, for instance, are simultaneously organic and deathly; they function to remind us of the internal space of the female body, but also its uncanniness. The maternity corset attempts to make closed – and impregnable – what has clearly been opened and impregnated.

The 'straps, buckles, laces and bones' of maternity corsetry aim to support the pregnant abdomen as well as control its movement, however. This often involves the close association – and even amalgamation – of the maternity corset with the maternal body, in terms of both its strengths and perceived weaknesses. The advertisement for Madame Caplin's 'Self-Regulating Gestation' corset (pictured in Fig. 3) states that it is 'calculated to answer all the phases of pregnancy. Elastic and dilatable, [it] affords support without pressure, and thereby preventing abortion, resulting from deficiency of muscular power'.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Perhaps it is no coincidence that much of the nineteenth-century material on beauty found in medical guidebooks for women represents the ideal female form as that of a Grecian statue. For example, Caplin reproduces three types of feminine figure already prevalent in medical discourse: '1. Intellectual beauty as shown in the statue of Minerva. 2. Nutritious beauty as shown in the statue of Venus. 3. Locomotive beauty as shown in the statue of Diana.' These are accompanied with illustrations of the statues in question. See Caplin, 'On the Relation of Dress to the Human Figure', in *Health and Beauty*, pp. 1-6 (p. 3). Pancoast's guide similarly identifies ideal female forms by drawing inspiration from the Venus de Medici: '[t]he surface of the whole female form should be characterized by plumpness, elasticity, delicacy and smoothness, because this is not only essential to beauty in woman, but is necessary for the gradual and easy expansion of her person during gestation and delivery. [...] The principal object of a true man's discourse should be what is useful; that of a true woman's that which is agreeable. There should be nothing in common in their discourse but truth [...] The most perfect model of the human female ever, created by Grecian art, is that of the celebrated piece of sculptuary known as THE VENUS DE MEDICI. [...] young ladies should take the Venus de Medici as an example of what a female figure should be'. See S. Pancoast, *The Ladies' Medical Guide: A Complete Instructor and Counsellor*, pp. 357-58. Valerie Steele points out that the Venus de Milo was an image used by dress reformers to highlight the beauty of the natural (nude) waistline in opposition to the unnatural (corseted) waistline. See Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, pp. 52-53. I discuss the image of the Venus de Milo in relation to anatomical images in the Introduction.

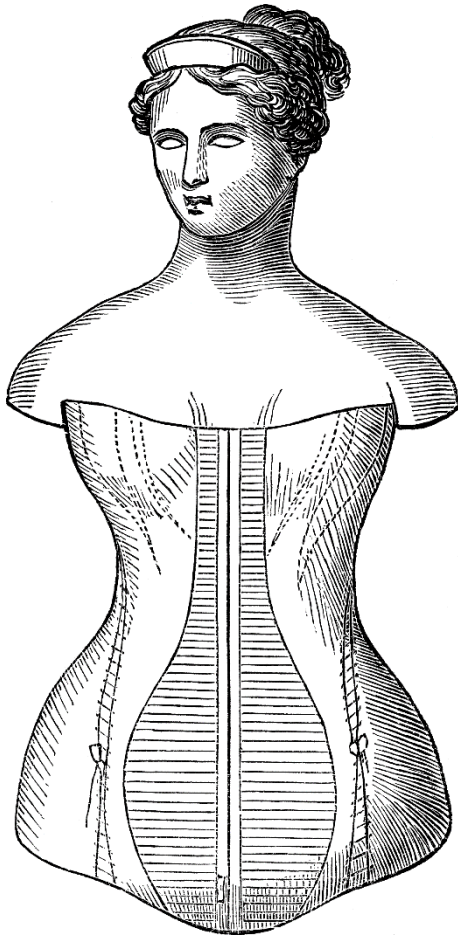
²⁴⁶ Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 46.

Similarly, her 'Gestation Belt' works by 'combining support and elasticity, keeping up the centre of gravity, and making locomotion easy; it permits the wearer to take exercise to the last period of gestation.'²⁴⁷ Caplin's emphasis on preventing 'abortion' and on both support and elasticity, rigidity and 'locomotion', presents the pregnant body as a problem to be solved by specific and specialised foundation garments. Indeed, Caplin writes extensively on the benefits of properly fitted corsetry from the non-medical perspective of one working within the fashion industry (though she repeatedly cites medical literature in support of her theories).²⁴⁸ Her Gestation Corset is painstakingly adapted to this changing body, its elastic material mimicking and strengthening the 'natural elasticity' of the abdominal wall, and its 'dilatable' structure reminiscent of the cervix. The female body lacks muscular power, she states, but may be exercised in order to improve its strength. If the abdominal muscles are supported, then they may be exercised safely; the wearer may remain mobile.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 47.

²⁴⁸ Summers argues that Caplin's 'success was, in part, due to her husband's involvement as much as to her unique designs. Monsieur Caplin was a doctor who advised his wife on the physiological impact of corsetry.' See Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 31.

²⁴⁹ Patricia A. Vertinsky explores nineteenth-century debates about exercise and their relationship with the dress reform movement. See Patricia A. Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 76-82.

Fig. 3²⁵⁰

Caplin's account is illuminating not only because she uses *Health and Beauty; or, Corsets and Clothing* to sell her own brand of maternity (and other) corsets, but also because her presentation of the pregnant body combines the language of medicine, fashion and poetry:

The natural elasticity which is given to all of the organs concerned, the slow and beautiful process by which it proceeds, all prepare for the last and final effort. Immediately that this is effected, another set of organs come into action to supply the offspring with nutrition [...] and the organs which have been distended during the previous nine months resume again their normal proportions, and it is to this ebb and flow of the vital force that we have adapted our Gestation Corset.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ 'Gestation Corset', in Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 54. Illustrated as worn on a Grecian bust, Caplin's corset attempts to reconcile the differences between the immobile, idealised feminine body and the expanding pregnant body. The motif of the statue, to which I will return in relation to Lehmann's text, is prevalent in nineteenth-century representations.

²⁵¹ Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 53.

Alongside her detailed discussion of the reproductive organs and abdominal muscles ('organs' is one of Caplin's favourite nouns) Caplin writes of the 'slow and beautiful process' of pregnancy, and the 'ebb and flow of the vital force' that it entails. Her presentation suggests that the pregnant body is a beautiful body, despite the fact that it is disproportionately distended. Comprised of organs that function actively and apparently independently of the individual concerned, the pregnant body takes on a supernatural quality. Indeed, Caplin's Gestation Corset makes a 'magical difference' to the individual's experience of pregnancy, allowing her to position herself as a beneficent fairy godmother:

Various have been their exclamations, such as 'There is a magical difference in the ease I now feel. How can I sufficiently thank you, dear madame?' Others have declared that the corset has metamorphosed them completely; for instead of a restlessness and constant discomfort, they had experienced an immunity from all inconvenience. What, then, is the peculiarity of our corset? We answer, that it is made on such accurate scientific *data*, that it fits the body and chest of each individual; that, to quote the words of a medical gentleman when speaking of it – '*Madame, your corset is more like a new layer of muscles than an artificial extraneous article of dress!*' And this is practically the case.²⁵²

Such testimonials are familiar tropes in the language of advertisement, but here they also highlight the importance of the maternal voice, which is given equal weight to the medical expert opinion quoted. The exclamation from the anonymous 'medical gentleman' is balanced by the various words of approval expressed by pregnant wearers of Caplin's corset. The 'magical difference' that the wearer experiences allows her to metamorphose into a more comfortable, functioning and eloquent maternal subject, transforming her previous pregnant 'restlessness' into purposeful mobility. The medical gentleman, meanwhile, endorses the corset by emphasising its similarity to the natural pregnant body itself – it is '*more like a new layer of muscles than an artificial extraneous article of dress!*'.

²⁵² Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 59.

According to Caplin, the scientific data that informs the corset's design allows the pregnant body to continue its expansion until the moment of birth, 'the last and final effort'. This maternity corset is intended to both showcase and support the pregnant body's inherent capability for transformation.

The pregnant subject's eloquence is a theme that appears both in Caplin's work and *Aurora Leigh*. Caplin calls the body an 'envelope', suggesting that its contents are not only important, but literary in nature.²⁵³ The body has a message or invitation to convey, and its 'vital force' is wrapped carefully, to be opened only at the opportune moment. The properly applied Gestation Corset keeps this body closed and impermeable until it is time for the 'envelope' to be opened and the baby to be born. The baby, concealed inside this envelope, is envisaged as an unread text – much like Aurora's foetal book. Aurora, however, shows us what happens when the unread text is 'ripped up' or aborted. She aborts the first draft of her book, demonstrating that poetic pregnancy may be prematurely ended much like actual pregnancy:

[...] I ripped my verses up,
And found no blood upon the rapier's point;
The heart in them was just an embryo's heart
Which never yet had beat, that it should die;
(III: ll. 245-48).

This positions miscarriage – and abortion – as full disclosure of the poetic process.²⁵⁴ The drafting process is thus a series of miscarried, aborted or abandoned poetic pregnancies – far from the familiar Romantic narrative of perfect and spontaneous poetic creation experienced by male poets.²⁵⁵ Instead of birthing a metaphorical 'brain-child' instantly (as

²⁵³ Caplin, *Health and Beauty*, p. 1, p. 53.

²⁵⁴ Again, I take miscarriage here to mean pregnancy loss, and abortion to mean induced or deliberate pregnancy loss.

²⁵⁵ The dominant Romantic narrative of poetry defined it as the 'spontaneous overflow of feelings [...] recollected in tranquillity'. See William Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 241-72 (p. 266). I discuss this in Chapter IV (Labour).

her male counterparts seem to) Aurora takes time to conceive, gestate and carry her poetic pregnancy – and not every pregnancy results in the birth of a living child.²⁵⁶ Here Barrett Browning suggests that Aurora's first artistic attempts have not quickened; their 'embryo's heart' was still from the onset. Nevertheless, this language suggests the potential for life. Though bloodless, the verses have an 'embryo's heart'. They are quite clearly the product of poetic pregnancy, and described in terms that show a familiarity with, and confident use of, medical discourse. The foetal-text is not an unborn child; rather, it is an embryo, not fully alive, at least in this presentation. Aurora's early verses, therefore, are represented as an 'obstruction' to be released from the deathly space of the womb so that the body's natural healthy state can be re-established.²⁵⁷

Aurora's method of abortion is also significant. Instead of tight-lacing or taking an abortifacient, Aurora destroys her verses with a 'rapier', a light and thin sword which was originally worn by gentlemen in the sixteenth century as part of fashionable male dress. She chooses to (metaphorically) introduce a sharp object into the womb through the opening of the cervix, in order to wound, dislodge or disturb the foetus and induce abortion.²⁵⁸ The

²⁵⁶ As discussed in the Introduction, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that male writers have consistently used the childbirth metaphor throughout literary history. See Susan Stanford Friedman's article 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (1987), 49-82. Barbara Johnson, meanwhile, argues that twentieth-century women poets who write about abortion (such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Sexton, Lucille Clifton and Adrienne Rich) use apostrophe to rewrite the lyric tradition, 'textually placing aborted children in the spot formerly occupied by all the dead, inanimate, or absent entities previously addressed by the lyric.' Furthermore, she continues, the setting up of a competition between poetry and motherhood in these abortion poems results in the unsettling of the male childbirth metaphor: '[i]t is as though male writing were by nature procreative, while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal'. See Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986), 28-47 (p. 32, p. 38). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf describes modern 'Fascist' poetry, which she defines as 'motherless', as 'a horrid little abortion': '[p]oetry ought to have a mother as well as a father. The Fascist poem, one may fear, will be a horrid little abortion such as one sees in a glass jar in the museum of some country town.' See Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 101-02.

²⁵⁷ Victorian abortifacients often marketed themselves as menstrual 'regulators', means of removing 'obstructions'. This was not considered a criminal offence as pregnancy could not be determined before quickening was experienced. See Summers, *Bound to Please*, p. 51.

²⁵⁸ In 'Representations of Illegal Abortionists in England, 1900-1967', Emma L. Jones explains that '[f]or a miscarriage [abortion] to take place, a foetus has to be disturbed, whether through external trauma, dilation of the cervix, irritation of the uterine cavity, or perforation of the uterus. The contents of the uterus have to then be expelled or physically removed'. See Emma L. Jones, 'Representations of Illegal Abortionists in England,

noun 'rapier', combined with the way it is employed here, serves as an echo of Marian Erle's rape, although the verb 'rape' is conspicuously absent from Barrett Browning's text, and these meanings of 'rape' and 'rapier' are not etymologically related.²⁵⁹ Aurora's wielding of the rapier, however, shows her to be cross-dressing; during the course of the verse-novel she both sheds her 'feminine clothes' and puts on masculine ones. She is also the abortionist of the text, a figure that is powerfully transgressive, since it both demonstrates control over female bodies within the home and a degree of medical expertise.²⁶⁰ Aurora's domestic space thus becomes a forbidden and forbidding space, a place where the pregnant subject can 'breathe large', put on improper clothes, and write freely.²⁶¹ Aurora resists conforming to the prescribed roles of marriage and motherhood, which are laid out for her to wear as though they are a costume. Her status as a female poet thus positions her as able to discard the garments that demonstrate her femininity, and some of the constrictions that accompany this femininity. Jill Fields writes that the decline of the Victorian corset was a key factor in the transition to twentieth-century fashion and modern moral codes, a transition which took place over the final decades of the nineteenth century.²⁶² Aurora's dropped clothes, carelessly yet deliberately discarded, anticipate the developments in culture and fashion that take place in the early twentieth century. This subsequent period of

1900-1967', in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (2011; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 196-215 (p. 197).

²⁵⁹ The noun 'rape' also means 'rasp' or 'file', and it is this particular meaning that is connected to 'rapier'. See 'rape, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 31 July 2015].

²⁶⁰ In her article on the representation of illegal abortionists in England in the twentieth century, Emma L. Jones emphasises the positioning of lay abortionists within the home in such representations. This, she argues, highlights anxieties surrounding the corruptive influence of women: abortion's 'association with dirt and danger reflected enduring popular beliefs concerning the pollutant capabilities of the female body and its reproductive substances, particularly its "decomposing matter" such as menstrual or postnatal blood'. Aurora's transgressive wielding of the rapier therefore can be construed as a precursor to representations of the lay abortionist. See Emma L. Jones, 'Representations of Illegal Abortionists in England, 1900-1967', p. 208.

²⁶¹ Jill Fields points out that Victorian terms for undergarments in England include 'unmentionables', whereas in France they were 'inexpressibles'. This reinforces the idea that femininity's foundation garments constrict both the body and forms of expression such as speech, writing and poetry. See Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality*, p. 11.

²⁶² Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality*, p. 3.

rapid political and cultural change influenced modern fashion and transformed the popular feminine silhouette from the corseted waist of the Victorian and later Edwardian period, to the undefined, dropped waist of the 1920s flapper.

Dropping the Waistline and Dropping the Baby: Mis-Carrying in *Orlando*

So what do clothes tell us about Barrett Browning's literary 'daughters', the pregnant poets of the twentieth century? Simultaneously concealing and revealing, the garments that the female writer chooses to wear and to shed, to represent and to deconstruct, provide visual anchorage for thinking about issues of artistic conception and loss. If unclasping the girdle within the privacy of her own home allows the poet both to write and 'abort' her work (as Aurora did) then discarding the girdle altogether – or at least the appearance of wearing one – surely allows the poet greater visibility and freedom in the public sphere. The next generation of women writers operated within a rapidly changing political and social 'room'.²⁶³ During the late nineteenth century, the figure of the 'New Woman', emancipated from restrictive garments, became increasingly prominent.²⁶⁴ The Rational Dress Society and other such organisations of the dress reform movement (the Rational Dress Association and the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union, for instance) advised women to replace their

²⁶³ Virginia Woolf famously uses the room as a metaphor for women's freedom (or lack thereof) in her 1929 essay 'A Room of One's Own', to which I will return later in this chapter.

²⁶⁴ Einav Rabinovitch-Fox defines the New Woman as 'both an image and an appellation referring to a generation of women who came of age between 1890 and 1920 and challenged, through their attitudes and appearances, Victorian values and gender norms.' The appearance of the New Woman, she continues, 'varied according to class, race, age, and ethnic differences. In fact, it represented a variety of feminine types ranging from the Gibson Girl to the bohemian feminist, the suffragist, and the flapper, each representing its own version of "new womanhood"'. Rabinovitch-Fox argues that many previous historical studies of the New Woman neglected her visual appearance, 'rendering her nearly disembodied'. Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham, meanwhile, note that the New Woman, 'with her short haircut and practical dress, her demand for access to higher education, the vote and the right to earn a decent living, her challenge to accepted views of femininity and female sexuality, [...] was the focus of [...] intense anxiety as well as hope'. This chapter aims to interrogate the embodiment of that figure of new womanhood, the flapper. See Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, '[Re]Fashioning the New Woman: Women's Dress, the Oriental Style, and the Construction of American Feminist Imagery in the 1910s', *Journal of Women's History*, 27.2 (2015), 14-26 (p. 15); *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

corsets with chemises and bodices; the Rational Dress Society even published a 'Rational System of Underclothing' in 1881.²⁶⁵ This movement advocated lighter, more comfortable clothing intended to facilitate female hygiene and mobility for the 'New Woman' (the most obvious example of this being the Bloomer Costume). By emphasising physical freedom, the dress reformers attempted to alter in the public and political sphere a central problem for women – what Aurora Leigh identified as the want of 'room'. Though lampooned in the popular press, this was to an extent successful.²⁶⁶

Pertinently, the politicisation of fashion during this period also coincides with the beginnings of the feminist Suffrage movement, which persistently lobbied for women's rights in a public forum.²⁶⁷ Though many early twentieth-century suffragettes kept to the Edwardian silhouette of the corseted waist, long, heavy skirt and large hat, they also demonstrated that fashionable dress was something to be negotiated for the publicly viewed female subject. As Amy L. Montz points out, '[s]uffragettes recognized the usefulness of fashion in conveying a woman's voice: they shopped at designated, marketed and recognized "Suffragette-friendly" stores, wrote fashion columns alongside their peaceful and militant action journalism, and otherwise identified themselves as activists for the Vote by wearing specifically chosen, easily recognizable uniform colours that spoke of the movement they supported'.²⁶⁸ Indeed, many were tactical in their 'conscious feminization' of dress, keeping

²⁶⁵ Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003), p. 67.

²⁶⁶ Emma West notes that '[p]ublications such as *Punch* regularly depicted the "New Woman" as masculine, brash and unattractive, wearing trousers, a shirt and tie and smoking'. See Emma West, 'A Modern(ist) Mode: Fashion, 1910, and the Limits of Modernism', *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, 1.2 (2011), 65-78 (p. 70). Angelika Köhler also explores illustrations of the New Woman in *Life* magazine (specifically, the Gibson Girl), whereas Trina Robbins considers the images of female illustrator and journalist, Nell Brinkley. See Angelika Köhler, 'Charged with Ambiguity: The Image of the New Woman in American Cartoons', in *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930*, pp. 158-78; Trina Robbins, 'The Day of the Girl: Nell Brinkley and the New Woman', in *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930*, pp. 179-89.

²⁶⁷ Women were finally given the same voting rights as men in 1928; the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 enabled women aged over twenty-one to vote.

²⁶⁸ Amy L. Montz, "'Now she's all hat and ideas": Fashioning the British Suffrage Movement', *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, 3.1 & 2 (2012), 55-67 (p. 56).

to the conservative Edwardian silhouette in order to demonstrate their proper suitability for the Vote.²⁶⁹

For Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, however, modern fashion meant the unclasping of the traditional girdle, the dropping of the waist of the Victorian and Edwardian silhouette, brighter, bolder colours and patterns, and lighter, more comfortable garments in which it was possible to move around, and even to exercise. Indeed, Emma West notes that '[m]odern fashion was itself a product of change', positioning Suffragism not only as an important influence, but as inspired by changing silhouettes: '[f]ashion not only embodied changes in human character but it also inspired them: it altered how women moved, lived, interacted and related to each other and their environment'.²⁷⁰ Such 'embodiment' emphasises the link between the female body and what (un)covers it, and how that impacts on women's experiences within the spaces they inhabit. Indeed, modern garments certainly revealed a preoccupation with female mobility. For instance, in her 1905 description of a day at the seaside, Woolf emphasises the effect of modern dress on 'the free stride of the legs'. Ladies, she continues, 'shorten their skirts, throw aside their bonnets, & caper as they walk, consciously, almost defiantly as though they asserted a right'.²⁷¹ Furthermore, Paul Poiret's 1908 design of the 'corsetless' dress was highly influential, marking a 'radical break from the heavy, fussy designs of the Edwardian era'.²⁷² His designs included dresses made from lightweight fabrics and (most scandalously) harem pants. As West argues, 'Poiret's

²⁶⁹ Montz, "'Now she's all hat and ideas': Fashioning the British Suffrage Movement', p. 56. Katrina Rolley also discusses this, arguing that dress was used by suffragettes to signal either 'deviation from or adherence to the feminine ideal'. See Katrina Rolley, 'Fashion, Femininity and the Fight for the Vote', *Art History*, 13.1 (1990), 47-71 (p. 51).

²⁷⁰ West, 'A Modern(ist) Mode: Fashion, 1910, and the Limits of Modernism', p. 69.

²⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, ed. by M. A. Leaska (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 296. Quoted in R. S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009; repr. 2011), p. 13.

²⁷² West, 'A Modern(ist) Mode: Fashion, 1910, and the Limits of Modernism', p. 71. Fields points out that Poiret's corsetless dress and hobble skirt were still constraining, however, since despite their appearance they required corsetry to create a slim silhouette. See Fields, *An Intimate Affair*, p. 50.

designs also helped women embrace a modern lifestyle. His loose, comfortable garments made activities such as sport, cycling or driving possible. For the first time, women could fully negotiate the speed and terrain of the modern city. Fashion changed the way that women interacted with and experienced modernity.²⁷³ According to this perspective, loosening and discarding altogether the 'straps, buckles, laces and bones' of the Victorian corset enabled women to begin to redefine the feminine silhouette as something that enhanced, rather than constricted, such defiant mobility.

By the 1920s the fashionable female silhouette had changed from the hourglass to the flapper – boyish, pre-sexual, flat-chested and narrow-hipped. The legs, exposed by the short hemline of the flapper costume, seemed to be constantly moving or dancing the Charleston (Fig. 4).²⁷⁴ However, the flapper of the interwar period was conspicuously not pregnant. Her silhouette was athletic and boyish, her hemlines were short and she was most likely single. Following the First World War, young men were outnumbered by young women: the androgynous female body replaced the (largely absent) male body. The young women cut their hair; they looked like boys. Thus, the flapper costume, with its dropped waistline, did two things: it revealed and opened the Victorian closed/clothed body and it suppressed and constricted the traditionally feminine, reproductive body. The legs, freed from long skirts and the layers of petticoats underneath, became mobile and exposed – and this exposure draws attention to the potential expression of public, previously prohibited, female sexuality. The flapper could *part* her legs if she chose. Her reproductive body, signified by her breasts and hips, was flattened and slimmed, as the corset became longer and was worn lower on the body to create the illusion of the 'natural' waistline.²⁷⁵ She was

²⁷³ West, 'A Modern(ist) Mode', p. 75.

²⁷⁴ The Charleston was a popular dance which originated in 1920s America. Charleston was also the name of the Sussex house owned by Vanessa Bell (Woolf's sister) and Duncan Grant, and occupied by the Bloomsbury set.

²⁷⁵ Fields, *An Intimate Affair*, p. 49.

a sexual subject but not a fertile one; much to the chagrin of some feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she had effectively ‘dropped’ the baby.²⁷⁶ This action can be linked to modernist writing, which aesthetically speaking was a literature of fracture and fragmentation. Like many of her contemporaries, Woolf was concerned with breaking away from established modes of thinking about the subject and the world – in short, with ‘dropping’ things.²⁷⁷



Fig. 4²⁷⁸

In her 1928 novel *Orlando*, Woolf experiments with the feminine silhouette by detailing exactly what happens when a poet – the eponymous Orlando – changes both

²⁷⁶ Dress reformers/feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman criticised the flapper for this. For instance, Gilman insisted that '[b]y a strong, well-informed, rigidly selective motherhood the young women of today could cleanse the human race of its worst inheritance by a discriminating refusal of unfit fathers ... [But] as women [these girls] dress, their facial decoration, their behaviour, show no hope of better motherhood, which is what they are women for'. See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Vanguard, Rear-Guard, and Mud-Guard', *Century Magazine*, 104 (July 1922), 348-53 (p. 53).

²⁷⁷ They are also concerned with remaking the subject. Ezra Pound famously declared the mandate of modern literature was to 'Make it New'. In terms of form, the modernist novel drops many of the conventions of the Victorian realist novel, and in so doing, questions and challenges its established conventions. See Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

²⁷⁸ Photograph of dancing flappers, in Chelsea Mageland, 'The Roaring '20s: 1920-1929', *The History of Human Sexuality* <<http://historyofsexuality.umwblogs.org/topic-1/early-1900s/roaring-20s/>> [accessed 3 August 2015].

his/her sex and his clothes. As Randi Koppen argues, *Orlando* literalises 'the old metaphor of writing as the dress of thought'.²⁷⁹ Playfully charting the beginning of Orlando's life as a man in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the novel also shows him transformed, as he wakes up one day in the eighteenth century to find that he has become a woman. Woolf then presents Orlando's continued experience during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which she becomes not only a wife and mother, but a fully-realised poetic subject. Significantly, the novel ends on 'the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight': the moment of the novel's birth and the year that equal female suffrage was achieved.²⁸⁰ For Woolf, this is the current moment, the date at which her fluctuating poetic subject and his/her changing wardrobe has come to rest.²⁸¹ This is the period of the flapper costume and what Koppen calls 'modern clothes-consciousness'.²⁸² Indeed, Koppen's reading of Woolf and fashion positions both clothes and writing as modes which enact the dropping of the past as well as (re)production: '[m]odernity's break with the past [...] constitutes fashion not simply as the garment of the present, but as a generative principle which ensures an endless series of presents'.²⁸³

Fashion's ongoing return to the present – its repeated mass production and reproduction, as well as its functional materiality as its garments are both put on and taken off the body – makes it 'new'. Koppen's use of the adjective 'generative' is particularly resonant in terms

²⁷⁹ Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity*, p. 59.

²⁸⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) ed. by Rachel Bowlby (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 314. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

²⁸¹ Woolf herself has been subjected to attention regarding her fashion choices, both by her contemporaries and by critics. Rosamond Lehmann, for instance, commented that Woolf 'dressed like an aesthetic don': 'There was something about her that made one think of William Morris and the New Age and the Emancipation of Women'. Lisa Tickner, meanwhile, considers photographs of Woolf wearing her mother's dress. See *Recollections of Virginia Woolf by Her Contemporaries*, ed. by Joan R. Noble (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p. 62; Lisa Tickner, 'Mediating Generation: the Mother-Daughter Plot', *Art History*, 25.1 (2002), 23-46.

²⁸² As Lisa Cohen explores, Woolf identified her interest in fashion in terms of 'frock consciousness'. See Lisa Cohen, "'Frock Consciousness": Virginia Woolf, the Open Secret, and the Language of Fashion', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 3.2 (1999), 149-74.

²⁸³ Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity*, p. 6. It is also worth noting here the etymological link between 'texts' and 'textiles'. See 'text, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 31 July 2015]. Both involve a making and remaking of materials to form texts/fabric.

of poetic pregnancy, suggesting that clothes themselves are inherently creative and share a close relationship with the body. Similarly, if the dressed body holds particular meaning, so too does the discarded dress:

Garments, as we normally encounter them, do not exist as separate entities; they are seen on a body, brought into movement and animation by a living corporeality. A garment presents the body to the world as image and as thing, while performing its work on the body as imagined extension of self and as inorganic other. Empty clothes enter into yet another phenomenology, another imaginary register, which is no less an evocation of the interface even though the body is absent.²⁸⁴

This analysis suggests that dropped and discarded clothes evoke the absent body: they signify what they used to contain and are not complete objects in themselves, but 'empty'. Clothes are performative, both investing with animation and being animated by their wearer. They draw attention to the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, the poet and her 'room'.²⁸⁵ Woolf's androgynous poetic subject, meanwhile, wears and discards both masculine and feminine garments throughout *Orlando*, demonstrating their overt performativity.²⁸⁶

Costuming her hero(ine) preoccupies Woolf; Orlando cross-dresses, changes sex and clothes, and provides the subject of the narrator's ironic reflections about what makes a woman:

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. [...] it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. [...] The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face [...] The woman takes a sidelong glance at it [...]. That is the view of some philosophers and wise ones, but on the whole, we

²⁸⁴ Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity*, p. 2.

²⁸⁵ By implication, Aurora's unclasped girdle not only evokes her body and its inner spaces, but also its absence from representation. Hidden between the lines of text, Aurora's body is unclothed rather than naked.

²⁸⁶ Woolf based Orlando's character on her friend and lover, writer Vita Sackville-West. For further exploration of Orlando's androgyny, see Rachel Bowlby, 'Orlando's Vacillation', in *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 43-53.

incline to another. The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. (pp. 179-80)

Here Woolf playfully engages with the notion of the envelope and its appearance; both clothes and bodies have symbolic value and practical application.²⁸⁷ Clothes sometimes render their wearers ridiculous – for investing inanimate garments with subjectivity, so that *they wear their human wearers, is ridiculous* – but they also tell us something significant about constructions of femininity and masculinity. According to *Orlando*, putting on a restrictive garment makes the wearer restricted in both body and soul. The clothes ‘mould’ the subject, who is composed of a variety of corporeal parts (arm, breast, heart, brain and tongue). The differences, meanwhile, between men’s and women’s clothes are irrevocably linked with their embodied experience: a man’s costume enables him to ‘seize his sword’ while a woman’s hands are preoccupied with preserving an alluring modesty, keeping ‘the satins from slipping from her shoulders’. Though the pen and sword are traditionally antithetical, here the two are conflated. ‘Sword’, after all, has ‘word’ embedded within it, and it is the rapier that Aurora Leigh wields when she redrafts/aborts her book. The sword/pen are masculine accoutrements, whilst the satin wrap is as feminine as the hands that prevent it from slipping. The satin fabric – luxurious, glossy, expensive and impractical – acts as the material signifier of femininity. It is the substance that is made, rather than the subject that makes; it may be ripped and remodelled by the rapier or sword, and is constantly slipping. This perpetual slipping of the fabric exists in direct contrast with the body that prevents it from dropping. The female subject, thus positioned and positioning,

²⁸⁷ Anaïs Nin’s ‘Under a Glass Bell’ also describes the female body as an envelope: ‘[w]hen my children were born I didn’t suffer. The births were difficult. I refused to take gas. I was amused. I wanted to see myself bringing children into the world. I worked hard. I felt pain, of course, but I didn’t suffer like a human being. I felt pain detachedly, as if it were not happening to my body: I have no body. I have an external envelope which deludes others into thinking I am alive.’ This suggests that the female body, like the clothes that cover it, can be conceptualised as an envelope, an external covering to the subject’s inner ‘text’. See Anaïs Nin, ‘Under a Glass Bell’, in *Under a Glass Bell* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 34-41 (p. 36).

holds still, resembling in her stillness and posture the classical sculptures mentioned earlier. She must continue to hold still in order to prevent her shoulders from being suddenly, immodestly, exposed. The female gaze in this excerpt is similarly circumspect: the woman is the object of the gaze, rather than the subject gazing, and the man, by contrast, 'looks the world full in the face'.

Thus we learn that the person who wields the s/word is enabled by his clothes and the woman who holds her satins in place is prevented from examining the world fully. However, the second part of the excerpt undermines the importance afforded to garments. Woolf's narrator reveals that she has been ventriloquising 'some philosophers and wise ones', and ironically suggests that such opinions demonstrate a lack of understanding about the difference between the sexes. The sexes, 'happily', are profoundly and essentially different. Clothes, the narrator states, 'are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath'. Tempting though it is to attempt to pinpoint Woolf as essentialist here – as showing that it is not her clothes that prevent the female subject from writing, but her body – the sustained irony of her narrative suggests something else. Since they dress the subject, clothes are undeniably visible; their symbolic value, however, stems from what is hidden and invisible within the subject. This 'something' is intangible and difficult to identify – it is likely to be only part of a subject's identity:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (p. 181)

This suggests that identity is both gendered and fluid. Clothes are 'but a symbol', subject to changing interpretations, and their relationship with the subject they signify is arbitrary because all human beings shift from one sex to the other. Orlando's changing sex and costumes merely demonstrate for us the interiority of all subjects. The way that the sexes 'intermix' suggests that both femininity and masculinity are uncontainable or 'leaky' (to use

Shildrick's term).²⁸⁸ According to this statement, the way that clothes are put on and repeatedly dropped is often mistaken by those 'wise ones' as evidence for stable gendered categories, when in fact it mirrors this flux in individual identity. Rather than provide evidence of fully-realised masculine or feminine subjectivity, clothes suggest that the opposite is true: that all subjects are decentred and unstable.

The silhouette that is most in flux, of course, is the pregnant silhouette, and this is due to the expanding body beneath the clothes. As we have previously considered, the nineteenth-century silhouette attempts to disguise or make stable this state of flux through the use of corsetry and other foundation garments. When these garments are discarded, then the subject is thrown into (re)productive disorder; unclasping the girdle gives the female poet particular freedom in her writing. However, Woolf's emphasis on dress in her novel suggests that it is not simply her clothes that affect Orlando, but her shifting sex and the historical context in which she lives. In the nineteenth century, for instance, Orlando finds herself preoccupied with marriage and unable to write anything except dissatisfying 'insipid' verse, which flows involuntarily from her pen (p. 227). She also finds herself confronted with the possibility of childbirth, since the century appears to be a fertile one. In this exchange between Orlando and her housekeeper, Mrs Bartholomew, Woolf deals specifically with the pregnant silhouette:

'But is it true, m'lady,' the good woman asked, hugging herself, while the golden crucifix heaved on her bosom, 'that the Queen, bless her, is wearing a what d'you call it, a –' the good woman hesitated and blushed. 'A crinoline,' Orlando helped her out with it [...] Mrs Bartholomew nodded. The tears were already running down her cheeks, but as she wept she smiled. For it was pleasant to weep. Were they not all of them weak women? wearing crinolines the better to conceal the fact; the great fact; the only fact; but, nevertheless, the deplorable fact; which every modest woman did her best to deny until denial was impossible; the fact that she was about to bear a child? To bear fifteen or twenty children indeed, so that most of a modest woman's life

²⁸⁸ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). I discuss the female body's 'leakiness' in the Introduction.

was spent, after all, in denying what, on one day at least of every year, was made obvious. (p. 224)

Here Orlando articulates what her housekeeper cannot: the name of the foundation garment used to conceal pregnancy, the crinoline. The crinoline replaced layers of cumbersome petticoats underneath the fashionable dresses of the mid-late nineteenth century. Though resembling a cage, it actually allowed for greater freedom of movement for women's legs – and resulted in them taking up more room in public gatherings. Unlike the corset, which compressed the female body, the expansive silhouette of the crinoline made women highly visible. Though repeatedly satirised and caricatured in contemporary publications such as *Punch*, and prompting anxiety about flammable clothing, there is evidence to suggest that the crinoline was sometimes used to disguise pregnancy.²⁸⁹ It is this concealment that Woolf alludes to in *Orlando*. Mrs Bartholomew cannot conceal her embarrassment or her sorrow at the 'fact' of childbearing. Visible signs of the body in flux – blushing and weeping – are signs of both knowledge of pregnancy and pregnancy itself. Indeed, Mrs Bartholomew holds her body protectively, 'hugging herself'. She finds it impossible to articulate pregnancy and its coded referent, the word 'crinoline'. Woolf's repetition of the word 'fact' suggests a comic tension between the undeniable visibility of the pregnant body and the 'modest woman's' persistent denial of such evidence of sexual activity.

²⁸⁹ Julia Thomas discusses this in her chapter on 'Crinolineomania', a term used by *Punch* in 1856. See Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), pp. 77-103 (p. 88). Thomas points out that anxiety about what kind of monstrous body the crinoline might be concealing prompted persistent attempts to make it visible. In an 1856 illustration in *Punch* entitled 'Dress and the Lady', for instance, the figure of woman, 'like a biological specimen, is sliced in two, the left side of the image showing her outdoors and dressed in all her finery, a fringed parasol making her ornamentation complete, while the right side pictures the "lady" in her dressing room and stripped of all her flounces; all that remains is the crinoline cage, which dispels the illusion of her magical skirts'. See Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians*, p. 89.

Coded in this excerpt then, is the possibility that Mrs Bartholomew too is pregnant – or at least has experienced pregnancy. Orlando herself will soon experience pregnancy, though this is an invisible pregnancy; the reader does not know of it until she is ‘safely delivered of a son’ in Chapter Six (p. 282). This creates a tension between the (in)visible pregnant body and the poetic pregnancy. Orlando’s pregnancy takes place in the twentieth century, after the waistline has been dropped and the crinoline discarded. Her clothes, therefore, reinforce the invisibility of her maternal body, suggesting that the infertile silhouette of the flapper can be both misleading and camouflaging. Indeed, Orlando might conceivably have worn a girdle underneath her dress; maternity corsetry was still advertised during the early twentieth century (Fig. 5). The process of Orlando’s poetic pregnancy, meanwhile, has been prominent throughout Woolf’s text. The invisibility of Orlando’s pregnancy, therefore, is caught up with Woolf’s narrative; Orlando’s physical pregnancy takes second place to her poetic pregnancy.

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Fig. 5²⁹⁰

In terms of poetic pregnancy, therefore, dropping the waistline creates a certain amount of disassociation between the pregnant woman's body and the figure of the writer. The female writer or artist in fictional accounts has often 'dropped' or at least considered

²⁹⁰ 'Style, Health and Comfort From Infancy to Old Age: H. & W. Corset Waists' (1914), NYPL Digital Collection <<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org>> [accessed 3 August 2015].

dropping her baby.²⁹¹ Orlando's most visible pregnancy throughout the novel is a poetic one. We do not know that Orlando is expecting a son until the moment that she is 'delivered', but we do know that she spends centuries composing her long poem, 'The Oak Tree', the manuscript of which she carries in her underclothes, near her 'bosom'. She ends the novel by physically dropping this volume:

The ferny path led, with many turns and windings, higher and higher to the oak tree, which stood on the top. The tree had grown bigger, sturdier, and more knotted since she had known it, somewhere about the year 1588, but it was still in the prime of life. The little sharply frilled leaves were still fluttering thickly on its branches. Flinging herself on the ground, she felt the bones of the tree running out like ribs from a spine this way and that beneath her. She liked to think that she was riding the back of the world. She liked to attach herself to something hard. As she flung herself down a little square book bound in red cloth fell from the breast of her leather jacket – her poem 'The Oak Tree'. 'I should have brought a trowel,' she reflected. The earth was so shallow over the roots that it seemed doubtful that she could do as she meant and bury the book there. (pp. 308-09)

Here, towards the climax of Woolf's novel, Orlando returns to the source of her poetic inspiration – the oak tree that she first encountered in the sixteenth century, when she was a young man. Woolf emphasises the physicality of this undertaking: Orlando ascends the hill, flings herself on the ground, and 'attach[es] herself' to the tree. The landscape, itself representative of the pastoral idyll associated with poetic heritage, is likewise highly visceral.²⁹² The tree has grown larger and stronger and more complex; its 'knotted' appearance demonstrates both age and vitality, and its symbolic capacity to become entangled or entwined. It has 'bones' which feel like ribs 'running out' from a spine; though

²⁹¹ Cora Sandel's novel *Alberta and Freedom* (1931) for instance, has its eponymous protagonist conceive an illegitimate child whom she decides to keep, but her painter friend Liesel decides to abort her pregnancy because the father of her unborn child (a sculptor) cannot find room in his life for art and a baby – pregnancy and art are presented as initially incompatible choices. These themes are continued later in the century, when the heroines of Margaret Drabble's novels *The Millstone* (1965) and *The Waterfall* (1969) face similar dilemmas in which art, pregnancy and childrearing compete for attention.

²⁹² Pastoral romance, originating in the classical texts (by Theocritus and Virgil) written about rustic life and shepherds, is an established literary tradition. Notable examples from the Renaissance include Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590), Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579), Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,' (1599) and Sir Walter Raleigh's response, 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd' (1600).

static and grounded, the tree moves in Orlando's imagination. By straddling it, she feels as though she is 'riding the back of the world' and in so doing absorbs its hardness and sharpness, its solidity and its stillness. Indeed, Orlando's straddling of the tree resembles sexual intercourse, since her body and the body of the tree seem to move together. This notion is developed further in her subsequent reflections on writing poetry. Orlando realises that poetic conception is a secretive, private and bodily business that engages both the individual and the landscape:

Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? [...] What could have been more secret, she thought, more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods, and the farms and the brown horses standing at the gate, neck to neck, and the smithy and the kitchen and the fields, so laboriously bearing wheat, turnips, grass, and the garden blowing irises and fritillaries? (p. 310)

Orlando's 'stammering answer' to the voice of poetry – the Muse, perhaps – has produced an imperfect poem. She has answered the fertility of this pastoral landscape, described in language that evokes childbearing ('laboriously bearing') with a poem dedicated to a single oak tree within it. With its 'crooning song', fruitful harvest and brown horses, standing 'neck to neck', this landscape is both physical and maternal. It has taken Orlando until 1928 to realise this fact, and her awakening at this moment – an epiphany or 'moment of being' causes the book to fall from the breast of her jacket. At the climax, Orlando drops her book. She *mis-carries* her manuscript.

The miscarried manuscript of 'The Oak Tree' is subjected to a rather anti-climactic fate. Orlando considers burying it beneath the tree's roots – even rehearsing her parting words to the manuscript as though she were at a funeral – but the shallowness of the earth would render such burial futile. Her final 'fling' with the tree, the object upon which her poem is based, gives Orlando mental clarity; she decides that the reality of burying her book beneath its roots does not match the idea, in much the same way as the physical presence

of the tree is something distinct from both her poem and the accolades which that poem has been granted. Her dropping of the book is therefore symbolic, demonstrating the moment at which Orlando becomes a fully-realised poetic subject. This poetic miscarriage is enabling, a productive loss that the artist leaves 'unburied' where it falls:

So she let her book lie unburied and dishevelled on the ground, and watched the vast view, varied like an ocean floor this evening with the sun lightening it and the shadows darkening it. (p. 310)

Orlando's gaze shifts from her exposed book, which lies 'dishevelled' as though it were a garment she had undone and stepped out of, to the world around her. The artistic gaze is not simply introverted: it positions the individual poetic subject in relation to her surroundings. Her 'room' has been completely opened up into a vast landscape that takes on an otherworldly quality, neither fully light nor dark, land nor water, feminine nor masculine. It is a space that is both liminal and all-encompassing. It constitutes both loss and gain; for Orlando, dropping the book/baby is the epiphanic moment.

The potential for creative epiphany demonstrated by Orlando's mis-carrying contrasts with subsequent interwar abortion narratives. Writers such as Anaïs Nin, Olive Schreiner and Jean Rhys present abortion as a legitimate choice for women, albeit one that is fraught with anxiety and danger. Women in these texts do not simply miscarry: they induce their miscarriages. Their abortions have a complicated and often destructive impact, and are undertaken due to various reasons, including illegitimacy, lack of financial security and the desire for freedom.²⁹³ This chapter next explores what happens when the baby is

²⁹³ Anaïs Nin's short stories 'The Mouse' and 'Birth' both deal with abortion. In 'The Mouse', a servant girl has an abortion through fear. When she contracts an infection, the narrator takes her to a hospital but they refuse to admit her. In 'Birth', meanwhile, the protagonist delivers a stillborn child at six months. This can be read as a late abortion, particularly with light to Nin's life (she had a late abortion). See 'The Mouse' and 'Birth', in *Under a Glass Bell* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 24-32, pp. 102-07. Helen Bradford argues that Olive Schreiner's fiction (especially *The Story of an African Farm* and *Undine*) displays acute awareness of abortion; Jean Rhys's novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, climaxes with an abortion. See Helen Bradford, 'Olive Schreiner's Hidden Agony: Fact, Fiction and Teenage Abortion', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21.4 (1995), 623-41; Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000).

deliberately dropped in one such interwar text, Rosamond Lehmann's 1936 novel, *The Weather in the Streets*. Like Woolf, Lehmann's version of the abortion narrative casts a writer as the figure of the modern woman, whose body and dress emphasise her transgressive modernity. Lehmann's writer fails consistently to produce a finished piece of writing, and this is linked with her fluctuating flapper silhouette. Indeed, Lehmann's presentation of Olivia Curtis complicates our conception of the flapper body as an infertile, modern and 'concave' body. Following an affair with her old friend, the married Rollo Spencer, Olivia becomes pregnant. This pregnancy further draws attention to what the novel has been encouraging the reader to do from the onset – examine Olivia's figure. However, unlike Orlando, Olivia aborts rather than mis-carries her baby.

The Wrong Clothes: 'modern concavity' and Abortion in *The Weather in the Streets*

Like Orlando, Olivia's identity fluctuates and is coded in a variety of ways. She is a single woman, a spinster aunt, an estranged wife and 'the Other Woman'.²⁹⁴ She is a photographer's assistant, a member of the middle class and part of the bohemian London set of artists and writers depicted in the novel. Most importantly in terms of this analysis, Olivia's dropped waistline and thin body identify her with the figure of the flapper. Indeed, the novel pays obsessively detailed attention both to her body and to her clothes, which often mark her out as a misfit. Continuously described in terms of her weight, youth and the dresses and undergarments she wears, Olivia feels much of the time as though she does not fit into the society that she inhabits: 'my clothes were wrong' (p. 10). Olivia makes this statement early on in the novel, but this feeling of not fitting in, of wearing the 'wrong' clothes, persists throughout, both in terms of misshapeness and morals. The adjective

²⁹⁴ Rosamond Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936; Virago: London, 2013), p. 325. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

‘wrong’ connotes a treacherously shifting appearance and direction, ‘[h]aving a crooked or curved course, form, or direction; twisted or bent in shape or contour; wry.’²⁹⁵ The novel’s formal construction reflects this: Olivia’s narrative, which fluctuates between the first person and free indirect discourse, emphasises the fluidity of the individual female subject and the break from previously established narrative conventions. This narrative experimentation compounds the threat of the flapper, the ‘loose’ woman who is dangerously mobile and ‘crooked’. Embodied in Olivia, she epitomises the conflict between nineteenth-century constructions of femininity and early twentieth-century modernity, both in terms of her dress, her illegitimate pregnancy and Lehmann’s use of a transgressive, modern narrative technique in the depiction of her subjectivity.

Olivia’s clothes, and the body that inhabits them, fluctuate dangerously, and this is manifested in her weight loss. Her fashionable thinness, and the trouble that this causes, is a point that Lehmann’s novel reiterates throughout. When Rollo and Olivia meet on the train at the beginning of the novel, Olivia is subjected to his overtly male gaze. Lehmann’s narrative emphasises his identification of Olivia’s body as a thin body, and Olivia’s recognition of this:

He looked her over with a warm blue eye, and she saw an image of herself in his mind – fined down almost to the bone, thin through the hips and shoulders, with thin well-shaped cream-coloured hands, with a face of pronounced planes, slightly crooked, and a pale smoothly-hollowed cheek, and a long full mouth going to points, made vermillion. No hat, hair dark brown, silky, curling up at the ends. Safely dressed in these tweeds. Not uninteresting: even perhaps...? ‘All those charming plump girls I used to know,’ he said, ‘they’ve all dwindled shockingly.’ (p. 9)

Rollo’s ‘warm blue eye’ provides Olivia with a mirror. She sees herself as refined to thinness, rendered as though she were a sculpture, with clearly defined angular features and ‘well-shaped’ hands. Indeed, the sculptured feminine body – motionless, idealised and

²⁹⁵ See ‘wrong, adj.’, in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 31 July 2015].

moulded by male hands – is a notion that the novel explores throughout. The aural echo of ‘fine’ and ‘file’ compounds this sense that the female subject is shaped into thinness, as does the definition of the verb phrase ‘fine down’ (‘to make gradually finer; to thin off, whittle away or down’).²⁹⁶ This also suggests that Olivia’s body has been purified and thus made aesthetically attractive.²⁹⁷ The ‘pure’ body is the pre-maternal, pseudo-virginal body, and this is Rollo’s image of Olivia. However, this description is also subverted by Lehmann’s narrative technique. Her free indirect discourse, focalised through Olivia’s subjectivity, places her in control of this image of herself. Rollo’s eye may be the mirror, but the female subject’s image within it is continually shifting. Olivia’s narrative enacts what Woolf describes as the surreptitious, ‘sidelong glance’ of women (*Orlando*, p. 180). This glance is a resistant one, a look that draws attention to the very act of looking and therefore subverts dominant male ways of constructing the female subject as a feminine object. It also calls into question the notion of the idealised feminine body as a statue, since Olivia’s body, though fixed in Rollo’s ‘mirror’, is similarly resistant to such petrification.

Though smooth and sculptural, Olivia’s ‘pronounced’ features are conspicuously not symmetrical. Her face is ‘slightly crooked’ and painted; her mouth, unlike her silhouette, is ‘full’, and seems about to speak rather than remain silent; her hands are similarly capable of sculpting themselves, and her hair, that feature traditionally associated with female sexuality, is uncovered and curling. Though she is dressed ‘safely’ in tweeds (‘safely’ perhaps because of their practicality, or unattractiveness) these clothes are also enabling. Olivia is dressed for a journey; her clothes allow her to move between urban and rural landscapes, and between the associated social classes that inhabit these landscapes. When Rollo attempts to categorise Olivia as one of ‘those charming plump girls I used to know’ he reveals himself to

²⁹⁶ See ‘fine, v.’, in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 31 July 2015].

²⁹⁷ ‘To make fine or pure; to purify from extraneous or impure matter; to clarify, refine.’ See ‘fine, v.’, in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 31 July 2015].

be both fascinated and surprised by the difference between the Edwardian feminine figure (corseted, narrow-waisted, but full-busted) and the modern silhouette. Indeed, Lehmann's text differentiates between the modern silhouette and its Edwardian and Victorian predecessors by repeatedly dwelling on the memories of its male, upper-class characters. This sets up a tension between the nostalgic past remembered by Rollo and others, and the modern present, occupied by Olivia's resistant silhouette. The popular late nineteenth-century American figure of the 'Gibson Girl', for instance, was statuesque in proportions, taking her cultural cues from both the athletic, bicycling 'New Woman', and the voluptuous hips and bust of the Victorian feminine silhouette.²⁹⁸ Composed and confident, yet modestly arrayed, the image of the Gibson Girl implicitly informs Rollo's look at Olivia.²⁹⁹ While the male gaze is preoccupied with Olivia's modern body, it ghosts her silhouette with the outline of a distinctly nineteenth-century spectre of femininity. Another encounter between Olivia and a male representative of the upper class, Sir Ronald, reveals Olivia's figure not only to be 'crooked' and 'wrong' but potentially 'degenerate', 'unalluring' and 'disquieting':

'I love puddings,' she said, in the style of pretty confession. 'In fact, I love food altogether.'

'Excellent! So do I. I like to hear a lady admitting to a healthy appetite. From what I gavver, it's rare in vese degenerate days.' His eyes travelled mildly over her, and his thought was plain: Not that these curves are as they should be...Tastes formed in the Edwardian heyday, when Aunt Blanche had, presumably, dazzled him with her upholstery, revolted from modern concavity. Ah, Blanche and Millicent Venables, notable pair of sisters, graceful, witty, majestic! ...And all the others...Alas! A mould discarded. These contemporary silhouettes, not only unalluring but disquieting, like so many other symptoms in the sexes nowadays... (p. 76)

²⁹⁸ The Gibson Girl, named after the pen and ink illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson, was a popular American image of the New Woman. Presented both as an active participant in the world, and a figure of attractive femininity, the Gibson Girl demonstrates the tension between the transgression and conventionality inherent in women's negotiations of feminine roles. Angelika Köhler, exploring illustrations of the Gibson Girl in *Life* magazine, argues that such visual representations came to represent a backlash against the possibility of gender role change. See Köhler, 'Charged with Ambiguity', pp. 174-75.

²⁹⁹ Ironically, one of Gibson's images shows four Gibson Girls examining a very small man with a magnifying glass. See *The Weaker Sex. II* [pen and ink over graphite underdrawing]. Cabinet of American illustration, Library of Congress (1903). First published in *Collier's Weekly*, 31.12-13 (4 July 1903). <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010716170/>> [accessed 1 August 2015].

Here Olivia's body is again subjected to scrutiny. Most disquietingly for Sir Ronald, Olivia embodies and is, indeed, deemed symptomatic of 'modern concavity'. The notion of the concave feminine body is highly significant for this reading of the text. It has an outline which curves inward rather than outwards; it follows the bone structure.³⁰⁰ Unlike Aunt Blanche's 'upholstery', an innuendo which identifies her body with the room that she inhabits, Olivia's contemporary silhouette suggests discomfort. Clearly, Sir Ronald is both physically and aesthetically uncomfortable at the thought of occupying her 'room'.³⁰¹

Olivia's thinness means that her ribs and pelvis are pronounced, and her abdomen is concave rather than convex – unlike the pregnant silhouette. However, a concave body is also a hollow body, and it follows that such a body is both empty and waiting to be filled. This reflects the tension identified previously between the flapper's dangerous infertility and her potential for spreading her legs and reproducing illegitimately. Despite its apparent emptiness, Olivia's concave body contains the potential for expansion. Indeed, the notion of appetite is parodied in this excerpt through innuendo. Olivia assures Sir Ronald that she loves 'puddings' and food, anticipating his thoughts on her appearance, 'in the style of a pretty confession'. Unlike sexual appetite, an appetite for dessert is a socially acceptable female appetite, though it nevertheless calls for restraint. Olivia's apparent love for pudding does indeed flout the rules, and requires her to confess prettily in order to maintain the appearance of propriety; excess (as embodied by a rich and sugary dessert) would be

³⁰⁰ Ironically, this aligns the flapper body with the 'straps, buckles, laces and bones' of the corset (as discussed earlier). Olivia's thinness effectively corsets the abdomen without the need for extra underwear.

³⁰¹ The interior design of the period generally furnished rooms in a simpler style than what had gone before, utilising clean lines, geometrical patterns and experimental designs. However, Bridget Elliot argues that women designers also experimented with hybridised modern and art deco styles, demonstrating that conceptualising interwar interior design is not straightforward. See Bridget Elliot, 'Art Deco Hybridity, Interior Design, and Sexuality between the Wars: Two Double Acts: Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher/ Eyre de Lanux and Evelyn Wyld', in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 109-29.

deemed as unacceptable as self-starvation. Lehmann's subsequent pun on 'taste' suggests that Olivia has offered herself up for sexual and social appraisal at this event, and Sir Ronald obliges through his transparent thoughts on the ideal 'mould' of womanhood – one that has been discarded by flappers such as Olivia. Lehmann's narrative technique allows Olivia access to Sir Ronald's thoughts, breaching his subjectivity and rendering fluid her own. The free indirect discourse following the colon ('his thought was plain') draws attention to Olivia's self-conscious shaping of Sir Ronald's narrative. The rest of the excerpt – Sir Ronald's impressions of Olivia, modernity and memories of the Edwardian heyday of his youth – are all focalised through Olivia. The third-person narrative technique and Sir Ronald's dialogue have been discarded just like the nineteenth-century feminine silhouette or 'mould'. The notion of moulding returns us to the statue metaphor; rather than be moulded, Olivia has been 'fined down' and her hands are a sculptor's. Contrasted with Aunt Blanche and Millicent's majestic and generous frames, Olivia's body is, to Sir Ronald's eyes, at least, undesirable – and 'not only unalluring but *disquieting*' (emphasis added). She has the 'wrong' clothes and the 'wrong' body, and is apt to move in the 'wrong' direction, and to do so audibly.

The uncertainty surrounding Olivia's modern feminine silhouette reflects more widespread anxiety about her ability to conceive. Seen through Sir Ronald's eyes, it is one 'symptom' among many of a more general problem with femininity that categorises the modern age. This medical noun, along with the characterisation of the early twentieth century as 'degenerate', suggests the prevalence of eugenicist discourse during this period when considering female bodies in relation to their reproductive capacity.³⁰² Indeed, Lehmann's language and the novel's concern with the

³⁰² Clare Hanson discusses eugenicism at length in her study, pointing out that its discourse was so prevalent that even early feminists used it. Hanson comments that while eugenicists argued that women should not engage in pursuits incompatible with motherhood (such as intellectual study, athleticism and public life), 'in

thinness and 'modern concavity' of Olivia's body corresponds with the contemporary interest in a eugenicist branch of obstetrical medicine known as pelvimetry, and corresponding anxieties surrounding the size and shape of women's pelvises. Practitioners of pelvimetry sought to learn all they could about the anatomy and possible malformations of the female pelvis with the aim of facilitating safer, shorter labours.³⁰³

Originating in the nineteenth-century (out of craniotomy and other sub-specialities of Victorian science), pelvimetry was concerned with measuring women's pelvises, thus making an analogy between the structures of the female body and mechanical structures. The basic design of a pelvimeter involved a set of callipers coupled with rulers, though Joanna Grant points out that the first 'pelvimeters' were actually the hands of medical men.³⁰⁴ According to Grant, this represented male fantasies of standardisation and rationalisation of supposedly primitive female bodies.³⁰⁵ Indeed, pelvimetry's relationship with pregnancy is fraught. Grant's analysis links the language of the pelvimetrical 'machine' to that of food, suggesting the Gothic conflation of the female body with mechanical consumption: '[i]n these manuals, we see the organic, physical body of the woman being absorbed into the workings of a machine, being eaten, as it were, by a new technology that can strip away her physicality and reveal that of the unborn child'.³⁰⁶ This illuminates the anxiety about food

practice there were many ways in which eugenic thought could be used to support, or at least complement, feminist demands' (p. 86). Indeed, Hanson shows how both Marie Stopes' books, *Married Love* and *Wise Parenthood*, and Sylvia Pankhurst's account of her 'eugenic baby', appearing in *The News of the World* in 1928, demonstrate engagement with, and acceptance of, some eugenicist thought surrounding maternity. See Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 84-87, pp. 114-16.

³⁰³ Joanna Grant, "'Those Parts Peculiar to Her Organization': Some Observations on the History of Pelvimetry, a Nearly Forgotten Obstetric Sub-Speciality', in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge, pp. 135-47 (p. 136).

³⁰⁴ Grant, "'Those Parts Peculiar to Her Organization': Some Observations on the History of Pelvimetry', p. 139.

³⁰⁵ Grant, "'Those Parts Peculiar to Her Organization': Some Observations on the History of Pelvimetry', p. 137.

³⁰⁶ Grant, "'Those Parts Peculiar to Her Organization': Some Observations on the History of Pelvimetry', p. 145.

demonstrated in Lehmann's text. By facing Sir Ronald's scrutiny (which both laments her thinness and ascribes this to modern 'degeneration') Olivia faces the male management of female bodies which, on one hand, pathologises them as requiring further feeding, and on the other hand, penetratively 'strips' them. Olivia's concavity, therefore, demonstrates the uneasy position of the feminine body in light of such medical discourse.

Olivia participates to a certain extent in her own pathologisation. When she realises that she is pregnant, her narrative focuses on the bodily experience of pregnancy, an experience that includes persistent morning sickness. Fully aware that her situation makes her an unsuitable potential mother according to conservative social mores, Olivia keeps her pregnancy secret. Her subsequent account reveals that she considers her pregnancy both a 'fall', demonstrating an abandonment of social mores that govern 'proper' behaviour, and as constituting a loss of control over her female body and its fashionably feminine, flapper waistline:

She was no longer so thin: it must be growing, getting enough nourishment. Her breasts hurt. She fancied her figure changing perceptibly. When do one's clothes begin to get too tight? ...She remembered Kate unfamiliar and touching in a grey maternity frock with white ruffles. Such dignities will not be for me. To be rid, to be rid, to be rid of this...To be not sick...I should be hanging on doors, lifting wardrobes and pianos, trying to fall downstairs, doing everything I can...Instead, day after day, inert, she rested, strolled, sank down in chairs, crawled to the bathroom, fell into bed again: protecting herself against her own designs against Nature, lowering herself unresistingly to a vegetable standard: A maggoty, spoiling vegetable... (p. 258)

Pregnancy, as previously discussed, makes the waistline expand, causing the female body to transgress its boundaries and become obviously and disturbingly corporeal. Olivia's weight is beginning to increase and her breasts hurt. Her unborn child, designated here with the object third-person pronoun 'it', 'must be growing'. Its status and size – its viability – is uncertain, and its mother has a limited knowledge of its development. The anxiety about 'showing', about being identifiably pregnant, is pressing here. Corresponding with

Lehmann's emphasis on (the 'wrong') clothes throughout the novel, Olivia wonders about maternity wear. When should an expectant mother discard her ordinary clothes and put on maternity ones? She remembers her sister Kate in a frock reminiscent of domestic Edwardian femininity, doll-like in grey 'with white ruffles'. Maternity wear showcases the pregnant female body and, according to Olivia, affords it dignity. It also makes the wearer 'unfamiliar and touching' – someone who is uncanny, simultaneously recognisable and unrecognisable, and who has the ability both to be touched and to touch others, rather like the foetus in utero.³⁰⁷ The physicality of the pregnant body, then, is coupled with a sense of its abstract separation from sensual, physical life. Pristine and covered by the maternity dress, Kate's body is clean and proper. It arouses tenderness and sympathy in observers; it is costumed in a shift-like garment that simultaneously suggests a hospital gown and a doll.³⁰⁸ Kate's pregnant body is a spectral body that is both present and absent from representation. We cannot see her body beneath the grey and white shift, and that renders it ghostly.

However, as an illegitimate mother, Olivia is excluded from such 'dignities'. Her body is becoming increasingly visible with pregnancy. Maternity wear is equally 'wrong' for her; not only she is inert and vegetative, but corruptive and corrupting, a 'maggoty, spoiling vegetable'. This suggests that Olivia is the improper abject double to her uncanny sister.³⁰⁹ If Kate represents the proper (if uncannily spectral) figure of maternity, then Olivia's pregnant body throws the feminine figure into crisis, not least because its 'maggoty', illegitimate and expanding boundaries threaten contamination. This contrasts with the clean sculptural lines of Olivia's pre-pregnant body which, though 'wrong', were self-contained and concave. Her pregnancy, however, transforms her into a grotesque and deathly body.

³⁰⁷ In Chapter III (Ultrasound) I discuss the uncanniness of the maternal body and foetus in ultrasound scans.

³⁰⁸ Nicola, Rollo's wife, is also described throughout the novel as doll-like, 'a wax figure immune in a show case' (p. 150). 'Proper', legitimate maternity/femininity is thus coded as fragile, pristine, and miniature.

³⁰⁹ This echoes Barrett Browning's image of women being 'sepulchred alive', as explored earlier. I discuss the abject female body further in Chapter IV (Labour).

Olivia participates 'unresistingly' in this bodily state. Indeed, Lehmann's cluster of verbs ('rested', 'strolled', 'sank', 'crawled', 'fell') suggests simultaneous passive inertia and activity. Olivia's narrative voice fluctuates between the third person and the first person here, as she attempts to differentiate between her subjectivity and her lived experience of pregnancy. The two seem to be fundamentally at odds: pregnancy, transforming and warping the flapper silhouette from its modern concavity to an increasingly convex abdomen, affects the subject's ability to move through her rooms as well as her language. For instance, Lehmann's repetition of the infinitive verb 'to be' ('to be rid' and 'to be not sick') acts as the narrative transition between the third-person voice and the first-person, and emphasises the pregnant subject's struggle to comprehend her own positioning.

Indeed, Lehmann's tone is poetic; her repetition of verb phrases suggests a gradual building up or increase of the subject's experience *with* her body. Pregnancy both increases Olivia's waistline and her sense of being. She feels as though she should be taking steps to miscarry (lifting heavy weights and falling down stairs) but her body will not allow it. The personified Nature keeps Olivia unresistingly and abjectly pregnant, and the third-person narrative reasserts itself to demonstrate her passivity. No longer a thin flapper, Olivia is becoming a grotesquely expanding one, a maternal body that cannot be dressed in maternity clothes but can only grow in the corruptive dark, like a vegetable. Suddenly sick, in pain, immobilised and made passive, Olivia struggles to articulate and split her subjectivity between her ailing pregnant body and her modern mind, but finds that the two are irrevocably linked.

If part of the flapper's threat is that she stands in for the absent male body following the Great War, then her ability to part her legs and produce illegitimate heirs that 'corrupt' the established patriarchal lineage compounds this threat. In this post-war society, there are not enough men to marry; the flapper thus represents a surplus femininity that is not quite

straightforwardly feminine. Olivia's thin, flapper body is both nubile and dangerously mobile. Olivia's abortion, therefore, can be read as simultaneously transgressive and conservative: it is both the moment at which she asserts her independence and reclaims her waistline from the expansion and subsequent 'looseness' of pregnancy by refusing to become a maternal subject, and the moment at which her body is brought back to its less threatening, pre-pregnant state. Her abortion is potentially conservative as it reasserts her body's positioning as pseudo-virgin and infertile; she will not produce the illegitimate child that would draw attention to the flawed morals of an upper-class patriarchal representative such as Rollo.

However, Olivia's choice is also conflicted; she experiences emotional and physical suffering following her decision to abort her baby. This reflects the prevalence of abortion debates during this period, which had become increasingly audible as young unmarried women were more sexually active than their nineteenth-century predecessors. The importance of accessing reliable contraception was foregrounded by campaigners such as Marie Stopes.³¹⁰ Abortion, meanwhile, was a contested topic in political and legal discourses, with on one hand, the documented prosecution of illegal abortionists, and on the other, feminist campaigns to change abortion legislation.³¹¹ From the late nineteenth century onwards, abortion's legal status was in turn criminalised, reformed and regulated. Made specifically illegal in the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, it was subsequently permitted in the 1929 Infant Life Preservation Act, provided that the life of the mother was at risk. Women's organisations' campaigns for amendment to this law in the 1930s

³¹⁰ Hanson notes that '[t]he dissemination of contraceptive information in the late nineteenth century probably had more impact on the birth rate than Marie Stopes' work in the 1920s. However, the period between 1880 and 1920 coincided with the first wave of feminism, and it was women's desire for greater independence which was the second major factor leading to a rapid reduction in family size.' See Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, p. 7.

³¹¹ See Emma L. Jones, 'Representations of Illegal Abortionists in England, 1900-1967', and Lesley Hoggart and Ross Gill, 'Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control and Abortion Rights in Britain', *Feminism and Psychology*, 14.3 (2004), 459-460.

(spearheaded by Stella Browne, among others) resulted in the formation of the Abortion Law Reform Association in 1936, the same year that *The Weather in the Streets* was published.³¹² As stated previously, women's changing silhouette is caught up with such political debates and negotiations; dropping the waistline has a thematic and associative link with deliberately 'dropping' a pregnancy.³¹³ Olivia's unplanned and illegitimate pregnancy results in two attempts at abortion: Olivia at first takes over-the-counter abortifacients, and then (following the failure of this method to induce miscarriage) has an abortion, performed illicitly by a doctor. This moment occurs at the structural and thematic centre of the novel, and marks a shift in Olivia's development.

The sections in which Olivia procures an abortion are very different in tone from the rest of Lehmann's novel. These episodes (Chapters V-VIII) are brief, and create the sense of deliberate constriction – as though Olivia were being forced back into her slim-fitting clothes, garments that no longer fit. The resulting formal shift is characterised by restriction and the retreat of Olivia's subjectivity into a barely-there, near invisible, free indirect discourse. Indeed, Lehmann's narrative is now predominantly in the third-person voice. The abortionist, Mr Tredeaven, becomes the dominant subject in this episode, and he is characterised by his cold assessment of the female form:

Conducting her to the door he paused by the mantelpiece and said: 'Care for pretty things?'

'Yes.'...Oh, rather.

'I thought you did. What do you think of these?' He indicated a couple of bronzes – female figures, semi-nude, with drapery, holding torches aloft. 'I picked them up the other day. Nice, aren't they? Empire...'

'Lovely.' She looked at them. Meaningless, expensive, repulsive objects, 'It's not a period I know much about.'

³¹² It was not until the 1967 Abortion Act that abortion was made legal in the UK (though not Ireland), provided that two registered medical practitioners agreed that the procedure was necessary.

³¹³ Barbara Johnson's article shows that this persists in twentieth-century women's poetry. Lucille Clifton, for instance, in 'The Lost Baby Poem' includes the line 'I dropped your almost body down', while Adrienne Rich's 'To a Poet' details the rivalry between poems and children, aborting the poem. See Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', p. 36.

‘I like to pick up a piece here and there when it takes my fancy.’ He fingered them with his notable white hands.
 Whose envelope paid for those? What’ll he buy with the next one?
 ‘I don’t go in for being a connoisseur,’ he said, relinquishing them, opening the door. (p. 276)

There is a significant formal shift here that calls into question what Bronfen calls the ‘sanctioned feminine form of authorship’ for women, childbearing.³¹⁴ It shows that pregnancy is not always ‘sanctioned’ by society; indeed, Olivia’s illegitimate pregnancy (as opposed to her sister Kate’s, for instance) is conspicuously unsanctioned and requires a similarly illicit means of ending it. It is an unproductive, unfeminine authorship, and Lehmann’s writing style correspondingly creates a sense of infertility for her protagonist. This excerpt occurs just after Mr Tredeaven and Olivia have arranged an appointment for the abortion and negotiated its price. Throughout, Lehmann emphasises Tredeaven’s ‘notable white hands’, those hands that will carry out the abortion and thus are concerned with unmaking (un)sanctioned feminine forms of authorship. Like Olivia’s hands, Tredeaven’s are capable, shapely and pale. However, unlike Olivia’s, Tredeaven’s hands (like his other features) are both unattractive and grotesquely corporeal. He has ‘strong, plump, manipulative fingers with cushiony tips’ (p. 275). His body is the polar opposite of Olivia’s flapper body: strong and fleshy, soft and manipulative. Indeed, Tredeaven’s ‘cushiony tips’ are abject; they suggest something inhuman, disturbing and unctuous.³¹⁵ These are the hands which examine Olivia and administer the abortion, and we are reminded of the fact that the first gynaecological tools – the first pelvimeters – were male hands.³¹⁶ Tredeaven handles not only female bodies, moreover, but representations of them. His miniature

³¹⁴ Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, p. 404.

³¹⁵ This links the abject hands of the abortionist with Olivia’s abject pregnant body (as discussed earlier), suggesting that both pregnancy itself and the prospect of its abortion by the medical man threaten the subject.

³¹⁶ This also reminds us of the nineteenth-century ‘touch’, the medical examination of pregnant women carried out under clothing, with the gaze averted. I explore the notion of touching the pregnant body - and translating its touch - in Chapter III (Ultrasound).

bronze figures from the nineteenth century ('Empire') are modelled on the classical female form. Tredeaven 'fingers' these objects, revelling in his ownership of them, which is funded (as Olivia asks herself) through his illegal abortion clinic. Each one therefore represents a female patient – a woman such as Olivia.³¹⁷

Tredeaven's stewardship of these feminine forms similarly reduces Olivia to a vessel for his fantasies. He wrongly assumes that she will appreciate his collection of ornaments which he showcases, repeatedly touching them and offering them up for her appraisal, before eventually (and we sense, reluctantly) 'relinquishing them'. Though he claims he is no connoisseur, Lehmann's narrative technique – in the third person interspersed with Olivia's internal free indirect discourse – undercuts this. We get the sense that Tredeaven 'fingers' these feminine objects precisely because he considers himself an expert critical judge of the female form. The female figures he collects are those preoccupied with holding their costume, carrying torches aloft and keeping the satins slipping from their shoulders like Woolf's archetypal women in *Orlando* (p. 92). Like the female patient upon the abortionist's table, they are 'semi-nude, with drapery'. Though Olivia publicly acquiesces to Tredeaven's aestheticism, she privately categorises the statues as '[m]eaningless, expensive, repulsive objects'. She too links the statues with the women they represent, but she views their classic nineteenth-century version of femininity as 'meaningless' in relation to the very modern exchanges taking place within the abortion clinic. One of these exchanges is, of course, the acquisition of these objects, but Olivia's private opinion of them undermines Tredeaven's touch. Her reading of them as objects that misrepresent what they supposedly signify reframes the feminine form for the reader as something far more nebulous and subject to change and transformation than fixed, static objects. The reproductive female

³¹⁷ Or Etty, Olivia's friend whose 'narrow miniature body, that, too, [was] trapped, subjected to the common risks and consequences of female humanity' (p. 226).

body destabilises and exceeds its boundaries. The silent, partially disrobed female patient upon the abortionist's table is conspicuously not an object of aesthetic beauty. She is an individual, human subject, whose experience is both unique and in common with other female subjects (such as Etty) who have also undergone illicit abortions.

Indeed, Olivia's body is described throughout the novel in terms that suggest not only an affinity with sculpture but the ability (or lack thereof) to sculpt oneself in response to masculine views of the figure of woman. Olivia's agency fluctuates, suggesting a dislocation of sorts, a 'disquieting' slipping between subject and object. Sometimes her dissent is internal, shown through Lehmann's narrative technique (in Tredeaven's clinic, for instance) and sometimes it is shown through her flapper silhouette (as in the examples discussed previously). Olivia is also shown as passively acquiescent. Following the first consummation of their love affair, Rollo comments: "'You were like a statue. I thought I'd never be able to bring you to life'" (p. 148). Here Lehmann alludes to the classical myth of Pygmalion, who falls in love with a statue that he has made himself, and then has that statue brought to life by Aphrodite.³¹⁸ Rollo does, of course, cause Olivia's body to carry life; he awakens in her both sexual desire and latent maternity, and in this particular episode she is presented as culpable in this identification of herself as a Galatea, Pygmalion's sculpture. However, as Lehmann shows throughout the novel, Olivia is not simply an inanimate object brought to life to fulfil Rollo's sexual fantasy of creation and subjugation. She is, as discussed previously, more than capable of sculpting herself. Olivia's body, though examined and made into such an object by Rollo and Tredeaven, nevertheless reasserts its 'wrong' direction and its 'modern concavity'. This is where both her pregnancy and the act of abortion itself sits: located somewhere between resistance and subjugation, her pregnancy demonstrates the

³¹⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A.D. Melville, with an intro and notes by E.J. Kenney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), X. 222-314, pp. 232-34.

rebelliousness of the reproductive female body, and the abortion renders it simultaneously inanimate and active. It is the abortion that precludes the end of the affair with Rollo. Ironically, it signifies both a death and a coming to life for Olivia; it renders her body inanimate in Tredeaven's 'notable hands' but it also brings subsequent animation and active resistance to the ways of modelling femininity that those hands undertake.

The abortion itself is not represented; like Aurora's undressed body, it occurs between the margins of text. However, losing a pregnancy – deliberately dropping a baby – is a process rather than a single event. Olivia's mis-carrying female body bleeds until she is no longer pregnant. It is a gradual process, just like the coming to life of Pygmalion's statue. It conspicuously does not begin and end with the visit to Tredeaven. Indeed, Olivia's induced miscarriage happens at home, in the presence of her estranged husband, Ivor:

'Olivia!
She heard herself say clearly:
'I'm having a miscarriage.'
'Shall I get a doctor?'
'Yes...Quick.'
He went hurtling down the stairs. She cried out on a tag-end of breath:
'Don't be long!'
He wouldn't have heard. (p. 286)

Here Lehmann uses the third-person narrative voice in order to convey Olivia's feeling of dislocation and distance from her miscarrying body. She does not openly acknowledge her abortion; instead, she explains that she is 'having a miscarriage'. This makes Ivor run for medical aid not only in a motion reminiscent of Olivia's earlier musings about throwing herself down the stairs to induce miscarriage, but in a manner one would expect of a father rushing to get help for a woman in labour. Significantly, it is not Rollo who looks after Olivia here, but Ivor, suggesting that there is a temporary reassertion of social mores and married life, albeit brief and ironic. Ivor is not the father of Olivia's child, yet he assumes the role of caring husband and father

for this somewhat performative scene. Olivia's clear speech and 'tag-end of breath' suggests simultaneous clarity and physical effort. She has comprehended her own position and asserted her experience of abortion as something not wholly chosen by her, as something that societal rules have caused her to carry out. Ivor's apparent deafness to her final urgent entreaty heightens the irony of this moment. Olivia is effectively silenced; she slips into unconsciousness and when she wakes up she has miscarried her pregnancy.

Nicola's Room: Lehmann's Hidden Mother

I began this chapter by asking about the room afforded to women writers and their bodies in the spaces that they occupy. Aurora Leigh's assertion that women 'want more room' can be linked closely with her clothes, particularly the way that corsets confine and shape her reproductive body. By the early twentieth century, the corset had been remodelled and the female silhouette had been transformed into the dropped waist of the flapper, a figure whose refashioning of what it means to be feminine was both freeing and problematic. Lehmann's abortion narrative shows us a protagonist who deliberately drops her waistline and her baby in response to dominant constructions of femininity that prohibit the unmarried flapper from becoming a mother, a decision that reinforces such constructions even as it questions them. The mobility afforded to Olivia through her costuming ultimately has physical limitations, however. Lehmann uses the motif of the room as well as 'the wrong clothes' to illustrate this. By having an illicit affair, Olivia must move surreptitiously between different kinds of rooms, rooms belonging to a variety of individuals and styled both in a markedly nineteenth-century and a modern fashion. Perhaps the most significant rooms that she inhabits are those belonging to Rollo's wife, Nicola:

The room was long and empty and simple with cool luminous colours like the insides of shells – the low, straight-lined, broad chairs and sofas covered in white

brocade, and the woodwork pinkish grey. It really was a good modern room. There was only one picture, a long, horizontal panel in the end wall, contemporary, though I can't be sure who did it – two seated monumental figures of women on the seashore playing on guitars, a group in the foreground lying with stretched listening limbs, the colours rather pale, blues, browns and greys. It surprised me, worried me rather. I liked it. (p. 176)

I opened the door of Nicola's bedroom, switched on a light, looked in...came out and shut the door again. Dust sheets over the quilt on the broad, low, silver-headed double bed, the mirror laid flat on the dressing-table under sheets of newspaper, pale-blue walls, blue curtains with a magnolia pattern, a drawing of Rollo, young, over the mantelpiece, two flower pictures, irises and pink lilies, pretty, a door leading into what must be Rollo's dressing-room. Shrouded, deserted...the mistress of the house is away... (p. 177)

Olivia encounters both of these rooms in close proximity; the latter she opens and enters in secret. The first room is the suite of the married couple, a room which Olivia is surprised and worried by, for Nicola's influence upon it, and her modern tastes, are palpable. It suggests that Nicola is just like Olivia. She is Olivia's double, the invisible wife to the visible 'Other Woman', the legitimate non-mother to Olivia's illegitimate maternity. Furthermore, the room's simplicity and pale colour scheme make it an attractive space for the artistic woman. Every feature is tasteful and non-imposing; the 'cool luminous colours' suggest spaciousness and the beach. This room is sparsely furnished, inviting the occupant to move about freely within it. The repeated conjunction 'and' ('The room was long and empty and simple') suggest a cumulative poeticism in Olivia's narrative. Rather like the moment earlier in which her poetic tone mirrored her growing pregnant waistline, here Olivia's narrative shows her poetic sensibility expanding to fill this room. Though this room is supposedly jointly occupied by Rollo and Nicola, Nicola's decoration and Olivia's occupation remakes it as a feminine space. The room also contains a surprising representation of femininity: a picture of 'two seated monumental figures of women on the seashore playing on guitars'. The identity of the artist is unknown – though I would suggest that Nicola herself is a likely candidate – and the two women depicted are both creative and 'monumental'. They are

(re)producers of artistic creation rather than maternal figures, and they are afforded physical prominence. Within the paintings, the women are also both listening and being listened to. Unlike Tredeaven's statues, these are representations of women that are modern – although unlike the flapper silhouette, they are substantial. They are 'monuments' rather than figurines; they are important, notable and commemorative. There is also the sense that they are sepulchral: they entomb someone or something unspecified, and so they worry Olivia as well as surprise her.

Indeed, given Lehmann's doubling of Olivia and Nicola, the monumental women in the painting draw attention to what it means to entomb another being in pregnancy – what it means to have a womb/tomb and experience both pregnancy and its loss. Occupying Nicola's rooms make Olivia and the reader realise the similarities between them. Nicola's previous miscarriage is the counterpoint to Olivia's pregnancy, just as Nicola's second pregnancy corresponds with Olivia's abortion. Thus, Lehmann sets the two women up in symmetry, if not in competition, with one another. This brings me to the second excerpt, which describes Nicola's bedchamber in terms of her absence. Everything in this chamber is shrouded and temporarily unused, and the overall effect is ghostly. From the dust sheets covering the bed to the mirror laid protectively flat on the dressing table, the room reinforces Nicola's absence by conflating her body with the room's physical features. Rather like a 'hidden mother', Nicola's room is '[s]hrouded...deserted'.³¹⁹ Rendered an absent presence throughout the novel, Nicola is the hidden mother who has been temporarily 'deserted' by her husband; almost all we know about her is her miscarriage, a loss that has rendered her immobile and infantile, 'a witless die-away ninny' (p. 96). In Olivia's imagination Nicola has featured as 'perfectly helpless [...] [wearing] wonderful

³¹⁹ 'Hidden mothers', nineteenth-century photographs showing young children in the laps of their shrouded, 'hidden' mothers, are discussed in the Introduction.

nightdresses and wraps' (p. 150). This room, then, both reinforces and disrupts such a reading of Nicola as a ghostly figure. The room is dressed or wrapped just as Nicola is supposedly dressed while she lies in bed in another room, somewhere unspecified, after she has miscarried her first child. However, this room's desertion also hints at Nicola's subsequent mobility. By the end of the novel, Nicola is pregnant once more, and has 'deserted' her bed chamber to occupy other rooms.

The motif of the room, then, evokes both the space of female bodies and Woolf's vision of the room as necessary prerequisite for literary creation. Indeed, Woolf suggests that the difficulty of occupying, even the inexpressibility of, the woman's room is a double-bind for the writer:

One goes into the room – but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room. The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers – one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex form of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.³²⁰

Woolf's configuration of the room as a developing, pregnant space, permeated by untapped creative potential, is highly relevant to my readings of these texts. Each room is as individual as the woman who occupies it; its furnishings, textures and sounds are as complex as any other of femininity's 'forms', including dress. If women writers 'have sat indoors all these millions of years' then they have also worn garments of various shapes and proportions. The figures of femininity are too, by this logic, 'permeated by their creative force'. Furthermore, according to Woolf, women's words must needs breed 'illegitimately' to begin

³²⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 86-87.

with, implying that women writers require both societal legitimacy and the practice of producing abortive drafts. Like Aurora, Woolf's woman writer wants 'room' – to create, to abort and to birth her text.

Chapter III

A 'look within': Ultrasound Poetry

I have been standing all my life in the
 direct path of a battery of signals
 the most accurately transmitted most
 untranslatable language in the universe
 I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-
 luted that a light wave could take 15
 years to travel through me And has
 taken I am an instrument in the shape
 of a woman trying to translate pulsations
 into images for the relief of the body
 and the reconstruction of the mind.

– Adrienne Rich³²¹

Impertinent Rays: The X-Ray and the Pregnant Subject

In 1897, Emily Culverhouse wrote a satirical poem that drew attention to the consequences of a new technological development that suddenly exposed the contents of the human body to visual scrutiny: the X-ray. In 'Photography Up To Date – And Beyond It' Culverhouse delights in subjecting the X-ray – and those who use it – to poetic analysis. Beginning by poking fun at the typical 'Englishman' and his concept of autonomous existence, Culverhouse humorously imagines a state of being in which, thanks to the X-ray, everything is transparent and nothing is private. The (fundamentally dishonest) Englishman suddenly realises that the fashionable new technology reveals his innermost thoughts, desires and motives to an enthusiastic audience. All who gaze upon the X-ray of his body – his photographer, doctor, wife, colleagues and relatives – will know his true nature. Therefore, Culverhouse suggests that the world will never be the same again, now that the internal truth of the body may be discovered beneath its devious external shape:

An Englishman's body belongs to himself,
 But surely that proverb was made

³²¹ Adrienne Rich, 'Planetarium', in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), pp. 73-74 (p. 74).

Before Dr Roentgen's impertinent rays,
 With furtive, adumbrate, and mystical ways,
 Our structures began to invade.

'T is an 'habeas corpus' of uncanny source,
 A forerunner of agencies evil,
 A gruesome, weird, and mysterious force,
 (But clothed in a garb of science of course)
 A league between man and the devil.³²² (ll.1-10)

As a consequence of the X-ray, the autonomous male subject finds himself in the cross-hairs of an 'impertinent' gaze – that of both Dr Roentgen, inventor of the X-ray, and significantly, the woman poet. Indeed, Culverhouse's gaze is deeply impertinent because it turns the tables on the male subject, making him the object of her poem. The X-ray gaze ironically assures the Englishman's liberty whilst restricting and prohibiting his illicit behaviour. The invasion of what Culverhouse terms 'our structures', therefore, not only refers to the body, but to the gendered social structures within which this body functions. The freedoms that enable the Englishman to hide parts of himself that are disturbingly corporeal (such as the 'calcareous nodules' on his lungs, l. 21) or socially transgressive (the 'snugly ensconced' bracelet and fan in his pocket, meant for his mistress, ll. 71-75) are thus ironically restricted by the gaze that exposes the body to a kind of 'habeas corpus' (l. 6). Provocatively 'clothed' in the 'garb of science', yet ultimately gruesome, weird, uncanny and diabolical, the look within the body that the X-ray provides makes Culverhouse's Englishman fear the exposure of all his dishonesty, subterfuge and infidelity.³²³

³²² Emily Culverhouse, 'Photography Up To Date - And Beyond It' (1897), repr. in Peter E. Palmquist, *Elizabeth Fleischmann: X-Ray Pioneer Photographer* (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1990), pp. 31-34. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

³²³ Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles discusses such anxiety about the exposure of X-ray during this period, arguing that '[t]his was a world where men and women wore several layers of clothing in all seasons and entered the ocean to swim covered from neck to knee. Clothes concealed the skin, and the skin concealed the secrets of the heart.' Furthermore, Kevles argues that the X-ray gaze was focused on 'the two holiest sanctums of the human body - the sex organs and the brain'. This suggests that X-ray looks within the body can be gendered as feminine (focusing on the sex organs) and masculine (examining the brain), which reinforces Cartesian divisions between body and soul. See Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles, *Naked to the Bone: Medical Imaging in the*

Culverhouse underlines the fact that the penetrative gaze of X-ray has undermined the male subject's autonomy:

For a steady gaze thrown on the sensitive plate,
 With a *one-ness* of theme and conception,
 And fixing our minds in a uniform strain,
 Will picture the image begot by our brain,
 And reveal our most inmost perception.

Who among us is safe if this can be done,
 Who can bear such a scrutinization?
 Scant courtesy, too, our friends would afford,
 When they find that our actions are often a fraud,
 And our words but mis representation. (ll. 51-60)

This implies that the image 'begot' by the brain – both the technology of X-ray 'begot' by Dr Roentgen and the images found within the male subject's mind – is faithfully reproduced for the reader on the 'sensitive plate' (l. 51). Indeed, so accurate and mimetic is this new technology in depicting the previously unseen physical body, that it reveals the inner workings of the mind. Thus, I would argue that Culverhouse offers a representation which implies that the Cartesian division of mind and body is fundamentally flawed.³²⁴ The X-ray gaze within the body tells the truth about the mind or soul. It has a 'one-ness of theme and conception' (l. 52), which suggests that it is inherently unified in purpose and matter – it does what it is. By implication, language misrepresents the subject. Playfully essentialist in its representation of the male subject, Culverhouse's poem also acts as a subtle corrective to dominant cultural representations of the female body. The subtext of Culverhouse's poem is that while the 'Englishman' had previously been complacent in the knowledge that

Twentieth Century (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 14, 27. Anxiety about the erotic potential of forbidden looks within the female reproductive body was reflected in the various advertisements for X-ray 'proof' underwear that circulated during this period. My chapter on Miscarriage (II) further explores the covering and uncovering of the closed/clothed body by examining similar foundation garments.

³²⁴ As noted in my Introduction, Descartes' Enlightenment model separates the mind (the *res cogitans*) from the corporeal body (the *res extensa*). See René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method for Guiding One's Reason and Searching for the Truth in the Sciences*, in *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. by Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 24-25.

his body was securely containable, privy only to his own thoughts and imaginings, the female body had been penetrated by the gaze for centuries.³²⁵ Indeed, though Culverhouse does not mention this in her poem, one of X-ray's first uses was to look within and make pictures of the living pregnant body.

The advent of X-ray technology at the end of the nineteenth century fundamentally altered the way in which pregnant bodies were read and interpreted. Following Roentgen's discovery in 1895, images of living fetuses began to enter medical discourse. Doctors no longer had to rely on listening to the foetal heartbeat and their patients' confirmations of 'quickening' to diagnose pregnancy; they could look for themselves. The first X-ray of a pregnant woman took place in 1896.³²⁶ This moment, occurring at the *fin de siècle*, coincides with an increased medical concern for foetal well-being and diagnosis.³²⁷ In 1901, a mere five years after the first X-ray of a pregnant woman, J.W. Ballantyne published a paper in the *British Medical Journal* entitled 'A Plea for a Pro-Maternity Hospital', which took 'Pro-Maternity' to mean not only better medical care for pregnant and birthing women, but specialised 'prenatal diagnosis and treatment'.³²⁸ Ballantyne's work thus began what Hanson describes as a shift in obstetric medicine 'away from the health of the mother and towards

³²⁵ As previously mentioned in the Introduction, William Hunter's seventeenth-century anatomical atlas, for instance, beautifully renders in exact detail the pregnant body. See William Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi: Tabulis Illustrata [The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus: Exhibited in Figures]* (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1774). Kevles discusses the 'visual deflowering' of the female body via the penetrative male gaze in relation to X-ray in *Naked to the Bone*, pp. 118-19. However, it is also worth noting that an overt look within the female body was prohibited during the nineteenth century by strict codes of modesty. Indeed, typically the doctor examining a pregnant woman would *avert* his gaze. His examination, known as 'the touch', would take place while the woman remained fully clothed. See Jenny Carter and Thérèse Duriez, *With Child: Birth Throughout the Ages* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1986), pp. 49-50.

³²⁶ Kevles notes that the foetus had died *in utero*; subsequent X-rays, however, did show living fetuses as well as dead ones. See Kevles, *Naked to the Bone*, p. 230.

³²⁷ This also coincided with the 'first wave' of feminism, which (among other actions) encouraged women to use contraception. This suggests that the female body was a contested space, mediated and medicated through conflicting cultural narratives that, on one hand, emphasised foetal health, and on the other, claimed the right to prevent pregnancy. See Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 7.

³²⁸ J.W. Ballantyne, 'A Plea for a Pro-Maternity Hospital', *British Medical Journal*, 6 April 1901, 813-15 (p. 815).

the health of the foetus'.³²⁹ The reproductive female body was increasingly opened to interpretation by the medical gaze.

Early X-ray images of the pregnant body provide a poignant insight into the experience of medicalised pregnancy in the early twentieth century. In London's Wellcome library, archivists have collected and transferred to digital media hundreds of images of foetal development. Among them, a small but significant number of X-rays show the skeletons of anonymous women and their foetuses, X-rays taken at various points during the past fifty years. Each image shows two distinct (though incomplete) bodies, one encasing the other. They appear both ghostly and instantly recognisable as human, a real mother and baby in-waiting. Though the two skeletons in each image are identifiable, their medical conditions require specific diagnosis via the expert medical gaze. Some show foetal abnormalities such as anencephaly, while others display foetuses near their term, suspended within their mothers' pelvises in breech or posterior positions. The mothers in each are exhibited metonymically, as pelvis and spinal column. One image (Fig. 1) shows a foetus in a position reminiscent of a newborn being cradled: spine curved, on its back, skull presented forwards, towards the gazer – not the correct position for labour.

³²⁹ Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, p. 8.

Fig. 1³³⁰

These diagnostic looks within the female body speak of difficult births and genetic anomalies. They are deathly, 'uncanny' images which blur the boundaries between self and other, woman and unborn child. Indeed, simultaneously familiar and strange, the X-ray foetus can be read in relation to Freud's definition of the uncanny: '[T]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'.³³¹ According to Freud, the womb is an inherently uncanny space.³³² It follows that X-ray representations of this space are also uncanny. The notion of origins, hugely important in Freud's essay, is given physical and visual incarnation in these images; these X-rays show the origins of human life and the family. Though they continue the Enlightenment rationale of exploring and

³³⁰ Pregnancy Transverse Lie, Abdomen X-ray, N0021272 [n.d.]. Image available from Wellcome Images.

³³¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 339-76 (p. 340).

³³² The uncanny womb 'is known of old and long familiar': '[t]his *unheimlich* place [...] is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning'. See Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 368. X-ray images, like Freud's essay, position the female reproductive body itself as uncanny, suggesting that it inherently rebels against Enlightenment models of rationality – the rationality that compels medical practitioners to look within the female body in the first place.

shining light on the unknown spaces of the body, the images themselves disrupt this medical gaze by their uncanniness. X-rays are looks within the female body which exclude tissue, blood and other bodily features from the frame. Not only do they suggest origins, therefore, but endings. In his book on *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle opens his discussion of origins by arguing that '[t]he uncanny entails another thinking of beginning':

the beginning is already haunted. The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced.³³³

These X-rays can be read in light of Royle's statement. They throw pregnancy, the female body and the medical gaze, into 'uncertainty'. '[W]eird and mysterious', they require specialist translation to fit a particular narrative about foetal origins since they look so much like skeletal corpses.

Tragically, the medical gaze of X-ray was indeed deathly. Following research which established a link between X-ray exposure and childhood cancers, radiologists no longer use X-ray as a routine pregnancy test – though X-rays were performed on pregnant women for some time after Dr Alice Stewart published the first Oxford Survey of Childhood Cancers in 1956.³³⁴ Until ultrasound technology replaced the X-ray fully during the late 1970s, the X-ray machine remained an important part of the obstetrician's equipment. Diagnostic looks within the female body are thus highly problematic to decode, not only because they privilege medical examination over the mother's account, but because each look potentially endangers the fetus. X-rays of pregnant women are particularly revelatory in the light of

³³³ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 1.

³³⁴ Alice Stewart et al, 'Malignant Disease in Childhood and Diagnostic Irradiation in Utero', *The Lancet*, 2 (1956), 447. Ann Oakley, 'From Walking Wombs to Test-Tube Babies', in *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*, ed. by Michelle Stanworth (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 36-56 (p. 44). Hanson, however, confirms an 'immediate and rapid reduction in their [X-ray's] use for diagnostic purposes'. See Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, p. 136. Stewart also later questioned the safety of ultrasound, but was unable to continue research into this due to a lack of funding. This was reported in the popular press. See Philip M. Boffey, "'Safe" Form Of Radiation Arouses New Worry', *The New York Times*, 2 August 1983, and Colman McCarthy, 'Childhood Cancers', *The Washington Post*, 23 October 1983.

subsequent images of ultrasound because ultrasound scanning, which uses high frequency sound waves to create an image of the inside of the body, is a continuation of this look within.

This chapter will examine such looks within the pregnant body in relation to the development of the 'ultrasound poem' in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As will be explored later on in this chapter, ultrasound poems share some of the themes and imagery that appear in Culverhouse's poem, suggesting that this early poetic engagement with the medical gaze predicted later poets' work, in a similar way that X-ray anticipated the ultrasound scan. Able to show the inner workings of the body in both the present moment, and foreshadowing in 'adumbrate and mystical ways' (l. 4) what is to come, the X-ray in Culverhouse's poem is depicted as both scientific and atavistic. Culverhouse's comic interrogation of the male subject position – an interrogation which, though it apparently reproduces the male scientific gaze, also undermines it – is a theme similarly taken up and reproduced by contemporary ultrasound poets such as Leontia Flynn, Pat Borthwick, Helen Dunmore, Sue Wood, Kathleen Jamie and Sally Douglas.³³⁵ These poets represent their experiences of undergoing an ultrasound scan during pregnancy in order both to re-appropriate the gaze and to explore its often troubling implications. Like the X-ray, the ultrasound scan is uncannily familiar and potentially unsettling for the pregnant subject. In this chapter, I identify two particular trends in women's writing about ultrasound: firstly, the attention paid to new technologies and their showcasing of the futuristic foetal spaceman; secondly, the somewhat incantatory or magical nature of watching sound that harkens back to an unspecified, atavistic past. Ultrasound creates

³³⁵ Leontia Flynn, *Profit and Loss* (London: Cape Poetry, 2011); Pat Borthwick, *Swim* ([n.p.]: Mudfog, 2005); Helen Dunmore, *Recovering a Body* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994); Sue Wood, *Imagine Yourself to be Water* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2009); Kathleen Jamie, *Jizzen* (London: Picador, 1999); Sally Douglas, *Candling the Eggs* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2011).

images of the foetus by applying sound waves to the pregnant abdomen via a hand-held transducer (my emphasis), thereby translating sound into image.³³⁶ My analysis explores ideas about looking within and translating women's bodies, and how this affects the construction of the poetic, pregnant subject.

An (Un)familiar Story: the Rise of Ultrasound

In her Introduction to a popular anthology of birth poems, Kate Clanchy comments that 'ultrasound has changed pregnancy from a mystery to a story with pictures familiar to us all – indeed, it has virtually spawned its own poetic genre'.³³⁷ Clanchy's identification of ultrasound as a transformative technology certainly resonates persuasively – though her assertion that pregnancy was a 'mystery' before the advent of this technology is not, strictly speaking, true. While ultrasound, invented during the Second World War and applied in obstetrical medicine from the mid-1950s, allows spectators to view the developing foetus in previously unseen clarity, medical practitioners have been prising open, touching, listening to and looking within the pregnant female body for centuries.³³⁸ What Clanchy actually means when she mentions the 'mystery' of pregnancy, then, is the pregnant woman's sensory knowledge of the foetus. Whereas medical looks within the pregnant body via specula, stethoscope, the scalpel and X-ray have long been established as means by which knowledge of pregnancy is gained, 'quickening' (the internal touch of the unborn infant) is a mode of

³³⁶ As I explore in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening), the prefix 'trans' carries the meanings 'across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another' and 'beyond, surpassing, transcending'. It is interesting to note that this links the notion of translation with that of transgression. See 'trans-, prefix', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

³³⁷ Kate Clanchy, 'Introduction', in *All the poems you need to say Hello* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2004), p. xv.

³³⁸ Equipment such as the stethoscope (invented by René Laënnec in 1819) and the X-ray machine date from the nineteenth century, whilst early types of specula have been used since the Roman period.

tactility that the pregnant woman alone can relate.³³⁹ These technologies have provided a picture which can be set alongside and in competition with women's accounts of the 'lived experience' of pregnancy. Clanchy's account, however, reclaims ultrasound scanning as something which extends beyond medical discourse. Its scope, she states, is transformative: ultrasound has 'changed pregnancy' into a collective narrative, 'a story with pictures familiar to us all'. Clanchy's phrase evokes the picture storybooks of childhood, suggesting that the images generated by ultrasound scans have become a means of telling ourselves stories about our origins. Available beyond the confines of exclusive and sometimes apparently indecipherable medical discourse, they have egalitarian appeal. According to Clanchy, ultrasound has taken on a life and reproductive agency of its own by having spontaneously 'spawned' a new poetic genre, 'ultrasound poetry'.

However, a significant part of the collective narrative of ultrasound is the resulting politicised debates about women's agency in the face of such penetrative looks. The perceived dangers of ocular focus on the foetus formed the cornerstone of some feminist arguments in the 1980s, which viewed obstetrical technology as a means of exercising predominantly male control over female bodies. For instance, in 1983 Iris Marion Young argued that the pregnant subject's encounter with obstetrical medicine results in her objectification and alienation from the experience of giving birth.³⁴⁰ In 2003 she added a postscript dealing specifically with ultrasound, arguing that its routine use in obstetrics 'reinforces' rather than contradicts her analysis, since it 'makes it possible for anyone to experience fetal movement by looking at the same projected image.'³⁴¹ For Young, ultrasound is transformative: the image of the foetus overrides women's experiences of

³³⁹ Now rendered obsolete, this term once was used to confirm pregnancy. I discuss quickening in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

³⁴⁰ Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *On Female Bodily Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 41-61.

³⁴¹ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', pp. 60-61.

pregnancy, rendering their accounts unnecessary where previously they were valuable. Young's analysis suggests that ultrasound technology has dramatically altered the way in which we view pregnant bodies by making the foetus the primary object of the gaze and open to interpretation by 'anyone'. Images of ultrasound scans may be circulated widely, received and reinterpreted without context. Typically, they showcase the foetus, floating in the dark space of the womb, as though entirely independent of its mother (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2³⁴²

As this image shows, the foetus appears in profile, in white relief against a dark, shadowy background. The image is framed by markers to measure scale and other factual pointers, such as the date of the scan. The overall appearance of the foetus is impressionistic; features such as head, nose, ears and eye sockets are identifiable, but undefined. We get

³⁴² Ultrasound Image of Normal 24 Week Foetus, N0019386 (1999). Image available from Wellcome Images.

the sense that this is an 'unfinished' work. Parts which signify the maternal body, such as the placenta and uterus walls, are excluded from the frame. Ultrasound, though improving healthcare, arguably emphasises foetal identity at the expense of maternal agency. Ultrasound poetry does much to reclaim this agency, and offers an alternative perspective on the pregnant body – the pregnant subject's.

Clanchy's identification of the 'ultrasound poem' therefore indicates both a cultural and a technological shift in ways of looking at the pregnant subject. Although its roots are to be found in older reproductive technologies, ultrasound is a modern phenomenon, and so is its literary 'spawn', ultrasound poetry. Much like the uncanny female body disrupts the medical gaze, ultrasound poems by contemporary women poets offer alternative ways of looking at and *from* the pregnant subject's perspective. They reclaim the female voice and compel us to *listen* as well as look. Indeed, poetry's careful interplay between form, metre, rhythm and lexis – its translation of imagery into meaningful text, its circulation of sound and language – means that it is particularly suited to exploring the medical gaze of ultrasound. Ultrasound too is concerned with translating; it continues a long-established tradition of translating the pregnant body via the medical gaze. Nineteenth-century medical practitioners, for instance, listened to the foetal heartbeat in order to visualise the unborn child when an overt look within was neither possible nor permissible. 'Stethoscope' has its etymological roots in the visual: it is a means of *looking* within the breast.³⁴³ The female patient, meanwhile, was rendered passive and mute, her body translated into sound and image, while her accounts of foetal movement became less important. This precursor to ultrasound provides us with a revealing analogy between medical and poetic practice. Both require translators of a kind: the doctor who listens to the foetal heartbeat and thereby

³⁴³ 'Stethoscope, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

imaginatively 'looks' at the foetus; the reader who constructs the poem's meaning by interpreting its rhythm, sound and imagery. Ultrasound poetry by women writers is additionally significant within this framework since it offers an alternative 'look' at pregnant experience from the perspective of the often marginalised and muted female subject. It reveals that poetry is influenced by and responsive to medical discourse, and effectively translates 'foetal movement' into the 'quickening' of previous years by privileging the pregnant subject's account over the moving image on the screen. Poetry and ultrasound scanning therefore can be identified as different modes of tactility – different ways of 'touching' and looking within the pregnant subject's body. Indeed, ultrasound poetry's pregnant subjects offer several different ways of looking both *within* and *from* the pregnant body.

The First Look: Leontia Flynn's 'Two Ways of Looking at an Ultrasound Scan'

The contemporary Irish poet Leontia Flynn writes that there are 'two ways of looking' at an ultrasound scan.³⁴⁴ The first, her pregnant speaker suggests, is experienced by a community of spectators, who scrutinise a television screen together:

Then as we lean in closer
to adjust the set
The Ghost Of All Our Christmasses to Come
appears
live! *Via* satellite!

A surveillance chart,
a CAT scan –
CCTV imagery? – a skull?
Or, as the dust settles, *nothing*.
Nothing at all. (ll. 6-15)

³⁴⁴ Leontia Flynn, 'Two Ways of Looking at an Ultrasound Scan', in *Profit and Loss* (London: Cape Poetry, 2011), pp. 21-22. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text. The Irish context of Flynn's text is also of particular significance in relation to contemporary abortion debates, though these are beyond the scope of this thesis; abortion is illegal in Ireland, unless the life of the mother is at risk. The ultrasound scan, often appropriated by anti-abortion groups, is especially problematic and resonant within this context.

This scan 'offers us a glimpse of the beyond' (l. 3) – a brief look into an otherwise unknown future, which 'we lean in closer' to view (l. 6). This look occurs at an unspecified moment which we know nevertheless to be specific: that point in the speaker's pregnancy at which an ultrasound scan is performed. Today pregnant women can expect to experience a minimum of two scans, one before fifteen weeks and one at around twenty weeks.³⁴⁵ As Flynn's poem notes, this represents a kind of 'surveillance chart' (l. 11) – a means of monitoring and defining what it means to be pregnant. The fact that Flynn's speaker and 'gowned technician' (l. 1) struggle to identify the foetus suggests that this particular scan takes place at an earlier stage of pregnancy than usual. This might account for the questioning tone of Flynn's first stanzas, and her speaker's gradual movement towards the screen on which her body and its contents appear. '[W]e lean in closer', Flynn's speaker intones, 'to adjust the set' (ll. 6-7) and attempt to distinguish the foetus's moving image from the 'shadows' (l. 3).

When it appears, the foetus is a projection of the spectators' futures, expressed by a gently mocking Dickensian allusion: 'The Ghost Of All Our Christmasses to Come' (l. 8). In *A Christmas Carol* (1843) 'The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come' is one of three spectres who represent past, present and future. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come is by far the most unsettling apparition for Scrooge, Dickens' protagonist:

It [the Ghost] was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded... It thrilled him [Scrooge] with a vague uncertain horror, to know that behind the dusky shroud there were ghostly eyes intently fixed upon him, while he, though he stretched his own to the utmost, could see nothing but a spectral hand and one great heap of black.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ This applies in Britain, as outlined by the National Health Service on their website. See <<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

³⁴⁶ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843; London: Oldams Press, n.d.), Ch 4, pp. 69-70.

The most notable characteristic of this spectre, aside from the fact that it may be identified as Death personified, is that it is only partially visible. Combined with Scrooge's exposed visibility, this makes it both frightening and 'thrilling'. Scrooge knows that the spectre's eyes are 'intently fixed upon him', but because it is 'shrouded' in 'deep black' and visible only as a 'spectral hand and one great heap of black' he experiences 'vague uncertain horror'.

Scrooge strains to see the ghost clearly but is unsuccessful; as Dickens' tale shows the reader, Scrooge is supposed to look at himself.

Like Dickens' spectre, Flynn's unborn child is not clearly identifiable. This too makes it unsettling and 'thrilling'. By comparing it with a personified Death, Flynn reminds us that childbirth is a dangerous business – a moment at which life and death are inexorably, closely linked. Her spectre is a mysterious entity, of which we are offered a mere glimpse by the gowned technician who carries out the scan (ll. 1-3). The scan itself is enacted through a reproductive technology which feels increasingly alien to Flynn's speaker. Flynn designates the gel which routinely is spread across the pregnant woman's abdomen as 'ectoplasm' (l. 2); through its ministrations her body becomes a liminal, unknown and unquantifiable space, 'the beyond' which has the capacity to contain both life and death (l. 4). Furthermore, rather than shedding light on her pregnancy, the ultrasound leaves the speaker uncertain, even disembodied. This first section of Flynn's poem is peppered with questions as she attempts to identify the image on the screen: 'Is it The Turin Shroud?', she asks (l. 5), 'A surveillance chart,/a CAT scan - /CCTV imagery? – a skull?' (ll. 11-13). These possibilities, drawn from contemporary culture and televised news stories, range from religious relic to Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) footage. The speaker struggles to anchor the image of the foetus on the screen with other images she has seen that monitor human, often transgressive, behaviour. CCTV, for instance, is a means of social and legal control over individuals, and the link Flynn makes between such screens and ultrasound scanning is

disquieting for this reason. Attached to and monitored by the medical equipment, the speaker cannot move freely; she may only 'lean' (l. 6). However, the excitement of experiencing the pregnant female body and the foetus on screen, an excitement which is generated by and linked with popular entertainment and sensationalist media coverage of 'breakthrough' events ('live! *Via satellite!*', l. 10) is undercut by what can ultimately be identified ('*nothing./ Nothing at all.*', ll. 14-15).

This (non-) sighting occurs at the centre of Flynn's poem; her second section takes up the scanned image once more, this time concentrating on the speaker's bodily experience and not on what she can or cannot identify on the monitor. '*Nothing*', whether it signifies a miscarried pregnancy and an empty space, or the speaker's alienation from her body and her inability to recognise the foetus it contains, is the focus of the poetic gaze. Indeed, this gaze and the scan by which it is made possible seems pointless at best, annihilatory at worst. Flynn draws attention both to the wonders of visual representation of the foetus and the difficulties and anxieties that attend its interpretation. When we rely on visual representation alone, we also rely on the translation skills of the gowned technician who remains anonymous, designated only by his or her uniform and job title. The similarity of this gowned figure to Dickens' shrouded spectre is striking, suggesting that the technician invites the pregnant subject to look at the ultrasound scan in order to show her the future. Indeed, there are two spectral presences here: the unborn child and the gowned technician. The spectre, from the Latin *specere*, meaning 'to look, see', has its etymological roots in the visionary; it is something which can and cannot be seen, and it both looks and is looked at.³⁴⁷ Flynn's spectral subjects enact this double, spectral look –

³⁴⁷ María de Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren suggest that this link between the spectre, spectacle and the specular make the spectre particularly illuminating. See María de Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 'Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities', in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. by María de Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 1-28 (p. 2). Jacques Derrida also famously defines the spectre in *Specters of Marx* as having 'a furtive and

and by so doing occlude the reader's vision. In her poem everything seems shadowy. The 'we' of the poem – comprising, perhaps, a partner or family member in addition to Flynn's speaker, the gowned technician and the reader – are exposed to multiple images. We see a 'Ghost', 'dust' and 'nothing', and no singular interpretation of these images holds authority.

Like Flynn's speaker we read the maternal body and its contents in terms of what is uncannily familiar; we project representations and images with which we are familiar onto what we actually 'see'. She suggests that although reproductive technologies such as the ultrasound scan have become familiar, experiencing them might be uncanny. The images, like X-rays, are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The pregnant subject, therefore, is both opened up to medical scrutiny and made unfamiliar by the ultrasound image that scrutiny produces: she becomes spectral. The figure of the gowned technician, simultaneously clinical and spectral, is fundamentally present in this representation as a subject against whom the pregnant speaker must position herself.

Flynn's interrogation of reproductive technologies and the gaze of the gowned technician is not an isolated case – and neither is it confined to poetry. In her autobiographical prose work on pregnancy and motherhood, Naomi Wolf describes experiencing an ultrasound scan in terms which are strikingly similar to Flynn's:

Passed from one smiling, absent-faced, white-coated woman to the next, I ended up stripped to a gown under the cold hands of a technician [...]

[S]he wiped a chilly, gelatinous substance on my belly; I was filled with trepidation at who or what I would encounter on the screen as she began to move the sensor over my abdomen like a computer mouse. It felt odd to be the informational field. On the black-and-white screen were grey-blue tumbled clouds, like the primeval clouds of creation.

An oval emerged at length out of the chaos. 'There, you can see the top of the fetus's skull,' she said, without inflection. [...]

The skull vanished, lost in the fog. 'See that string of pearls?' she asked in her practised voice. I squinted at the screen. Out of the formlessness appeared a

ungraspable visibility, or an invisibility of an invisible X [...] the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh, but still the body of someone or someone other'. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 6.

sinuous X-ray serpent. [...] 'The spinal cord: see, each vertebra is there. Again, perfect. No visible defect.'

Now the creature assembled itself against the mouse, manifesting its parts seemingly at will, as if it were battering against the membrane between us to make itself blindly known to me.³⁴⁸

Wolf's account is extensive in its description, not only of the image on the screen, but of her emotional, instinctive and intellectual responses to it. Like Flynn's speaker, Wolf sees her foetus through the mediation of a gowned technician, who translates the image on the screen so that she may identify the unborn 'creature' and its body parts. For the technician, this is an everyday, even monotonous experience: Wolf notes that she and her colleagues appear uninterested, 'absent-faced', their speech 'without inflection'. For Wolf, it is a magical one, worthy of a chapter in one's biographical narrative, 'the introduction of a lifetime'.³⁴⁹ Like Flynn's 'gowned technician', the medical staff are anonymous, indistinguishable, metonymic characters who nevertheless are central to the pregnant woman's experience. Wolf's style fictionalises – even poeticises – this experience; she presents it as an episode in her pregnant life in which her unborn baby confronts her with the truth of its uncanny alienation. Her language is stylised, drawing from imagery associated with technology, landscape, science fiction and fairytale.

All of these tropes are forms of cultural mediation – and *translation*. According to Wolf, the transducer is like 'a computer mouse'; as soon as the image appears on the monitor, 'coloured digits and a measuring graph superimpose[d] themselves'. The technology itself is personified and made active; the pregnant female patient is rendered a passive witness. Yet she, too, translates what she sees into familiar terms: the 'computer mouse' is a case in point, rather like the familiar household 'satellite TV' and 'CCTV

³⁴⁸ Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), pp. 22-23.

³⁴⁹ Wolf, *Misconceptions*, p. 22.

imagery' of Flynn's poem. The technician designates the foetus's spinal cord into a familiar object of female adornment, 'a string of pearls'. Such familiarisation is at odds with the supernatural imagery also deployed. Wolf reinterprets the technician's 'string of pearls', investing them with magical powers: they are 'the pearls of a fairytale'. The foetus's skull becomes a 'chalice'; it appears 'at will', 'to make itself blindly known to me.'³⁵⁰ Wolf's use of the adverb 'blindly' potentially refers both to the foetus (who cannot see its mother) and the mother herself. Wolf's vision is by no means clear; the foetus is occluded, often 'lost in the fog'. The suggestion is that ultrasound technology is imprecise, relying on skilled interpretation by an external mediator, the medical professional. This reiterates the notion that the translation of sound into visual image, and the reading of that subsequent image, is integral to both medical looks within the pregnant body and poetic looks by women writers. Contemporary women poets often use the (un)familiar tropes of cultural artefacts and modern medical technology in order to convey the translation taking place in experiencing an ultrasound scan. The most prevalent of these is the foetal spaceman, a metaphor for the unborn child that appears repeatedly in contemporary representations of pregnancy.

Meeting the Foetal Spaceman

Lennart Nilsson's foetal photographs, first appearing in *Life* magazine in 1965, introduced the foetal spaceman by presenting visual narratives of pregnancy that encouraged readers to see the foetus as a free-floating astronaut, a twentieth-century pioneer of modern technology (Fig. 3). By participating in a drama independent of its mother who was absent from the frame, Nilsson's cover image of a foetus became metonymic, representative of both 'Life' itself and the mid-twentieth-century experience of it (Fig. 4). The future, by implication, was

³⁵⁰ Wolf, *Misconceptions*, p. 23.

caught up in the fate of this promising new being. Whilst ultrasound scanning was yet to be made widely available, these photographs must have given those who saw them a clear sense of what the unborn child looked like, gendered 'him' as male and positioned the pregnant body as an 'inner' space to be charted and explored. The pregnant subject's body provided an alien – perhaps even hostile – environment, for which the brave foetal spaceman came prepared. Indeed, Rosalind Pollack Petchesky's analysis of the foetal spaceman trope suggests that the mother was made invisible by such focus on the foetus *in utero*:

The fetus in utero has become a metaphor for 'man' in space, floating free, attached only by the umbilical cord to the spaceship. But where is the mother in that metaphor? She has become empty space.³⁵¹

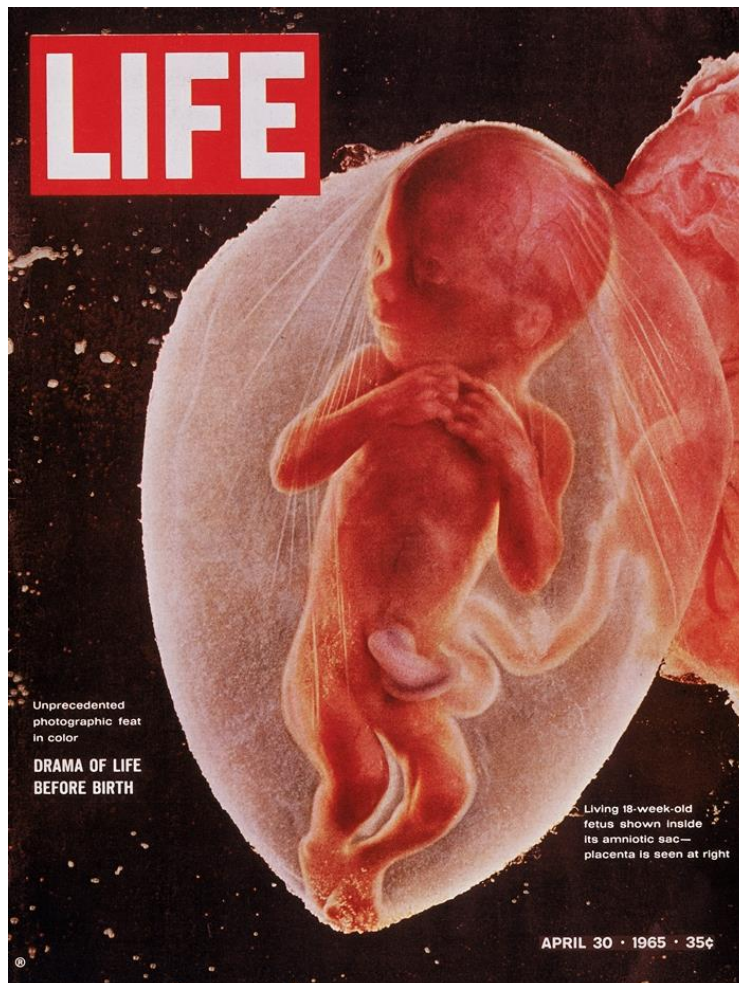
However, Petchesky's argument implies that this configuration is not straightforward. In the metaphor she posits, the maternal placenta is allegorised as the 'spaceship', though the darkness of her womb suggests 'empty space'. Thus, the maternal body subverts the metaphor by becoming spectral – neither fully present nor absent, both spaceship and space. The womb, too, is conspicuously not 'empty': the foetus fills it so completely that there is little room in the frame for the mother's outline.

³⁵¹ Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, 'Foetal Images: the Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', in *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*, ed. by Michelle Stanworth (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 57-80 (p. 63).



Fig. 3³⁵²

³⁵² Lennart Nilsson, *Spaceman, 13 weeks* (1965) <http://www.lennartnilsson.com/child_is_born.html> [accessed 17 August 2015].

Fig. 4³⁵³

In representations by women writers, however, the uncanny otherness of the foetus makes it both spaceman and alien. Iris Marion Young, for instance, in discussing dominant representations of the pregnant subject (as passively waiting for the arrival of her spaceman) emphasises the effect this has upon the subject's conception of her own identity. Young's pregnant woman encounters her own subjectivity:

The dominant culture projects pregnancy as a time of quiet waiting. We refer to the woman as 'expecting', as though this new life were flying in from another planet and she sat in her rocking chair by the window, occasionally moving the curtain aside to see whether the ship is coming.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Lennart Nilsson, *Drama of Life Before Birth*, *Time*, 30 April 1965: <<http://time.com/3876085/drama-of-life-before-birth-landmark-work-five-decades-later/>> [accessed 17 August 2015].

³⁵⁴ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', p. 54.

Young situates the pregnant woman in a recognisably popular setting: a science fiction film in which she contemplates the alien invasion calmly, as though awaiting the safe return of a human shuttle. This is how '[t]he dominant culture' (by which she means Western, technologically advanced twentieth-century culture) represents pregnancy. Indeed, Young's use of the verb 'projects' suggests that this culture does not simply *represent*: it sees and *reproduces* the image of pregnancy for a large, mass audience, much like the projection of a film reel onto a cinema screen. Ultrasound scanning is a way of 'occasionally moving the curtain aside' and exposing the contents of a female body whilst calling attention to the very mechanism by which it is exposed. As the pregnant woman gazes at the screen on which her foetus moves she also gazes internally at herself and, if we extend Young's logic, at the cinematic projection of pregnancy itself. This, as Flynn's poem suggests, 'offers us a glimpse of the beyond' (l. 3). However, such representation reveals an anxiety about the foetus's otherness which no ultrasound scan or penetrative look within can allay. Young seems well aware of the irony inherent to her chosen allusion. In the science fiction film the alien is often a figure of malignant otherness, superior to the human race in force and technology. This is its 'dominant culture'.³⁵⁵ If Western 'dominant culture' projects pregnancy as a time of waiting for a new, alien life to arrive as though from outer space, such films remind the reader that new life invariably emerges from within. The mother is culpable; she protects and nurtures the unborn being without being able to see its future.

Poetry written by little-known and marginalised contemporary women poets about pregnancy and childbirth, meanwhile, offers an alternative representation. Ultrasound poems often return the foetal spaceman to his mother's womb, thereby exploring the ambivalence of pregnant female identity through a recognisable literary and visual trope that

³⁵⁵ In the iconic *Alien* films, for instance, pregnancy is presented as a bodily invasion which annihilates the individual who is 'pregnant' and threatens the future of humanity itself. See *Alien*, dir. by Ridley Scott (20th Century Fox, 1979).

is nevertheless relocated firmly within the female body. In her poem 'Scan', Pat Borthwick's speaker describes her experience of ultrasound scanning in terms of a lunar expedition:

Together we explore my inner landscape on the screen.
He plots a course and charts me frame by frame.
See, here's your pancreas, your spleen, he chats,
and over here, this, the outline of your liver.

I watch my abdomen appear in monochrome.
Ghost-shapes float haloed, flickering like neon-signs.
I expect Apollo to land, a space-suited man step out,
glide strangely slowly across my contours with a flag. (ll. 1-8)³⁵⁶

Borthwick begins by presenting the speaker's body in terms of a landscape to be explored and charted by a community of spectators. She instantly distances her speaker's physical body from her experience of it; all is viewed and identified 'frame by frame' (l. 2). Though she begins with the plural pronoun 'we', suggesting the possibility – initially at least – of being part of the expedition, Borthwick shifts to 'he' in the next line, referring explicitly to her male radiologist (l. 3). It is not until the second stanza that her 'I' emerges to watch, in the present tense, her image appear on the screen (l. 5). The female body arrives only through its visual representation on the screen and its identification by the male radiologist. This identification takes place 'strangely slowly' (l. 8); Borthwick's rhythm here mirrors the slow-motion progress of a 'space-suited man' making his way across a lunar landscape (l. 7).

Like Flynn, Borthwick draws upon the widely disseminated and iconic footage of the first lunar space landings (in 1969). She suggests that her speaker's experience of the scan is like this footage – simultaneously enlightening and alienating, both familiar and strange. The means of mediation itself (television) is familiar, however strange the images on the screen might appear. As a consequence, Borthwick's 'I' soon disappears; the image on the monitor 'splits in two' (l. 10). The speaker is experiencing this exploration into the unknown space

³⁵⁶ Pat Borthwick, 'Scan', in *Swim* ([n.p.]: Mudfog, 2005), p. 48. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

of her internal body, but also passively is watching it happen. She participates in her own alienation. While the radiologist names her organs, she identifies herself with the moon, a space which is strange and 'other', traditionally an emblem of feminine mutability and linked with the menstrual cycle.

Borthwick implies that this vast landscape and its exposition by science frightens her speaker: 'I kneel behind a crater full of stars/ as data ricochets across the void.' (ll. 17-18). Her radiologist acts invasively: he 'plants his flag in the spot marked X, leaves moonboot tracks/ like "cut-here" lines across my ovarian tract.' (ll. 19-20). This suggests that Borthwick's subject also contemplates the possibility of infertility, or of her body being judged unfit for inhabitation. She fears that her 'moon' cannot support human life. It is at this point that we realise that the foetus is absent from the poem. At the centre of her uterus, to quote Flynn, lies '*Nothing at all*' (l. 15). The speaker is not yet pregnant; the internal space of her body, though comprised of identifiable features, is 'void' (l. 18).³⁵⁷ As Margrit Shildrick argues, 'Even in very early stages of pregnancy, the shadowy images of ultrasound serve to construct the foetus as an entity in its own right. The rest is space and silence.'³⁵⁸ Shildrick's comment that the 'shadowy images' of ultrasound construct an imagined foetus, whether one is there or not, suggests that the medical gaze inherently privileges this foetus over the 'space and silence' of the pregnant female subject. An image of an ultrasound scan at a very early stage of pregnancy illustrates this point effectively (Fig. 5).

³⁵⁷ Indeed, the poem's appearance as the first of a sequence entitled *Hospital Corners* complicates our reading of the ultrasound poem as dealing exclusively with pregnant experience. The remaining poems in Borthwick's sequence suggest that she is describing serious illness rather than pregnancy. However, I argue that Borthwick knowingly incorporates birth imagery in order to draw our attention to the possibilities of looking within, highlighting the tensions between birth and death inherent in the internal spaces of the female body.

³⁵⁸ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 41.



Wellcome Images

Fig. 5³⁵⁹

The image positions the tiny foetus at its centre; to the untrained eye, this foetus is identifiable as one almost exclusively because of the context of the ultrasound scan, and is thrown into relief by the dark ‘void’ of the maternal body. However, Borthwick reconfigures this space by articulating it from the perspective of the female subject. She is conspicuously not ‘silenced’.

In her final stanza, Borthwick returns to a home which reminds us of the ‘rocking chair’ of Young’s expectant mother:

That night I’m in the orchard among the apple trees.
 The hens have shaken out their duvets in the roots.
 I slide my hand under a warmth of breast, find
 a perfect egg to hold against the black. Obliterate the moon. (ll. 21-24)

By shifting her setting to a domestic, pastoral landscape, Borthwick effectively returns her speaker to earth. It is night, but the speaker is no longer overwhelmed by the vast

³⁵⁹ Foetus at 8 Weeks Gestation, Intra Vaginal Ultrasound Scan, N0014066 [1993?]. Image available from Wellcome Images.

strangeness of space, or by her radiologist's observations and data collection. Instead, she finds 'a perfect egg', the beginnings of natural animal life (l. 24). She does not hold it to the light to scrutinise its contents; she holds it against the sky, blocking the moon. Her final phrase simultaneously enacts and commands destruction. She thus defies the space with which she has been identified by the trope of the foetal spaceman; her aim is to rewrite this representation on her own terms.

Helen Dunmore also presents the foetus as spaceman in her poem, 'Scan at 8 Weeks'.³⁶⁰ Dunmore's speaker, however, addresses the foetus directly, as though it has simply arrived at the room in which she is placed: 'I turn and you've come' (l. 3). This turning motion refers to the speaker's gaze shifting from her pregnant belly to the screen on which its contents are shown. The foetus, designated as 'the baby' by the radiographer (l. 6), is more than a cluster of cells. The speaker, significantly, already knows this: she has identified the foetus as 'you'. It is not simply its visual representation via ultrasound which gives the foetus its subjectivity; the pregnant subject herself invests it with identity. Contrary to Young's argument, in this poem the pregnant woman does not experience the image of her foetus like everyone else.³⁶¹ Dunmore's speaker exerts subtle ownership over her body through her repeated use of the possessive adjective 'my', in 'my vagina' (l. 2) and 'my much-used womb' (l. 10). She has an intimate, instinctive knowledge of it, which the scan helps to reinforce.

Dunmore's final stanzas explicitly address the 'otherness' of her pregnancy and the precariousness of the foetus's future existence in this early scan:

You are all heart,
I watch you tick and tick

and wonder
what you will come to,

³⁶⁰ Helen Dunmore, 'Scan at 8 Weeks', in *Recovering a Body* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 33.

³⁶¹ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', pp. 60-61.

will this be our only encounter
in the white gallery of ultrasound

or are you staying?
One day will we talk about this

moment when I first saw your spaceship
far off, heading for home? (ll. 13-22)

The ritual of an ultrasound scan enables parents to identify the foetus as their baby, just as the speaker does in Dunmore's poem. Dunmore interweaves the literal and the metaphorical by identifying the foetus metonymically as 'all heart' (l. 13). This spondee slows the line, making the reader pause to consider the foetus in its entirety. Its defining feature, and the one which both the speaker and the radiologist identify as a sign of life, confirmation of the pregnancy itself, is its heartbeat. The foetus 'tick[s]' like a small clock, an object both mechanical and domestic (l. 14). Dunmore draws attention to the paradox of ultrasound technology – that one can *watch* sound (l. 14) – and reminds us that this is true of poetry, too. The metre of the poem and the sounds its language makes, are an integral part of what identifies it as poetry, and it is this quality that enables its disruption of the medical gaze. Indeed, Dunmore's 'Scan at 8 Weeks' is self-conscious in its poetic technique; its formal qualities highlight the similarities and differences between the way that ultrasound technology mediates the foetus and the way that poetry does. She aligns its mediation with that of poetry, thereby suggesting that neither are completely neutral practices. Both may be treated with a certain amount of critical scrutiny, and both are distinct from the actual physical bodies of mother and foetus being represented.

Indeed, the regular 'tick' of Dunmore's foetus seems to extend beyond the poem – her abrupt line break takes the reader to the next stanza, which contemplates its viability. It is as though the speaker cannot bear to count each beat, the lightly stressed 'tick' rhythm which the iambic line reinforces, in case it should stop. The line has a particularly driving

rhythm: we might expect a further 'and tick' in the following line. However, Dunmore's stanzas are irregular – she breaks the rhythm, though she does not stop it. The contrast between this line break between the stanzas and the enjambment at the end of it shows a delicate balancing to be taking place. Several clues suggest that pregnancy has been difficult and that miscarriage is a real possibility: this is a vaginal ultrasound rather than an abdominal one and, taken at eight weeks, it is earlier than the usual scan at twelve weeks.

Furthermore, the speaker is a mature woman. 'I'm much too old for this' (l. 4), she states; she looks at her 'much-used womb' (l. 10) on the screen and is astonished by its 'immaculate' appearance.³⁶² The speaker is hopeful, even though the foetus is 'much too young' (l. 5) to yet be viable. Nevertheless, she has invested emotionally in its presence, and by defining it as 'all heart' she suggests that it, too, may invest in her. The ultrasound scan is an established part of the narrative of pregnancy, which introduces the foetus before its life is secure. It makes the foetus a precarious subject.

The foetus's development may be measured by temporal markers such as seconds, the number of weeks (eight) and its length of 'eight millimetres' (l. 8). The scale of this spatial exploration is small, and its smallness only emphasised by the imagery of space travel which Dunmore employs. For instance, the notion of vast distances travelled in 'light years' is one that Dunmore uses to offset the diminutive foetus's 'spaceship' (l. 21), 'eight millimetres long/ and pulsing' (ll. 8-9). The foetus is too remote for the speaker to influence its course; its 'spaceship' is 'far off, heading for home' (ll. 21-22). However, Dunmore equates 'home' both with her speaker and the world in which she exists. In the same way as the foetus is close and distant, the speaker's body simultaneously represents home (inner space) and the far reaches of outer space. The 'white gallery of ultrasound' (l. 18), a phrase

³⁶² Dunmore thereby also alludes to the immaculate conception, suggesting that the female body is a receptacle for the divine unborn child. I discuss the potency of the Virgin subject in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening).

which evokes the gallery of the spaceship in the science fiction film, is the staging for this close ‘encounter’ (l. 17).

Sue Wood’s poem, ‘Scan’, like Dunmore’s, addresses the developing foetus directly, describing its appearance on the screen at ‘[t]welve weeks travelled’ as not only evoking the lunar landings of 1969, but as merging with images of them: ‘we see you/in the blur of first moon landings’ (ll. 1-2).³⁶³ Wood thus immediately locates her speaker’s unborn child in representation: visual, partially occluded, available remotely and subject to alternative interpretations. These are the perceived failings of ultrasound scanning, ones to which the ultrasound poem draws attention. However, in Wood’s poem, the foetus’s identity is secured by her speaker’s maternal knowledge: ‘know that all you are/ is all that is’ (ll. 6-7). The repetition of ‘all’ here recalls Dunmore’s ‘all heart’ (l. 13) and emphasises the entirety and completeness of subjectivity even while the body to which it belongs is still developing.³⁶⁴ Wood’s foetus – and its independent subjectivity – is a certainty, even though the scan itself is a ‘blur’:

You have travelled from a pinpoint
expanded from your time’s beginning
into the grain of a galaxy’s curve.
Here the womb, your cupped
eternity, tethers you, astronaut or alien
to your mother-ship.

You cannot be more alone
or more embraced.
Your x-ray face and budded hands
make a promise of nearness and need
that maps the path we walk together
and the footprints we leave behind. (ll. 14-25)

³⁶³ Sue Wood, ‘Scan’, in *Imagine Yourself to be Water* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2009), p. 24. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

³⁶⁴ It also makes an implicit political point by establishing ‘personhood’ at an early stage of pregnancy (though, at twelve weeks, later than Dunmore’s), before the foetus is medically ‘viable’.

Wood's foetus is identifiable as either 'astronaut or alien' (l. 18); it does not matter which within the context of her expanding maternal body. The mother's womb is 'cupped/eternity' (ll. 17-18), a 'galaxy' (l. 16), a space both limitless and a 'tether' (l. 18). For the pregnant speaker, the foetus is at the centre of the universe. She projects an existence in which the womb represents the world, as both a destination and part of the foetus's continuing journey through time and space. Wood uses the present perfect tense ('have travelled', l. 14) to suggest that exact time is not important, and that the journey itself has consequences which are yet unknown to the speaker, its 'mother-ship' (l. 19). She depicts pregnancy as a period of quiet waiting in which the pregnant speaker conspicuously is not anxious. If this presentation accords with Young's description of the woman in the rocking chair – and so counts as a 'dominant' cultural representation of pregnancy – then it is a confident one, which does not trouble itself with the implications of this representation.³⁶⁵

Wood acknowledges the ambivalence and paradoxes of pregnancy and the ultrasound scan but, rather than examine her own 'split-subjectivity', examines that of the foetus, who 'cannot be more alone/or more embraced.' (ll. 20-21).³⁶⁶ Wood's speaker empathises with her foetus. Though she notes its 'x-ray face and budded hands' (l. 22) – signs which Wolf saw as alien and other in her account – the speaker feels confident that these alien features 'make a promise of nearness and need' (l. 23). They are signs of fragility, 'nearness' and love. They are also signs that the foetus is at an early stage in its development, with unformed physical features and body parts, made visible through the scan. The relationship between the pregnant subject (the self) and the foetus (the other) is thus reconfigured as one based on sympathy rather than threat. The mother is a guiding influence, directing her

³⁶⁵ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', p. 413. It is also worth noting that Wood is a little-known contemporary poet, rather than culturally 'dominant'.

³⁶⁶ Young argues that the pregnant subject is 'split', as I discuss in the Introduction. See Young, p. 407.

spaceman home. The expectations generated by the scan posit a future in which mother and child walk a metaphorical path, as companions through life.

Rather than sit still while ‘expecting’, the pregnant speaker and her unborn child ‘walk together’ (l. 24) on their journey, and will continue both to walk and to leave ‘footprints’ (l. 25). During pregnancy, however, it is the mother only who is capable of walking, while the developing foetus floats inside her. Wood’s use of the present tense for these final lines brings reader, speaker and foetus into the present moment of the poem, a moment which encompasses past, present and future. When the baby is born its ‘budded’ limbs will have developed into recognisable hands and feet; eventually it will learn to crawl and walk with them. The ‘moonboot tracks’ (to use Borthwick’s phrase) of mother and infant may be followed throughout the journey of pregnancy and new motherhood, and ultrasound scanning allows this journey to be represented, and perhaps, to begin, from twelve weeks into pregnancy.

This poem presents ultrasound scanning positively, as a means of bonding with the unborn child – corresponding with the tone of much informative literature on the subject, geared towards encouraging expectant parents to view the scan not only as a diagnostic tool, but as an opportunity for ‘meeting’ their baby. A recent edition of Lennart Nilsson’s book, *A Child Is Born* (1991), includes a double-page centrefold containing images of the scan itself, a photograph of the foetus at the same age as the one being scanned and a pregnant woman experiencing an ultrasound scan. The latter shows the pregnant subject laughing as she and her male partner look at the image of their unborn child on the screen, her abdomen exposed.³⁶⁷ Adjacent to this, reads:

Seeing one’s unborn child in the uterus is an indescribable experience, as awesome as Earth seen from the moon, or Jupiter’s Great Red Spot. Seen on

³⁶⁷ Lennart Nilsson, *A Child Is Born*, text by Lars Hamberger, trans. Clare James (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1990), pp. 104-105.

the ultrasound screen the fetus waves, kicks and swivels in the amniotic sac.
And we can hear its rapid heartbeat.³⁶⁸

These words, like those found in contemporary poems about ultrasound and feminist accounts of pregnancy such as Wolf's, evoke space-travel. However, here pregnancy, formerly located firmly within the female body, becomes an 'out-of-body' experience for the male spectator (i.e. the father). It is made 'awesome' in the oldest sense of the word ('inspiring awe') by its mediation through modern technology.³⁶⁹ According to Nilsson, this is 'an indescribable experience'. However, it is one which poetic and medical discourse – and this text also – represents. A 'translation' takes place and a frame of reference is applied. The frame of reference here is particularly problematic due to the fact that it is imposed by a male subject that *observes*, rather than *experiences*, the physical process of being scanned. His is an 'out-of-body' experience that could never have been 'in body'. Usually we would define an 'out-of-body' experience as one in which the subject has a vivid, dissociative experience of viewing themselves from an external perspective. Yet the only person in the room who could actually experience this would be the woman being scanned, who is able to view on the television screen the internal space of her own body. However, by claiming this gaze and the unborn child as his own, this male subject arguably supplants the pregnant subject being scanned. As the possessive pronoun 'one's' reveals, this particular gaze is both singular and proprietorial, rather like Borthwick's spaceman and his territorial flag.

This raises questions about the location of the gazer in such representation. Indeed, the ultrasound technician is absent from the photographs in Nilsson's text, despite the fact that generally this is a text that frames pregnant experience in terms of medical technological practice. As in Wood's poem, the medical professional carrying out the scan

³⁶⁸ Nilsson, *A Child Is Born*, p. 104.

³⁶⁹ 'Awesome, adj.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

is elided from the frame. He or she must be there – but in this instance s/he is unnoticeable and absent from representation. Similarly, Nilsson's caption disrupts the gazer's position by comparing ultrasound to star gazing in reverse, the 'Earth seen from the moon'.

Presumably, we cannot all travel to the moon to see the Earth – particularly if that moon is identified elsewhere with the internal space of the female body. But ultrasound scanning equipment ensures that we can all watch and 'meet' the spaceman. As in Flynn's poem, the action occurs 'live! *Via satellite!*': spectators can stand on Earth, viewing a television screen that shows Earth as seen from the moon. Nilsson's pregnant woman is designated metonymically as 'the uterus', while the foetus is invested with deliberate, human motion: it 'waves, kicks and swivels' for its audience (a plural 'we', encompassing parents-to-be, third-person narrator, photographer and reader). Our identity and status as gazing subjects becomes unstable and paradoxical during such representation. This projects both the foetus and the mother as idealised subjects, ignoring the possibility of any ambivalence felt towards the image by either. In a sense both appear as though on a television screen, to be consumed as passive objects. Though poems such as Dunmore's and Wood's are positive in their representation of ultrasound, they also are ambivalent about its consequences and the possible questions it might raise. This separates them from Nilsson's text, even though both share 'spaceman' imagery. Flynn, Dunmore and Wood draw attention to the negotiations of meaning that take place within the medical setting of the ultrasound scan, a space gendered as masculine. The next part of this chapter explores the 'other' space of the ultrasound scan, via poetic encounters with the domestic, folkloric and atavistic. These are feminine looks within/from the pregnant subject, and comprise the uncanny double to Flynn's 'first way of looking' at ultrasound.

A Second Way of Looking

The 'second way' of looking at ultrasound, if we return to Flynn's poem, is to turn to the mysterious and folkloric, to 'mystic' knowledge and the domestic space of home (ll. 16-30). Flynn's poem again provides a starting point from which to consider this. The second half of the poem posits a scenario in which the ultrasound technician becomes a 'weather woman/with the magic wand' (ll. 16-17) who transforms the pregnant body into a different country:

When the weather woman
with the magic wand
gestures
to an area of high pressure
suddenly, I'm Iceland,

whose citizens
complain
they're left off so many maps
– so many maps of *Europe* –
far off, on the horizon, (ll. 16-25)

Flynn sets the ultrasound scan in the domestic space of the sitting room. The very act of looking at the screen takes her speaker imaginatively from the hospital in which a technician points out foetal development with a 'wand' (l. 17) to watching the weather forecast of which this gesture reminds her. However, no actual journey has taken place within the world of the poem. The speaker's gaze does not shift from hospital ward to weather forecast: the latter is all she sees. It is the gaze of the reader, accustomed to the hospital setting and reminded of the earlier 'gowned technician' (l. 1), that shifts.

Flynn removes her speaker from the medical setting entirely. Her transformation occurs because she suddenly identifies with Iceland, a country on the map. The suddenness of this self-identification is startling – it is an overt recognition of subjectivity not previously made in the poem. Also notable is Flynn's shift from the plural pronoun 'we' in her first section to the singular lyric 'I' of this one. The speaker is singular, identifiable as a country

but isolated from other countries and their collective social and political identity. Her 'citizens' are 'left off so many maps' (ll. 21-23). The italicisation of '*Europe*' (l. 24) suggests a tone of anger or exasperation with this situation – Europe, Flynn implies, is an obvious choice for Iceland and an international community to which 'she' already belongs, and yet Iceland is excluded from the European Union. Perhaps, however, Iceland is difficult to map; it is so different in its geology and its systems of governance.³⁷⁰ The landscape seems volatile with its volcanic disturbances and whales: 'the day/ feels the lava shift [...] the whale turn' (ll. 28-29). By identifying her body with this country, Flynn suggests that her speaker both desires and resists mapping. She wants the political recognition and agency that such mapping would bring for her pregnant subject, but also values her autonomy. Here the metaphor of the country/map suggests that Iceland represents the powerful pregnant body, while Europe refers to the wider political and social structures which help define and position that body. The pregnant body, by implication, is independent and alienated because '*Europe*' makes it so. It is 'other'.

Flynn's final stanza returns to a space reminiscent of a hospital ward:

where winter
is a corridor,
and pacing...pacing, the day
feels the lava shift, feels the whale turn,
silent, in the smoky bay. (ll. 26-30)

Such repetitive 'pacing' reminds us of accounts of labour which place birthing women as active agents by having them move around during contractions.³⁷¹ This image also suggests a

³⁷⁰ Iceland has a proud history of political progressiveness, particularly with regards to women's rights, public health and the education system. Current citizens experience free tertiary education and healthcare, and in 2013 women held 39.7% of its government seats. It also has a high fertility rate and a generous statutory parental leave package for both sexes. See Laurence Amand-Eeckhout, 'Women in Politics: Iceland', European Parliamentary Research Service (25 November 2013) <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/eplibrary/Iceland.pdf>> [accessed 25 June 2015]. The Icelandic Ministry of Welfare also outline their policies in 'Gender Equality' <<http://eng.velferdarraduneyti.is/departments/gender-equality/>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

³⁷¹ A. S. Byatt's novel *Still Life* (1985) for instance, has labouring mother Stephanie 'tramp' the hospital room during labour until she is told to lie down upon the bed by the hospital staff. See A. S. Byatt, *Still Life* (London: Vintage, 1995), pp. 110-11.

return to 'quickenings' as a way of knowing about foetal movement, a knowledge that is exclusive to women. The way in which Flynn's speaker 'feels the lava shift, feels the whale turn' (l. 29) strongly evokes the movement of the foetus within the womb. Both of these movements are natural phenomena – and nothing like the discomfiting squirming 'shadows' of earlier (l. 4). In Flynn's poem the foetus does not demonstrate any overtly human characteristics. It is more than human; its movement is part of the molten core of the earth itself and is both ancient and new. Significantly, it is also 'silent' (l. 30). Flynn's second way of looking shuns the exclamations of her first section. Here, the ultrasound scan is simultaneously aural and inaudible, since its translation of sound into image is carried out silently. This suggests that Flynn is proposing a poetic that privileges the pregnant subject's experience of touch over the visual auscultation of the technology itself. She experiences both the touch of the transducer on her abdomen and an imaginative touch resulting from her look at the image of the moving foetus. The mass visual consumption of ultrasound experienced by everyone in the room, and anyone outside it, is of lesser importance than the pregnant subject's look. This look, therefore, reinterprets the ultrasound scan in favour of individual maternal experience.

Flynn is not the only poet to offer a way of representing ultrasound which highlights the folkloric and magical aspects of pregnant experience. Much of Kathleen Jamie's sequence *Ultrasound* uses such tropes to represent her pregnant speaker and her unborn child. Indeed, the sequence itself acts as a kind of three-dimensional ultrasound picture by offering the reader the same two subjectivities from different perspectives.³⁷² Published in 1999 in *Jizzen* (an Old Scots word for 'childbed') this sequence draws upon an aural

³⁷² Non-diagnostic '3D' and '4D' ultrasound scans are becoming increasingly popular in the twenty-first century. Julie Palmer argues that these practices position the placenta as 'an obstruction to clear imaging, and the [...] representation of the "mother" on the screen'. See Julie Palmer, 'The Placental Body in 4D: Everyday Practices of Non-Diagnostic Sonography', *Feminist Review*, 93 (2009), 64-80 (p. 69).

tradition of Scots poetry and language, in which it remains embedded.³⁷³ Jamie's poems mix contemporary English with Scots; their meanings are both highly dependent on the sounds which they create and the visual poetic form that they take on the page. This returns us to the notion of translation, which Jamie's sequence both undertakes and requires from its readers. Throughout the sequence she highlights the fact that her speaker projects her foetus's identity by using different kinds of language. In 'Ultrasound' he is her 'lad', a 'wee shilpit ghost' (l. 2); in others he is 'an unborn thou' ('ii. Solstice', l. 1), a 'wee toshie man' ('v. Bairnsang', l. 1), and 'Our baby' ('vii. Prayer'. l. 1). In the poems in the sequence which present mother and child in a domestic setting after birth ('iii. Thaw' and 'iv. February') Jamie's speaker uses no epithets to address the child, only the pronoun 'you'. Mother and child have become separate entities: 'two, from my one' ('Thaw', l. 26).

'Ultrasound' is the first encounter between Jamie's mother and child, and one which the subsequent poems each reflect upon, refract and echo. It begins by drawing our attention to sound:

Oh whistle and I'll come to ye,
my lad, my wee shilpit ghost
summonsed from tomorrow. (ll. 1-3)

Jamie's soft monosyllabic exclamation 'Oh' opens the poem, hinting at an emotional response to something outside its representation to which we are not privy. There are few explanations in these poems; Jamie's intertwined use of English and Scots will not wait for the presence of a skilled translator to make them intelligible. Indeed, if the image of the foetus on the screen requires a skilled technician to interpret it for its expectant parents, Jamie withholds such mediation. She presents her speaker and the foetus as in dialogue with

³⁷³ Kathleen Jamie, 'Ultrasound', in *Jizzen* (London: Picador, 1999), pp. 11-18. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text. Through their overt translation and multilingualism Jamie's poems also make political points about homeland, national heritage, colonialism and Scottish identity. *Jizzen* highlights how particular social and historical contexts can foster identity and also create a sense of alienation – rather like Flynn's 'Iceland'.

one another, though she suggests that language itself is beyond the foetus. 'Oh whistle' invites the foetus to make a sound which would indicate its presence and allow the speaker to find it. Throughout the sequence the speaker appears to be searching for a language which might be intelligible to her unborn child, but her efforts do not elicit a linguistic response from him. He is a 'ghost' like Flynn's foetus, and such ghosts cannot speak. Instead, Jamie creates a juxtaposition of sounds and images which make her representation of the ultrasound scan somewhat impressionistic – rather like the ghostly image on the screen itself.

The Gothic image of the ghost confounds the relationship between past, present and future which the medical practice of ultrasound scanning so keenly reinforces. The ghost – a deathly, spectre who is neither fully present nor absent, both homeless and at home, from the past and appearing repeatedly in the now – challenges the notion that the foetal image is a stable representation of the child to be born. By haunting the narrative of Jamie's poem, it disrupts the medical gaze that establishes the developing foetus as a present sign of a future being and instead suggests that the speaker is enacting repeatedly a past look within. Like Dickens's *Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come*, Jamie's foetus is an apparition which belongs fully neither to past, present or future. The foetus's identity, like the language of the sequence, shifts throughout. He is gendered, but that is the only reliable information that the scan reveals. Once seen, the foetus becomes a supernatural entity not of this world. He is a 'wee shilpit ghost/ summonsed from tomorrow' (ll. 2-3); a 'seer's mothy flicker, /an inner sprite' (ll. 5-6). His features, as the Scots adjective 'shilpit' reveals, are 'pinched' and insubstantial.³⁷⁴ This ghostly vision is not the one that appears on the screen, however. Jamie's speaker, we realise in the following stanza, has closed her eyes and turned her gaze inward:

³⁷⁴ 'Shilpit, adj.', in *Dictionary of the Scots Language* <<http://www.dsl.ac.uk>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

this is what I see
 with eyes closed;
 a keek-aboot among secrets. (ll. 7-9)

This pregnant speaker is able to use her poetic imagination to steal a glance at the foetus, using '[s]econd sight' (l. 4) and the lyric 'I' (l. 7). The speaker elides the radiologist from the frame by the simple act of closing her eyes. As a result, the hospital bed and its accompanying medical staff are rendered absent; Jamie's 'I' and her unborn 'lad' are the only entities present in this poem. Jamie also uses Scots here to highlight the mobility of meaning in poetic language. '[K]eek-aboot' (l. 9), a compound verb that combines a 'glance' or 'peep' with 'every side' of a space, suggests that the pregnant gaze is circumspect and revealing.³⁷⁵ 'Keek' can also mean 'kick', which suggests foetal movement. This implies that at the heart of Jamie's poem (line 9 of 18) is the foetus's 'quickenings'. Like Flynn, Jamie suggests that the internal touch of foetal movement is a way of 'seeing' that has not been replaced entirely by modern ultrasound technology. This mode of tactility – powerfully experienced by the pregnant subject only – is characteristic of the ultrasound poem.

Jamie also posits a scenario in which Pandora, the first woman, had managed to scan her box:

If Pandora
 could have scanned
 her dark box,
 and kept it locked (ll. 10-13)

Her allusion to the Greek myth of Pandora's box thus identifies ultrasound with a potentially dangerous, specifically female compulsion to open things and look within. The foetus becomes 'Hope', the only remaining thing in Pandora's box after everything evil had been released into the world (l. 15). Ultrasound technology, Jamie implies, would have kept

³⁷⁵ 'Keek, v.', 'aboot, adv.', and 'keek-bo, n., v.', in *Dictionary of the Scots Language* <<http://www.dsl.ac.uk>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

the world from evil by satisfying curiosity without physically opening what should remain closed. She reconfigures the foetus as a totem, symbolising the Hope which a contemporary Pandora would keep contained, and presents the mother's body as its 'dark box', a source of worldly evil (l. 12). The notion that the female body is a dark and uncanny space is well established, and yet here we are reminded of the stethoscope, X-ray and other harmful ways of exposing the internal spaces of the body such as dissection. These medical means of exposure can be gendered as masculine ways of opening the 'dark box' rather than feminine ones. Jamie, however, appropriates the medical male gaze, in order to suggest that ultrasound allows the pregnant subject a way of 'seeing' that acknowledges the power of the reproductive body. Her pregnant subject can speak, and so is herself engaged in the translation of silence into sound.

However, Jamie also problematises this reading of ultrasound scanning by drawing attention to the foetus's uncanny appearance. Her 'lad' is an unknown quantity when compared with the speaker's distinctly reiterative, singing voice. She does not picture him as disturbingly alien; neither does she invest him with unmediated subjectivity. He is mediated through her closed eyes, and in that sense they are both captured, 'hauled silver-quick/ in a net of sound' (ll. 16-17). Ultrasound therefore has the potential to entrap the pregnant subject in the space of her own 'dark box'; it is a means of fixing identity which is as perilous in its own way as opening that box. The ultrasound scan not only represents the foetus, but the pregnant subject. Her image will also be captured; this look within her body risks disempowerment.³⁷⁶ This problem of ultrasound is one which the historian Barbara Duden also identifies. In *Disembodying Women* (1993) she argues that over time women have been 'forced' to identify their unborn children by sight, rather than by touch alone:

³⁷⁶ As Young has previously argued in 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', pp. 60-61.

Forced to see, to represent, to imagine, we have a restricted sensorium for the invisible shapes inside us. The Enlightenment has removed from our bellies, as from our minds, any reality that is not perceived by the eye.³⁷⁷

This refers to both the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and to its accompanying ocular metaphor, drawn from the literal reality of opening up bodies and shining a light on their internal spaces.³⁷⁸ Ironically, according to Duden, Enlightenment rational empiricism seems to have had the opposite effect from the one intended. She implies that, rather than increase our intellectual understanding of the world, the Enlightenment has limited its imaginative development. Duden argues that we experience reality through sight only, and that this has dulled our other senses. Furthermore, not only has it impacted upon our minds, but our 'bellies'. Duden's pregnant metaphor here suggests that the imaginative restriction placed upon the pregnant subject by Enlightenment principles (and its twentieth-century descendant, ultrasound) has effectively sterilised her poetic production. The reality of the foetus and the pregnant subject's experience of its quickening has been removed. Faced now with the prevalent image of the foetus, the ultrasound scan, the pregnant subject has lost the tactile understanding of her body previously provided by quickening.

However, as my analysis of ultrasound poetry has shown, contemporary women poets explore the process of translation in order to challenge such statements. Though perilous for its potential silencing of the pregnant subject, ultrasound nevertheless gives Jamie's speaker 'hope'. Indeed, both Duden and Jamie identify the unborn with this abstract concept; Duden argues that hope has been 'dissolved into expectations that can be managed at will', which suggests that the condition of pregnancy itself (of 'expecting') is one that is

³⁷⁷ Barbara Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*, trans. by Lee Hoinacki (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 8.

³⁷⁸ Isaac Newton's *Opticks* is one such Enlightenment text that uses the ocular metaphor. See Isaac Newton, *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*, 4th edn (London: [n.pub.], 1730).

currently more stable than in previous years.³⁷⁹ Jamie, meanwhile, highlights her speaker's different voices throughout the 'Ultrasound' sequence, indicating that identity, and particularly pregnant identity, is complex. 'Hope' still exists, however. Jamie quickly lowers the 'net of sound', the box's lid and her speaker's gaze, 'for pity's sake' (l. 18). She implies that Hope is fragile and might disappear if they look too long or too hard. Pregnancy is a tentative, fragile state; the gaze, if misdirected, might harm both mother and foetus. Nevertheless, in 'Ultrasound', Jamie's shift in tense from the conditional 'could have' (l. 11) to the present 'this [...] is' (ll. 14-15) asserts that her 'lad' is Hope for the speaker. Her pregnant subject chooses to open the box and look inside.

Flynn and Jamie are not the only contemporary women poets to approach ultrasound by considering its place in folklore and the natural world. Sally Douglas's 'Candling the Eggs' (2011) observes a pregnant woman holding a hen's eggs up to a lightbulb to determine their contents, the night before her own ultrasound: 'Tomorrow, it won't be light that candles/ her, but slender waves of sound.' (ll. 14-15).³⁸⁰ Douglas uses a third-person narrative, inviting her reader to consider the semi-pastoral landscape of the poem. Enclosed in the space of the artificially-lit barn, the woman scrutinises the eggs as though 'in an eighteenth century study' (l. 5).³⁸¹ Accordingly, Douglas's language is both precisely scientific and somewhat amateur: 'There are three possible conclusions:/ fertilised, edible, bad.' (ll. 7-8). These possible outcomes all refer to very different frameworks of reference. The opposite of 'fertilised', for instance, should be 'unfertilised', but here translates as 'edible'; the opposite of 'edible' is 'inedible', but Douglas uses 'bad', her language increasing its emotiveness by becoming both colloquial and a simplistic moral judgement. This draws

³⁷⁹ Duden argues that this effectively annihilates the 'unborn', making the once uncertainly hoped-for child a 'unique immune system in real time'. See Duden, *Disembodying Women*, p. 10.

³⁸⁰ Sally Douglas, 'Candling the Eggs', in *Candling the Eggs* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2011), p. 25. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

³⁸¹ The 'eighteenth-century study' of Douglas's poem evokes the space of Enlightenment scholarship.

our attention to the translation inherent in looking within and interpreting the contents of a maternal object; indeed, it shows the internal logic of this activity to be deeply flawed. We get the sense that there is a deliberate posturing in these opening lines; like the third-person narrative, this distances us from the character and scene depicted. The woman holds each egg '[c]arefully as a jeweller – fore-finger to apex,/ thumb to base' (ll. 1-2). It is not a candle which she uses to peer inside their semi-transparent shells, but a 'forty watt bulb' (l. 3). Nevertheless, the activity is called 'candling', and it is the woman's realisation of the gap between the physical action and the language used to describe it which changes the tone of the poem:

She thinks of how these dark trawls
are cloaked in words of light.

Last night, for instance, lamping in the fields –
rabbits, frozen in the rapture of the beam;
the shotgun's long pragmatic aim. (ll. 9-13)

The language associated with such farming practices, Douglas suggests, has become folkloric. Hunting rabbits, a brutal, if 'pragmatic' undertaking (l. 13), is 'cloaked in words of light' (l. 10). Though electric lights have replaced the candles and lamps that would have been used previously, the practice is still referred to as 'lamping' (l. 11). The woman performs each action as though it were ritual, but rituals too – from those carried out by the amateur scientist in the study, to those of a contemporary farmer – have their origins in the 'dark trawls' (l. 9) of folklore and superstition. The cycles of the seasons, birth and death, the light and the dark, are, as in Jamie's poems, presented as natural and inevitable. Douglas's 'dark trawls' echo and modify Jamie's 'dark box', so that it is not so much the pregnant subject herself who contains the potential for death, but her actions.³⁸²

³⁸² This also echoes Jamie's fishing imagery: 'hauled silver-quick/ in a net of sound' (ll. 16-17).

However, Douglas's study of a pregnant woman engaged in such ritual translation also suggests that the language itself is flawed. It cloaks the true purpose of the illumination. Diagnostic ultrasound, too, establishes whether the foetus is living and healthy; to pretend otherwise is to be lost in translation, or to be nostalgic for a past language that was never sentimental, for all its 'light'. Douglas's woman realises this, but, in the last stanza, carries out a 'translation' of her own:

Carefully she holds each one, as if it were
a tiny skull: thumb to occipital crest,
fore-finger to unclosing fontanelle. (ll. 16-18)

Douglas's ending remains unresolved, since the woman has yet to be 'candled'. However, self-consciousness lends greater care to her actions. She projects human characteristics onto the eggs, viewing them as miniature human skulls. The medical terminology she employs here suggests the possibility of a 'bad' diagnosis. The fontanelle, the soft spot on a baby's head where the skull later closes and hardens after birth, is 'unclosing'. The woman touches it gently with her forefinger, both exploring and protecting the spot. The skull is fragile and its fragility is prolonged to an unknown place and time. Douglas thus ends on a tender note, neither fully optimistic nor pessimistic about the 'candling' soon to take place.

Indeed, Douglas's poem hints at a possible 'third way' of looking at the ultrasound scan, since it avoids the lyric 'I', the pregnant pronoun.³⁸³ It thereby distances the reader from the pregnant subject. Written in the second person, the poem allows us to watch the speaker 'candling the eggs' from a distanced position that draws attention to the very act of looking.³⁸⁴ This positioning encourages the reader to view a particular instance of scanning

³⁸³ I discuss the 'pregnant pronoun' in the Introduction.

³⁸⁴ Holding something semi-transparent to the light to scrutinise it is an image which appears repeatedly in such representations. The pregnant speaker in Jennifer Richter's 'Ode to the Bones' for instance, compares the ultrasound scan which she experiences to a Chinese woman who leans 'to reach her line/ and her sheer catch/ she holds to the light.' (ll. 29-31). This action is both typical and unique; Richter's scene is infinitely repeatable and her foetus's bones part of a greater landscape which encompasses life, death and disaster. See

within the wider context of the practice of pre-natal monitoring, and other related practices and their discourses, such as medicine, anthropology and photography. One such example of this is found not in poetry, but in prose: Jamie's travelogue, *Findings* (2005). As its title suggests, Jamie's text investigates objects, landscapes and bodies via Enlightened, quasi-scientific examination that is nevertheless poetic.³⁸⁵ She thereby draws attention to the workings behind both the medicalised male gaze and the pregnant gaze itself.

'Speaking from the belly': A Third Way of Looking?

In *Findings*, Jamie invites the reader to 'look within' the female reproductive space when pregnancy has come to an end.³⁸⁶ Jamie describes a visit to Surgeon's Hall, a place which contains various anatomical collections and among them, a selection of foetal skeletons. Removed from the natural environment of their mothers' bodies, the foetuses are exposed to physical manipulation and visual analysis. They can be collected, and their bodies rearranged for display and comparison with each other. They are fascinating objects upon which the gaze can inscribe a variety of meanings. Jamie's description balances carefully between objective scrutiny and subjective interpretation, between medical discourse and poetic language. She draws from a variety of different metaphorical sources, and by so doing situates the foetuses within Gothic, biological and domestic spaces. The first foetus is 'a limp, fairy thing'; one has 'finger bones [...] as fine as dressmakers' pins'; all 'stand upright as if to attention' (p. 135). These foetuses are uncannily familiar, invested with animate

Jennifer Richter, 'Ode to the Bones', in *Threshold* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), pp. 47-48.

³⁸⁵ This links back to the idea of the eighteenth-century study as a space for carrying out scientific, rational investigations of the natural world.

³⁸⁶ Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort Of Books, 2005), p. 141. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

'attention' but also resembling the tools associated with feminine production ('dressmakers' pins'). Like X-ray images, they are deathly objects.

Jamie is rendered mute by these objects: she has been 'gazing in silence' (p. 133). Indeed, she disingenuously ascribes dialogue to the fetuses themselves, who call for the gazer to 'look within':

[T]hese objects in their jars show us the forms concealed inside, the intimate unknown and perhaps that is their new function [...] 'In the midst of this city, you think you are removed from nature', they say – 'but look within'. (p. 141)

By giving a voice to her foetal skeletons, Jamie appropriates them as objects which may be invested with new, speaking identities. According to *Findings*, the 'new function' of these specimens is to remind spectators of their maternal origins: paradoxically, to 'look within' the 'intimate unknown' of the absent maternal body, even whilst located 'in the midst of this city'. Jamie thereby highlights and exemplifies both medical and poetic gazes within the female body. She reinvigorates the dead fetuses, making them invite the subject's gaze and speak. Indeed, Jamie's ventriloquism reminds us of its etymology, 'speaking from the belly'.³⁸⁷ The 'belly', of course, belongs to the pregnant subject, and Jamie uses her fetuses to articulate this subjectivity, thereby offering another way of looking at - or *from* - the pregnant subject. This allows Jamie simultaneously to 'speak' from her own powerful reproductive body, and to participate in the discourse which opens it to scrutiny and privileges the developing fetus over the woman who carries it. The medical gaze exhibits the fetus separately from its mother, and thus suspends it in both time and space at a particular point in its development. This suspension of time and space, however, is a simulation. Jamie describes both the change in preservation techniques and the decay which such techniques ultimately cannot prevent: '[e]ven in the sealed, oxygen-depleted atmosphere within the jar, there is change and growth.' (p. 139). The most significant

³⁸⁷ 'Ventriloquism, n.', in *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 25 June 2015].

changes which occur, however, are not physical – they are in cultural reception and interpretation, and in function:

But nothing is truly fixed. The world changes, attitudes and taboos change. The objects in their jars have been so long dead they have outlived their function. No longer will they be carried into lecture halls and displayed to ranks of rowdy young men to illustrate a point, to describe a medical condition. Leaning over the banister, in the silent hall, I wonder what they are becoming, even as they stay the same. (p. 140)

Jamie uses these specimens as a means of reflecting upon the transformation of meaning.

They have 'outlived' their original function precisely because of its requirements. Now they are too 'long dead' to be useful for medical students. They are instead appropriated by the poet, who breaks the silence of the hall in order to invite a new way of looking at and translating the world.

Jamie's account of 'Surgeon's Hall' suggests that female poets must 'suspend judgement' in order to balance carefully within these ideological, cultural and political spaces of interpretation. It is this process to which the 'ultrasound poem' seeks to draw our attention. These poems self-consciously present the act of looking within and explore its consequences for both pregnant subject and unborn child, thereby enacting the uncanny dialogue between medical and poetical looks within the pregnant body. As they demonstrate, the foetus is both part of its mother's body and 'other' to it, both real and as (science-)fictional as the foetal spaceman. In this light, ultrasound scanning has not only changed the female experience of pregnancy, but has also allowed poets such as Flynn, Borthwick, Dunmore, Wood, Douglas and Jamie the opportunity to explore their often ambivalent responses to this experience. These poets are preoccupied with the uncanny familiarity of the female body, and the notion that it may be examined and translated by both medical and poetic gazes. Furthermore, though the medical gaze in particular can be deathly, these poems reinstate the vitality of the maternal body through their tactile

translation of image and sound, body and language. They do indeed look *within* and *from* the pregnant subject – they 'speak from the belly'.

Chapter IV

Labouring (M)others: Delivering *Frankenstein*

you uterus
 you have been patient
 as a sock
 while i have slipped into you
 my dead and living children
 now
 they want to cut you out
 stocking i will not need
 where i am going
 – Lucille Clifton³⁸⁸

Labour is the stage of pregnancy that represents its ending. Culminating with the birth of the baby, it is the process to which conception, gestation, quickening and foetal monitoring have led. It thereby fundamentally transforms the pregnant subject into a maternal one; she begins labour 'with child' and she ends it as a mother, the 'other' to the new, child subject. As Iris Marion Young argues, '[f]or others the birth of an infant may be only a beginning, but for the birthing woman it is a conclusion as well. It signals the close of a process she has been undergoing for nine months, the leaving of this unique body she has moved through'.³⁸⁹ Labour is thus simultaneously an ending and a beginning, a process looking both backwards and forwards. It is the stage of pregnancy that initiates an irrevocable change: the pregnant subject's arrival at maternity *through* her labouring body. The pregnant body, transforming itself and its unborn child-subject, is both active and powerful in its corporeality.

This final chapter, in exploring labour and birth as a conclusion to the narrative of pregnancy, takes Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* as its origin story. Indeed, *Frankenstein* is perhaps the most fundamental foundation text for thinking about pregnancy

³⁸⁸ Lucille Clifton, 'poem to my uterus', in *Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010* (New York: BOA Editions, 2012), repr. <<http://www.poets.org/print/node/53709>> [accessed 18 August 2015].

³⁸⁹ Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *On Female Bodily Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 41-61 (p. 55).

in women's writing, exploring ideas about birth and monstrosity, absent maternity, otherness and medical discourse. Beginning somewhere in the region of the North Pole, the novel introduces explorer Robert Walton, who rescues a stranger in the ice. This stranger, a dying Victor Frankenstein, then relates the story of his life, which is recorded via Walton's letters to his sister, Margaret. As Victor's narrative reveals, he has created a monstrous superhuman being from body parts and then abandoned it – and as a result of this poor parentage, the Creature has become lonely and murderous. The Creature had persuaded Victor to make him a female companion, but Victor aborted the companion before she could be animated. In revenge, the Creature murdered Victor's bride (Elizabeth) on their wedding night, and the two entered into a pursuit across the world until Victor meets Walton. The Creature reappears after Victor's death and expresses remorse to Walton. He vows to commit suicide and is last seen disappearing into the darkness of the Arctic landscape. This, the earliest text examined in the thesis, is a 'mother' text for my project. Deeply embedded in its early nineteenth-century medical and scientific context, the novel reveals contemporary anxieties about various technological and political developments, and is engaged with medical discourse in quite specific ways.

Both the eighteenth century, and the period of *Frankenstein's* early nineteenth-century composition, consisted of rapid medical changes. These included the rise of the professional man-midwife, surgical intervention during childbirth and the entry of Hunter's atlas and the headless pregnant torso into popular medical discourse.³⁹⁰ As Ornella Moscucci argues,

³⁹⁰ Surgical innovations during this period included the increased use of forceps, patented and jealously wielded by man-midwives such as the Chamberlens, a family of surgeons and physicians practising in England in the early eighteenth century. See Carolyn D. Williams, "'Difficulties, at present in no Degree clear'd up': The Controversial Mother, 1600-1800", in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, ed. by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge (2011; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 16-33 (pp. 26-29), and Sheena Somers, 'Transcending the Sexed Body: Reason, Sympathy, and 'Thinking Machines' in the Debates over Male Midwifery', in *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature*, pp. 89-106 (pp. 90-91). Hunter's 1774 anatomical atlas, as previously discussed in the Introduction, offered a teaching aid for the medical profession by depicting

‘until the early eighteenth century childbirth and the lying-in period were a kind of ritual collectively staged and controlled by women, from which men were usually excluded.’³⁹¹

This positions labour as a rite of passage, presided over by the authoritative figure of the midwife.³⁹² The subsequent ascendancy of the professional male-midwife or *accoucheur* in the eighteenth century reflected the Enlightenment model of the rational male scientist opening up unknown spaces (in this case, the spaces of the birthing chamber and the pregnant female body). Moscucci’s reading emphasises this cultural shift:

Accoucheurs characterised themselves as the carriers of rational, scientific expertise to an area hitherto dominated by allegedly backward and dangerous practices. They contrasted the ‘incompetent’ midwife with the enlightened medical practitioner of midwifery, claiming that accoucheurs were the only people who could conduct mother and baby through to a safe delivery.³⁹³

Both William Smellie and William Hunter were *accoucheurs* who investigated and distributed knowledge of the pregnant body via the dissection theatre and the production of anatomical atlases aimed at other male midwives.³⁹⁴ Such medicalisation, the increased management of labour by male professionals and the subsequent ‘beheading’ of the pregnant subject in representations such as the engravings in Hunter’s atlas, all form the backdrop to Shelley’s

in graphic detail its dissected pregnant bodies, images which are conspicuously headless. See William Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi: Tabulis Illustrata [The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus: Exhibited in Figures]* (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1774).

³⁹¹ Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 43.

³⁹² The history of female midwives is beyond the scope of this chapter, but valuable scholarship has been undertaken by Lisa Cody, among others. See Lisa Forman Cody, ‘The Politics of Reproduction: From Midwives’ Alternative Public Sphere to the Public Spectacle of Man Midwifery’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32.4 (1999), 477-95; Lisa Cody, *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (New York: Feminist Press, 1973); Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England 1660-1700* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³⁹³ Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929*, p. 50.

³⁹⁴ Smellie’s atlas similarly depicted dissected pregnant subjects. See William Smellie, *A Sett of Anatomical Tables, with Explanations, and an Abridgement, of the Practice of Midwifery* (London: [n.pub.], 1754).

supernatural drama. *Frankenstein* can be (and has been) read as a text engaged with medical science, the dissection theatre, grave robbing, electricity, the French Revolution and expeditions to new and undiscovered landscapes.³⁹⁵ Ellen Moers, however, calls the novel a 'birth myth', and it is from this perspective that I position my own critical voice in relation to *Frankenstein*.³⁹⁶

In her seminal work of feminist literary criticism, *Literary Women* (1976), Moers argues that *Frankenstein* was 'lodged in the novelist's imagination [...] by the fact that she was herself a mother'.³⁹⁷ During the period of *Frankenstein*'s composition, Mary was constantly pregnant or nursing.³⁹⁸ She was also surrounded – circled, perhaps – by other pregnant women. Percy Shelley's first wife, Harriet, was pregnant with their child when he eloped with Mary in 1814; Claire Clairmont, the Shelleys' companion, became pregnant by Lord Byron in 1816; Harriet Shelley committed suicide while pregnant with someone else's child in December 1816.³⁹⁹ Moers argues that it is unsurprising that Mary wrote about childbirth, given these circumstances. However, what is unique about *Frankenstein* is its representation of birth as a Gothic fantasy:

Mary Shelley was a unique case, in literature as in life. She brought birth to fiction not as realism but as Gothic fantasy, and thus contributed to Romanticism a myth of genuine originality: the mad scientist who locks himself in his

³⁹⁵ A significant body of *Frankenstein* scholarship deals with these topics. For instance, Fred Botting explores and surveys science, gender and the French Revolution in *Frankenstein*. See Fred Botting, *Making Monstrous: Frankenstein, Criticism, Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991). Elisabeth Bronfen, meanwhile, is one of the scholars who has examined Shelley's biographical context. See Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Rewriting the Family: Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' in its Biographical/Textual Context', in *Frankenstein, Creation, and Monstrosity*, ed. by Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 16-38.

³⁹⁶ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976; repr. London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 92.

³⁹⁷ Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 92.

³⁹⁸ Moers maps out the narrative of Mary's early pregnancies alongside *Frankenstein*'s composition. Mary was pregnant when she eloped with Shelley in July 1814 (giving birth to a daughter in February 1815), and again in April 1815 (giving birth to her son in January 1816). She began *Frankenstein* in June 1816, and was pregnant in early December 1816. See Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 95-96.

³⁹⁹ Moers also argues that '[d]eath and birth were [...] as hideously intermixed in the life of Mary Shelley as in *Frankenstein*'s "workshop of filthy creation"'. Mary suffered the loss of her (illegitimate) baby daughter in March 1815, while Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister, committed suicide in October 1816. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had died of puerperal fever following Mary's birth. See Moers, p. 96.

laboratory and secretly, guiltily works at creating human life, only to find that he has made a monster.⁴⁰⁰

Shelley's mad scientist's maternity is horrific and particularly Gothic because he is a man; here the pregnant subject unnaturally, 'secretly, guiltily' conceives and births his child within the scientific, enlightened chamber of the laboratory. The result is monstrous – and Moers argues that it is this traumatic 'afterbirth' that particularly characterises Shelley's myth.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, the text shows the punishing consequences of the maternal male subject's labours, while rendering its absent female bodies spectral.⁴⁰²

I aim to develop Moers' argument by offering a rereading of the novel that focuses on Shelley's maternal subjects – her overreaching male maternal subject, Victor Frankenstein, and her 'other' mothers (Margaret, Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine and the aborted female Creature) who are rendered absent, dead, disembodied or dismembered. By paying critical attention to *Frankenstein's* (m)others, and by comparing the novel with examples of the medical discourse from the period such as Hunter's atlas, I will argue that the deathly dismemberment of some of these subjects results in a proliferation of body parts that invite reassembly and reanimation. This can be linked to how the text itself evokes multiple readings, and thus reveals the significance of pregnancy, particularly labour, as a metaphor for literary production. As reading *Frankenstein* shows us, the process of birthing a book is fraught with anxiety about the transformation of the pregnant subject into

⁴⁰⁰ Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 93.

⁴⁰¹ Moers argues that '*Frankenstein* seems to be distinctly a woman's mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth'. See Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 93. This chapter, however, will contest Moers' argument by focusing on the motif of labouring in both *Frankenstein* itself, and in the texts that 'deliver' it to the reader, such as Percy Shelley's 1818 Preface and Mary Shelley's 1831 Introduction.

⁴⁰² The ways in which the pregnant body is ghosted, Gothicised and made spectral is also explored in Chapter III (Ultrasound).

a maternal one – especially how the child/book might reflect on its mother/author within an early nineteenth-century context.⁴⁰³ It also, however, allows for the female author to be read as a figure both engaged with, and positioned against, dominant masculine Romantic models of creativity, such as the one that Wordsworth outlines in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), which defines the ‘Poet’ as ‘a man speaking to men’.⁴⁰⁴ *Frankenstein* is a text that has been delivered repeatedly and variously, from critical readings such as Moers’, to the paratexts which frame the novel, material that includes Percy Shelley’s Preface to the 1818 edition and Mary Shelley’s 1831 Introduction. Mary Shelley’s initial draft of the novel, which famously began as a ghost story written during the summer of 1816 at Lake Geneva, has become the dominant narrative of its conception, but this is only part of its story. It is also a text that was conceived, gestated and laboured over during a period of months; its later drafts were moreover operated on with the collaborative, surgeon-like editing of Percy Shelley himself, as Charles E. Robinson’s edition shows.⁴⁰⁵

This chapter explores the ways in which *Frankenstein* has been ‘delivered’ – ways that suggest it is thoroughly influenced by, and in dialogue with, the increasingly medicalised pregnant body of the early nineteenth century. Percy Shelley’s Preface to the 1818 edition of the novel, for instance, introduces the novel by focusing on the physiological effect that it has on its reader, who ‘labours’ to get to the very corporeal blood and fibres of the text.

⁴⁰³ Mary’s authorship was initially anonymous; as will be later explored, both her Introduction and Percy Shelley’s Preface attempt to address the apparent disjuncture between feminine authorship and her ‘hideous progeny’.

⁴⁰⁴ William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 241–72 (p. 255).

⁴⁰⁵ Percy Shelley was a poet, and in both reviewing and helping to edit Mary Shelley’s drafts of *Frankenstein*, he took up his pen in the manner of a surgeon taking up a scalpel to dissect and reassemble a body. His edits of the manuscript include both ‘cuts’ and insertions. This can be seen in the surviving draft manuscripts (currently located in the Bodleian Library, Oxford). The Shelley-Godwin Archive also publishes these manuscript drafts online. See <<http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/>> [accessed 16 July 2015]. Both Percy’s insertions and Mary’s original draft have been reanimated by Charles E. Robinson’s edition of the novel. See Mary Shelley (with Percy Shelley), *The Original Frankenstein*, ed. by Charles E. Robinson (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2008; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

As my analysis reveals, the 'labour' of reading that Shelley privileges can be interpreted both in terms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical discourses, and twentieth-century theoretical perspectives. Young's argument, for example, resonates with Shelley's, because she states that '[t]he birthing process entails the most extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer'.⁴⁰⁶ Just as the labouring mother works *through* her body in order to give birth to her child and make what has been internal external, Shelley's reader has to read *through* the body of the text. The reading of the text thus involves a metaphorical labouring, in which the bodies of author and reader, suspended, overlap.

Percy Shelley's Labouring Reader

'[W]e think we can bear no more, and yet more is to be borne', wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818.⁴⁰⁷ Percy Shelley's review suggests that *Frankenstein* is an almost unendurable physical trial for its readers, requiring considerable strength and stamina. This, to my mind, evokes the childbirth metaphor as a way of describing the reading process rather than in its traditional sense as a metaphor for authorial creation.⁴⁰⁸ Reading *Frankenstein*, as the telling pun on 'bear' and 'borne' implies, is a kind of mental labour which assaults the reader's physical senses unremittingly until the novel reaches its climax: '[w]e are held breathless with suspense and sympathy, and the heaping up of incident on incident, and the working of passion out of passion' (p. 434). Shelley's compound sentence and repetition emphasises the accumulation of sensation which synchronises

⁴⁰⁶ Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', p. 50.

⁴⁰⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On "Frankenstein"' (1818), *The Athenæum: Journal of English and Foreign Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 10 November 1832, 730. Repr. in *The Original Frankenstein*, ed. by Charles E. Robinson (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2008; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 2009), pp. 434-46. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁰⁸ I discuss the childbirth metaphor in the Introduction.

readers' bodies with their minds. It is itself an overtly literary sentence, enacting its meaning by holding our 'suspense and sympathy' as Shelley works through and towards his 'passion'. Shelley's response is also instructive: 'we' labour together. 'It is impossible to read,' Shelley writes, 'without feeling the heart suspend its pulsations with wonder, and the "tears stream down the cheeks"' (pp. 435-36). Reading *Frankenstein* thus makes us 'breathless' with emotion, and this emotion in turn requires us to keep 'working' our bodies in order to continue the experience. Together, we labour in both mind and body towards the moment of birth, the moment at which the text is fully delivered/read.

Shelley's review suggests that readers of *Frankenstein* are likely to have a physiological reaction to the text – they might even feel physically overpowered and shed 'tears'. Here, Shelley implicitly engages with Romantic narratives of the poet and his reader as emotional subjects, afflicted by poetic sensibility. For instance, in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously outlined the relationship between poetry and emotion:

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.⁴⁰⁹

This, a fundamental Romantic narrative of artistic creation, positions the author as an emotional subject who is nevertheless able to recollect such emotion in tranquillity. According to this definition, the poetic process is *reproductive*; contemplating the emotion and its representation from a position of 'tranquillity' causes a new, similar emotion to be engendered in the mind of the subject. Reading poetry, then, reproduces that initial

⁴⁰⁹ Wordsworth, 'Preface', p. 266.

'spontaneous overflow'. This Romantic model thus suggests that poetry stems not only from what the poem is, or from what its author states it is, but also from the tearful 'overflow' of the reader's response.

Shelley's own 'A Defence of Poetry' (1840) similarly emphasises the effect of poetry on the imaginative faculties of readers and poets alike. 'A great Poem', he argues, 'is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight', which has the capacity to reach readers well beyond its publication period, so that 'new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight'.⁴¹⁰ Indeed, according to Shelley the 'poetical faculty' (of the imagination) 'engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce' the knowledge, power and pleasure that it first creates.⁴¹¹ Poetry, then, is inherently generative, fluid and spontaneous. It works by its permeation, and awakening of, the reader's poetic faculty. Furthermore, Shelley uses the childbirth metaphor explicitly to depict artistic conception:

[A] great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb, and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process.⁴¹²

This suggests that the (male) artist is an unconscious creator, a mere vessel for poetic inspiration. His creation cannot be explained or accounted for completely. The stages or 'gradations' of artistic labour are beyond his comprehension. Mostly, Shelley's account of the effect of poetry on the individual subject seems 'tranquil'. However, towards the end of his essay he comments that '[i]t is impossible to read the compositions of the most

⁴¹⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: the Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 674-701 (p. 693).

⁴¹¹ Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', p. 696. My emphasis.

⁴¹² Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', p. 697.

celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words.⁴¹³ This hints at the ‘startling’ effect that *Frankenstein* has on its readers, whilst also drawing on the concept of ‘electric life’ which the novel depicts. For Victor Frankenstein, the process of creation is ‘electric’, rather than generative – and for this reason its readers’ bodily reactions are frenetic, rather than tranquil. Indeed, Shelley’s account of the labour of reading *Frankenstein* not only draws upon the Romantic narrative of poetic creation, but on the Gothic.

Moers defines the Gothic as a mode which aims ‘to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.’⁴¹⁴ This definition draws upon the vocabulary of medical discourse, relying on the reader’s knowledge of anatomy to emphasise the particular physiological effects of reading. For instance, Moers assumes that we know that ‘epidermis’ means ‘skin’. She suggests that the Gothic functions as a way of identifying parts of the body by means of reaching out ‘to get to’ the physical components themselves. The notion that a reader may find fear ‘arousing’ also implies that sexual desire is a key component of the reading process, both as a motivator and as an effect. Significantly, what is ‘quickly’ aroused is also ‘quickly’ allayed; Moers suggests that built into Gothic literature is a kind of safety net which rescues the reader from too excessive a physical response. The reader may feel the heart ‘suspend its pulsations’ but reading itself will then allay that ‘physiological reaction’ and

⁴¹³ Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, p. 701.

⁴¹⁴ Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 90. Moers also distinguishes between the ‘Male’ and the ‘Female Gothic’, coining the latter term to delineate the work undertaken in this mode by women writers since the eighteenth century (p. 90). Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith point out that this has since opened up a large and ‘fertile field for critics’, including Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Anne Williams, Robert Miles, and E.J. Clery, among others. Indeed, Wallace’s and Smith’s rereading of Moers suggests that *Frankenstein*, with its focus on the ‘male overreacher’, is much closer to the ‘Male Gothic’. Radcliffean narratives of entombment and escape, meanwhile, ‘coded expression[s] of [...] fears of entrapment within the domestic and female body’, exemplify the ‘Female Gothic’. See Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, ‘Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic’, in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-12 (pp. 1-2).

return the heart to its normal steady beating. The skill of the author rests in 'his' ability to both induce and manage such labouring.

While Shelley takes pains to emphasise the novel's function as 'a source of powerful and profound emotion' on the susceptible reader, he also is careful to stress its author's gentle benevolence:

The sentiments are so affectionate and so innocent – the characters of the subordinate agents in this strange drama are clothed in the light of such a mild and gentle mind – The pictures of domestic manners are every where of the most simple and attaching character (p. 435)

Here Shelley's description suggests that *Frankenstein's* author has indeed 'recollected in tranquillity' the 'affectionate' sentiments that accompany the novel's 'strange drama'. He reassures the reader before s/he begins. This reflects the uncertain anonymity of *Frankenstein's* authorship, which in 1818 was presumed to be male. Percy Shelley was also Mary Shelley's partner and, later, her husband. His initial relationship to the text thus positions him as its *father*, while Mary's involvement is hidden. She is the 'hidden mother' behind the novel; indeed, she is hidden so thoroughly that even her outline is obscured.⁴¹⁵ Furthermore, Percy Shelley's disingenuousness in using the pronoun 'he' to designate 'the Author' of this novel constructs a substitute author figure, a kind of cipher who exhibits both masculine and feminine qualities. The 'Author' has a 'mild and gentle mind' that enables 'him' to show 'domestic manners [...] of the most simple and attaching character' (p. 435) as well as scenes of horror. Crucially, it is this gentleness, a quality associated with the idealised feminine, that enables the author to depict safely the 'strange drama' and

⁴¹⁵ Shelley's pregnant 'silhouette', then, is completely obscured. See the Introduction and Chapter II (Miscarriage) for further discussion of 'hidden mothers' and the pregnant silhouette.

'peculiar experiences' of the novel (p. 435). Domestic femininity, the 'affectionate', 'innocent' characteristics of the ideal woman depicted in Shelley's account of *Frankenstein's* 'male' authorship as well as in its minor characters, acts as a counterpoint to the Romantic excess of 'powerful and profound emotion' which the overreaching protagonist both experiences and engenders in the reader. The Author-cipher's perceived ideal femininity moderates the unsettling content of the novel and its reader's 'pulsations'. Similarly, Shelley's use of the passive voice ('We are held...') positions the reading process as an assisted *delivery* rather than an active labour. The real labouring of the novel is safely undertaken by its author, on behalf of the reader. Thereby, though the metaphor of labouring/reading identifies us with the mother/author, we are made aware that (s)he is uniquely able to bear the unbearable book, the monstrous child, *Frankenstein*.

This femininity is only reassuring, however, because the 'Author' is presumed to be male. The novel, Shelley reassures us, is 'conducted throughout with a firm and steady hand' (p. 434). He uses the vocabulary of medical discourse here in order to draw a link between *Frankenstein's* author and the figure of the enlightened medical man. The metaphor of the mother-author thus transforms: Shelley's Author is like a surgeon who engineers the reader's 'delivery'. 'He' is the *accoucheur* who delivers the novel, and so is both benevolent – a symbol of medical professionalism – and ultimately not responsible for any monstrosity or violent emotional response encountered by the reader. In an age before anaesthesia in the operating theatre (let alone in the domestic birthing chamber) Shelley's review presents *Frankenstein's* author as someone at the forefront of medical advancement, who delivers the novel in much the same way as a professional man-midwife delivers a baby. Having first introduced the reading process as a kind of labour located at the boundary between the 'pulsating' heart and the suspension of that pulse, Shelley develops his frame of reference to include surgery and dissection. The published novel is, after all, performative – like the

'theatre' of dissection.⁴¹⁶ Though Shelley's review does not explicitly mention dissection, it certainly implies a covert thematic link between it and the effect that *Frankenstein* has on its reader, because it is a means of *exposing* the human mind 'to view': '[t]he Novel thus rests its claim on being a source of powerful emotion. The elementary feelings of the human mind are exposed to view' (p. 434). This description of *Frankenstein* presents the novel as having a particularly complex function. Again, Shelley uses the passive voice to describe its effect on the reader. However, here he positions himself as a distanced external observer viewing the 'exposed' components and 'elementary feelings of the human mind'. The spirit of scientific enquiry informs Shelley's gaze, but there is the sense that this procedure costs bodies their agency and causes the collective readership to become individually fragmented. This draws a link between the novel's delivery and death, suggesting that readers are in danger of becoming caught up in Shelley's Gothic narrative of dismemberment and reanimation. Indeed, in its delivery of the labouring reader, *Frankenstein* can be read alongside anatomical atlases produced by eighteenth-century man-midwives. Both of these texts draw attention to the deathliness of birth.

William Hunter's 1774 atlas, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi* (*The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*), illustrated by the Dutch artist, Jan van Rymsdyk, begins with an illustration of a dissected pregnancy at full term.⁴¹⁷ This is unlike William Smellie's 1754 atlas – also illustrated by van Rymsdyk – which begins with illustrations of early pregnancy and moves

⁴¹⁶ Tim Marshall writes of the performative nature of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anatomical theatre, linking this with the medical gaze. Indeed, contextualising his study in terms of the legislative developments and associated scandals of the period (such as The Murder Act of 1752, which made the dissection of all murderers compulsory), he argues that *Frankenstein* recalls the early eighteenth-century public ritual of the 'gallows wedding', a series of rituals performed at the gallows by the poor (and which might include the dressing of the criminal in wedding clothes, and sometimes even the petitioning for his reprieve by women dressed in white, with a promise of marriage). See Tim Marshall, *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-robbing, Frankenstein and the Anatomy Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 143-59.

⁴¹⁷ Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*, Plate I.

towards the moment of birth.⁴¹⁸ During this period medical specimens of pregnant women were obtained when women died suddenly during labour. Such specimens were considered precious since they were a rarity, and provided the basis of obstetrical diagrams in key medical tomes such as Hunter's – volumes which contributed towards the professionalisation of midwifery. Hunter's atlas does not concern itself with the narrative of birth; it makes no attempt to disguise the fact of its specimens' deaths. As Lyle Massey argues, Hunter's atlas presents 'a string of images, each of which stands as an iconic demonstration of gestational morphology.'⁴¹⁹ Hunter's reader is expected to engage with this 'morphology' and to piece together the process of gestation from the multiple images of different specimens. Each image may be considered 'iconic' in its own right, since each depicts a different stage of pregnancy, or a different view of the reproductive organs and foetus (and in some cases, a different body). Each image is also headless, showing the pregnant subject's torso only. This maternal headlessness can be read as particularly significant in light of Cartesian dualism: by identifying women as all body, Hunter's text implies that men – particularly, medical men – are all mind. Indeed, Margrit Shildrick notes that Descartes intended his mind/body model to have medical application, allowing medical professionals to pathologise the malfunctioning female body.⁴²⁰ Hunter's images reinforce the notion that the female subject is the sum of her reproductive body. His atlas shows his interest (and the interests of other professional man-midwives) in the function of the gravid uterus, and what might be learned from its exposure. The pregnant subjects' minds are irrelevant; so too, are their previously active limbs.

⁴¹⁸ William Smellie, *A Sett of Anatomical Tables, with Explanations, and an Abridgement, of the Practice of Midwifery* (London: [n.pub.], 1754).

⁴¹⁹ Lyle Massey, 'Dissecting Pregnancy in 18th-Century England', *Anatomy Of Gender* (2005) <<http://anatomyofgender.northwestern.edu/massey01.html>> [accessed 31 October 2012].

⁴²⁰ Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 16.

Hunter's atlas encourages its reader to participate in the 'dissection' of these images by presenting them as self-conscious representations. In a narrative that reflects his privileging of Enlightenment models of reason and knowledge, he takes pains to tell the reader that the engravings are an exact record of what happens when an artist enters the dissection theatre and is charged with the task of representing exactly what he sees. In the text accompanying one illustration, for instance, Hunter points out that the artist has included the reflection of the window which appeared on the membrane covering the foetus's head (Fig. 1): 'the convex surface of the transparent membranes, reflected a distinct miniature picture, of the window which gave light.'⁴²¹ Hunter thus draws our attention both to the function of the window which aids the artist's work and the reflection – and the process of representation – itself. He earlier argued that the artist's representation is 'almost as infallible as the object itself'.⁴²² However, the female bodies which are presented in these images are *not* 'infallible', even though they are given object status. Their very existence proves that they are fallible: they have failed to give birth successfully, and Hunter tells us how each woman died when they first appear. This failure is intensified by the presence of the stillborn child in many of these images – children at full-term who are beautifully rendered in delicate line engravings (Fig. 2). Thus, Hunter inscribes into his atlas a keen sense of loss. Massey argues that '[i]t is death itself that seems most present in Hunter's atlas and this is why it conveys the sense that we are participating in an anatomical dissection.'⁴²³ The tension between the necessity of these dead bodies and the reader's purpose in 'dissecting' them – to learn how to give life by delivering babies successfully – throws particular light on both Shelley's review and on *Frankenstein* itself.

⁴²¹ Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*, Plate XXVI, Fig. IV.

⁴²² Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*, Preface.

⁴²³ Massey, 'Dissecting Pregnancy in 18th-Century England'.

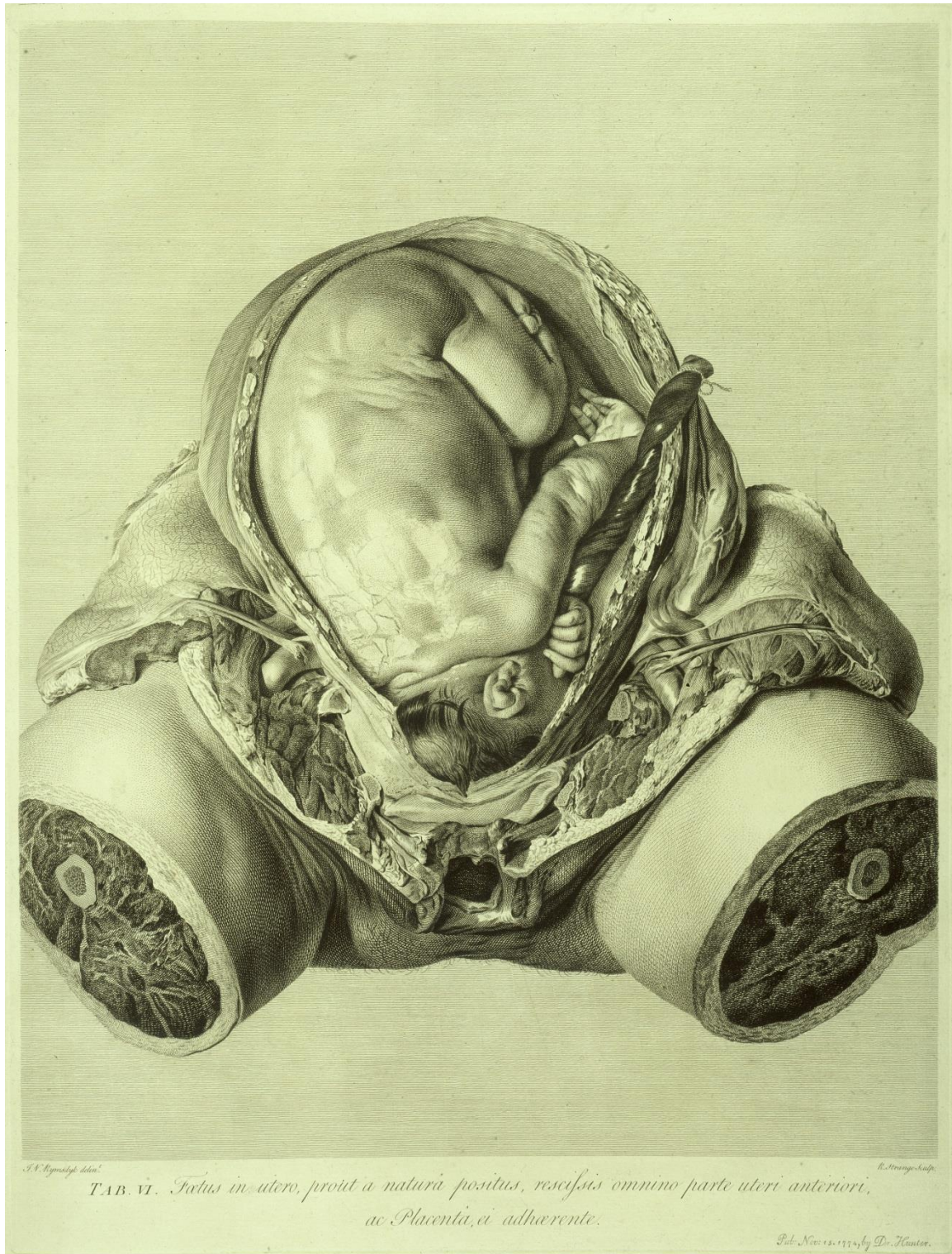
Like Victor Frankenstein, Hunter's atlas follows the maxim '[t]o examine the causes of life we must first have recourse to death'.⁴²⁴ Hunter's final figures show the corporeal substance of early pregnancy; labelled 'Conception', these images represent the origins of life, though they are deathly (Fig. 3). Hunter includes the following explanatory note: 'The whole object was considerably flattened and spread out, by its own weight, as it lay in a little dish before the painter.'⁴²⁵ Hunter's images show the dissected womb and the embryo inside, both of which are conflated into one 'object'. His notes focus on the physical presentation of the specimen, which cannot apparently hold its own weight. The mother is thus dismembered, represented only by her reproductive organs.

⁴²⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831) ed. by Maurice Hindle, rev. edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 52. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text. My analysis of the novel uses the 1831 edition, positioning it as the fulfilment of Shelley's labours. This is contrary to some recent readings of the novel that have searched for the authentic original text, privileging the 1818 version over its later revised publication. Marilyn Butler's edition is one seminal example of this. This thesis, however, whilst recognising the value of this scholarship in thinking about the novel's *conception*, is concerned with the *labour* and *delivery* of the finished text. This enables the chapter to look forwards and track such 'deliveries', by creating a timeline that begins with Percy Shelley's 1818 Preface and ends with Mary Shelley's 1831 text. See Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus: the 1818 text*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1993).

⁴²⁵ Hunter, *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*, Plate XXXIV.

Fig. I ⁴²⁶

⁴²⁶ Hunter, Plate XXVI, '3 months foetuses: Fig. 1. Fore-view of the womb opened, full three months; Fig. 2. A longitudinal section of the womb; Fig. 3. Back-view of the whole contents of the pelvis, consisting principally of the retroverted womb; Fig. 4. The womb opened to show the secundines and their contents', in *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidæ*. Image available from Wellcome Images.

Fig. 2⁴²⁷

⁴²⁷ Hunter, Plate VI, 'The child in the womb, in its natural situation', in *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*. Image available from Wellcome Images.

Fig. 3⁴²⁸

⁴²⁸ Hunter, Plate XXXIV, 'Gravid uterus, first few weeks of pregnancy', in *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*. Image available from Wellcome Images.

Overtly stylised, these images' headlessness, and the attention paid to small details such as the 'little dish', demonstrate highly self-conscious representation that both privileges mimesis and undermines it. For example, the bodies were not literally beheaded, though they are shown as headless. Again, Hunter's notes remind the reader of the conditions under which the specimen was viewed ('in a little dish'), a detail that evokes the domestic space of an artist's studio rather than a surgical setting. It thus demonstrates the cross-over between the domestic and the medical – the fluidity of literary and medical discourse. This resonates interestingly with Shelley's review, which places both the novel and the reader precariously on the operating table, to be operated on by the Author's 'firm and steady hand'. Shelley suggests that *Frankenstein* acts as a kind of experiment to show us the human condition, but it also prompts self-examination.

Like the man-midwife reading Hunter's atlas, Percy Shelley looks frankly at what *Frankenstein* 'exposes'. Shelley's review suggests that Susan Stanford Friedman is right to argue that readers 'complete' the childbirth metaphor through engaging with a collective interpretative framework.⁴²⁹ In this case, the reader undergoes a kind of 'sympathetic' labour made all the more significant by the fact that Percy Shelley was Mary Shelley's husband.⁴³⁰ Indeed, the figure of the father holds considerable influence in *Frankenstein*'s nineteenth-century reception context. Ironically, as Maurice Hindle notes, some later readers would come to view Mary Shelley as a kind of cipher for Percy Shelley's 'genius' and *Frankenstein* as a 'fortuitous refraction' of that genius.⁴³¹ However, as the 1816-17 draft manuscripts show, the fluidity of the text is the result of voluntary collaboration rather than

⁴²⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (1987), 49-82 (p. 54).

⁴³⁰ Also known as Couvade syndrome, 'sympathetic labour' is an involuntary manifestation of pregnant symptoms in men whose partners are pregnant at the same time. See Arthur Brennan, Susan Ayres, Hafez Ahmed and Sylvie Marshall-Lucette, 'A Critical Review of the Couvade Syndrome: the Pregnant Male', *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 25.3 (2007), 173-89.

⁴³¹ Maurice Hindle, 'Introduction', in *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. xi-xlvi (p. xiii).

textual interference.⁴³² Meanwhile, the position of the female author, who has the physical capacity to be both 'mother' and 'Author', reproducer and producer, is both threatened and threatening. Little wonder, then, that Percy Shelley concealed the identity of his wife behind an anonymous Author-cipher, or that his review emphasises the benevolent intent of the surgeon. However, Shelley's narrative was eventually superseded by Mary Shelley's own account of *Frankenstein's* delivery, after her authorship became public knowledge. In her 1831 Introduction, she reasserts the author's creativity in producing such textual 'hideous progeny'.⁴³³

Mary Shelley's 'hideous progeny'

By 1831 the identity of *Frankenstein's* author was known, and her publishers 'expressed a wish that I [Mary Shelley] should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story' (p. 5). This suggests that Shelley's contemporaries were interested not just in reading *Frankenstein*, but in reading the story of its composition, and desired that the author be read as a character in her own drama. Surely part of this fascination surrounding *Frankenstein's* conception was due to the fact that Mary Shelley was a young woman of just eighteen when she wrote it, and the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft? Shelley obliged, outlining her method and the circumstances of the novel's composition in her Introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel. She, too, used the childbirth metaphor, and by so doing created a kind of authorial origin myth.

⁴³² Robinson, 'Introduction', in *The Original Frankenstein*, pp. 16-37 (p. 24).

⁴³³ Mary Shelley, 'Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition' (1831), in *Frankenstein*, ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 5-10 (p. 10). All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

According to this myth, one of the important circumstances of Shelley's authorship was her parentage and childhood love of writing stories. As the daughter of 'distinguished literary celebrity', Shelley reflected that her desire to write was neither unsurprising nor improper (p. 5). Her 'scribbled' attempts were part of an idealised childhood located in a natural rural setting:

It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered. (p. 6)

Shelley here presents literary production metaphorically as biological reproduction and parenting. This is particularly important given that *Frankenstein* is concerned with what occurs when a birth results in neglectful parenting: the Creature is abandoned rather than fostered. Mary's metaphorical childbirth takes place in a setting both rural ('beneath the trees') and grand ('bleak sides of the woodless mountains'). It also, significantly, is within touching distance of domesticity – 'belonging to our house'. Shelley's lexis here is undeniably Romantic; the 'bleak', mountainous landscape provokes sublime terror.⁴³⁴ She has been influenced by contemporary notions of the sublime natural landscape providing inspiration for the poetic Imagination. James Beattie's 'Illustrations on Sublimity', for instance, outlines the pleasing terror of the sublime landscape in terms that are strikingly similar to Mary Shelley's:

There is a kind of horror, which may be infused into the mind both by natural appearances, and by verbal description; and which, though it makes the blood seem to run cold, and produce a momentary fear, is not unpleasing, but may even be agreeable: and therefore, the objects that produce it are justly denominated sublime. Of natural appearances that affect the mind in this

⁴³⁴ The positioning of the female subject beneath the trees also evokes the creative space of the grotto, which I discuss in Chapter I (From Consummation to Quickening), suggesting that this metaphor for female creativity also is a particularly Romantic one.

manner, are vast caverns, deep and dark woods, overhanging precipices, the agitation of the sea in a storm [...] those external things, which are pleasingly terrible [...]⁴³⁵

Beattie's sublime landscape includes dark and vast spaces of natural grandeur, which has an immediate and violent effect on the subject's physiology, making the blood 'run cold'. Like Beattie, and Percy Shelley, Mary wrote of the importance of affecting the reader's physiology through her story. She wished to 'awaken thrilling horror [...] to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart.' (pp. 7-8). However, the fact that Mary Shelley's landscape can be owned by the house suggests that authorship – particularly female authorship – is born at home too, the place of the idealised feminine. Both belonging to the domestic and adjacent to it, female authorship and metaphorical childbirth is simultaneously reassuring and threatening because of its liminality. Neither properly feminine nor completely engaged with the sublime, the female author gives birth to her 'hideous progeny' just outside the house.

This liminality recalls Percy Shelley's careful positioning of the Author-cipher in his review. Mary's account of the summer of 1816 at Lake Geneva also corroborates this placing, since it suggests that the novel was the product both of collaboration and of her 'possessed' imagination. The Shelleys and Lord Byron spent the summer reading ghost stories and decided to hold an informal writing competition – a narrative which has since taken on a kind of mythology of its own because it resulted in the composition of *Frankenstein*.⁴³⁶ However, her account of the Gothic vision which inspired the novel

⁴³⁵ James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical. On Memory and Imagination. On Dreaming. The Theory of Language. On Fable and Romance. On the Attachments of Kindred. Illustrations on Sublimity*. (London: W. Strahan, 1783), pp. 612-13.

⁴³⁶ The story of the summer of 1816 is reanimated in several other cultural texts, including Howard Brenton's play, *Bloody Poetry* (1984) and Ken Russell's 1986 film *Gothic*. See Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1985), and *Gothic*, dir. by Ken Russell (Vestron Pictures, 1986). For a critical exploration of such

suggests that the author is a passive receptacle for artistic inspiration and not an active agent in the creation of horror:

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw – with shut eyes, but acute mental vision – I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. [...] His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. (p. 9)

Mary repeatedly emphasises sight at the expense of thought by stating that she did not ‘think’ of *Frankenstein*. ‘I busied myself to *think* of a story’, she recalls, but the story would not come (p. 7, my emphasis). She was instead ‘possessed’ and ‘gift[ed]’ with ‘acute mental vision’. The importance of imaginative sight recurs throughout this excerpt (‘I saw’, Mary repeats) as does the artistry of the ‘pale student’ who has assembled ‘the hideous phantasm of a man’.

At this point Mary’s characters are ‘half-vital’; conceived as insubstantial apparitions, they are only realised fully later in the text. Their ghostliness, however, also implies that there is a certain amount of deception and illusion inherent both in the characters themselves and in Mary’s account of their creation. These are Gothic subjects, whose spectrality seems fundamentally at odds with the ‘vividness’ of Mary’s vision. They call into question the material certainty of the body, ghosting it in a way that echoes the ghosting of the pregnant body in *Frankenstein*.⁴³⁷ Indeed, *Frankenstein*’s ‘birth myth’ emphasises the

reanimations, see Steven Earl Forry, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from Mary Shelley to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

⁴³⁷ My reading of *Frankenstein*’s spectral maternal subjects, and the ‘ghosted’ pregnant body, as this chapter shows, undertakes to expose to view the ‘hidden mothers’ within Shelley’s text. As Chapter III (Quickening) reveals, such ghosting is apparent throughout the texts examined in this thesis.

absence of the pregnant body despite its emphasis on labouring. The persistent artistry of the 'pale student', a man who births a monstrous being, marks him as another Author-cipher in the text. Mary's origin myth can thus be read as an example of the 'Female Gothic' text, which, according to Diana Wallace, contains the ghostly subject at its heart.⁴³⁸ Wallace traces the metaphor of the ghostly woman in the Female Gothic, arguing that its prevalence haunts both literature and feminist criticism precisely because it has 'enormous power to convey women's experiences of living in a culture which historically denied them legal status as "subjects" within marriage, and which has continued to make women feel that they are denied a full subjectivity'.⁴³⁹ The spectral female subject, recast as multiple women 'imprisoned, buried alive, and as "ghosts"' in Gothic texts of the 1790s, and in late twentieth-century feminist criticism, thus allows the relationship between the silenced and 'unspeakable' female subject and the cultural spaces that she 'haunts' to be articulated.⁴⁴⁰ Though Mary's spectral 'pale student' is male rather than female, his unnatural maternity makes him even more ghostly; here, he uncannily mirrors the figure of the Gothic ghostly woman. Furthermore, Mary's account of authorial conception also ghosts *her* pregnant body by looking instead towards apparitions, reveries, dreams and spectres as sources of poetic inspiration. She downplays her active authorship, claiming that this creative vision was *delivered* by her imagination, rather than *laboured*. This suggests that it is the artistic or poetic imagination itself that is gifted with poetic pregnancy, rather than the subject to whom it belongs, and by implication, this enables both male and female subjects to become 'pregnant'. Indeed, Mary Shelley's strategic positioning of herself as a passive receptacle of this novel's monstrous birth allows her both to appropriate the childbirth metaphor

⁴³⁸ Diana Wallace, "'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory', in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, pp. 26-41 (p. 26).

⁴³⁹ Wallace, "'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory', p. 38.

⁴⁴⁰ Wallace, "'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory', pp. 26-27.

previously utilised by male writers, and to explore the horrific consequences of her male maternal subject's labours.⁴⁴¹ Mary's Introduction thus provides a highly self-conscious origin myth, its meaning shifting continuously.

The 'fathering' of the text is also something that Mary addresses; indeed, she later admits thinking of the story, but states that Percy Shelley's encouragement and influence was most instrumental in birthing the novel:

At first I thought but a few pages – of a short tale; but [Percy] Shelley urged me to develop the idea at greater length. 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. (p. 10)

This suggests that *Frankenstein* was conceived originally as a short story, but that Percy Shelley's 'incitement' changed this form irrevocably. Mary's use of this noun is particularly revealing since it is one which was used in the contemporary medical discourse surrounding galvanism, the introduction of electrical current into dead animal and human tissue, which demonstrated muscle contraction and raised questions such as '[d]oes the incitement of the influence which in Mr. Galvani's experiments, occasions the muscles of animals to contract, either wholly or in part depend upon any peculiar property of living bodies?'⁴⁴² Arguably this question is equally applicable to the authorship of *Frankenstein*. Does Percy Shelley's 'incitement' make the novel, or does it depend upon the 'peculiar property' of Mary's authorial body? Mary firmly states that she 'certainly did not owe' her husband for even

⁴⁴¹ Susan Stanford Friedman argues that the childbirth metaphor has been reappropriated by female writers. I discuss this in the Introduction. See Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', *Feminist Studies*, 13.1 (1987), 49-82.

⁴⁴² William Charles Wells, 'Observations on the Influence, Which Incites the Muscles of Animals to Contract in Mr Galvani's Experiments', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 85 (1795), 246-62 (p. 246). The phenomenon of galvanism inspires Victor Frankenstein in the novel.

‘one incident’. However, while Mary claims ownership of the original idea or ‘suggestion’ of the story, ‘the form in which it was presented to the world’ is attributed to ‘my husband’. This reinforces the idea that Percy Shelley could be placed as a self-designated surgeon or *accoucheur* whose reading both ‘fathers’ the novel and assists in its delivery.

The *form* of Mary's 'hideous progeny', however, requires what she calls 'chaos' – the intertextual mass of circumstances, stories and voices around the author, waiting to be shaped and moulded:

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. [...] Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject: and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it. (p. 8)

While Mary's authorial body is rendered spectral, the body of the text is moulded from dark and shapeless substances, suggesting that the composition process is rather like Victor Frankenstein's late night visits to the charnel house. Victor assembles his Creature from the corpses belonging to anonymous specimens, probably sourced from executed criminals and desecrated graves.⁴⁴³ Similarly, *Frankenstein's* epistolary narrative constructs the novel from a series of documents and first-hand accounts, thereby establishing an authorial conceit: the text is comprised of found material, collated and organised by its benevolent author. The novel's origin myth suggests that as father/*accoucheur* of the text, Percy Shelley helped create this ‘form’, whilst Mary engaged in the ‘moulding and fashioning’ of the novel's

⁴⁴³ Ironically, these were also the sources for many nineteenth-century dissections – the widespread knowledge of which promulgated the notion that anatomists were sinister figures associated with criminal and illicit exchanges of bodies, and both corporal and capital punishment. Marshall discusses ‘resurrectionist culture’ in his study. See Marshall, *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-robbing, Frankenstein and the Anatomy Literature*, pp. 177-218.

subject. Here, of course, 'subject' refers to both the business of the novel – its central topic or theme – and subjectivity.

If *Frankenstein* is a 'birth myth', then it is also concerned with how subjectivity comes into being. Furthermore, the dark imaginative space described in Shelley's Introduction is evocative of the womb.⁴⁴⁴ Therefore, the pregnant subject's place in this birth myth is uncertain; even as it ghosts the pregnant body, Shelley's novel reinforces the notion that creation is a highly visceral process. Maternal subjectivity, then, is formed from 'shapeless substances' that are simultaneously abstract and corporeal – *shape-less*. Such ambiguity provokes what Julia Kristeva famously calls 'abjection'.⁴⁴⁵ Indeed, Kristeva's characterisation of 'the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body' that throws the subject into uncertainty can be linked with the effect that Shelley hopes her invention will have on the reader.⁴⁴⁶ As her Introduction shows, Shelley wants *Frankenstein* to both fascinate and terrify its reader. For Kristeva, the maternal body is the site of the abject, the borderline space that both separates and connects the self and its threatening other. Characterised by its leakiness, the overflow of 'dark' and deathly substances such as blood, milk and menses that it cannot quite contain, the maternal body throws subjectivity into crisis. The novel is conspicuously not a mere abstract 'brainchild'. Authorship means making a text out of various 'dark' components without 'thinking' of the consequences – rather like Victor Frankenstein's actions. With its focus on the fostering of

⁴⁴⁴ Moers similarly considers *Frankenstein's* conception in terms of its origins from the deathly womb: 'The sources of this Gothic conception, which still has power to "curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart," were surely the anxieties of a woman who, as daughter, mistress, and mother, was a bearer of death'. See Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 98.

⁴⁴⁵ Kristeva defines the abject as 'the jettisoned object [...] radically excluded and [which] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses'. She continues, 'Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of a pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be'. This positions birth – and the maternal body – as inherently abject, with its transformations, separations and ambiguities throwing the subject into crisis. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2, p. 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, p. 54.

the Creature and the damaging consequences of this, the novel demonstrates the development of Victor Frankenstein's monstrous maternal subjectivity, as well as the Creature's development. From his illicit labours to his abandonment of and subsequent search for the child-subject of his creation, Victor gradually becomes Shelley's central (m)other.

Victor Frankenstein's 'workshop of filthy creation'

Mary Shelley's central maternal subject is a man. Victor Frankenstein's labouring dismembers bodies in order to animate a new child-subject. Prepared to circumvent all laws in order to fulfil his ambition, he is far from the benevolent surgeon-author suggested by Percy Shelley's review, although like this surgeon he claims philanthropic intentions and aims to give life by first learning through death.⁴⁴⁷ Thus, *Frankenstein* shows birth and death, bodies and horror to be irrevocably linked. The business of *childbearing* is indeed both burdensome (as Percy Shelley's Preface indicated) and gruesome. Throughout Chapter IV Mary Shelley repeatedly uses the language of sexuality and childbirth to describe Victor's 'labour' (pp. 51-57). She depicts Victor's successful assembling of the Creature as a long, arduous process which results in 'gratifying consummation' (p. 53). This childbirth was both 'painful' and 'overwhelming' – and resulted in a violent amnesia once its result became visible:

After so much time spent in painful labour, to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying consummation of my toils. But this

⁴⁴⁷ The Creature thus both parallels and reverses the anatomist's atlas, since he too is comprised of dead matter which has been given, and has the potential to give, life. Yet following his abandonment he chooses to take lives; Victor Frankenstein's 'child' murders his brother William, his friend Henry Clerval and his bride Elizabeth. The innocent servant Justine Moritz is executed for the murder of William, and Victor's father, Alphonse Frankenstein, dies after hearing of Elizabeth's death.

discovery was so great and overwhelming, that all the steps by which I had been progressively led to it were obliterated, and I beheld only the result. (p. 53)

Victor Frankenstein's childbirth is both active 'labour' and passive delivery; he 'toils' but has also 'been progressively led to it' by an anonymous, unidentifiable guide.⁴⁴⁸ Shelley likens the moment of birth to sexual consummation and pleasure: this is a labour which leads the reader not to the crowning of a baby, but back to conception.⁴⁴⁹ Such circularity emphasises the unnatural nature of Victor's creation. His 'brainchild' is a narcissistic product of his imagination and so cannot arrive into secure life without an imaginative leap. Indeed, in *Frankenstein* the 'crowning' moment occurs in the space between chapters – the Creature's 'birth' is conspicuously absent. Shelley shows us Victor's labour and the Creature opening its eyes but the reader is left to bridge the interpretative gap between the Creature being fully assembled and then being invested with life. Like Victor, we see 'only the result'; all memory of labour has been 'obliterated'.⁴⁵⁰ This again disrupts the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy by emphasising the physical reality of Victor's 'headbirth'. It suggests that experiencing 'discovery' overwhelms the rational steps which led to that discovery, rather like the reading of a Gothic novel overwhelms the subject reading it.⁴⁵¹ Given that

⁴⁴⁸ This recalls Mary's account of her spectral vision in conceiving the novel.

⁴⁴⁹ The 'crowning' moment of labour occurs when the baby's head emerges from the woman's vagina, originally so called because it described the engagement of the baby's head with the dilated cervix during labour: '[w]hen the Midwives touch this Orifice, they find that it encompasses the head of the Foetus like a Crown'. See Pierre Dionis, *The anatomy of humane bodies improv'd, according to the circulation of the blood, and all the modern discoveries. Publickly demonstrated at the theater in the Royal Garden at Paris*, trans. from 3rd edn (London: [n.pub.], 1703), p. 193.

⁴⁵⁰ This can be read as a macabre inversion of the traditional narrative of childbirth, which insists that the labouring mother forgets her pain when confronted with the 'result' of that pain, her baby.

⁴⁵¹ Victor's experience of labour also suggests that pain – and the forgetting of it – is formative for the subject. This is something that preoccupies Gothic fiction more generally. Indeed, Steven Bruhm argues that 'the pained body in Gothic fiction becomes the conduit through which one's identity vacillates – now felt, now numbed; now empowered, now silenced; now self, now other – and through which one relates to others and invites others to relate to oneself'. See Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), p. 148. In the birthing chamber, women had been expected to endure painful labour in accordance with Biblical decree ('In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'). See Genesis 3. 16. However, following the introduction of chloroform into medical practice in the

Victor's narrative identifies itself as a warning to other over-reaching scientists, his amnesia is a convenient way of protecting both discovery and discoverer from other competing male creators.

Shelley's language also emphasises the violence of birth. Indeed, Shelley draws upon the Gothic to emphasise the physiological changes which labour brings. Victor's 'midnight labours' cause him to become 'pale' and 'emaciated', and to enter into a 'trance':

These thoughts supported my spirits, while I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardour. My cheek had grown pale with study, and my person had become emaciated with confinement. Sometimes, on the very brink of certainty, I failed; yet still I clung to the hope which the next day or the next hour might realise. One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I had dedicated myself; and the moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding-places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? My limbs now tremble, and my eyes swim with the remembrance; but then a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward: I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit. It was indeed but a passing trance [...] (p. 55)

Like a labouring woman, Victor Frankenstein endures a physically traumatic 'confinement'.⁴⁵²

Both trapped in this bodily state, and confined to the physical space of his 'pursuit', Victor bears more than a passing resemblance to Percy Shelley's labouring reader. With 'unrelaxed and breathless eagerness' he seeks Nature's 'hiding-places' while she, personified

mid-nineteenth century, this began to change. See Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750-2000* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 11.

⁴⁵² Victor's emaciation demonstrates an inversion of the pregnant woman's bodily expansion, and is often considered a symptom of *early* pregnancy by medical guidebooks. For example, John Morley notes that the loss of appetite and nausea experienced in early pregnancy can cause a change in appearance which is disturbingly familiar: '[t]he countenance loses its freshness, and becomes paler; the lower eyelid is of a dark or leaden colour; and the whole body becomes, in a degree, emaciated.' See John Morley, *An Essay on the Symptoms of Pregnancy, from The Earliest Stage to The Period of Quickening. With a Physiological Explanation of the Physical and Mental Changes Produced by the Impregnated Uterus upon the System of the Mother* (London: S. Highley, 1829), p. 12.

as ‘the moon’, looks upon his labours. The moon, a symbol of femininity and mutability, and associated with the menstrual cycle, is part of the *mise-en-scène* of Gothic literature. Most remarkable in this account, however, is the tension between Victor’s ‘remembrance’ and description of the physical trials of labour (which even retrospectively make his limbs ‘tremble’ and his eyes ‘swim’) and his loss of sensation, physical mass and rational mind at the time of this labour. Again, Shelley seems to engage with the link between labour and memory, but here she suggests that the physical sensation of labour can only be recalled from a narratorial distance, and that ‘sensation’ itself – the physiological response to an emotional encounter – may be superimposed upon a physical event after it has passed.⁴⁵³

Mary Shelley’s drafting process can also be read in terms of labour. As the following excerpts show, the labouring and final delivery of *Frankenstein* is also made up of stages.⁴⁵⁴ The first extract (below) is reconstructed from Mary Shelley’s ‘original’ draft manuscript, republished in Charles E. Robinson’s edition of *The Original Frankenstein*. The second, which forms the body of Robinson’s text, occurs earlier in Robinson’s book than the first and shows Percy Shelley’s insertions:

These thoughts supported my spirits while I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardour. My cheek was pale with study, and my person emaciated by confinement. [S]ometimes on the very brink of certainty I fail[e]d yet I still clung to the hope which the next day or the next hour might realize. One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I clung and the moon gazed on my midnight labours while with unrelaxed & breathless eagerness I pursued nature to her most secret hiding-places. But who shall know my secret operations as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate my lifeless clay? Now my limbs tremble and my eyes swim with the remembrance, but then a resistless and almost frantic [impulse]

⁴⁵³ This can be linked back to the Romantic narrative of ‘spontaneous overflow of feelings [...] recollected in tranquillity’. See Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, p. 266

⁴⁵⁴ Medical practitioners also divide labour into ‘stages’.

urged me on; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for one pursuit. It was indeed a passing trance [...].⁴⁵⁵

These thoughts supported my spirits while I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardour. My cheek *had grown* pale with study; and my person, *become* emaciated by confinement. Sometimes on the very brink of certainty I failed, yet I still clung to the hope which the next day or the next hour might realise. One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I clung; and the moon gazed on my midnight labours while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her most secret hiding-places. Who shall *conceive the horrors of* my secret *toil* as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate *the* lifeless clay? My limbs *now* tremble, and my eyes swim with the remembrance; but then a resistless and almost frantic *impulse* urged me *forward*; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for one pursuit. It was indeed a passing trance [...] (p. 78; italics denote Percy Shelley's insertions).

Robinson's reanimation of this 1816-1817 draft seeks out an 'original' text which is authentic and straight from the authorial imagination; he pieces together Mary's draft by removing Percy Shelley's edits. Robinson's text privileges Percy's insertions, however – perhaps unsurprisingly since they are closest to the revised 1831 version of the novel. Clearly, the Shelleys collaborated, and though Robinson includes Percy Shelley in parenthesis his project is about identifying his handwriting more than it is about piecing together Mary Shelley's unadulterated work. Robinson designates the authors of *The Original Frankenstein* as 'Mary Shelley (with Percy Shelley)'. This delivery is active and somewhat surgical, rather like the one depicted in Percy Shelley's review.

⁴⁵⁵ Mary Shelley (with Percy Shelley), *The Original Frankenstein*, ed. by Charles E. Robinson (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2008; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 2009), pp. 273-74. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

Such editorial *accouchement* suggests that the authorship and ownership of the text is fluid. It arguably privileges Percy Shelley's editorial 'firm and steady hand' over Mary's juvenile authorship. Mary's original draft was juvenile – her lexis and syntax were much simpler and she hardly included any punctuation. It also has a more direct narrative style; her lack of punctuation creates an urgency which enacts Victor's labour and causes the reader to be equally 'breathless': 'One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I clung and the moon gazed on my midnight labours while with unrelaxed & breathless eagerness I pursued nature to her most secret hiding-places' (p. 273). Mary also emphasises the present tense by placing '[n]ow' at the start of her sentence: 'Now my limbs tremble [...]' (p. 274). The reader becomes caught up in this sensation. This differs from the final draft, which (as I earlier noted) creates a distinction between the labour that has passed and the 'sensation' which is provoked by remembering it. 'My limbs *now* tremble', Percy Shelley corrected (p. 78).⁴⁵⁶ Percy Shelley introduced a more Latinate lexis and the past perfect tense ('had grown'), which served to heighten and delineate more specifically the stages of Victor's labour, so that it is precisely rendered.

In all versions of the text, Victor's 'labour' takes place in a 'workshop of filthy creation', located at the very 'top' of his lodgings: 'In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation [...]' (1831 edition, p. 55). This makes the Creature both a 'brainchild', formed because of a persistent idea in the mind of his creator and symbolically located 'at the top of the house', and an embodiment of 'dark' substances. Simultaneously, 'chamber', 'cell' and 'workshop', Victor's room is an unstable, changing space.⁴⁵⁷ Indeed, the transformation of Victor's workshop from an enlightened, rational

⁴⁵⁶ Again, suggesting that such powerful emotion is 'recollected in tranquillity'.

⁴⁵⁷ This recalls the room/womb/tomb I discuss in Chapter II (Miscarriage).

space, to a corporeal, abject one, parallels the overall plot of the novel: 'motherhood' begins as something which is sought after by Victor, and takes place within the safe and domestic confines of the 'solitary chamber'; however, it soon imprisons him in an apparently endless and fruitless exchange with his creation. The Creature's existence means that Victor never will be solitary again; the two are still engaged in pursuit when Robert Walton's framing narrative ends at the novel's close. This description recalls our earlier reading of Mary Shelley's Introduction, which positions authorship just outside the boundary of the home. One reason why her story is so disturbing, perhaps, is that Victor Frankenstein allows his horrific labour to take place within the domestic space, albeit 'separated from all the other apartments'. He cannot ultimately exclude the Creature from the home, or abandon it. The dangerous liminality of the labouring subject aligns him with Shelley's 'other mothers', those female subjects whose maternity is hidden within the text, to be reassembled and reanimated by the reader.

Shelley's Other Mothers

Shelley's other mothers are relegated to the margins of the text. They are consistently absent, dead, disembodied or dismembered. Some of them (Justine, for instance) are also punished in lieu of Victor Frankenstein by the Creature. However, it is this very absence which makes them most present.⁴⁵⁸ Despite, and perhaps because of, their marginalisation, their dismembered body parts appear everywhere once we begin looking for them. Much like Hunter's dissected mothers, their death and dismemberment results in a proliferation of

⁴⁵⁸ Moers' reading similarly emphasises the absent presence of mothers in literature. See Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 92-93.

represented body parts which invite reassembly. The labour of reading *Frankenstein* as a birth myth, therefore, involves the reanimation of these 'hidden mothers'.

Shelley's framing narrative positions an implicitly maternal subject as its sole addressee. Robert Walton's letters are addressed to his sister, Margaret Walton Saville, known both by her married name, 'Mrs Saville', and affectionately as 'dear, excellent, Margaret' (p. 18). My interpretation is based on a reading of Margaret's *position* in the text rather than on what the text explicitly reveals about her life: Margaret is one of the most ghostly and significant of Shelley's 'hidden mothers'. As will be discussed, the 'MWS' of her initials (recalling 'Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley'), the nine months of Walton's story, Margaret's domesticity and the fact that she is married, her position in terms of the other female characters in the text, and perhaps most significantly, her care of Walton's 'manuscript', suggest that she is a maternal subject. Indeed, Shelley emphasises the familial relationship between Walton and Margaret, a fact which anticipates and parallels Victor's relationship with Elizabeth. Both female characters are 'sisters'. Elizabeth is Victor's 'more than sister' – she will become his bride (p. 37).⁴⁵⁹ Mrs Saville is respectably established as a married woman in a domestic setting; both her sexuality and her (implied) maternity are safely contained within the English home. While Walton's shifting locations are mapped from St Petersburg to the Arctic, Margaret remains in one place. This suggests that female stasis is a necessary prerequisite for male mobility, and is echoed in Victor and Elizabeth's positioning. He travels to University while she remains at home.

⁴⁵⁹ Shelley's revised 1831 edition changes the nature of the relationship between Elizabeth and Victor. In the 1818 edition Elizabeth is Victor's orphaned cousin; in the 1831 edition Elizabeth is the daughter of a Milanese nobleman found among peasants and presented to Victor as a 'gift' by his mother. Victor subsequently refers to her as his 'more than sister'. Shelley also alters Elizabeth's appearance from a hazel-eyed, bird-like child to a golden-haired, blue-eyed one. This emphasises Elizabeth's idealised femininity, whilst downplaying the potentially incestuous nature of her relationship with Victor.

Indeed, both Walton and Victor journey across continental Europe and the North Sea in order to fulfil ambitious desires for knowledge. Walton fantasises about discovering 'wondrous power' (p. 15) hitherto unknown to man:

I am already far north of London; and as I walk in the streets of Petersburg, I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves, and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling? This breeze, which has travelled from the regions towards which I am advancing, gives me a foretaste of those icy climes. Inspirited by this wind of promise, my day dreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon, and diffusing a perpetual splendour. There – for with your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators – there snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. [...] What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? (p. 15)

This excerpt presents for the first time a male fantasy of discovery and enlightenment which is subsequently reiterated throughout *Frankenstein*. It foregrounds the importance of imagination, dreams and sensibility (all irrational qualities) in the pursuit of (rational) knowledge, again reiterating the interplay between such Enlightenment values and the Gothic. This reflects the tension also inherent in the text's central motif of labour, an undertaking that is Gothic in its messy corporality, despite Victor's Enlightenment fantasy. Like Victor, Walton wishes to make ground in his pursuit of 'eternal light'. He does not know exactly what he is searching for – but fully expects to reach physical and spiritual transcendence, a geographical 'region of beauty and delight' which corresponds with his imaginative vision. Indeed, Shelley foregrounds the narcissism of Walton's Romantic Imagination and its potential pitfalls by insinuating Margaret's presence into these letters.

Though Walton is apparently eager to distance himself from London and his sister's domestic sphere of influence, he repeatedly evokes her as a reader. He addresses her both by name and through epithets which emphasise their relationship ('my sister') and asks her questions which are semi-rhetorical, since his travels allow him to write to Margaret but not to receive and read her replies. Indeed, a full correspondence between Walton and Margaret is conspicuously absent from the text. Shelley does not allow Margaret to answer.

Her silence positions Margaret as a reader above all else, and results in our alignment with her unrepresented subjectivity. When Walton asks, 'Do you understand this feeling?', he encourages us (Margaret and the reader) to attempt a journey of mental understanding and imaginative empathy whilst simultaneously excluding us from that understanding. The physical sensation of the 'cold northern breeze' upon one's face prompts imaginative 'delight', but this is a physical experience in which we cannot partake. Walton attempts to educate his sister about the power of the imagination but his journey is made alone, and necessarily so – for Walton, knowledge is experienced by the individual in the wilderness. Indeed, since Walton imagines Margaret's thoughts and responses to his letters, in a sense he is her author.⁴⁶⁰ He imagines her asking about his return: '[...] and when shall I return? Ah, dear sister, how can I answer this question?' (p. 18). However, Shelley's narrative invites a reading of Walton's letters which consistently undermines his authority. Walton's narcissism and self-centredness do not approach the emotional empathy required to identify his sister's concerns. All of his rhetorical questions assume

⁴⁶⁰ Maureen N. McLane argues that Walton represents the mariner as failed poet, while *Frankenstein* itself can be read as a parable of the 'ambiguous cultural work' of poetry: 'The possibility of *Frankenstein* depends on poetry, or rather, on a failure in poetry.' Walton, McLane continues, understands himself as a failed poet: 'We might conjecture that, had he succeeded as a poet, he might have remained at home, participating in the literary and political intrigues of the 1790s. As it was, he found himself forced to cultivate other areas of development.' See Maureen N. McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 20. Instead of emphasising Walton's failure as a poetic subject, however, my reading introduces the possibility that Margaret, placed as she is in the home, might indeed be read as a maternal poetic subject.

that Margaret's most pressing concern is his safe return; Walton never asks Margaret any questions about herself. Indeed, immediately after reassuring her that he 'will not rashly encounter danger', he asks, 'Why not still proceed over the untamed yet obedient element?' (pp. 23-24). The frequency of such elicitations and their cumulative effect produces a tone of sustained irony. Shelley invites us to fill Margaret's silences; we are able to interpret them in ways that Walton cannot, for all his flights of fancy. Margaret's persistent absence invites the reader to reassemble her subjectivity and imagine her reactions to Walton's tale. We are complicit in this delivery of the story.

Margaret's significance as a 'hidden mother' is metatextual. Charles E. Robinson points out that her initials recall the 'MWS' of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and that both Walton's narrative and the drafting of the 'Fair Copy' of the novel (which eventually became the printer's copy for the 1818 first edition) take place over a 'gestation period' of nine months.⁴⁶¹ This suggests that both Walton and Margaret are authorial figures, and that Margaret particularly can be construed as a cipher for Mary Shelley embedded within the text, despite the prevalence of male author-creators in *Frankenstein*. If Margaret is a conduit for Walton's creativity, then she does not occupy this position comfortably. Through her reading, she experiences the nine months (or two-hundred-and-seventy-six days) of Walton's voyage. Since Victor's story is itself embedded within this epistolary narrative, this effectively makes Margaret both its reader and editor. Indeed, Margaret allows an interpretative gap (or margin) to be exploited by readers looking for maternal subjects. Frequently side-lined by Walton's comments, Margaret nevertheless holds control over the final manuscript. Walton's authorship is thereby exposed as a means of parenting the text which attempts to exclude maternal authority. Walton records Victor's story, and Victor

⁴⁶¹ Robinson, 'Introduction', in *The Original Frankenstein*, pp. 22-23.

instructs him to edit it in a particular way. Both operate according to a set of flawed assumptions which privilege male imaginative enterprise over female experience. Margaret, explicitly cast as wife and implicitly made a mother, serves as a reminder of a distinctly female model of authorship. Metaphorically pregnant with narrative, she authors the text in a domestic sphere far removed from the Arctic wilderness, a setting that has the potential to birth both babies and books.

Frankenstein presents the domestic sphere and the maternal subject within it as increasingly fragmented. The female characters that inhabit Victor's home are destroyed in turn; each is figuratively (if not literally) 'beheaded', a motif that recalls Hunter's atlas and the figure of the 'hidden mother'. This 'beheading' suggests that maternal subjectivity is a prerequisite to maternal death: mothers, both natural and unnatural, are born only to be destroyed. Once dead, they function as the means of another mother's destruction. Victor's mother, Caroline, is the first of these beheaded maternal subjects to appear. Like Margaret, she is absent from the narrative but recurrently appears in a miniature portrait. Whereas Margaret both appears in and has control over the physical manuscript of the letters themselves, Caroline's object is passed from character to character. Being dead, she is truly passive. The miniature portrait of her head, rendered precisely by the artist and described later in detail by the Creature, changes ownership frequently and illicitly. Itself a signifier of Caroline's decease, it also provides a prop for the Creature's murderous schemes and thereby becomes doubly significant as a symbol of death. When the Creature murders William, Victor's young brother, he places the miniature in the folds of Justine's dress to implicate her in the murder. Justine, a faithful family servant, is later found guilty of this murder and executed. Elizabeth's confirmation that this portrait was originally placed around William's neck condemns Justine and anticipates the placing of the hangman's noose around her neck. The portrait causes matricide rather than infanticide, with Justine's death

occurring between chapters, just like the Creature's birth. Birth and death are thus inextricably linked in this text.

The desirable image of natural maternal femininity which Caroline's portrait presents the Creature, and his reading of this image, motivates his framing of Justine. The Creature, conceived and born 'unnaturally', resents Caroline's maternity:

As I fixed my eyes on the child [William], I saw something glittering on his breast. I took it; it was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned: I remembered that I was for ever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow; and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. (p. 144-45)

Finding Caroline's 'glittering' portrait makes the Creature hate all 'such beautiful creatures' as much as he hates himself, since it enables him to see himself through their eyes. Here, Caroline is read as both sexual object and maternal subject – a particularly problematic and dangerous combination for a nineteenth-century mother. As Elaine Showalter explores in her study of female insanity during the Victorian period, nineteenth-century theories of madness 'were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle – puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause'.⁴⁶² This stems from older Hippocratic and Galenic theories of hysteria that established a link between the female reproductive body and the vulnerable female mind; as Andrew Scull points out, hysteria was a gendered disease.⁴⁶³ In the nineteenth century, an overtly sexual or sexualised woman was considered a deviant, insane one; similarly, all new mothers had the potential to develop puerperal

⁴⁶² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1987; London: Virago, 2001), p. 55.

⁴⁶³ Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 54-55.

insanity. Caroline's capacity to be read as sexually deviant even in absence and death, and to inspire both sexual attraction and murderous 'rage' in the Creature, makes her dangerous. However, Shelley draws attention to the interpretative gap between Caroline's maternal body and how it is represented. Her 'dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes' and her 'lovely lips' recall both the blazon of a Petrarchan sonnet and Victor's assembly of the Creature's body parts. This suggests that maternal subjects, though punished, are unconscious of and so may be absolved from guilt. It is the male gaze of the Creature and his creator which carries agency and responsibility; it is they who can make the maternal subject monstrous. Thus, the text implicitly offers a feminist creation myth, one that is hidden within its maternal subjects.

Both Justine and Elizabeth could be cast as the 'affectionate', domestic characters who, Percy Shelley states, redeem *Frankenstein* from its dangerous effect on the reader ('On "Frankenstein"', p. 435). However, both experience symptoms of puerperal insanity following the murder of William. While Elizabeth loses consciousness, Justine is taken ill and 'confined to her bed' (p. 80). Indeed, when shown William's body, she falls into 'violent hysterics' (p. 84). This 'confinement' recalls Victor's labour. It is related repeatedly for both private and public audiences, in the Frankenstein home and in court.⁴⁶⁴ Indeed, Justine's confinement both anticipates her later imprisonment and evokes the treatment often given to women deemed insane. Nineteenth-century debates about the most effective treatment for puerperal insanity seem to have been centred around the question of whether the

⁴⁶⁴ Another male heir, Victor's brother Ernest, as well as Victor himself, narrates Justine's confinement. This emphasises the authorial control with which male characters in the novel are able to represent female characters such as Justine. Similarly, Elizabeth's evidence, given 'in a faltering voice', confirms Justine's guilt since it demonstrates for the court her misplaced and betrayed benevolence, prompting 'murmur[s] of horror and indignation' (p. 84).

affected woman should be removed from or confined within the family home.⁴⁶⁵ Like Caroline, Justine is sexually attractive and therefore considered a threat to conventional sexual codes of behaviour. Her absence from the home and apparent memory loss on the night of William's murder suggests that she has been dangerously mobile, even unchaste.⁴⁶⁶ Following Justine's violent hysterics and confinement, the picture is 'produced'. This acts as a confirmation of her guilt and also echoes the birthing process in which women are confined to a chamber whilst in labour.

The importance of confining the maternal subject reflects widespread anxiety about the materiality of the reproductive body and its generative power, as well as its links to mortality.⁴⁶⁷ Justine's nocturnal wanderings, and their deathly consequences, necessitate her confinement. Indeed, the figure of the maternal subject in *Frankenstein* is powerfully and repeatedly associated with death. This is embodied and then dismembered most potently in Shelley's deathly 'almost-mothers': the female Creature, conceived as the Creature's bride at his behest; and Elizabeth, Victor's bride, murdered on their wedding night. The fate of these two characters draws attention to the parallels between Victor and his Creature and reinforces the notion that creative actions have destructive consequences.

Like the male Creature, Elizabeth is reanimated from unconsciousness. When she finds out about William's murder, she faints. This simulates death, again evoked through its absence: 'She fainted, and was restored with extreme difficulty. When she again lived, it

⁴⁶⁵ Hilary Marland, 'Maternity and Madness: Puerperal Insanity in the Nineteenth Century' (April 2003) <<http://www.nursing.manchester.ac.uk/ukchnm/publications/seminarpapers/maternityandmadness.pdf>> [accessed 11 December 2012].

⁴⁶⁶ This implies that Justine's encounter with the Creature (only narrated after her execution, from the Creature's perspective) has rendered her unchaste. His anger that Justine is sexually unavailable and his subsequent insertion of the portrait into her pocket, in the folds of her dress, suggests that this action ghosts sexual violation: 'the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: be hers the punishment! [...] I bent over her and placed the portrait securely in one of the folds of her dress.' (p. 145).

⁴⁶⁷ Again, this can be read in light of Kristeva's positioning of the abject body as maternal and deathly. See Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror*, p. 54.

was only to weep and sigh.’ (p. 47). Alphonse does not state that Elizabeth died, but that ‘she again lived’. Her excess of feeling is so powerful that it both makes her insensible and persists beyond her return to sensibility. This excessive emotion causes Elizabeth to become temporarily inarticulate; she can only weep and sigh. Such excess of powerful feeling recalls Percy Shelley’s review and parallels Percy’s labouring reader with Elizabeth’s maternal subjectivity. Indeed, it suggests that Elizabeth is experiencing symptoms of puerperal insanity, which in this case may have led to a desire to commit infanticide. Her final words, and subsequent loss of consciousness, reinforce this diagnosis: “‘O God! I have murdered my darling infant!’” (p. 47). In 1810 the man-midwife Thomas Denman described the symptoms of puerperal melancholia as including a ‘total insensibility of what is said and done’.⁴⁶⁸ In language that seems to anticipate Victor’s description of *his* confinement, Denman continues:

No object, however beautiful or interesting, gives pleasure to their eye, no music charms their ear, no taste gratifies their appetite, no sleep refreshes their wearied limbs or wretched imaginations; nor can they be comforted by the conversation or kindest attention of their friends.⁴⁶⁹

Denman’s emphasis on the power of the ‘wretched imagination’ and the toll it takes on the maternal body implies that sensory deprivation accompanies aesthetic deprivation. His observations suggest that it is our ability to appreciate beauty and take pleasure in the material world – the interactions between this world and the Imagination – that makes us sane. The melancholic subject cannot appreciate the sublime or the beautiful. Indeed,

⁴⁶⁸ Thomas Denman, *Observations on the Rupture of the Uterus, on the Sniffles in Infants, and on Mania Lactea* (London: J. Johnson, 1810), p. 63.

⁴⁶⁹ Denman, *Observations on the Rupture of the Uterus*, p. 63

Victor's symptoms suggest that the sublime experience has become impeded by puerperal insanity:

It was a most beautiful season; never did the fields bestow a more plentiful harvest, or the vines yield a more luxurious vintage: but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature. And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time. (p. 56)

This description evokes the beauty and fecundity of the 'season' only to deny its effect on Victor, who is engaged in unnatural creation. Following the Creature's 'birth', Victor also experiences a kind of puerperal insanity which renders him bedridden and insensible. 'Remember, I am not recording the vision of a madman', Victor earlier states (p. 53). His account resembles that of a mad *woman*.

However, though Elizabeth's heart does 'suspend its pulsations' briefly, she is recalled to 'life' and language. Her defence of Justine in the courtroom, though ultimately ineffectual, is articulate and casts Justine too as William's surrogate mother:

She nursed Madame Frankenstein, my aunt, in her last illness with the greatest affection and care; and afterwards attended her own mother during a tedious illness, in a manner that excited the admiration of all who knew her. [...] She was warmly attached to the child who is now dead, and acted towards him like a most affectionate mother. (p. 86)

Shelley emphasises the nurturing role played by the female servant in the home, a role which ultimately is just as ineffectual as Elizabeth's speech. Justine has nursed two dying mothers and looked after William 'like a most affectionate mother', but such maternal care does not prevent death. In fact, *Frankenstein* repeatedly suggests a causal link between

maternal subjectivity and death. Furthermore, Justine's maternal care prompted potentially dangerous physiological reactions in those who witnessed it: her manner 'excited the admiration of all who knew her'.⁴⁷⁰ According to Percy Shelley's review, bodily excitement and arousal requires quick and careful treatment to allay dangerous physical symptoms. It requires the reinforcement of a conventional model of domestic femininity to make it safe. However, *Frankenstein* consistently shows such domestic femininity to be dangerous even as it works to soothe these symptoms. Victor dismembers the half-finished female Creature, and the Creature takes his revenge by strangling Elizabeth. It is the female Creature's reproductive capacity which motivates Victor's actions:

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? [...]

As I looked on him [the Creature], his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery. I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and, with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew.

⁴⁷⁰ Like Shelley's use of the noun 'incitement' to describe Percy Shelley's role in the novel's conception, 'excitement' carries particular resonance during the period immediately following *Frankenstein's* publication. Andrew Scull notes that scientific discourse surrounding 'nerves' during the nineteenth century linked the brain with the uterine system, which were reflexively connected to one another: "'Excitement" or disorders of the reproductive system thus imposed immense strain on the brain and nerves and could prompt hysteria or even outright insanity.' See Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography*, p. 73. Puerperal mania was characterised by increased levels of physical and mental agitation and delirium – not unlike Victor's labour. According to the physician John Conolly, a woman suffering from puerperal mania might exhibit a 'great degree of excitement'. Francis Ramsbotham similarly defined puerperal mania as 'attended with great excitement and furious delirium'. See John Conolly, *Treatment of the Insane Without Medical Restraints* (1856; London: Dawsons, 1973), p. 107, and Francis H. Ramsbotham, *Principles and Practice of Obstetric Medicine and Surgery in Reference to the Process of Parturition*, 3rd edn (London: John Churchill, 1851), p. 554. Though these accounts were written after *Frankenstein's* publication, it seems pertinent that such vocabulary was in circulation during the nineteenth century.

I left the room, and, locking the door, made a solemn vow in my own heart never to resume my labours; and then, with trembling steps, I sought my own apartment. (p. 170-71)

Victor's anxiety about the female Creature's potential for monstrous motherhood – that 'a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth' as a result of her existence – prompts him to destroy violently the pieces of her body that he has already assembled. Shelley's lexis suggests that the natural desire for companionship and domestic life will become vampiric when embodied in a female mate. Her use of the verb 'thirsted' in such close proximity to 'children' suggests that the Creature's desire for biological 'devil' children is all-consuming and will result in human children being fed upon. The consumption of one race will result in the growth of another. Victor reflects that this will make humanity's condition 'precarious and full of terror' – the stuff of Gothic novels. In order to prevent such terror Victor carries out an equally horrific act. He aborts the female Creature before her birth. Again, Shelley foregrounds the physiological effect of this action and its potential double meaning. Victor 'thought with a sensation of madness' on his promise and destroys his work whilst 'trembling with passion' – he both retrospectively reflects upon his 'madness' in agreeing to the Creature's request with 'thought', and experiences repeatedly the symptoms or 'sensation' of madness. It appears that Victor is trapped within a cycle of puerperal insanity, and his only response is to leave his laboratory and lock the door. He seeks refuge in his own apartment, a masculine domestic space from which female characters are conspicuously excluded.

Victor's response to monstrous maternity – a strategy of dismemberment and confinement – also links him with the figure of the surgeon. Having destroyed his

work in a fit of 'passion' and locked the laboratory door, he must return in order to retrieve his surgical implements:

Yet, before I departed, there was a task to perform, on which I shuddered to reflect: I must pack my chemical instruments; and for that purpose I must enter the room which had been the scene of my odious work, and I must handle those utensils, the sight of which was sickening to me. The next morning, at day-break, I summoned sufficient courage, and unlocked the door of my laboratory. The remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being. I paused to collect myself, and then entered the chamber. With trembling hand I conveyed the instruments out of the room; but I reflected that I ought not to leave the relics of my work to excite the horror and suspicion of the peasants, and I accordingly put them into a basket, with a great quantity of stones, and laying them up, determined to throw them into the sea that very night; and in the mean time I sat upon the beach, employed in cleaning and arranging my chemical apparatus. (p. 199)

Though Victor spends time methodically 'cleaning and arranging' his apparatus, he does not have the 'firm and steady hand' of the surgeon-author whom Percy Shelley described in his review (p. 434). In fact the hand which picks up and moves the instruments is 'trembling'; the sight of the instruments themselves is 'sickening'; the 'relics' of his work would 'excite' the peasants. It seems that the reality of the spectacle of Victor's 'workshop of filthy creation' has a deeply disturbing physiological effect on this surgeon and on anyone else who may encounter it – presumably this includes the reader also. This particular delivery has physiological consequences.

Victor's private laboratory lacks the precise control that the dissection theatre and its surgeons hold over their specimen bodies; he has 'mangled' the *dead* flesh of a

human being in a manner both reminiscent of the dissection theatre and unlike it.⁴⁷¹ However, we are not shown the body parts themselves. We are left to imagine what they look like in the same way as we are left to imagine Justine's execution. The female Creature's remains are put into a basket to be submerged – an ironic twist on the baby in the basket motif (as first encountered in the Biblical story of Moses) and a reminder that this story is being told at sea.⁴⁷² 'I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being' is another of Shelley's sentences invested with double meaning. Victor's 'almost felt' horror at his own actions both evokes and abstains from a fully empathetic response towards this almost-'living flesh'. Neither fully embodied nor disembodied, the female Creature is left to be taken up by readers and reanimated. Her potential as a monstrous maternal subject is never fully realised, but neither is it fully confined. It is simply submerged, with the potential to resurface beyond Victor's narrative and the end of the novel.

Indeed, the monstrous maternal subject's potential for resurfacing and reanimating is enacted by Victor's revisiting of the scenes of maternal 'beheading'. Just as he returns to his laboratory to look at (and dispose of) the female Creature, he returns also to the 'bridal bier' to look at Elizabeth's body:

She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Every where I turn I see the same figure – her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier. [...] For a moment only did I lose recollection; I fainted. [...] She had been moved from the posture in which I had first beheld her; and now, as she lay, her head upon her arm, and a handkerchief thrown across her face and neck, I might have supposed her asleep. I rushed towards her, and embraced her with ardour; but the deathly languor and coldness of the limbs told me, that what I now held in my arms had ceased to be the Elizabeth

⁴⁷¹ He is aligned more with the 'resurrectionist' grave robbers who often provided these bodies.

⁴⁷² Exodus 2. 1-10.

whom I had loved and cherished. The murderous mark of the fiend's grasp was on her neck, and the breath had ceased to issue from her lips. (pp. 140-141)

Like the female Creature, Elizabeth is destroyed before she can become a mother. The Creature murders her on her wedding night, before the consummation of her marriage with Victor. Though we are not shown her death, the discovery of her body and its arrangement on the bed ('thrown' and 'flung' with her 'distorted features half covered by her hair') implies that Elizabeth was subjected to sexual violence by the Creature. Indeed, Victor's focus on Elizabeth's 'relaxed' and languorous limbs suggests that her body has been exposed to a harmful and erotic male gaze which makes all gazers complicit in her murder. We are invited to look upon Elizabeth's body in a way that contrasts with the unrepresented body parts of the half-finished female Creature. Elizabeth's sightless gaze, meanwhile, is averted, covered at first by her hair and then by a 'handkerchief thrown across her face and neck'. This both preserves and undermines the notion of ideal feminine modesty, and recalls the figure of the 'hidden mother'. Elizabeth's body is symbolically separated from her head by a veil-like garment which both protects her from and exposes her to erotic scrutiny. The eroticism of this scene provokes sexual desire in Victor, who rushes to embrace Elizabeth 'with ardour'. This is far from the clinical dismemberment undertaken on the dissection table, and suggests that creation is an erotic and deathly encounter in the male Romantic Imagination, whilst the maternal body is rendered spectral.⁴⁷³ Indeed, the adjectives 'lifeless' and 'inanimate' contain their opposite meanings ('life'

⁴⁷³ Elisabeth Bronfen discusses the Romantic construction of the beloved, deathly muse and its implications for poetic creativity. See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 360-83.

and 'animate') which imply their potential for reversal. As Victor's labours demonstrated, if something is 'inanimate' it can be reanimated. Elizabeth's body is thus appropriated, dismembered and reassembled by all of her 'readers' – the Creature, Victor and readers outside the text.

Such thematic mirroring draws attention to the instability, and indeed, the richness of the text. *Frankenstein* has multiple meanings, and they shift constantly. Elizabeth's final positioning on the bed recalls the earlier eroticism of the sleeping Justine and Caroline's portrait, both of whom have now 'ceased to be'. Victor's brief loss of consciousness similarly recalls Elizabeth's earlier faint and her symptoms of puerperal insanity. When he recovers consciousness Victor does not see Elizabeth's corpse as it truly is, but supposes her 'asleep'. It is the 'murderous mark' on her neck and the coldness of her limbs which indicates her death.⁴⁷⁴ Throughout presented as an ideal 'more than sister', wife-to-be and (almost-) mother, Elizabeth provides a model of femininity which is both reanimated and dismembered, embodied and ghosted. The Creature has killed her and made her his bride – and this has altered irrevocably Elizabeth's identity. She has 'ceased to be the Elizabeth' familiar to Victor and become a new maternal subject who, though deceased, has the potential to be monstrously reanimated by the Creature's 'mark'. This form of reproduction is enacted by Victor's revisiting of the spectacle of Elizabeth's corpse. Just as his labours earlier resulted in an unnatural moment of 'consummation' rather than crowning, Victor's repeated visits to the bodies of his dismembered almost-mothers result in

⁴⁷⁴ Elizabeth's 'mark[ed]' neck and her 'bloodless arms' also suggest that she is the victim of a vampire; this echoes Victor's anxieties about the bloodthirsty potential of the Creature's offspring, whom he earlier describes as a 'race of devils' (p. 119).

cyclical stasis rather than natural biological reproduction. His labours are deathly and dangerous.

Frankenstein positions the figure of the medical man as ultimately infertile. It is an origin text because it shows us something new: the Gothicised labour of a monstrous, male maternal subject. As this chapter has explored, the novel interrogates the contemporary medical discourse that represents the female reproductive body as something to be exposed, dissected and pathologised by male surgeons. Hunter's mothers, for instance, are ghosted by their visual representation; similarly, Victor's labours produce deathly beings, both masculine and feminine. Shelley's other, 'hidden mothers' – Elizabeth, Justine, Margaret and the female Creature – haunt the novel's pages. These representations prompt readings that both take into account the messy corporeality of the female body and emphasise the importance of reading reproduction as a metaphor for female artistic creativity – reflecting, perhaps, the instability of the pregnant subject and the fact that her labour is often a painful, difficult process.

The novel's persistent monstrosity has spawned a significant number of feminist critics (Moers among them) who reanimate *Frankenstein* in a critical context.⁴⁷⁵ Furthermore, *Frankenstein* anticipates the 'birth' of a mode of contemporary women's literature that explores pregnant subjectivity; indeed, according to Moers 'the young women novelists and poets of today who are finding in

⁴⁷⁵ In *A Cultural History of Pregnancy* Hanson points out that Ellen Moers was the first critic to read *Frankenstein* as a 'birth myth', but that others such as Mary Jacobus, Barbara Johnson and Alan Bewell have also read the novel in terms of its representation (or elision) of the reproductive female body. Hanson herself argues that *Frankenstein* 'considers the potentially destructive power of an inadequate uterine environment'. See Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy*, p. 49; Mary Jacobus, 'Is There a Woman in This Text?', *New Literary History*, 14 (1982), 117-41; Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Alan Bewell, 'An Issue of Monstrous Desire: *Frankenstein* and Obstetrics', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2.1 (1988), 105-28.

the trauma of inexperienced and unassisted motherhood a mine of troubled fantasy and black humour are on the lookout for Gothic predecessors'.⁴⁷⁶ The novel acts as a kind of experiment to show us the human condition, but it also prompts self-examination. Indeed, it creates a thematic link between Victor's Creature – composed of dissected body parts selected and assembled by his creator – and the novel's readership, comprised of diverse individual human minds and bodies, reading and being 'delivered' together. *Frankenstein* thus links the body of the text with maternal bodies, and maternal bodies with literary reproduction. Its potential to be reread, reassembled and reanimated both provokes and deals with contemporary anxieties about monstrous mothers, birth and death. It births readings which reanimate its female bodies and fill their silences.

⁴⁷⁶ Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 97.

Conclusion

Afterbirth

[T]he opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born.
- Virginia Woolf⁴⁷⁷

Beheading and Bodysnatching

In the Autumn 2009 edition of *Mslexia*, Polly Clark published a poem entitled 'Beheaded' that presented childbirth as an execution. Her speaker, placed upon a public scaffold, describes the experience of giving birth in terms that correlate the 'crowning' of the baby with the 'beheading' of its mother:

I hear perfectly: the thud
onto linen, the strange gasp
like the cry of a premature baby,
just once and then silence. (ll. 1-4)⁴⁷⁸

Clark's opening stanza both explicitly evokes and defamiliarises birth. Her 'beheaded' subject's senses are heightened, but they are also singular, confined by the order of stanzas and introduced separately. While Clark initially concentrates on her speaker's hearing, the second stanza begins by describing what she can 'see perfectly' (l. 5). Yet, though she still has the capacity to use language, the speaker finds that words cannot emerge from her body: 'I still have all my words. / I move my mouth, / like someone begging for water' (ll. 10-12). She tells us of her beheading '*without a single word of protest*' (l. 24, emphasis added). This fragmentation suggests that the very act of expressing labour is something of a paradox. According to the logic of the poem, a woman can no more speak when she is birthing than when she is dead. The 'silence' of the poem, after that first 'strange gasp', seems very loud indeed.

⁴⁷⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 112.

⁴⁷⁸ Polly Clark, 'Beheaded', in 'Making a Poem', *Mslexia* (Autumn 2009), p. 22. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

It is striking, then, that the women poets and novelists included in this thesis speak of pregnancy, poetic and real, from the perspective of the birthing subject. Their words, both strange and loud, nineteenth-century, modern and contemporary, resonate with one another in ways that are often unexpectedly powerful. From Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pregnant poet in *Aurora Leigh*, to Virginia Woolf's cross-dressing hero(ine) in *Orlando*, to Kathleen Jamie's spectral subjects in her ultrasound poems and Mary Shelley's hidden (m)others in *Frankenstein*, these women writers have demonstrated a preoccupation with articulating the pregnant subject's voice – 'all' her words, even those that are apparently inexpressible. The corpus of work gathered together and explored in this thesis exemplifies the ways in which women writers can be read in relation to one another, as not simply participating in a lineal model of influence, but in a female tradition of storytelling, echoes and hauntings that circulate among mothers and daughters, sisters and midwives. Indeed, the ways in which birth has historically been managed by female midwives provides an evocative parallel for these women writers' thematic echoes. Unlike man-midwives, female midwives during the centuries before Hunter's *Atlas* did *not* dissect pregnant bodies; they were lay practitioners, who shared knowledge and skill predominantly through practical application and informal training. According to Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, it is for this reason that female midwives share a history of persecution with witches and other women who were deemed transgressive.⁴⁷⁹

Clark's decision to make explicit her childbirth/execution metaphor in a magazine dedicated to the development and promotion of new women writers positions her within a cooperative framework of creative activity between a community of women writers, which reveals and opens up not only the workings of a birth poem, but also its central maternal

⁴⁷⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives & Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, 2nd edn (New York: the Feminist Press, 2010), pp. 18-21.

subject. In the interview that accompanies 'Beheaded', Clark outlines her poetic method, identifying her speaker as herself and thus firmly placing her poem in the confessional mode. She articulates the central problem of representing childbirth in poetry: what Iris Marion Young identified in 1983 as 'split subjectivity'.⁴⁸⁰ By explaining that her own experience of childbirth involved a separation of the subject from the act of labour, Clark acknowledges her ambivalence towards maternity:

I'd read somewhere that if you have your head cut off, you remain conscious for several minutes after. [...] The idea seemed to connect to the act of childbirth, that complete removal, separation, of the self [...] what childbirth was like for me.⁴⁸¹

What Clark's poem most draws attention to, however, is the precarious positioning of the pregnant subject during pregnancy, labour and after she has given birth: her deathly afterlife. It is this afterlife, simultaneously corporeal and ghostly, which this conclusion reflects upon, using it as a way of theorising both the figure of the pregnant poet and her relationships with her literary mothers and daughters.

The notion that birth is inextricably linked with death is not a new one; certainly, throughout history childbirth has always been a dangerous business for mother and baby alike. Likewise, the figure of the transgressive poet has long been construed as criminal. The scaffold, associated with the guillotine of the French Revolution, is a place at which the conservative bourgeoisie and revolutionary radicals alike are decapitated for their political beliefs; it is a powerfully evocative and performative space (Fig. 1). In Clark's poem, the subject's execution results in a celebration of womanhood by 'the people' who had previously refused to 'cheer' the dangerous, criminal pregnant poet (l. 21). They instead applaud a woman who has been rendered dead – and thus safe – by motherhood.

⁴⁸⁰ Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *On Female Bodily Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 41-61.

⁴⁸¹ Clark, 'Making a Poem', p. 22.

Moreover, Clark's image of the newborn 'premature baby' (l. 3) – the only point during the poem at which pregnancy explicitly is evoked – has a disconcerting effect. It suggests the possibility of infant mortality, even though it is the maternal subject who is being 'executed'. This moment also disrupts subjectivity, leading us to question who the 'I' of the poem, strange and other, signifies. It is this positioning of the maternal subject's voice that in her interview Clark calls 'shocking'.⁴⁸² The figure of the pregnant subject, placed uncertainly between life and death and acutely aware of this, looks back through her mother(s) *and* forward to her daughters. This is a labouring speaker and she is executed; in giving life, she is stripped of her own. Ghosted, she speaks from the scaffold. In Woolf's terms, she lays down her body, rather than puts it on.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² Clark, 'Making a Poem', p. 22.

⁴⁸³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 112.



Lith. de Delaporte

*Naissance du juste milieu.
Après un enfantement pénible de la Liberté.*

*Le parrain de l'enfant montre au peuple cet embryon monstrueux Casim. P. veut donner un coup de poise
à l'accouchée souffrante. Guiz. tient le forceps, Dufaure le Docteur se frotte les mains de plaisir, Lamolot tient
ses adoucissements tous prêts, le baron Alth. porte les lettres de sang, par Sébast. et sa nourrice. Schen toujours si
généreux, le petit Ch. et le grand poullet Gaulois au quel il fait la nique.*

Wellcome Images

The process of ‘laying down’ or ghosting the maternal body, however, has also been criticised. In her article on anthologies of women’s poetry about childbirth, Karin Voth Harman argues that a surprisingly large number of poems on this theme fail to represent the maternal body in all its corporeality. Quoting a review of *The Virago Book of Birth Poetry* by Blake Morrison, who asserts that it contains ‘plenty after birth but not much afterbirth’, Harman draws attention to the perceived absence of the maternal body in contemporary women’s poetry. By asking ‘where’s the body?’ she issues a challenge to women writers depicting childbirth to overcome taboos which apparently silence the authentic, ‘lived experience’ of pregnancy:

As I turn to these birth anthologies asking: ‘where’s the body?’ I find, not so surprisingly, less a triumphant ‘essentialist’ celebration of the powerful female flesh than evidence that certain taboos ‘protecting’ the female body are still intact. [...] What are all these poems [...] actually doing with the woman’s body if they’re not writing about it? Many opt to focus on the simpler, more discrete body and consciousness of the foetus or new-born baby. Others reflect upon the other issues or personalities which attend birth, depicting the mother’s interaction with the father, with her birth attendants, or with her analgesics. Frequently poets apply extended metaphors to the body which metamorphose it into something else: usually a great force of nature such as the fertile earth or the stormy sea.⁴⁸⁵

As this thesis has shown, the maternal body is often ghosted in women’s writing about pregnancy. *Frankenstein’s* maternal subjects, for instance, include the disembodied Margaret, Elizabeth, Caroline and Justine, while in *The Weather in the Streets* the proper maternal subject, Kate, is the uncanny spectral double to Olivia’s improper, abject and miscarrying body.⁴⁸⁶ Rendered spectral, uncanny and metaphorical, the pregnant subjects in these texts

⁴⁸⁴ E. Forest, after J. Grandville, 1831, after Eugène Devéria, 1827, *An exhausted mother gives birth before a crowd of French officials, symbolising the birth of the ideas of the July Revolution and their troubled patrimony in the hands of contemporary politicians* [Lithograph]. Available from Wellcome Images. Interestingly, the mother holds her legs firmly together – suggesting, perhaps, that this birth is not a result of active maternal labour, but is instead a passive delivery. As I discuss in Chapter IV (Labour), *Frankenstein* has been read as an allegory of the French Revolution.

⁴⁸⁵ Karin Voth Harman, ‘Delivering the Mother’, in *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, ed. by Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 178-88 (p. 180).

⁴⁸⁶ As discussed in Chapters IV (Labour) and II (Miscarriage).

self-consciously metamorphose into deathly maternal subjects. Their bodies, meanwhile, are punished by the physicality of pregnancy, becoming (as in Clark's poem) corpse-like, abject and excessive. Maternal bodies are repeatedly hidden, (un)dressed, shrouded in cloth and made statuesque in their stillness.⁴⁸⁷ Harman calls this mode 'body-snatching', suggesting that the maternal body has been wrongfully, illicitly stolen by unknown grave-robbers.⁴⁸⁸

However, I contest her assumption that metaphors which transform the pregnant body into something *beyond* the corporeal are disempowered, 'dead' metaphors.⁴⁸⁹ A key part of this thesis's aim has been to examine the childbirth metaphor as a model for female creativity. As writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning show, this is not a single metaphor, but a matrix of metaphors that open up multiple *meanings*, rather than fix *meaning*. My analysis illustrates that the snatched body is still a *body*; it can be reanimated, reappropriated and put on again, as *Frankenstein* so powerfully demonstrates. It can even be hidden in metaphor, as Barrett Browning's foetal text proves, or render her raped mother, Marian Erle, a poetic Madonna. Similarly, ultrasound poems show the power of ghosting, by making spectral all bodies – mother, foetus and gowned technician – in order to reappropriate the medical gaze and explore its troubling implications. Indeed, the Gothic body, both snatched and spectral, offers a way out of Harman's standoff between what she perceives as 'dead' metaphors and 'essentialist' female flesh, or between what Morrison identifies as 'after birth and afterbirth'.

⁴⁸⁷ The motif of statues, and the importance of clothes (particularly, undergarments) has been explored in Chapter II (Miscarriage).

⁴⁸⁸ Harman, 'Delivering the Mother', p. 180.

⁴⁸⁹ Harman argues that, though 'many feminists find "earth mother" imagery very empowering, [...] I find these metaphors work better in *theory* than in *poetry*. In poetry they run a high risk of being 'dead' metaphors: they have lost their power to jar the imagination because they compare things which readers readily accept as having something in common.' See Harman, 'Delivering the Mother', p. 181.

Like many of the texts explored thus far, Clark's depiction of the birthing subject is particularly Gothic. It shows us a woman who loses her head and yet lives; the image of the 'living dead' looms large in this representation.⁴⁹⁰ Furthermore, by physically separating the speaker's head from her torso, 'Beheaded' suggests that giving birth creates a clear – and horrific – split between mind and body, a Cartesian model which haunts many of the texts explored in this thesis.⁴⁹¹ By engaging with the pregnant body as a self-contained yet leaky, expanding and expansive entity that breaches boundaries with impunity, such representations highlight the tension between pregnancy's corporeality and its spectrality. Though visceral, the pregnant subject becomes increasingly disembodied, just as Clark's speaker floats above her decapitated corpse. Beheading the mother, however, is an unpredictable undertaking that has disturbingly *fertile* consequences; Clark does not mention the Medusa, but nevertheless that image of monstrous motherhood shadows her decapitated mother.

In Greek mythology, the Gorgon Medusa was originally beautiful, but became transformed into a serpent-haired monster after being raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple.⁴⁹² Athena punished Medusa by making her face so terrible to behold that the mere sight of it would turn onlookers to stone. Medusa, pregnant with Poseidon's child, was then beheaded by the hero Perseus. However, Pegasus, a winged horse, and Chrysaor, a golden sword-wielding giant, sprang from her decapitated body.⁴⁹³ According to mythology, other 'births' followed the spilling of Medusa's blood; the corals of the Red Sea and the many

⁴⁹⁰ Interestingly, in popular culture, the only way to kill the living dead is either to cut off their heads and stake their hearts (vampires), or to destroy (usually through penetration by bullet or a hand-held weapon) their brains (zombies).

⁴⁹¹ For example, in Chapter IV (Labour) I explored how the Cartesian mind/body division is enacted by medical texts such as William Hunter's *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi*, and complicated by Mary Shelley's representation of body parts (maternal and otherwise) in *Frankenstein*.

⁴⁹² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A. D. Melville, with an introduction and notes by E.J. Kenney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), IV.776-803, p. 98.

⁴⁹³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV.776-803, p. 98.

poisonous vipers of the Sahara were all Medusa's 'children'.⁴⁹⁴ The consequences of beheading the pregnant subject are monstrous indeed. Rather like the open Pandora's box, Medusa's spilled blood seems to engender both horror and hope.⁴⁹⁵ The medical management of childbirth, which, from the eighteenth century onwards, has figuratively beheaded the mother, is disrupted by such classical echoes. Indeed, this reminds us of Barrett Browning's rewriting of classical texts in *Aurora Leigh*, a mode of reanimation that anticipates subsequent textual practice by other women poets.⁴⁹⁶ The Medusa-mother, repeatedly reincarnated and beheaded in representations, continues to haunt medical discourses of pregnancy in the twentieth century. Her unflinching stare gazes forwards and backwards.

Elizabeth Baines's novel, *The Birth Machine* (1983), for instance, uses images of beheading and the Medusa in order to highlight the medical mismanagement of childbirth, thereby demonstrating the feminist politicisation of birth from the second-wave onwards.⁴⁹⁷ Baines's heroine, Zelda Harris, is a doctor's wife, and is made a test subject by the hospital her husband works at to try out a new 'birth machine', a device intended to induce, regulate and control a woman's labour, thereby making it a process which can be made to fit

⁴⁹⁴ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV.740-75, p. 97; Lucan, 'Medusa and the Snakes of Libya', from *Pharsalia*, IX, trans. by Robert Graves, in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 40-42.

⁴⁹⁵ While the vipers and Chrysaor are monstrous, Pegasus is often seen as an image for poetic inspiration – for instance, in W. B. Yeats's 'Easter 1916' (ll. 24-25) and 'The Fascination of What's Difficult'. See W. B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916' and 'The Fascination of What's Difficult', in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1989), repr. by The Poetry Foundation

<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/247616#poem>>,

<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172058>> [accessed 22 September 2016]. The Medusa has also been identified as a *menstrual* monster by (among others) Freud in his essay 'Medusa's Head' (1922) and Marie Mulvey Roberts in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*. See Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head', in *The Medusa Reader*, ed. by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 84-85; Marie Mulvey Roberts, 'Menstrual Misogyny and Taboo: The Medusa, Vampire and the Female Stigmatic', in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*, ed. by Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 149-61.

⁴⁹⁶ As discussed in Chapter I (Quickening).

⁴⁹⁷ As discussed in Chapter I (Quickening), feminist 'gynocritics' rereadings of *Aurora Leigh*, among other texts, politicise the reproductive body and thus expand the literary canon to include previously marginalised female authors.

conveniently and predictably into an obstetrician's routine.⁴⁹⁸ The machine drugs Zelda, sending her into a hallucinatory state in which past and present fuse together. Removed from the experience of giving birth, she (like Clark's speaker) is beheaded:

She does it, she gets control – snip, cuts her head and shoulders away from the rest of her body, [...] She's their baby, their goody, their Frankenstein beauty. Oh, no, she's not, here's the urge: her body gels, gathers, and now she's her very own monster, wolf-mouth howling, frog-legs flexing: they flinch back. She can make them flinch back, hold them off from her own magic circle. She laughs, wild strangled laughter, coiling helter-skelter inside the huge knot of her, she sees them looking from one to the other. In spite of their magic, in spite of their enemas, she squirts shit in their faces.⁴⁹⁹

Like Clark's labouring mother, Zelda floats away from her body. Her head becomes detached; indeed she unhinges it herself in an act of rebellion when she is strapped, incapacitated, to the birth machine. Displayed performatively on this stage-scaffold for the benefit of the medical staff, Zelda nevertheless surprises them by her passive refusal to perform. She is a 'leaky' subject; her body, its fluids and her visceral, taboo language – blood, sweat and shit – cannot be contained.⁵⁰⁰ This language illuminates the maternal subject in her own terminology. It showcases the visceral and intellectual capabilities of the subject, and revisits the imagery of the 'living dead', imagery which both fascinates and repels an audience. Indeed, Zelda's body is Gothic in its monstrosity. Ironically described as 'their Frankenstein beauty', she is both creator and Creature. This suggests that the male medics identify Zelda's body with their own (pro)creative fantasies. Like Victor Frankenstein, they wish to create a beautiful creature in their own image. But, unlike Frankenstein, Zelda is a female subject. She already has the capacity to create. The more they attempt to control

⁴⁹⁸ Ultimately the machine does not work; Zelda has to have an emergency caesarean. However, caesareans create their own divisions between head and body, and mother and baby, by cutting into the body.

⁴⁹⁹ Elizabeth Baines, *The Birth Machine*, rev. edn (Cambridge: Salt, 2010), pp. 78-79. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁰⁰ Margrit Shildrick's conception of the 'leaky' female body, as illuminated in her *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), is discussed throughout this thesis.

her, the more her body leaks. This maternal subject is ‘her very own monster, wolf-mouth howling, frog-legs flexing [...] She laughs, wild strangled laughter’.

Zelda thus embodies what Hélène Cixous describes as ‘the laughing Medusa’ in her seminal essay of the same title. Indeed, throughout her essay Cixous explores tensions between boundaries such as speech and silence, birth and annihilation, and body and soul. She argues that a woman must write ‘her self’ in order to subvert Cartesian dichotomy and masculine norms, and in so doing she ‘will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure’.⁵⁰¹ This refers directly to the kind of performative stage/scaffold upon which women are pathologised by medical discourse, and also highlights Zelda’s ‘living deathliness’ as a labouring subject; Zelda becomes the ‘uncanny stranger on display’ when she is attached to the birth machine. However, her grotesque and leaky body subverts this display. She thereby does ‘return’ to her body, and her ‘wild strangled laughter’ breaks the oppressive ‘silence’.

Nevertheless, Zelda’s return to the body is *through* metaphor – if these are what Harman calls ‘dead’ metaphors, then they are provocatively ‘*undead*’.⁵⁰² Read as Gorgon-like, monstrous, dangerous and potentially castrating, Zelda is a powerful subject. Furthermore, in accordance with Cixous’ argument, Zelda is ‘impregnable’ precisely because her leakiness allows her to ‘wreck *partitions*’ and ‘cut through’ corporeal dichotomies (emphasis added):

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word ‘silence’.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰¹ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976), 875-93 (p. 880).

⁵⁰² Harman, ‘Delivering the Mother’, p. 181.

⁵⁰³ Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, p. 886.

Beheading therefore becomes an act of rebellion – a way of ‘cut[ting] through’ the ‘ultimate reserve-discourse’. The medics respond to Zelda’s transgression by ‘manhandling’ her, lifting her over and letting the machine continue its work (p. 7). Zelda counters this by sitting up and removing her ‘bloody skull’ from her body, an image that reconfigures the Cartesian mind/body dualism in its Gothic aspect. If the head is both ‘bloody’ and deathly, then it is ‘undead’. Furthermore, if it is ‘bloody’ then it is *of the body*:

They lift her over. The ceiling slips, she’s slipping, losing her grip, losing substance, a soul that doesn’t need feeding, falling, parachuting over the skull and round it and away, and for a moment she thinks she’s free, that she’s left it behind, bloody skull floating away above her. (p. 79)

The positioning of the subject in this excerpt is liminal; Zelda occupies a space somewhere between her body, stretched out on the machine, and her floating skull. Freedom for Zelda means ‘losing substance’ and leaving behind the constraints of the labouring body, albeit temporarily.⁵⁰⁴

Baines’s birth scene thus enacts the tension between the grotesquely corporeal pregnant body and its ghostly apparition. Such simultaneous embodiment and ghosting allows the pregnant subject to resist the medical management and appropriation of her body. Her Medusan monstrosity makes her difficult to silence, while her spectrality creates space for exploring pregnancy as an experience fertile with metaphor. The resulting spectacle ‘slips’ between representations of the female subject as either all body or all ghost. The pregnant body, then, is shown to be inherently resistant to classification. Taking into account such resistance, the next part of this conclusion looks forward to how contemporary feminist criticism might further re/member this corpus of women’s writing,

⁵⁰⁴ Unlike Clark’s mother, Zelda cannot hear the sounds and language of the gowned attendants. The medics do look in her direction, but they appear to misread what they see. She thinks they have guessed that she has unhinged herself from her body, and beheaded herself in rebellion. However, actually they look past her, to her husband positioned symbolically at her head. They misread the ‘object’ in front of them.

by examining the afterbirth. This is not to return the woman to her body in the way that Harman envisages, however – but to gesture towards the metaphorical importance of corporeality. The placenta and its relationship with the maternal subject, which is both afterbirth and *after birth*, serves as an epilogue to the literary narrative of pregnancy mapped out in this thesis. Its treatment epitomises the representation of the pregnant subject in many of the texts that I have examined – and, as I explore, its matter can be considered metaphorically, in order to illuminate the poetic pregnant subject.

Metaphorical Matter: After Birth and Afterbirth

For labouring subjects, the final, painful contractions occur not as the baby ‘crowns’ but after he or she has been born. The placenta is another object that the mother must ‘push’ out from her body before labour can be determined as finished; it is the birthing that takes place *after birth*. Ritualised by various historical and contemporary birth practices, designated as surplus ‘clinical waste’ and incinerated, commercialised, made into cosmetic products and subjected to scientific research and the harvesting of its stem cells, the placenta has been inscribed as variously as the pregnant subject herself.⁵⁰⁵ It has also been

⁵⁰⁵ JaneMaree Maher, Maria Fannin and Emily Burns are among the critics who situate the placenta in terms of the tension between scientific/medical discourses and ritual. For instance, Emily Burns writes that ‘the “definition” of the placenta depends on the particular discourse being employed. Experientially, it is an electric, sensual thing, and medically, it is an endocrine organ that acts as the transfer agent of oxygen and nutrients between a mother and her fetus.’ She categorises ‘various traditions, customs, rituals and beliefs surrounding the placenta’ as ‘anxiety-releasing mechanisms’. This is particularly evocative when we consider the Gothic, which too is concerned with ‘anxiety-releasing mechanisms’. Indeed, rituals for the placenta raise the spectre of the Gothic, since they include burying, lotus birth (in which placenta and baby stay attached until the umbilical cord breaks naturally) and consumption. Scientific discourse, meanwhile, labels the organ both ‘clinical waste’ and a valuable resource of research (primarily in terms of stem cells – which, again, provokes much cultural anxiety). Furthermore, in their article ‘Can the Afterbirth Play a Role after Birth?’ Jorg Dötsch, Ralf L. Schild and Ellen Struwe highlight how the prophetic function of the placenta – its perceived ability to predict the baby’s future health – causes scientific and ritual discourses to overlap, making it a ‘mirror’ for the newborn child: ‘Before the introduction of modern medicine, the afterbirth (placenta) has been believed to host many secrets and even parts of the newborn baby’s soul. Placenta and fetus are closely linked in the so-called feto-placental unit. Therefore, the placenta contains information on intrauterine fetal life. [...] We are currently conducting a multicenter study to predict the probability of later disease inflicted by

conceptualised *in utero* as an ‘obstruction to clear imaging’, a visual representation of the maternal body (in ultrasound scans) and a chimera that ‘breaks all the rules of human identity’.⁵⁰⁶ Indeed, feminist theorists such as JaneMaree Maher have argued that the placenta’s liminality makes it an ideal metonym for a revised model of pregnant subjectivity:

It contests any separation, since it marks out the imbrication and fluidity of the pregnant body, but it also refuses an uncomplicated collapse. In material and theoretical ways, then, the placenta acts as a synecdoche of the entire process of pregnancy.⁵⁰⁷

Maher reads the placenta as both ‘matter and metaphor’, arguing that ‘[i]nstead of the divisive view of pregnancy as two-in-one, the placenta calls for an understanding of the singularity and fluidity of this bodily incarnation’.⁵⁰⁸ Maternal and foetal bodies are never in ‘fusion’, but they do exchange ‘vital’ fluid, nutrients, hormones, waste and other material, in a complex system regulated by the placenta.⁵⁰⁹ Both the pregnant subject and her unborn child are transformed by this continuous and systemic exchange: the foetus develops into a newborn baby; the mother grows into the familiar round-bellied form of the heavily pregnant woman, before giving birth. The placenta thus both enables and regulates the ‘leaky’ female body, which has been explored throughout this thesis.

Like the pregnant subject, the placenta occupies a contested space in representation, and has been subject to debate about both its function and origin. For instance, in her

an adverse intrauterine environment.’ See JaneMaree Maher, ‘Visibly Pregnant: Toward a Placental Body’, *Feminist Review*, 72 (2002), 95-107; Maria Fannin, ‘Placental Relations’, *Feminist Theory*, 15.3 (2014), 289-306; Emily Burns, ‘More Than Clinical Waste? Placenta Rituals Among Australian Home-Birthing Women’, *The Journal of Perinatal Education*, 23.1 (2014), 41-49 (p. 41); Jorg Dötsch, Ralf L. Schild and Ellen Struwe, ‘Can the Afterbirth Play a Role after Birth?’, *Human Ontogenetics*, 2.1 (2008), 25-28 (p. 25).

⁵⁰⁶ Julie Palmer, ‘The Placental Body in 4D: Everyday Practices of Non-Diagnostic Sonography’, *Feminist Review*, 93 (2009), 64-80 (p. 69); P. W. Nathanielsz, *Life Before Birth: The Challenges of Fetal Development* (New York: WH Freeman and Company, 1992), p. 65.

⁵⁰⁷ Maher, ‘Visibly Pregnant: Toward a Placental Body’, p. 104.

⁵⁰⁸ Maher, ‘Visibly Pregnant: Toward a Placental Body’, p. 105.

⁵⁰⁹ ‘Vital fluid’ is a term used by D. H. Jacques, in his 1859 text, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection*. I discussed this term’s resonance in relation to the figure of the ‘permeable poet’ in Chapter I (Quickening). See D. H. Jacques, *Hints Toward Physical Perfection: Or, The Philosophy of Human Beauty; Showing How to Acquire and Retain Bodily Symmetry, Health, and Vigour, Secure Long Life, and Avoid The Infirmities and Deformities of Age* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1865 [1859]), p. 60.

dialogue with Luce Irigaray, biologist Hélène Rouch asserts that ‘there’s a commonly held view that the placenta is a mixed formation, half-maternal, half-fetal’.⁵¹⁰ ‘However,’ she continues, ‘although the placenta is a formation of the embryo, it behaves like an organ that is practically independent of it’:

It plays a mediating role on two levels: [...] it’s the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means that there’s never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues [...] it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms [...] but also modifying the maternal metabolism.⁵¹¹

Rouch’s emphasis on the mutual exchange facilitated by the placenta implies that, like the pregnant body itself, the placenta enacts the separate-togetherness of maternal-foetal relations. Indeed, according to Rouch, it is both ‘space’ and ‘system’, suggesting that the placenta encompasses both the womb-space of the foetal environment itself and how that space functions. The placenta is thus construed as active matter that fulfils maternal and foetal needs by mediating between these two ‘organisms’. It provides both a link and dividing point between the pregnant subject and the foetus.

Maher, meanwhile, represents the placenta as the ‘not I’ or ‘other’ that, made from surplus cells, defines the foetus as a separate subject from a very early stage of pregnancy. Like Rouch, Maher describes placental formation by drawing upon the medical discourse of embryology:

The placenta is marked out from the rest of the conceptus at about the 14-day mark. At this point, the four-celled fertilized egg develops what is known as the primitive streak. This streak will become the spinal column of the developing embryo, later the foetus. The cells that are not part of this development are the placental cells. [...] It [the placenta] is the ‘not I’ that defines and distinguishes the foetus from its surrounds.⁵¹²

⁵¹⁰ Luce Irigaray, ‘On the Maternal Order’, in *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. by Alison Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 37-44 (p. 38).

⁵¹¹ Irigaray, ‘On the Maternal Order’, pp. 38-39.

⁵¹² Maher, ‘Visibly Pregnant: Toward a Placental Body’, pp. 102-03.

Here, Maher presents an origin story. Initially formed from the same embryonic cluster, the foetus and placenta soon become distinguishable on a cellular level. The placenta, defined by what it is not ('not part of this development') occupies a position of negative space. Consequently, it becomes 'marked out' as though in silhouette.⁵¹³ Thus, like the maternal subject envisioned throughout this thesis, the placenta is simultaneously obscured and revealed. Its existence throws the foetus, with its 'primitive streak', into stark relief.

By citing the placenta as the 'not I', Maher equates the formation of this organ with emptiness and non-existence, implying that it is both creative and annihilatory. This echoes the way in which uterine space is constructed by the medical gaze in ultrasound scans.⁵¹⁴ Like the pregnant womb-space that surrounds the foetus during an ultrasound scan, the placenta's presence becomes synonymous with 'space and silence'.⁵¹⁵ However, as Maher points out, its formation also suggests excess. The placenta, she argues, 'is in excess of the definitional boundaries that are deployed in representations of the reproducing body. It is also in excess of the relation between gestating body and foetal entity, but it is necessary for their co-existence'.⁵¹⁶ Because it is difficult to define on a cellular level as belonging to either mother or foetus, the placenta occupies a liminal space. Furthermore, like the maternal body itself, it disrupts boundaries by not only breaching them in its fluid transfer of nutrients and other matter to (and *from*) the foetus, but in its uncontainable materiality. It is large, heavy and necessary for foetal development. Indeed, as Bernhard Siegfried Albinus's nineteenth-century illustration shows, the placenta is surprisingly expansive, matching in size and shape the full-term unborn baby, who is depicted as still attached to it (Fig. 2).

⁵¹³ The importance of the silhouette in conceptualising the pregnant subject recurs throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter II (Miscarriage). The notion of the silhouette, as simultaneously revealing and concealing the pregnant subject, resonates provocatively in my discussion.

⁵¹⁴ Indeed, this echoes the empty space of the womb as discussed in Ultrasound (Chapter III).

⁵¹⁵ Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*, p. 41.

⁵¹⁶ Maher, 'Visibly Pregnant: Toward a Placental Body', p. 103.

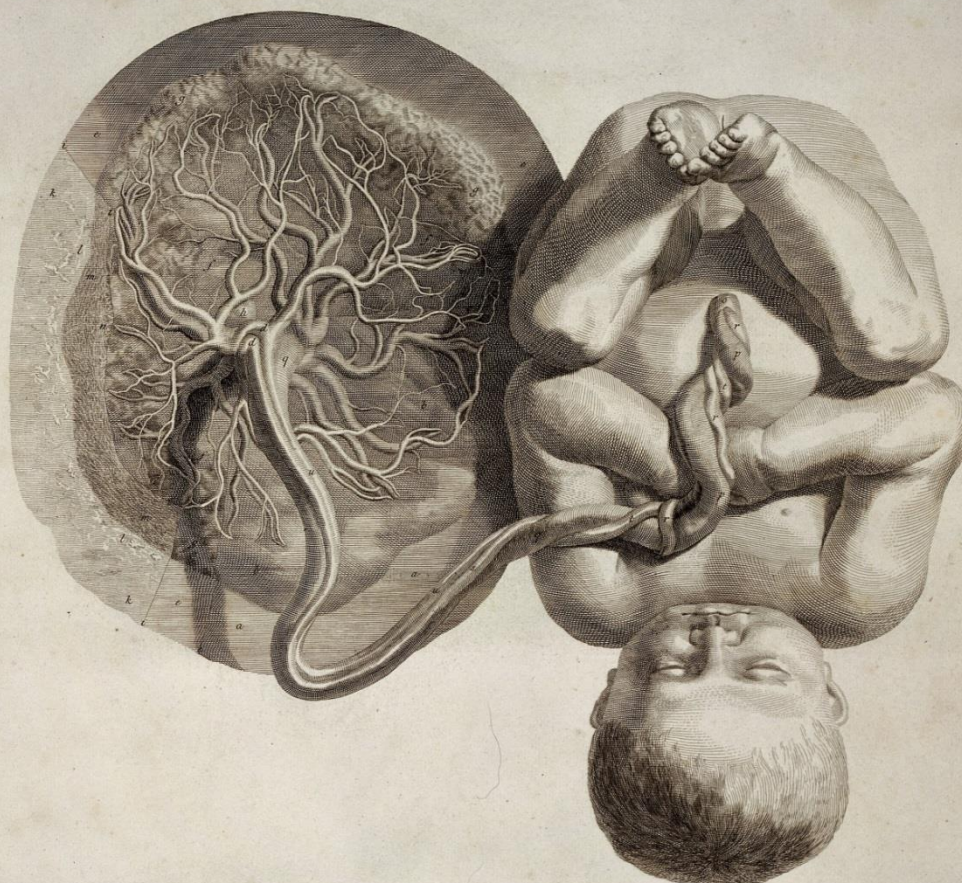
Albinus renders in mimetic detail the placenta's tissue, blood vessels and umbilical cord. Its intricate, tree-like blood vessels branch out into a circular, cloud-like mass of flesh which is neatly extricated from the womb.⁵¹⁷ The unborn child, positioned upside down as though about to descend through the birth canal, appears to be sleeping peacefully. Visualised as outside and separate from the absent maternal body, the placenta nevertheless stands in for its pregnant/maternal host. Though removed from the womb, it is represented as still providing sustenance for the foetus; this image is a rare opportunity to view it whilst it is still intact and connected to the child. Again, this creates a tension between the deathly nature of these medical images and their representation of the vital unborn child.⁵¹⁸ Indeed, inscribed into this image are anxieties surrounding the placenta's potential for both nurture and threat.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ I use the term 'tree-like' knowingly; it reminds me of the oak tree that Orlando encounters both figuratively (as poetic inspiration) and viscerally (in her straddling of its 'bones') in Woolf's text, as I discussed in Chapter II (Miscarriage).

⁵¹⁸ As explored in Chapter IV (Labour). Given that this is an image of dissection, it could be suggested that the placenta has failed its purpose in keeping the unborn child alive. The mother, as Albinus's title tells us, died in labour.

⁵¹⁹ Malfunctioning or unhealthy placentas can threaten foetal development and complicate labour. Placenta praevia, for example, occurs when the placenta covers the cervix, and prevents a vaginal birth from taking place. Placental abruption, meanwhile, is a serious condition in which the placenta starts to come away from the uterine wall.

B. S. ALBINI UTERI GRAVIDI TAB. V.



Placenta eadem, quae Tab. IV. cum embryone Tab. III. sed inverso.
 a b Pars amnios, ut Tab. IV. Sed hinc c d e reliquum ejus resectum,
 detractumque. d d Hic umbilico arcte adnexa, et continuata.
 e f g Chorion, detracta amnio, nudum. f g Hic placenta
 partem anteriorem restit. g Hic per illud apparet involucrium
 membranaceum supradictum: h hic massula quaedam, involucri
 illius continuatio. i i i Hinc reliquum chori rarsum, et detractum.
 k l m n Involucrium membranaceum nudum, detracto chorio. Iuxta
 placenta ambitum crassius, densius, et tanquam in massulas inae-
 qualiter distinctum l l. Unde et anteriorem placenta partem restit.
 Tab. VI. et interiorem totam, in fibrarum magis distinctum speciem
 m, usque ad placenta locum illum, ubi vasa umbilici ad placen-
 tam non longe ab ejus margine penetrant: post quasi reticulatum n.

Embryo in semet conglobatus, membris ad speciem ovi compositis.
 o Quaedam quasi vaginae speciei, cutis propage: unde principium
 umbilici, qui ad placenta, juxta centrum ejus pertinet.
 p u Umbilicus. p q Vena umbilici: r s t u arteriae duae. Hic
 primum spirae in modum intortae p r t: deinde rectae q s u. Vena
 et arteriae in ramos non longe a placenta abeunt, indeque per inte-
 riorem ejus partem quoque versus in ambitum tendunt. In figura
 facile internoscuntur, eo quod arteriae, quam venae, magis lumbosae.
 Supereminet, in chorio, tanquam in vagina, inclusae. Penetrantque
 ad placenta: sed plerique rami non prius, quam cum non longe
 ab ejus ambitu abeunt. Nec committuntur se invicem arteriae et venae,
 nisi paucae: quaedam ex parte. At ubi penetrant, fere citi arteria
 cum vena: et variis convenient modis.

Fig. 2⁵²⁰

⁵²⁰ Bernhard Siegfried Albinus, Tab. V, 'fetus attached to umbilical cord and placenta', in *Tabulae VII uteri mulieris gravidae cum iam parturiret mortuae...* (Lugduni Batavorum: J. et H. Verbeek, 1748-1751). Image available from Wellcome Images.

This medical look at the afterbirth epitomises the complex and often contradictory treatment of the pregnant subject in both medical and poetic discourses, which renders her simultaneously absent and present, deathly and living, known and unknown, as highlighted during the course of this thesis. Much like the pregnant subject, the placenta is construed as excessively corporeal – a Gothic organ that requires careful uncovering. It is with this in mind that I now uncover the story of Mary Wollstonecraft's placenta, which offers us a way of looking not only at the deathly afterlife of the pregnant subject, but at the literary mother. Most narratives of pregnancy end with the birth of the *child*, not the placenta; the harrowing account of Wollstonecraft's third stage of labour, the 'afterbirth', is one of the few present in childbirth narratives.⁵²¹

On the 30th August, 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to her younger daughter, Mary, after a long and arduous labour. At home, and attended by the female midwife in charge of the Westminster Lying-In hospital, Mrs Blenkinsop, Wollstonecraft laboured for eighteen hours. She wrote notes to William Godwin, her husband, reassuring him that everything was progressing smoothly, albeit slowly: 'Mrs Blenkinsop tells me that I am in the most natural state, and can promise me a safe delivery – But that I must have a little patience'.⁵²² The baby was not breech, and her previous delivery in 1794 of her elder daughter, Fanny, had been straightforward. Believing medical intervention during labour to be best avoided, Wollstonecraft had argued that 'the proper business of a midwife, in the

⁵²¹ Of course, *Frankenstein* does not end with the birth of the child – it explores what comes 'after'. The Creature has *not* been attached to a placenta, which is perhaps one of the reasons for the horrific events that follow. However, the link between the monstrous child and his (male) maternal creator – the 'umbilical cord' – is, in a sense, never severed. Nevertheless, always in the background, yet largely missing from birth scenes in literature, the placenta is the unwanted, messy matter that acts as an unspoken afterword to what Sharon Olds calls the 'glistening verb' of the baby, thereby showing that labour is not complete upon the birth of the new child subject, but rather on the expulsion of this mediating organ. See Sharon Olds, 'The Language of the Brag', in *Selected Poems* (London: Cape, 2005), pp. 6-7.

⁵²² William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1798), ed. by Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 265; quoted in Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 451.

instance of a natural labour, is to sit by and wait for the operations of nature, which seldom, in these affairs, demand the interposition of art'.⁵²³ Her notion that the 'proper' business of a midwife – both correct, decorous and *proprietal* – was simply to 'sit by and wait' positions childbirth as an unseen delivery carried out by the mysterious, primitive and 'natural' female body.⁵²⁴ Indeed, Wollstonecraft's vague description of 'the operations of nature' suggests that the maternal subject herself cannot fully understand the process of labour. By contrast, the artful interventions of the surgeon or *accoucheur* are knowledgeable, though only seldom necessary; Wollstonecraft is silent on the circumstances of such intervention. Labour, she implies, is fundamentally of the body and not the mind, which is the realm of 'art'.⁵²⁵ The midwife, whose purpose is both to support the labouring mother and (I infer) to guard her against unnecessary medical intervention in her vigil, is *artless*.

Though many of her contemporaries used man-midwives to help deliver their babies, Wollstonecraft's stance demonstrates resistance to this fashionable medical management of

⁵²³ Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, p. 265; quoted in Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 448. Fiercely intellectual, Wollstonecraft had loved and lived unconventionally, and was lately married to William Godwin. Both her novels and her famous treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) had expressed radical feminist thought on the position, and agency of, female subjects. As Barbara Taylor points out, identifying Wollstonecraft as a feminist is problematic, not least because the term is anachronistic, coming into use in the twentieth-century. Furthermore, she argues, '*The Rights of Woman* castigates its females in the harshest terms for classic feminine follies: vanity, irrationalism, intolerance, frivolity, ignorance, cunning, fickleness, indolence, narcissism, infantilism, impiety and, above all, sexual ambition. [...] The savagery of the denunciation is shocking. And while the feminist point behind it – the point to which the whole book tends – is that women are coerced into this debilitated condition by a male-dominated society, the rhetorical weight of Wollstonecraft's attack falls so heavily on her own sex as to make a reader begin to wonder whether the aim is less to free women than to abolish them'. See Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 12-13.

⁵²⁴ Wollstonecraft wrote that during the August of 1797 she eagerly anticipated her delivery, as then she could 'regain [her] activity, and [...] reduce to some shapeliness the portly shadow, which meets my eye when I take a musing walk'. See Todd, p. 449. The constraining physicality of late pregnancy, and its impact on both mobility and 'shapeliness', takes us back to the notion of the pregnant silhouette. It also mirrors the position of the pregnant subject, who is often depicted as sitting and waiting by the window. See Chapter III (Ultrasound).

⁵²⁵ Though, as Jan Van Rymsdyk's anatomical illustrations in Hunter's *Anatomia Uteri Humani Gravidi* show, art can also be made of the female reproductive body. Hunter's employment of an artist to represent his dissections mimetically ironically emphasises the importance of art that 'artlessly' depicts what is *seen*. I discussed this in the Introduction.

childbirth.⁵²⁶ Biographer Janet Todd, filling in the gaps in what we know of Wollstonecraft's labour, surmises that, in accordance with late eighteenth-century practice, 'Wollstonecraft would probably lie down for contractions and walk around between them to help shake down the child. Unlike so many of her acquaintances [...] she seems not to have been a great user of opium or laudanum, so she had no obvious ways of combating pain'.⁵²⁷ Her labour, then, can be understood as resembling what Grantly Dick Read, in the early twentieth century, would call 'natural childbirth'.⁵²⁸ Wollstonecraft went up to her bedchamber at two o'clock in the afternoon; Mary was born at twenty minutes past eleven in the night, 'puny and weak', but alive.⁵²⁹ She would grow up to become Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*. Wollstonecraft, however, was to die eleven days later from puerperal septicaemia. Her womb had stopped contracting, leaving the afterbirth inside her body. Though Mrs Blenkinsop is likely to have kneaded and manipulated Wollstonecraft's abdomen to stimulate contractions, she was unsuccessful, and Dr Louis Poignand, her senior colleague at the Westminster Lying-In hospital, was fetched. Having resisted male medical management of her labour thus far, and delivered her baby with the support of a female midwife, Wollstonecraft agreed to receive help from the doctor. The dangerous presence of the now extraneous, redundant organ within, called for 'art' rather than 'patience'.

Poignand, as both Todd and Claire Tomalin indicate, unwittingly introduced infection into the womb by reaching in repeatedly with his hands, and pulling at the placenta, which came away in pieces.⁵³⁰ As Jacques-Pierre Maygrier's illustrations indicate, this was considered proper medical practice (Fig. 3). Indeed, Maygrier's images are instructive,

⁵²⁶ I discussed the ascension of the man-midwife in Chapter IV (Labour).

⁵²⁷ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 450.

⁵²⁸ I discussed Grantly Dick Read's 'natural childbirth' in the Introduction. See Grantly Dick Read, *The Birth of a Child: Obstetric Procedure in Normal Childbirth for those who attend Women in Labour* (London: Wm. Heinemann Medical Books Ltd, 1947).

⁵²⁹ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 450.

⁵³⁰ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, p. 451; Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 277.

showing his medical reader the correct method of detaching a retained placenta. The illustration encourages the reader to position themselves as the man-midwife at the scene of birth; the man-midwife in this image is depicted metonymically, as arms and hands. He inserts one arm deep into the woman's uterus, feeling for the placenta (which is shown attached to its far wall). Once he has found it, the man-midwife uses the other hand to grasp the umbilical cord, and pull the afterbirth away.

Fig. 3⁵³¹

⁵³¹ Jacques-Pierre Maygrier and Eduard Caspar Jacob von Siebold, Plate XLVII, Figs. 1 & 2, in *Abbildungen aus dem Gesamtgebiete der theoretisch-praktischen Geburtshilfe, nebst beschreibender Erklärung derselben / Nach dem Französischen des Maygrier bearbeitet und mit Anmerkungen versehen von Eduard Casp. Jac. von Siebold* [translation of *Nouvelles démonstrations d'accouchements*] (Berlin : F.A. Herbig, 1829 [i.e. 1828-1829]). Image available from Wellcome Images.

Though intended to provide guidance on saving the mother's life, this is a deathly image, which simultaneously hides and exposes the pregnant subject. Here, she is once again depicted as headless and shrouded in cloth, the folds of the garment covering her genitals mirrored by the layers of skin apparently folded back to expose the womb.⁵³² The procedure itself would have been painful, dangerous and bloody – far from the neat extraction presented in Maygrier's artful illustration. Since there was little understanding of the importance of disinfection during this period, Poignand's hands may have been unwashed.⁵³³ Indeed, Tomalin characterises the doctor as well-meaning but ignorant: '[he] ferreted around as best he could'.⁵³⁴ It was this medical interference, so unlike 'art' with its 'ferreting', that contributed towards Wollstonecraft's death – though she may have died anyway, had the placenta remained unremoved. Unexpelled, it might have been reabsorbed into her body harmlessly, or it might have decayed within her womb, gradually poisoning her. Wollstonecraft became gravely ill, and died on 10th September, 1797.

Mary Wollstonecraft's story highlights the proximity of birth and death, and life and loss, for the pregnant subject. It reminds us of the dangerous reality of childbirth – the physical hardship and cost of pregnancy and labour, post-partum. Indeed, the birth

⁵³² This is reminiscent of both Hunter's Atlas and Maygrier's images (that I discussed in the Introduction).

⁵³³ Puerperal sepsis, also known as childbed fever, was the most common reason for maternal mortality during this period. Tina Cassidy gives an evocative account of the spread of infection (particularly common in nineteenth-century hospitals) due to the dual practices of autopsy and internal examination by male doctors: 'Because government regulations required autopsies on mothers who died of the fever, physicians and medical students, who practised obstetric examinations on cadavers, created a devastating cycle by going from the autopsy slab – where decomposing bits of the body would stick under their fingernails and in the creases of their skin – to the delivery table, where they would perform internal exams to check for dilation or descent. At no time in between did they properly wash their hands'. Cassidy's doubling of the autopsy slab and delivery table, the cadaver and the labouring mother, highlights the (un)deathly positioning of the birthing body on both surfaces, where they are prised open and examined by the contaminating gaze and hands of the male obstetrician. This enacts the deadly doubling between medical and literary representations of the pregnant subject that I have explored throughout this thesis. Joanna Kavenna's 2010 novel, *The Birth of Love*, similarly depicts the consequences of the obstetrician's touch, by telling the story of nineteenth-century Hungarian obstetrician Ignaz Semmelweis (1818-65), who realised the link between hand-washing and disinfection and implemented a strict cleanliness regime in his Viennese hospital. Kavenna examines the end of Semmelweis's life, when he was committed to an asylum. See Tina Cassidy, *Birth: A History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007), pp. 56-61 (p. 57); Joanna Kavenna, *The Birth of Love* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

⁵³⁴ Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 277.

metaphor, a vocal/focal point in poetry and prose to which the women writers explored in this thesis have repeatedly returned, acknowledges this reality through its intense corporeality. Meanwhile, feminist readings of such texts – including my own – play with metaphor in order to draw parallels between pregnant and poetic creativity. Harman's metaphor of reading even includes feminist literary critics, by arguing that they serve as midwives:

By serving as midwives to writers attempting to deliver mothers, in all their complexities, to the public gaze, critics now have the opportunity to publicise and promote different understandings of motherhood. The medium of poetic language offers a crucial alternative to the potent linguistic mix of medicine, psychology and politics which currently drowns most mothers' voices.⁵³⁵

Given the uncertainty surrounding pregnancy, the afterbirth provides valuable metaphorical matter to contextualise the discrete, rounded pregnant belly that has been shaped, uncovered and conceptualised during the course of this thesis. Thus, by re/membering the mother, we can also deliver the afterbirth and situate these writers' texts in terms of their relationships with one another, and indeed, with feminist literary criticism. What we decide to do with this symbol of foetal-maternal relations, pregnant subjectivity, reproductive bodies and metaphorical matter, is open to debate; the possibilities are as various, perhaps, as ways of disposing of, commemorating and consuming the organ itself. It allows us to ask what comes next for the pregnant poet, after her book/baby has been born. The answer, inevitably, is the afterbirth – the potent yet dangerous matter that must be expelled from the body completely, and checked for its intactness, in order for the pregnant subject to complete her transformation into a maternal subject.

⁵³⁵ Harman, 'Delivering the Mother', p. 179.

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