

**Reflections on a UROP:**  
**“Making the Makers: Conceptualizations and Representations of the Pregnant Body in  
Shakespeare’s World”**

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I met professor JB Shank at the top of spring semester in 2018 when I took his honors seminar on “The Nature of the Cosmos.” The class was an interdisciplinary dive into global cosmologies, and each student met periodically with JB to discuss our individual projects. During one of my meetings, I brought up my interest in the history of obstetrics and gynecology, and JB suggested that I pursue a UROP, for which he offered to serve as an advisor. Since JB was on sabbatical during the 2018-2019 academic year, I decided to apply for a fall 2019 grant, and I titled my application: “Making the Makers: Conceptualizations and Representations of the Pregnant Body in Shakespeare’s World.” I am a theatre major, and I wanted to investigate how social, political, religious, philosophical, and medical discourses in Shakespeare’s culture correlated to representational practices in dramatic literature of the period.

What follows below is a collection of my research reflections. The theme and content of the project evolved throughout the semester to focus less on representations of pregnant women as characters in literature and more on women’s personal conceptualizations of selfhood in the period as related to their role as childbearers. The notion of the “self” was much different in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century England than it is today, and it was illuminating to read primary sources from the period and learn about those differences. It is through difference that we learn to locate and understand ourselves—either through differences in time (history) or contemporaneous cultures (anthropology)—and this research was a valuable exercise in recognizing and making meaning out of difference. It was a critical inquiry for me in terms of the development of my future research interests and the themes I want to explore as a theatre artist.

### **Phase 1: September-early October**

This stage of research was largely focused on the *Renaissance Sourcebook*, a source that I found both absorbing and comprehensive. I also made connections with *The Age of Curiosity*,

a course that JB taught in the Art History Department that semester—much of the early course material was from the same period as my research. I also made connections to my background knowledge of Shakespeare's plays and the work of Anne Carson, all of which I was interested in exploring further. Here are excerpts from my notes and reflections:

*The Renaissance Sourcebook is a compilation of sources from the period, most of which are short, so I've been able to jump around. I first scanned the theology section of the book, which included sermons from the Elizabethan Age on the proper conduct of women according to the bible, but I found it hard to get past the language being used to describe the differences between the sexes in the sermons without having more context about how the Elizabethans understood the physiology of the difference. Most of the sermons included language about how women must be "born with" (i.e. instructions to the men around them) and that they also must monitor themselves, because they are "inconstant." The concept of inconstancy immediately led me to our discussions of the medieval macrocosm and microcosm—how the heavens are immutable, unchanging, and how the female body undergoes so much more change than the male body that it had to have been perceived as closer to the profane than the sacred. I was reminded of a text of Anne Carson's—which, for the life of me, I cannot locate the title of—in which she speaks of ancient Greece as not only a misogynistic but a "gynophobic" culture, whose monsters are women with "deranged boundaries," a collective nightmare stemming from the inconstancy of the female life cycle with its bloods, its penetrations, its perforations and changes of shape. I was also reminded of multiple instances in Shakespeare where "inconstant" is used in a negative context—often to insult men. One idea for a future stage of research that I have is to trace the use of that word, or other repeated words that I encounter in primary sources from the period, in Shakespeare's plays, especially in reference to the pregnant body.*

*I then spent a lot of time in the sourcebook's physiology section, reading mostly Galen and Aristotle. The author elucidated how Galen and Aristotle were authoritative voices in the natural sciences well into Shakespeare's lifetime, with Galen providing many physiological explanations and Aristotle providing more philosophical ones, to "save the appearance of things," as C.S. Lewis would say. The understanding of the body was humoral and gender essentialist, prioritizing the social order of gender as the appearance to be maintained as much as the observable aspects of biological sex. Men were hot and dry, women were cold and moist (and passive), and most of women's problems were due to her coldness or her moisture (disease due to misbalanced humors).*

*During Shakespeare's lifetime, the medical understanding of the differences between the sexes was transitioning—from woman being an inverted and perverted form of man to woman being distinct from man in the structure of her body. The latter interpretation was not popularized in medical writing until after Shakespeare's death. One major concept that was evidently still ingrained during Shakespeare's lifetime was the idea that man provides the "form"—sometimes referred to as the "motion" or the "origin"—of future generations, whereas woman provides the "matter." It was emphasized over and over again that what female "semen" lacks is soul, which is what makes the male the active and essential component of intercourse, whereas woman is simply a host for man's soul-filled semen (which Galen describes as "the peak of concoction. "). Medical writing of Shakespeare's time also emphasized that there can only be one form for one thing, so there can be only one originator—one semen—a single maker.*

*I hypothesize that this serves to emphasize the Christian worldview; the single source of the virtuosity of creation. What are the consequences of a worldview in which women are seen as creators in their own right? (and what about the feminization of "nature"?). Also, why is it that*

*in a worldview that combines three entities (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) into one, it is impossible to imagine two entities contributing to the creation of one human child? Did the Virgin Mary truly contribute nothing to Jesus Christ? Does the modern, Western understanding of the immaculate conception story depend on the Galenic understanding of reproduction? The concept that Mary was simply a vessel for the already-formed, perfect Son of God?*

*Another major question that arose was an epistemological one: if women are said to be the matter wherein men inject their form, they are specifically intended to host something/someone that is beyond them ...if they are mutilated men (as Aristotle describes women), they cannot possibly understand the extent of their role in reproduction, can they? I will want to look more into the education of women in regards to this. Were women supposed to know the mechanics, not to mention the philosophical and cosmological significance, of their own bodies? It seemed, from the section on theology, that religion was the one area in which women had any potential to be authoritative voices, mainly citing Galatians Chapter 3—the concept that there is no man or woman and that “all ye are one in Jesus Christ.” This verse and its inclusion in the sermons that the sourcebook features seem to suggest that the subjugation of women was understood to be a temporary one in this period, and that heaven would be equal. This would seem to support the conclusion that it is the imperfect female body which is to blame for the subjugation of women, not the female mind or soul—though it is not clear to me right now whether the Elizabethans universally believed that women had souls in the same way that they believed men had souls.*

**Phase 2: Mid October-early November**

During this phase, I had a pivotal meeting with JB where we discussed the modern notion of subjectivity. JB elucidated that our “punctuated individualism” did not exist in Shakespeare’s lifetime. He formally introduced the concept of “office” to me: this was an early modern idea that was tied to their ordered cosmos. An individual’s conceptualization of “being” was a teleological one as much as an ontological one, because each being was created with a divine purpose, or an office, which was tied to their social station and determined their actions throughout their lifetime. Each person occupied a position in the cosmos and their position came with a series of duties to perform. To ask them to conceive of a “selfhood” without these duties would be akin to asking them not to breathe. For most early modern women, childbearing was an essential component of their “office,” and this was a critical distinction for me.

I reached a point in this research where I felt that I’m uncovering just a little more than the tip of the iceberg, and to draw conclusions felt premature, but I figured that I had to begin drawing some and just risk discovering that I’m wrong later. Here are some of my notes and reflections:

*I continue to be interested in the pregnant body as a state of being and the Elizabethan woman’s ability to identify her self within it. I understand that this self is inextricably tied to her “office” and that the concept of a “punctuated self” does not yet exist in this period. I was struck by an image that was used in one of the Age of Curiosity power points before spring break—it was an illustration of the Chain of Being that was included as reminder of the period’s cosmology. The illustration was structured using the categories “realm of being,” “realm of becoming,” and “realm of nonbeing,” and it struck me that women were in the “realm of becoming” section of the illustration, situated between men and animals. I knew this, but the “realm of becoming” language was inspiring to me as a means of articulation. It is not*

*something I have heard recently, and on the occasions that I do recall hearing it, I remember women being situated in the “realm of being,” but in any case, they are less qualified for the status of being than men. As such, I identified this phrase as a potential jumping off point for a future essay.*

*In all of my sources, I have found words like mutilation, inadequacy, incompleteness, and inconstancy which describe the female body and the female’s place in the earthly world. However, in spirit, women are understood to be equal to men, and their eventual ascension to heaven is part of a redemption narrative that parallels that of a man. Specifically, women are saved through bearing children, making the time of parturition a central development for the average woman in her spiritual journey. What I am now intrigued by is what defines that journey and how it accumulates meaning. I think it is possible to conceptualize the process of childbearing in this period as both an internal and an external space that women enter, both of which could be termed “realms of becoming.” I have found this a helpful phrase to describe the development of the premodern female “self.”*

*Parsing out the development of this self and the entrance into this realm of becoming involves asking questions about the function of the female body in medical, religious, and social contexts. I am interested in the fact that the female body, and specifically the womb (or the “matrix”) is a site of change, and therefore powerful, but that it is not often conceptualized as an active instigator. It has power, but does not wield it. It is a structure that is disposed to retain, to nourish, and to make grow, but it does so in a passive sense rather than an active one. The body is an agent of change in accordance with nature (nature, who is often anthropomorphized as female). God, on the other hand, is an active agent, anthropomorphized as male, enacting change through conscious decision making and handiwork. I am interested in how the female*

*body is a site through which power can flow and how that shapes women's relationships to power, to spirituality, and their own processes of becoming.*

### **Phase 3: Mid November-December**

In this stage, I pored over a dissertation by Sara B.T. Thiel on pregnancy plays on the Stuart Stage and on primary source material from English women of the period. I identified some primary dialectical tensions and also uncovered the extent to which the topic of childbirth in this period, and in general, is complex and multidirectional. Here are some of my notes and reflections:

*In her dissertation, Thiel identifies the "pregnancy play" as a dramatic subgenre that emerged post 1603. Thiel proposes that the greater representation of pregnancy onstage and the subsequent emergence of this whole subgenre can be attributed to the greater visibility of gestating monarchs after the death of the famously virginal Queen Elizabeth I. Commentary and connections to contemporary politics adjacent to the plays are less interesting to me for some reason, though I do recognize the potentiality of Thiel's claim. I suppose I would have to do further research into the common English people's relationship to the monarchy and its figures in order to develop a greater understanding of and investment in that aspect of English culture at this time, because it has not come up in primary source material. In reading about English society, its religion, its medical practices, and even its lawmaking, no relationship to the monarchy has been mentioned. From the research that I have done thus far, it seems that the people of this period located cultural authority in classical and religious source material more so than in their living rulers, though I know the actions of monarchs were very influential from previous work. This is an intriguing disconnect that I could go into if I so chose.*

*Thiel structures her dissertation with five chapters, and each chapter focuses on a group of plays that represent a particular dramaturgical strain within the pregnancy play subgenre. Pregnancies are categorized as performative, patricentric, prosthetic, peripheral, or pageant-esque, to paraphrase her chapter titles. Pregnancy did not have a singular meaning on the Stuart stage, but many often contradictory meanings. Pregnancy was staged in both authentic, meaningfully compelling ways and in explicitly comic ways, constructed to emphasize the absurdity of “great bellies” on boy actors. Narratives surrounding pregnancy portrayed it as anywhere from a symbol of political power, a mysterious threat to patriarchal structures of inheritance due to the opaque nature of the pregnant abdomen, an emblem of wholesome procreation and social control within marriage, to an uproarious play on the leaky imperfections of the female body, which is rendered the butt of a joke. Within these different interpretations of the plays I can identify a central dialectic, as articulated by the Renaissance Woman Sourcebook, regarding the female body in this period: the two dominant discourses about womanhood are 1. The paradisaical and 2. The invective, and these are framed in two major accounts: 1. Theology and 2. Physiology. It is rare that the pregnant woman is ascribed full humanity in dramatic literature of the period; she tends to slide towards either an angelic or a devilish state in accordance with these two extreme discourses. As I have looked into primary sources—mainly women’s rare accounts of their experiences in childbirth—I have identified some threads which I look forward to specifying more in the coming weeks. One thread is the idea of childbirth as social and religious duty and the ways in which that duty informed women’s senses of themselves. Childbirth was undertaken within the bounds of marriage as a mutual goal for the husband and wife for which the wife was carrying the physical burden; this burden was undertaken for the benefit of society at large, to the detriment of the individual woman.*

*Pregnancy was acknowledged to be a detrimental state for women in most written accounts (some accounts describe it as an “ideal” state, but these are the minority, and the illness rhetoric that was used in descriptions of childbirth was not flattering on the physiological process—lots of instances of “travail”). However, the concept that the soul of the woman is “saved through bearing children” was a biblical one that many women clung to. They perceived their duties to include carrying and birthing children as well as raising them to be godly. Suffering was a necessary enterprise in these accounts, and so too was a loss of control. Women describe praying either before or in the midst of labor, and interestingly most of the prayer is about pain, rather than safety. Women pray for the strength to endure whatever pain must come rather than praying for the survival and health of themselves and their infants. When safe deliveries did occur, all credit was given to God and his mercy: not to the mother, nor to the midwife or doctor present. The mothers do appear to find some satisfaction in the endurance of pain—they take pride in their ability to endure—and this culture also considered painless or incredibly quick labors to be inherently suspect. I was fascinated by the notion that quick, quiet, secret labors were associated with illegitimate children, and that female communities were used as a form of social control in order to keep individual women in check. The midwifery system of this period was both a conventionally “empowering” one, in the modern sense, and an inherently patriarchal one due to the midwives’ inabilities to access formal, bookish education. The oral culture and private knowledge of female communities was both a significant source of power for women and a result of marginalization.*

### **Final Reflections**

This research process heavily influenced my thinking about the role of historical knowledge in the production of contemporary cultural knowledge. My discussions with JB and

interactions with my source material revealed that the modern Western frame of historical storytelling is “supercessionist” in that it renders the “premodern” obsolete and antiquated when situated in discussion with the modern. In light of this, one also must resist the temptation to approach past worldviews with a “historicist” mindset, thereby fetishizing history and limiting its relevance to contemporary matters. This research process taught me to approach historical study with an eye for dialectical tensions. Modern representations of self-actualized women could be challenged and enriched by cultural ideas from hundreds of years ago, especially in the context of theatre production, during which modern artists are interacting with centuries-old texts. I intend to continue this direction of inquiry to build my body of knowledge around Shakespeare’s world and plays, challenge my fellow artists and scholars to consider the wisdom gleaned by learning about difference across time, and reorient my own thinking about what constitutes empowered selfhood, especially related to gender and childbearing.

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