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In Brave Embroid'ry Fair Arrayed:  
The Soul-Body Dynamic and Motherhood in Early Modern Literature

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the soul-body dynamic and motherhood in seventeenth-century literature. The topics examined in each chapter demonstrate the spiritual importance of the womb in particular across a range of literary texts from the period. I analyse both male-authored and female-authored texts that discuss women's bodies, and I support each argument by referencing theological and medical texts from the period.

I argue for the centrality of the womb and, more generally, women's bodies when exploring early modern women's spirituality. Literary and theological representations of women labelled them as witches, mothers, or virgins, suggesting a good/evil duality in their nature. Yet, by analysing selected texts from the seventeenth century, I demonstrate that their spirituality was more complex. The soul-body connection in literary texts reflects the womb's transformational power and women's relationship to spirituality through their bodies.

I begin this thesis by examining the initiatory process of this dynamic: ensoulment during gestation. I detail early modern medical, theological, and philosophical beliefs about ensoulment before analysing both male- and female-authored texts on this topic, including *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-14), Hester Pulter's (1640-1650), and Mary Carey's (1657) poetry. I posit that during gestation, a spiritual bond is created between a mother and her child, and this bond is represented in seventeenth-century texts that deal with pregnancy. I argue that the womb is central to women's spirituality because of the common belief that it is where the soul enters the body. Equally, the womb creates both life and death through pregnancy and miscarriages, which further emphasises this organ's spiritual nature.

In the second chapter, I continue this thematic-based approach by analysing several texts that foreground the mother-child bond and its effect on sleep and dreams. I examine

Mary Sidney Herbert's Psalm translations and adaptations (c.1599), focusing specifically on Psalms 51 and 139, which present an unconscious foetus 'asleep' in the womb. I also explore Rachel Speght's 'The Dreame' (1621) and her demonstration of the mother-child bond in a daughter's dream about her mother. I then use this analysis of unconscious sleep states to reevaluate Hermione's dead sleep in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611), which occurs as a result of losing both her children.

In chapter three, I examine the texts of four women prophets from the seventeenth century: Eleanor Davies, Anna Trapnel, Ann Bathurst, and Jane Lead. I posit that the womb is central to their ability to achieve altered states of consciousness and consequently imbues it with spiritual importance. In chapters four and five, I analyse two texts that use metamorphosis to highlight the centrality of the soul-body dynamic in women's ability to gain power: Heywood and Brome's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634) and Margaret Cavendish's *The New Blazing World* (1666). Finally, in chapter six, I step away from the womb by examining its fluids in women's alchemical poetry. I analyse menstrual blood in Elizabeth Jane Weston's and An Collins's poetry before focusing on the representation of breastmilk in Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* (1679). These texts demonstrate that the womb not only produces duality through its corrupting and purging agents, but also functions on a deeper level of spiritual transformation.

The selection of texts used in this thesis highlights the womb's role in the soul-body dynamic in the seventeenth century. Male authors considered this organ both mysterious and dangerous in the period. Yet, I argue that by examining female writers in tandem with male writers, the womb is essential to understanding early modern women's experience of spirituality.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I certify that this thesis is my own work except for the portions which I explicitly indicate are the works of others.

## Introduction

In 1624, a broadside was printed in London by John Trundle with two poems that discussed infanticide. One of these two poems, ‘The much-afflicted *Mothers* Teares, for her drowned *Daughter*’ (1624), is written by Anne Musket, a mother incarcerated for murdering her nine-year-old daughter. She describes her state:

Come, tender Mothers, see a *Mothers* feares;  
 Sinnes Palsie, shake mee; and my Floud of teares:  
 Come heare my sighs, and penitentiall prayers;  
 Deaths shade's my *Mansion*; my Companion, *Cares*.  
 O! how much worse than any sauage Beare,  
 She-Wolfe, or Tygresse, must I now appeare?  
 Since they, their young, with such respect doe cherish;  
 And mine, by *Mee*, doth thus vntimely perish<sup>1</sup> (Musket, lines 1-8).

The consequences of Musket’s act appear on her body through physical symptoms of ‘Palsie’ and a ‘floud of tears’, but she also fears her body will transform into a human-animal hybrid. The word ‘monster’ has several *OED* definitions, notably ‘a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms’.<sup>2</sup> It could also be defined as ‘An animal or plant with a deformity; (*Medicine*) a fetus, infant, or individual having congenital malformations of parts of the body’.<sup>3</sup> In this poem, however, the mother fears monstrosity for herself, not her infant. The poem does not specify if Musket anticipates an external physical transformation or if her monstrosity is a metaphor for an internal transformation. In *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605), Richard Verstegen discusses Peter Stubbe’s case of lycanthropia, which served as an inspiration for John

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Musket, “The Much-afflicted Mothers Teares for Her Drowned Daughter,” in *The Penitent Sonnes Teares for His Murdered Mother / by Nathaniel Tyndale, Sicke Both in Soule and Body, a Prisoner Now in Newgate. The Much-afflicted Mothers Teares for Her Drowned Daughter / [by?] Anne Musket, the Wofull Mother for Her Lost Daughter* (London: John Trundle, 1624).

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “monster (n.), sense 1.a,” June 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8403325122>>

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “monster (n.), sense 3.a,” June 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2109024589>>

Webster's exploration of the disease in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-14). Verstegen, explains that Stubbe, who had committed several violent murders, 'dyed with very great remorse, desiring that his body might not be spared from any torment, so his soul might be saved.'<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Musket fears both physical and spiritual repercussions for her murder, but it is specifically because she murdered her own child that she fears these consequences.

After committing the murder, Musket comments: 'child-bed pangs, (the Mothers painfull lot) / Forgot thou wert my Flesh; Forgot how oft / I kist thee; blest thee' (lines 12-14). These lines suggest her neglect of the motherly bond to her child. Equally, she mentions labour pains which occur in the womb. Seventeenth-century medical texts described this organ in ambiguous terms. Edward Jorden's *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called The Suffocation of the Mother* (1603) represented it as dangerous and a source of illness for both mother and child.<sup>5</sup> Musket hints at this danger when she mentions labour pains. These lines also highlight the mother-child bond, created physically through the 'flesh' and the pain experienced during childbirth.

Yet, this bond is also spiritual. Musket neglects to breastfeed her child: 'Forgot how oft vpon my tender brest / Thou hast bin fed; how often taine thy rest'. (lines 17-18) Puritan theologians suggested that breastmilk was providential and highlighted the spiritual importance of a mother breastfeeding her child instead of a wet-nurse.<sup>6</sup> In *Christian Oeconomie* (1609) William Perkins demonstrates the importance of a mother breastfeeding when he notes: 'God hath giuen milke to women that beare children, & hath so appointed,

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Verstegen, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities* (Antwerp: Robert Bruney, 1605), 237. See also Sue Wiseman. *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance: 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called The Suffocation of The Mother* (London: John Windet, 1603) Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 59.

<sup>6</sup> See Lauren Cantos, "Maternal Breastfeeding: Providence and Advocacy in Seventeenth-Century Sermons and Prescriptive Literature," in *Religion and Life Cycles in Early Modern England*, ed. Caroline Bowden, Emily Vine, and Tessa Whitehouse, 65-87 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 65-66.

that no meat is more naturall to the child, then the mothers milke.’<sup>7</sup> Musket neglects to nurture the bond to her child, and the consequences of her infanticide are both physical and spiritual. She describes how ‘Mine Eye drops Water; But, my Heart drops Blood.’ (Line 24) Although both tears and blood are bodily fluids, they equally hold spiritual importance.<sup>8</sup> Blood holds theological importance, and women’s blood specifically carried connotations of purity and corruption in physical as well as spiritual terms.<sup>9</sup>

The spiritual is centralised in Musket’s poem when she prays, ‘Let my poore *Soule* that balme of *mercy* meet’ (line 40). She ends her text, stating ‘That *life*, to *death*, shall neuer more giue way; / So, while I weepe, helpe my poore Soule to pray.’ (Lines 51-52) Despite women housing other souls inside their wombs during gestation, early modern male writers such as John Donne doubted their spiritual nature. In *Paradoxes and Problems* (1633) in one of the sections entitled ‘Why hath the common opinion afforded woemen Soules?’, he questions:

[W]hen some call them [women] Angels, some Goddesses and the Peputian Heretikes made them Bishops, wee descend so much with the streame, to allow them soules. Or doe wee somewhat, in this dignifying of them, flatter Princes and greate Personages that are so much governd by them? Or doe wee, in that easynesse and prodigality, wherein wee dayly loose our owne soules to wee care not whome, and so labour to perswade out selves, that sith a woman hath a soule, a soule is no great matter?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie: Or, A Short Survey of The Right Manner of Erecting and Ordering a Familie, According to the Scriptures* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1609), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Anne M. Scott, and Michael David Barbezat, eds. *Fluid Bodies and Bodily Fluids in Premodern Europe: Bodies, Blood, and Tears in Literature, Theology, and Art* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> *The Womans Doctor* (1652) Nicolaas Fonteyn notes that ‘provident Nature assigned [women] their monethly Courses, that by the benefit of those evacuations, the feculent and corrupt bloud might be purified’. Nicolaas Fonteyn, *The Womans Doctour* (London: John Blague and Samuel Howes, 1652), 1.

<sup>10</sup> John Donne, “Why Hath the Common Opinion Afforded Woemen Soules?” in *Paradoxes and Problems*, ed. Helen Peters (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980) 28-29.

Donne's text proposes that the soul-body relationship is gendered by suggesting that women do not have a soul while men do.<sup>11</sup> Sarah Johnston remarks that 'the conventional gendering of the soul-body hierarchy served as a patriarchal tool for women's subordination (as it explicitly did), [and] it carries equal potential to promote empowering ideas of women.'<sup>12</sup> Exploring texts written by women about their own souls offers a more nuanced perspective on these early modern questions.

Musket's poem encapsulates the exploration this thesis examines: the soul-body dynamic in women and, specifically, how it connects to motherhood in seventeenth-century literature. Each chapter explores one of the aspects that this poem presents, beginning with the child-mother bond in chapters one and two. The first chapter examines the spiritual bond between a mother and child created in the womb. Ensoulment occurs during gestation, and this event, combined with the womb being the location of stillbirths and miscarriages, demarcates this organ as spiritually important. I begin by analysing John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* to highlight the womb's ability to create this bond. I then support this argument by analysing Mary Carey and Hester Pulter's poetry on pregnancy and motherhood.

In chapter two, I continue examining women's poetry and male-authored drama, but this time, I explore unconscious sleep states and their connection to the womb. I begin with Mary Sidney Herbert's adaptation and translation of the Psalms, specifically focusing on Psalms 51 and 139. I argue that unconscious sleep states in the womb are spiritually important, allowing the foetus to bond with both God and their mother. I then turn to Rachel Speght's *Mortalityes Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed, imaginarie in manner: reall in matter* (1621) to highlight how the connection between a mother and her child is perceived

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah E Johnson, *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, *Staging Women*, 5.

in dreams and sleep. In the final section of this chapter, I apply this understanding from women's texts to William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611). I argue that Hermione's deathlike sleep occurs as a consequence of the loss of her children in the postpartum period and this event allows her to maintain a bond with Perdita.

I have chosen to explore the soul-body dynamic through a case-study approach because it offers a clearer representation of this dynamic across multiple texts, writers, and years throughout the century. I begin my first two chapters by focusing mainly on early modern drama because these texts highlight the cultural understanding of women's bodies and souls in a popular context. The predominately male-dominated authorship of early modern drama and the all-male casts in public theatres offer a rich perspective for the analysis of gender dynamics in early modern England, especially when contrasted with early modern women's writing on the soul-body relationship.

The third chapter, on women's spiritual writings, was placed in the middle of the thesis because it creates a bridge between the first and second half of the thesis. This chapter focuses on the spiritual language of the womb and how gender is central to women's spirituality. I analyse texts by women prophets but support my analysis with male-authored cases of women's demonic possession, demonstrating the importance of gender in these experiences. I examine Eleanor Davies's prophecies (1590-1652), Anna Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* (1654) and *Report and Plea* (1654), Ann Bathurst's diaries (1679-1696) and Jane Lead's *A Fountain of Gardens* (1696) and *The Ascent to The Mount of Vision Where Many Things were Shewn* (1699). By analysing the bodily symptoms in prophecy and comparing them to the symptoms women experience in demonic possession, I argue that these spiritual experiences are gendered in their manifestation and arise specifically from the womb.

In chapters four and five I build on my points about gender and women's bodies by examining metamorphosis in early modern literature. I analyse Thomas Heywood and

Richard Brome's play *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634) in chapter four and Margaret Cavendish's utopian prose tract *The New Blazing World* (1666) in chapter five. Both texts use metamorphosis to demonstrate the importance of gender in the representation of political and social power.

Finally, in chapter six, I explore the outward manifestation of women's spiritual wombs: their maternal fluids. By examining women's alchemical poetry on menstrual blood and breastmilk, I argue that their wombs are the source of spiritual transformation that allow these authors to move away from negative connotations associated with these fluids in male-authored texts. I examine Elizabeth Jane Weston's *Parthenica* (c.1608), Anne Collins' *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1653), and Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* (1679). These texts demonstrate that women use the symbolic references associated with bodily fluids to create a narrative that presents their gender in a spiritually motivated light. This thematic approach allows a re-evaluation of the womb in early modern literature, written by both men and women, and this organ emerges as a source of spiritual importance and transformation.

In *Visionary Women*, Phyllis Mack wrote, 'the most potent image of woman's spiritual marginality was not the deviant witch brewing potions or stroking her familiars but the ordinary mother.'<sup>13</sup> Yet, the mothers' spirituality and its connection to their bodies has not received the consideration it deserves in scholarly research. The womb is the place where humans receive their souls during gestation. Motherhood colours all female experience, from virginity to grandmotherhood, and this is especially true at a time when women's main value in society was their status as a mother. The experience of motherhood is, therefore, an integral part of understanding seventeenth-century womanhood.

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<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oakland, C.A.: University of California Press, 1992), 35.

Several scholars have approached questions related to the soul-body dynamic. Phyllis Mack examines women's spirituality and prophecy in *Visionary Women*. Her research focuses on the importance of gender in Quaker women's prophecy during the second half of the seventeenth century. Mack also investigates the intersection of class and gender and their symbolic representation in the history of religious discourse.<sup>14</sup> She states that

Because contemporaries believed in the fundamental sameness of all women's souls and bodies, regardless of the differences in outward social attributes, it was but a series of infinitesimal steps from the figure of the gossiping grandmother to the scold to the witch, or from the pious matron to the prophet.<sup>15</sup>

The interaction of early modern women's soul and body is central to the question this thesis seeks to address, and *Visionary Women* provides the starting point for this investigation by highlighting the positions women occupy in society as mystics and visionaries. Mack, however, focuses on historical records (correspondence or almanacs, for example). She does not observe literary representations by or about women during this period or explore how these mystics describe their bodies in relation to their spirituality. This thesis focuses on literary texts by women about their bodies' spiritual capacity, comparing these writings with male-authored texts as well as medical and theological texts on the female soul-body dynamic.

Like Mack, Laura Gowing uses historical records for her research in *Common Bodies*, but she focuses on women's bodies, not their spirituality. She highlights how 'the body's construction in printed texts and images takes us much further in grasping how deeply gender shapes understandings of corporeality, but it is essentially a study of discourse, not

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<sup>14</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*, 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

embodiment.’<sup>16</sup> Through each chapter, Gowing demonstrates how discourses of women are shaped around the representation of their bodies in social settings. According to Gowing, ‘the politics of the body made women awkward subjects of patriarchy, and brought them to participate in its enforcement. The social life of common bodies lays bare some of the convictions and practices that both troubled and helped maintain the hierarchies of early modern society.’<sup>17</sup> This thesis builds on Gowing’s work, addressing women’s place in social hierarchy and their representation through their bodies in literature, but it also incorporates women’s representation of their own bodies, offering an added layer to the discourse.

Published shortly after *Common Bodies*, Mary Fissell’s *Vernacular Bodies* also examines discourses of women’s bodies. However, this work examines women’s reproductive capabilities as represented in both cheap print and ‘popular culture’.<sup>18</sup> Fissell states that ‘[t]he intersections of that culture of print and the wrenching changes of religion and civil war created new ways to imagine the relationship between body and gender, new in both their details and in their modes of articulation.’<sup>19</sup> I build on Fissell’s arguments by examining women’s literary works and their descriptions of their reproductive capabilities. I juxtapose men’s and women’s literary representation of women to highlight how the soul-body dynamic is a gendered experience for women that begins in their bodies.

In *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage*, Mary Floyd-Wilson examines the interest of science and medicine in the womb and the assumption of preternatural capacity this organ holds. Floyd-Wilson uses early modern drama as a source for this understanding of the womb. She argues it is through the ‘representations of women’s

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<sup>16</sup> Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 209.

<sup>18</sup> The term ‘popular culture’ is clarified by Fissell: ‘I mean a complex and interconnected system of printing, increased literacy, shifting patterns of censorship, and evolving styles of storytelling.’ Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 8.

bodies and women's knowledge, [that] early modern drama participates in natural philosophy's production of epistemological boundaries.'<sup>20</sup> This thesis similarly begins by using early modern drama to highlight the spiritual nature of women's bodies and how it represents the boundaries that shape women's corporeal and spiritual experience in early modern culture.

The soul-body dynamic is examined in Sarah E. Johnson's work *Staging Women and the Soul-body Dynamic in Early Modern England* (2014). Johnson focuses on several Masques by early modern male authors to demonstrate the gendering of the soul-body dynamic and its cultural coding. Johnston states that 'when gender comes into play, as it so frequently does, the designation of the body as feminine and the soul as masculine, in relation to each other, predominates, along the assignment of certain key characteristics to each.'<sup>21</sup> She explores gender ideology mainly through the 'soul-body/husband-wife comparison [...] and each of these four pairings functions, in the plays or masques under consideration, as a variation on, or nuanced expression of, this central marriage analogy.'<sup>22</sup> Although these pairings also appear in this thesis, the focus remains on the spiritual capacity of women's bodies and specifically of their wombs.

Finally, I have also used Amy Kenny's *Humoral Wombs on the Shakespearean Stage* as an important source for this thesis. Kenny's work 'considers how the humoral womb was evoked, enacted, and embodied on the early modern stage by exploring the intersection of performance studies and humoral theory.'<sup>23</sup> Equally, she considers 'both an early modern medical reading of the female body presented in [Shakespeare's] canon and how it was represented on stage through the male performer.'<sup>24</sup> Kenny's work uses medical texts and

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 24.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Staging Women*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Kenny, *Humoral Wombs on the Shakespearean Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Kenny, *Humoral Wombs*, 3.

literary sources to examine the humoral womb's cultural representation in early modern drama. This thesis uses similar literary and medical source texts but focuses on the spiritual nature of motherhood instead of the humoral body.

This thesis examines texts written by women alongside male-authored medical, theological, and literary works to identify the relationship between women and their souls. I argue that this relationship is deeply informed by their gender, and the womb is central in defining their spirituality. By examining a range of women writers and characters, I postulate that women's relationship to spirituality is manifested through their bodies, whether mystics, mothers, duchesses, or witches. Women carried their spirituality through their lives by embodying it corporeally, and this relationship is represented in the period's literature. By examining the overlap between male-authored literary, medical, philosophical, and theological texts about women alongside women's texts about their bodies and souls, the language of early modern women's spirituality becomes clear. Women did not need to be mystics to be spirituality embodied. Their bodies, and specifically their wombs, made them spiritual. I examine this common thread throughout the century by exploring multiple approaches to their spiritual embodiment.

# 1. Enduring Bonds: The Spiritual Connection Between Mothers and Children in Early Modern Poetry and Drama

## 1.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the early modern understanding of the bond between mother and child and how it was believed to endure beyond death, as it is illustrated in the literature of the period. The seventeenth century saw several publications on the topics of female reproductive anatomy, obstetrics and midwifery.<sup>1</sup> The numerous reprints of these publications throughout the century demonstrate the interest and anxiety around these topics as well as the threat of death posed by childbirth to both mother and infant. The majority of these texts were written by men and offered a predominantly male perspective.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the womb was considered a place of ‘secrets’<sup>3</sup> and ‘mysteries’.<sup>4</sup> This conception of the female organ was primarily born from the male gaze’s inability to see the womb, which was hidden inside the female body. This unseen quality, combined with the difficulty of obtaining female corpses to dissect in medical classrooms, gave the womb an aura of mystery in male medical writing.<sup>5</sup> This chapter will consider the womb as a spiritual entity, something which much extant scholarship on this topic has overlooked. In what follows, I will argue that the

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<sup>1</sup> See Eucharius Rösslin, *The Birth of Mankynde* (London: Richard Jugge, 1565), Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse*, Jacob Rueff, *Expert Midwife, or An Excellent and Most Necessary Treatise of the Generation and Birth of Man* (London: Edvard Griffin, 1637), Levinus Lemnius, *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (London: Jo Streater, 1658), Nicholas Culpeper, *Directory for Midwives, or A Guide for Women* (London: Peter Cole, 1662), John Oliver, *A Present for Teeming Women* (London: Sarah Griffin, 1663), James Wolveridge, *Speculum Matricis Hybernicum* (London: E. Okes, 1670), Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book, Or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered* (London: Simon Miller, 1671), François Mauriceau, *The Diseases of Women with Child, and in Child-bed* (London: John Darby, 1672), among others.

<sup>2</sup> David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Kenny, *Humoral Wombs*, 8.

womb holds a deeper significance than simply a ‘mysterious’ organ to be assessed from an anatomical perspective and is, in fact, a place of spiritual importance.

The soul was believed to enter the child’s body during the mother’s pregnancy. In *Speculum Matricis Hybernicum* (1670) James Wolveridge states that ‘Whilst the infant is in the womb, ... After the 45th. day, as *Hippocrates* adviseth, it receiveth life, and together with that a soul (according to the opinion of many) divinely infused’.<sup>6</sup> However, theories of when ensoulment happened varied in the seventeenth century. During this time, the ‘Aristotelian idea of conception, in which the woman contributed passive matter and the man active motion to an embryo, was competing with William Harvey’s new model in which a woman’s contribution was itself active and efficient’.<sup>7</sup> Harvey states ‘The *Physitians* do rightly maintain against the *Aristotelians*, that both Sexes participate [in] the *Efficient* power; because that which is generated, is a thing compounded of them both: for it is mixt of them both, in the figure and similitude of the Body, and in the Species too’.<sup>8</sup>

The next sections of this chapter will detail how women, as well as the womb, were central to the ensoulment process and how this is illustrated in seventeenth-century literature. In the first section, I will outline the early modern understanding of the soul based on Aristotelian theory, the understanding of the ensoulment process, the early modern assessment of the womb and how this impacted the representation of women and mothers. In the second section, I will observe a selection of early modern texts that address the spiritual importance of the womb. Beginning at the start of the seventeenth century with *King Lear* (1606), I focus on Lear’s appropriation of the womb when he declares he is suffering from hysteria. I will then examine *The Duchess of Malfi* and Nathaniel Tyndale’s poem ‘The Penitent *Sonnes* Teares for his murdered *Mother*’ (1624), which both explore

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<sup>6</sup> Wolveridge, *Speculum*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 112.

<sup>8</sup> William Harvey, *Anatomical Exercitations, Concerning the Generation of Living Creatures: To which are Added Particular Discourses, of Births, and of Conceptions, etc.* (London: James Young, 1653), 170.

how murder affects the bond between mothers and children. Finally, I will turn to female authors by examining Mary Carey's 'Upon the Sight of my abortive Birth the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1657' (1657) and Hester Pulter's poetry. The choice to examine texts that span from the beginning of the seventeenth century to its end allows a better understanding of the early modern female perspective of the womb and the spiritual bond between mothers and their children, which endures beyond death.

## 1.2. The Soul in Early Modern Philosophy and Theology

Questions about the soul, what constitutes the soul, and how it is connected to the body were a matter of great concern during the early modern period. In this section, I will outline how the soul was commonly understood, some debates about its constitution, and how this fed into seventeenth-century literary understandings of the spiritual womb. In *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* Katharine Park and Eckhard Kessler state that 'Aristotle and his followers defined the soul as the life principle of the individual body - that which differentiated living from non-living things.'<sup>9</sup> The constitution of the soul itself, according to Aristotelian theory, can be primarily understood as divided into several parts. In *De Anima*, Aristotle explains 'while parts of the soul are inseparable from one another, the soul as a whole is divisible.'<sup>10</sup> The division can be summarised by the notion that there were three kinds of souls defined by three types of faculties. The first and lowest kind of soul, the vegetative soul, only possessed a nutritive faculty. This faculty was responsible for 'reproduction and assimilation of nutriment', and was believed to belong to the souls of plants.<sup>11</sup> Animals possess a sensitive soul and sensitive faculties in addition to vegetative

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<sup>9</sup> Katharine Park and Eckhard Kessler, "Psychology: The Concept of Psychology," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye, 453-463 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 455.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima, with Translation, Introduction and Notes*, ed. Trans. Robert Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 47.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, 63.

ones. Sensitive faculties consist of sensation, self-motion, touch, hearing, seeing, remembering, and having imagination. Finally, humans possessed rational souls comprised of vegetative, sensitive, and intellective faculties. These intellective faculties set humans apart from other animals because they allow humans to reflect on themselves and the world at large by the use of ‘reasoning faculty and thought.’<sup>12</sup> Aristotelian scholars, at the end of the fifteenth century, questioned whether the difference between souls was, in fact, due to a difference in form or matter. This debate continued into the sixteenth century. More and more scholars agreed with the ‘assertion of the identity of the soul and its faculties and a corresponding emphasis on the organs of the body as the key to psychological function below the level of intellection.’<sup>13</sup>

This examination of the organic soul from an anatomical perspective suggested that the soul develops as the organs develop. This understanding became common among Aristotelian scholars. Katherine Park has noted, when paraphrasing Pagel, that some of these scholars

began to approach the vexed problem of the origin of the soul as a problem in embryology rather than in metaphysics or theology, for many sixteenth-century philosophers, unlike their medieval predecessors, the answer lay in the sequential development of the organs rather than in the successive infusion of different levels of the soul.<sup>14</sup>

This, in turn, led to questions relating to the connection between soul and body, and from the middle of the sixteenth century into the seventeenth century, the debate turned to the materiality of the soul housed within the material body. A key concern was what constituted

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, 63. This understanding of the Aristotelian soul is taken from: Daniel Garber, “Soul and Mind: Life and Thought in The Seventeenth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, 757-795 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 760.

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Park, "Psychology: The Organic Soul," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye, 464-484 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 478-479.

<sup>14</sup> Park, "Psychology: The Organic Soul," 482., citing Pagel (1967), 233-247.

the soul, whether it was made of incorporeal substance, and what this substance was. The understanding of incorporeal substance was dependent on physical, metaphysical, theological, and moral grounds. The notion that the soul develops as organs do is significant to this chapter's analysis as it pertains to the moment of ensoulment during pregnancy while the foetus's organs develop in the womb.

### 1.3. Ensoulment: Medical and Theological Background

During the seventeenth century, beliefs about when life began and when the soul entered the body were a matter of debate. Medical authorities believed that ensoulment 'occurred when the child "quicken" in the womb, evident when the mother felt her child move for the first time.'<sup>15</sup> The *OED* gives several definitions of the verb 'to quicken', but when referring to pregnancy it states, 'Of a woman (or other female mammal): to reach the stage of pregnancy when movements of the fetus are perceptible. Also †*transitive* (in *passive*) (*obsolete*). Later also (of a fetus): to begin to move.'<sup>16</sup> Early modern theologians did not necessarily mention 'quicken' but stated that the soul arrived in the child while gestating in the womb. For example, Jean Calvin notes that

though the body is formed progressively. .... None of [the parts of the body] had existed; no order or distinctness of parts having been there at first, but a formless substance. And thus our admiration is directed to the providence of God in gradually giving shape and beauty to a confused mass.<sup>17</sup>

Equally, John Trapp comments on Exodus 21:22, stating that 'And yet no mischief follow. i.e., No life be lost. There is a time, then, when the embryo is not alive; therefore the soul is

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Adcock, Sara Read, and Anna Ziomek, *Flesh and Spirit: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 41.

<sup>16</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "quicken (v.1), sense I.4," June 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2608750515>>

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, "Commentary on Psalms - Volume 5 - Christian Classics Ethereal Library." *Home - Christian Classics Ethereal Library*. Last modified 2020. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom12.xxiii.iii.html>.

not begotten, but infused after a time by God.’<sup>18</sup> The predominant belief was that the body formed partially in the womb and ‘after a time’ the soul entered the body.

However, the exact date of ensoulment was open to debate. Physicians such as Levinus Lemnius notes in *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (1559) that it occurs at the 45<sup>th</sup> day.<sup>19</sup> He also states that female infants are endowed with a rational soul around the 50<sup>th</sup> day and mentions the 42<sup>nd</sup> day when discussing the ensoulment of babies that miscarry.<sup>20</sup> Ambroise Paré states that for male infants, ensoulment occurs at ‘about the fortieth day, and in females about the forty-fifth day.’<sup>21</sup> Despite the varying beliefs surrounding the exact date of ensoulment, it was generally believed to occur around the six-week mark. Additionally, it was believed that male souls arrived on average in the body five days before female souls. The womb can be seen as holding significant spiritual importance since it is the place where souls come into the physical world.

The spiritual importance of the womb can further be seen as it was the place where life was created, and equally, where death was created as well. The deaths of mothers and children occurred frequently in childbirth during this period, but it is unclear exactly how common they were. According to Ralph Houlbrooke ‘before 1750 pregnancy and childbirth were roughly 150 times more dangerous than they are today, and a good deal riskier still in London and during the second half of the seventeenth century.’<sup>22</sup> Regarding the deaths of

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<sup>18</sup> John Trapp, *A Clavis to the Bible. Or a New Comment upon The Pentateuch: Or Five Books of Moses* (London: Timothy Garthwait, 1650), 81.

<sup>19</sup> The first publication of Lemnius’s work was in Latin: Levinus Lemnius, *Occulta Naturae Miracula* (Antwerp: Guilielmus Simon, 1559). The first English publication was in 1658.

<sup>20</sup> Lemnius, *The Secret*, 33, 58. Lemnius states, ‘the Soul is given to every Infant, and infused into it, when the Child is perfect in all parts of the body, which happens about the 45. day commonly after conception, especially for males that are like to come forth to see the light in 9. moneths. But females that are of a weaker constitution, receive not their Souls till about the 50 day.’ In a subsequent chapter, he further notes: ‘Abortion [meaning miscarriage] oft-times shews the parts of the Infant perfectly made up, which when it is 42 dayes old, is endowed with a rational Soul, and is alive.’

<sup>21</sup> Ambroise Paré, *The Workes of that Famous Chirurgion Ambrose Parey*, trans. Thomas Johnson (London: Th. Cotes and R. Young, 1634), 895.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and The Family in England 1480-1750* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1998), 18.

**Table 1 Parish register stillbirth rates**

Parish	County	Date	Births	Stillbirths	SBR
All Hallows Bread St <sup>a</sup>	London	1671–1700	301	17	53
St Boltoph Bishopgate <sup>b</sup>	London	1617–1650	2,101	112	51
St Dunstan in the East <sup>b</sup>	London	1605–1653	3,103	103	32
St Helen's Bishopgate <sup>c</sup>	London	1595–1680	1,521	76	48
St Martin-in-the-Fields <sup>d</sup>	London	1620–1636	5,142	275	51
St Mary Somerset <sup>b</sup>	London	1605–1653	2,079	62	29
St Michael Cornhill <sup>b</sup>	London	1580–1650	2,261	75	32
St Mildred & St Margaret Moses <sup>e</sup>	London	1670–1700	509	23	43
St Peter Cornhill <sup>b</sup>	London	1580–1650	1,769	88	47
St Vedast & St Michael le Quern <sup>f</sup>	London	1578–1700	3,755	219	55
Balderstone <sup>g</sup>	Lancs	1787–1812	949	47	47
Hackness <sup>h</sup>	Yorks	1631–1660	478	25	50
Hawkshead <sup>i</sup>	Lancs	1581–1710	4,606	218	45
Terling <sup>j</sup>	Essex	1601–1665	1,309	58	42
York (four parishes) <sup>k</sup>	Yorks	1614–1700	4,624	220	45
Overall			34,507	1,618	45

**Sources:** a) Bruce Bannerman, 'All Hallows';  
b) Finlay, *Population and metropolis*, 37;  
c) W. Bruce Bannerman ed., 'The registers of St Helen's, Bishopgate, London', *Publications of the Harleian Society—Registers*, 31(1904);  
d) J.V. Kitto ed., 'The register of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London 1619–1636', *Publications of the Harleian Society—Registers*, 65 (1936);  
e) W. Bruce Bannerman ed., 'The registers of St Mildred Bread Street and St Margaret Moses, Friday Street, London', *Publications of the Harleian Society—Registers*, 42 (1912);  
f) Littledale 'St Vedast';  
g) Lancashire Online Parish Clerk Project (<http://www.lan-opc.org.uk>), accessed on 2 April 2008;  
h) Johnson and Hart, 'Hawkness';  
i) Schofield, 'Perinatal mortality', 13;  
j) K. Wrightson, 'Infanticide in earlier seventeenth-century England', *LPS*, 15 (1975), 18;  
k) C. Galley, *The demography of early modern towns* (Liverpool, 1998), 65.

children, it is difficult to find detailed statistics for this period regarding the rate and frequency of stillbirths and miscarriages because the recording practices varied from parish to parish. Additionally, 'it would appear that unbaptised, early neonatal, burials were being treated the same as true stillbirths.'<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Chris Galley has collected data from fifteen parishes from 1578 to 1812. This data shows a total of 34,507 births and 1618 stillbirths.<sup>24</sup> Galley notes that the table he presents of his findings 'does not contain sufficient data to allow definite conclusions [... and] may suffer from under- or over-reporting.'<sup>25</sup> The overall Still Birth Rate (SBR) Galley suggests is 45. The risks to the mother and child were not the same, but risks to the child at birth generated risks for the mother as well.<sup>26</sup> Indeed,

<sup>23</sup> Chris Galley, "The Stillbirth Rate in Early Modern England," *Local Population Studies*, 81 (2008): 75-83, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Image taken from: Galley, "The Stillbirth," 81.

<sup>25</sup> Galley, "The Stillbirth," 80.

<sup>26</sup> Chris Galley and Alice Reid, "Maternal Mortality," *Local Population Studies*, 93 (2014): 68-78, 70.

‘stillbirth and maternal mortality rates were strongly correlated, with about 5 stillbirths for each maternal death’.<sup>27</sup>

This data is congruent with the data on maternal mortality collated by Roger Schofield. This indicates a ‘rate of 10 per 1000 (1 per cent), as it was for much of the period before 1750, a woman on average would have run a 6 to 7 per cent risk of dying in childbed at some time in her procreative career’.<sup>28</sup> However, the data is not entirely reliable. Schofield’s research was in large part collected from Swedish parishes, which had more detailed recording practices than English parishes. Marsha Urban notes that most research from this period ‘generally overestimated mortality rate in childbirth until recent studies included the poor. Until then, most of the information about childbirth came from diaries of middle- and upper-class women and men.’<sup>29</sup>

Lucinda McCray Breier states that ‘in 1648 only 106 London women died in childbirth; in 1652 the number had jumped to 213. Even allowing for population growth,

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<sup>27</sup> E.M. McClure, R.L. Goldenberg, and C.M. Bann, "Maternal Mortality, Stillbirth and Measures of Obstetric Care in Developing and Developed Countries," *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics* 96, no. 2 (February 2007): 139-146, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Schofield, "Did Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in "the World we Have Lost", in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, eds. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson, 231-260 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 259. Though 6-7 percent for maternal mortality is quite low relative to 100 percent, it is much higher than current rates. According to recent research done at the National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit (NPEU) ‘Pregnancy remains very safe in the UK, with the overall maternal death rate showing a slight decrease. Among 2,173,810 women who gave birth in 2017-2019, 191 died during or up to six weeks after pregnancy.’ This suggests a percentage of approximately 0.009, which is much lower than the 6-7 percent from the period before 1750. The numbers are equally much lower regarding the current stillbirth rates. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), ‘the 2020 rate was 3.8 stillbirths per 1,000 births ..., unchanged since 2019.’ Galley’s SBR was calculated at 45 between 1578 to 1812. An SBR of 45 is in fact staggeringly high compared to the current 3.8 figure. These statistics were collected respectively from the following sources: NPEU: NPEU, "New Report Highlights Persistent Inequalities and Continued Inequitable Care for Pregnant Women." *Welcome | NPEU*. Last modified November 11, 2021. <https://www.npeu.ox.ac.uk/news/2188-new-report-highlights-persistent-inequalities-and-continued-inequitable-care-for-pregnant-women>. ONS: ONS, "Child and Infant Mortality in England and Wales." *Home - Office for National Statistics*. Last modified February 17, 2022.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/childhoodinfantandperinatalmortalityinenglandandwales/2020>.

<sup>29</sup> Marsha Urban, *Seventeenth-Century Mother’s Advice Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

that increase is extreme, particularly considering that only 194 women died in childbirth in 1660.<sup>30</sup> This research shows that despite having some data, it is still unreliable and not entirely reflective of the full scope of childbirth and maternal death rates in the seventeenth century. Beier goes on to note that ‘it is probable that this paucity of evidence reflects female modesty and male ignorance and disgust more than it does actual absence of such disorders.’<sup>31</sup> Because of this lack of data, it is difficult to assess just how high or how low the deaths due to childbirth actually were during this period.

To gain a better understanding of the relationship early moderns had to death in the womb, it is useful to observe advice books and biographies relating to childbirth. There were a number of advice books published by mothers, for example, Dorothy Leigh’s *The Mother’s Blessing* in 1615, Elizabeth Josceline’s *The Mothers Legacies, to her Unborne Childe* published in 1624, and Elizabeth Richardson’s *A Ladies Legacie to her Daughters* printed in 1645. Josceline ‘wrote her mother’s advice book because she believed, and rightly so, that she would die in childbirth. This text was published and republished, emphasizing high mortality rates by its example.’<sup>32</sup> This popularity suggests that the experience of birth was feared and carried an aura of death as well as life around it. After conceiving, Josceline felt ‘the apprehension of danger that might preuent me for [form] executinge that care, I so exceedingly desired’.<sup>33</sup> This impending danger shows Josceline’s understanding of the proximity of death. She also comments that ‘in truthe deathe appearinge in this shape, was doubly terrible vnto mee[,] first, in respect of the paynfullnes of that kinde of death, an[d] next the losse my littell one should haue in wantinge mee.’<sup>34</sup> By observing death around her

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<sup>30</sup> Lucinda McCray Beier, *Sufferers and Healers: The Experience of Illness in Seventeenth-Century England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987), 135.

<sup>31</sup> McCray Beier, *Sufferers and Healers*, 144.

<sup>32</sup> Urban, *Seventeenth-Century*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Joscelin, “To my Truly Louinge and Most Dearly Loued Husband Taurell Jocelin,” in *The Mothers Legacy to Her Vnborn Childe*, ed. Jean LeDrew Metcalfe, 46-55 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), lines 3-5.

<sup>34</sup> Joscelin, *The Mothers*, lines 6-9.

while she is creating a new life shows how the womb is both capable of creating and destroying life simultaneously.

Arnold Boate, a Dutch physician, gave an account of death in childbirth in his biography of his wife, Margaret Dungan, which was published in 1651. Boate's account is very graphic and details how his pregnant wife began losing a lot of blood and 'in the space of lesse than halfe an houre she lost more than tvvo pound. and having continued to loose some more blood for the space of an houre longer, and begun to bleed afresh the next morning'.<sup>35</sup> Boate continues on to detail ten more instances of losing blood 'like a spiggot' and losing close to 12 pounds of blood on one occasion.<sup>36</sup> Boate recounts her death by stating that 'she never came to herselfe again but gave up her ghoste some three hourse after the beginning of this last fit'.<sup>37</sup> The graphic nature of his account highlights the danger and violence ever-present in childbirth.

The fact that childbearing could cause such bloody deaths would undoubtedly leave a mark on many who had to witness such events and, in turn, gave the womb a foreboding aura. In *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England*, Mary Fissell, while using Edward Jorden's text on hysteria, suggests that the 'womb was a dangerous organ [...] it was intimately connected with other important organs of the body, by direct and by sympathetic links ... [and] could cause trouble in other parts of the body.'<sup>38</sup> I agree with this assessment of the womb as dangerous, but I think it is further worth noting that its early modern conceptualisation went beyond being only a dangerous anatomical organ and held spiritual importance through its capacity to create both life and death.

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<sup>35</sup> Arnold Boate, *The Character of a Trulie Vertuous and Pious Woman as It Hath Been Acted by Mistris Margaret Dungan* (London: Ste. Maucroy, 1651), A6r.

<sup>36</sup> Boate, *The Character*, B1v.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, B3v.

<sup>38</sup> Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 59.

The womb can, therefore, be understood as a liminal space that sits between life and death. Phyllis Mack has stated that ‘women were ... portrayed as liminal creatures inhabiting a no-man's-land of natural and spiritual forces’.<sup>39</sup> This liminality, combined with the previously mentioned hidden, ‘mysterious’ quality of the womb, imbued female bodies with a sense of occult qualities. This occult quality was seen, for example, in the belief that women had the ability to shape the physical appearance of their babies through the power of their thoughts.<sup>40</sup> In *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-glasse* (1636), John Sadler notes that monstrous births can occur through ‘the imaginative power at the time of conception, which is of such force that it stamps the character of the thing imagined upon the child’.<sup>41</sup> Leminus also comments on this by stating that ‘Imagination of women with child, and divers phantasms which the mind conceives, deform the body, and cause Children to be of a shape not proper to the Sex.’<sup>42</sup> The womb was also believed to magnetically attract and repel entities to it, much in the same way as the lodestone attracts iron.<sup>43</sup> According to Deborah Willis ‘in early modern culture the figure of the witch was closely intertwined with that of the mother.’<sup>44</sup> The womb held power because of its supernatural abilities, which connected it and women to witchcraft. This association endows the womb with a pejorative aura and affects how women were represented culturally. This aura will be examined further in the texts analysed in this chapter to determine how it impacts the spirituality of women.

While female bodies, and specifically the womb, were imbued with connotations of supernatural faculties, seventeenth-century medical advances countered these superstitious beliefs. In 1603, the physician Edward Jorden published *A Briefe Discourse of A Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, which offered an understanding of the womb that was

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<sup>39</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*, 66.

<sup>41</sup> John Sadler, *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-glasse* (London: Anne Griffin, 1636), 136.

<sup>42</sup> Leminus, *The Secret Miracles*, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge*, 16, 73, 76.

<sup>44</sup> Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 17.

based on medical observations rather than its supposed otherworldly abilities. Jorden stated that physicians sought to diagnose symptoms with ‘supernaturall causes: ascribing these accidents either to diabolicall possession, to witch-craft, or to the immediate finger of the Almighty’ instead of offering a medical diagnosis of the womb’s ailments such as hysteria.<sup>45</sup> Ideas of the womb as a hysterical organism roaming around the female body were not new, dating back to Ancient Greece, but by favouring biological diagnoses instead of ‘supernaturall’ ones, Jorden reframed the perception of the womb.<sup>46</sup> However, the spiritual importance of this organ remained present in early modern minds throughout the century. This assessment, combined with the mysteries it seemed to hold for male anatomists, suggests a gap in current study that can be filled by examining texts that explore the female perspective.

Previous scholarship has principally focused on either the medical or the supernatural aspects of the womb without considering the spiritual importance of this organ. The medical perspective can be observed in Kaara L. Peterson’s *Medicine, Hysterical Disease, and Social Controversy in Shakespeare’s England*, which focuses on ‘stories rehearsed in medical texts as evidence of early modern culture’s *representation* of hysterical afflictions’.<sup>47</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson offers an occult reading of the womb, suggesting that it attracts and repels ‘various entities on the basis of its inherently sympathetic and antipathetic qualities.’<sup>48</sup> Deborah Willis has examined the vilification of mothers as witches and how this association caused suspicion, anxiety and fear within early modern society.<sup>49</sup> When considering the spirituality of women, Phyllis Mack discusses the spirituality of mothers and the spiritual consequences

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<sup>45</sup> Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Joanna Levin, "Lady MacBeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," *ELH* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 21-55, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Kaara L. Peterson, *Popular Medicine, Hysterical Disease, and Social Controversy in Shakespeare’s England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 5.

<sup>48</sup> Floyd-Wilson, *Occult Knowledge*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 17.

for mothers in the event of child death.<sup>50</sup> However, she does not address the question of ensoulment or the bond this creates between mother and child.

This chapter, therefore, examines how female literary voices and characters can offer a fresh insight into the spirituality of the female body in early modern culture. As the place where souls come into this world, the womb has more to offer than a purely anatomical assessment. It is the organ that defines motherhood beyond the physical act of bringing a pregnancy to full term. The womb sits at the crossroads of life and death, creating a spiritual connection between a mother's soul and that of her child. Yet, the spiritual vocabulary of the womb has largely been ignored by scholarship. It is my contention that a new understanding can be gained by bearing in mind the spiritual nature of the womb, which would have been inherent in the representation of this organ and the female body in the literature of the period.

#### **1.4. The Spiritual Womb in Early Modern Literature**

The texts discussed in the next section of this chapter - Shakespeare's *King Lear*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Nathaniel Tyndale's 'The Penitent *Sonnes* Teares for his murdered *Mother*', Mary Carey's 'Upon the Sight of my abortive Birth the 31st of December 1657' and Hester Pulter's poems - illustrate the bond between mother and child beyond the physical to exemplify a spiritual connection that supersedes the mortality of either. The examination of these texts within the context of the changing religious and philosophical landscape of the seventeenth century provides a new understanding of the womb as the place of ensoulment.

I begin my analysis with *King Lear* because it offers a view of the womb at the beginning of the century. Shakespeare's reference to *hysterica passio* is a veiled reference

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<sup>50</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*, 37.

to the absent queen or else to the absent mother of Lear's three daughters.<sup>51</sup> As in *The Winter's Tale*, the queen's absence in *King Lear* infringes on her children's fates. In Act II scene II, when Lear arrives at Gloucester's castle, he finds Kent in the stocks. He states:

They could not, would not do 't; 'tis worse than murder,  
To do upon respect such violent outrage:  
Resolve me, with all modest haste, which way  
Thou mightst deserve, or they impose, this usage,  
Coming from us. (II.II.213-217)

Lear is outraged that Regan would humiliate him by treating his servant poorly. The emotion causes him to declare, 'O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! *Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow' (II.II.247). Later in the scene, Lear further states 'But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter / Or rather a disease that's in my flesh, / Which I must needs call mine.' (II.II.410-412). These lines suggest that Lear recognises the disease is within himself, just as his daughters are a part of himself.<sup>52</sup> With this acknowledgement, Lear 'will be led to recognize not only his terrifying dependence on female forces outside himself but also an equally terrifying femaleness within himself.'<sup>53</sup>

However, men did not possess a womb and were not commonly believed to develop *hysterica passio* in the seventeenth century. Indeed, 'hysteria or "the mother," as the Elizabethans usually called it, continued to be regarded, as it had been since ancient times, as an illness affecting women alone.'<sup>54</sup> Kaara L. Peterson suggests that Shakespeare would have been aware of Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a text which details a male case of *hysterica passio*. Yet, Peterson notes that the man experiencing the disease, named Richard Mainy, had symptoms which were 'similar enough to the

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<sup>51</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 39.

<sup>52</sup> R. A. Foakes, "Introduction," in *King Lear*, 1-151 (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 39-40.

<sup>53</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), 104.

<sup>54</sup> David F. Hoener, *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 320.

indisposition called “the Mother” that he is led to believe they are a “spice” of it, i.e., they are like it.’<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Lear’s symptoms are *like* this feminine disease, known commonly in the seventeenth century as ‘The Mother’.

When Lear declares he has hysteria, he is attempting to align himself with the Mother, not only with the disease, but with the maternal role and, by extension, the unique bond that exists between mother and child. With this statement, Lear is reframing his sexual anatomy and his sexual identity. When represented on stage within the world of the play, Lear’s words serve as a move from male to female because of his appropriation of the womb. Lear’s comment comes after the Fool highlights Lear’s abuse by his daughters. The Fool jokingly notes that ‘Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind / But fathers that bear bags / Shall see their children kind’ (II.II.238-240). Lear is simultaneously retorting back to the Fool and trying to convince himself that his connection to his daughters is stronger than one ruled solely by money.

Lear’s self-diagnosis of *hysterica passio* is further justified by his inner anger towards his daughters and their betrayal. In *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*, David Hoeniger states that ‘in Plato’s *Timaeus* and Hippocratic treatises we encounter the curious notion of the uterus as an animal that desires children.’<sup>56</sup> Yet, during the seventeenth century, the womb was also a place commonly believed to be capable of generating death and consuming children through miscarriages and stillbirths, as stated previously. With this line, Lear is also justifying his desire to consume, that is, to kill, his betraying daughters. This point is made clear when he states a few lines later that he desires ‘*Vengeance, plague, death, confusion!*’ (II.II.284).<sup>57</sup> Hoeniger also notes, while quoting

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<sup>55</sup> Kaara L. Peterson, “Historica Passio: Early Modern Medicine, *King Lear*, and Editorial Practice,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 1-22, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare*, 321.

<sup>57</sup> My emphasis.

Areteaus, that 'the womb is like an animal within an animal'<sup>58</sup> which roams around the body demanding satisfaction. By referencing hysteria, Lear is exonerating himself from his desire for vengeance, stating that he has an animal inside his body which operates independently from him, almost like a feral beast or monster, desiring to consume his daughters.

However, Lear does not actually possess a womb, and he fails to see the spiritual bond between mother and child. Instead, he views the womb as a weapon capable of destruction, justifying murder and vengeance. The womb is similarly portrayed in *The Winter's Tale*, in which Hermione's pregnant body is viewed as a threat. While Leontes can be seen as weaponising the womb when he accuses Hermione of infidelity, Lear tries to appropriate certain maternal aspects to justify his desire for vengeance.<sup>59</sup> Even though the actual mother remains absent from the entirety of *King Lear*, her importance and the importance of her womb cannot be overstated.<sup>60</sup> It is through her that Lear has three daughters who are at the centre of the play.

Similarly, the Duchess of Malfi is the titular character in Webster's play, but she is absent from the final act. While Lear fails to understand the spiritual importance of the womb and the spiritual bond between mother and child, the Duchess does feel this bond and its effects when her children are murdered. The womb allows the Duchess to maintain a connection to her children beyond death, and this ultimately affects her soul as well. There is a clear shift in the language the Duchess uses before and after the deaths of her husband

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<sup>58</sup> Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare*, 321.

<sup>59</sup> The word 'womb' appears two more times in *King Lear*, once when Lear says to Goneril, 'Into her womb convey sterility!' (I.IV.270) and once when Gloucester makes a joke after Kent states 'I cannot conceive you' by replying 'Sir, this young fellow's mother could: whereupon /she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son.' (I.I.11-13).

<sup>60</sup> Mary Beth Rose states that 'Among the romances, tragedies, and "problem plays," mothers are conspicuously absent from *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Measure for Measure*. Even more striking, in the six most celebrated romantic comedies (*Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*) no mothers appear at all.' Mary Beth Rose, "Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1991), 291-314, 292.

and children. The stage direction that indicates their deaths reads: ‘Antonio and his Children, appearing as if they were dead.’ (IV.I.54.SD) <sup>61</sup>

Before this stage direction, the Duchess demonstrates spiritual piety, notably telling Ferdinand that he ‘violate[s] a sacrament o’th’ church’ when he suggests that her marriage is not legitimate (IV.I.38). Furthermore, when Ferdinand gives her the severed hand a few lines later, the Duchess questions, ‘what witchcraft doth he practise that he hath left / A dead man’s hand here?’ (IV.I.53-54) These lines demonstrate that the Duchess does not show an inclination towards witchcraft. However, as soon as her children die, her speech becomes spiritually damning. She begins with a new understanding of witchcraft, stating ‘It wastes me more / Than were’t my picture, fashioned out of wax, / Stuck, with a magical needle and then buried / In some foul dunghill.’ (IV.I.62-64) She then moves on from this statement to list different ways she could commit suicide, which would cause eternal damnation to her soul. She states ‘And let me freeze to death’, ‘Portia, I’ll new kindle thy coals again’, and ‘I’ll starve myself to death’ (IV.I.67, IV.I.70.; IV.I.74). Bosola remarks on her turn away from spiritual piety, stating ‘Despair? Remember / You are a Christian’ but this comment does not deter the Duchess from her descent into damnation (IV.I.72-73).

Her speech culminates in her display of curses a few lines later. She notes that she will ‘curse the stars’ and curse ‘the world / To its first chaos.’ (IV.I.93.; IV.I.96-97) By choosing to curse the ‘first chaos’, the Duchess is here aligning herself with a theology of the universe that predates Christianity. Indeed, ‘the author of Genesis, like virtually the entire ancient world, assumed that the universe was created from a primal chaos [...] But the Christian theology that early came to dominate the church could not tolerate this constraint upon God’s power.’<sup>62</sup> With this line, the Duchess is cursing the world back to a time

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<sup>61</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2009), stage direction.

<sup>62</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), xvii.

predating Christianity and to a time without a Christian god. According to John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667), the world before Christian creation was in a ‘wilde Abyss / The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave, / Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire’ (Milton, II.910-12).<sup>63</sup> The world only exists thanks to ‘th’Almighty Maker’ who used ‘his dark materials to create more worlds’ (II.915-916). The fact that the Duchess would prefer to live in a world without a Christian God suggests she has renounced her Christian heritage with the act of cursing.

Furthermore, the use of the word ‘womb’ in Milton’s text highlights the pejorative connotations associated with this organ and, by extension, the female body. Milton is referencing a line in *De Rerum Natura*: ‘The earth, as we know, was our mother and also will be our tomb.’ (V.259)<sup>64</sup> The suggestion that the Earth is both a tomb and a mother indicates a negative connotation associated with female bodies. The tomb/womb comparison is common in early modern literature and appears frequently in texts contemporary to Webster’s time. John Milton writes in his epitaph to the Marchioness of Winchester (1645) that ‘The haples Babe before his birth/ Had burial, yet not laid in earth, / And the languisht Mothers Womb / Was not long a living Tomb.’ (Lines 31-34)<sup>65</sup>

Equally, in *Romeo & Juliet* (c.1595), Shakespeare makes the tomb/womb connection when Friar Laurence states, ‘the earth that’s nature’s mother is her tomb / What is her burying grave, that is her womb’ (II.III.5-6).<sup>66</sup> The negative association between these two rhyming words equally ‘conflates life and death, harrowingly replacing gestation with decay.’<sup>67</sup> The Duchess in Webster’s text is turning towards the negative aspects associated

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<sup>63</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York, N.Y.: W W Norton & Company, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura, The Nature of Things: A Poetic Translation*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Oakland, C.A.: University of California Press, 2008). John Milton, *Paradise Lost: A Poem, in Twelve Books*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003), 321, notes to II.910: ‘Lucretius is speaking of the earth, not Chaos.’

<sup>65</sup> John Milton, ‘An Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester’, in *John Milton Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. Stella P. Revard, trans. Lawrence Revard (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Kenny, *Humoral Wombs*, 12.

with motherhood as a consequence of her children's murders. This change in her attitude is notably visible through her use of the word 'curse', which is defined by the *OED* as 'a great evil'.<sup>68</sup> While the *OED* gives several definitions for this word, this particular one is retained because it demonstrates how the act of cursing causes a spiritual shift in the Duchess, which moves her away from being 'a Christian' towards evil, which can be understood as an act of spiritual perdition (IV.I.73).

In his discussion of curses, Keith Thomas notes that 'these imprecations could lead on to a charge of witchcraft.'<sup>69</sup> This is worse than just committing a sin as witches 'took a further damning step. Their feminine souls made an explicit and aggressive choice to conjoin with the devil'.<sup>70</sup> According to Jean Calvin 'the blame of perdition is thrown upon those who of their own accord bring it upon themselves.'<sup>71</sup> The act of perdition is fundamental to the process of becoming a witch and can be seen in witches' confessions who declare being re-baptised by the devil. In the *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, for example, Mary Osgood confessed on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1692 that 'she was baptized by the devil, who ... made her renounce her former baptism, and told her she must be his, soul and body, forever, and that she must serve him, which she promised to do.'<sup>72</sup> This satanic sacrament worked to '[reverse] one's original baptism and promise to keep the Lord's covenant.'<sup>73</sup> It is by renouncing their promise and loyalty to God that witches declare their allegiance to Satan.<sup>74</sup>

*The Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) further argues for the connection between women and their allegiance to evil through their bodies. It is 'because of fleshly lust, which in

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<sup>68</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "curse (n.)," December 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3690264898>>

<sup>69</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1971), 610.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Reis, "The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England," *The Journal of American History*, 82 (June 1995): 15-36.

<sup>71</sup> Jean Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, M.A.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 770.

<sup>72</sup> John Higginson, *SWP No. 096: Mary Osgood* (pubd online 2018) <<https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/n96.html>>

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Reis, "Witches, Sinners and The Underside of Covenant Theology," in *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology: Witchcraft in the British Isles and New England Volume 1*, ed. Brian P. Levack, 271-286 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 281.

<sup>74</sup> Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 10.

[women] is never satisfied. ... [and neither is] the mouth of the womb. Consequently, they rouse themselves to vigorous action with evil spirits.’<sup>75</sup> This passage suggests a connection between mothers, their wombs, and evil spirits. The fertility of a mother that is manifested in the womb is a place where it was believed evil could fester. According to John Oliver, it is in the womb that mothers can transmit through ‘the sin of [their] soul [...] some like foul disposition, and leave some such spot on [the] child, as shall be a stain on his name, and a blemish to your family.’<sup>76</sup> The womb is, therefore, understood as a place that has the power to create both evil and good. The Duchess demonstrates the manifestation of this power through the shift in the language she uses in this scene. In her grief, she is compelled to turn away from the good her womb has produced - her children - and turn towards evil as a result of their deaths. The bond the womb creates between the Duchess and her children can also be noted through Ferdinand’s attitude towards her children. He rarely refers to her children by name, calling them ‘beggarly brats’ or ‘young wolves’ instead (III.III.63, IV.II.249). The choice to call them ‘young wolves’ in Act IV scene II foreshadows Ferdinand’s lycanthropia. These lupine references allow Ferdinand to create a parallel between himself and the Duchess’s children who grew in her womb.

The ability of the womb to create such a powerful and spiritual connection can also be seen in the relationship the Duchess has with her twin brother, Ferdinand. Their shared gestation in their mother’s womb further emphasises the power of this body part. After the Duchess is murdered, Ferdinand states, ‘She and I were twins, / And should I die this instant, I had lived / Her time to a minute.’ (IV.II.256-258) Ferdinand is noting with this line something that he already knows subconsciously, which is that he cannot live without his twin. It is because of their shared gestation in the womb that Ferdinand feels such a strong need for proximity with his sister. After she dies, he mentions ‘[dying] this instant’ as if he

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<sup>75</sup> Heinrich Kramer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. Trans. P.G. Maxwell-Stuart (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 76, quoting in part *Proverbs*, penultimate [chapter].

<sup>76</sup> Oliver, *A Present*, 30.

would almost prefer that instead of continuing to live without her. He also tries to blame Bosola, stating ‘by what authority didst thou execute / This bloody sentence’ (IV.II.287-288). By calling into question Bosola’s actions and asking by whose authority the deed was done, Ferdinand is trying to distance himself from the murder. He does this because he feels the consequence of it on his soul as their souls are connected by their shared gestation in the womb.

It is by examining the perception of twins and conjoined twins during the early modern period that this connection can be better understood. While conjoined twins were believed to share certain parts of their body, there was uncertainty about whether they equally shared a soul. This issue was addressed by Pope Paul V when he tried to regulate the practice of baptisms in the *Roman Ritual* (1614). When discussing conjoined twin baptisms, the ritual attempts to cover any scenario by stating that ‘When in doubt as to whether there is one or several persons in the deformed mass, one part is to be baptized absolutely, and the others each with the condition: If you are not baptized, I baptize you, etc.’<sup>77</sup> This highlights just how connected the souls of twins were believed to be because even theological tracts were unsure about the singularity or plurality of the souls of conjoined twins and included conditions in the baptismal rite to address all souls potentially present. Daisy Murray notes that ‘with conjoined twins, the baptism became particularly problematic because of the need to decide whether the child/children should be baptized as one or two individuals.’<sup>78</sup> For twins that were not conjoined, it was their physical similarities that would suggest a similarity in their souls as well. Indeed, the physical likeness of twins ‘corresponded with a more spiritual and emotional likeness and extended to all forms of the twin relationship, not just with conjoined twins.’<sup>79</sup> The Duchess and Ferdinand were not conjoined, but as twins,

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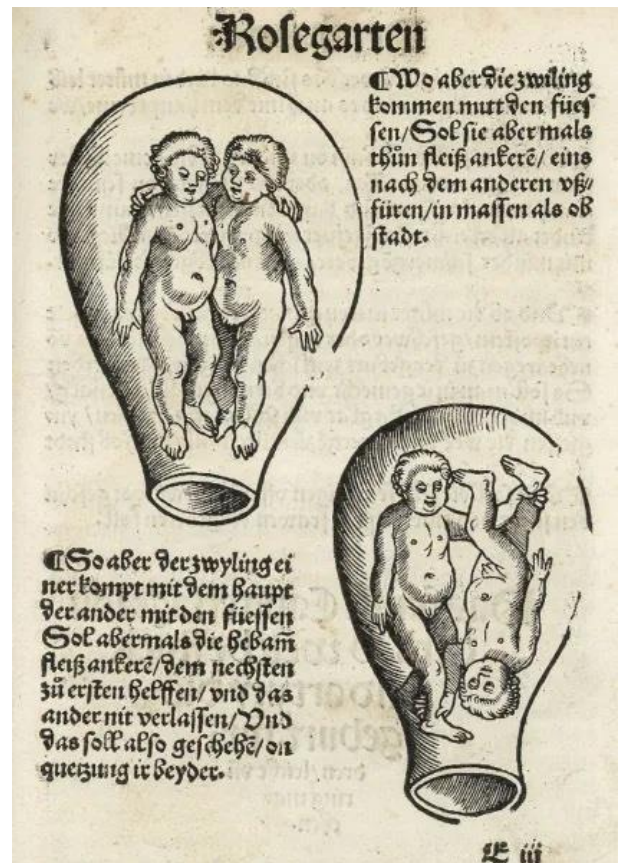
<sup>77</sup> Philip T. Weller, ed. *The Roman Ritual* (Chicago, I.L.: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1964), 23.

<sup>78</sup> Daisy Murray, *Twins in Early Modern English Drama and Shakespeare* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 20.

<sup>79</sup> Murray, *Twins*, 20.

they still would have been viewed as having a very close bond because of their shared gestation in the womb.

According to Galenic theory, twins grew in separate cavities, the male on the right and the female on the left.<sup>80</sup> However, in *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), Helkiah Crooke states that ‘there is but one bosom in the wombe of a woman; but two parts thereof the right and the left distinguished only by a line, not disscuered by any partition’.<sup>81</sup> Physical touch was believed to be very important in the early modern period, and contact between bodies could have not only physical repercussions but spiritual ones as well.<sup>82</sup> These repercussions would also occur in the womb. Crooke notes that ‘it is by the benefit of Touching that we are conceiued and formed in the fertile Garden of our Mothers wombe.’<sup>83</sup> He further states that the child in the womb first receives the sense of ‘Touching; whereby hee is cherished, nourished, and encreased, and is at length perfected; for so long as he is in the prison of the wombe, hee neither seeth, nor heareth, nor smelleth, nor tasteth any thing, but yet hath absolute necessity of the sense of Touching’.<sup>84</sup> Crooke’s suggestion that touching is the most prominent sense in



<sup>80</sup> William Viney, "The Significance of Twins in the Middle Ages." *The Wonder of Twins*. Last modified July 23, 2013. <https://thewonderoftwins.wordpress.com/2013/07/23/the-significance-of-twins-in-medieval-and-early-modern-europe/>.

<sup>81</sup> Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia a Description of the Body of Man* (London: William Iaggard, 1615), 312.

<sup>82</sup> Roya Biggie, "How to Do Things with Organs," *Early Theatre* 21, no. 2 (2018): 91-110, 98-99.

<sup>83</sup> Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 648.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 648.

the womb is further amplified in cases of twinship since the twins would be in direct contact in the womb.

In Eucharius Rösslin's *The Birth of Mankynde*, illustrations show twins holding each other by the ankle or by the shoulders.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, there was fear associated with the sense of touch in the early modern period because it could cause spiritual damage. Richard Brathwaite questions in his *Essaies vpon the Fiue Senses* (1620), 'O how many fall by this *Sence of life* [touch], making it their sence of death? *Sodoms* apples were but *touched*, and to dust and ashes they were reduced'.<sup>86</sup> Brathwaite's fear demonstrates the early modern lust that was associated with this sense. Indeed, touch 'most frequently evokes the erotic and seductive, and early modern depictions of the Five Senses sometimes portray Touch through lascivious or pornographic scenes.'<sup>87</sup> Twins who shared a womb for nine months were at risk of developing an unnatural closeness that would affect them throughout their lives as well.

This proximity that twins had during their nine months of gestation is also important when regarding the spiritual connection between the Duchess and Ferdinand. When Ferdinand believes his sister is having an affair, he is so angry that the Cardinal states 'there is not in nature / A thing that makes man so deformed, so beastly' and that Ferdinand should 'put [himself] in tune.' (II.V.56-57, II.V. 61-62) With these lines it is clear that Ferdinand is so preoccupied with his sister's romantic liaisons that he is unable to control his emotions. He is transformed into something unnatural, even 'beastly'. This surprises the Cardinal, who asks, 'are you stark mad?' (II.V.66). Because the Cardinal did not share a womb with the

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<sup>85</sup> Eucharius Rösslin, *Der Swangern Frauwen und Hebammen Rosegarten* (pubd online 25<sup>th</sup> May 2008) <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eucharius\\_Rösslin\\_-\\_Der\\_schwangeren\\_Frauen\\_und\\_Hebammen\\_Rosengarten.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eucharius_Rösslin_-_Der_schwangeren_Frauen_und_Hebammen_Rosengarten.jpg)>

<sup>86</sup> Richard Brathwaite, *Essaies vpon the Fiue Senses* (London: Edvvard Griffin, 1620), 45.

<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth D. Harvey, "Introduction: The "Sense of All Senses"," in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey, 1-21 (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1.

Duchess, he cannot understand why Ferdinand feels so preoccupied with his sister and her affairs. Early modern physicians generally believed that ensoulment happened at the 45<sup>th</sup> day of gestation for boys and the 50<sup>th</sup> for girls, as I have stated previously in this chapter.<sup>88</sup> Because Ferdinand would have had five extra days of possessing a soul, he would feel their spiritual connection more strongly than the Duchess. This added time clarifies further why Ferdinand feels such a strong compulsion to control his sister, her womb, and her life in general.

Throughout the play, Ferdinand's speech regarding his sister and his desire for closeness with her becomes increasingly dramatic. He begins in Act I, scene II, by stating that '[her] darkest actions – nay, your privatesst thoughts / Will come to light' as if he had some means of understanding her thoughts without her consent (I.II.231-232). He then moves on to express a desire for a more physical form of closeness when he implies that he has sexual desires for her later in the scene. He shows the Duchess his 'father's poniard' (I.II.246), which has 'phallic implications'.<sup>89</sup> Ferdinand continues to make phallic innuendos when he states that 'women like that part which, like the lamprey / Hat ne'er a bone in't.' (I.II.251-2) Ferdinand becomes more explicit in Act II, scene V when he suggests he would like to ravage, that is, rape, his sister. He wishes

I could be [a tempest],  
That I might toss [The Duchess's] palace 'bout her ears,  
Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads  
And lay her general territory to waste (II.V.17-20)

With these lines, Ferdinand is moving away from the awkward phallic suggestions he made in Act I scene II to outwardly suggest sexually ravaging his sister like a storm might ravage a forest, suggesting a perverse fixation with her womb.

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<sup>88</sup> Lemnius, *The Secret*, 33, 58.

<sup>89</sup> Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, see notes for I.II.246.

Later in Act II, scene V, Ferdinand expresses a desire to take matters even further when he wishes to use his used handkerchief to ‘make soft lint for [The Duchess’s] wounds, / when I have hewed her to pieces’ (II.V.30-31). Ferdinand’s desire to kill his sister shows the escalation of his compulsion to possess her body. The act of murder can be seen as the ultimate act of possession of one body over another. It is ‘the decision-making power of life and death [that] infuses a feeling of omnipotence’ in the murderer over their victim.<sup>90</sup> It is this omnipotence that Ferdinand needs to feel over the Duchess, who, since exiting the womb, is no longer in the sphere of his influence.

The Duchess does not feel the same compulsion to possess her brother’s body because her ensoulment occurred after his in their mother’s womb. After Ferdinand makes sexual suggestions to her in Act I, scene II, she cries out, ‘Fie, sir!’ scandalised by his comments (I.II.252). Both of Ferdinand’s siblings display discomfort towards his need for proximity with the Duchess because they did not have the same experience as Ferdinand did *in utero*. Because Ferdinand’s soul spent more time in his mother’s womb than the Duchess and shared a close proximity to her developing body, he feels a need to continuously possess this body, and the longer he is unable to do so, the more uncontrollable this desire becomes.

Previous scholarship has examined Ferdinand’s need for control over the Duchess’s body as well. For example, Martha Ronk Lifson has stated that it is ‘because he has been unable to possess her body [that] he is committed to destroying its integrity.’<sup>91</sup> Daisy Murray explores the twin relationship by specifically focusing on Ferdinand’s ‘narcissistic inclination as [the Duchess] is essentially a reflection of her brother, yet separate enough that he can displace his obsession onto her.’<sup>92</sup> Louise Powell has commented on the enduring

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<sup>90</sup> Nicola Malizia, "Serial Killer: The Mechanism from Imagination to the Murder Phases," *Sociology Mind* 07, (March 2017): 44-59, 48.

<sup>91</sup> Martha Ronk Lifson, "Embodied Mortality in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Pacific Coast Philology*, 23, no.1/2 (1988): 47-59, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Murray, *Twins*, 38.

bond between the Duchess and Ferdinand noting that the fact that ‘the Duchess and Ferdinand once shared a womb with each other is suggested to be so influential that it affects them not only as adults but also beyond death.’<sup>93</sup> Powell explores how the early modern understanding of twinship from a medical perspective can offer a better understanding of Ferdinand’s pull towards his twin sister. While I agree with Powell, I have taken a step further in this chapter to explore the spiritual connection between twins and specifically how their bond affects them both after death, a perspective that has so far not been applied to *The Duchess of Malfi*. I have found no scholarship focusing on the soul development of twins and how this impacts the spiritual bond between the Duchess and Ferdinand. It is because of the ensoulment process that they share such a close bond, and it is because Ferdinand had a soul in the womb before the Duchess did that his connection turns into an obsession.

Ferdinand’s increasing need for his sister drives him to murder her and ultimately pushes him to insanity as well. He states ‘I will send her masques of common courtesans, / Have her meat served up by bawds and ruffians’ (IV.I.121-122). His attempt to drive the Duchess mad before he himself goes mad suggests this shared soul connection: one cannot live without the other. Louise Powell notes that ‘there is no peace for either when one is alive and the other is dead.’<sup>94</sup> After the Duchess’s murder, Ferdinand is unable to retain his sanity and the nature of his soul changes. He is diagnosed with ‘A Very Pestilent disease, [...] / They call *lycanthropia*.’ (V.II.5-6) Lycanthropia was assessed as a spiritual disease by Jean Bodin, who believed that ‘every manifestation of lycanthropia, even imaginary ones, are diabolical in origin’ (‘chaque manifestation de lycanthropie, même imaginaire, est d’origine diabolique’).<sup>95</sup> This understanding of the disease implies a shift in Ferdinand’s

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<sup>93</sup> Louise Powell, “‘It Seems She Was Born First’: The Persistence of Twinship in *The Broken Heart* and *The Duchess of Malfi*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, (February 2017): 1-15, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Powell, “‘It Seems’,” 1.

<sup>95</sup> C. Oates, “Démonologues et Lycanthropes: Les Théories de la Métamorphose au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Métamorphose et Bestiaire Fantastique au Moyen-âge*, ed. Laurence Harf-Lancner, 71-105 (Paris: École Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles, 1985), 86, my translation.

soul, which is similar to the one the Duchess experiences after she learns of her children's deaths.

Lycanthropia was considered evil, and those who suffered from it were often perpetrators of various crimes. For example, Peeter Stubbe was said to have 'proceeded to the execution of sundry most heinous and vile murders'.<sup>96</sup> This malady gives Ferdinand absolution for the murder of his sister because the mentally ill were not believed to be responsible for their actions. In theological terms 'the responsibility for sinful acts rests upon the rational consent to commit the sin, and there is surely adequate evidence in the final act of the play to contend that Ferdinand lacks this ability.'<sup>97</sup> Lycanthropia, furthermore, allows Ferdinand's obsession with the Duchess's body to continue. The doctor who gives his diagnosis states that those who develop the illness 'steal forth to churchyards in the dead of night / And dig dead bodies up' (V.II.11-12). This diagnosis gives Ferdinand an excuse to necromantically continue his need for proximity to his sister's body. Though we do not know if he ever digs up her body, he is stated to have been 'Behind St Mark's church, with the leg of a man / Upon his shoulder', suggesting his continued obsession with the Duchess post-mortem (V.II.14-15).

Before developing lycanthropia, Ferdinand states 'The wolf shall find her grave and scrape it up' (IV.II.298). This comment suggests Ferdinand knows he will develop lycanthropia, and this disease will give him a reason to continue to seek proximity with his sister, whether dead or alive. Gail Kern Paster states that Ferdinand '[loses] the humoral benefit of his own sensitive human soul'.<sup>98</sup> Paster is suggesting that something within Ferdinand's soul has been lost, almost as if a part of his soul departed with the Duchess when

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<sup>96</sup> Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Appendix 2, 392.

<sup>97</sup> Brett D. Hirsch "An Italian Werewolf in London: Lycanthropy and *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 11.2 (September, 2005): 2-43, 25.

<sup>98</sup> Gail Kern Paster, *Humouring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 162.

she died. It is perhaps this loss that causes Ferdinand to develop the disease, which in turn causes a shift in his soul, or what remains of his soul, after his sister's death. Ferdinand is responsible for his sister's death, and because they share this spiritual connection, his soul is not able to bear the spiritual consequences of his actions, and this manifests as the development of his disease.

I want to move on now to discuss a rather different text, a poem written in 1624, Nathaniel Tyndale's 'The Penitent Sonnes Teares for his murdered Mother'. Written a decade after *The Duchess of Malfi*, this poem also examines the spiritual bond between a mother and child and the consequences of murder on this bond. Previously, I discussed how the Duchess of Malfi experienced a shift in her soul after the death of her children, and I detailed how Ferdinand's murder of his twin sister caused him to develop a disease that affected his soul. Here, I will argue that the consequences of murder on the soul bond are not only felt by twins who shared a womb or by a mother losing her child but equally by the child as well.

This poem, written by Tyndale after his conviction for killing his mother, demonstrates how the soul bond endures after death and, because of this, causes the son's soul to fall ill. His soul is changed after his act of matricide as he notes that 'as I my selfe now, (with a Heart doth bleed)' (line 26).<sup>99</sup> The temporal indicator of the word 'now' shows that he feels a change in his soul, experienced as a disease, since murdering his mother. He also asks the 'great Phisicain, [to] Heale my wound' and comments on his 'leprous sinne' (line 35, line 41). These lines are explicit examples of the spiritual consequences of murder represented by leprosy, historically regarded as a disease of the soul caused by sin.<sup>100</sup> During

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<sup>99</sup> Nathaniel Tyndale, "The Penitent Sonnes Teares for His Murdered Mother," in *The Penitent Sonnes Teares for His Murdered Mother / by Nathaniel Tyndale, Sicke Both in Soule and Body, a Prisoner Now in Newgate. The Much-afflicted Mothers Teares for Her Drowned Daughter / [by?] Anne Musket, the Wofull Mother for Her Lost Daughter* (London: John Trundle, 1624).

<sup>100</sup> Saul N. Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 107.

the early modern period, leprosy was less common and ‘it had become more a disease of myth than something confronted by English people on a regular basis.’<sup>101</sup> However, commentators on the Bible still mentioned the spiritual consequences of leprosy. For example, George Petter discusses it in his commentary of the Gospel of St Mark, written in 1661, stating that

The Leprosy of the body which reigned among the Jews, was a Type of Sin which is the Leprosy of the Soul; and our Saviour, ... [who] came into the World to cure the faithful of their sins, which are the sicknesses of their Souls.<sup>102</sup>

In early modern literature, the representation of leprosy was often connected to evil. Indeed, ‘A number of writers use the term "leprosy" in the general sense of a loathsome evil.’<sup>103</sup> For example, in *Hamlet*, the Ghost describes leprosy, stating ‘And a most instant tetter barked about, / Most lazarlike, with vile and loathsome crust, / All my smooth body.’ (I.V.60-72)<sup>104</sup> The use of words such as ‘vile’ and ‘loathsome’ suggests the evil that is associated with leprosy during the early modern period.

Tyndale states that his ‘vntimely birth / Brought not a *Man*, but *Monster* to Earth.’ (Line 25) This line implies a form of moral deformity that would be similar to a bodily deformity worthy of being called ‘monstrous’. Tyndale asks God

O cure my soule; 'tis that great worke, I know,  
For which (so High) thou didst descend so low:  
Then, great Phisician, Helpe mee; Heale my wound;  
Great Shepheard, Seeke mee; Let my *Soule* be found.

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<sup>101</sup> Alexandra Houston, "'Seiknes Incurabill': the Evolution of Literary Representations of Leprosy in Medieval and Early Modern English Narratives," *Chicago Journal of History*, (November 2016): 30-41, 40.

<sup>102</sup> George Petter, *A Learned, Pious, and Practical Commentary, upon the Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: J. Streater, 1661), 89.

<sup>103</sup> Olaf K. Skinsnes, and Robert M. Elvove, "Leprosy in Society V. "Leprosy" in Occidental Literature," *International Journal of Leprosy* 38, no. 3 (1970): 294-307, 297.

<sup>104</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2016).

That heauenly inuitation, made to those,  
 Whose many sinnes load them with many woes,  
 Is made to mee: For onely sinne doth griue mee,  
*And not my death* (lines 30-40).

In these lines, he seems to be pleading with God for forgiveness rather than worrying about what will happen after death. His plea fits into ‘a sixteenth-century leitmotif concerning death and salvation that would have been well known [at the time]: the "final moment" before death, that is, the belief that one's state of mind at the final instant of life eternally committed one's soul to salvation or damnation’.<sup>105</sup> However, pleading for salvation ‘runs counter to any accepted theology of salvation, either Catholic free-will, Protestant predestination, or any Catholic/Protestant combination on the free will/predestination spectrum.’<sup>106</sup> Tyndale’s state of mind is still interesting because it suggests that through the act of murder, his soul has developed an illness that could only be cured by the grace of God in the final moments of his life. Just as Ferdinand develops lycanthropia after murdering the Duchess, Tyndale develops leprosy. The changes in both Ferdinand and Tyndale illustrate how murder committed by someone connected spiritually to their victim by the womb corrupts their soul through spiritual disease.

I will return to the idea that a soul-sickness causes a deterioration of spiritual relationships in the next chapter. I examine disturbed sleep states that develop because of grief and affect the connection between mother and child even after death. However, before I move to this analysis, I will first turn to examine women writers’ perspectives on the bond between mother and child created in the womb.

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<sup>105</sup> Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce, "The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 259-275, 260.

<sup>106</sup> Wunderli and Broce, "The Final Moment," 261.

## 1.5. Early Modern Women's Writing on the Spiritual Womb

I now turn to examine poetry from later in the seventeenth century written by women to explore how the spiritual importance of the womb was understood by female writers of the period. I begin with Mary Carey's poem 'Upon the Sight of my abortive Birth the 31st of December 1657'. While Tyndale murdered his mother, Carey lost her child in a miscarriage. The enduring bond between mother and child is visible in this poem, and Carey is very aware of the spiritual importance of this organ.

The poem is presented as a form of dialogue between herself and God. In this way, Carey can suggest that God's reason for her miscarriage is her failure to perform her spiritual duties. The poem begins with a description of the foetus as 'a poor despiséd Creature[,] A little Embryo; void of Life, & Feature' (line 1).<sup>107</sup> A few lines later, she calls it 'my dead formless Babe' (line 13). The use of the words 'void' and 'formless' suggest a connection to the creation of the cosmos. In Genesis, a similar wording is used: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was *without form*, and *void*; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'<sup>108</sup> Carey's word choices draw a parallel between the creation within the womb and the creation of the universe. Walter Charleton suggested in 1652 that 'God created the world *ex nihilo*' and that 'all things existent [in the whole World] besides himself, were created by him.'<sup>109</sup> Carey's vocabulary is significant because it suggests a creation that is not *ex nihilo* but rather a creation that is more feminine.

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<sup>107</sup> Mary Carey, "Lady Mary Carey - Upon the Sight of my abortive Birth the 31st of December 1657," in *Flesh and Spirit: An Anthology of Seventeenth-century Women's Writing*, eds. Rachel Adcock, Sara Read, and Anna Ziomek (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

<sup>108</sup> Genesis 1:1-2 (KJV), my emphasis.

<sup>109</sup> Walter Charleton, *The Darknes of Atheism Dispelled by The Light of Nature a Physico-theologicall Treatise* (London: J.F., 1652), 39.

With creation *ex nihilo* ‘God creates outside of Godself, separate from Godself, by a fiat of power; this is deemed a masculine way of viewing God’s act of creation.’<sup>110</sup> Yet Carey’s view aligns more closely with myths of creation ‘from a primal ocean charged with the signifiers of birth’ from the pre-Hellenistic era.<sup>111</sup> Creation *ex nihilo* ‘systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation.’<sup>112</sup> This chaos ‘has taken on the persona of a frightful mess, an abortive birth; but certainly not of nothing.’<sup>113</sup> Carey’s language aligns with a view of creation that originates in the female chaos of an abortive birth. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton uses similar language, stating that ‘In the beginning, how the heav’ns and earth / Rose out of chaos’ and later notes that one could ‘perish rather, swallowed up and lost / In the wide womb of uncreated night / Devoid of sense and motion’ (I.9-10, II.149-151). Milton’s version, however, still requires the ‘Almighty Maker [to] ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds.’ (II.915-916) By returning power to the male God, Milton also ‘strips Chaos of female generative power’, whereas Carey’s understanding of creation rests within the womb.<sup>114</sup>

The ‘little Embrio’ is perhaps void of life, but it is the fact that the Embrio was formed and created at all that is significant. The womb is the seat of creation and, therefore, has spiritual importance. It is through this seat of creative chaos that life can begin and where the embryo can receive a soul. This is what Carey is alluding to through her choice of words that recall the creation of the universe in Genesis. Equally, this wording echoes Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus, since the foetus was created from a void in Mary’s womb. Calvin comments that ‘We do not hold Christ to be free from all taint, merely because he was born of a woman unconnected with a man, but because he was sanctified by the

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<sup>110</sup> Lisa D. Powell, "The Infertile Womb of God," *CrossCurrents* 65, no. 1 (March 2015): 116-138, 126.

<sup>111</sup> Keller, *Face*, 14.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>114</sup> Shannon Miller, "Maternity, Marriage, and Contract: Lucy Hutchinson's Response to Patriarchal Theory in *Order and Disorder*," *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 107-135, 343.

Spirit'.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Carey suggests her conception is blessed by 'God's praise, babes blesse; it highly doth me please' (line 20). Carey's perspective emerges from a Protestant background and her wording implies that the creation within the womb occurs through God.

Yet, Carey's embryo is still without life and 'formless' (line 13). To fully understand her meaning, it is equally necessary to observe the early modern understanding of miscarriages. Seventeenth-century belief suggested that if a child came into the world before its time, it could be deformed. Miscarried babies were often associated with monsters due to these malformations and were believed to gestate in the wombs of unhealthy women who had sinful thoughts.<sup>116</sup> In *A Present for Teeming Women* (1663), John Oliver states

For, as the fancy, and longing of a woman with child doth sometimes make such strange impressions on the child in the womb, that it carries some sign thereof after its birth; and as the hurt, bruise, or fall of a woman, in that condition, makes her child sometimes imperfect, monstrous, crippled, or deformed.<sup>117</sup>

Yet, in her poem, Carey moves away from any notion of monstrosity. She states, 'And that this Babe (as well as all the rest,) / Since't had a Soul, shall be for ever blest' (line 9). By stating that the soul is 'for ever blest', or in other words, that it has gone to heaven, Carey is exonerating both herself and the child from the implied sinfulness associated with deformed children.

However, Carey still faces the popularly held belief that mothers miscarry because they are being punished by God for sinfulness. It was necessary for 'mother-poets ... to confront the idea that their children's early deaths signified and were a form of punishment

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<sup>115</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion – Volume I* (Lafayette, Ind: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2002), 414. See also Arnold Huijgen, "Sixteenth-Century Reformers' Perspectives on the Virgin Birth," in *The Apostles' Creed: Born of the Virgin Mary*, eds. Marcel Sarot and Archibald L. Wieringen, 183-201 (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 194.

<sup>116</sup> Adcock, Read, and Ziomek, *Flesh and Spirit*, 24.

<sup>117</sup> Oliver, *A Present*, 30.

for their own sins.’<sup>118</sup> In examining Carey’s prose text ‘A Dialogue Betwixt the Soul and the Body’, Michelle Dowd notes the use of the word ‘miscarriage’ has a double meaning, both signifying the loss of a child in the womb, but also that ‘it is one’s approach to prayer and repentance rather than one’s body that can miscarry.’<sup>119</sup> This indicates that there are spiritual implications both to the gestation in the womb as well as to the loss of a child in the womb. Carey feels she has miscarried in her spiritual duties and is confronted with the physical experience of a miscarriage as a manifestation of her lack of piety.

After stating that she has miscarried, Carey moves quickly on to enumerate the number of healthy children she has had. She notes that ‘Seven times I went my time, when Mercy giving Deliverance unto me & mine all living; / Strong, right-proportioned, lovely Girls, & Boys.’ (Lines 2-3) Through these lines, Carey shows her past successes in childbirth. She also indicates her past achievements on a spiritual level since she was able to carry so many children to term and, in addition, that these are children who were ‘right-proportioned’ and ‘lovely’. Yet, Carey repeatedly insists that it is her deficient spiritual practice that caused her miscarriage. While writing in the voice of God, she notes, ‘Thou often dost present me with dead Fruit; Why should not my Returns, thy Present suit: / Dead Duties, Prayers, Praises thou dost bring’ (lines 20-21). These lines exemplify the spiritual connection between mother and child because it is through not valuing her spiritual work that Carey miscarries. Therefore, a connection exists between the mother’s spiritual practice and the formation of her child in her womb. It is only by having a devoted practice to God ‘In Hearing, Reading, Conference, Meditation; In acting Graces & in Conversation’ that Carey hopes ‘more Fruit to bring, then heretofore’ (line 22, 35).

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<sup>118</sup> Pamela Hammons, “Despised Creatures: The Illusion of Maternal Self-Effacement in Seventeenth-Century Child Loss Poetry” *ELH*, Spring, 1999, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Spring, 1999): 25-49, 27.

<sup>119</sup> Michelle M. Dowd, "Genealogical Counternarratives in the Writings of Mary Carey," *Modern Philology* 109, no. 4 (2012): 440-462, 449.

The spiritual connection between mother and child is further represented in Carey's assertion that her unborn child had a soul. According to François Mauriceau, it is through a 'particular action of the Womb; by which working upon both seeds there retained it forms and shapes a body out of them, composed of divers parts, which it disposeth in order, to become in time the Organ of the Soul, which be infused into it.'<sup>120</sup> This implies that the soul arrives rather late in gestation after the womb 'forms and shapes a body'. Carey seems to be relatively early in her pregnancy when she miscarries because she describes the child as 'a little Embryo' (line 1). However, she remains confident that her child 'had a Soul' (line 9). Her contradiction of standard medical knowledge seems only plausible if Carey had an inner knowing about her child's spiritual state. In *The Midwives's Book* (1671), Jane Sharp comments on soul development by stating that 'the child in the Mothers womb hath a soul of its own, yet it is a part of the mother untill she be delivered, as a branch is part of a Tree while it grows there'.<sup>121</sup> This statement further implies the spiritual connection between mother and child since the child's soul is directly connected to that of its mother, growing like a branch on a tree. Carey is confident in the ascension of her child's soul to heaven because she already knows it has a soul as it was connected to her own.

The womb's spiritual function can also be seen in Hester Pulter's poems, which connect mother to child and also to a greater hierarchy within the universe. Pulter's poems present the cosmos within an astronomical hierarchy based on the Copernican system.<sup>122</sup> For example, in 'The Revolution' Pulter states that planets 'who yearly run / Round that illustrious globe, the sun', placing the sun at the centre of the cosmos (lines 7-8).<sup>123</sup> Copernicus' heliocentrism was controversial during this period 'because it disrupted the idea

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<sup>120</sup> Mauriceau, *The Diseases*, 25.

<sup>121</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 119.

<sup>122</sup> Louisa Hall, "Hester Pulter's Brave New Worlds," in *Immortality and the Body in the Age of Milton*, ed. John Rumrich and Stephen M. Fallon, 171-186 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 172, 176.

<sup>123</sup> Hester Pulter, "The Revolution," (Poem 16, Amplified Edition), ed. Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall (2018), <http://pulterproject.nortwestern.edu>.

that the rest of the world revolved around God's creation on earth. Pulter elegantly solves this problem by making the sun at the center of this new universe a divine force.<sup>124</sup> In her poem 'The Hope' Pulter addresses Death while anticipating her time of passing. She expects 'poor mortals' loss, or pain, or wonder, / And all that is in thee to atoms turned' (lines 8-9).<sup>125</sup> Pulter presents the idea that after death, souls decompose into atoms and return to the cosmos. The suggestion that souls become part of the universe allows Pulter to marry astronomy to the spiritual.<sup>126</sup>

Pulter's use of the word 'atoms' in the context of her understanding of the afterlife suggests an awareness of seventeenth-century atomism and Lucretian philosophy.<sup>127</sup> Lucy Hutchinson translated Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* probably around the same time as Pulter wrote 'The Hope'.<sup>128</sup> Lucretius suggests that the body and soul cannot live once separated. This is seen, for example, in the following lines

Again, the body's and the mind's live powers  
 Only in union prosper and enjoy;  
 For neither can nature of mind, alone of self  
 Sans body, give the vital motions forth;  
 Nor, then, can body, wanting soul, endure  
 And use the senses. Verily, as the eye,  
 Alone, up-rended from its roots, apart  
 From all the body, can peer about at naught,  
 So soul and mind it seems are nothing able,  
 When by themselves (III.559-568).<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> See amplified notes on 'globe, the sun' in Pulter, "The Revolution, lines 7-8. See also Pulter's poem 'The Center'.

<sup>125</sup> Hester Pulter, "The Hope," (Poem 65, Amplified Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.nortwestern.edu>.

<sup>126</sup> Hall, "Hester Pulter's Brave," 181.

<sup>127</sup> Alice Eardley, "Hester Pulter's "Indivisibles" and the Challenges of Annotating Early Modern Women's Poetry," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 52, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 117-141, 126.

Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, "Hester Pulter's Well-Wrought Urns: Early Modern Women, Sonnets, and New Criticism," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2020): 120-143, 19.

<sup>128</sup> Eardley, "Hester Pulter's," 19.

<sup>129</sup> Lucy Hutchinson, *Lucy Hutchinson's Translation of Lucretius, De Rerum Natura*, ed. Hugh De Quehen (London: Duckworth, 1996).

With this concept of the inseparability of soul and body, Lucretius is attempting to keep his readers from ‘wishful thinking that ... the spirit take flight from the body at death to enjoy an eternal afterlife’.<sup>130</sup> However, Pulter’s atomism counters this because she uses atoms as part of the spiritual ingredients that make up the afterlife. In death she anticipates that ‘from obscurity my atoms raise / To sing in joy His everlasting praise, / And reunite my body to my spirit’ (lines 34-36).<sup>131</sup> With this, Pulter is taking concepts from both Lucretius’ atomism and Aristotle’s *minima* in her understanding of the afterlife. Aristotle states that

[I]f the parts of a whole may be indefinitely big or small (by parts I mean components into which a whole can be divided and which are actually present in it), it is necessary that the whole thing itself may also be of any size.<sup>132</sup>

Pulter is creating her own version of the afterlife where she was able to keep ‘the atomist concept of material indivisibility but combined it with the strong influence of Aristotelian *minima* – though not necessarily divisible – particles of matter’.<sup>133</sup> This concept of the afterlife allows Pulter to redefine the heavens and how they welcome souls in the afterlife.<sup>134</sup>

The afterlife and the cosmos seem to be one and the same in her poetry. In ‘The Eclipse’, she states, ‘But O, Mortality, ‘tis thou alone / [that] hidest from my soul celestial joys’ (lines 37-42).<sup>135</sup> According to Pulter, ‘the world, and all living beings within it, is formed from atoms, and that these atoms are indispensable components for the realisation of

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<sup>130</sup> Alvin Snider, "Hutchinson and the Lucretian Body," In *The New Science and Women's Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein*, ed. J. Hayden, 29-46 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 34.

<sup>131</sup> Hester Pulter, "The Brahman, Emblem 44," (Poem 109, Elemental Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.nortwestern.edu>.

<sup>132</sup> Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 187b14–21.

<sup>133</sup> Cassandra Gorman, *The Atom in Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2021), 120.

<sup>134</sup> Gorman, *The Atom*, 176, 182, 184, 185.

<sup>135</sup> Hester Pulter, "The Eclipse," (Poem 1, Amplified Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.nortwestern.edu>.

eternal life.’<sup>136</sup> Pulter reinterprets Lucretian philosophy and marries it to a Christian afterlife. Similarly, Pierre Gassendi, along with Walter Charleton, argues ‘for God’s control over the particles of creation’.<sup>137</sup> Pulter was not alone in her use of atomism in her poetry; her contemporaries Lucy Hutchinson and Margaret Cavendish equally took an interest in this concept. After translating *De Rerum Natura*, Lucy Hutchinson returned to questions of atomism in her work *Order and Disorder*. She describes the postlapsarian condition, stating that ‘our scattered atoms shall again condense’ (V. 253).<sup>138</sup> This line creates a ‘sense of empathy with the loss of prelapsarian bliss’.<sup>139</sup>

Margaret Cavendish, however, states that ‘small *Atomes* of themselves a *World* may make, / As being subtle, and of every shape: / And as they dance about, fit places find’ (lines 1-3).<sup>140</sup> Her use of atoms is ‘left ambiguous as to whether they operate by “chance” or by predestination.’<sup>141</sup> Cavendish uses Lucretian imagery but does so without agreeing with *De Rerum Natura*’s arguments in order to construct her views of the universe, and Hutchinson disagrees with Lucretius but uses it as fodder for her poetry.<sup>142</sup> Pulter, on the other hand, uses Lucretian atomism to deconstruct the universe and atomism, combined with Aristotelian *minima*, to suggest an afterlife that is inherent within the atoms that disperse after death into the cosmos. In this manner, she can marry a scientific understanding of the universe to her spirituality to address where souls reside after death.

Pulter’s construction of a cosmic afterlife is specifically relevant when analysing her poems on birth and how souls come into this world. In her poem ‘Written in 1648 While I Lay Inn, with My Son John’, she displays the importance of the womb as her son grows

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<sup>136</sup> Gorman, *The Atom*, 125.

<sup>137</sup> Gorman, *The Atom*, 151 and Eardly, "Hester Pulter’s," 126.

<sup>138</sup> Lucy Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, ed. David Norbrook (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

<sup>139</sup> Gorman, *The Atom*, 186.

<sup>140</sup> Margaret Cavendish, “Poems and Fancies – A World Made by Atomes,” in *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, ed. David Cunning, 153-170 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 153.

<sup>141</sup> Gorman, *The Atom*, 152.

<sup>142</sup> Snider, "Hutchinson," 42.

inside her. She states she is ‘sad, sick, and lame, as in my bed I lay’ (line 1).<sup>143</sup> Yet, while she is pregnant and lying in bed, Pulter is also able to experience the vastness of the universe. She notes that ‘my thoughts being free, I bid them take their flight’, and they ‘flew instantly ... up to that sphere where night’s pale queen doth run’ (lines 6-7). Pulter joins the Moon, and notes that her ‘thoughts about her orb was hurled, / I did perceive she was another world.’ (lines 17-18) Pulter then moves to explore other planets, stating ‘Next Venus, usher to the night and day,’ and ‘My fancy next to Mercury would run’ (lines 23, 27). These lines suggest that her soul departed from her body to explore the heavens.

However, she is not dead and did not leave her body permanently; it is her pregnant body which allows her to experience her cosmic version of the afterlife as she is straddling life and death because of her status as a pregnant woman. Her poetry displays a connection between the female body and its cycles to the universe, from life through death to immortality.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, it is significant that Pulter visits the moon first since ‘there was a generalised acceptance by a number of authors that the moon had some role to play in the timing of menstruation’.<sup>145</sup> Nicholas Culpeper notably states that ‘we may know when to give remedies to Maids whose Terms come not down, for we must do it in the time when the Moon is new or ready to change, and to elder women about the time that Nature useth to send them forth’.<sup>146</sup> I discuss the connection between women’s blood and the moon further in chapter six, but it is relevant here as well. Pulter’s thoughts ‘flew instantly, without intermission,’ towards the luminary connected to menstruation, suggesting that Pulter’s ability to leave her body stems from her pregnant state (line 6).

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<sup>143</sup> Hester Pulter, “Written in 1648 While I Lay Inn, with My Son John,” (Poem 45, Amplified Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.nortwestern.edu>.

<sup>144</sup> Ruth Connolly, "Hester Pulter's Childbirth Poetics," *Women's Writing* 26, no. 3 (December 2016): 282-303, 282.

<sup>145</sup> Sara Read, *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early-Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 17.

<sup>146</sup> Nicholas Culpeper, *Directory for Midwives, or A Guide for Women* (London: Peter Cole, 1662), 76.

In her poem ‘Universal Dissolution,’ Pulter returns to imagery related to childbearing. She describes the moment Aurora, the goddess of dawn, gives birth to Justice, ‘her blessed infant she brought forth’ (line 111).<sup>147</sup> With this image, Pulter presents a feminine goddess possessing a womb, which gives a woman authority over Justice, her child. Pulter also represents Earth as having a womb. She states that ‘Tellus’s womb involved so rich a treasure’ to describe how Earth envelops her daughter’s cadaver (line 20).<sup>148</sup> It is a reversed process of birth where Pulter’s daughter enters the earth’s womb to die, or rather, to be reborn in death. The idea that planets and gods have wombs places the feminine body within the hierarchy of Pulter’s Copernican universe, experiencing the same cycles the planets do.

Pulter’s cosmology appears in several poems and is presented, not as ‘the geo-centric universe of Ptolemy, but the heliocentric system of Copernicus. [...] the cosmos of her contemplations is the Copernican system as confirmed by Galileo.’<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, Pulter inscribes the female body within this universe. Ruth Connolly notes ‘the sexed female body underpins her poetics and informs the principal motifs of her poetry: the endless revolutions of matter and spirit through stages of birth and death, disintegration and regeneration.’<sup>150</sup> Pulter’s poetry exemplifies how the female body is connected to cycles of the universe, which makes it capable of existing in this liminal way, equally part of the cycles of life and death.

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<sup>147</sup> Hester Pulter, “Universal Dissolution,” (Poem 6, Amplified Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>.

<sup>148</sup> Hester Pulter, “Upon the Death of my Dear and Lovely Daughter, Jane Pulter,” (Poem 10, Amplified Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>.

<sup>149</sup> Sarah Hutton, “Hester Pulter (c. 1596-1678). A Woman Poet and the New Astronomy,” *Etudes Epistémè* 14, no. 14 (2008): 1-10, 4. Pulter’s poems that address astronomy include: “The Eclips”, “The Center”, “A solitary complaint”, and “The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge”. See Hutton, “Hester Pulter,” 2.

<sup>150</sup> Connolly, “Hester Pulter’s Childbirth,” 282.

Pulter illustrates the connection the womb has to a larger whole, but she also sees death represented in the female womb. She uses the popular womb/tomb comparison I mentioned previously in this chapter and characterises a tomb as ‘black Oblivion’s womb’ (line 20).<sup>151</sup> For Pulter, the womb is a trap or a ‘loathed cell’ that she cannot escape (line 3).<sup>152</sup> She uses this language because she feels trapped in her body during her pregnancies, and it is only her ‘thoughts being free’ that she can imagine personal liberty (line 3). She imagines freedom coming in death, noting, for example, that ‘For I noe Liberty expect to See / Untill to Atoms I dispersed bee’ (lines 102-103).<sup>153</sup> Her interpretation of Lucretian materialism allows her to find freedom in death and her body decomposing into atoms. It is through her understanding of atomism that ‘Pulter literally loses herself within the atomic environments of her poems’.<sup>154</sup> Pulter hopes to be free when she dies, but motherhood also endures beyond death. As stated previously, Jane Sharp noted how the child’s soul is like a branch of a tree, growing from the mother into its own self.<sup>155</sup> Yet, when the child is born there is no spiritual umbilical cord to be cut, only a physical one. This spiritual bond created between mother and child while the child is gestating in the mother’s womb endures in life and beyond life as well as in death.

Pulter cannot escape the connection her pregnancies create to her children. She is unable to accept her daughter Jane’s death, stating that she ‘turned a Niobe as she [Jane] turned earth.’ (line 58) This transformation into a Niobe, ‘a weeping rock’, represents the change Pulter must undergo to survive when her daughter leaves this existence. In Ovid’s

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<sup>151</sup> Hester Pulter, “My Soul, Why Art Thou Full of Trouble?” (Poem 40, Elemental Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>.

<sup>152</sup> Hester Pulter, “The Perfection of Patience and Knowledge” (Poem 39, Amplified Edition), ed. Liza Blake, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>.

<sup>153</sup> Hester Pulter, “Why Must I Forever Thus bee Confin’d?” (Poem 57, Elemental Edition), eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, in *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, eds. Leah Knight and Wendy Wall, (2018), <http://pulterproject.northwestern.edu>.

<sup>154</sup> Gorman, *The Atom*, 120.

<sup>155</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives*, 119.

*Metamorphoses*, Niobe is described as turning into a stone after all her children were killed by Apollo and Artemis. Arthur Golding's translation states 'All power forwent as now, / into stone *her very womb* and bowels also bind.' (VI.391-392)<sup>156</sup> This line highlights that her change to stone begins in the womb, which equally suggests the importance of motherhood in this transformational process. By referencing Niobe, Pulter aligns herself with that loss but also suggests that her soul has undergone an inner shift tantamount to Niobe's external one. This transformation exemplifies the shift that mothers must undergo when this spiritual connection with their children is maintained, but the physical one is severed by death.

In *Shakespeare's Schoolroom – Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion*, Lynn Enterline notes that schoolboys were presented with Niobe's story in Ovid as an example of 'a bereaved mother's inconsolable pain' and were 'asked to read and translate' it.<sup>157</sup> The use of Niobe's story to understand grief appeared in multiple early modern literary texts as well. For example, Hamlet mentions Niobe when noting Gertrude's short period of grief after her husband's passing, stating 'she follow'd my poor father's body, / Like Niobe, all tears' (I.II.152-153). Equally, at the end of *Edward I*, George Peele's Gloucester mourns Joan's death, stating 'Wept I like Nobe' (L4v).<sup>158</sup> In *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione is turned to stone after the loss of her child, just like Niobe. When Hermione's family is reunited at the end of the play, she is revived. This return is a 'dynamic transformation [that] counters the model of sorrow turning one to stone that is at the core of the Niobe story.'<sup>159</sup> Hermione's return is directly tied to the bond she shares with her daughter, Perdita, as we will see in chapter two. Pulter, however, experiences no such reunion and ends her poem precisely with a line on

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<sup>156</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding, ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), my emphasis.

<sup>157</sup> Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 138.

<sup>158</sup> George Peele, *King Edward I* (London: Abell Ieffes, 1593).

<sup>159</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, "Give Sorrow Words: Emotional Loss and The Articulation of Temperament in Early Modern England," in *Dead Lovers: Erotic Bonds and the Study of Premodern Europe*, eds. Basil Dufallo and Peggy McCracken, 143-165 (Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 160.

Niobe, stating that she ‘turned a Niobe as [Jane] turned earth’ (line 58). By ending her poem with this line, Pulter is capitalising on the reference to grief that Niobe represents and further amplifies the sense of a mother’s mourning that the early modern reader would understand.

## 1.6. Conclusion

While the medical understanding of the womb evolved over the course of the seventeenth century from a supernatural entity capable of attracting seed to a nervous organ causing hysterical disease, the ultimate purpose of a mother’s womb remained the same. It was a place where souls and bodies would come together to be brought into this world. A mother’s soul creates a direct link to her child while in the womb, and this endures beyond death. When dealing with murder, such as in *The Duchess of Malfi* or in Tyndale’s poem, the consequences on the connected soul left alive are immediate. The Duchess of Malfi experiences an inner shift when she commits her soul to evil after her children die, while Ferdinand and Tyndale both develop spiritual diseases which consume their souls. Carey and Pulter, as mother poets, offer a more direct insight into the spiritual bond between mother and child.

It is perhaps in the very word ‘bond’ that further understanding can be gained. The *OED* defines the word as it was used in the seventeenth century as ‘generally, “string, band, tie”’.<sup>160</sup> In *King Lear*, Cordelia tells Lear, ‘I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less.’ (I.I.92-93) The note in the Arden edition specifies the meaning of bond in this context as ‘a complex word that suggests filial obligation, or bond of natural affection between child and parent’.<sup>161</sup> John Kerrigan examines the bond between parent and child as well in *Shakespeare’s Binding Language*. When discussing Cicero, he states that

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<sup>160</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “bond (n.2),” March 2025, < <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1036401695>>

<sup>161</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, see notes to I.I.93.

Of the bond (*colligatio*) between kindred, the first (*coniugium*) is between spouses, the next between parents and children, [...] The Latin used by Cicero meshes natural and social bonds with the ties made by binding language. *Vinculum* can mean “oath”, while *colligatio* contains a ligature, as in *obligatio* (“contract, agreement”). [...] Shakespeare’s audience would have been familiar with bond used of oaths, kinship, duty, friendship, service, and so on.<sup>162</sup>

The spiritual bonds I discuss in this chapter would have equally been recognised, falling under the category of kinship.

It is in the gestation process that this bond is created between mother and child, so aptly represented by a physical bond, the umbilical cord. The umbilical cord is cut at birth, symbolising the beginning of life with this gesture. The cord of death can be seen as severed at the moment of passing away. Bosola picks up on this in *The Duchess of Malfi*. When the Duchess dies, he notes ‘there the cords of life broke’ (IV.II.343). This is seen quite literally in the play because the Duchess is set to die from ‘strangling’ (IV.II.199). According to Louise Powell ‘Ferdinand chose to have the Duchess [...] strangled with a cord; given their shared births, this cord could perhaps symbolise the umbilical cord, and so allow Ferdinand to play out a fantasy that the Duchess was asphyxiated in the womb.’<sup>163</sup>

The choice to have the Duchess strangled does more than symbolise the umbilical cord. It equally represents the spiritual bond that haunts Ferdinand and keeps the Duchess tied to him. The note in the Arden edition states that ‘death is imagined as the severing of a thread or cord (perhaps like the cord of life woven and cut by the three fates of classical myth)’.<sup>164</sup> There are three fates, yet only two cords to cut, one of life and one of death. The third cord might be the one invisible cord that this chapter is about, linking the mother to the child beyond life and beyond death. The fates of classical myth can, therefore, be spinning three

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<sup>162</sup> John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 436-437.

<sup>163</sup> Powell, “It Seems,” 11.

<sup>164</sup> Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, see notes to IV.II.343.

strands together: the cord of life, the cord of death, and the cord of spiritual connection linking souls beyond their mortal existence.

## 2. Early Modern Child Loss: The Wounded Soul in Female Sleep and Dreams

### 2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter established the early modern understanding of a spiritual bond between mother and child that is created while the child gestates in the womb. I examine this relationship further in this chapter by focusing on its effects on the body in sleep states. Dreams and sleep in the medieval and early modern periods have been considered extensively in previous scholarship.<sup>1</sup> However, the connection between dreams and sleep for the female body, and specifically the female body in pregnancy or the postpartum period, has been little explored, especially in relation to early modern literature. There has also been little investigation into the connection of various stages of motherhood with disturbed sleep, such as nightmares, comas or sleep paralysis and how this occurs because of trauma related to childbearing or childrearing.<sup>2</sup> The word ‘trauma’ and its use in terms of emotional distress was not common in the early modern period. The *OED*’s earliest use of ‘trauma’ is recorded in 1684 in Steven Blankaart’s *A Physical Dictionary* (1684), meaning ‘A wound, or external

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of this include Peter Brown, ed. *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "Sleep: Theory and Practice in the Late Renaissance," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 41, no. 4 (October 1986): 415-441; A. R. Ekirch, "Sleep We Have Lost: Pre-Industrial Slumber in the British Isles," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (April 2001): 343-386; Sasha Handley, *Sleep in Early Modern England* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 2016); Janine Rivière, *Dreams in Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘disturbed sleep’ to refer to early modern sleep impairments, ‘sleep impairment’ being the contemporary medical term for experiences such as sleep paralysis, comas, night terrors, etc. I use the term ‘nightmare’ in the contemporary sense of the word meaning a ‘frightening, or unpleasant dream.’ I will use the spelling of night-mare with a dash in the middle, or simply use the contemporary term ‘sleep paralysis’ to refer to the early modern meaning of night-mare: ‘A female spirit or monster supposed to settle on and produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal.’ When I refer to ‘comas’ I am using the contemporary meaning of the word as this word was rarely used in the early modern period. The words ‘lethargy’, ‘dead sleep’ or ‘cataphora’ were more commonly employed for prolonged sleep states. For more details on nightmare see “nightmare”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “nightmare, n. & adj.”, July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9238715733>>, as well as “sleep paralysis” listed under the definition for “sleep”, *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sleep, n.”, July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1172749012>> For more details on comas see Matthew J. Rigilano "Waking the Living Dead-Man: The Biopolitics of Early Modern Sleep," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 75-112, 87.

bodily injury in general'.<sup>3</sup> It is only in 'later usage particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, [...] the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.'<sup>4</sup> However, in the early modern period, the understanding of trauma as an emotional wound was not recognised.<sup>5</sup> Zackariah Long states that what 'is now discussed in psychiatric and scientific circles concerning trauma once belonged to a different lexical territory, namely literature about the soul.'<sup>6</sup> This chapter examines early modern texts that stress how grief is thought to impact the soul and express emotional pain using spiritual terminology.

In the first section of this chapter, I will address the early modern understanding of grief, as well as the understanding of early modern emotions and their connection to the soul. I will then turn to explore how emotional distress manifests in dreams and specifically highlight the connection between women's disturbed sleep, pregnancy and emotional trauma caused by grief. The second part of this chapter will focus on female-authored texts. I examine Mary Sidney Herbert's translation and adaptations of the Psalms and her understanding of sleep-like states as mediated through a biblical lens to show how these states strengthen the spiritual bond between mother and child. I then examine Rachel Speght's 'The Dreame'. This text demonstrates how the mother-child bond is affected by trauma and processed in dreams. Drawing on the conclusions of this section, I examine Hermione's 'death' in *The Winter's Tale*, suggesting that she is, in fact, not dead but rather experiencing a prolonged sleep state. After losing both her children, Hermione is cast into a deathlike sleep, which offers her the possibility to address the loss of her children in a space

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<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "trauma, n., sense 1", July 2023.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5504621941>> see also Steven Blankaart, *A Physical Dictionary* (London: John Darby, 1684).

<sup>4</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Zackariah C. Long, "Toward an Early Modern Theory of Trauma: Conscience in *Richard III*," *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 49-72, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Long, "Toward," 49.

removed from the reality of the traumatic event. Through the analysis of Shakespeare's text, I argue that a new perspective of the mother-child bond is possible by applying early modern emotional trauma theory to women's bodies and their experiences of child loss.

Previous research has not thoroughly examined the connection between grief, disturbed sleep, and motherhood, instead focusing on adjacent topics, such as non-gendered sleep. Peter Brown's *Reading Dreams* examines the interpretation of dreams from the late medieval to the early modern period, but this work does not focus on female dreams or motherhood.<sup>7</sup> Janine Rivière equally examines dreams in *Early Modern Dreaming*, but she does not focus on its literary representations.<sup>8</sup> Sasha Handley and Roger Ekirch both discuss sleep in the early modern period but conduct a historical analysis of it, not a literary one.<sup>9</sup> Handley concludes that early modern sleepers were affected by whom they slept with, especially since bed sharing was a popular sleeping arrangement in the seventeenth century. It was a 'solution to nocturnal overcrowding and it had the added benefit of ensuring that co-sleepers felt warm and secure. Sleeping companions were usually of the same sex, of similar age, comparable social status and preferably had some level of acquaintance.'<sup>10</sup>

The time between wakefulness and 'sleeping could prove crucial to successful engagement in sociability.'<sup>11</sup> Ekirch describes how, up until the modern era, nightly sleep was divided into two different sections, known as a first and a second sleep. Between these two sleeps 'up to an hour or more of quiet wakefulness midway through the night interrupted the rest of most Western Europeans'.<sup>12</sup> In the first half of sleep 'subjects experienced rapid eye movement sleep as they awakened around midnight, with REM being the stage of sleep

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, ed. *Reading*.

<sup>8</sup> Rivière, *Dreams*.

<sup>9</sup> Handley, *Sleep*, Ekirch, "Sleep,".

<sup>10</sup> Handley, *Sleep*, 176.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ekirch, "Sleep,"344.

directly connected to dreaming.<sup>13</sup> According to this research, this pattern of sleep made it easier to remember dreams because of the break in sleep halfway through the night.<sup>14</sup> As the Industrial Revolution began, sleep patterns changed, and sleep became one block and ‘our assimilation of nocturnal visions has gradually waned, and with it, a better understanding of our deepest drives and emotions.’<sup>15</sup> Dreams were more easily remembered and were more vivid experiences during the early modern period thanks to the break between the first and second sleep.<sup>16</sup> Ekirch, however, does not specifically focus on women, childbearing trauma, and the sleep disturbances that may arise from these experiences.

There are several publications on sleep disturbances, but these works examine historical recordings of sleepwalking or sleep paralysis. They do not examine their representation in early modern literature.<sup>17</sup> Patricia Crawford examines early modern women’s dreams, but she focuses on prophetic dreams by female prophetesses from the period, such as Anna Trapnel and Ann Bathurst, and does not examine the representation of women and motherhood in poetry or drama.<sup>18</sup> Danielle Clarke observes women who wrote dream vision poetry in the early modern period. However, she does not explore the connection between dreams and sleep disturbances in women or mothers.<sup>19</sup> Regarding trauma, Thomas Anderson explores ‘the way personal and collective loss is registered [... and focuses] on the connection of representation of violence in literary works to historical

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<sup>13</sup> Ekirch, "Sleep," 382.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 385, 344.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>17</sup> Some examples include, but are not limited to: Elizabeth Hunter, "The Noctambuli: tales of sleepwalkers and secrets of the body in seventeenth-century England," *The Seventeenth Century* 37, no. 1 (2022): 99-124. Charlotte-Rose Millar, *Witchcraft, the Devil, and Emotions in Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Owen Davies, "The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations," *Folklore* 114, No. 2 (Aug., 2003): 181-203.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Crawford, "Women's Dreams in Early Modern England," in *Dreams and History: The Interpretation of Dreams from Ancient Greece to Modern Psychoanalysis*, eds. Daniel Pick and Lyndal Roper (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Danielle Clarke, *The Politics of Early Modern Women's Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

traumas'.<sup>20</sup> Patricia Cahill explores trauma in the early modern period but only examines its connection to warfare, not child-related trauma.<sup>21</sup> The early modern understanding of emotional trauma that affects the soul, its connection to grief, child loss, sleep disturbances, and motherhood, however, remains unexplored. This chapter will thus analyse the relationship between these experiences in literary representations from the seventeenth century, where sleep acts as a space removed from the reality of the traumatic event to process difficult emotions related to child loss.

## 2.2. Early Modern Grief, Sorrow, and Soul-Sickness

In this first section, I will explore the early modern understanding of emotional trauma and its connection to a spiritual vocabulary. The terminology surrounding emotional trauma was different in the early modern period than today, as I've suggested in the introduction. Words that refer to emotional expressions, '[i]n the term coined by French linguists [...] are faux amis or "false friends", and changes in their meanings often reflect larger changes in emotional definition over time.'<sup>22</sup> Today, the word 'emotion' mainly refers to 'any strong mental or instinctive feeling'.<sup>23</sup> The *OED* defines its early modern usage as either a '[p]olitical agitation, civil unrest; a public commotion or uprising' or as a 'movement; disturbance, perturbation; an instance of this.'<sup>24</sup> The word 'emotion' was 'focused on

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<sup>20</sup> Description taken from: Thomas P. Anderson, "Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton. Thomas P." *Taylor & Francis*. Last modified December 31, 2016.

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315247137/performing-early-modern-trauma-shakespeare-milton-thomas-anderson>

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Cahill, *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage*, 33-35 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> R. S. White, "Language of Emotions," in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. Susan Broomhall, 33-35 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, "emotion, (n.) sense 3.a", March 2025.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2679463612>>

<sup>24</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, "emotion, (n.) sense 1.a", March 2025.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2262908073>>

violence and disruptive motion (including political movements and migration). It was a disorderly, extreme and physical more than psychic quality.’<sup>25</sup>

The terms ‘passion’ and ‘affection’ were the closest approximations of the terms used to describe emotions.<sup>26</sup> These terms appear in texts relating to sorrow or grief, which are present in texts predating the early modern period. There were ‘competing taxonomies of passions: a range of ancient categories were available, and these vie for dominance’.<sup>27</sup> For example, Augustine explains that according to the Stoics, there are

[T]hose emotions which the Greeks call *εὐπαθείαι*, and which Cicero calls *constantia*, the Stoics restrict to three; and, instead of three “perturbations” in the soul of the wise man, they substituted severally, in place of desire, will; in place of joy, contentment; and for fear, caution; and as to sickness or pain, which we, to avoid ambiguity, preferred to call sorrow.<sup>28</sup>

These lines demonstrate a conflation of terms surrounding grief and sorrow in classical texts. Augustine further clarifies the distinction between these emotions when he refers to his mother’s death. He states ‘I closed her eyes; and there flowed a great sadness on my heart, and it was passing into tears, when at the strong behest of my mind my eyes sucked back the fountain dry, and sorrow was in me like a convulsion.’<sup>29</sup> He then states that ‘I was then left destitute of a great comfort in her, and my soul was stricken; and that life was torn apart, as it were, which had been but one out of hers and mine together.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Patricia Simons, "Emotion," in *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction*, ed. Susan Broomhall, 36-38 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 36.

<sup>26</sup> Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, "Introduction: Reading the Early Modern Passions," in *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, eds. Gail Kern K. Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, 1-20 (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>27</sup> Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>28</sup> Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Moscow, I.D.: Roman Roads, 2015), 354.

<sup>29</sup> Saint Augustine, *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion - Volume VII*, ed. Trans. Albert C. Outler (London: SCM Press, 1955), 196.

<sup>30</sup> St. Augustine, *Augustine*, 196-197.

In the medieval period, Aquinas identifies eleven passions in *Summa Theologiae*, which he classified as follows: ‘first come love and hatred; second, desire and aversion; third, hope and despair; fourth, fear and courage; fifth, anger; sixth and last, joy or sadness, which come after all the emotions’.<sup>31</sup> In a subsequent chapter, Aquinas further clarifies that sorrow is caused by despair and suggests that ‘[t]he body is harmed by sorrow more than by any other emotion.’<sup>32</sup> This vocabulary of passions, which had a direct impact on the soul, was passed down from the medieval period to the early modern era.

In the seventeenth century, ‘grief, like love, is frequently represented as a dominant category in the early modern register of the passions’.<sup>33</sup> Thomas Wright, who is considered ‘something of a touchstone for literary scholars, [offers] a detailed description of embodied passion’.<sup>34</sup> Wright describes grief in *The Passions of The Minde in Generall* (1601) as one of ‘the diseases of the soule’ and highlights how ‘Physitions commonly affirme, how there be certayne vniversall causes which incline our bodies to divers infirmities; so there are certayne generall causes, which move our soules to sundry passions.’<sup>35</sup> William Vaughn describes the causes of grief in his *Approved Directions for Health* (1600) as twofold and result from ‘spirituall diseases’ that are both outward and inward. He clarifies

The outward are disgraces, iniujries, hatred, miserie, losse of honour and such like accidents: which wee call outward; because they arise out of our bodies, The inward causes of spirituall maladies are two fold: the one corporall, which presently at the first bickering doe

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossarie, Volume 19*, ed. Trans. Eric D’Arcy (London: Blackfriars, 1967) 55.

<sup>32</sup> In this translation the word ‘emotion’ is used instead of the word ‘passion’. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossarie, Volume 20*, ed. Trans. Eric D’Arcy (London: Blackfriars, 1975) 131.

<sup>33</sup> Katrin Ettenhuber, “‘Tears of Passion’ and ‘Inordinate Lamentation’: Complicated Grief in Donne and Augustine,” in *Passions and Subjectivity in Early Modern Culture*, eds. Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhuis, 201-216 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 206.

<sup>34</sup> Erin Sullivan, "The passions of Thomas Wright: Renaissance emotion across body and soul," in *The Renaissance of Emotion: Understanding Affect in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, eds. Richard Meek and Erin Sullivan, 25-44 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London: Valentine Simmes [and Adam Islip], 1604), 38.

torment the body: the other meerey spirituall, rightly termed the passions of the soule, which torment the soule it selfe.<sup>36</sup>

In this passage, Vaughan demonstrates that spiritual maladies can have an effect on the body, even causing it ‘torment’. Equally, the soul itself is tormented when spiritual maladies occur.

John Abernethy uses the word ‘sorrow’ when discussing grief in *A Christian Heavenly Treatise* (1615). He describes it as ‘a most miserable sicknesse of the soule’ that can be caused by ‘externall troubles’ including ‘losses of friends, parents, wiues, children’.<sup>37</sup> By calling sorrow a ‘sickness’, Abernethy suggests that grief affects the soul like an illness. The *OED* lists a now obsolete definition for the word ‘sick’ as ‘deeply affected by some strong feeling, as [sorrow...], producing effects similar or comparable to those of physical ailments.’<sup>38</sup> The entry then quotes Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c.1580): ‘War with good counsel, set the world at naught; / Made wit with musing weak, heart sick with thought.’ (I.I.68-69)<sup>39</sup> This quotation demonstrates how the term ‘sick’ relates to emotional pain in the period and specifically highlights its spiritual effects.

Even though the loss of a child was conceptualised differently in the early modern period than today, previous scholarship has shown ‘a remarkable sensibility to the importance lent to the premature death of a child’ in the early modern period.<sup>40</sup> In *King John*, Constance describes her grief caused by the loss of her son Arthur, stating ‘Grief fills the room up of my absent child, / Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me’ (III.IV.93-94).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> William Vaughan, *Approved Directions for Health* (London: T.S., 1612), 90.

<sup>37</sup> John Abernethy, *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise, Containing physicke for the soule* (London: Richard Badger, 1622), 345, 347.

<sup>38</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “sick (adj.), sense II.4.a.”, March 2025.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7633314837>> The final entry is dated 1886, meaning that this use of the word was still possible in the early modern period.

<sup>39</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. William C. Carroll (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 188.

<sup>41</sup> William Shakespeare, *King John*, eds. J. J. M. Tobin and Jesse M. Lander (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2018).

These lines demonstrate how Constance is haunted by the loss of her son, which does not leave her in peace. Her grief exemplifies how the loss of a child might affect a mother in the early modern period and how it can manifest itself in dreams as a spiritual sickness. This type of manifestation notably appears in cases where the child-parent bond is affected. For example, in a case originally examined by Freud and then later revisited in Cathy Caruth's work on trauma theory, a father dreams of his deceased child.<sup>42</sup> Caruth comments on Freud's investigation of 'dreams occurring as traumatic neuroses'.<sup>43</sup> She states that these dreams 'cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but [are] purely, and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits.'<sup>44</sup> As a result, trauma can manifest itself within the landscape of dreams.

Caruth notes this father's dream tells the story of his grief 'as the very relation of the psyche to reality: the dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream.'<sup>45</sup> Dreams act as a space removed from the reality of the traumatic event that allows the trauma to be addressed.<sup>46</sup> Trauma theory predominately focuses on male-experienced traumas such as wars, genocides or natural disasters.<sup>47</sup> According to Laura Brown, the trauma women experience occurs mostly in secret, rendering female trauma a 'private [event], sometimes known only to the victim'.<sup>48</sup> For women writers, dreams and sleep are representative of a space to process traumatic emotions and are worth investigating. However, before turning

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<sup>42</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 94-115.

<sup>43</sup> Caruth, ed. *Trauma*, 5. Quoting Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud - Volume 18*, eds. Trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953).

<sup>44</sup> Caruth, *Trauma*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 95.

<sup>46</sup> Long, "Toward," 57.

<sup>47</sup> Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, 100-112 (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 101.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, "Not Outside," 101.

to analyse texts written by women, I will first look at the early modern understanding of dreams and disturbed sleep and their connection to gender.

### 2.3. Early Modern Sleep Disturbances and Gender

The connection between dreams and difficult emotional experiences is demonstrated in multiple texts predating the early modern period in the long tradition of dream-vision poetry. Macrobius focuses on dreams in his commentary of Cicero but is not interested in nightmares, stating they ‘are not worth interpreting since they have no prophetic significance’.<sup>49</sup> He does, however, note that they are ‘caused by mental or physical distress.’<sup>50</sup> Macrobius was ‘the principal intellectual precursor’ that influenced ‘an extensive intellectual and literary tradition which absorbed the ideas of the Neoplatonic dream theorists and culminated in the dream poems of Chaucer, the most significant explorations of dream in English literature before Shakespeare.’<sup>51</sup>

Chaucer presents disturbed sleep in *The Book of the Duchess* (c.1368-72), a dream vision poem that explores difficult emotions in a dream. The poem begins when the sleeper describes his insomnia: ‘I may nat slepe wel nygh noght: / I have so many an ydel thought, / Purely for default of slepe’ (lines 3-5).<sup>52</sup> A few lines later, he declares he believes his sleeplessness is a result of ‘a sicknesse / That I have suffred this eight yere.’ (Lines 36-37) This sickness is unfortunately not further explained in the poem. However, it is possible that ‘Chaucer’s sleeplessness in the first lines of this poem represents not only his failure to dream, but also his inability to write [...] sleeplessness results in a poetically barren state of

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<sup>49</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. Trans Willaim Harris Stahl Willis, (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Macrobius, *Commentary*, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 1974), 10-11.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Book of The Duchess," in *Dream Visions and Other Poems: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch, 3-38 (New York, N.Y.: W W Norton & Company, 2007).

mind'.<sup>53</sup> Chaucer's main literary influence was 'the French tradition of the dream or love vision', which often presents 'a dreamer in a state of despair or confusion, who enters the world of dream, usually a garden or field, and is transformed by its agency, till he awakes or emerges from the dream to a renewed sense of harmony'.<sup>54</sup> Chaucer, along with other 'medieval writers of dream-poems were conscious of writing in an ancient tradition, going back to Scriptural and Classical sources, to which they felt a need to establish the relationship of their own poetic visions.'<sup>55</sup>

This tradition was continued into the early modern period where Shakespeare notably uses dreams as a tool to explore his characters' 'condition in which they undergo experiences without fully understanding them'.<sup>56</sup> This connection is demonstrated, for example, by Lady Macbeth's disturbed sleep in Act III scene III of *Macbeth* (1606). The Doctor comments on her sleepwalking, stating, 'The heart is sorely charged.' (V.I.54)<sup>57</sup> The notes clarify that Lady Macbeth is 'painfully overburdened'.<sup>58</sup> This burden refers to the emotional toll her guilt has taken. When Lady Macbeth is examined by her doctor, he states that 'this disease is beyond my practice' (V.I.67). Paul Kocher comments in his article that it is a spiritual disease, which calls 'for the guidance of religion and the mercy of God.'<sup>59</sup> Lady Macbeth states 'I have given suck,/ and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me' (I.VII.62-63). This line means she had a child who died sometime before the beginning of the play. It is possible to read her sleepwalking as a result of a soul-sickness, a response to

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<sup>53</sup> Lisa J. Kiser, "Sleep, Dreams, and Poetry in Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess", " *Papers on Language & Literature* 19, no. 1 (1983): 3-12, 3-4.

<sup>54</sup> Garber, *Dream*, 11-12.

<sup>55</sup> A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Garber, *Dream*, 12.

<sup>57</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth: Arden Performance Editions*, eds. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, see notes to V.I.54.

<sup>59</sup> Paul H. Kocher, "Lady Macbeth and the Doctor," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Fall 1954): 341-349, 341.

the traumatic event of losing a child. Lady Macbeth's state exemplifies a situation where negative emotions are manifesting in sleep.

Nicholas Culpeper explains that sleep refers to 'Rest and Quietness of the Body, of the Mind, and of the Spirits.'<sup>60</sup> Sleep was 'a state of transition between day and night, between degrees of consciousness, between the earthly and spiritual realms, and between life and death.'<sup>61</sup> In the medieval period, sleepwalking was believed to be both 'a disorder of body and soul'.<sup>62</sup> In the early modern period, Martin Luther's *Tischreden oder Colloquia*, a text published posthumously in 1566, concludes that 'Papists say that these sleep-walkers are people who have never been baptised or, if they were, the priest was drunk when he administered the sacrament.'<sup>63</sup> This assertion suggests that sleepwalking was understood not only as a symptom of bodily disease but also had spiritual origins as baptism is a symbol 'of moral or spiritual purification'.<sup>64</sup>

Records from the early modern period show an awareness that trauma could manifest as sleep disturbances for women. Paracelsus's *Of The Supreme Mysteries of Nature* (1591) comments on the pregnant women's potential for nightly assault, stating

some people, especially women in child-bed, have been so oppressed in the night in their sleepe, that they have thought themselves to be as it were strangled, neither could they possibly cry out, or call any helpe, but in the Morning have reported that they were Ridden by a hag: And they are still accounted to be witches, or Inchanters that do this.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Galen, and Nicholas Culpeper, *Galen's Art of Physick* (London: Peter Cole, 1652), 96.

<sup>61</sup> Handley, *Sleep*.

<sup>62</sup> William MacLehose, "Sleepwalking, Violence and Desire in the Middle Ages," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 37, no. 4 (2013): 601-624, 601.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Luther, "Tischreden oder Colloquia (1566)," in *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary History*, ed. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, 18 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 18.

<sup>64</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "baptism, n.", July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6146623927>>

<sup>65</sup> Paracelsus, *Of The Supreme Mysteries of Nature* (London: J.C., 1656-1655), 58-59. Also see Owen Davies, "The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations," *Folklore* 114, No. 2 (Aug., 2003): 181-203, 189.

The fact that Paracelsus highlights that 'women in child-bed' specifically experience sleep paralysis suggests that this category of people is worth further investigation. The early modern term for sleep paralysis, 'night-mare', in itself implies the female gender. The *OED* defines the word 'nightmare' as 'A *female* spirit or monster supposed to settle on and produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal.'<sup>66</sup> The word 'mare' has multiple definitions, but the most relevant for this chapter refer to 'a woman', 'the female of any equine animal' or 'a spirit believed to produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal'.<sup>67</sup> These definitions emphasise the connection between sleep paralysis and women.

The etymology of the word further demonstrates this point since 'mare' derives from the old Norse word 'mara'. In Norwegian folk belief, women were believed to become 'mara' 'by being one of seven daughters of women who relieved labour pains by supernatural means'.<sup>68</sup> The word 'mara' not only highlights a connection to the female gender but equally suggests a connection to the rituals of birth through its connection to 'labour pains'. In *The English Physitian, or An astrologo-physical Discourse of the vulgar herbs of this nation* (1652), Nicholas Culpeper recommends that women who were 'not sufficiently clenched after Childbirth' should be given a remedy of 'black Seed' because it is 'very effectual for such as in their sleep are troubled with the Diseas called Ephialtes or Incubus, but we do commonly cal it the Night-Mare'.<sup>69</sup> This quotation highlights that women who had recently had a child might experience sleep paralysis because there is a plant

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<sup>66</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "nightmare, n. & adj.", July 2023.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9238715733>>

<sup>67</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "mare (n.1), sense I.2.b", March 2025.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4853251568>>

*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "mare (n.1), sense I.2.a", March 2025.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8456085525>>

*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "mare (n.2), sense 1.a", December 2024.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7095259468>>

<sup>68</sup> Davies, "The Nightmare," 186.

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas Culpeper, *The English physitian: or an astrologo-physical discourse of the vulgar herbs of this nation. Being a compleat method of physick*. (London: Peter Cole, 1652), 193.

(peony) specifically mentioned for aiding to relieve this type of sleep disturbance. There was an understanding that women who had experienced childbirth were at risk of having sleep disturbances because early modern language inherently connects the female gender to these difficult experiences.

If trauma is a soul-sickness and manifests in dreams, then examining the activity of the soul in sleep and its description in unconscious states can highlight how this sickness was conceptualised in the early modern period. The question of what happens to the soul in states of unconsciousness, whether while alive or dead, preoccupied early modern theologians and philosophers. Henoah Clapham in *The sinners sleepe* (1596) notes that ‘the poore soule keepeth an eqaull balance betwixt her Flesh and Spirit: [the] flesh a sleepe, the spirite awake.’<sup>70</sup> Clapham is suggesting that while the body is unconscious, the soul is active. Katharine Park distinguishes the organic soul from the intellective, noting that the latter ‘did not require physical organs and could subsist after the body’s death; peculiar to man, these latter faculties constituted [the] immortal soul and differed distinctly from the functions of the organic soul.’<sup>71</sup> The suggestion that the intellective soul, called ‘soul’ hereafter, would survive beyond death implies that the soul remains active in states of unconsciousness.

This understanding of unconscious states highlights the heretical belief of mortalism, which suggested ‘the soul sleeps or dies with the death of the body to be reawakened or resurrected at the Last Judgement.’<sup>72</sup> According to Calvin, ‘sleep itself, which stupefying the man, seems even to deprive him of life, is no obscure evidence of immortality’.<sup>73</sup> He further

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<sup>70</sup> Henoah Clapham, *The Sinners sleepe vvherein Christ willing her to arise* (Edinburgh: Robert Walde-Graue, 1596), 16.

<sup>71</sup> Park, "The Organic Soul," 464.

<sup>72</sup> Nicholas McDowell, "Dead Souls and Modern Minds? Mortalism and the Early Modern Imagination, from Marlowe to Milton," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2010): 559-592, 595, 559. The first record of the use of the word ‘mortalism’ appears in 1646: ‘From that he fell to Anabaptisme and to Mortalisme, holding the Soul Mortall’ in T. Edwards, *Gangræna: Part 1* (London: T.R, 1646), 114. See also *Oxford English Dictionary*, “mortalism, n.”, July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1045702153>>

<sup>73</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, P.A.: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.15.2.

states that it is an error to imagine that in death ‘the soul, instead of resuming the body with which it is now clothed, will obtain a new and different body’.<sup>74</sup> Calvin suggests that no time will elapse ‘between death and the beginning of the second life.’<sup>75</sup> The debate surrounding the activity of the soul post-mortem adds to the confusion surrounding the activity of the soul in sleep. I will now explore early modern texts written by women that address the question of the activity of the soul in unconscious sleep states and its connection to the mother-child bond.

## **2.4. The Mother-Child Bond in Unconscious Dream States in Women’s Writing**

I begin by examining Mary Sidney Herbert’s translations and adaptations of the Psalms to highlight the importance of sleep in creating spiritual connections to God, as well as between mother and child.<sup>76</sup> I then apply this understanding of the bonds that sleep creates to Rachel Speght’s ‘The Dreame’, demonstrating the consequences of a mother’s death on the sleep of a child. These texts highlight how women describe the bond between a mother and her child, how trauma impacts this bond, and how it leads to sleep disorders. I conclude this section by noting how dreams offer Speght a space to explore trauma in a manner that is removed from the reality of the traumatic event, suggesting the dream acts as a literary device used to explore soul-sickness in the early modern period.

While Sir Philip Sidney began the work of translating the Psalms himself, he died in 1586, having only finished 43 texts. His sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, continued the work he had begun, translating Psalms 44 through 150, and adapting many that he had already

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<sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.25.7.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.25.8.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret P. Hannay, "'Wisdom the Wordes': Psalm Translation and Elizabethan Women's Spirituality," *Religion & Literature* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 65-82.

translated.<sup>77</sup> Early modern translators were allowed a certain amount of freedom in interpretation because of the difficulty in understanding the biblical text. Alice Knight comments on this, stating that interpretation 'assumes that meaning was not always immediately available' and that 'the early modern world argued so strongly for the clarity of their interpretive positions precisely because faith could be frustratingly unclear'.<sup>78</sup> Sidney Herbert's version of the Psalms offers an insight into the early modern female understanding of sleep mediated through a biblical lens.

Sidney Herbert 'was one of the few translators actually to have experienced motherhood.'<sup>79</sup> Her interpretation of unconscious sleeplike states is therefore particularly relevant when discussing the sleep of mothers. Notably, in Psalm 139, the psalmist develops as a foetus in its mother's womb

Fashionless, ere form I took,  
Thy all and more beholding eye  
My shapeless shape  
Could not escape:  
All these, with times appointed by,  
Ere one had being, in the book  
Of thy foresight, enrolled did lie (139.57-63).

Despite being 'fashionless' and 'shapeless', an unformed body, the foetus is still connected to God, who has an 'all and more beholding eye' watching over its creation. These lines suggest that even before the child is born, there is a connection between 'the vulnerable, unconscious body [of the foetus] with the divine mind, against all human logic.'<sup>80</sup> The mind

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke and Sir Philip Sidney, *The Sidney Psalter: The Psalms of Sir Philip and Mary Sidney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiv.

<sup>78</sup> Alison Knight, *The Dark Bible: Cultures of Interpretation in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 7-8.

<sup>79</sup> Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 184.

<sup>80</sup> Nancy L. Simpson-Younger, "Still in Thought with Thee I Go" Epistemology and Consciousness in the Sidney Psalms," in *Forming Sleep: Representing Consciousness in the English Renaissance*, eds. Nancy L. Simpson-Younger and Margaret Simon, 69-88 (University Park, P.A.: Penn State Press, 2020), 81.

of the child is thinking with God during sleep, even when unconscious and not yet fully formed.<sup>81</sup>

In Psalm 51, again, the psalmist describes their development as an unborn child in the womb, while being ‘in a prolonged, sleeplike state’. They are able to receive God’s teaching through the womb, which is a place of teaching as the psalmist perceives ‘inward truth: which, hardly else discerned, / My truant soul in thy hid school hath learned’ (51.20-21). The use of the word ‘truant’ is reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*’s first Sonnet

Invention, Nature’s child, fled step-dame Studie’s blowes;  
And others’ feete still seem’d but strangers in my way.  
Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes,  
Biting my trewand pen, beating myself for spite,  
‘Foole,’ said my Muse to me; ‘looke in thy heart and write.’ (Lines 10-15)<sup>82</sup>

Here, we have a male character who metaphorically suggests he is pregnant with invention, and he is only able to make his ‘trewand pen’ write once his muse has told him to look inside his heart. The difference between the male-authored text and the female Psalm adaptation is expressed through the unconscious state and the organs that are highlighted in each text. In Sidney’s sonnet, the writer is awake and must look into his heart for inspiration. However, in Sidney Herbert’s Psalm adaptation, the foetus is unconscious and receives ‘inward truth’ from God’s ‘hid school’. Thus, the unconscious state of a forming foetus allows a certain closeness with God while it is growing in the womb. In Sidney Herbert’s Psalm, knowledge is transferred through God, but in Sidney’s poem, knowledge emerges from his own inner state, suggesting a gendered difference in the acquisition of spiritual knowledge.

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<sup>81</sup> Simpson-Younger, “Still in Thought,” 81.

<sup>82</sup> Philip Sidney, *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William. A. Ringler (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), 165, Sonnet I.

A gendered difference is also present when comparing Sidney Herbert's Psalm translation to male-authored versions. Her translation focuses on foetal development in the womb, while male-authored versions do not acknowledge the female body as clearly. Psalm 51 in the Geneva Bible reads as 'Behold, thou lovest truth in the inward affections: therefore has though taught me wisdom in the secret of mine heart'.<sup>83</sup> This version locates the seat of knowledge not in the womb but rather in the heart. In George Joye's translations of *Dauids Psalter* (1534), this line is entirely omitted and goes from line 5: 'Beholde / with sorowe and payne was I borne: and with sinne my mother conceiued me', directly to line 7: 'Bespreigne me with ysope and I shalbe clene: washe me / and so shal I be whyter than snowe'.<sup>84</sup>

Again, in Psalm 139, Sidney Herbert focuses the text on the feminine ability to create life in the womb, stating: 'Fashionless, ere form I took, / Thy all and more beholding eye / My shapeless shape / Could not escape' (139.57-59). Sidney Herbert's choice to describe foetal development as a 'shapeless shape' echoes Mary Carey's poem I discussed in chapter one on foetal development and its similarities to Genesis. The King James version states 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was *without form*, and *void*; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'<sup>85</sup> Sidney Herbert's wording implies God's involvement in giving a shape to the foetus. In the Geneva Bible, the focus is not on a foetus's development but rather on God's eyes watching the psalmist: 'Thine eyes did see me, when I was without form: for in thy book were all things written, *which* in continuance were fashioned, when there was none of them *before*.'<sup>86</sup> Finally, Joye's version reads 'Thy eyes ensee my fawtes / and in they boke ar their al writen / my dayes wer fashioned / whe as yet there was not one of them.'<sup>87</sup> Joye's

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<sup>83</sup> Psalm 51:6 (GNV)

<sup>84</sup> George Joye, *Dauids Psalter, diligently and faithfully tra[n]slated by George Ioye* (Antwerp: Maryne Emperowr, 1534), 76.

<sup>85</sup> Genesis 1:1-2 (KJV), my emphasis.

<sup>86</sup> Psalm 139:16 (GNV)

<sup>87</sup> Joye, *Dauids Psalter*, 210.

translation moves the focus completely away from foetal development and rather centres the lines on the days that God grants the psalmist.

In Sidney Herbert's translations, she also highlights sleep and the connection to God that occurs while unconscious. Sidney's adaptations of the Psalms 'frames a range of embodied sleep states as an educational means through which to access knowledge about the divine.' (139:16)<sup>88</sup> In Psalm 139, Sidney Herbert states 'I lie to sleep, from sleep I rise, / Yet still in thought with thee [God] I go.' (139.69-70) In the Geneva Bible, this line reads as 'If I should count them, they are more than the sand: when I wake, I am still with thee.'<sup>89</sup> Sidney Herbert's choice to use the word 'sleep' instead of 'wake' is noteworthy because the focus is on sleep, not wakefulness. This emphasis implies that God's presence is felt more clearly by the psalmist when asleep.

Calvin's commentary on the Psalms supports Sidney Herbert's interpretation. Calvin notes that 'Now we pecyue Davids nature meanyng, namely that God so governeth mankynde, as nothing at al can escape him, no not even their depe thoughtes'.<sup>90</sup> This shows that there is a link between 'depe thoughtes' and a higher knowing, or God, that connects the sleeper to something deeper than themselves. Macrobius also commented on this by stating 'all truth is concealed. Nevertheless, the soul, when it is partially disengaged from bodily functions during sleep, at times gazes and at times peers intently at the truth'.<sup>91</sup> Sidney Herbert echoes these beliefs in her version of the Psalms as she highlights the soul's ability to reach the truth in God while in an unconscious state. Similarly, Philip Sidney touches on

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<sup>88</sup> Simpson-Younger, "Still in Thought," 69.

<sup>89</sup> Psalm 139:18 (GNV)

<sup>90</sup> Jean Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and Others. with M. John Caluins Commentaries* (London: Thomas East and Henry Middelton, 1571), 232v.

<sup>91</sup> Macrobius quoting Porphyry. See Macrobius, *Commentary*, 92. See also Peter Brown, "On the Borders of Middle English Dream Visions," in *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown, 22-50 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36.

the idea of divine inspiration and the poet's prophetic role in *The Defence of Poesy*.<sup>92</sup> He states, 'Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet'.<sup>93</sup> For Sidney, poets are like prophets and reveal 'divine truths to sinful humanity and [lead] them to moral and spiritual renewal.'<sup>94</sup> This prophetic ability creates a parallel with the spiritual bond I suggested previously in chapter one, between mother and child, but in this case the connection is between God and the poet.

Returning to Sidney Herbert's adaptation of Psalm 139, the lines preceding the section on the connection to God note 'How to this whole and these parts did grow, / In brave embroid'ry fair arrayed'. (139.54-65) The word 'embroid'ry' suggests a chainlike creation, as Michele Osherow has suggested. Osherow states that this line 'in the Geneva Bible translates as "I was facioned", but the original poem indicates a more specific elaborate sort of crafting'.<sup>95</sup> Osherow suggests this craft is a reference to 'needlework' and 'to knit'.<sup>96</sup> Knitting implies the creation of multiple links of yarn stitched together to create a larger garment. The *OED* defines knitting as 'to tie in or with a knot; to tie, fasten, bind'.<sup>97</sup> This binding, or tying in, which is described as 'embroid'ry fair arrayed', shows the stitching together of a spiritual chain between God, mother, and child.

Knitting also implies femininity through its association with needlework and embroidery. Some women had access to writing and publishing but 'other women's names are largely unknown, their existence registered only by the needlework that they left behind

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<sup>92</sup> Roger E. Moore, "Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Prophesying," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 50, no. 1 (2010): 35-62, 36.

<sup>93</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, Or, the Defence of Poesy*, revised edition, eds. Geoffrey Shepherd, and R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 83.

<sup>94</sup> Moore, "Sir Philip Sidney," 36.

<sup>95</sup> Michele Osherow, "Mary Sidney's Embroidered Psalms," *Renaissance Studies* 29, no. 4 (September 2015): 650-670, 650: Osherow quotes 'I was facioned' from *The Geneva Bible: A facsimile of the 1560 edition* (Peabody, M.A.: Henderson Publishers, Inc., 2007), and quotes 'elaborate sort of crafting' from *The Holy Bible, King James Version (1611) 400th Anniversary Edition* (Peabody, M.A.: Henderson Publishers, Inc., 2010), Psalm 139: 15 (GNV).

<sup>96</sup> Osherow, "Mary Sidney's," 651.

<sup>97</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "knit, v.," July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3225337916>>

and by their choice of narratives.’<sup>98</sup> Needlework and embroidery are signs of women’s existence in the period and were ‘associated with particular moral qualities that were expected of women, ideals representing chastity, maternity, or marriage.’<sup>99</sup> Sidney Herbert’s choice to use the terminology of needlework in her poem about foetal development specifically suggests that the spiritual work that occurs in this gestational sleep is women’s work. This biological knitting echoes the bond I discussed previously in chapter one between mother and child that develops during pregnancy.

Considering Sidney Herbert’s Protestant convictions, she likely would have been aware of the theology surrounding soul-sleeping. As Margaret Hannay argues of other Protestant women who translated the Psalms, Sidney Herbert would have believed Calvin was ‘an important authority to be studied.’<sup>100</sup> Her linking of sleep states to God implies her knowledge of Calvin’s treatise, *Psychopannychia* (1534), and the controversial doctrine of mortalism, which suggests that the soul remains in the deceased body, but it is asleep until the Last Judgement. This doctrine, therefore, connects sleep to an unconscious body. However, the title of Calvin’s work suggests that the soul is active in this state. Indeed, the titular word, ‘Psychopannychia’ has its roots in Greek and ‘is a composite [...] formed by combining the noun ψυχή (soul) and the feminine adjective παννύχια (active all night long), meaning, therefore, something like “soul awake at night.”’<sup>101</sup> Even in the word itself used in Calvin’s title, there is a suggestion that the soul remains awake while the body is asleep and that there is more to this state than simply a lack of consciousness.

The study of sleep also allowed writers to consider what will happen to the soul in death, assuming that sleep acts like an anticipatory act of death. Calvin refuted the idea that

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<sup>98</sup> Susan Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), xv.

<sup>99</sup> Julie Reiss, "English Embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: 'Twixt Art and Nature," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 7, no. 3 (2009): 350-355, 354.

<sup>100</sup> Hannay, "Wisdom," 67.

<sup>101</sup> George H. Tavard, *The Starting Point of Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 9.

the soul was inactive in sleep, stating that ‘sleep itself, which benumbs man, seeming even to deprive him of life, is no obscure witness of immortality, since it suggests not only thoughts of things that have never happened, but also presentiments of the future.’<sup>102</sup> Calvin is then suggesting that the soul is capable of acquiring knowledge, sometimes even with precognition, when asleep. There is a ‘strong tradition of prophetic and predictive dreams in the Bible’ that Sidney Herbert would have known.<sup>103</sup> An example of predictive dreams occurs in Genesis when ‘Joseph dreamed a dream, and told his brethren, who hated him so much the more.’<sup>104</sup> In this dream, Joseph’s brothers bow to him, symbolising his future leadership.<sup>105</sup> Sidney Herbert does not specifically mention predictive dreams or the acquisition of knowledge in sleep. However, her understanding of sleep-like states echoes Calvin’s belief that the soul remains awake while the body is asleep. This belief suggests that it is possible to gain knowledge in sleep because the soul is active in this state and not simply unconscious.

While Sidney Herbert’s Psalm translations foreground the precognisant state accessible in sleep, Speght’s ‘The Dreame’ makes use of this ability to explore a traumatic experience before the event occurs. ‘The Dreame’ takes the form of a dream-vision poem and, like Sidney Herbert’s Psalms, suggests knowledge can be acquired in sleep. Speght’s ‘The Dreame’ is prefixed to *Mortalities Memorandum*, a larger work dedicated to the acquirement of knowledge by women. Yet, it is this ‘prefixing’ of a dream to knowledge that is of interest. According to Speght, acquiring knowledge and the act of dreaming are intertwined. In her dream, Speght states ‘my griefe, quoth I, is called *Ignorance*’ and that

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<sup>102</sup> Calvin, *Calvin*, 185.

<sup>103</sup> Rivière, *Dreams*, 57. Rivière is referring to Kruger who comments on biblical prophetic and predictive dreams stating: ‘The Bible itself — in the Old Testament stories of Joseph and Daniel (Genesis, chapters 37, 40, 41; Daniel, chapters 2, 4, 7-8, 10-12) and in the appearances of God’s angel to the New Testament Joseph (Matthew 1:20-24, 2:13, 2:19-22) – validates the use of dreams as predictive tools. But the Bible also lends its authority to a distrust of the dream, at certain points strongly condemning the practice of dream divination’. Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>104</sup> Genesis 37:5 (GNV).

<sup>105</sup> Genesis 37 (GNV).

'the only medicine for [her] maladie' is knowledge, suggesting that knowledge can be acquired while dreaming (lines 43, 91).<sup>106</sup> The dream is successful because Speght does receive knowledge in the dream; she learns of her mother's passing.

At the beginning of the poem she is 'disconsolate' and feels 'sadnesse' (lines 28, 37). Yet, she does have a clear reason for this sadness. On line 51, she notes 'I feele disease, yet know not what I ayle.' (line 51) It is only in lines 278-280 that her ignorance is replaced with knowledge of her mother's passing as she notes

The name of this impartial foe was Death,  
Whose rigour whil'st furiously did view,  
Vpon a sodeyne, ere I was aware;  
With pearcing dart my mother deare it flew;  
Which when I saw it made me so to weepe,  
That teares and sobs did rouze me from my sleepe.  
But, when I wake't, I found my dreame was true;  
For Death had ta'ne my mothers breath away (lines 277-284).

These lines clarify that Death appears in Speght's dream and attacks her mother with a 'pearcing dart' (line 280). Speght then wakes up to find her dream has come true, and her mother has indeed died. Speght dreamt of her mother's death either before the event took place or, at the very least, before she received knowledge of her mother's passing in the waking world, outside of the dream. While scholars have interpreted this poem as 'allegorically [representing] Speght's personal journey from Ignorance to Knowledge and [documenting] her exhilarating entrance into the world of learning',<sup>107</sup> it is equally possible to suggest that the ignorance that plagues her, is a premonitory understanding of her mother's death. Speght's poem demonstrates not only how knowledge can be received in sleep but also how the trauma of loss affects Speght in the dream space and how it is processed there.

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<sup>106</sup> Rachel Speght, *Moralities Memorandum, With a Dreame Prefixed, Imaginarie In Manner; Reall In Matter* (London: Edvard Griffin, 1621).

<sup>107</sup> Linda Vecchi, "'Lawfull avarice': Rachel Speght's *Mortalities Memorandum* and the Necessity of Women's Education," *Women's Writing* 8, no. 1 (2001): 3-20, 3.

As stated previously, trauma was understood in the early modern period to be a 'sickness of the soul'.<sup>108</sup> Speght addresses this sickness before even learning of her mother's death. Dreams present an ideal space, removed from the reality of traumatic events, that afford the dreamer the ability to heal from the trauma. Just before the dream starts, Speght notes that 'nothing in this world is permanent' (line 12). In the dream, she describes how it allows the 'appoyntment of supernall power' and occurs in a place removed from our own world, called '*Cosmus*' (lines 19, 22). This other cosmos does not operate under the same universal laws our world does and 'past, present, and future are experienced simultaneously.'<sup>109</sup> The lack of linear time within the dream space equally highlights the perturbed relationship of trauma to time. Just like trauma, the dream is removed from linear time and is the perfect place to process trauma. Speght knows this because before and after the dream occurs, she repeatedly uses words that reference the passage of time. Before the dream begins, she uses the word 'permanent' (line 12). After waking up at the end of the poem, she uses words such as 'speedie', 'time', 'daily', 'begun', and 'sequell' (lines 290, 292, 294, 298, 299). The use of this temporal vocabulary to describe the waking world demonstrates its linear relationship to time, but the dream space does not have this same relationship.

Thomas Anderson suggests, when discussing royal death as a traumatic event, that trauma is like 'an event that interrupts the links between the past and the present.'<sup>110</sup> Patricia Cahill has also investigated time and the trauma of war in *Richard III*, noting that 'the play, through its destabilizing representations of space and time, ultimately presents audiences with an experience not unlike Richard's own uncanny meeting with the past.'<sup>111</sup> Trauma,

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<sup>108</sup> Long, 'Toward,' 49.

<sup>109</sup> Alison Findlay, "Relative Values: Gendering Time and Space," *Renaissance and Reformation* 35, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 167-183, 169.

<sup>110</sup> Thomas P. Anderson, *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 9.

<sup>111</sup> Cahill, *Unto*, 22.

whether experienced because of the death of a parent or in war, changes the victim's relationship to time as past and present become intertwined through the traumatic event. Speght's ability to learn of her mother's passing before the event occurs is possible because it happens in the dream space.

Cathy Caruth's work on trauma theory, which is an important resource for early modern scholars of emotions, has highlighted the disruption to temporality caused by trauma.<sup>112</sup> Dreams act as a delay to time, revealing the gap 'between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it', as I've pointed out in the introduction to this chapter.<sup>113</sup> In her chapter in *Early Modern Trauma*, Amelia Zurcher highlights how 'accounts of trauma are often characterized by disruptions in temporality and perspective that make traditional historical reconstruction difficult.'<sup>114</sup> This temporality is specifically highlighted in Speght's poem because the timing of the events is important. Speght dreams of her mother's death before she dies (or before acquiring the knowledge of her mother's death in the waking world). In the dream, Speght states 'I feele disease' and searches 'for [her] griefe a remedie', which suggests that the dream itself is working to address the trauma (lines 51, 40). The 'remedie' is the precognisance of her mother's passing because it allows Speght, as Caruth suggests, to overcome the trauma in the fiction of a dream.<sup>115</sup>

Speght's text demonstrates how the bond between a mother and child is felt in sleep and how trauma can manifest in dreams when this bond is affected by death. I will now turn to examine *The Winter's Tale* since Hermione's death occurs after one of her children dies and the other is taken away from her. Examining sleep states in Mary Sidney Herbert's Psalm

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<sup>112</sup> Caroline Bicks, "Fear of the Queen's Speed: Trauma and Departure in *The Winter's Tale*," *Humanities (Basel)* 11, no. 6 (2022): 1-16, 2. See also Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 95-100.

<sup>113</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 95.

<sup>114</sup> Amelia Zurcher, "The Trauma of Self: Hannah Allen and Seventeenth-Century Women's Spiritual Writing," in *Early Modern Trauma: Europe and the Atlantic World*, eds. Erin Peters and Cynthia Richards, 81-104 (Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 82.

<sup>115</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 95

adaptations and the spiritual bond between a mother and child in Speght's 'The Dreame' have demonstrated how these states are affected by the mother-child connection. Given the impact grief can have on mothers' dreams, a reassessment of the representation of women in male-authored texts is necessary.

## 2.5. Pregnancy and Disturbed Sleep in Early Modern Drama

In this final section of this chapter, I use the analysis from the previous section as a basis to examine how the loss of Hermione's children causes her to have disturbed sleep in *The Winter's Tale*. Even though there are obvious examples of women impacted by traumatic births, women in the postpartum period have been little studied in early modern texts. For instance, William Sampson's 1636 play, *The Vow Breaker*, highlights the connection between pregnancy and disturbed sleep. Anne, who is pregnant, experiences disturbed sleep because she is haunted by the ghost of her ex-lover and 'her dream may even be perceived as a form of delirium, brought on by both her chronic state of anxiety and the physical trauma of childbirth.'<sup>116</sup> William Shakespeare equally investigates a mother's disturbed sleep in *Macbeth* through the representation of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, as I've mentioned previously.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare revisits the idea of soul-sickness in Hermione, who has lost both her children. In the introduction to the Arden edition, the editors suggest that the apparition of Hermione's spirit 'proves, almost certainly we say, that Hermione is dead.'<sup>117</sup> However, I will argue here for a different interpretation: Hermione experiences a soul-sickness because of the death of her son and the loss of her daughter, which results in a

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<sup>116</sup> Fiona Martin, "'Mong'st the Furies Finde just Recompence': Suicide and the Supernatural in William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* (1636)," in *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England*, eds. Victoria Bladen and Marcus Harnes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 136. William Sampson, *The Vow Breaker*, 117-139 (Cambridge: Proquest LLC, 1994).

<sup>117</sup> John Pitcher, "Introduction," in *The Winter's Tale*, ed. John Pitcher, 1-135 (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 5.

deathlike sleep that allows Hermione to process the trauma of the loss while her spirit is still attached to her living, but comatose, body.<sup>118</sup> I will begin this section with an explanation of the early modern understanding of comas and prolonged sleep states before moving on to analyse Shakespeare's text.

### 2.5.1. Early Modern Prolonged Sleep States

The word 'coma' was not common in the early modern period, and the first listing noted by the *OED* appears in 1646, which defines this disease as 'a state of unnatural, heavy, deep and prolonged sleep.'<sup>119</sup> The term 'dead sleep' was more common. This state was 'frequently associated with death, and synonymous with the Galenic term 'cataphora'.<sup>120</sup> There were several different types of sleep states known to early modern physicians. In order of increasing severity, they can be listed as lethargy, dead sleep/cataphora, carus, and apoplexy.<sup>121</sup>

In *The Methode of Phisicke* (1583) Philip Barrough describes the word 'coma' as 'may be called in Englishe dead sleepe. It is a disease wherin the sicke cannot awake, nor keep open his eyes, but doth keepe his eyes continually close shut, and is in a sound sleepe.'<sup>122</sup> The idea of a sleeper falling into a deathlike sleep also appears in the pamphlet *The True Relation of Two Wonderfull Sleepers* (1646), which describes how Elizabeth Jenkins 'so thoroughly without consciousness, was said to have become "a Carcasse."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Kaara L. Peterson has suggested that 'Hermione's tragic postpartum death, 16-year absence, and reanimation pointedly mirror the hibernating hysteric.' This chapter builds on Peterson's argument by clarifying that Hermione's sleeplike state is a coma caused by trauma. See Peterson, *Popular Medicine*, 145-146.

<sup>119</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "coma, n.<sup>1</sup>", September 2023.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9196991371>>

<sup>120</sup> Rigilano, "Waking the Living," 87.

<sup>121</sup> P. J. Koehler, and E. F. Wijdicks, "Historical Study of Coma: Looking Back Through Medical and Neurological Texts," *Brain* 131, no. 3 (2008): 877-889, 879.

<sup>122</sup> Philip Borough, *The Methode of Phisicke, Conteyning the Causes, Signes, and Cures of Inward Diseases in Mans Body* (London: Richard Field, 1596), 24.

<sup>123</sup> Rigilano, "Waking the Living," 90.

Naming a coma as ‘dead sleep’ and describing sleepers as ‘carcasses’ shows its similarity with death, implying that a person suffering from it is straddling the bounds between death and sleep.

The length of comas could vary, and early modern texts do address the time sleepers spent unconscious. For example, Agrippa discusses dead sleep in Book I of *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1533) for several pages. One passage states

The same doth Pliny testifie of a certain boy, whom he saith, being wearied with heat, and his journey, slept fifty seven yeers in a Cave. [...]. M. Damascenus tels, that in his time a certain country man being wearied in Germany, slept for the space of a whole Autumn, and the Winter following, under a heap of hay, untill the Summer, when the hay began to be eaten up, then he was found awakened as a man halfe dead, and out of his wits.<sup>124</sup>

Agrippa's two examples of ‘dead sleep’ are of particular interest because they suggest that this dead sleep lasted for periods of ‘fifty-seven years’ and ‘of a whole Autumn’ respectively. This passage suggests an early modern awareness of prolonged, comatose states that could last for decades.

Even though Hermione appears to be dead in *The Winter's Tale* with no ‘heat outwardly or breath within’, her state could still be understood as a dead sleep, and this lack of breath Hermione is showing is a typical symptom of dead sleep (III.II.203).<sup>125</sup> In Philemon Holland’s translation of Pliny’s *The Historie of the World* (1601) there is an example of a woman who ‘for a seuen-night lay for dead, and fetched not her breath sensibly, who in the end was raised againe to life.’<sup>126</sup> This example highlights how similarly these deathlike sleeps resembled death itself, where the sufferers didn’t even seem to breathe. The connection between sleep and death is also evidenced by biblical passages such as Daniel

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<sup>124</sup> Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (London: R.W. for Gregory Moule, 1651), 130.

<sup>125</sup> Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. John Pitcher (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2010).

<sup>126</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The History of the World*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: Adam Islip, 1634), 184.

12:2, which describes the dead as ‘those who sleep in the dust of the earth’.<sup>127</sup> There is also a mention of ‘dead sleep’ in Psalm 76: ‘O God of Jacob, Both the chariot and horse are cast into a dead sleep.’ (76.13-15)<sup>128</sup>

Shakespeare connects death and sleep in several plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Pericles* (1609), and *Cymbeline* (1610). In *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Laurence describes the sleeping potion as death in Act IV scene II

Thou hast the strength of will to slay thyself,  
Then is it likely thou wilt undertake  
A thing like death to chide away this shame,  
That cop’st with death himself to scape from it.  
An if thou dar’st, I’ll give thee remedy (IV.II.72-76).

Suggesting a potion is ‘a thing like death’ and can act as an alternative to ‘slay[ing] thyself’ highlights the proximity of sleep to death.<sup>129</sup> Once Juliet has ingested the potion, Capulet assumes she is dead and describes how ‘Her blood is settled and her joints are stiff. / Life and these lips have long been separated. / Death lies on her like an untimely frost’ (IV.V.26-28).

In *Pericles*, the titular character’s pregnant wife, Thaisa, goes into labour while on a ship. The midwife believes she dies, stating ‘Here’s all that is left living of your queen / A little daughter.’ (III.I.20-21)<sup>130</sup> However, Thaisa survives and Cerimon declares in the next scene ‘Gentlemen, this queen will live. Nature awakes; / A warmth breathes out of her! He hath not been / Entranced above five hours.’ (III.II.91-93) Finally, in *Cymbeline*, Imogen, disguised as Fidele, ingests a poison given to her by the Queen, believing it is medicine. Arviragus appears later in the scene carrying Fidele, and states ‘The bird is dead’

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<sup>127</sup> Daniel 12.2 (KJV).

<sup>128</sup> Psalm 76.6 (KJV). Sidney Herbert translates this line as ‘True Jacobs sole devotion / Thy check the very cars and horses mortified [meaning subdued, killed] / Cast in a dull sleep, and quite deprived of motion.’ Sidney Herbert, *The Sidney*.

<sup>129</sup> Tanya Pollard, “‘A Thing Like Death’: Sleeping Potions and Poisons in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*,” *Renaissance Drama* 32, (2003):95-121, 99.

<sup>130</sup> William Shakespeare, *Pericles*, ed. Suzanne Gossett (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2004).

(IV.II.196).<sup>131</sup> A few lines later, he adds ‘Thus smiling, as some fly had tickled slumber, / Not as death’s dart being laughed at; his right cheek / Reposing on a cushion.’ (IV.II.209-211) All three characters, Juliet, Thaisa, and Imogen/Fidele, are still alive but are straddling the borders between life, sleep, and death. Shakespeare highlights the connection between these states again in Hamlet’s famous monologue, ‘To die, to sleep; / To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub; / For in that sleep of death what dreams may come.’ (III.I.64-66) Shakespeare’s own assertion that sleep and death are adjacent, therefore necessitate a reexamination of Hermione’s death in *The Winter’s Tale*.

Scholars have suggested that Hermione does not die but spends sixteen years in hiding with Paulina. The introduction to the Arden edition states: ‘A woman can’t literally die, reappear as a spirit and then be alive again. [...] Surely we know the truth. Hermione, aided by Paulina, went into hiding in 3.2, to wait, preserving herself, she says, for her daughter’s return (5.3.125-8).’<sup>132</sup> The argument in this chapter is similar to the hiding theory. I argue that Hermione falls into a coma the moment she faints in Act III scene II and remains in this state, for a portion, if not all of her sixteen-year absence until the final scene of the play. She reappears in Act V, scene III, having regained her health. It is unclear in the text at what point Hermione fully recuperates her health, but some clues suggest her illness, which I will investigate now.

### **2.5.2. Hermione’s Soul-Sickness and Prolonged Sleep in *The Winter’s Tale***

Hermione’s deathlike sleep begins in Act III scene II. She ‘faints’, and Paulina states, ‘this news is mortal to the queen: look down / And See what death is doing.’(III.II.144.SD, III.II.145-146) While this could be interpreted either as a ‘dead sleep’ or as death itself,

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<sup>131</sup> William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. Valerie Wayne (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2017).

<sup>132</sup> Pitcher, “Introduction,” 5.

Leontes states that 'Her heart is but o'ercharged; she will recover,' suggesting it is a coma (III.II. 146). Assuming Leontes is correct, the possibility of recovery suggests Hermione is not dead, as one cannot 'recover' from death, but rather that Hermione is in a coma. Later in the scene when Paulina asserts that 'she's dead. I'll swear't' (III.II.200). Leontes responds that 'all tongues to talk their bitterest.' (III.II.213) This bitterness Leontes refers to implies that Paulina is focusing on the worst potential outcome of Hermione's deathlike sleep, not that she is already dead. After Leontes's line, 'A Lord' notes that 'Howe'er the business goes, you have made fault / I'th' boldness of your speech.' (III.II.214-215) Paulina is quick to 'repent' and declares she has 'showed too much / The rashness of a woman!' (III.II.217-218) These lines imply the outcome of Hermione's fate is yet to be determined and Paulina has been too bold in assuming Hermione is dead.

Hermione's coma is caused by the emotional trauma of losing her children and is represented in the play by her sixteen-year absence. Caroline Bicks applies early modern trauma theory to Hermione's emotional distress by directly tying it to her pregnancy and postpartum period. She states

Hermione's grief appears to have spread well beyond the lodging of her heart to affect the natural course of her pregnancy. Although this is the midwife's assessment and not Hermione's, untimely births were attributed to extreme emotions. By featuring them here, Shakespeare calls attention to their perceived harmful effects on the combined body-mind.<sup>133</sup>

Bicks highlights the emotional overwhelm Hermione feels and how this traumatic experience causes her to faint. It is 'the near simultaneous effects of joy and grief, hearing the oracle and then the news of her son's death within a few lines' that causes Hermione's

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<sup>133</sup> Bicks, "Fear," 6.

emotional shock.<sup>134</sup> Bicks does not offer a further explanation for Hermione's death, but she does quote Kaara L. Peterson's argument of 'hibernating hysteria' as a partial explanation.

Peterson suggests that 'Shakespeare's portrayal in *The Winter's Tale* of Hermione's tragic postpartum death, sixteen-year absence, and reanimation pointedly mirrors the hibernating hysteric'.<sup>135</sup> She clarifies that even 'in their most fanciful and even quirky narratives about *hysterica passio*, [early modern medical] writers describe women hovering in a liminal state between life and death – hibernation.'<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, Peterson connects Hermione's state to her postpartum body and links it to Jorden's publication of *The Suffocation of the Mother*, specifically highlighting the differences between supernatural and natural causes for *hysterica passio*. She states that Hermione shakes 'off her "hibernating" state of syncope, understood (at the very least by Polixenes) as stylized theatre.'<sup>137</sup> However, Peterson does not suggest that this hibernating state is a coma caused by the traumatic loss of her children, nor does she explain Hermione's ghostly appearance in Act III, scene II.<sup>138</sup>

Jorden's *The Suffocation of the Mother* does demonstrate that comatose states can develop as a cause of a mother's postpartum period and grief. He states that women who are 'deliuered of their children before their time, vpon feare, anger, grieffe, [...] taken with the Falling sicknesse, Apoplexies [comas], Madnesse, Swounding, Palsies, and diuerse such like infirmities vpon the like causes.'<sup>139</sup> Jorden then gives multiple examples of these symptoms manifesting. One woman is described as having 'a most grieuous fit of the mother, wherin she lay as if she had beene halfe dead, hearing what was said about her, but could

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<sup>134</sup> Bicks, "Fear," 7.

<sup>135</sup> Peterson, *Popular Medicine*, 145-146.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>138</sup> Peterson states that 'the message of Hermione's charade is conceived as the awakening of a suffocated hysteric "hibernating" until the time for her re-reception by her penitent spouse is nigh, not as a real miracle of *stone artwork* coming alive.' Peterson, *Popular Medicine*, 151.

<sup>139</sup> Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse*, 16.

not speake, nor enjoy her other senses.’<sup>140</sup> Another woman’s experience resembles Hermione’s sixteen-year-long absence

But we had of late a most rare example of this disease in an Essex Gentlewoman of good note, who being once frighted by squibs, fell into these fits of the Mother, which held her euery day, and whensoever else she did eate any comfortable meat, for the space of *fifteene or sexteene yeares* together, with such violent conuulsions, as fiue or six strong men could scarce hold her downe. Sometimes her limbes would be contracted, sometimes perticular Muscles, which would cause swellings in diuerse parts of her bodie, sometimes she would be *without all maner of sense*.<sup>141</sup>

This passage demonstrates that the symptoms associated with *hysterica passio* included states of prolonged unconsciousness. This woman is ‘without all maner of sense’ for ‘fifteene or sexteene years’ just like Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*. Although there is no clear evidence of Shakespeare reading Jorden’s text, the parallels between the passage quoted above and *The Winter’s Tale* are interesting because they both examine a woman’s sixteen-year-long health struggles caused by their womb.

Hermione’s coma occurs after the loss of both of her children, and this trauma fuels her comatose state. In the next scene, she appears to Antigonus as a ghost, describing her sorrow. According to Antigonus, Hermione appeared to him to ensure Perdita is left ‘in Bohemia; / There weep and leave it crying’ and to tell him ‘Perdita, / I prithee call’t.’ (III.III. 30-32) Perdita is Hermione’s only surviving child, who was taken away from her. Both of her children’s names are meaningful, emphasising the bond she shares with them. The name ‘Mamilius derives from the Latin mamilla/mamillanus’, meaning from the breast.<sup>142</sup> The choice to name a male child ‘of the breast’ implies a strong motherly connection. The name ‘Perdita’ derives from ‘perditus’ meaning ‘ruin, decay, loss’ again highlighting Hermione’s

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<sup>140</sup> Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse*, unnumbered between 16-17.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, my emphasis.

<sup>142</sup> "Mamilius - Name's Meaning of Mamilius." *Name-Doctor.com*. Last modified 2020. <https://www.name-doctor.com/name-mamilius-meaning-of-mamilius-41325.html>.

trauma at having lost not one, but both of her children.<sup>143</sup> It would consequently make sense for Hermione to wish to protect her.

This is true not just because Perdita is her child but also because Hermione's soul-sickness is caused by the loss of her children. When she appears to Antigonus, she is described as 'a vessel of like sorrow,

/ So filled and so becoming. In pure white robes' and 'her eyes / became two spouts' as she cries with grief.

(III.III.20-21) These lines demonstrate her grief at losing her children, specifically through her clothing choice. In the seventeenth century, black was not always the colour of mourning. For funerals, 'certain sovereigns even wore bright colors for the occasion [...] and the queens [wore] white'.<sup>144</sup> A portrait of Mary Queen of Scots from c.1559 depicts her in 'white mourning —*en*



*deuil blanc* — to mark the loss of three members of her immediate family within a period of

<sup>143</sup> "Perdita - Name's Meaning of Perdita." *Name-Doctor.com*. Last modified 2020. <https://www.name-doctor.com/name-perdita-meaning-of-perdita-7551.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 135.

eighteen months.’<sup>145</sup> Hermione’s white robes equally represent her state of mourning, and the mention of her grief demonstrates the intensity of her feelings of loss.

If Hermione is still alive but in a comatose state, her soul would still be active while her body is inert. It is this activity that allows her to remain close to Perdita by appearing to Antigonus during an out-of-body experience (OBE) in Act III scene III. I discuss souls leaving their bodies more in chapter three, highlighting how early modern women prophets describe the soul exiting the body in altered states. Similarly, Hermione escapes the confines of her body while in a dead sleep. Antigonus comments ‘I have heard, but not believed, the spirits o’th’ dead May walk again.’ (III.III.15-16) Antigonus is implying that it is unlikely Hermione’s spirit is a ghost, but having no explanation for it, he also admits ‘if such things be, thy mother / Appeared to me’ (III.III.16-17). However, in the next line, he does not call the apparition a ghost but prefers to name it ‘a creature’ instead, suggesting he is unsure about her spiritual status (III.III.18). The word ‘creature’ itself indicates liveliness. It is defined by the *OED* as ‘a created thing or being; a product of creative action; a creation’ as well as ‘a human being; a person, an individual’.<sup>146</sup> These definitions suggest Hermione is not dead or a ghost but rather a living being. Hermione’s soul flight emphasises how she is compelled out of her body to visit Antigonus to remain connected to her daughter.

John Donne describes OBEs in his poem ‘The Extasie’ (c.1605-13) stating

Our souls (which to advance their state  
Were gone out) hung ‘twixt her and me.  
And whilst our souls negotiate there,

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<sup>145</sup> François Clouet, *Mary, Queen of Scots' en Deuil Blanc*, Oil on panel, 30.3 x 23.2 cm (support, canvas/panel/stretcher external), RCIN 403429 Image taken from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mary\\_queen\\_of\\_Scots\\_in\\_mourning.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_queen_of_Scots_in_mourning.jpg)  
Quotation taken from: Anonymous. "Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-87)." *Royal Collection Trust*. Last modified 2025. <https://www.rct.uk/collection/403429/mary-queen-of-scots-1542-87>.

<sup>146</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “creature (n.), sense 1.a,” June 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3185896653>>  
*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “creature (n.), sense 2.a,” June 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1195379750>>

We like sepulchral statues lay (lines 15-18).<sup>147</sup>

Donne's description of lovers as statues mirrors Hermione's immobilised comatose state. Furthermore, this ecstasy resembles 'death in that it frees the soul from the body so that soul may mount toward the realm of angels.'<sup>148</sup> Shakespeare's inspiration for Hermione's OBE could come from a passage in Plutarch's *Moralia*, on Hermitimus, an ecstatic from the classical period. In his translation, Holland states

[N]umber you have hard how the soule of *Hermodorus* the Clazomenian, was wont to abandon his body quite, and both by day and night to wander into many places: and afterwards to returne into it againe, having beene present the while to heare and see many things done and said a farre off.<sup>149</sup>

This passage demonstrates Hermitimus's ability to depart his body while still alive, a capacity for which he was known in the early modern period. Hermitimus was 'renowned as [an ecstatic] whose [soul] travelled'<sup>150</sup>. Other early modern writers mention him as well. For example, Ben Jonson in *Volpone* (1616) notes that 'Hermitimus was next (I find it, in my charta)' (I.II.14).<sup>151</sup> Equally, John King in *Lectures vpon Ionas* (1599) states 'Hermitimus, that his soule would depart from the body at times and come home againe, sleepeth.'<sup>152</sup>

Holland also mentions Hermitimus in his translation of Pliny's *The Historie of the World*, in which he devotes a whole chapter to out-of-body experiences. Hermitimus is described as leaving his body to visit 'remote places, of such things as could not possibly be

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<sup>147</sup> John Donne, "The Extasie," in *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Hugh A. Robbins (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2010).

<sup>148</sup> Charles Mitchell, "Donne's 'the Extasie': Love's Sublime Knot," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8, no. 1 (1968): 91-101, 98.

<sup>149</sup> Plutarch, *The philosophie, commonlie called, the morals vvritten by the learned philosopher Plutarch of Chæronea* (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603), 1220.

<sup>150</sup> Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189.

<sup>151</sup> Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. Robert N. Watson (London: Methuen Drama, 2015).

<sup>152</sup> John King, *Lectures Vpon Ionas, Delivered at Yorke in the Yeare of Our Lord 1594* (Oxford: Ioseph Barnes, 1599), 78.

knowne vnlesse it had bin present there: and all the while his body lay as halfe I dead, in a trance.’<sup>153</sup> A few lines later, Pliny gives an example of a woman ‘among the Greeks compiled by Heraclides, where he writeth of a woman that for a seuen-night lay for dead, and fetched not her breath sensibly, who in the end was raised againe to life.’<sup>154</sup> Pliny further states that ‘women of all others by reason of their sex are most subject to this danger, to be reputed for dead when there is life in them.’<sup>155</sup> These quotations highlight how similarly these deathlike sleeps resembled death itself, where the sufferers didn’t even seem to breathe and how likely women were to be misdiagnosed if this malady afflicted them.

Although there is no definitive proof of whether Shakespeare read Pliny or not, scholars have suggested its possibility. Jane Grogan notes ‘Shakespeare would have learned not just from epic or esteemed historians such as Thucydides and Livy, but also from [...] Pliny’s encyclopaedic natural history and various ecclesiastical histories and chronologies.’<sup>156</sup> According to Stuart Gillespie, ‘[i]f Shakespeare perused the *Naturalis Historia* at all, this probably happened before or during the composition of *Othello*’.<sup>157</sup> *Othello* predates *The Winter’s Tale* by seven years, which suggests that if Shakespeare did read Pliny, he would have done so well before writing about Hermione’s soul-travelling. There is, however, more certainty that Shakespeare read Plutarch’s works. Shakespeare was aware of this text, ‘possibly in its first English translation by Philemon Holland published in 1603.’<sup>158</sup> Stuart Gillespie highlights that ‘the use of six names from Plutarch in *The Winter’s Tale* may imply other as yet undiscovered debts.’<sup>159</sup> The similarity between Hermione’s and

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<sup>153</sup> Pliny, *The History*, 184.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>156</sup> Jane Grogan, "History and Geography," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Shakespeare and Classical Literature*, eds. Sean Keilen and Nick Moschovakis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 145.

<sup>157</sup> Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*, 138-155 (London: Athlone, 2001), 423.

<sup>158</sup> Miryana Dimitrova, "Taking Centre Stage: Plutarch and Shakespeare," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch*, eds. Sophia A. Xenophontos and Aikaterini Oikonomopoulou, 493-511 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 493.

<sup>159</sup> Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books*, 434.

Hermotimus's names is not coincidental either, suggesting Hermione's name choice was purposeful to highlight her ability to have an out-of-body experience.

After Act III scene III, 'Time, the Chorus' enter and announce the sixteen-year interval: 'I turn my glass and give my scene such growing / As you *had slept* between', implying there has been sixteen years of sleep, not death (IV.I.16-17).<sup>160</sup> The coma allows Hermione to process the trauma of the past internally in a space removed from time. Harvey Wiltshire argues in his discussion of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* that one of the hallmarks of trauma, in early modern and modern understanding, is represented by 'the delayed manifestation of the signs and symptoms that evince the originary experience having taken place; as such, trauma is defined by the period of latency that follows the instigating event.'<sup>161</sup> When Hermione falls into her deathlike sleep, she is, as Katarzyna Burzyńska argues, 'metaphorically and literally immobilised by her grief.'<sup>162</sup> This immobilisation echoes the previously mentioned quotation from Thomas P. Anderson that describes trauma as an 'event that interrupts the links between the past and the present.'<sup>163</sup>

After this scene, the text hints at Hermione's illness. In Act V scene I Dion asks 'what were more holy / Than to rejoice the former queen is well?' (V.I.30) The Arden edition suggests 'well' is used here to refer to 'the dead, free from care in heavenly bliss'.<sup>164</sup> However, the *OED* defines 'well' as 'sound in health; free or recovered from sickness or infirmity', and this is how Shakespeare uses it in multiple other plays.<sup>165</sup> For example, in *Macbeth*, during the banquet scene, Ross states 'Gentlemen, rise: his highness is not well'

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<sup>160</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>161</sup> Harvey Wiltshire, "'So Much Grief and not a Tongue': Trauma and Intertextuality in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*," *English: Journal of the English Association* 69, no. 265 (2020):124-144, 124.

<sup>162</sup> Katarzyna Burzyńska, *Pregnant Bodies from Shakespeare to Ford: A Phenomenology of Pregnancy in English Early Modern Drama* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 89.

<sup>163</sup> Anderson, *Performing*, 9.

<sup>164</sup> Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, see notes to V.I.30.

<sup>165</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "well, adj. & n.<sup>3</sup>", September 2023.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1161902246>>

referring to Macbeth's hallucinations (III.IV.52). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Salerio describes how Antonio is doing, noting he is 'not sick my lord, unless it be in mind, / Nor well, unless in mind.' (III.II.233)<sup>166</sup> Whether alive and well or dead, these passages show a close connection between death and sleep that could easily be confused, especially in long-lasting sleep-like states, such as the one Hermione is experiencing in *The Winter's Tale*.

Act V, scene I, also addresses Hermione's ability to have out-of-body experiences when Leontes wishes that Hermione's 'sainted spirit / Again possess her corpse' (V.I.57-58). Leontes is hoping for Hermione's soul to return to her comatose body, and not that she magically regains consciousness after being dead for sixteen years. Paulina replies to Leontes's remark, noting that 'had she such power' to return to her body, she would be justified in doing so (V.I. 60). Leontes then concludes 'She had', meaning her spirit possesses the ability to both leave her body and return to it (V.I.61). Later in this scene, Paulina notes that Hermione is not breathing when she tells Leontes not to marry until 'That / Shall be when your first queen's again in breath.' (V.I.82-83) As I've suggested previously, those who suffered from comas appeared like corpses without seeming to breathe, just as Hermione is described.

The proximity of death to sleep is also highlighted in the final scene when Perdita comments on Hermione's statue that 'life as lively mocked as ever / still sleep mocked death' (V.III.19-20). This line suggests that sleep is 'convincingly [counterfeiting]' death and that it 'is the image of death' without being death itself.<sup>167</sup> Shakespeare seems to be purposefully blurring the boundaries between sleep and death. The Steward's comment that 'if ever truth were pregnant by circumstance. That which you hear you'll swear you see' and the

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<sup>166</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Drakakis (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2010).

<sup>167</sup> Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, see notes V.III.19-20.

Gentleman's line 'our absence makes us unthrifty to our knowledge' suggest the audience's ignorance (V.II.30-31, V.II.109-110). Sean Benson picks up on this point

Hermione's quasi resurrection is the only moment in Shakespeare's plays where first-time audiences are not privy to the fact that she has apparently been alive all this time. Shakespeare's decision to exclude the audience from all knowledge of what happened to Hermione during those 16 years places it in the situation of most of the characters: the audience shares in the tension as well as the final release that Leontes undergoes.<sup>168</sup>

The play is purposefully ambiguous about Hermione's state, which adds tension to the final scene. However, early modern medical beliefs suggest that Hermione's fainting and sixteen-year-long absence are more than simply a time of 'hiding'. Once awoken, Hermione clarifies she has 'preserved' herself (V.III 127). The *OED* defines this word as 'to protect or save *from* (†also *fro*, *of*, *out of*) (injury, sickness, or any undesirable eventuality).'<sup>169</sup> Although Paulina and Hermione do deceive the other characters in the final scene, pretending that Hermione is a statue, Hermione's speech indicates that she was unwell during her absence, not dead.

The word 'trauma' implies a contemporary understanding of the word, but the investigation of the texts in this chapter shows an early modern understanding of the concept, which was labelled differently as a soul-sickness. Mary Sidney Herbert demonstrates a link between God, mother, and child that is active in unconscious sleep states. Rachel Speght connects her grief to the loss of her mother, which she primarily experiences within a dream. Finally, the examination of *The Winter's Tale* demonstrates how the loss of children affects an early modern mother. Hermione's sleep shows both the spiritual and bodily consequences

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<sup>168</sup> Sean Benson, *Shakespearean Resurrection: The Art of Almost Raising the Dead* (Pittsburgh, P.A.: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 158.

<sup>169</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, "preserve (v.), sense 1.a," March 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1030162022>>

of loss, which causes her coma and subsequent OBE. As female trauma is more 'secretive', it is necessary to examine its inward manifestations to fully understand the female experience of grief and loss in the early modern period and its literary representations.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Brown, "Not Outside," 101.

### 3. The Womb from Whence It All Rises: The Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern Women's Prophecy

#### 3.1. Introduction

Having explored the spiritual bond between mothers and their children in the previous two chapters, I now want to analyse texts by female prophets and radicals later in the seventeenth century. This chapter focuses on the language used to describe the female experience of prophecy, its similarities with demonic possession and how they are presented through gendered bodily manifestations that equally affect the soul. Prophecy here refers to 'an instance of divinely inspired speech or writing; a revelation from God or a god; a prophetic text'<sup>1</sup> and the word 'possession' refers to the 'domination or control of a person by a demon or spirit; an instance of this.'<sup>2</sup> Prophecy and possession were connected to femininity and the innate sinfulness associated with female bodies.<sup>3</sup> According to Jean Bodin, it was women's sinful bodies that allowed them to accept souls or spirits inside themselves.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I will examine passages from prophetic women's writings, such as Eleanor Davies's prophecies, Anna Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* and *Report and Plea*, Ann Bathurst's diaries as well as Jane Lead's *A Fountain of Gardens* and *The Ascent to The*

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "prophecy, n.", July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1183770645>>

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "possession, n.", July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1113785963>>

<sup>3</sup> See Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women*, 27. Nancy M. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 25, 40, 41, 61, 154, 161. Moshe Sluhovskiy, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, & Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 16, 97, 251. Brian Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 2013), 99. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Religion and Sexuality in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 190. Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1988), 244-268. Boyd E. Brogan, "His Belly, Her Seed: Gender and Medicine in Early Modern Demonic Possession," *Representations* 147, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 1-25.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Bodin states that 'quelquesfois le malin esprit parle, comme dedans l'estomach, estant la bouche de la femme close, ... quelquesfois par les parties honteuses' ('sometimes the cunning sprit speaks, as if through the stomach, while the mouth of the woman is closed, ... sometimes through the shameful parts') Jean Bodin, *La Démonomanie des Sorciers*, 4th ed. (Lyon: Antoine de Harsy, 1598), 165 L3r, my translation.

*Mount of Vision Where Many Things were Shewn*. Rather than examining each prophet in turn, they will all be examined in tandem according to recurring themes that highlight the soul-body connection. I will consider these texts alongside records of demonic possession. The choice to explore these female prophets in this way allows for an exploration of how women in the seventeenth century understood their own bodies and what they believed happened to their souls in these experiences.

These four writers discuss how prophecy manifests itself in the female body, but they approach it differently. Regarding the soul, they all describe its ability to reach other realms, such as heaven or hell. I believe there is space for this study because I have not been able to find scholarship that examines this specific overlap of women's prophetic writings and their connection to obstetrics and demonic possessions. Michel de Certeau explores female possession between 1610 and 1630 and the language used to describe these divine and demonic experiences, but does not specifically analyse women's female prophetic texts.<sup>5</sup> Nancy Caciola focuses on separating fake from real possessions and demonic possessions from divine prophecy, but she does so in the twelfth century.<sup>6</sup> Moshe Sluhovsky also explores demonic possessions and prophecy, but in early modern Europe, predominantly in Spain, France and Italy, leaving English women's prophetic writings largely unexplored.<sup>7</sup> Phyllis Mack examines Trapnel, Bathurst and Davies's texts, but she does not compare the language used by these prophets to demonological tracts and pays little attention to the use of sexualised vocabulary to describe prophetic experiences.<sup>8</sup> Carme Font explores the importance of women's prophetic writing and discusses the prophets examined here, including Trapnel, Davies, Bathurst and Lead. However, Font predominantly focuses on the

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<sup>5</sup> Certeau, *The Writing*, 250.

<sup>6</sup> Caciola, *Discerning*.

<sup>7</sup> Sluhovsky, *Believe*, 251.

<sup>8</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*. Mack does mention Bathurst's use of sexual language to describe her ecstatic experience on page 9 but this is only a short entry. She also discusses at length the demonisation of women through their bodies, but she does so without textual reference to these prophets. See pages 9, 21, 24, 27, 31, 46.

political importance of these women's utterances to determine how prophecy impacted the understanding of women's authorship.<sup>9</sup> Again, she does not explore the sexualised language of the female body used by these prophets.

Some scholars such as Elizabeth Clarke, Patricia Crawford and Nigel Smith examine a combination of Lead, Bathurst and Trapnel's writings to highlight their descriptions of prophecy as a marriage to Christ, a sexual experience or a connection to motherhood and childbearing, but these scholars do not detail the similarities between the description of bodily experiences of divine possession with the descriptions commonly seen in early modern demonic possession.<sup>10</sup> I explore these experiences in conjunction with descriptions of demonic possessions to see what similarities are present in the understanding of the female body, its capacity to endure these experiences, and how they affect the soul. I am not suggesting that these women prophets were experiencing demonic possessions, even though some were accused of being demoniacs.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I am demonstrating that the symptoms of prophetic states and demonic possession are both described as occurring through the female body and therefore suggest the female body's ability for preternatural experiences.

In the introduction to this chapter, I outline the early modern understanding of divine and demonic possessions as well as provide an overview of how women's bodies and souls were understood in relation to this discourse. In the second half of this chapter, I examine

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<sup>9</sup> Carme Font, *Women's Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 217.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Clarke, *Politics, Religion and the Song of Songs in Seventeenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Nigel Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe: The Philadelphian Example," in *The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women, 1558-1680*, ed. Johanna Harris and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 190-201.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Anna Trapnel was accused of being a witch and experiencing voluntary demonic possession through her practice. For Trapnel to guarantee her 'spiritual credentials, her commentaries must be validated not only by her own condition, but also by the clearly biblical foundations and public significance of the visions themselves, and the socially worthy witnesses of her trance who testify to its reality. At the same time, the public invective which threatened to accuse her of witchcraft or distraction registers the potential instability in the meanings of vision and trance.' Katharine Hodgkin, "Reasoning with Unreason: Visions, Witchcraft, and Madness in Early Modern England," in *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology, and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Stuart Clark, 217-236 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 225.

the texts of the female prophets. Their descriptions of their bodies demonstrate how the female gender, and specifically the womb, is central in achieving altered states of consciousness, acting as a liminal space between the divine and the demonic. I also address how these prophets feared falling into demonic states and the dangers posed to their bodies and souls if this did occur.

Finally, I turn to examine the female prophets' souls and their activity during these experiences. The womb allows these prophets' souls to leave their bodies in altered states of consciousness to visit both heaven and hell. This ability is dangerous because it suggests these women prophets can transgress boundaries of the earthly realm and visit the afterlife because of their female bodies. I will posit that the womb is characterised in these experiences as a liminal space that sits between both normal and altered states and between the divine and the demonic, allowing these prophets to escape the societal confines dictated by their femininity.

### **3.2. Prophecy and Demonic Possession in Early Modern England**

Prophecy and demonic possessions were discussed in strikingly similar terms in the early modern period, where a spirit takes hold of a host's body. St. Paul's authoritative statement that 'Satan disguises himself as an Angel of Light' shows that it was difficult to distinguish prophecy and demonic possessions because the demonic spirit tried to emulate the prophetic voice.<sup>12</sup> In contemporary research, there is a conflation of terms that sees the word 'possession' referring to prophetic states as well as demonic possession. In Nancy Caciola and Moshe Sluhovsky's article 'Spiritual Physiologies: The Discernment of Spirits in Medieval and Early Modern Europe' for example, the authors note that 'the external etiologies of the two syndromes— divine and demonic possessions or seizure—were

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 11:14 (CSB).

represented in such similar terms as to be indistinguishable.’<sup>13</sup> Observing the body in trance and the symptoms that accompanied it to ascertain whether it was an instance of demonic or divine possession was thought to be an efficient method of comprehending these experiences.

According to Stuart Clark, possession ‘was the product of demons, or disease, or deception, singly or in combination, from these three models.’<sup>14</sup> Aquinas addresses the origins of possession in similar terms to Clark when he refers to souls that are ‘carried away’.<sup>15</sup> This experience occurs for one of three reasons

[F]irst, from a bodily cause, as is clear from those who by reason of some infirmity have lost their reason. Secondly, from the power of demons, as with those who are possessed. Thirdly, from the divine power. It is in this sense that we now speak of ecstasy, in so far, namely, as one by the Spirit of God is uplifted to a supernatural level, with abstraction from the senses.<sup>16</sup>

There are three ways for an altered state to occur, according to Aquinas: the first happens in cases of illness, the second when demons possess a person and third in cases of spiritual ecstasy. The term ‘carried away’ is one translation of the Latin ‘*rapio*’. However, ‘*rapio*’ can equally be translated as either ‘rapture’ or ‘ecstasy’. Divine rapture called ‘ecstasy’ here,<sup>17</sup> can be defined ‘as an elevation from a state in accordance with nature towards that

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Caciola and Moshe Sluhovsky, "Spiritual Physiologies: The Discernment of Spirits in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-48, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 395.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries, Volume 45*, ed. Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1964), 95.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Summa - Volume 45*, 97.

<sup>17</sup> According to Bernard McGinn, ‘Thomas Aquinas discussed *extasis* and *raptus* both in the *Summa theologiae* (*STh*) and in his *Disputed Questions on Truth* (*De veritate*)<sup>31</sup>. [...] Thomas distinguishes between ecstasy, which indicates a general going beyond the self by being placed outside the proper order of nature, and rapture, which adds a note of force or violence.<sup>32</sup>’ Note 31 in McGinn: ‘The major texts are *STh* IIaIIae, q. 175, aa. 1-6; and *De veritate*, q. 10, a. 11, and q. 13, aa. 1-5. Thomas’s teaching on ecstasy fits within his wider doctrine on contemplation, on which see R. Van Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation*, Oxford 2021.’ Note 32 in McGinn: ‘In *STh*, q. 175, a. 3, ad 1, Thomas distinguishes three kinds of rapture.’

which is above nature, by the power of a superior nature.’<sup>18</sup> The *OED* further defines ‘ecstasy’ as a term ‘used by mystical writers as the technical name for the state of rapture in which the body was supposed to become incapable of sensation, while the soul was engaged in the contemplation of divine things.’<sup>19</sup> It is in ecstasy that a vision of God can be attained when ‘a person completely disengages from their physical senses and even their imagination, which relies on physical images.’<sup>20</sup> For Aquinas, when discussing prophecy in *Summa Theologiae*, it ‘is a knowledge which divine revelation engraves in the mind of a prophet, in the form of teaching.’<sup>21</sup> This state is different from demonic possession because it directly impacts the prophet’s mind, and ‘demons do not enlighten the human mind.’<sup>22</sup> Yet, receiving information is a part of both divine and demonic experiences.

Knowledge is received differently depending on whether it is received by demonic influence or from prophecy. Aquinas notes that ‘demons manifest to men what they know, not by enlightening their intelligences, but by giving them imaginative visions, or even by addressing them in terms of sense impressions.’<sup>23</sup> According to Aquinas, demons can affect people, either through influencing their imaginations inside their minds or through impressions. For Aquinas, there were three types of prophecy: ‘bodily, imaginative, and intellectual. Bodily prophecy occurs when the senses perceive divinely or angelically crafted [images ...].’<sup>24</sup> Imagination allows the senses to ‘perceive bodies whose images then become

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Because the 1964 Gilby edition of the *Summa Theologiae* translates ‘raptu’ as ‘ecstasy’ in question 175, which is relevant here, the word ‘ecstasy’ is retained in this chapter for consistency to discuss divine rapture. For more on the difference between divine rapture and ecstasy according to Aquinas see Bernard McGinn, “Ecstasy in Classic Christian Mysticism,” *Lo Sguardo - Rivista di Filosofia* 33, no. 2 (2021): 187-213, 199. See also Rik V Nieuwenhove, *Thomas Aquinas and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *Summa - Volume 45*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “ecstasy, n.”, September 2023.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9471105436>>

<sup>20</sup> Marika Rose, “The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas ‘*Summa Theologiae*,” *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (February 2013): 540-551, 548.

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas, *Summa - Volume 45*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Michelle Karnes, “Marvels in the Medieval Imagination,” *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015): 327-365, 341.

imprinted on imagination, awaiting interpretation by the intellect.’<sup>25</sup> The second type of prophecy, imaginative, imprints images onto the imagination. The third type of prophecy, intellectual, ‘involves the direct illumination of the intellect without the prior impression of images on imagination. It is the highest type of prophecy’.<sup>26</sup>

This shows two important elements. Firstly, these three types of prophecy are ranked, and intellectual prophecy is considered the highest. Secondly, in the lower kinds of prophecy, the senses need to perceive images that are then imprinted onto the imagination, while in the highest type of prophecy, the senses are not concerned, nor is imagination; the intellect directly perceives knowledge without any other stages.<sup>27</sup> Because imagination is not used in intellectual prophecy, and the intellect is illuminated with prophecy directly, it does not risk being subjected to demonic influences. Although written in the medieval period, Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* remained popular in early modern theological discourse and ‘also came to serve as the textual context in which many new theological developments were articulated.’<sup>28</sup> Aquinas’ text was therefore used as a source on divine prophecy in the seventeenth century.

*The Malleus Maleficarum* also discusses possession and refers at length to St Thomas, demonstrating Aquinas's enduring influence on beliefs about possession. Kramer’s text expands on the causes of possession, stating two main reasons for its occurrence. One reason derives from mortal sin, which sentences a sinner ‘to serve the Devil, inasmuch as the Devil sometimes suggests a sin externally, in terms of either the senses of perception or

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<sup>25</sup> Karnes, “Marvels,” 341.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 341-342.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Bakker, Christoph Lüthi, and Claudia Swan, “Introduction,” in *Image, Imagination, and Cognition: Medieval and Early Modern Theory and Practice*, eds. Paul Bakker, Christoph Lüthi, Claudia Swan, and Claus Zittel, 1-10 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Reginald M. Lynch, *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae and Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Early Modern Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 1.

the imagination and therefore, the Devil is said to inhabit the desiring of a human.<sup>29</sup> This comment implies that the sinner is then possessed through the act of sinning, which allows the devil to penetrate their desires. The second cause for possession is then explained by the fact that ‘The devil can also inhabit a human in substance, as is clear in the case of those “seized.”’<sup>30</sup> This second cause of possession is not defined further, nor does it address how the soul itself might be bound in possession.

However, anthropological studies on possession have not spent time examining “‘what is actually happening” in these situations’, according to Stuart Clark.<sup>31</sup> Instead, ‘enquiries have told [anthropologists] overwhelmingly that what is happening are forms of behaviour that the actors take to be (barring the unauthenticated examples) genuine cases of possession.’<sup>32</sup> Demoniacs were predominantly presumed to be ‘patients. They were really suffering from acute neurosis or hysteria and those contemporaries who preferred to think that they were possessed by the devil were guilty of making some sort of mistake.’<sup>33</sup> However, this chapter does not seek to determine whether or not prophets or demoniacs were sick or lying. Instead, the goal is to analyse the records women prophets kept regarding their experiences of altered states.

I am highlighting the similarities in the descriptions of their bodies and souls in these divine and demonic states. Specifically, I am suggesting how both experiences are described as occurring through the womb. Female anatomy is, therefore, central in achieving these

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<sup>29</sup> Heinrich Kramer, and Jakob Sprenger, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. Christopher S. Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 344.

<sup>30</sup> The word ‘seized’ is in quotes and refers back to section 48D of *The Malleus Maleficarum*, which states that this word is used when ‘the use of reason is completely fettered. We can give examples for this with certain natural defects like those of the delirious and the drunken. Therefore, it is no wonder that the demons can in this way fetter the use of reason with God’s permission. Such people are called “seized” (Lat. “arrepticii”, sing. “arrepticus” from the verb “arripio, arripere”) because the use of reason has been seized by the demon.’ Kramer, *The Hammer*, Mackay, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, *Thinking*, 398.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

experiences. Even though the prophets explored here are not demoniacs, they describe a fear of interacting with the devil or visiting hell, which I will discuss further in the next section of this chapter. Despite this fear, their description of these experiences suggests that the female body creates these states, allowing them to vacillate between the divine and the demonic. This chapter examines the textual representations of their gendered bodies, the role corporeality played in achieving altered states and the impact these experiences had on their souls.

Because divine and demonic possession affected both the body and the soul, early modern theologians addressed both the spiritual and the corporeal when discussing these altered states.<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther noted that ‘men are possessed in two ways; corporally and spiritually’.<sup>35</sup> The Roman ritual from 1614 defines demonic possession as ‘the domination by the demon over man’s bodily organs and his lower spiritual faculties’, which echoes Aquinas’s description of bodily prophecy.<sup>36</sup> *The Malleus Maleficarum* equally addresses the soul-body dynamic in possession, noting ‘the working of the soul is in the body, so that it can give it form and pour in life, [...] The demon, [...] in a given part of the body and in a given place, changing and working on the pictures derived from the senses of perception.’<sup>37</sup> This passage suggests that the working of the soul is independent from the working of the demon in the body.

However, the texts analysed later in this chapter offer a different perspective on this dynamic, suggesting that the body and soul are both affected in cases of prophecy or possession and highlighting the importance of the female gender in achieving these altered states. Those who experienced possession were

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<sup>34</sup> For more on this see: Sluhovsky, *Believe*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, *The Table Talk Or Familiar Discourse of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: D. Bogue, 1848), 267-268.

<sup>36</sup> Weller, *The Roman Ritual*, 379.

<sup>37</sup> Kramer, *The Hammer*, Mackay, 336.

[L]ikely to be female [and] were viewed as having incorporated foreign spirits into the body, and ... were reported to manifest identical supernatural actions such as trances, prophesying, rigidity, bloating, levitation, and so forth.<sup>38</sup>

Because women were believed to be more prone to experience these supernatural actions, the connection between possession and the female body is relevant here. While an increasing number of women ‘began to gain attention for their claims to celestial visions, suspicions concerning women’s reliability when describing their supernatural experiences grew [and there was] a sharp increase in reports of women being defined as demoniacs’.<sup>39</sup> There was, therefore, a risk associated with prophesying for women because their states could appear demonic in origin. Whether the messages are divine or demonic, they are received through the prophet’s body. The connection between the corporeal and the spiritual is the focus of this chapter, since it is through the female soul-body dynamic that these messages are received in these experiences.

When considering the female soul-body connection, the womb is central to this relationship, and as I discussed in the first chapter, there was a mysterious aura surrounding this organ. Its partial and occasionally eccentric understanding created a sense of uncertainty about female bodies generally. As Amy Kenny states ‘women’s bodies were considered unknowable, secretive, and untrustworthy in early modern medicine because of the illusive womb.’<sup>40</sup> This sense of confusion extended into the understanding of possession as well. Someone who was possessed could be ‘experiencing a heavenly vision, an attack of lunacy, or a diabolical fit.’<sup>41</sup> Women were believed to be more likely to experience possession than men according to the predominantly Galenic understanding of their bodies and the space the womb provided. Women ‘were believed to be closer to the Devil, ... [and] their bodies were

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<sup>38</sup> Caciola, *Discerning*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Caciola, Moshe, “Spiritual,” 6.

<sup>40</sup> Kenny, *Humoral Wombs*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Phyllis Mack, “Women as Prophets during the English Civil War,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no.1 (Spring 1982): 18-45, 31.

more naturally suited to house devils.’<sup>42</sup> This understanding rendered the boundary of women’s bodies weaker and more easily breached by spirits.

According to King James, women are more likely to practice witchcraft, which includes voluntary demonic possession, because ‘that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill’.<sup>43</sup> Because of their sex, women were thought to have more porous boundaries than men, making them more susceptible to possession. Edward Jorden specifically remarks on the womb, stating that ‘diuers superfluties [...] do abound’ there and that it is ‘porous’ in nature.<sup>44</sup> As Nancy Caciola argues in *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, it is this ‘open/sealed duality [...] inscribed upon the body [that is] not only a matter of gender but [...] a result of the individual’s moral status. [...] Thus the conception of bodies as either porous and open or dense and sealed also alludes to notions of sin and righteousness.’<sup>45</sup> It is not only because of their physical attributes that women were more likely to be possessed but also because of their moral deficiency that made them vulnerable to attack.

In *Dialogicall Discourses of Spirits and Divels Declaring their Proper Essence, Natures, Dispositions, and Operations, their Possessions and Dispossessions* (1601), John Deacon ushers caution when dealing with cases of possession because

[S]ome seducers sprung vp, who (for gaine or glorie) pretending a *special power* from aboue, for the *dispossessing of diuels*, both might and did also therein deceiue the wisest of iudgement. [...] so like to the *actuell possession of diuels*, as verie fewe or none can hardly discerne the one from the other.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Roper, *Oedipus*, 190.

<sup>43</sup> James VI and I, *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue: Diuided Into Three Bookes* (London: William Cotton, and William Aspley, 1603), 43-44.

<sup>44</sup> Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Caciola, *Discerning*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> John Deacon, *Dialogicall Discourses of Spirits and Divels Declaring their Proper Essence, Natures, Dispositions, and Operations, their Possessions and Dispossessions* (London: George Bishop, 1601), 172.

This text shows there was doubt at the turn of the seventeenth century regarding the nature of possession and if it was genuine or fake since it was virtually impossible to ‘discerne the one from the other.’<sup>47</sup> Because women were believed to be less trustworthy than men, their choice to fake a possession suggested they were witches who swore allegiance to the devil, just as a real possession equally suggested this fidelity because the female body was corruptible.

Phyllis Mack comments on this phenomenon by stating that ‘in the case of witches, over ninety percent of whom were women, the devil was said to approach his victim in the shape of a man or animal familiar, who converted her not by rational argument but by full physical penetration.’<sup>48</sup> There was an implied connection between possession and witchcraft because of women’s untrustworthiness that allowed the devil to penetrate their physical bodies. It is unsurprising that female prophets were accused of witchcraft and communicating with the Devil instead of divine entities. The similarities between a voluntary demonic possession, like witchcraft, an involuntary demonic possession, and divine prophecy suggest that all of these states share certain attributes. It is this chapter’s goal to determine what these similarities are and how they relate to the female body and soul.

If demons are more likely to possess female bodies, there remains the question as to how female souls might be affected by these experiences. Aquinas suggests that souls are not affected by demonic possession, noting that ‘the devil cannot substantially inhabit human beings by inhabiting their souls, since only God can enter our minds. [...] The devil can also inhabit human beings by inhabiting their bodies, which is obviously the case with

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<sup>47</sup> Deacon, *Dialogicall Discourses*, 172.

<sup>48</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*, 46.

possession’, suggesting that possession occurs in the body solely.<sup>49</sup> *The Malleus Maleficarum* equally notes this when stating

God alone slides into the body, that is, into the essence of the soul, but when we say that an angel slides into the body, especially a bad angel in the case of those possessed, he does not in that case slide within [the soul] because only [...God...] can slide in in this way.<sup>50</sup>

There is a distinction between the body versus the soul being possessed where only one boundary can be breached. However, Saint Augustine states that demons can enter the soul when he notes, ‘the evil spirit acts in a seemingly peaceful manner and, without tormenting the body, possesses a man’s spirit.’<sup>51</sup> There are then multiple theories from the medieval period on whether or not the body and the soul can be possessed that filtered into the early modern period.

Some records of early modern exorcisms do suggest that the soul is affected. For example, in the record of Mary Glover’s possession and exorcism (1603), she is asked how she feels once exorcised and answers that ‘she saw nothings, but she did feele somewhat depart, and withall, felt such a fredome of all the powers and faculties of soule and body as she neuer felt the like before’.<sup>52</sup> This comment implies the belief that possession affects more than just the demoniac’s body and that the soul itself is impacted because Mary Glover felt freedom in both ‘soule and body’. According to Balthasar Bekke in *The world of the Bewitch’d* (1695), possession ‘is an inevitable torment to Man from the Devil, which is in

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. by Brian Davies and Turner Nevitt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2020), Quodlibet III, question 3, article 3. <https://academic.oup.com/book/32390/chapter/268675173>

<sup>50</sup> The word ‘soul’ here is substituted for simplicity instead of the word ‘essence’ which is used in Mackay’s translation. The footnotes further explain: ‘Another etymological play in the Latin: the abstract noun “essence” is derived from the infinitive “being” (esse). As the grantor of esse, God alone can enter the body’s “essence.” This sentence is a somewhat garbled recapitulation of Aquinas Sent. 2. 8. 1. 5. Ra 3, where he argues that an angel can enter the “mass” (quantitas) of the body, but cannot enter its “essence” (see preceding note), which is the soul, and since the soul derives from God alone, he alone can enter it.’ For further information see: Kramer, *The Hammer*, Mackay, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Saint Augustine, *St. Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis - Volume II*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 196, See also 193, 198.

<sup>52</sup> John Swan, *A True and Breife Report, of Mary Glouers Vexation* (London: S.N, 1603), 56-57.

his body, who acts there, and keeps him in his power for a certain time.’<sup>53</sup> A few pages from this quotation, Bekke also states that ‘the Devil Isaacarum [...], says, that Behemet had not only vex'd Job in his body, but that he had also troubled his Soul’.<sup>54</sup> This record suggests that the body and the soul were believed to be susceptible to attacks and could be affected in cases of possession.

The vulnerability of the soul in cases of possession highlights the question of what happened to women's souls in these states. Theologians suggested that ‘possession, whether by God or demons, in physiological terms, [was] a kind of corporeal indwelling to which women's open and porous bodies were particularly prone.’<sup>55</sup> The Bible also highlights the difference between men and women and their relationship to the divine in Genesis 1:27, which states that ‘God created man in his own image’, while Eve was created from Adam's rib, an image at two removes.<sup>56</sup> Aemilia Lanyer addresses the female relationship to the divine image in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) when she states that women had their ‘Faith and Loue vnto such grace did clime, / To haue reflecion from this Heau'nly light’, suggesting that their image is reflected back by ‘Heau'nly light’, that is to say, by God ( lines 989-990).<sup>57</sup> Women therefore ‘not only reflect Christ but also reproduce him’.<sup>58</sup> They are representations of ‘the divine image in all their interaction, mirroring the “glorie of the Lorde”’.<sup>59</sup> Lanyer's interpretation suggests that women can be representations of God,

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<sup>53</sup> Balthasar Bekker, *The World Bewitch'd: Or An Examination of the Common Opinions Concerning Spirits* (London: R. Baldwin, 1695), 204.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

<sup>55</sup> Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2006), 59.

<sup>56</sup> Gen, 1:27 (KJV).

<sup>57</sup> Aemilia Lanyer, “Salve Deus Rex Judæorum,” in *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, ed. Susanne Woods (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> Esther G. Richey, ““To Undoe the Booke”: Cornelius Agrippa, Aemilia Lanyer and the Subversion of Pauline Authority,” *English Literary Renaissance* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 106-128, 115.

<sup>59</sup> Richey, ““To Undoe the Booke,””115.

whether an image twice removed from God or a mirror of his glory. Lanyer's text then implies that women's souls could be considered as potentially equal to male souls.

Saint Augustine comments on the spiritual equality of men and women, stating that

[S]ince [scripture] does not say that the soul of the woman was made from the soul of the man, it is reasonable to assume [...], that the woman received her soul in the same way [as man does]. Had that not been true, there would have been an obvious occasion to state the fact, if not at the formation of Eve, at least later when Adam says, *This now is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.*<sup>60</sup>

Augustine is suggesting that there is no difference between male and female souls and that the soul is not distinguished by its sex. If souls are equal, but women are more likely to experience altered states because of their bodies, then the soul-body dynamic becomes central in understanding the nature of these experiences and their impact on women. The examination of the soul-body connection in female altered states and their conceptualisation by women in their own writing allows a better understanding of the spiritual nature of early modern women. I will, therefore, examine the prophetic texts of four female prophets from the seventeenth century to determine how their texts overlap with conceptualisations of demonic possessions in this period to better understand this soul-body dynamic in altered states.

### **3.3. The Gendered Soul-Body Dynamic in Women's Prophetic Texts**

In this section, I will focus on the bodily manifestations of prophecy and demonic possession. I will begin by examining the use of voice in these states and how this presents a gendered experience that moves between the masculine and feminine, demonstrating a heightened sense of gendered identity that is not otherwise present in the female prophets. I

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<sup>60</sup> St. Augustine, *St. Augustine*, 97.

will then turn to examine the sensual language used to describe these experiences and the importance of the womb to achieve altered states. Caroline Walker Bynum has previously discussed the female body in connection to altered states of consciousness in the medieval period, stating that ‘cases of psychosomatic manipulation (or manipulation from within) are almost exclusively female. I refer here to several phenomena that are sometimes called “paramystical” by modern scholars of religion’.<sup>61</sup> This section of the chapter will highlight the effects prophecy and demonic possession have on the body of women and how their experience is a gendered one as it occurs specifically through the female sexual organs.

By examining female prophetic texts and records of demonic possession, I will argue that the female sexual organs enable states of altered consciousness and that the womb allows female prophets to shift between the divine and the demonic. Considering the risk of witchcraft accusations associated with the demonic, this ability to shift between these two states suggests it is a bodily ability that the prophets have. Their descriptions of these experiences highlight the ecstasy of interacting with the divine and the fear associated with the demonic, suggesting that their bodies have the capacity to produce both experiences despite the potential risks related to the demonic state.

The similarities between divine and demonic possessions were primarily visible in the physical symptoms present in the body, and these symptoms could also show the gendered nature of possessions. Both divine and demonic possessed women would enter ‘into immobile and insensible trance states, and [claimed] special gifts such as xenoglossia or prophetic knowledge’<sup>62</sup> One of the key aspects recorded in both divine and demonic

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<sup>61</sup> She refers specifically to ‘trances, levitations, catatonic seizures or other forms of bodily rigidity, miraculous elongation or enlargement of parts of the body, swellings of sweet mucus in the throat (sometimes known as the “globus hystericus”) and ecstatic [nosebleeds, which] are seldom if at all reported of male saints, but are quite common in the vitae of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women.’ Caroline W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 186.

<sup>62</sup> Caciola, Sluhovsky. "Spiritual," 6.

possessions is the use of voice to communicate. In the Preface to Anna Trapnel's *Cry of a Stone*, the relator acknowledges the importance of the voice in utterances of prophecy, noting that 'anything that pretends to be a Witness, a Voice, or a Message from God to this Nation, shall not be held unworthy the hearing and consideration of any, because it is administered by a simple and unlikely hand'.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding demonic possession, Zacharias Vicecomes compiled a list of symptoms of possession by evil spirits in *Complementum Artis Exorcistae* (1619) that includes some of the following signs: 'They answer questions angrily in a loud, quarrelsome voice [and] They say many things whose meaning it is impossible to decipher.'<sup>64</sup> These symptoms show the importance of voice because it is used as a symptomatic marker of demonic possession. These types of symptoms are represented in multiple records, appearing, for example, in *A true narration of the strange and greuous vexation by the Devil, of 7. persons in Lancashire* (1600).<sup>65</sup> The use of vulgar language that is more animalistic than human suggests a lack of femininity or at least a lack of certain attributes that would have been considered feminine and appropriate for women in the early modern period. It is through the voice that a shift in gendered identity can be perceived when these female prophets' voices move from feminine to animal to masculine.

The voice acts as a conduit between the immaterial and the material, allowing the spirit to take possession of the body, controlling the voice and using it as a means to enter the physical world. John Vesling explains in *The Anatomy of The Body of Man* (1653) how the voice is created within the body, thanks to 'the Wind-pipe called *Trachaea* and *Aspera Arteria* conduceth much to the perfecting of the Office of the Lungues, being the channel by

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<sup>63</sup> Anna Trapnel, *The Cry of a Stone* (London: S.N., 1654), unnumbered Preface entitled: 'To all the wise Virgins in Sion, who are for the work of the day, and wait for the Bride-grooms coming,' My emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Zacharias Vicecomes, *Complementum Artis Exorcistae*, in *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary History*, ed. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, 46-48 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 47.

<sup>65</sup> John Darrel, *A true narration of the strange and greuous vexation by the Devil, of 7. persons in Lancashire* (England?: Imprinted [by the English secret press?], 1600), 17.

which we draw air by inspiration, and by expiration cast out fuliginous vapors, and form voice and speech'.<sup>66</sup> The voice is the primary channel through which the message from divine or demonic origins is conveyed. In prophecy, the voice 'speaks for another voice too remote from human words and wisdom to ever make a connection with us in any other way but through the chosen prophet's *persona*.'<sup>67</sup> The message the prophet delivers is encoded within the prophet's (or the demoniac's) vocal identity.

Early modern physiognomists recognised that vocal identity carried different meanings depending on the kind of voices used by speakers.<sup>68</sup> In *Voice and Books in the English Renaissance*, Jennifer Richards highlights how Renaissance physiognomies held that a person's voice, tone or pitch could give clues to a person's character.<sup>69</sup> Renaissance humanists had at their disposal several classical traditions that placed a high value on the voice. According to Aristotle, 'Now voice is a kind of sound of an ensouled thing. For none of the things without soul gives voice.'<sup>70</sup> For example, Thomas Hill suggests in *Physiognomies* (1613) that a big voice denotes that 'the sound of words perceiued very corrupt: is an apparent note of a franticke Creature, iniurious, and a glutton' or that a voice which is 'decerned small, soft in the hearing, and in a broken manner, doth witsse a womanly fearfulnessse to consist in that Creature, and to be effeminate.'<sup>71</sup> Changes in voice during prophecy or possession would have been noted as significant indicators of a shift in a person's character or identity. Lyndal Roper has given many details on demonic

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<sup>66</sup> Johann Vesling, *The Anatomy of The Body of Man* (London: Peter Cole, 1653), 44.

<sup>67</sup> Jan Wojcik and Raymond-Jean Frontain, *Poetic Prophecy in Western Literature* (Plainsboro, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984), 13.

<sup>68</sup> For more on this see Martin H. Porter, *Windows of the Soul: Physiognomy in European Culture 1470-1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> Jennifer Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance: A New History of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 82.

<sup>70</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima - On the Soul*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1986), 103.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Hill, *A Pleasant History Declaring the Whole Art of Phisiognomy Orderly Vttering all the Speciall Parts of Man, from the Head to the Foot* (London: W. Iaggard, 1613), 133-134.

possessions, notably highlighting the change in voice of one possessed woman who experienced

[T]he Devil [speaking] through [her] body in a male voice, spitting at them all and screaming ... Possession becomes a kind of hypermasculine caricature, as she displays all the emblems of the classic male vices—drinking, hunting, swearing and whoring.<sup>72</sup>

The contrast made between a male versus a female voice suggests that possession is a gendered experience that sees women shift from their feminine identity to one that is ‘hypermasculine’ or, as stated previously, into an animalistic state.

The move away from femininity then allows the female body to speak out in ways that it otherwise would not be allowed to do, transgressing gendered social boundaries. Trapnel would often display ‘shifts in voice and attitude, [and had a] tendency to burst out in song and hymn’.<sup>73</sup> In *The Cry of a Stone*, a passage describes how Trapnel finished singing ‘a Song, in three or four of the last words, in the last verse, her voice sunk into her breast, that they could not be understood, like the words of a man falling asleep.’<sup>74</sup> Here, we see the gendered implication of her changing states, where her voice seems more like a man’s when prophesying. Anna Trapnel was heard to be speaking words that were ‘like the words of a man falling asleep’.<sup>75</sup> Trapnel’s use of a male voice in an altered state gives authority to her utterances that her feminine voice would not have achieved.

Equally, Ann Bathurst describes divine possession by stating, that ‘that Birth of Power seemeth so Large & Masculine fform, Larger by far than my own fform; that sure to have That born in & thrô me’.<sup>76</sup> Bathurst specifies the male gender of the spirit possessing her, and this spiritual joining together of male and female suggests ‘a spiritual pregnancy

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<sup>72</sup> Roper, *Oedipus*, 190-191.

<sup>73</sup> Font, *Women’s*, 129.

<sup>74</sup> Trapnel, *The Cry*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, my emphasis.

<sup>76</sup> Ann Bathurst, *MS Rawl. D. 1262 - Spiritual Diary* (Oxford, Bodleian: Unpublished manuscript), 426. See also Font, *Women’s*, 181-182.

that brims with sensual overtones.’<sup>77</sup> The shift from a female to a male voice allows female prophets to transgress the normative rules for speech and deportment that they were expected to observe, allowing them the ability to comport themselves with more freedom. Women prophets were ‘[c]onfined to an obscure existence, without property, official power, or political status, visionary women supposedly experienced a sense of freedom and self-realization when they spoke in public.’<sup>78</sup> Women were instructed not to ‘speak in the Church by permission, but by commandment, whereas it is permitted unto Men at times to speak in the Church by permission’.<sup>79</sup> Yet, while their voice becomes more male, their bodies themselves experience a heightened femininity.

Eroticised spiritualism in Western Christianity is not a new concept and female prophets in the medieval period highlighted the soul-body dynamic through means of sensual descriptions of their experiences. In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Caroline Walker Bynum details how several medieval mystics ‘regularly speak of tasting God, of kissing him deeply, of going into his heart or entrails, of being covered by his blood.’<sup>80</sup> For example, Julian of Norwich notes that ‘God is nerer to vs. þan owre owne soule. for he is grounde in whom oure soule stondyth. and he is mene þat kepith þe substance & the sensualyte togeder’.<sup>81</sup> She illustrates her connection to God by means of sensual language to highlight the proximity of the fleshly to the spiritual. When discussing medieval women’s visionary experiences, such as Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich, Bynum notes that these women ‘hopelessly blur the line between spiritual or psychological, on the one hand, and

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<sup>77</sup> Font, *Women’s*, 181.

<sup>78</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*, 88.

<sup>79</sup> George Keith, *The Woman-preacher of Samaria; a Better Preacher, and More Sufficiently Qualified to Preach Than Any of the Men-preachers of the Man-made-Ministry in These Three Nations* (London: S.N., 1674), 23-24. See also Phyllis Mack, "Women," 27.

<sup>80</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 190.

<sup>81</sup> Translated as: ‘God is nearer to us than our own soul, for he is the ground in whom our soul stands, and he is the means that keeps the substance and the sensuality together so that it shall never depart.’ Translation and quotation from Julia B. Holloway, *Julian Among the Books: Julian of Norwich's Theological Library* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 238.

bodily or even sexual on the other.’<sup>82</sup> The connection between female sexual organs and altered states of consciousness is a lexicon that early modern women prophets inherited from their medieval predecessors.

Sexual language is also used in records of female demonic possession. *The Malleus Maleficarum* dedicates a whole chapter to detail how witches ‘perform carnal acts with incubi in order to bond with evil spirits.’<sup>83</sup> Another passage highlights the interest demons have in female sexual organs who attack ‘the witch in her private parts [...], if her body is in a state of readiness for impregnation, if he can, without difficulty, get hold of semen which has been detached from a man, he does not hesitate to assault her with it in order to infect her offspring.’<sup>84</sup> The interest demons have in a witch’s womb suggests this body part is of importance in cases of possession. Similarly, Jean Bodin describes how, in cases of possession, spirits will communicate either through the stomach or ‘through the shameful part’, meaning the female sexual organs.<sup>85</sup> In cases of demonic possession, the bodily manifestations often presented themselves ‘through swelling [of bellies]’ and ‘it made sense for [a demon] to take up residence in the space that could stretch to accommodate a child’, which is the womb.<sup>86</sup> The records of the possession of the Muschamp family (1650) further demonstrate this interest in this area of the body. The witch accused of causing the possession is described as desirous of ‘[consuming] the child that Mistress Moore had last in her womb, but the Lord would not allow it.’<sup>87</sup> The fact that it was the child that was most recently ‘in her womb’ suggests not only that there is a connection to the female gender but that this is a valued bodily organ in spiritual terms.

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<sup>82</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 190

<sup>83</sup> Kramer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Maxwell-Stuart, 139-145.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-143.

<sup>85</sup> Bodin, *La Démonomanie*, 165 L3. My translation of: ‘Par les parties honteuses’.

<sup>86</sup> Brogan, “His Belly,” 7.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Moore, *Wonderful News from the North. Or, a true relation of the sad and grievous torments, Inflicted on the Bodies of three Children of Mr George Muschamp* (London: T.H., 1650), 25.

Despite the haziness created between these boundaries during altered states, the prophets examined here are specific in their articulation of their bodily experience and their occurrence within the womb. The nature of their spiritual experiences is felt specifically in the sexual organs in both literal and figurate terms. Jane Lead describes her state of divine possession at the beginning of *A Fountain of Gardens*

This Voice came, saying, Behold I am God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, whom thou hast been enquiring after; I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as *Rebecca* was unto *Jacob*, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again.<sup>88</sup>

Lead's understanding of the prophecy she received is that it came from 'God's Eternal *Virgin-Wisdom*' and specifies that 'deep Wisdom' comes forth 'out of [her] Womb'. This language highlights the femininity that is inherent in the process of proclaiming prophetic utterances. Diane Purkiss comments on this feature, stating that 'in these maternal metaphors, there is an underlying linkage between female reproduction and the production of the Word of God.'<sup>89</sup> Lead seems to be speaking figurately with her assessment of the Word of God coming from her womb. However, Ann Bathurst gives a more literal description. When in an altered state she explains how 'I stood in all pure Skie ober my head and under my feet a very pure whiteneß: and I felt such a sweet flowing into my bowells & stomack [...] I found it food to the soul, spiritual manna, -[which] flowed into my mouth'.<sup>90</sup> Here, Bathurst suggests that the stomach and bowels are the space from which the power, or 'spiritual manna', is drawn to achieve an altered state.

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<sup>88</sup> Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens* (London: J. Bradford, 1696), 18.

<sup>89</sup> Diane Purkiss, "Producing the Voice, Consuming the Body: Women Prophets of the Seventeenth Century," in *Women, Writing, History, 1640-1740*, eds. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman, 139-158 (London: Batsford, 1992), 53.

<sup>90</sup> Bathurst, *1262*, 77.

Similarly, Eleanor Davies describes how virginal power arises in the ‘bowels and belly’

The *Celestiall Woman* clothed with the Sun, ... the Suns entring in *Virgo*, the bowels and belly: Shewing the time of the Churches great deliverance, about Michaelmas to give her enemies for ever the overthrowe <sup>91</sup>

Here, Davies suggests that ‘the season of Virgo, the astrological sign of the virgin, was a time of prophetic consequence’.<sup>92</sup> Her choice to call herself a virgin, despite already being a mother and a wife, is then done to align herself with the power inherent in this state. However, she connects this state to her bowels and belly instead of her womb. This conflation could occur because the location of the womb was ambiguous during the early modern period. It was believed that it ‘is not fixed and immoveable, but moveable [...and] some women do affirm that it ascends as high as their Stomack.’<sup>93</sup> This travelling womb echoes King Lear’s comment: ‘*Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow’ (II.II.247). King Lear suggests the womb is ‘climbing’ or, in other words, moving inside his body, as I have discussed in chapter one.

Equally, the *OED*’s definition of ‘womb’ suggests a conflation of the terms womb/stomach, specifically in spiritual usage. In biblical use, it can refer to ‘the stomach as the seat of the feelings and affections, the heart, the soul.’<sup>94</sup> There is also a conflation of the terms bowel/womb in biblical texts as well. Psalm 71 reads, ‘Vpon thee haue I bene staided from the / wombe: thou art he that toke me out of / my mothers bowels’.<sup>95</sup> Calvin comments

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<sup>91</sup> Lady Eleanor Davies, *Prophetic Writings of Lady Eleanor Davies*, ed. Esther S. Cope (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 110.

<sup>92</sup> Esther S. Cope, *Handmaid of the Holy Spirit: Dame Eleanor Davies, Never Soe Mad a Ladie* (Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan Press, 1992) 100.

<sup>93</sup> John Pechey, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice Enlarged, in the Most Weighty and High Concernments of the Birth of Man* (London: H. Rhodes, J. Philips, J. Taylor, and K. Bentley, 1698), 39.

<sup>94</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “womb, n., sense 2.b”, September 2023.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2306049980>>

<sup>95</sup> Psalm 139: 6 (GNV, 1560).

on this by further noting ‘the coming out of our moothers womb should be an enterance into a thousand deaths.’<sup>96</sup> Despite the Psalm using both the terms ‘womb’ and ‘bowels’, Calvin underscores the use of the word ‘womb’. He later equally uses the term ‘bowell’ to refer to the womb in his commentary on Psalm 139 when he notes ‘God shapeth us euen in our mothers bowels.’<sup>97</sup> This conflation might not exist in early modern anatomical treatises, but there is an implied synonymy between these terms when used in spiritual language.<sup>98</sup>

Ann Bathurst further highlights the womb when she states that the work of spirit is a threefold process which begins as

[A] conception in the womb from whence all arises & so to the heart the seat of wisdom & when to the head the divine understanding. Knowledge is conceived in the womb & communicates to the heart wisdom; & wisdom communicates to the head understanding, each leaving a portion in the conception & conceivable powers.<sup>99</sup>

The choice to use the word ‘conceive’ when describing how knowledge is formed in the womb suggests that the information received is specifically feminine. The womb is, therefore, a place of spiritual importance, a notion previously explored in the first chapter of this thesis, but more than this, it holds the power that allows these altered states to manifest since it is the place ‘whence all arise’ and where ‘knowledge is conceived’. It is initiatory in the process of achieving states of prophecy and receiving divine knowledge.

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<sup>96</sup> Jean Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and Others. with M. John Caluins Commentaries - Part I* (London: Thomas East and Henry Middelton, 1571), 266v.

<sup>97</sup> Jean Calvin, *The Psalmes of David and Others. with M. John Caluins Commentaries - Part II* (London: Thomas East and Henry Middelton, 1571), 231v.

<sup>98</sup> In *Mikrokosmographia* Helkiah Crooke describes the bowels as ‘THE inferior or lower belly consisteth of two sorts of parts; one called Continent or Contayning and investing parts, the other parts Contained. The inuesting or Contayning parts which properly make the *Abdomen*, (for they hide and conceale the bowels or entralles and the guttes scituated in this lower belly, called therefore of the greekes [...], that is, aboue the belly).’ See Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 65.

<sup>99</sup> Ann Bathurst, *MS Rawl. D 1263. - Spiritual Diary* (Oxford, Bodleian: Unpublished manuscript), 6, July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

According to Bathurst, this knowledge then moves from the womb to the heart and finally the head. Jane Lead also describes the womb as a ‘hiding Place of Strength’.<sup>100</sup> She states that it

Must be till it hath attained every measure and part, to the growing big, and filling up the Birth’s place, with Breasts full of Milk, the Spring Word of the Spirit diffusing into them, the natural course of the Blood Issue of Sin also stopping, all which will be evident Signs unto you, that are still apt to be questioning, whether this Ghostly Birth is in you forming.<sup>101</sup>

There is a double-edged nature to the womb which is a place capable of ‘the Blood Issue of Sin’ as well as a place capable of generating divine prophecies. Indeed, ‘Whether menstruation is a metaphor for sin, or a sign of sin’s workings within, its disavowal as sin works not only to valorize pregnancy, but also to position the reproductively able female body as a source of pollution.’<sup>102</sup> Gail Kern Paster’s postulates in *Humoring the Body* that menstrual blood is ‘produced by the liver, flows to the womb [and ...] this redistribution [...] would probably be understood as particularly damaging, given the excremental associations of menstrual blood in general and of suppressed menses in particular.’<sup>103</sup> In chapter six, I will return to discuss the corrupting and purifying effects of menstrual blood and breastmilk, which were both believed to originate in the womb.

Menstruation is relevant here because it demonstrates the duality in women’s bodies, which demonstrates how the womb can lift the female body to divine altered states of consciousness while also making it capable of contamination. This organ sits at the threshold between a ‘hiding place of strength’ and a location capable of polluting women and creating sin, highlighting the duality inherent in this bodily organ. Because the womb allows women to connect to demonic spirits just as it can also bring forth ‘God’s Eterneal Virgin-Wisdom’

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<sup>100</sup> Lead, *A Fountain*, 440.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>102</sup> Purkiss, "Producing," 152.

<sup>103</sup> Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 92.

in altered states, it demarcates itself as a liminal space between God and the Devil, between the divine and the demonic while also being a liminal space between the corporeal and the spiritual, while being both simultaneously.

While I have compared these women's prophetic experiences to records of demonic possession, I have not yet shown how these prophets feared moving into a demonic altered state themselves. Several of the prophets examined in this chapter describe this potential or were accused of experiencing demonic rather than divine states. Anna Trapnel records several moments where she feels 'Satan and [her] fearful nature joyned together'.<sup>104</sup> She states for example that 'therefore go not thy journey, said Satan, for that extraordinary dispensation of prayer and singing shall not be with thee'.<sup>105</sup> She feels she was 'being forced by *Sathan* to walk up and down the fields, attempting to throw my self into a Well.' She also mentions that she wishes to commit suicide and avoids food because she was afraid she might 'worshippest the Devil'.<sup>106</sup> Her description of 'being forced' by Satan and her desire to commit suicide as a consequence of receiving messages from the Devil are important because they suggest she did not desire to have a demonic experience.

This ability to receive demonic messages presented a danger for Trapnel who had to legitimise her utterances. Katherine Hodgkin has commented that Trapnel needed to 'be validated not only by her own condition, but also by the clearly biblical foundations and public significance of the visions themselves, and the socially worthy witnesses of her trance who testify to its reality.'<sup>107</sup> Trapnel was not always successful in her justification of the origin of her trances and was accused of witchcraft as a consequence. She notes in *Report and Plea* that

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<sup>104</sup> Anna Trapnel, *Anna Trapnel's Report and Plea* (London: Thomas Brewster, 1654), 3.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Trapnel, *The Cry*, 8.

<sup>107</sup> Hodgkin, "Reasoning with Unreason," 225.

*England's Rulers and Clergie do judge the Lords hand-maid to be mad, and under the administration of evil angels, and a witch, and many other evil terms they raise up to make me odious, and abhorr'd in the hearts of good and bad, that do not know me.*<sup>108</sup>

She goes on to state that members of the clergy ‘stood at the Chamber door talking against me, and said, *She speaks non-sence*’.<sup>109</sup> She also relays how she was threatened with a ‘great pin [...] used to thrust into witches’ to test if she was in fact a witch.<sup>110</sup>

Equally, Eleanor Davies is also accused of ‘devellish practizes in her pretended prophecies’.<sup>111</sup> Diane Watt notes that Davies ‘was brought before the High Commission: the charges laid against her included that she had dared to interpret Scripture (“which much unbeseemed her Sex”) and that she had falsely claimed to have received prophetic revelation.’<sup>112</sup> Women’s prophetic experiences are described in turn as either insanity, possession, or witchcraft, and these descriptions ‘demonstrate the failure of the rulers and clergy to understand what is really happening: their worldly knowledge cannot encompass the spiritual dimensions of [these] visions.’<sup>113</sup> These women prophets are unable to openly express their bodily capacity for preternatural experiences because this ability is dangerous and it puts them at risk of accusations of witchcraft or insanity.

This risk existed because their symptoms were similar to those of demonic possession and witchcraft. I am therefore not suggesting that the prophets are necessarily choosing to move between divine and demonic states, but rather that their bodies allow this possibility. Because the womb is capable of connecting with demonic states just as it can

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<sup>108</sup> Trapnel, *Anna Trapnel's Report*, section: To The Reader.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>111</sup> Cope, *Handmaid*, 71. Cope is quoting a letter to ‘the English resident at Hague, Sir William Boswell [who] received a dispatch from Whitehall ... [which] did not state the opinions of individual commissioners; instead, it provided a summary of their assessment of Lady Eleanor.’

<sup>112</sup> Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 118.

<sup>113</sup> Hodgkin, “Reasoning with Unreason,” 230.

also bring forth ‘God’s Eterneal Virgin-Wisdom’,<sup>114</sup> it demarcates this body part as a liminal space that is spiritually important. The womb becomes not only the place where souls come into the world or exit it prematurely through miscarriages and stillbirths as stated in the first chapter. It is also a space where ‘spiritual manna’<sup>115</sup> allows a divine or demonic altered state to occur, which highlights the singularity of this organ.

### 3.4. The State of the Soul in Women’s Prophetic Experiences

The liminality of the womb is further proven by its capacity to act as a transient location between our world and the next. The language used to describe states of prophecy suggests that the souls of women can also leave their bodies during prophecy to visit other locations. Jane Lead describes herself as ‘an empty vessel’ capable of being filled and Eleanor Davies notes that she was ‘no longer ... merely wife and mother; she was Daniel’s handmaid, a *vessel* for the Word of God.’<sup>116</sup> The use of the word ‘vessel’ implies that the body can act as a host capable of accepting a spirit within itself. However, Lead precedes this word with the word ‘empty’, suggesting that something has first been removed from the body before it can act as a vessel. This description is then like Trapnel’s, who states that she is a ‘poore carcasse’, implying that her spirit has gone from her body as there is only a corpse left behind.<sup>117</sup> Ann Bathurst characterises the experiences in a comparable manner when she questions ‘how then can I be the Case to such a fform, till I be no more’.<sup>118</sup> This statement suggests her soul is absent, while her body remains simply a ‘case’. Therefore, the body can be understood as a receptacle of sorts left empty during these altered states.

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<sup>114</sup> Lead, *A Fountain*, 18.

<sup>115</sup> Bathurst, *1262*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> Cope, *Handmaid*, 42, my emphasis and Lead, *A Fountain*, 169.

<sup>117</sup> Trapnel, *The Cry*, 49 and Lead, *A Fountain*, 169.

<sup>118</sup> Font, *Women’s*, 182.

If a prophet's body is empty during these experiences, the question remains where the soul goes in ecstatic states. The word 'ecstasy' suggests what happens to the souls of women who experience these altered states. In Greek, 'ecstasy' means "to put out of place," and it was commonly used [...] to describe the soul separating from the body in a trance state.<sup>119</sup> John Smith comments on the separation of body and soul in his *Select Discourses* (1660), stating '*Ecstasies* did *Plotinus* find his own Soul separated from his Body.'<sup>120</sup> The act of prophecy is a means for the prophet's soul to leave her body during these experiences. Jane Lead describes how she wishes to leave her body behind, noting 'O what Raptures of Love's Divine did I feel, ardently desiring a Dissolution from my own Creaturely Being.'<sup>121</sup> Her 'creaturely being' refers to her body, which she wishes to leave behind or be 'dissolved' from in order to experience divine ecstasy. The word 'creaturely' also echoes Antigonus's description of Hermione's out-of-body experience in *The Winter's Tale*, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

Thomas Traherne discusses a similar relationship between the body and soul in his poetry. For example, in 'Thanksgivings for the Body' (1699), he notes how God's 'Raptures ravish me, and turn my soul all into melody' and further describes

To those Affections which in Souls arise;  
All holy Glories from the Soul redound,  
And in the Body by the Soul abound,  
Are felt within, and ravish ev'ry Sense, (lines 10-13).<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Jan Purnis, "Bodies and Selves: Autopsy, Out-of-Body Experiences, Mind-Wandering and Early Modern Consciousness," in *Shakespeare and Consciousness*, eds. Paul Budra and Clifford Werier, 191-213 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 199.

<sup>120</sup> John Smith, *Select Discourses* (London: J. Flesher, for W. Morden, 1660), 100.

<sup>121</sup> Jane Lead, *The Ascent to The Mount of Vision Where Many Things were Shewn* (London: S.N., 1699), 79.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas Traherne, "Thanksgivings for the Body," in *The Works of Thomas Traherne: Church's Year-Book; Meditations and Devotions from the Resurrection to all Saints' Day; A Serious and Pathetical Contemplation of the Mercies of God in Several most Devout and Sublime Thanksgivings for the Same [Meditations on the Six Days of the Creation]*. ed. Jan Ross. (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2009).

Traherne is an ‘ecstatic celebrant of God's beneficence and man's infinity; he already delights in the beauty of this world as a testimony of the glory of God and rejoices in his fellow men who manifest the same qualities as himself.’<sup>123</sup> These lines highlight the relationship between body and soul that is heightened during ecstatic experiences.

Ann Bathurst equally describes the soul’s progress through the body before being removed from it. In manuscript 1262, Bathurst states that ‘I perfectly felt a Touch on the top of my head, [which] drew my spirit out of me, as you [...] draw a - knife or sword out of a sheath, & it cut as it was drawn forth, I felt it cut like a two-edged sword.’<sup>124</sup> Not only does this passage highlight the process Bathurst believes the soul experiences in altered states, but it also suggests the bodily location of the exit through the top of the head. Bathurst’s description of an empty sheath is like Lead’s ‘empty vessel’ analogy, and once removed from the confines of its sheath or vessel, the soul is able to roam freely and take flight away from its body.

It is during these flights that the soul can experience other realms that are beyond Earth. Miranda Anderson discusses the concept of human extension in *The Renaissance Extended Mind* by noting that extension occurred ‘not only through the body and material world, as in current EM theories, but also through the mind’s ability to extend via intellectual flights, which were generally believed to be humans’ most god-like quality.’<sup>125</sup> The extension can be seen in the female prophets who also take flight beyond the borders of their bodies. Bathurst describes how she ‘mounted up to see Jesus’ and ‘descended again to Paradise. She further notes, ‘I desired to see God the Father again, and the Elders in Heaven [with] their Crowns; and I desired also to sitt [with] Them [with] a Crown on my head. and

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<sup>123</sup> Sharon C. Seeling, "The Origins of Ecstasy: Traherne's Select Meditations," *English Literary Renaissance* 9, no. 3 (1979): 419-431, 420.

<sup>124</sup> Lead, *The Ascent*, 10.

<sup>125</sup> Miranda Anderson, *The Renaissance Extended Mind* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 72.

I did so.’<sup>126</sup> Bathurst also describes visiting hell, and calls it ‘a dark smoaking furnace [... which] comprehended no light.’<sup>127</sup> The simplicity with which Bathurst is able to travel to heaven and hell purely suggests that it is possible to visit multiple otherworldly locations by simply wishing to do so.

This ability to experience both exalted realms as well as demonic realms echoes Anna Trapnel’s comment that she fears ‘Satan and [her] fearful nature joyned together’.<sup>128</sup> Much like Trapnel, Bathurst also fears demonic states. She describes worrying over her own sinfulness: ‘my whole life was like an act of sin, and that Hell was to receive me; I said I had deserved the hottest place of it: and I saw Hell open to me, a great black dark pit’.<sup>129</sup> These experiences echo the descriptions of witch’s flight such as in *The Malleus Maleficarum* which describes how a man ‘watched a woman [and] saw her anoint herself and then fall asleep. On waking, she maintained she had gone flying’.<sup>130</sup> This ability to take flight further demonstrates the liminal state of the female body that allows women to access both heaven or hell during these altered states of consciousness.

For the female mystics explored in this chapter, the risk of reaching hell suggests their sinfulness and potential to be seen as witches, willingly associating with the devil. Bathurst fears her ability to vacillate between both the divine and demonic will prevent her salvation. She states, ‘I did verily believe God was able to save me, though I was at the very brink of Hell just a going in; but whither God was willing to save me, this I feared’.<sup>131</sup> This comment is dangerous because if a woman had ‘supernatural encounters without being in trance [she] is too easily seen as colluding with (rather than yielding to) overwhelming and

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<sup>126</sup> Bathurst, *1262*, 11.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>128</sup> Trapnel, *Anna Trapnel's Report*, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Bathurst, *1262*, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Kramer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Maxwell-Stuart, 134.

<sup>131</sup> Bathurst, *1262*, 4.

mysterious forces, which may readily become demonic.<sup>132</sup> Bathurst expresses this fear of the demonic when visiting a dangerous territory such as hell. However, she concludes the passages, by acknowledging that God will save her

For God came in by a mighty hand & a strong arm, and pulled me out of the claws of Sathan, & brought me from the Gates of Hell. and then - considering how the Lord spake peace & silenced all my doubtings, and how He freely accepted me, and also the raptures of joy I then had.<sup>133</sup>

This passage allows Bathurst to exonerate herself from any potential accusations of witchcraft because she is suggesting that God has already intervened and deemed her worthy of salvation.

This capacity to soul-travel also suggests the possibility of interacting with the dead. Bathurst states, 'I remembered two little children [which] died one at fourteen weeks, the other at fourteen days end; and immediately as soon as I began to desire it they came'.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Davies recalls a dream in which she interacts with her deceased grandson: 'included a poetic account of her own sad dream [...] of a child beheaded for treason and women who tried to quit the head'.<sup>135</sup> The female prophets cannot only see the landscapes of heaven and hell when their souls take flight, but they can also interact with spirits residing in these locations. However, during a time of religious upheaval, this ability would be problematic. Bathurst and Davies suggest they can interact with the dead, regardless of whether the deceased reside in heaven, hell or purgatory. Yet, the abolition of purgatory surrounded the afterlife with ambiguity and created uncertainty about where spirits reside after death.

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<sup>132</sup> Hodgkin, "Reasoning with Unreason," 225.

<sup>133</sup> Bathurst, *1262*, 5.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>135</sup> Cope, Esther S. "'Dame Eleanor Davies Never Soe Mad A Ladie'?" *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1987): 132-144, 139, referencing Manuscripts: *Sion's Lamentation* and HEH, Hastings Manuscripts HA 2 3 3 7.

During the Reformation, the status of purgatory was in flux, and exploration of the Americas led to the reconceptualisation of Earth's geography, as well as heaven and hell's locations.<sup>136</sup> For most of the seventeenth century, hell was believed to be at the centre of the earth, with one of its entrances being on Mount Hecla in Iceland.<sup>137</sup> Edmund Bohun describes Hecla in *A Geographical Dictionary* (1688) as 'a burning Mountain in *Island*, near the City *Schalholt*, in the South part of the Isle. The natives call it, *one of the mouths of Hell*.'<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, developments in astronomy led to the skies becoming 'an arena of ideological contention.'<sup>139</sup> In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Raphael urges Adam not to question the geography of heaven, stating God 'Placed heaven from earth so far, that earthly sight, / If it presume, might err in things too high, / And no advantage gain.' (Milton, VIII.120-122)<sup>140</sup> The gradual abandonment of the Ptolemaic system in favour of a heliocentric universe left heaven in a perturbed state.<sup>141</sup> Despite these changes, the prophets explored in this chapter suggest they possess the ability to visit a realm beyond the physical world.

Their ability to travel to hell and interact with the dead echoes Aeneas's visit to the Underworld in Virgil's epic poem. In the medieval and early modern period 'the Virgilian Underworld was prized for its revelation of the mysteries of the universe.'<sup>142</sup> In *The Aeneid*, this realm is accessed through a cave, which is described 'with jagged pebbles underfoot and a gaping mouth guarded by dark woods and the black waters of a lake. No bird could wing

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<sup>136</sup> Kristen Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>137</sup> Martin Korenjak, "Why Mountains Matter: Early Modern Roots of a Modern Notion," *Renaissance Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2017): 179-219, 189, 195.

<sup>138</sup> Edmund Bohun, *A Geographical Dictionary, Representing the Present and Ancient Names of All the Countries, Provinces, Remarkable Cities ...: And Rivers of the Whole World: Their Distances, Longitudes and Latitudes* (London: Charles Brome, 1688), 186. See also Poole, *Supernatural*, 95-135.

<sup>139</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Time's Purpled Masquers: Stars and the Afterlife in Renaissance English Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>140</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>141</sup> Fowler, *Time's Purpled Masquers*: 39-40.

<sup>142</sup> Philip R. Hardie, *The Last Trojan Hero: A Cultural History of Virgil's Aeneid* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 31.

its flight over this cave and live' (Virgil, VI.239-241).<sup>143</sup> Only landmarks describe the entrance to Hades, and the text 'provides hardly any information about the routes; therefore readers have no chance of acquiring configurational knowledge of underworld space.'<sup>144</sup>

In *Paradise Lost*, which was inspired by Virgil's text, Milton describes hell as 'In utter darkness, and their portion set / As far removed from God and light of Heav'n / As from the center thrice to th' utmost pole.' (I. 71-74) Like *The Aeneid*, Milton's epic uses mysterious language to describe this space. Indeed, 'it is hard to find [...] an edition of *Paradise Lost* that includes any diagrams of Milton's hell. Its topography is simply too elusive for such treatment.'<sup>145</sup> In *De Doctrina Christiana* (1660),<sup>146</sup> Milton further comments on location, stating 'it is unlikely that hell should be prepared within the world, and in the bowels of an earth not yet cursed.'<sup>147</sup> The fact that female prophets' souls could visit the afterlife while still alive posed a threat to the theological and geographical narratives of the time. Female prophets who were members of 'radical groups, such as the Fifth Monarchists, were putting forward apocalyptic visions directly challenging religious and

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<sup>143</sup> Virgil. *The Aeneid*, trans. David West (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>144</sup> Péter Hajdu, "Topography and Mappability in Virgil's Underworld Narrative," *Neohelicon* 49, no. 1 (2022): 43-58, 51.

<sup>145</sup> Ronald R. Macdonald, *The Burial-Places of Memory: Epic Underworlds in Vergil, Dante, and Milton* (Amherst, M.A.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 143.

<sup>146</sup> *De Doctrina Christiana* is attributed to John Milton but its authorship has been challenged by some critics. It is used here because it provides value for a historical analysis of the cultural and religious background of the epic. Fabrice Schultz has addressed this matter, stating: 'Although the question of Milton's authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana* was challenged by some critics and deemed inconsistent with canonical works in matters pertaining to religious dogma, notably his views on the Trinity, the Incarnation or the materiality of God (Hunter), other literary critics argued that the text rightfully belonged in the Milton canon (Campbell *et. al*, Lewalski). We believe that even though Milton's authorship remains open to discussion, the value of *De Doctrina Christiana* to provide a historicist analysis of the cultural and religious background of the epic poem remains as valid as that of any other contemporaneous text.' Fabrice Schultz, "'The Hollow Deep of Hell': Infernal Landscapes in Richard Crashaw's 'Sospetto d'Herode' and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*," *17 – 18* 80, (2023): 1-18, note 10.

<sup>147</sup> John Milton, 'De Doctrina Christiana' in *The Complete Works of John Milton, Vol. 8: De Doctrina Christiana, Vol. 2*, eds. John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 893. See also Schultz, "'The Hollow Deep'".

political powers.’<sup>148</sup> While theologians, philosophers, and cartographers debated about the location of the afterlife, the ability these female prophets demonstrate to visit it suggests the subversive nature of their utterances.

Furthermore, the female prophets suggest that these experiences occurred through the female body. Jane Lead references Sophia/Wisdom’s womb when discussing Rebecca’s spiritual motherhood, stating ‘I am to unseal the Treasures of God’s deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as Rebecca was unto Jacob, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again’.<sup>149</sup> Lead not only elevates Rebecca’s spirituality to ‘the role of a spiritual mother comparable to Sophia’, she also ‘adapted the story so that it was applicable to herself. [...] Lead is positioning herself as the child not only of Sophia but also of Rebecca.’<sup>150</sup> This conflation shows the importance of the womb in Lead’s spiritual motherhood. Ann Bathurst also comments that ‘Knowledge is conceived in the womb’.<sup>151</sup> It is because of the female body that this knowledge is received. The womb allows women to experience realms beyond their earthly existence, something that the educated male class cannot do. According to these female prophets, the womb is the means through which they can transgress multiple boundaries from female spaces into male-educated ones, from earthly spaces to divine and demonic spaces, and from ordinary to ecstatic states of prophecy.

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<sup>148</sup> Debra Parish, "Anna Trapnel: Prophet or Witch?" in *Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Lisa Hopkins and Aidan Norrie, 113-136 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 118. See also Paul Salzman, *Reading Early Modern Women's Writing*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>149</sup> Lead, *A Fountain*, 18.

<sup>150</sup> Julie Hirst, "'Mother of Love": Spiritual Maternity in the Works of Jean Lead (1624–1704)," in *Women, Gender, and Radical Religion in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sylvia Brown, 161-187 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 169.

<sup>151</sup> Bathurst, *1263*, July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6.

## 4. Gender Fluidity and Metamorphosis in *The Late Lancashire Witches*

### 4.1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I examined the spiritual vocabulary of the womb in prophetic experiences and highlighted how women prophets risked being accused of witchcraft. In this chapter, I focus more clearly on the connection between the womb and witchcraft, specifically exploring metamorphosis on the early modern stage. I examine Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634), which uses corporeal transformation as a literary device to address the limitations women face because of their wombs and, more broadly, because of their gender. By changing into bodies that are not defined by motherhood, such as animals, the witches remove the gender coding from their bodies to exercise greater freedom and power. I argue that the literary depiction of women in this politically motivated play uses metamorphosis to simultaneously demonstrate the witches' ability to subvert patriarchal and social order through their fluid corporeality and demonstrate the fear associated with their bodies.

Women were represented as witches in early modern texts either because of the anxiety surrounding their maternal bodies or because of the concern that they would not submit to their husbands' authority.<sup>1</sup> In *The Malleus Maleficarum*, the association between magical ability and motherhood appears when the author examines the origins of a sorcerer's power. He assumes the magic results from 'the Devil's support, because he had been offered and dedicated to the Devil with a curse by his mother or a midwife.'<sup>2</sup> This passage not only demonstrates the supposed connection between women and the devil but also the vilification

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<sup>1</sup> Raisa Maria Toivo, *Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Society: Finland and the Wider European Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 165.

<sup>2</sup> Kramer, *The Hammer*, Mackay, 377.

of mothers. Deborah Willis has commented that ‘witches were women, I believe, because women are mothers: witchcraft beliefs encode fantasies of maternal persecution.’<sup>3</sup> This persecution is also demonstrated in the *Malleus* quote because it vilifies midwives, who manage childbearing. According to Diane Purkiss ‘the witch is a kind of anti housewife, her own dark Other who causes pollution where there should be order’.<sup>4</sup> She usurps ‘authority over the household in order to misuse it, to invert it.’<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Stuart Clark comments that early modern witchcraft narratives hold potential to analyse ‘sex, gender, and honour in the daily experiences of women, [...and] historians of gender [suggest] seeing them as evocations of the world of the household and the anxieties of motherhood.’<sup>6</sup> Witches represent deviant women who move away from the socially acceptable household sphere to use power outside of its controlled bounds of maternity. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, this deviance is illustrated through metamorphosis, which allows the witches to escape the restrictive bonds that their female bodies imply.

This chapter is unique in its exploration of metamorphosis in relation to both witchcraft and motherhood, as the intersection between these subjects has previously been little addressed by scholars. Deborah Willis examines records of witchcraft trials and demonstrates the influence of class over the representation of witches and their connection to motherhood. Diane Purkiss has also explored witchcraft in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama with an awareness of historical and ‘twentieth-century meanings of witchcraft [...emphasising] domesticity and nurture as constitutive in definitions of good womanhood

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<sup>3</sup> Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Purkiss, "Women's Stories of Witchcraft in Early Modern England: The House, the Body, the Child." *Gender & History* 7, no. 3 (1995): 408-432, 414.

<sup>5</sup> Purkiss, "Women's Stories," 414.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Clark, "Introduction," in *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Stuart Clark, 1-18 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 10-11.

and its inversion.<sup>7</sup> Purkiss does highlight women's bodies in terms of both motherhood and witchcraft, stating

Just as the housewife is involved in the circulation and exchange of goods and gifts with her neighbours, so the witch is involved in similar networks of bodily exchange and transfer of power. Just as the boundaries of the mother's body blur and blend with that of her child, so the witch breaches the protective space around the body with a look, a gift, a touch, a word or a visit.<sup>8</sup>

Purkiss's assessment demonstrates the intertwined definitions of housewife, mother, and witch in early modern texts that also highlight the soul-body connection through these 'networks of bodily exchange'. Her work further investigates these overlapping meanings in several plays, including *The Late Lancashire Witches*, but neither Purkiss nor Willis specifically address metamorphosis or how this type of magic affects the representation of women's embodiment.

Regarding Metamorphosis specifically, Sue Wiseman investigates several forms, such as classical discourse on transformations, sacred metamorphosis, as well as monstrous and werewolf transformations.<sup>9</sup> Her focus is on the 'methodology that allows her to re-historicise the concept of metamorphosis, avoiding a modern separation of early modern material into areas of knowledge separated by disciplines.'<sup>10</sup> This chapter differs from Wiseman's approach because it focuses on the female soul-body dynamic in metamorphosis to determine how women are transformed in Heywood and Brome's play. Carole Walker

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<sup>7</sup> Katherine Hodgkin, "Historians and Witches," *History Workshop Journal*, 45, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 271-277, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 125.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Wiseman, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance: 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Salzman, "Wiseman, Susan, *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance 1550-1700*," *Parergon* 32, no. 2 (2015): 374-375, 374. Wiseman, *Writing Metamorphosis*.

Bynum has equally written on metamorphosis, but her text, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, focuses on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

I will begin this chapter by examining the representation of witches and mothers on the early modern stage before focusing on metamorphosis and its connection to the soul-body dynamic. I will then turn to analyse human-to-animal transformations in Heywood and Brome's text. *The Late Lancashire Witches* subverts gendered hierarchies through metamorphosis, representing bodily and spiritual deviance in the process. This chapter is relevant to the overall direction of the thesis on the soul-body dynamic and motherhood because it examines these topics in a play that uses metamorphosis to challenge women's identity by transforming their bodies into those of animals.

## 4.2. Witchcraft and Motherhood in Early Modern Drama

I will begin this section by exploring how witches were portrayed as maternal figures on the early modern stage. According to Deborah Willis, the witch appears in marginal roles and is often portrayed on the early modern stage as a hybrid created from 'multiple traditions, a composite not only of the village witch, the pamphlet witch, the witch of religious tracts, but also of the fairy-tale witch, the witch of ballads, medieval romance, continental demonological texts, the Bible, and the Greek and Roman classics'.<sup>12</sup> Even in classical texts, motherhood and witchcraft are entwined, notably through the figure of Medea. She is most known for her representation in tragedies by Euripides and Seneca, in which she murders her children after Jason rejects her.<sup>13</sup> She also appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where she

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<sup>11</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2. Matthew Wright, "Making Medea Medea," in *Female Characters in Fragmentary Greek Tragedy*, eds. P. J. Finglass and Lyndsay Coe, 216-243 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 216-243.

murders her two sons as revenge against Jason: ‘With burning of her husband’s bride by witchcraft wreaked had been / And that King Creon’s palace she on blazing fire had seen / And in her own dear children’s blood had bathed her wicked knife’ (VII.501-503). Classical witches such as Medea were adapted in early modern texts as powerful female figures that represented contemporary anxieties about women and their bodies.

John Marston’s *Sophonisba or The Wonder of Women*, (1606) is an example of how an early modern playwright used classical witches as inspiration. In this play, the princess Sophonisba is pursued by both Syphax and Massinissa, but in the opening scene, she marries the latter. Spurred by jealousy, Syphax conjures the witch Erictho to magically force Sophonisba into accepting him. Instead, Erictho tricks Syphax into sleeping with her by taking Sophonisba’s shape. In Act IV, scene I, the transformation is described as: ‘enter ERICTHO in the shape of SOPHONISBA, her face veiled, and hasteth in the bed of SYPHAX’ (IV.I.SD).<sup>14</sup> Yet, Erictho ‘borrows heavily from the classical witch of the same name in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*’ and represents a more conventional display of witchcraft on the early modern stage.<sup>15</sup> Marston follows ‘the pattern, already well established in the Elizabethan theatre, of using witches based on classical models which were far removed from the witch stereotype familiar from trial pamphlets’.<sup>16</sup> Even though Marston’s play does use metamorphosis, it is a fictionalised version of a classical witch. This transformation is different from the portrayal of witches in *The Late Lancashire Witches*. Heywood and Brome’s characters were based on accused witches on trial at the time of the performance, highlighting fears about women and their bodies during the period.

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<sup>14</sup> John Marston, *John Marston's The Wonder of Women or The Tragedy of Sophonisba: A Critical Edition*, ed. William Kemp (Abingdon: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Eric Pudney, *Scepticism and belief in English witchcraft drama, 1538–1681* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2019), 133.

<sup>16</sup> Pudney, *Scepticism*, 132-133.

The plays of the first years of the seventeenth century demonstrate anxiety about the female body in contemporary settings. The Mary Glover witch trial and Edward Jordan's subsequent publication of *The Suffocation of the Mother* in 1603 further entwined witchcraft and motherhood. Jordan suggests that physicians diagnosed hysteria by seeking 'about the Moone for supernaturall causes: ascribing these accidents either to diabolicall possession, to witch-craft, or to the immediate finger of the Almighty.'<sup>17</sup> The witch and the hysterical woman 'existed on a continuum of possible antimothers, alternately figuring the extreme perversion of ideal nurture or the potentially anarchic force of the womb.'<sup>18</sup> This female organ becomes the central focus of the witch, the mother and the hysteric alike, and early modern plays demonstrate this conflation by collapsing these stereotypes into a single character who represents all three.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare demonstrates the stage-witch character through Lady Macbeth.

She states

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me',  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this. (I.VII.54-59)

These lines show her motherhood and her ability for cruelty because she is willing to murder her own child if necessary. Her hysterical traits are also displayed through sleepwalking. The doctor comments 'This disease is beyond my practice: yet I have / known those which have walked in their sleep, who / have died holily in their beds.' (V.I.59-61) Both Lady Macbeth and the Jacobean witch had become hysterics, a scientific phenomenon that displays mental

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<sup>17</sup> Jordan, *A Briefe Discourse*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

anguish and despair.<sup>19</sup> Through Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare displays this overlapping of the witch, mother, and hysteric. Her witch's power is represented as that of 'the wife/mother's power to poison human relatedness at its source.'<sup>20</sup>

Equally, the three witches display a preoccupation with women's household activities in the cauldron scene.<sup>21</sup> They throw ingredients into a cauldron, parodying a cooking recipe. They state, for example, 'Fillet of a fenny snake, / In the cauldron boil and bake' (IV.I. 12-13). Through cooking, the play presents 'other forms of misfeeding, since the purpose of the potion is to produce the prophecies which will deceptively lure Macbeth to his death.'<sup>22</sup> In this manner, Shakespeare inverts the housewifely duties of a mother to serve the witches' malevolent purposes.

Yet, despite their association with mothers, the three witches are also described in terms that distinguish them from a female body or female features. Banquo describes them: 'Upon her skinny lips: you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so' (I.III.45-47). Willis suggests that they still embrace the maternal because 'they are masculine mothers who in effect pursue completeness through a form of hermaphroditism, associating power with breast and phallus but shunning the vulnerability of the vagina.'<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Lady Macbeth demands 'unsex me here' (I.V.41), suggesting her desire to move towards an asexual embodiment. Witch hermaphroditism also appears in *The Late Lancashire Witches* as a consequence of metamorphosis, which I explore later in this chapter. Shakespeare, however, does not transform his witches' bodies; instead, he

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<sup>19</sup> Dymna Callaghan, "Wicked Women in *Macbeth*: A Study of Power, Ideology, and the Production of Motherhood," in *Reconsidering the Renaissance: Papers from the Twenty-First Annual Conference*, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare, 355-369 (Binghamton, N. Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 369.

<sup>20</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 137-138.

<sup>21</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 212.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>23</sup> Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 168. While preference is given to the term 'intersex' in contemporary usage, the early modern period used the term 'hermaphrodite' solely. To avoid implanting twenty-first century practices and terminology into the period, the word 'hermaphrodite' will be used when discussing its usage in the seventeenth century.

describes them in terms that highlight their genderlessness. This asexuality allows the witches to violate gender hierarchy by stepping away from femininity, which echoes the reasons for metamorphosis in Heywood and Brome's play.

Shakespeare returns to questions of motherhood and witchcraft a few years later in *The Tempest* (1611) through the character of Sycorax. Prospero describes her as 'this blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child' and the notes clarify: 'blue eyelids were associated with pregnancy, but also with malevolent women' (I.II.269).<sup>24</sup> For Shakespeare, Sycorax embodies the stereotypical image of the marginalised witch.<sup>25</sup> She also straddles the boundary between witch and mother by moving 'from swollen-bellied mother, [into...] crone: all within 26 years at the most.'<sup>26</sup> In Act V, scene I, Prospero comments on her power: 'His [Caliban's] mother was a witch, and one so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs' (V.I.269-270). This description echoes Medea's speech on the connection between the moon and witchcraft in *Metamorphoses*

Most faithful unto privities, O golden stars, whose light  
Doth jointly with the moon succeed the beams that blaze by day,  
And thou, three-headed Hecate, who knowest best the way  
To compass this our great attempt and art our chiefest stay,  
Ye Charms and witchcrafts and thou earth, which both with herb and  
weed  
Of mighty working furnishes the wizards at their need (VII.259-264)

These lines and the subsequent ones have also been associated with Prospero's monologue to renounce his magic.<sup>27</sup> However, parallels 'between Sycorax and the Ovidian or Senecan Medea' and her 'sorcery [are] an important and justly famous element of *The Tempest*'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*, eds. Alden T. Vaughan, and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 123.

<sup>26</sup> Marina Warner, "'The Foul Witch' and Her 'Freckled Help': Circean Mutations in the New World," in *The Tempest and Its Travels*, eds. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, 97-113 (London: Reaktion, 2000), 97.

<sup>27</sup> Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Despite her portrayal as a strong witch who resembles Medea, there is no indication that Sycorax uses metamorphosis in this play.

Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1613-16), however, presents a malevolent mother-witch character who uses supernatural power to affect her own body. In the first Act, Hecate, the head of a coven of witches, offers her dark magic in service to the non-magical characters. Sebastian asks her to make Antonio impotent the night of his marriage to his love interest, Isabella, and Almachildes asks for a love charm for Amoretta. The next two acts follow these characters and the consequences of Hecate's magic. In Act IV, the witches use transvection to fly through the night sky. This play is relevant to this chapter on metamorphosis because Hecate is described as both a mother and a witch, who uses transvection, which implies the soul-body dynamic through its practice.

Hecate's malevolence is directly tied to both her identity as a mother and a witch. She displays an incestuous relationship with her own son, Firestone. He asks, 'Mother, I pray, give me leave to ramble abroad tonight,' and Hecate responds, 'And who shall lie with me then?' (I.II.95,98).<sup>29</sup> This exchange demonstrates how Hecate's 'monstrous sexual appetite becomes merely another aspect of a malevolent maternal power; Middleton has absorbed the eroticizing tendencies of continental representation [of the witch]'.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, when Sebastian and Almachildes visit her in Act I, she describes using an infant as an ingredient for a transvection ointment: 'There, take this unbaptisèd brat; / Boil it well; preserve the fat / You know 'tis precious to transfer / Our 'noited flesh into the air' (I.II.18-21). The fact that Hecate is willing to use an infant in her magical working suggests her malevolence and specifically how this cruelty is tied to motherhood.

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Middleton, *A Critical Edition of Thomas Middleton's the Witch*, ed. Edward J. A. Esche (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 163.

Furthermore, the use of an infant to create an ointment used for transvection also highlights the connection between motherhood and the soul-body dynamic in witchcraft. The *OED* defines transvection as ‘the action of carrying or conveying from one place to another; transportation’.<sup>31</sup> A reference in *The Malleus Maleficarum* clarifies the connection of this practice to witchcraft: ‘physical transvection’ of witches is possible ‘under instruction from an evil spirit, they make an ointment from the body-parts of children [...] they are carried at once into the air, day or night, in full sight of everyone [...] or invisibly.’<sup>32</sup> The act of transvection occurred either as a result of a witch flying in body and spirit, or alternatively, that the witch’s soul leaves her unconscious body to travel in spirit through the air.<sup>33</sup>

However, the possibility of witches' spirit travel was problematic because of its theological implications. Kramer comments in *The Malleus Maleficarum* that ‘the embodied soul cannot so suddenly transport its body in location or raise it up, but with God’s permission it would be able to do so readily, when disembodied.’<sup>34</sup> King James also states that regarding ‘spirituall transporting, it is certaine the soules going out of the bodie, is the onely difinition of naturall death’.<sup>35</sup> A few lines later, he further states, ‘the soule once parting from the bodie, cannot wander anie longer in the worlde, but to the owne resting place must it goe immediatlie, abiding the conjunction of the bodie againe, at the latter daie.’<sup>36</sup> Despite this denial of the possibility of travelling solely in spirit, the debate itself implies the soul-body dynamic of witches. These arguments destabilise the connection

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<sup>31</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “transvection (n.),” September 2025, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1138311678>>

<sup>32</sup> Kramer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, Maxwell-Stuart, 137.

<sup>33</sup> Emily Sosolik, "Flights of Fancy: The Debate over Transportations to the Witches' Sabbath in Early Modern Europe," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*, 4: no. 2, (2014): 1-17, 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Kramer, *The Hammer*, Mackay, 297.

<sup>35</sup> James VI and I., *Daemonologie*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

between body and soul, and this point will be further demonstrated in the analysis of *The Late Lancashire Witches* and their metamorphosis into animals.

The association of witches with animals also appears in *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford.<sup>37</sup> This play was based on a woman named Elizabeth Sawyer, who was accused and executed for witchcraft. Sawyer's 'identity conforms to the powerful stereotypes of early modern discourses on witchcraft, yet the play also critiques such stereotypes by depicting the processes of social labelling.'<sup>38</sup> In the stage adaptation, Sawyer sells her soul to the devil, who appears as a black dog. The devil promises Sawyer revenge and, in the next acts, causes difficulties for the other characters. In the final act, Sawyer is found out, tried, and executed.

While this play does not present metamorphosis itself, it does highlight the connection witches have to animals through the devil-dog as Sawyer's familiar. The witch explains: 'Talk of familiars in the shape of mice, /Rats, ferrets, weasels and I wot not what, /That have appeared and sucked, some say, their blood' (II.I.110–112).<sup>39</sup> Once the devil appears to her as a dog he instructs: 'To confirm't, command me / Do any mischief unto man or beast' (II.I.137-138). For Sawyer, a witch 'is someone close to animals' and this closeness 'is the essence of witchcraft'.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, she achieves her revenge by forcing other characters to become closer to animals. For example, Old Banks wishes to go 'ten times in an hour [to] run to the cow, and taking up her tail, kiss, [...] my Cow behind; that the whole town of Edmonton has been ready to bepiss themselves with laughing me to scorn' (IV 1. 64–67).

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<sup>37</sup> The play was written and performed in 1621 but first published in 1658. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, "Introduction," in *The Witch of Edmonton by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford*, 1-24 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria Bladen, "Shaping Supernatural Identity in *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621)," in *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England*, eds. Marcus Harmes and Victoria Bladen, 95-116 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 97.

<sup>39</sup> William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton*, eds. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 242.

Through witchcraft, Sawyer shifts ‘the boundaries between animal and human for the entire village.’<sup>41</sup> Within the hierarchy of souls, animals were considered lower than humans, a point I will address further in the next section of this chapter. It is relevant here because *The Witch of Edmonton* and Sawyer’s reliance on animals in her magical practice demonstrate how witches affect the boundaries of the hierarchy of souls through their magic. I will now turn to explore the soul-body dynamic in metamorphosis, notably addressing the hierarchy of beings in both spiritual and social terms, before analysing *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

### **4.3. The Spiritual Implications of Metamorphosis in Early Modern England**

Metamorphosis between beings is problematic on a spiritual level because men, women, and animals were believed to possess different types of souls. According to Aristotle, the intellective soul that humans possess is composed of three parts: the vegetative soul, the sensitive soul and the intellective soul (also called the rational soul), as stated in previous chapters.<sup>42</sup> When considering animals, they were believed only to possess the vegetative and sensitive souls and so lacking the intellective soul which is particular to man alone. Human-to-animal metamorphosis highlights the movement of a soul between different states of being, suggesting a potential shift between the vegetative, sensitive, and intellective souls. This movement raises questions regarding the soul-body dynamic.

Aristotle’s claims about soul development, which occur differently in plants, animals, and humans, help to clarify these changes. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle developed his theory of epigenesis by observing chicken eggs. He suggests that animals are formed from ‘either something external’ or ‘something present in the semen or seminal fluid; and

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<sup>41</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 242.

<sup>42</sup> See Garber, “Soul and Mind,” 760. Park, “Psychology,” 478-479. Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. Trans. Robert Hicks, 47.

this is either some part of Soul, or Soul, or something which possesses Soul.’<sup>43</sup> Maria Varlamova explains that for Aristotle, ‘the animation of the embryo is a process which consists of successive actualization of its soul’s parts and powers.’<sup>44</sup> Aristotle comments that this consecutive development means that embryos ‘possess nutritive Soul [...and] it is while they develop that they acquire sentient Soul as well’.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, ‘Aristotle affirms that at first the foetus lives a vegetative life. Thereafter, as the body of the embryo develops and becomes suitable for an animal soul, the animal soul emerges as actuality of the body’.<sup>46</sup> There is, therefore, a spiritual shift as the foetus moves from only having a vegetative soul to having both a vegetative and a sensitive one.

When considering human soul development, Aristotle demonstrates that ‘a human also has the capacities of a sensitive soul. In the correlation of three parts of soul a higher part includes the lower one as matter and potentiality and at the same time cannot exist without it.’<sup>47</sup> The intellective soul enters the foetus during gestation, as I have discussed in previous chapters. Soul development in plants, animals, and humans implies a shift between these soul-parts, which similarly occurs during metamorphosis.

Souls of men and women were also considered differently, just as the souls of humans were considered different to the souls of animals. These different types of souls emphasise the problem that man-to-animal and woman-to-animal transformations pose on a spiritual level. In *Timaeus*, Plato addresses a gendered difference between male and female souls, stating that souls reincarnate into male bodies when they have ‘lived well throughout his appropriate time [...] but he who had failed to live well would, in his second birth, take on

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<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (London: Heinemann, 1943), 145.

<sup>44</sup> Maria Varlamova, "The Soul-Parts as a Cause of Embryogenesis in Aristotle's *De Generatione Animalium*," *SHOLE. Filosofskoe Antikovedenie i Klassičeskaâ Tradiciâ* 13, no. 1 (2019): 94-105, 94. Varlamova refers to ‘Soul parts’ as the ‘three parts of soul: nutritive, sensitive and rational’. See page 100 of her article for more.

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 167.

<sup>46</sup> Varlamova, “The Soul-Parts,” 98.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

woman's nature. If in that form he still did not refrain from evil, [...] he would take on some such bestial nature.'<sup>48</sup> Plato argues that a value is ascribed to souls depending on what type of body they inhabit. If a soul is 'weak (in the sense of vicious) in its previous life, it is reincarnated in a female – or, even worse, in an animal-body.'<sup>49</sup> This hierarchy suggests that men were considered at risk of reincarnating into women if their souls were 'weak, or vicious', implying that moral vice may be the cause of this spiritual demotion.<sup>50</sup>

Peter Harrison comments on the use of this hierarchy as explained in *The Celestial Hierarchy* of pseudo-Dionysius, detailing how it created 'new connexions between all living things.'<sup>51</sup> Harrison notes that

Pride of place was given to the human race, with man located at the very centre of a great chain of being, part-animal, part-angel. The further effect of this influential conception was a mitigation of the stark dualism of the Platonic tradition. There may be two worlds, but the human being is an inhabitant of both, and thus serves as a bridge between them.<sup>52</sup>

For Harrison, man is placed centrally, sitting between the animal and the angelic realms while being part of both simultaneously. A difference was perceived between men and other lower-level beings, such as plants or animals, which is based on Aristotle's classifications presented in *The Generation of Animals*.<sup>53</sup> Aristotle states 'There is always a *class* of men, of animals, of plants' and that 'wherever possible and so far as possible the male is separate from the female, since it is something *better* and more divine in that it is the principle of

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<sup>48</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, Second ed., ed. Trans. Peter Kalkavage (Indianapolis, I.N.: Focus, 2016), 41B-41C.

<sup>49</sup> Jana Schultz, "Conceptualizing the 'Female' Soul – a Study in Plato and Proclus," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27, no. 5 (2018): 883-901, 887.

<sup>50</sup> The *OED* defines 'vicious' as 'Of habits, practices, etc.: of the nature of vice; contrary to moral principles; depraved, immoral, bad.' Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "vicious (adj.)," March 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1001819490>>

<sup>51</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40.

<sup>52</sup> Harrison, *The Bible*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Edward P. Mahoney, "Lovejoy and the Hierarchy of Being," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 2 (June 1987): 211-230, 214.

movement for generated things.<sup>54</sup> In these extracts, Aristotle suggests a hierarchy between different types of beings and a hierarchy between male and female.

Saint Augustine equally suggests a difference between men's and women's souls when he comments that Adam received his soul from God, but that is not the case for Eve. He states 'it is not said that God gave her [Eve] life in a similar fashion by His breath, and the conclusion might be drawn that both her soul and body came from him who had already been given life.'<sup>55</sup> He concludes, 'there is no mention of God's breathing into her face because, as a matter of fact, the soul of the woman came from the man.'<sup>56</sup> This commentary suggests a difference between men's and women's souls and implies a hierarchy between them. Aquinas further developed the concept of spiritual hierarchy in *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Aquinas states that 'various grades ensued among spiritual substances, some appearing as angels of various orders, some as human souls also of various states and conditions, some again as demons in various states.'<sup>57</sup>

Scholarship has previously addressed this system of classification of souls, notably situating it within the Great Chain of Being. Initially popularised by O. Lovejoy's 1936 work, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* and by E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* in 1943, scholars in the late 1980s questioned the prevalence of the Great Chain of Being in the seventeenth century. Edward Mahoney addressed Lovejoy's conceptualisation, noting that Lovejoy 'has omitted central aspects of the conception of the Great Chain of Being as it was heatedly debated throughout the late medieval and Renaissance period.'<sup>58</sup> Equally, Tillyard's approach on fixed hierarchy was

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<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 131, 133.

<sup>55</sup> St. Augustine, *St. Augustine*, 96.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>57</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Of God and His Creatures: An Annotated Translation, with some Abridgement, of the Summa Contra Gentiles of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Joseph Rickaby (London: Burns & Oates, 1905), 106.

<sup>58</sup> Mahoney, "Lovejoy," 216.

addressed by Jonathan Dollimore, who noted that ‘contrary to the insistence in this homily on fixed hierarchy, this was a period when social mobility was more extensive than at any other time before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’.<sup>59</sup> However, these criticisms do not eliminate the presence of a known hierarchy, which was, as Mahoney states ‘heatedly debated’ during the period.

The suggested spiritual superiority of men was also used to set them above women in a social context. During the early modern period, ‘[a]ll hierarchies are interrelated and dependent upon each other.’<sup>60</sup> This statement was especially relevant for women since ‘[h]usbands were not prohibited by law from beating their wives. In contrast, women who killed their husbands were severely punished.’<sup>61</sup> This double standard highlights the hierarchy between man and wife, whereby the husband is considered superior to the wife. Richard Brathwaite comments in *The English Gentlewoman* (1631) that women should choose to discuss ‘such arguments as may best improve your knowledge in household affaires, and other private employments. To discourse of State-matters, will not become your auditory: nor to dispute of high points of Divinity.’<sup>62</sup> Brathwaite is separating the household from state matters that he doesn’t consider suitable for women to discuss.

Women who took on public roles were seen as ‘transgressive and socially destructive, spreading vice and disease. They invert social normality, trespassing into spaces not intended for them. They disrupt gender boundaries, questioning the nexus of power that subjects and defines them.’<sup>63</sup> Phyllis Mack comments that ‘a man’s identity was chiefly determined by his place in the social hierarchy, which was part of a universal hierarchy, or Chain of Being,

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983), 84.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Walters, "Gender and Civil War Politics in Margaret Cavendish’s *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8 (Fall 2013): 207-240, 220.

<sup>61</sup> Walters, "Gender," 220.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentlewoman* (London: B. Aslop & T. Fauucet, 1631), 89-90.

<sup>63</sup> Jerome De Groot, "Mothers, Lovers and Others: Royalist Women," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700*, ed. James Daybell, 194-210, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 196.

a woman's nature was thought to have no fixed identity or place.’<sup>64</sup> While men ‘stood poised on a point between the animals and the angels, women seemed constantly to waver between both extremes.’<sup>65</sup> Within the household, men ruled ‘over unfree people (i.e. slaves) and over free subjects (i.e. wife and children).’<sup>66</sup> William Gouge comments on gendered duties in *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) stating ‘affaires abroad doe most appertaine to the man, and are especially to be ordered by him: that which the wife is especially to care for, is the businesse of the house’.<sup>67</sup> Women, in their role as wives and mothers, were seen as subordinate to men and tied to the household sphere.

This separation of male/female duties has been addressed in previous scholarship, which suggests that during the period, ‘the hitherto unified public-and-private realms split into two separate, but unequally valued, gendered domains: the marginal, female world of domesticity and the central male world of commerce and politics.’<sup>68</sup> These gendered boundaries of ‘male and female, public and private, are at once distinct and overlapping early modern cultural categories’ and demonstrate how women in the early modern period could be written out of the public sphere because of their gender and solely defined by their wifely and motherly duties.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the examination of witchcraft cases also implies both order and hierarchy because ‘demonological speculation was steeped in the logic and language of binary opposition’.<sup>70</sup> The Devil, and witches who acted as his agents, ‘represented chaos and disorder, and sought to mimic, in contrary fashion, true religion. In

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<sup>64</sup> Mack, *Visionary Women*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Anna Becker, “Gender in The History of Early Modern Political Thought,” *The Historical Journal* 60, no. 4 (2017): 843-863, 858.

<sup>67</sup> William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties Eight Treatises* (London: Iohn Haviiland, 1622), 255.

<sup>68</sup> Rachel Trubowitz, *Nation and Nurture in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Trubowitz, *Nation and Nurture*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft, Witch-Hunting, and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

the process, the idea of diabolical disorder provided a valuable counterfoil to the order and decorum of divine right monarchy'.<sup>71</sup>

This chapter highlights how witchcraft, and specifically the power of metamorphosis, enables women to shift beyond the domestic and motherly categories they inhabit in early modern society. This shift is represented in literature by transforming their female bodies into genderless ones. This movement implies physical shifts in corporeality through metamorphosis, which I will address now before examining *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

#### 4.4. The Physical Implications of Metamorphosis on Gender in Early Modern England

The connection between metamorphosis and gender appears repeatedly in literature. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transformations can cause a character to transform from their gender into something genderless (such as Daphne into a laurel tree, Narcissus into a flower, Byblis into a weeping stream), or move from one gender into another gender (like Caeney moving from male to female, or Iphis from female to male).<sup>72</sup> In *Divine Weekes* (1605), Du Bartas also highlights gender through Eve's creation: 'Bone of his Bone, Flesh of his very Flesh. / Source of all ioyes? sweet *Hee-Shee-Coupled-One*' (VI.1060-1061).<sup>73</sup> Describing Eve as 'Hee-Shee', created from his 'very Flesh', suggests androgyny in her being. The original text supports this androgynous interpretation: 'Et la Chair de fa chair, & les Os de fes os. / Source de tout bon-heur, *Amoureuse Androgyne*' (And the Flesh of his flesh, & the bones of his bones / Source of all happiness, *Loving Androgyne*) (VI.986-987).<sup>74</sup> The original text

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<sup>71</sup> Elmer, *Witchcraft*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Daphne: I.668-682, Narcissus: III.591-648, Byblis: IX.766-776, Caeney: XII.516-556, Iphis: IX.789-937.

<sup>73</sup> Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, *Du Bartas His Devine Weekes and Workes*, trans. Josuah Sylvester (London: Humfrey Lounes, 1611).

<sup>74</sup> Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, *La Sepmaine (Texte De 1581)*, ed. Yvonne Bellenger (Paris: Nizet, 1981), my translation and emphasis.

suggests a melding of two different genders into one genderless being, and the English translation prefixes the female pronoun to the male, which highlights gender in the process.

In early modern representations of metamorphosis, this gendered focus is still present, notably in early modern texts on witchcraft. For male authors of witchcraft treatises, ‘allusions to Ovid’s texts sometimes facilitate imaginative challenges to patriarchal social evaluations of female emotion and the female body.’<sup>75</sup> In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), Reginald Scot states that, according to Bodin, witches ‘transubstantiate themselves into wolves, and them whom they bewitch into asses: [...], that it may be naturally brought to passe, that a girle shall become a boy; and that any femall may be turned into the male’.<sup>76</sup> A few lines later, Scot clarifies that ‘some Poets fables might be thought lies (whereby the witchmongers arguments should quaille) he maintaineth for true the most part of *Ovids Metamorphosis*, and the greatest absurdities and impossibilities in all that booke’.<sup>77</sup> Despite Scot’s incredulity around the topic of metamorphosis, its literary representation in early modern texts about women and women’s bodies existed.

These witchcraft treatises brought ‘Ovid’s works from the metaphorical realm of poetry into the realm of the everyday. The witch that might be one’s neighbour becomes Medea, just as Medea becomes one’s neighbour.’<sup>78</sup> In the late sixteenth century, ‘the *Metamorphoses* and Ovid’s other works were not just domesticated texts for schoolboys; they were also linked to fears of actual bodily transformation and witches themselves.’<sup>79</sup> This conflation suggests that early modern witches are potentially as powerful as goddesses of the classical period. In the case of *The Late Lancashire Witches*, this conflation draws attention

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<sup>75</sup> Cora Fox, "Authorising the Metamorphic Witch: Ovid in Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*," in *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Alison Keith and Stephen J. Rupp, 165-178, (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 167.

<sup>76</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Brinsley Nicholson, (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1973), 71.

<sup>77</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie*, 73.

<sup>78</sup> Fox, "Authorising," 174.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

to the witches' power through metamorphosis and how that power is directly tied to their bodies. According to Colby Gordon, '[i]t is not merely that gender transitivity was a sign of consorting with demons, and that genital variation was read as the sign of a demonic pact: witchcraft was also framed as a root cause of gender variance.'<sup>80</sup> Women hold the potential to transform, and their representation as witches symbolises this fluidity.

The etymology of the word 'metamorphosis' demonstrates an ability to move away from fixed embodiment. The prefix 'meta' means 'to change', while 'morphosis' is derived from 'morphē', meaning 'form' or 'structure' and can be understood as to transform or to transfigure, which suggests a change in corporeal form.<sup>81</sup> The prefix trans- was used in the early modern period to form several words that imply change: trans-formation, trans-mutation, trans-substantiation, or trans-ition, for example.<sup>82</sup> When exploring female metamorphosis, this prefix highlights the potential of gender fluidity during the transformational act.

Colby Gordon explores this potential in *Glorious Bodies* when investigating bodily transformations in theological texts. He states 'that bodies are capable of changes that will liberate them from normative gender, radically alter their experience of embodiment, or do away with sexuation entirely.'<sup>83</sup> This prefix meta- serves as 'the reigning sign of all that disrupts the sex/gender system in particular, and [refers to], as Susan Stryker writes in *Transgender History*, "people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender"<sup>84</sup> The philology of this prefix demonstrates how

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<sup>80</sup> Colby Gordon, *Glorious Bodies: Trans Theology and Renaissance Literature* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 10.

<sup>81</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "metamorphosis, n.", March 2024.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7374725284>> Catherine Bruguière, Olivier Perru, and Frédéric Charles, "The Concept of Metamorphosis and its Metaphors: Possible and Impossible Transformations of Life; Metamorphosis in Children's Literature," *Science & Education* 27, no. 1-2 (2018): 113-132, 114.

<sup>82</sup> Joseph Gamble, "Toward a Trans Philology," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 26-44, 27.

<sup>83</sup> Gordon, *Glorious Bodies*, 99.

<sup>84</sup> Gamble, "Toward," 29.

gender is inherently necessary to the transformational act. This gendered aspect of metamorphosis appears in the deviance personified by the witch's body.

Gender variance and its connection to women's bodies even appear in medical manuals that suggest the possibility of sex changes. Alexander Read describes the female sexual organs in his *Manuall of Anatomy* (1638) as consisting of 'foure distinct parts; to wit, the Cunnus, the matrix, the stones, and the sper-matick vessels.'<sup>85</sup> In *Mikrokosmographia*, Helkiah Crooke quotes book XV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* alongside the possibility of sexual transformations: 'the *Hyaena* also a cruell and subtle Beast, doth euery other yeare change her sexe. Of whom, *Ouid* in the xv. of his *Metamorphosis* saith: [...] The same *Hyaena* which we saw admit the male before, To couer now her female mate, we can but wonder sore.'<sup>86</sup> Crooke then gives the example of a man 'who had beene before a woman till the age of xv. yeares, [...], yet at length by accident of a fall, the Ligaments [...] being broken, her priuities came outward, and she changed her sex'.<sup>87</sup> Crooke's pairing of this story with Ovid's text suggests that sex changes are understood in similar terms as metamorphosis.

Jane Sharp also references corporeal transformations when discussing male and female generative parts

[S]ome have written that the Generative parts in men, differ not from those in women, but in respect of place and situation in the body; and that a woman may become a man, and that one *Tyesias* was a man for many years, and after that was strangely metamorphos'd into a woman, and again from a woman to a man.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Alexander Read, *The Manuall of the Anatomy of Dissection of the Body of Man, Book I* (London: John Haviland, 1638), 230.

<sup>86</sup> Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 249. In Golding's translation this line reads: 'Much rather may we wonder at the hyen, if we please: / To see how interchangeably it one while doth remain / A female, and another while becometh male again.' Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, XV.450-452.

<sup>87</sup> Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 249.

<sup>88</sup> Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 81.

Sharp illustrates the change from male to female and its reverse using Tiresias, the oracle from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In this tragedy, Tiresias is described as 'the seer, the man of god' and as 'master of all the mysteries of our life'.<sup>89</sup> Ovid also refers to Tiresias as 'being made a woman straight, seven winters lived so', but a few lines later this transformation is reversed: 'and straight returned his former shape in which he first was born.' (III.409, 414) Sharp emphasises that 'a woman may become a man', suggesting that it is solely women who might experience a sex change.<sup>90</sup> Crooke further comments on this point, stating 'the ancients haue thought that a woman might become a man, but not on the contrary side a man become a woman. For they say that the parts of generation in women ly hid, because the strength of their natural heate is weaker then in me.'<sup>91</sup> Jess Pfeffer highlights how 'Crooke's examination of, as he terms them, women who transform into men, forces us, as contemporary readers, to rethink the association between bodily materiality and intentional expression.'<sup>92</sup> This association suggests the early modern understanding of the female gender as capable of transformation.

Thomas Laqueur addressed the understanding of sex and anatomy in *Making Sex*, stating '[f]or thousands of years it had been a commonplace that women had the same genitals as men except that, as Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in the fourth century, put it: "theirs are inside the body and not outside it."<sup>93</sup> Laqueur's hypothesis suggested male and female bodies existed on a continuum known as the one-sex model.<sup>94</sup> Laqueur also addressed sex change in the sixteenth century, citing Ambroise Paré for example: when 'a girl chasing

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<sup>89</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*, ed. Bernard Knox, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1984), 339, 341.

<sup>90</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives*, 81, my emphasis.

<sup>91</sup> Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 249.

<sup>92</sup> Jess R. Pfeffer, "Trans Materiality: Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia*, Sexual Dimorphism, and the Embodiment of Identity," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2019): 227-241, 228.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>94</sup> Katharine Park, "The Myth of the "One-Sex" Body," *Isis* 114, no. 1 (2023): 150-175.

her swine who suddenly sprung an external penis and scrotum'.<sup>95</sup> Scholars have criticised Laqueur's one-sex theory. Katherine Park states that this model 'did not have anything like the long-standing or widespread acceptance that would justify identifying it as the premodern view of the sexed body'.<sup>96</sup> However, 'in the decades around 1600, the "one-sex" body and the theme of women turning into men enjoyed a robust second life in vernacular literature, medical and non-medical'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, women's sexual anatomy and its ability to transform was a point of interest in seventeenth-century texts. Whether medically possible or not, this ability captured the imagination of early modern writers who discussed women's bodies, thereby shaping literary representations.

This capacity for corporeal transformation is further emphasised by the fact that women's bodies hold the power to transform others as well during pregnancy. According to Galen, it is in the womb that a foetus is no longer called 'an embryo only, but already a child too, when [...] it jerks and moves as an animal now fully formed.'<sup>98</sup> Galen further notes: 'this plant is going to become an animal not by losing the power that it had from the beginning but by acquiring another one.'<sup>99</sup> This understanding of the womb that equates it to a chemical transformation is also present in early modern alchemical texts, which use the womb as a symbol for alchemical transmutation.

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<sup>95</sup> Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 7. See also Paré, *The Workes*, 975.

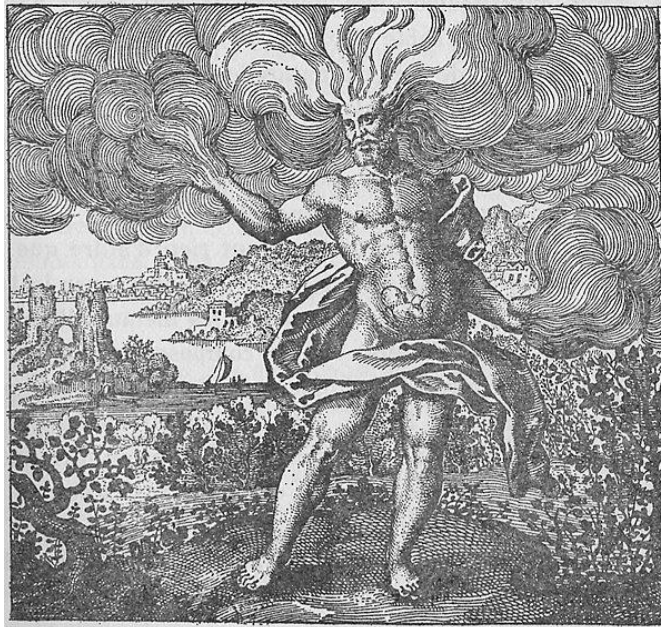
<sup>96</sup> Park, "The Myth," 155.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>98</sup> Galen, *On Semen*, ed. Trans. Phillip De Lacy (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992), 95. See also Collins, *Bodies*, 84.

<sup>99</sup> Galen, *On Semen*, 96.

The first emblem in Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617) depicts wind as a man carrying a child in its womb. The epigram states 'when the unborn child, which lies hidden in the womb of the North wind'.<sup>100</sup> This first emblem represents Mercury as the pregnant 'wind, which receives the sulphur, or Dionysus, or, if alternatively, Aesculapius, as the



unripe fruit from the mother's womb, or from the ashes of the birth mother's body and takes it to a place where it may ripen.'<sup>101</sup> This commentary and the emblem itself demonstrate the early modern understanding of the womb as a location of transformation. Indeed, 'alchemy was not concerned with

any actual case of intersex birth; the alchemical hermaphrodite was merely a metaphor used to represent a chemical substance.'<sup>102</sup> However, alchemical imagery did not exclusively reference chemical substances and could equally refer to a spiritual transformation, as I examine more fully in chapter six. I will now turn to examine Heywood and Brome's play and its representation of Metamorphosis, which highlights the soul-body dynamic through its transformations.

#### 4.5. Human-to-Animal Metamorphosis in *The Late Lancashire Witches*

<sup>100</sup> H. M. Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens: Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 55. Image taken from Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, image,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org>. Creative Commons License (CC-PD-Mark), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michael\\_Maier\\_Atalanta\\_Fugiens\\_Embleme\\_1.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michael_Maier_Atalanta_Fugiens_Embleme_1.jpeg)

<sup>101</sup> Jong, *Michael Maier's*, 58.

<sup>102</sup> Leah DeVun, "The Jesus Hermaphrodite: Science and Sex Difference in Premodern Europe," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 132-146, 194-195.

This section examines animal metamorphosis in *The Late Lancashire Witches* and how transformation affects women's bodies as well as their social status as mothers. This play is based on the trial of seven women convicted of witchcraft in Lancashire in 1634, three of whom were brought to London for a further trial.<sup>103</sup> Charlotte Coffin comments that this text is 'clearly inspired by judicial records of the contemporary trial [and] has been characterised as a commission from the privy council, destined to further the case of the prosecution.'<sup>104</sup> Heywood and Brome were given 'exclusive rights to the source material, [and] the King's Men were to produce a play presenting the case for the prosecution.'<sup>105</sup> The cultural context in which the play was written is important when considering the representation of women's bodies. This case, and by extension the play, demonstrates the fear of women's bodily capacity for supernatural harm. I argue that the witches' metamorphosis is used to signal how women move outside their female bodies, spiritually and physically. Consequently, their transformation also shifts women out of their associated categories of domesticity, marriage, and motherhood, resulting in a move towards gender fluidity to resist patriarchal restrictions.

The play begins by highlighting the tension between the witches as a source of entertainment and their challenge to authority. In Act I, Scene II, the witches place a spell on the Seely household, causing the servants to act as the masters. Doughty comments 'This is quite upside-down: the son controls the father and the man overcrows his master's coxcomb. Sure they are all bewitched.' (I.II.139)<sup>106</sup> This scene serves a dual purpose by both presenting the witches and 'also trivializ[ing] them and their *maleficum*. [...The] witches

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<sup>103</sup> Charlotte A. Coffin, "Theatre and/as Witchcraft: A Reading of *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634)," *Early Theatre* 16, no. 2 (2014): 91-119, 91.

<sup>104</sup> Coffin, "Theatre," 91.

<sup>105</sup> Alison Findlay, "Sexual and Spiritual Politics in the Events of 1633–34 and *The Late Lancashire Witches*," in *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories*, ed. Robert Poole, 146-165 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 150.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Brome, and Thomas Heywood, *The Late Lancashire Witches*, ed. Helen Ostovich, *Richard Brome Online* (<http://www.dhi.ac.uk/brome>, 17 January 2010).

must be associated with the carnivalesque, as agents of festive, temporary, reversible disorder.’<sup>107</sup> This reshuffling of the social order turns the Seely household upside down in a carnivalesque style, but it also demonstrates a break from the hierarchical order of early modern households. Diane Purkiss has commented that ‘the image of the witch thus emerges in yet another inversion of the housewife and mother.’<sup>108</sup> By changing the social order of the characters, the play signals that witches do not adhere to the titles of domestic life assigned to women in early modern society.

Despite establishing their status as anti-mothers and anti-housewives, the witches maintain a gendered separation of the household. One of the witches, Meg, comments

The father to the son doth cry;  
The son rebukes the father old;  
The daughter at the mother scold;  
The wife the husband check and chide,  
But that's no wonder, through the wide  
World 'tis common! (II.I.205)

The only gendered exchange is between the wife and husband, and the witches describe this as ‘common’. Within a family, ‘husband and wife were of equal status when viewed from the standpoint of their children or their servants, [...] Nevertheless, this was a continuing hierarchical relationship in which the wife was always situated in a subordinated position.’<sup>109</sup> The reordering of the Seely family is still noteworthy because it implies a shift within the women’s space.

Early modern witches ‘inverted the positive values of patriarchal society, and witches, whatever their actual gender, were sex-related to women.’<sup>110</sup> By changing the household's

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<sup>107</sup> Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 211.

<sup>108</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 125.

<sup>109</sup> Becker, “Gender,” 861.

<sup>110</sup> Helen Ostovich, and Lisa Hopkins, "Introduction," in *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, eds. Helen Ostovich and Lisa Hopkins, 16-37 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 27.

order, the play suggests that the boundaries between male-dominated public space and female-dominated private space are becoming less clear. This blurring of boundaries echoes the blurring between male and female bodies that appears later in the play through metamorphosis.

The question of how metamorphosis itself occurs is addressed in a conversation between Arthur and Whetstone in Act II, scene II

Arthur	Could I at once dissolve myself to words And after turn them into matter, such And of that strength as to attract the attention Of all the curious and most itching ears [...]
Whetstone	Heyday, This gentleman speaks like a country parson that had took his text out of <i>Metamorphoses</i> (II.II.227-228)

This interaction highlights the essence of transformation itself, as Arthur describes he would need to ‘at once dissolve myself’ and turn ‘into matter’. This understanding suggests that words themselves are central to the process of transformation. By connecting transformation to words, Arthur hints at the literary legacy of metamorphosis, which Whetstone acknowledges directly by mentioning Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Whetstone is mocking Arthur by comparing his speech to that of ‘a country parson’. Helen Ostovich comments on this line: ‘Arthur sounds like a minister basing his boring sermon on verses from Ovid [...] with a huge afterlife in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson, and others. Whetstone has heard enough about Ovid to mention him but not to say the title correctly.’<sup>111</sup> Yet, the play echoes Ovid’s metamorphic bodies through the witches’ transforming ability. The ‘increase in literary productions influenced self-consciously by Ovid occurred at around the same time as the birth of English demonological writings.’<sup>112</sup> The interest in metamorphosis displayed

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<sup>111</sup> Helen Ostovich, ed. *The Late Lancashire Witches: Critical Introduction*, DHI – The Digital Humanities Institute - Robert Brome Online. Last modified 2010. Notes to II.II.31-33.

<<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/brome/viewTranscripts.jsp?type=BOTH&play=LW&act=2>>

<sup>112</sup> Fox, "Authorising," 165.

in both Ovid's text and early modern representations of witchcraft did not first appear in the 1630s but was already displayed in the late sixteenth-century texts.<sup>113</sup>

I will now return to Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, which I have already discussed in the introduction. This text is relevant to this section because Scot specifically highlights witches' metamorphic ability, offering arguments both for and against its possibility. Scot suggests 'that witches are curst queanes, and manie times scratch one another, or their neighbours by the faces; and therefore perchance are turned into cats.'<sup>114</sup> However, later in the text, he suggests the opposite: 'Even as much as to *Ovids Metamorphosis*, *Aesops fables*, *Moores Utopia*, and diverse other fansies; which have as much truth in them, as a blind man hath sight in his eie.'<sup>115</sup> Scot's text was published in 1584, and *The Late Lancashire Witches* was first written and performed in 1634, a period when witchcraft accusations were declining.

According to Marion Gibson, no pamphlets on witchcraft were printed between 1621 and 1643.<sup>116</sup> During the reign of Charles I, there was 'official reluctance to acknowledge supernatural interference in the daily governance of the nation.'<sup>117</sup> However, in 1633-34, a full-scale enquiry was led following the Lancashire witch accusations despite the scepticism surrounding witchcraft at the time. Furthermore, the accused women were examined by midwives who emphasised the locations of the witch's mark: 'on the lower body near genitals or fundament. This is the rhetoric of anxieties about breastfeeding and the maternal body.'<sup>118</sup> The fact that Heywood and Brome's play displays metamorphosis as a sign of the witches'

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<sup>113</sup> Fox, "Authorising," 165.

<sup>114</sup> Scot, *The Discoverie*, 74.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>116</sup> Marion Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 302. See also Peter Elmer, *Witchcraft*, 71.

<sup>117</sup> Elmer, *Witchcraft*, 74.

<sup>118</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 243.

power, despite the decline in witchcraft representations, highlights the fear associated with the female body and a mother's reproductive capacity.

Heywood also connects witchcraft to motherhood in *The Hierarchie of The Blessed Angels* (1635). This work predominantly focuses on angelology but does mention witchcraft in a few of its nine books, notably highlighting witches' association with Medea: 'To shew that these Magicall sorceries haue beene from great antiquitie, and not lately crept into the world by the proditionous insinuation of the Diuel; me thinks I heare *Medaea* thus speaking' (IV.260).<sup>119</sup> Medea is 'utterly resistant to male strictures and control, and to the obedience and passivity traditionally demanded of women in patriarchal societies, whether these are classical, medieval or early modern.'<sup>120</sup> Heywood's choice to associate early modern witches with Medea in *The Hierarchie of The Blessed Angels* suggests the playwright's assessment of witches as women who resist submission to patriarchal order, but also as malevolent mothers, as I have previously demonstrated.

The influence of Ovid's text in *The Late Lancashire Witches* goes beyond the witch-Medea connection since the animal transformations in the play also occur in the *Metamorphoses*. However, Heywood and Brome's witches have agency to transform, while Ovid's characters are generally transformed because of circumstances out of their control. The first instance of metamorphosis occurs in the play's second act, when the events that led to the trial that inspired the play are dramatised: a twelve-year-old boy claims he saw two greyhounds in a forest that transformed into a witch and a demon-boy. In Act II, scene III of the play, the Boy mentions seeing hunting dogs when walking: 'What have we here? A brace of greyhounds broke loose from their masters?' (II.III.290) The boy further comments 'Now if I could but start a hare by the way, kill her, and carry her home to my supper' (II.III.290).

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<sup>119</sup> Thomas Heywood, *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells*, (London: Adam Islip, 1635).

<sup>120</sup> Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea*, 4.

However, he cannot get the dogs to obey his command and begins beating them when they transform. The stage direction clarifies ‘*As he beats them, there appears before him GOODY DICKIESON and BOY 2, upon the dogs’ going in.*’ (II.V.324.SD). The boy notes with surprise ‘Now bless me heaven, one of the greyhounds turned into a woman, the other into a boy!’ (II.V.324)

The choice to represent a dog transformation can be linked to Ovid’s text through Hecuba, who also undergoes this type of metamorphosis. When Hecuba learns of the death of her son, Polydorus, she flies into a rage. She howls and transforms into a dog. She is described as having ‘Lost after all her woman’s shape and barked all her life’ (XIII.489). Hecuba’s myth ‘had resonance in the early modern social imaginary: to invoke Hecuba was to strike chords of profound pity for those crushed beneath Fortune’s wheel, but equally it was to evoke the sorrows of wounded motherhood and the tragic emotions connected with child loss.’<sup>121</sup> This representation of Hecuba is also seen in Hamlet’s play-within-a-play. Hamlet states ‘What’s Hecuba to him, or he to [Hecuba,] / That he should weep for her? What would he do’ (II.II.586-587). Metamorphosis in Ovid’s text ‘is almost always a painful and limiting experience which leaves its victim, not in a state of satisfied closure, but of eternal stasis and ongoing suffering.’<sup>122</sup> Ovid’s character inspires grief and pity, but for the witches of *The Late Lancashire Witches*, metamorphosis is a power they use at will to further their own ends.

The witches’ metamorphoses demonstrate not only their control over their own bodies but also their power over male characters. In Act III, scene II, Mrs Generous requests a horse but is denied by Robin, who states, ‘I dare not deliver him you; my master has t’en a

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<sup>121</sup> Marguerite A. Tassi, "Wounded Maternity, Sharp Revenge: Shakespeare's Representations of Queens in Light of the Hecuba Myth," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 37, no. 1 (2011): 83-99, 84.

<sup>122</sup> Alison Sharrock, "Noua ... corpora: New Bodies and Gendered Patterns in the *Metamorphoses*," *Dictynna*, no. 17 (2020): 1-26, 1.

notice of the ill case you have brought him home in diverse times.’ (III.II.464) Mrs Generous then replies: ‘Oh, is it so? And must he be made acquainted with my actions by you, and must I then be controlled by him, and now by you? You are a saucy groom.’ (III.II.465) Mrs Generous does not appreciate the refusal and the suggestion that her husband and the groom are ‘controlling’ her. This implication of control pushes her to transform Robin into a horse to force him to serve her. Furthermore, ‘when she takes over the physical body of Robin in this scene, she is also flouting her husband.’<sup>123</sup> This act also highlights the gendered hierarchy between men and women that the witch subverts thanks to metamorphosis.

Comparing horse transformations to Ovid’s text further highlights the gendered power dynamic at work in *The Late Lancashire Witches*. In Ovid’s text, there is only one horse transformation: Ocyrhoe, the daughter of the centaur Chiron, is transformed into a horse after prophesying that her father has renounced his immortality.<sup>124</sup> Her prophetic ability incurred ‘the wrath of God’ and caused her to ‘feel by proof far better had it been / If that the chance of things to come I never had foreseen.’ (II.825-826) Ocyrhoe was punished ‘to feed on grass and fling in fields, I feel myself so light. / I am transformed to a mare like other of my kin.’ (II.828-829) Instead of being transformed into a centaur, like her father, she undergoes a full-body transformation into a mare. This metamorphosis ‘serves a double purpose – she is not merely punished, but silenced’ because she loses her human voice by becoming a horse.<sup>125</sup> The consequence of this horse transformation is different to that presented in Heywood and Brome’s text.

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<sup>123</sup> Ostovich, ed. *The Late Lancashire Witches*, see notes to III.II.465.

<sup>124</sup> Ocyrhoe’s myth appears in several accounts and the cause of her transformation differs depending on the version. Ovid seems inspired by Euripides’ *Melanippe The Wise* in which Ocyrhoe is punished for giving prophecies to mortals. See John Heath, “Prophetic Horses, Bridled Nymphs: Ovid’s Metamorphosis of Ocyroe,” *Latomus* 53, no. 2 (1994): 340–53.

<sup>125</sup> Heath, “Prophetic,” 346.

Considering that Ovid was used in seventeenth-century schools further polarises the witches' verbal dominance. In seventeenth-century humanist classrooms, the emphasis was placed on 'rote learning, on the authority of a master, and on the authority of Latin texts, they suggest, helped to fashion docile servants of absolutist regimes.'<sup>126</sup> The repetition required specifically for 'rote learning' demonstrates a need to use the voice in classrooms. Additionally, classroom students 'were in most grammar schools supposed to speak Latin at all times.'<sup>127</sup> Boys were expected to learn, recite and speak Ovid's *Metamorphoses* out loud in Latin in the classroom, a space that excluded women. The fact that Heywood and Brome's text presents the same type of metamorphosis that Ovid's text uses to silence women is noteworthy, suggesting the witches' ability to challenge societal norms of the period.

In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, power is eventually turned against Mrs Generous when Robin steals her magic bridle and uses it on her. This event occurs at the end of the witches' feast and after the witch named Gillian remarks 'But stay, where's the boy? Look out: if he escape us, we are all betrayed!' (IV.I.607) The witches all flee before the boy raises the alarm. In this confusion, Robin '*seizes the bridle and puts it on MISTRESS GENEROUS*' (IV.I.622.SD). It is only after the boy escapes and puts the witches at risk of discovery that Robin can use Mrs Generous' metamorphic magic against her.

In the early modern period, bridling carried metaphorical significance and 'led first to a metaphoric idea of bridling women's tongues and eventually to the literal social practice.'<sup>128</sup> The bridle could refer to a scold's bridle, a metal contraption that fit onto a woman's head and was used to silence them.<sup>129</sup> A 'scold' refers to 'a married woman who

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<sup>126</sup> Colin Burrow, "Shakespeare and Humanistic Culture," in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, eds. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor, 9-27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>127</sup> Burrow, "Shakespeare," 13.

<sup>128</sup> Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1991): 179-213, 199.

<sup>129</sup> Valerie Wayne, "Refashioning the Shrew," *Shakespeare Studies* 17, (1985): 159-187, 159.

did talk, in life and in literature, especially during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. That was the problem. She was known for causing and increasing marital discord because she complained so much to her husband.'<sup>130</sup>

In *The Taming of The Shrew*, Shakespeare references this practice when Grumio describes how Kate fell off her horse and Petruchio's reaction

[T]hou shouldst have heard how her horse fell,  
and she under her horse; thou shouldst have heard  
in how miry a place, how she was bemoiled, How he  
left her with the horse upon her, how he beat me  
because her horse stumbled, how she waded  
through the dirt to pluck him off me, how he swore,  
how she prayed that never prayed before, how I  
cried, how the horses ran away, how her bridle was  
burst, how I lost my crupper, with many things of  
worthy memory which now shall die in oblivion (IV.I.70-77).<sup>131</sup>

This scene does not include a literal representation of bridling or a man riding a woman, but metaphorically, the reference to a woman 'under her horse' combined with 'bridle was burst' implies the power dynamics between Kate and Petruchio. Indeed, 'Petruchio's treatment of Kate in his house and on the road back to Padua resembles the kind of exactitude and repetition of exercises that a rider requires when training his horse in the manage'.<sup>132</sup> This equine vocabulary implies 'the bawdier use of the horse/rider metaphor and its connotations of male dominance. In this trope, to "mount" and "ride" a woman works both literally and metaphorically to exert control over the imagined disorder presumed to result from the "woman on top."'<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Wayne, "Refashioning," 159.

<sup>131</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Barbara Hodgdon (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2010).

<sup>132</sup> Joan Hartwig, "Horses and Women in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1982): 285-294, 288.

<sup>133</sup> Boose, "Scolding," 199.

This reversal, which allows a woman to dominate a man, also appears in the story of Aristotle and Phyllis.<sup>134</sup> This story describes an Indian woman named Phyllis who attracted Aristotle's attention and '[a]s he was pressing her to requite his love, she said he must prove it first, by allowing her to ride upon his back. [...] and placing a saddle on ARISTOTLE'S back, a bit in his mouth, etc., she rode upon him, he walking upon all fours.'<sup>135</sup> The story dates back to 13<sup>th</sup>-century French and German texts but was depicted in several paintings and woodcuts throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>136</sup>

In Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1530 version, Phyllis rides Aristotle without a crop or



bridle, but her gaze turned towards the viewer suggests her dominance.<sup>137</sup> Within 'the context of profound social and cultural changes of the 16th and early 17th centuries, and not least the problem of witchcraft, we can see these images as expressions of male anxiety and fear.'<sup>138</sup> The use of bridling in the play implies a metaphorical discussion of power between the characters who ride and those who are ridden. *The Late Lancashire Witches* highlights this point by having Mrs Generous ride her groom, only for the

<sup>134</sup> George Sarton, "Aristotle and Phyllis," *Isis* 14, no. 1 (1930),10

<sup>135</sup> Sarton, "Aristotle," 8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>137</sup> Image taken from: Lucas Cranach The Elder, *Phyllis and Aristotle*, image,

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas\\_Cranach\\_d.Ä.\\_-Phyllis\\_und\\_Aristotle\\_\(1530\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas_Cranach_d.Ä._-Phyllis_und_Aristotle_(1530).jpg)

<sup>138</sup> Darin Hayton, "The Curious History of Phyllis on Aristotle," *dhayton.haverford.edu*. Last modified February 19, 2016, <https://dhayton.haverford.edu/blog/2016/02/19/the-curious-history-of-phyllis-on-aristotle/#fn:72587>.

dynamic to shift in the reverse later, demonstrating the shifting power dynamic between men and women throughout the play. Heywood and Brome's play 'uses the topical story of the witches to dramatize crises in the gender order and in contemporary religious politics. Witchcraft functions as a metaphor for threats posed by unruly subjects'.<sup>139</sup> The connection between the stage and the trial is created when male dominance counters the witches' autonomy, and in the play, this power dynamic is represented by a witch being forced to transform into a mare.

The play's final act creates a parallel between the witches' metamorphosis and how women who act with agency shatter gendered social structures. The witches attack a mill while in the shape of cats, and during the attack, the Soldier cuts off a cat's paw. Once severed, the paw transforms into a human hand with a ring, and the Soldier asks, 'Is't possible cats should have hands / And rings upon their fingers?' (V.III.935) The moment of the hand-severing is crucial 'in the men's triumph over witchcraft. Arthur remarks: 'Now from the last night's witchcraft we are freed' (V.III.904).<sup>140</sup> This moment provides evidence against Mistress Generous, literally proving that she 'had a hand' in the upheaval at the mill. The ring allows unequivocal identification, and the hand metonymically functions as the witch's signature'.<sup>141</sup> The ring appears as a metonym for patriarchy, metaphorically representing the bridge between men and women that has been severed through the shifting power dynamics throughout the play.

When Mrs Generous agreed to marry her husband, she 'wore a betrothal ring symbolizing her marriage and submission to her husband, which is now ironically reversed into proof of her rebellious activities.'<sup>142</sup> Even though the spell is broken and the witches

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<sup>139</sup> Findlay, "Sexual," 152-153.

<sup>140</sup> The soldier cuts the hand at the end of V. II. but the next scene begins with a conversation between Generous, Arthur, and Robin before the soldier enters and explains what happened.

<sup>141</sup> Coffin, "Theatre," 98.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

lose their power at the end of the play, the characters cannot continue in their socially dictated roles. The marital bond, represented by the severed hand bearing the ring, has been cut, signifying the end of the husband-wife relationship. This scene suggests that women cannot leave the household without consequences. Women were ‘socialised to identify as ‘good’ housewives and mothers, they held themselves responsible for the successful preservation of the household’<sup>143</sup> The witch as a character is meant to represent a perversion of the respectable mother by ‘expressing and acting on feelings and desires that women must repress for the sake of others in order to construct their identities as mothers.’<sup>144</sup> Because the witches transform into animals, they lose their identities as mothers, which, in turn, excludes them from the household.

The staging of the play and the potential use of real animals could heighten the move away from female embodiment. It is not clear if animals were used in the original staging, but a record of an early production survives, describing the moment of metamorphosis. Nathaniel Tomkyns comments in a letter of 16 August 1634 to his friend Sir Robert Phelips after seeing one of the first performances at the Globe Theatre in London:

[T]he transforming of men and women into the shapes of several creatures and especially of horses by putting an enchanted bridle into their mouths; their posting to and from places far distant in an incredible short time; the cutting off of a witch-gentlewoman’s hand in the form of a cat, by a soldier turned miller, known to her husband by a ring thereon.<sup>145</sup>

Tomkyns’s description suggests that the bridle is put into the actors’ mouths on stage, implying the actors must mime their animal metamorphosis.

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<sup>143</sup> Philippa Carter, "Work, Gender and Witchcraft in Early Modern England," *Gender & History* 37, no. 1 (2025): 91-108, 92.

<sup>144</sup> Purkiss, "Women's Stories," 417.

<sup>145</sup> Ostovich, ed. *The Late Lancashire Witches*, unnumbered page, critical introduction.

Helen Ostovich comments on the greyhound transformation specifically, stating

there might be a stage bush over the trapdoor in the stage, through which the dogs might 'disappear' while the yipping sound of beaten dogs could be picked up by the actors who appear through the trap as Goody Dickieson and Boy 2. This effect would be more 'magical' than having actors play the dogs from the start.<sup>146</sup>

Ostovich does conclude that it is also possible that actors might play the dogs, which is the case in Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton*.<sup>147</sup> Charlotte Coffin suggests that the horse metamorphoses could be done offstage and through 'symbolic transformation: a bridle is enough to effect the change of Robin (3.2) and Mistress Generous (4.1)'.<sup>148</sup> However, E.K. Chambers suggests real animals may have been used: 'living dogs and even horses may have been trained' by the King's Men who held the exclusive rights to the play.<sup>149</sup> Additionally, if real animals were used to represent characters in their metamorphic shapes, this would contrast starkly with human bodies and, as a consequence, enhance the display of the witches' power. The presence of animals moves the witches away from their feminine bodies. On stage, biological sex is given 'cultural meaning through the performance of gender in clothing, grooming, speech and conduct.'<sup>150</sup> However, when actors are swapped out for animals, clothing, grooming, or speech cannot be used to perform gender.

Furthermore, the witches' transformation also shifts their spiritual status within the Great Chain of Being. As I discussed in the introduction, humans possessed a rational soul in addition to the sensitive and vegetative souls animals had. The threat the witches' power poses on a spiritual level is demonstrated by their ability to change between animal and

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<sup>146</sup> Ostovich, ed. *The Late Lancashire Witches*, notes to stage direction after II.V.324.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Coffin, "Theatre," 108.

<sup>149</sup> E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage – Volume I* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923), 372.

<sup>150</sup> Frances E. Dolan, "Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern England," in *Gender, Power and Privilege in Early Modern Europe: 1500 - 1700*, eds. Penny Richards and Jessica Munns, 7-20 (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2014), 8.

human forms. The act of metamorphosis threatens the known spiritual hierarchy to which all beings belong. For example, Robin transforms into a ‘horse’ (III.II.469.SD) while Mrs Generous transforms into a ‘mare’ (IV.I.622.SD). This gendered dichotomy within the metamorphic act suggests that male souls cannot move into female bodies and female souls cannot move into male bodies. Despite the play presenting metamorphosis as fluid, capable of transforming a human into an animal, the equine transformations suggest the importance of gender in this process.

However, the witches do demonstrate fluidity when they move into hermaphroditic bodies. This ability is stated in Act II, scene I, when Whetstone states: ‘Tis said hares are like hermophrodites - one while male and another female, and that / which begets this year brings young ones the next which some think to be the / reason that witches take their shapes so oft’ (II.II.237). In these lines, hares are described as hermaphrodites, both male and female. Sarah Carter says of early modern hermaphroditic characters: ‘the hermaphrodite here is unclassifiable, *both* male and female but *neither*, simultaneously described as a multiple and as nothing, belonging to several categories and to none.’<sup>151</sup> This assessment of hares was common in the early modern period according to Thomas Brown in *Pseudodoxia epidemica* (1646), who notes ‘that Hares are both male and female, beside the Vulgar opinion, was the affirmative of Archelaus, of Plutarch, Philostratus, and many more.’<sup>152</sup> Brown further states that Hares are commonly believed to change sex every year as an ‘annuall alternation as is presumed; that is, from imperfection to perfection, from perfection to imperfection, from female unto male, from male to female againe, and so in a circle to both’.<sup>153</sup> The fact that the witches in Heywood and Brome’s text prefer to transform into hares is noteworthy because it implies they like to be in a state that is considered neither male nor female, but somewhere

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<sup>151</sup> Sarah Carter, *Ovidian Myth and Sexual Deviance in Early Modern English Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 118.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or, Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents, and Commonly Presumed Truths, Book III* (London: T.H., 1646.), 146. See also Gamble, “Towards,” 26-27.

<sup>153</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia*, 147-8.

in between. Equally, this preference means that the witches want to be free of any gender-coding that would subordinate them to men.

Yet, gender is visually present in the play because the witches were played by male actors dressed as women. This double part is analogous to double-crossdressing, where the male actors play multiple roles, in this case, a woman and an animal, either a greyhound or a mare. Simone Chess has noted a wariness ‘about anachronistically conflating fictional representations of crossdressers with [trans] and other gender-variant identities.’<sup>154</sup> While this chapter is equally desirous of steering clear of these confluences, the double-crossdressing of a man-to-woman on the stage is relevant here. Simone Chess comments on double-crossdressing, stating that this practice ‘in some ways re-conflate[s] sex with gender, linking men to masculinity and women to femininity, because as much as crossdressing can and does indicate disjuncture in the sex-gender system, it also relies on that same system’s stability.’<sup>155</sup>

*The Late Lancashire Witches* subverts this system because its doubling is not from male-to-female-to-male but from male-to-female-to-animal, which inherently destabilises the sex-gender system. Chess further notes that ‘doublecrossdressing and other kinds of gender swapping can therefore be seen as inherently conservative, as they reinforce the idea that there are only two sexes and only two genders’<sup>156</sup> When animals are included in the

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<sup>154</sup> Simone Chess, *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 15. Simone Chess uses the term ‘trans\*’ that has been explained on [transstudent.org](https://transstudent.org):

‘The history of the asterisk is not well known. Often, it is misattributed to its pronounced metrosexual (Sam Killerman, who is notably a white, cisgender, heterosexual man). This attribution is incorrect, as its pronounced metrosexual was just one web site that popularized it long after its inception.’ The website concludes its article on the use of ‘trans\*’ with the following remark: ‘In the end, we decided to stop our use of the asterisk because of how unnecessary and inaccessible it is and its common application as a tool of binarism and silencing trans women. We encourage you to do the same. We are in the process of removing all asterisks from our web site, publications, and infographics.’ I have therefore decided to swap out the word ‘trans\*’ for ‘trans’ in keeping with [transstudent.org](https://transstudent.org)’s policy. See Anonymous. "Why We Used Trans\* and Why We Don't Anymore -," *Trans Student Educational Resources* -. Last modified October 9, 2023, <[https://transstudent.org/issues/asterisk/#:~:text=The%20asterisk%20being%20used%20to,existence%2C%20just%20a%20common%20misunderstanding.](https://transstudent.org/issues/asterisk/#:~:text=The%20asterisk%20being%20used%20to,existence%2C%20just%20a%20common%20misunderstanding.>)>

<sup>155</sup> Chess, *Male-to-Female*, 42.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

transformative process, this conservatism is shattered in favour of a para-humanist understanding of the body because this type of transformation subverts the gender binary in favour of a more fluid embodiment that moves away from the gendered human altogether.

This analysis does not suggest that animal forms should be included in the human gender spectrum. However, it does suggest that including an animal in the transformational process disrupts the normative gender binary. Equally, before their transformation, boy-actors would have played the witches. Simone Chess comments, ‘boy actors had queer affects primarily because they were boys, and boyhood was understood as inherently androgynous and gender fluid.’<sup>157</sup> The witches are either played by boy-actors who are less restricted by gender-codes or by animals. These different types of embodiment further emphasise how the witches subvert the patriarchal roles associated with female bodies by destabilising their gendered representations on stage.

The witches are neither male nor female, and it is this bodily fluidity that gives them power through metamorphosis. When Robin removes the bridle from Mrs Generous’s mouth, he does so in front of her husband, revealing her metamorphic powers. Mr Generous states

My blood is turned to ice, and all my vitals  
Have ceased their working! Dull stupidity  
Surpriseth me at once and hath arrested  
That vigorous agitation which till now  
Expressed a life within me: I, methinks,  
Am a mere marble statue and no man.  
Unweave my age, O Time, to my first thread!  
Let me lose fifty years in ignorance spent,  
That being made an infant once again  
I may begin to know what, or where am I,  
To be thus lost in wonder! (IV.II.651).

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<sup>157</sup> Simone Chess, "Queer Residue: Boy Actors' Adult Careers in Early Modern England," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 242-264, 247.

These lines demonstrate the power metamorphosis has, according to Mr Generous. His blood has 'turn'd to ice' seeing his wife transform from a horse into a woman and he is 'lost in wonder' at this revelation. Metamorphosis grants Mrs Generous the power to turn her husband into 'a mere marble statue and no man'. Metamorphosis is then used to question gender on the early modern stage by pushing the boundaries of what is defined as male, female, and animal, respectively.

The witches of Heywood and Brome's play are stepping outside of the bounds of their bodies. They achieve this metamorphosis because of their female bodies, which allows them to shift their gender into animals and away from their bodies, and their wombs. This bodily transformation equally moves them away from motherhood and the household. By representing metamorphosis on the early modern stage, where gender is in question because of boy-actors' androgyny or the use of animals, *The Late Lancashire Witches* further highlights shifting gender narratives. Metamorphosis is therefore a tool that physically, spiritually, and socially removes confines set around women.

## 5. Metamorphosis, Gender, and Angelic Androgyny in Margaret Cavendish's *The New Blazing World*

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter continues the exploration of metamorphosis by examining angels in the early modern period and Margaret Cavendish's use of angelic metamorphosis in *The New Blazing World*. The analysis of Cavendish's text determines how a female author writing after the civil wars and republic employs bodily transformation in a similar manner to Heywood and Brome. Cavendish uses metamorphosis to move away from the Ovidian-inspired witch's power towards an androgynous angelic being, harnessing the theological symbolism associated with this particular genderless state. The *OED* defines 'angel' as 'in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: a member of a class of celestial beings considered intermediate between God and humanity and typically acting as attendants, messengers, or agents of God.'<sup>1</sup> Angels were generally considered sexless.<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:30 describes: 'For in the resurrection they neither marry wives, nor wives are bestowed in marriage, but are as the Angels of God in heaven'.<sup>3</sup> When considering Cavendish's exploration of metamorphosis through a woman becoming an angel, the question of gender becomes relevant to the woman's role in the political context of the time. I argue that Cavendish uses her character's genderless status as an angel to foreground her political arguments while still maintaining her role as a woman within a patriarchal social hierarchy.

By focusing this chapter on a text written by a woman royalist after the civil wars, a distinct representation of metamorphosis emerges in contrast to *The Late Lancashire*

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "angel (n.)," March 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1103347451>>

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Gender in a Different Dispensation: The Case of Shakespeare," *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 7–19, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Matt.: 22:30 (GNV)

*Witches*' display of bodily transformation. These texts are written at two different points of seventeenth-century literary history. The civil wars from 1642 to 1651 divided these two periods, and women's ability to write and publish evolved significantly because of the wars. Britain saw 'the greatest number of [women's] publications appear[e] during the central years of the Civil War and Interregnum'.<sup>4</sup> The literary representation of women changed during this time, demonstrated by a more restrictive approach used to represent women in Heywood and Brome's play, but the novella displays a greater imaginative freedom, which is in part a consequence of a shifting focus on women's feelings after the civil wars ended.

During the second half of the century, women writers 'probed more deeply into women's feelings and the male rationale. [...] they developed a sweeping and powerful criticism of men's attitudes towards and treatment of women.'<sup>5</sup> This shifting emphasis was possible because 'the feminist reevaluation of women and their social position was a natural consequence of the Civil War when power, allegiance, liberty, and slavery became subjects of debate.'<sup>6</sup> Cavendish's writing during this period focuses on women's social position, and she repeatedly returns to themes of motherhood, procreation, and gender. Equally, her philosophical interests inform her writing and affect the representation of the soul-body dynamic through her angelic metamorphosis in her novella.

This chapter is unique in its exploration of metamorphosis as a literary tool to explore androgyny in Cavendish's work. Scholars who have explored Cavendish's oeuvre focus on the importance of gender, but do not specifically investigate angelology or metamorphosis in her writing.<sup>7</sup> Several scholars have also focused on angelology, primarily concentrating

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<sup>4</sup> Mihoko Suzuki, "Introduction," in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1610-1690: Volume Three*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki, 33-47 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome Nadelhaft, "The Englishwoman's Sexual Civil War: Feminist Attitudes Towards Men, Women, and Marriage 1650-1740," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 4 (1982): 555-579, 555.

<sup>6</sup> Nadelhaft, "The Englishwoman's Sexual," 558.

<sup>7</sup> Emma L. E. Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024). Lisa Walters, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Megan Cole, "Traumatic Pregnancy, Queer Virginity, and Asexual Reproduction in Margaret

on Miltonian angels, but they have not investigated the literary metamorphosis of women into angelic beings.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, there is an overlap between early modern trans studies and this chapter. Colby Gordon explores trans embodiment in the early modern period, specifically focusing on gender in religious writings. Gordon argues ‘that transition *happened*, both socially and surgically, and that the significance of such alterations was glossed through the categories provided by theology.’<sup>9</sup> Simone Chess, Colby Gordon and Will Fisher also address the importance of trans early modern studies by highlighting central questions of focus: ‘How did people think about transgender embodiment in an era that preceded the possibility of modern medical transition? What conceptual vocabularies did they use to imagine the potential, or even inevitability, of gender fluidity?’<sup>10</sup> This chapter engages with these questions in relation to the representation of women’s bodies in early modern literature and the symbolic move from a female gender towards intersex embodiment through metamorphosis. I do engage with recent scholarship on trans embodiment and apply it to *The New Blazing World*. However, I do not discuss men, their transition to intersex persons, or male metamorphosis in general. I limit the boundaries of this chapter to exploring only women because they are relevant to the overall direction of this thesis on spiritual motherhood.

I will begin this chapter with an introduction to Cavendish’s work and its connection to the soul-body dynamic and motherhood, before introducing early modern angelology and

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Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*," *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 45, no. 1 (2021): 83-108. Delilah Bermudez Brataas, "Margaret Cavendish's Imaginative Reproductions," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 64, no. 1 (2026): 63-86.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Marshall, and Alexandra Walsham, *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Joad Raymond, *Milton's Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Robert H. West, *Milton and the Angels*, (Athens, G.A.: The University of Georgia Press, 1955).

<sup>9</sup> Colby Gordon, *Glorious Bodies*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Simone Chess, Colby Gordon, and Will Fisher, "Introduction: Early Modern Trans Studies," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 1-25, 5.

its connection to gender and the soul-body dynamic. I will then examine the Empress's transformation into an angelic being in *The New Blazing World*. I argue that Cavendish's female protagonist experiences a metamorphosis to remove the restrictions placed on her gendered body, which allows her to express a politically charged message.

## 5.2. Margaret Cavendish's Writing on Motherhood and the Soul-Body Dynamic

Margaret Cavendish repeatedly engages with the topics of motherhood and the soul-body connection in her writing. Cavendish's own troubles with pregnancy may have contributed to her interest in procreation. In 1645, she married William Cavendish, but after two years of marriage, they still had no children.<sup>11</sup> The couple sought help from physician Théodore de Mayerne, who prescribed a variety of treatments.<sup>12</sup> It is not 'clear that the couple's childlessness was Margaret's fault' and the situation was possibly caused by her husband's impotency.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Cavendish's texts do not contain any instances 'where she clearly expresses sorrow or frustration over her childlessness, or a yearning for motherhood. Anxiety over her inability to conceive does appear, but alongside an appreciation of the options her childlessness offered.'<sup>14</sup> In *Sociable Letters* (1664), for example, she states it is the 'part of every Good Wife to desire Children to Keep alive the Memory of their Husbands Name and Family by Posterity, yet a Woman hath no such Reason to desire Children for her Own Sake'.<sup>15</sup> Cavendish's difficulties with pregnancy, therefore, highlight why the topic appears repeatedly in her writing across different genres.

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<sup>11</sup> See Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Royalist, Writer and Romantic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), and Brataas, "Margaret Cavendish's,".

<sup>12</sup> Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 103-104.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Brataas, "Margaret Cavendish's," 68.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 101.

Cavendish plays with different genres and interprets them in creative ways. In the mid-seventeenth century, the word ‘genre’ was unstable and mutable, because certain texts were ‘discredited on scientific grounds, [but could] retain a poetic or literary quality.’<sup>16</sup> Because of this changeable quality of ‘genre’, in this section of the chapter, I examine texts from a variety of genres across Cavendish’s work. These texts include *Poems and Fancies* (1653), *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), *Philosophical Letters* (1664), *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668), and *The Covent of Pleasure* (1668), to demonstrate Cavendish’s views on the soul-body dynamic, motherhood, and the relevance to metamorphosis of a woman into an angelic body.

It is first worth examining Margaret Cavendish’s understanding of matter, since her materialism informs her thoughts on corporeality. Cavendish approached materialism when she considered atomism in her first published work, *Poems & Fancies*. In ‘A World Made by Atoms’, Cavendish comments on the Lucretian principle of atomism, noting that small Atomes of themselves a World may make, / As being subtle, and of every shape: / And as they dance about, fit places find’ (lines 1-3). These lines suggest that matter is ‘made up of fundamental, naturally indivisible particles—atoms—[which] has a long history, going back to Democritus and Leucippus in the fifth century BCE and vividly presented in Lucretius’s poem of the first century BCE, *De Rerum Natura*.’<sup>17</sup>

However, Cavendish’s ‘theory of matter evolved dramatically between [this text] and *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*’ and ‘she very quickly seemed to repudiate in favor of her later vitalist materialism’.<sup>18</sup> She states that ‘motions that are proper to create figures, are

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<sup>16</sup> Rees, *Margaret Cavendish*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah A. Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 43.

<sup>18</sup> Justin Begley, "Margaret Cavendish Reads Josuah Sylvester: Epicurus, Atheism, and Atomic Skepticism in *Poems and Fancies*," *English Literary Renaissance* 53, no. 3 (2023): 376-400, 379. See also Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe*, 40.

different from those motions that dissolve them, so that sympathetical internal motions, do not only assist one another, but Sympathetical external Motions, and Sympathetical figures'.<sup>19</sup> She then specifically mentions procreation when describing how these motions create a third motion 'by the way of procreation; yet all figures are created, after one and the same kinde of way.'<sup>20</sup> Cavendish's philosophy suggests 'matter and motion was basic to all creation and it was without sex.'<sup>21</sup> She is then suggesting that procreation occurs in nature without sex or the need for a womb. This theory highlights women's identity and how they are defined beyond their reproductive organs.

By writing in the second half of the seventeenth century, Cavendish joined an ongoing discussion of generation and procreation. Since in 'the mid-seventeenth century, chemical and mechanistic models challenged traditional Aristotelian concepts of the male and female bodies and their functions.'<sup>22</sup> William Harvey published *Anatomical Exercitations Concerning the Generation of Living Creatures* in 1653, inspired by Aristotle's epigenetic work.<sup>23</sup> Harvey focuses predominantly on the generation and transformation of the soul in animals that are hatched from eggs, using notably the example of a chicken

The Egge which was before endowed with a vegetative soule, is now over and above that, furnished with a Motive and sensation power; and is raised from a Plant to an Animal and that at the same time the soule of the Foetus is gone in, which first formes the chicken [out...] of the Egge.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa T. Sarasohn, "Margaret Cavendish Thinks about Sex," in *Margaret Cavendish: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, eds. Walters, Lisa, and Brandie R. Siegfried, 33-50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Sarasohn, "Margaret Cavendish," 33.

<sup>23</sup> Bruguière, Perru, and Charles, "The Concept of Metamorphosis," 115.

<sup>24</sup> William Harvey, *Anatomical Exercitations*, 94.

Harvey views this change from vegetative soul to animal soul as a form of transformation that affects both the body and the soul, as the chicken takes shape inside the egg.

Harvey also discusses the physical metamorphosis of butterflies that move through ‘a succession of forms’ and ‘the same Efficient, Nutritive, and Preserving principle, must needs be in each of these: unless we will place one soul in the Boy, another in the Young man, and a third in the Old.’<sup>25</sup> Here, Harvey suggests that the soul progressively changes with the body and is not endowed with a new soul at each stage of transformation. In ancient Greek, the word for butterfly is ‘psyche’, which equally refers to the soul, as the *OED*’s definition suggests: ‘breath, life [...] the source of all vital activities, rational or irrational, the soul or spirit’.<sup>26</sup> The outward transformation of the butterfly, therefore, highlights the inward soul transformation as well, moving from a vegetative to a sensitive soul. The change the butterfly soul undergoes implies the change believed to occur in other cases of metamorphosis, where one soul-part evolves, just as the body does, into a different soul-part.

Cavendish responds to Harvey’s arguments on metamorphosis and generation in *Philosophical Letters*. She suggests that these experiences are achieved through motion, which is inseparable from matter. She comments: ‘if, according to your Author [Harvey], the sole action be the cause of Generation without transferring of substance, then Matter is useless, and of none or little effect; which, in my opinion, is not probable.’<sup>27</sup> In a subsequent letter, she further states that ‘the perceptive corporeal motions are the ground-motions in Nature, which make, rule, and govern all the parts of Nature, as to move to Production, or Generation, Transformation, and the like.’<sup>28</sup> For Cavendish, these changes in corporeality are achieved thanks to self-moving matter, which is essential for both reproduction and

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<sup>25</sup> William Harvey, *Anatomical Exercitations*, 345.

<sup>26</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “psyche, n.”, September 2023.  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8281833933>>

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters* (London: S.N., 1664), 421.

<sup>28</sup> Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, 513.

transformation.<sup>29</sup> Cavendish challenges the womb's procreative function with her understanding of matter and corporeality because 'all of matter in its entirety, regardless of sex, is vitalistic and self-moving, it has the power to create: it does not happen only in one place, such as a womb.'<sup>30</sup>

In 1666, Cavendish released *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, where she further developed her theory on matter. She comments, 'nature is composed of sensitive, rational and inanimate matter, without any separation or division from each other; for, could matter be divided into an atom, that very atom would have a composition of these three degrees of matter.'<sup>31</sup> Cavendish's understanding that there are three degrees of matter is important because it suggests that there is some order to the universe, which is contrary to her views of a chaotic and atomistic cosmos.<sup>32</sup> *The New Blazing World* was printed 'as an appendix to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*' and Cavendish further highlights her understanding of matter.<sup>33</sup> In the novella, she settles to make 'a world of her own invention, and this world was composed of sensitive and rational self-moving matter'.<sup>34</sup> When considering Cavendish's move away from atomism towards vitalist materialism, angelic metamorphosis implies a shift within the material substance that composes both the body and soul of the main protagonist in her novella. She is therefore suggesting a transformation that echoes procreation but is achieved through metamorphosis.

Cavendish also comments on generation in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. She states: 'I observe that all Creatures of Nature are produced but out of one matter, which is common to all, and that there are continual and perpetual Generations and

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<sup>29</sup> Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Observations*, 168

<sup>32</sup> Boyle, *The Well-Ordered*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 287.

<sup>34</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Observations*, 187-188.

Productions in Nature, as well as there are perpetual Dissolutions.’<sup>35</sup> In this text, ‘the process of generation [is taken] to its underlying material substratum, [...] denying the ancients’ sexualized biology.’<sup>36</sup> For Cavendish, ‘man can become a woman, or a woman a man, because of the asexual unitary basis for all differences in nature.’<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the gender assigned to a body is not fixed. It is ‘as if gender means some ontologically universal state of being. “Gender” is a malleable category, possessing no objective meaning outside the society in which it is constructed.’<sup>38</sup> There is, therefore, for Cavendish, a sense of transformation tied to gender, allowing for the mutability of sexes.

Cavendish returns to comment on the transformations caused in foetal generation and metamorphosis a few years later in *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*. She suggests that the move between sensitive and intellectual faculties in the foetus occurs during quickening. The mother does ‘not feel her Child so soon as it is produced, [because...] the Child cannot have an Animal Motion, until it hath an Animal Nature, that is, until it be perfectly an Animal Creature; and as soon as it is a perfect Child, she feels it to move, according to its nature’.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in cases of metamorphosis, she notes, ‘I understand Metamorphose to be a change and alteration of the Exterior Form, but not any change or alteration of the Interior or Intellectual Nature’<sup>40</sup>. Here again, Cavendish highlights the connection between the body, or ‘exterior form’, and the soul, called, ‘interior or Intellectual Nature’. She states, she ‘cannot chuse but wonder, that wise men should believe (as some do) the Change or Transformation of Witches, into many sorts of Creatures.’<sup>41</sup> This comment suggests that she does not believe in metamorphosis. Her choice, therefore, to represent it in *The New*

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<sup>35</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, 103. See also Sarasohn, “Margaret Cavendish,” 40.

<sup>36</sup> Sarasohn, “Margaret Cavendish,” 40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy Divided Into Thirteen Parts: With an Appendix Containing Five Parts* (London: A. Maxwell, 1668), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Cavendish, *Grounds*, 175.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

*Blazing World* demonstrates a desire to use it as a literary device to explore the restrictions women face because of their gender, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

In the same year that *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* was published, Cavendish also release *The Convent of Pleasure*. In the preface of this play, she further comments on gender. She states that she does ‘not keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders’ when writing.<sup>42</sup> This play presents a negative view of motherhood and an alternative to sexual procreation, favouring an asexual form of generation.<sup>43</sup> In this play, Lady Happy inherits her father’s estate and rejects marriage to create a convent. The women who join her must be ‘resolv’d to live a single life, and vow Virginitie’ (I.II.101). In Act III, the women of the convent stage a play-within-a-play that highlights the difficulties of both marriage and motherhood. When a midwife is caring for a pregnant woman, one character asks, ‘Is the Lady deliver’d?’, and another responds, ‘Yes, of life; for she could not be delivered, and so she died.’ (III.IX.4-5) Furthermore, marriage is described negatively with one lady stating, ‘If all Married Women were as unhappy as I, Marriage were a curse’ and another responding there’s ‘No doubt of it.’ (III.IV.5-6) Both the centring of virginity within the convent and the rejection of motherhood demonstrate an idealised representation of asexuality within this play.

Virginity in *The Convent of Pleasure* implies queerness in the same way that angelic androgyny does in *The New Blazing World*. In the play, virginity is not used as ‘a conservative moral or religious trope, [because] Cavendish treats virginity as a queer life path’ and this treatment aligns it with asexuality.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, sexual virginity is represented as an alternative to traumatic pregnancies and subsequent motherhood.<sup>45</sup> In *The Convent of*

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<sup>42</sup> Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, *The Convent of Pleasure and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Shaver (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 259. See also Sarasohn, “Margaret Cavendish,” 49.

<sup>43</sup> See Cole, “Traumatic Pregnancy,”

<sup>44</sup> Cole, “Traumatic Pregnancy,” 85.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

*Pleasure*, Cavendish offers a ‘multivalent critique of pregnancy’ which is done in an ‘effort to theorize an asexual reproductive ideology.’<sup>46</sup> In *The New Blazing World*, the Empress marries the Emperor but escapes motherhood by transforming her body into that of an androgynous angel, incapable of heterosexual procreation. Yet the Empress retains certain female traits after becoming an angel, aligning femininity with the idealised genderless state the angel represents in the early modern period. In the next section, I will focus on the early modern understanding of angelic corporeality and androgyny before turning to its representation in Cavendish’s novella.

### 5.3. The Soul-Body Dynamic and Early Modern Angelology

Since angels were considered different in both body and soul to humans, I will first describe their spiritual and corporeal nature before addressing the question of angelic androgyny. The first biblical appearance of an angel occurs in Genesis 3.24 when God’s actions after the Fall are described: ‘Thus he cast out the man, and at the East side of the garden of Eden he set the Cherubims, and the blade of a sword shaken, to keep the way of the tree of life.’<sup>47</sup> The *OED* further notes that in medieval angelology, there are nine types of angels classed into three different groups: ‘the first comprising cherubim, seraphim, and thrones; the second dominations, virtues, and powers; and the third principalities, archangel, and angels.’<sup>48</sup>

According to Peter Marshall, it was through medieval scholars in the thirteenth century, such as Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas ‘that speculation about angels reached its apogee. [...] they addressed searching and perplexing metaphysical

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<sup>46</sup> Cole, "Traumatic Pregnancy," 83.

<sup>47</sup> Gen 3.24 (GNV, 1599). See also Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, "Migrations of Angels in the Early Modern World," in *Angels in the Early Modern World*, edited by Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, 1-40 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “angel (n.),” March 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1103347451>>

questions about their essence and existence.’<sup>49</sup> Bonaventure notably differentiates between three universal hierarchies, ‘the ecclesiastical, the angelical, and the divine’, but he also names these respectively as ‘the subcelestial, the celestial, and the supercelestial’ and further explains that they ‘are high, higher, or more high accordingly as they describe the ecclesiastical, the angelical, or the divine hierarchies’.<sup>50</sup> Bonaventure’s descriptions suggest that the angelic realm sits between the ‘subcelestial’ and ‘supercelestial’ at a specific level or height that is hierarchically separated. There were two primary schools of thought in the thirteenth century regarding the spiritual composition of angels. The first, called ‘universal hylomorphism, [maintained] that angels are form/matter composites, and [the second] (let’s call it) spiritual immaterialism, [maintained] that spiritual beings such as angels are pure, self-subsistent forms.’<sup>51</sup> Medieval scholars ‘reached a general conclusion [...] that angels are pure intelligences not naturally united with bodies, though with a natural power to control the local motion of bodies and so to shape materials for apparition.’<sup>52</sup>

This understanding was echoed in Ficino’s writing. He states that ‘angels are intelligences, the first of created beings, but not entirely simple in nature, for they have number. Ficino absorbed Aquinas’ account of angels being necessary as created but spiritual in nature.’<sup>53</sup> In his *Platonic Theology* (1482), Ficino notes that after God ‘it is correct then to place angel next, an unmoving plurality; and then after angel, soul, which is more distant from God still, since it is a plurality subject to movement. It is a plurality because nothing

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<sup>49</sup> Marshall and Walsham, "Migrations," 6.

<sup>50</sup> Saint Bonaventure, *The Works of Bonaventure: The Breviloquium - Volume IX*, ed. Robert J. Karris, trans. Dominic V. Monti (New York, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005) Taken from Esther Woo, "Theophanic Cosmic Order in Saint Bonaventure," *Franciscan Studies* 32 (1972): 306-330, 313.

<sup>51</sup> Brendan Case, "Seraphicus Supra Angelicum: Universal Hylomorphism and Angelic Mutability," *Franciscan Studies* 78, no. 1 (2020): 19-50, 19.

<sup>52</sup> West, *Milton*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Bruce Gordon, "The Renaissance Angel," in *Angels in the Early Modern World*, eds. Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, 41-63 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51.

after God can be absolutely simple unity.’<sup>54</sup> Angels are therefore described as spiritual beings set above humans' rational souls.

Ficino further explains that angels are in between God and rational souls because ‘the further [the soul] recedes from God, the closer it comes to corporeal qualities which are totally subject to movement. If it were entirely immobile, it would be angel; if entirely mobile, it would be quality.’<sup>55</sup> Humans possess the intellectual soul that separates them from animals and their sensitive souls, whereas angels are described as having unmoving plurality that is closer to the unity of God. The rational soul is the middle point, at the centre ‘in this vertical hierarchy and is able to take on certain qualities of the angel who stands above it. The rational soul falls between intelligible reality (God and the angels) and corporeal reality (quality and body).’<sup>56</sup>

This vertical hierarchy is inherited by early modern writers such as Thomas Heywood, who comments in *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells* on the nature of angelic beings

[L]ittle further let my Muse aspire,  
To take myne eyes from Earth, to look up higher,  
Unto the glorious Hierarchie above;  
The blest degrees in which the Angels move.  
In this, the best Theologists assent,  
That they are Substances Intelligent,  
Immortale, Incorporeall, Moving Still  
(Heywood, IV.193-194).<sup>57</sup>

Heywood’s description highlights both the hierarchical categorisation of angels and their essence, which is both ‘intelligent’ and ‘incorporeal’. This differentiation is important when considering metamorphosis from human into angel because it suggests that the quality of the

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<sup>54</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology: Volume 1*, ed. James Hankins. Trans. Michael Allen and John Warden (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 221.

<sup>55</sup> Ficino, *Platonic*, 223.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon, "The Renaissance," 51.

<sup>57</sup> Heywood, *The Hierarchie*.

human soul is also transformed along with the human body through the metamorphic process.

#### 5.4. Angelic Androgyny and the Challenge to Motherhood

Angelic corporeality also challenges motherhood and procreation through asexual representations in theological and literary texts. According to Peter Marshall, ‘angels were asexual spiritual beings, though they usually took the outward form of young men’.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, their genderless state tended to favour a masculinised form.<sup>59</sup> This tendency was supported by biblical references such as Matt. 19.12: ‘For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.’<sup>60</sup> Eunuchs in the classical world were not uncommon, and it ‘is quite possible that these sexually nonfunctional beings may have shared physical characteristics that came to be associated with angels’.<sup>61</sup> Laura DeVun addresses angelic androgyny in the history of Christian writing, specifically discussing the interpretation of Adam in Genesis

[C]ertain Christian writers, adopting the ideas of early Jewish exegetes, viewed Adam an angelic androgynous, a lost prototype of human nature that reflected God's purity and simplicity at the beginning of time, and that transcended the need for bodily distinctions. For church fathers such as Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Damascene, among others, the most elevated state of humanity was the absence of binary sex.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Marshall and Walsham, "Migrations," 5.

<sup>59</sup> Dyan Elliott, "Tertullian, the Angelic Life, and the Bride of Christ," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz, 16-33 (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 31.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew 19.12 (KJV).

<sup>61</sup> Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>62</sup> Leah DeVun, "Heavenly Hermaphrodites: Sexual Difference at the Beginning and End of Time," *Postmedieval a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2018): 132-146, 134.

According to DeVun, this elevated state of humanity was directly tied to a genderless embodiment. The ‘text of Genesis was sometimes understood to suggest that before Eve existed as a separate creature, woman was physically lodged within Adam’s body’ and this embodiment was divinely pure, just as angelic embodiment is pure.<sup>63</sup>

The discussion of angelic gender continued into the medieval period. Notably, in the thirteenth Century, William of Auvergne stated that ‘if someone should say similarly that the male sex has no place among sublime and blessed spirits, I respond that it is true’.<sup>64</sup> Thomas Aquinas also commented on angelic embodiment but focused more on corporeality than gender, stating it is ‘impossible for an intellectual substance [of angels] to have any kind of matter’.<sup>65</sup> The discussion on corporeality is important because it implies asexuality. Angelic androgyny had ‘occasionally been discussed within the church but had always been resolved by the conclusion that non-corporeality inevitably implied sexlessness.’<sup>66</sup>

In the early modern period, questions about angelic embodiment and the ways angels chose to appear to humans persisted. Martin Luther claims that angels know ‘nothing of the lower area and of the flesh’.<sup>67</sup> They only take ‘anthropomorphic forms [...] when they appeared to human beings.’<sup>68</sup> This comment suggests that angels undergo a kind of metamorphosis from intelligible reality into corporeal reality to communicate with humans. Jean Calvin also addresses angelic corporeality in *The Institutes of Christian Religion* (1536), stating, ‘it is certain that spirits lack bodily form, and yet Scripture, matching the

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<sup>63</sup> Gordon, *Glorious Bodies*, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas De Mayo, "William of Auvergne and Popular Demonology," *Quidditas* 28 (2007): 61-88, 81.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossarie, Volume 9*. Ed. Kenelm Foster and Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars, 1964), 9, 5.

<sup>66</sup> Enid Gauldie, "Flights of Angels," *History Today* 42, (1992): 13-20, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works - Volume 11: The Christian Society*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Saint Louis, M.O.: Concordia Publishing House, 1976), 321-322. See also Philip M. Soergel, "Luther on the Angels," in *Angels in the Early Modern World*, eds. Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, 64-82 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 70.

<sup>68</sup> Soergel, "Luther," 79.

measure of our comprehension, usefully depicts for us winged angels under the names of cherubim and seraphim'.<sup>69</sup> It is only when angels appear to humans that they would appear embodied. Indeed, 'as incorporeal spirits, angels and devils did not have "natural" appearances. [...] Most authors held that these bodies were fashioned of condensed air.'<sup>70</sup> For reformers, angels were the ideal example of celibacy that monastics were meant to emulate.<sup>71</sup>

This pure ideal echoes hermaphroditic corporeality depicted in alchemical texts. In *Splendor Solis* (c.1582), an illumination shows a two-headed being with one white and one red wing.<sup>72</sup> This hermaphrodite 'represents *conjunction*, "Conjunction". [...] The dualities of man and woman, and different wings reaffirm that the origin of the Work lies in the conjunction of Philosopher's Sulphur and Mercury.'<sup>73</sup> Symbolically, gender becomes central in the process of the creation of the



<sup>69</sup> Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes*, ed. John T. McNeill, 168.

<sup>70</sup> Martha McGill, "Angels, Devils, and Discernment in Early Modern Scotland," in *Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Brock, Michelle D., Richard Raiswell, and David R. Winter, 239-263 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 250.

<sup>71</sup> Laura Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England, 1400-1700* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 52.

<sup>72</sup> Image take from Salomon Trismosin, *Splendor Solis*, image, <https://commons.wikimedia.org>. Creative Commons License (CC-PD-Mark),

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Splendor\\_Solis\\_09\\_hermaphrodite\\_with\\_egg.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Splendor_Solis_09_hermaphrodite_with_egg.jpg)

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Skinner, Rafal T. Prinke, Georgiana Hedesan, and Joscelyn Godwin, eds., *Splendor Solis: The World's Most Famous Alchemical Manuscript* (London: Watkins, 2019), 112.

philosopher's stone, suggesting that the hermaphrodite is the alchemical ideal of transformation.

Alchemical language offers early modern writers a symbolic way to discuss gender.

For example, John Donne uses this vocabulary in his poem 'The Canonization'

The phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us; we two being one, are it.  
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love (lines 23-27).<sup>74</sup>

The transformation of the phoenix through its death and rebirth represents the merging of two sexes into one that moves into a state of love. Donne's display of 'hermaphroditic characteristics efface their gender and contribute to the heightened sense of copulation suggested in the poem.'<sup>75</sup> This text demonstrates the conversation between alchemical language and poetry as Donne draws 'on alchemical materials, quite possibly on illustrations from its rich visual tradition.'<sup>76</sup> The genderless body of this melded being allows the transformation, suggesting the importance of genderlessness to the process. This androgynous imagery allows Donne to explore gendered bodies in his poem as well. His 'personas are not women, nor are they obviously feminine: they are multiply gendered or agender, or they are inanimate objects without any clear relationship to gender at all. What these lyric bodies are not, however, is male.'<sup>77</sup> Donne uses gender, or rather the lack of gender, as a space to discuss matters that cannot be encoded with traditional feminine or masculine attributes.

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<sup>74</sup> John Donne, 'The Canonization,' in *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Hugh A. Robbins (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2010).

<sup>75</sup> Lisa Gay Jennings, "The Alchemy of Sexuality in Early Modern English Lyric Poetry," PhD diss., Florida State University, 2015), 60.

<sup>76</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington, K.Y.: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 174.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon, *Glorious Bodies*, 118.

Milton also comments on angelic gender in book I of *Paradise Lost*, stating ‘For Spirits when they please / Can either Sex assume or both, so soft / And uncompounded is their essence pure’ (I.429-431). Julie Crawford has previously stated that ‘Milton’s angels are certainly heir to the tradition of “holy hermaphroditism” that [Laura DeVun] traces in the history of Christian thought.’<sup>78</sup> Even though ‘Protestantism replaced the medieval ideal of celibacy with Christian marriage, the angels continued to escape the constraints of gender’.<sup>79</sup> *Paradise Lost*’s angels suggest that the most elevated state of embodiment is tied to asexuality and the absence of binary sex.<sup>80</sup> This understanding of ideal corporeality impacts the representation of women in early modern texts. Indeed, ‘feminist and queer historiography on women, boys, crossdressers, androgynes, and hermaphrodites persuasively shows that these figures blurred the binarized gender distinctions [and...] presented early modern bodies as vulnerable and mutable sites of difference.’<sup>81</sup> By moving from a woman’s body into an androgynous angelic one, Cavendish’s Empress in *The New Blazing World* displays the gender malleability that metamorphosis allows.

Margaret Cavendish comments on angelic corporeality in *Philosophical Letters*

[T]he holy Scripture mentions, as Angels and Devils, and the divine Soul of Man; but I say onely, that no Immaterial Spirit belongs to Nature, so as to be a part thereof; for Nature is Material, or Corporeal; and whatsoever is not composed of matter or body, belongs not to Nature.<sup>82</sup>

Angels are a part of nature, and as a result of this belonging, they are also ‘Material, or Corporeal’ according to Cavendish.<sup>83</sup> She further states in *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*

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<sup>78</sup> Julie Crawford, “Transubstantial Bodies in *Paradise Lost* and *Order and Disorder*,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 75-93, 80.

<sup>79</sup> Belsey, “Gender,” 14.

<sup>80</sup> Crawford, “Transubstantial Bodies,” 81.

<sup>81</sup> Abdulhamit Arvas, “Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 116-136, 116.

<sup>82</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, 84.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

that ‘whether Angels, and Devils, are Material, that is not declared: for, though they are named Spirits, yet we know not whether those Spirits be Immaterial. But, considering that Hell and Heaven is described to be Material, it is probable, Spirits are also Material’.<sup>84</sup> For Cavendish, angels are ‘material’ rather than ‘immaterial’, and this statement implies corporeality as well. This separation is equally represented in the metamorphosis in *The New Blazing World*. Asexuality offers Cavendish a means to explore women’s bodies in a manner that removes them from their ability to procreate and the identity of motherhood, which I will explore more in the next section of this chapter.

## 5.5. Angelic Androgyny and Metamorphosis in *The New Blazing World*

*The New Blazing World* was written shortly after the civil war and the republic. During this time, there was ‘a remarkable increase in women’s publications.’<sup>85</sup> These works also include texts by women mystics, such as Anna Trapnel and Jane Lead, which I analysed in chapter three.<sup>86</sup> These spiritualists use gender as a metaphor to explore their connection to God. For example, Jane Lead describes how her prophecies arose from ‘God’s Eternal *Virgin-Wisdom*’ and ‘deep Wisdom’ comes forth ‘out of [the] Womb’.<sup>87</sup> Cavendish is not writing as a spiritualist but as a royalist commenting on political discourse through her fiction. Cavendish ‘lived on the edge of the arena of high politics, and the course of her life was moulded by the fortunes of the royalist party to which she belonged’, and she also explored gender in her texts.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*, 84, 148-149.

<sup>85</sup> Suzuki, "Introduction," 3. See also Sarah C. Ross, and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, *Women Poets of the English Civil War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 1. Soergel, "Luther," 79.

<sup>86</sup> Ross, and Scott-Baumann, *Women Poets*, 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> I explore this gendered terminology more in chapter 3. Lead, *A Fountain*, 82.

<sup>88</sup> Susan James, "Introduction," in *Political Writings by Margaret Cavendish*, ix-xxix (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ix.

*The New Blazing World* begins when a merchant kidnaps a young lady because he does not have the social rank to marry her. They sail to the North Pole, where he and his entire crew freeze to death, but the lady survives. She drifts on the ship into the Blazing World. There, she meets hybrid animals that can walk and talk like humans. She marries the Emperor of this land and takes on the title of Empress. In the second half of the narrative, she learns that her native world is at war and that her homeland is being devastated. She returns to her world to aid the war effort and ultimately destroys the attacking force. It is during this intervention that she transforms into an angel. Metamorphosis into a genderless angel places the Empress above both gender and society, integrating her into a celestial hierarchy, which gives her the divine right to comment on earthly affairs and deliver a political message during a time when her female body would otherwise have prohibited her from doing so.

Some royalist discourse notably employed angels as metaphors to discuss the hierarchical structure they defended. Neither royalist nor radical discourse dissipated immediately in the years following the restoration of the monarchy. The Act of Oblivion was passed in August 1660, and '[t]his legislation commanded people not to remember publicly the civil wars. On the other hand, personal memories of what were referred to as the 'late broken times' were lodged firmly within most people's minds.'<sup>89</sup> There were tensions between those who sought to forget and those who sought to preserve the memory of the past. However, these tensions did not seek 'to prohibit all acts of remembering the conflicted past'.<sup>90</sup> The royalist pamphleteer James Howell notes in *An Eucharistical Rapture* (1663) that the 'Archangels, who the most sublime Degree / Do hold in the Cœlestial *Hierarchy*'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Matthew Neufeld, *The Civil Wars After 1660: Public Remembering in Late Stuart England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 17.

<sup>90</sup> Neufeld, *The Civil Wars*, 17.

<sup>91</sup> James Howell, "An Eucharistical Rapture, with A Gradual Hymn to the Heavenly Hierarchy," in *Poems on Several Choice and Various Subjects, Occasionally Composed by an Eminent Author* (London: Collected and Published by Sergeant-Major P. F., 1663), 122.

Howell further comments on celestial hierarchies in his *Divers Historical Discourses* (1661), stating that those who would plunge ‘their own native Country in any publick engagement or civil war’ are in fact

[A] pack of perverse people [...] multiplied in *England*, who by a kind of natural inclination, are opposit so point blank to *Monarchy* in State, and *Hierarchy* in Church, that [...] I say if these men were in Heven, they would go near to repine at the *Monarchical* power of God Almighty himself, as also at the degrees of *Angels*, and the postures of holiness in the Church triumphant.<sup>92</sup>

In this passage, Howell creates a parallel between the celestial and political hierarchies during the English Civil Wars. Even though ‘Howell wrote for popular consumption’,<sup>93</sup> he was known to have ‘a curious relationship with the “peeples voice”. [...] His fondness for popular tradition and wisdom shaped the style in which he wrote and structured his polemical responses to the civil wars, but Howell retained a strong sense of rightful place.’<sup>94</sup> Like Howell, Cavendish equally uses the celestial hierarchies to comment on the political situation in *The New Blazing World*.

Before her metamorphosis occurs, the Empress is described in several different ways: she is a ‘young lady’, a ‘Lady’, an ‘Empress’, her ‘Majesty’, her ‘Imperial Majesty’ and a ‘powerful princess’.<sup>95</sup> She is described as a supernatural being first when she meets the Emperor: ‘No sooner was the Lady brought before the Emperor, but he conceived her to be

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<sup>92</sup> James Howell, *Divers Historical Discourses of the Late Popular Insurrections in Great Britain and Ireland Tending All, to the Asserting of the Truth, in Vindication of their Majesties* (London: Richard Royston, 1661), 11.

<sup>93</sup> Dawn Goldstone, "Royalism and Social Change: The Case of James Howell," *Literature Compass* 10, no. 3 (2013): 249-259, 251.

<sup>94</sup> Goldstone, "Royalism," 251.

<sup>95</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World Called The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (London: William Pickering, 1992): The Empress is called ‘young lady’ on pages 125-126; ‘Lady’: 127-132; ‘Empress’: 133-186, 188-197, 200-223; ‘Majesty’: 136, 145, 147, 155, 157-158, 162-163, 165, 179-180, 190-191, 202, 205-207, 220, 221; ‘Imperial Majesty’: 160, 197, 201; ‘Powerful princess’: 209. This list is non-exhaustive. There is also another instance when the Empress appears ‘like an angel’ in a chapel ‘and as that chapel was an emblem of Hell, so this was an emblem of Heaven’ on page 164.

some goddess, and offered to worship her'.<sup>96</sup> However, the Empress refuses this title, stating 'that although she came out of another world, yet was she but a mortal'.<sup>97</sup> When she returns to her homeland, her countrymen believe her to be an 'angel', a 'deity', a 'sorceress', and a 'goddess'.<sup>98</sup> In this section of the text, the Empress does not contradict these statements, which suggests she has transformed.

She is seen by 'her countrymen [who] perceived at a distance' that she appeared 'like an angel, or some deity and all kneeled down before her, and worshipped her with all submission and reverence.'<sup>99</sup> This description suggests that the Empress is an otherworldly being who has transformed into an angelic or even God-like figure. Some scholars have suggested that the Empress's transformation is a deception; 'in Christ-like majesty, the Empress elicits immediate adulation and "submission." Yet here again display is created through artifice: science creates spectacle, which dazzles and hypnotizes.'<sup>100</sup> I argue instead that the shift in language in *The New Blazing World* is enough to demonstrate that the transformation is real and her body does undergo a metamorphosis because the characters of the novella accept it.

Cavendish's description of her angelic transformation implies a change in her corporeality that is more than altered clothing or artificial display. The Empress is described in terms that give her a godlike status. She has 'placed some of the star-stone, near her face, which added such a lustre and glory to it, that it caused a great admiration in all that were present, who believed her to be some celestial creature, or rather an 'uncreated goddess.'<sup>101</sup> Cavendish's choice to describe the Empress as an 'uncreated' deity echoes Aristotle's

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<sup>96</sup> Cavendish, *The Description*, 132.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 211. She is also described on this page as: 'others said the devil deluded them in the shape of a fine lady.'

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>100</sup> Anne M. Thell, "The Power of Transport, the Transport of Power: Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*," *Women's Studies* 37, no. 5 (2008): 441-463, 459.

<sup>101</sup> Cavendish, *The Description*, 215.

description of the world as ‘uncreated and indestructible.’<sup>102</sup> In *Physics*, Aristotle explains that all natural scientists believe in the truth that ‘it is impossible for anything to come into being from non-being.’<sup>103</sup> He further clarifies that ‘there is always *something* underlying substances, something for them to come from.’<sup>104</sup> Cavendish is equally suggesting that the Empress-turned-angel was not created from nothing.

The prefix ‘un’ suggests that the Empress is created through shifting matter, and no new creation occurs. In *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, Cavendish states she ‘cannot believe, that some sorts of creatures should be produced on a sudden by the way of transmigration or translation of parts, which is the most usual way of natural productions; for both natural and artificial productions are performed by degrees’.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, nature and ‘her particulars are subject to infinite changes and transmutations by virtue of their own corporeal figurative self-motions’.<sup>106</sup> According to Tom Stoneham and Peter West, Cavendish addresses the concept of being uncreated when she discusses immaterial spirits; ‘unlike God, finite immaterial spirits could not possibly exist even *outside* of nature, since that would require them to exist uncreated.’<sup>107</sup> It is only in nature that transformations such as the Empress’s metamorphosis can occur. Cavendish’s choice to transform her Empress

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<sup>102</sup> This quotation is from Philo referencing Aristotle’s lost dialogue *On Philosophy*. Philo, “On the Eternity of The World” in *Every Good Man is Free. on the Contemplative Life. on the Eternity of the World. Against Flaccus. Apology for the Jews. on Providence*, trans. F. H. Colson, 184-294 (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1941), 239. See also Anton-Hermann Chroust, “Some Observations on Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Uncreatedness and Indestructibility of The Universe,” *Rivista Critica Di Storia Della Filosofia* 32, no.2 (1977): 123-143.

<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*. David Bostock, ed., Robin Waterfield, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 187a 33-34.

<sup>104</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 190b 4-6.

<sup>105</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eileen O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>107</sup> Tom Stoneham, and Peter West, “The Unorthodox Margaret Cavendish,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, eds. Karen Detlefsen and Lisa Shapiro, 435-449 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 440.

<sup>107</sup> Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Observations*, 444.

into an angel allows her to move her protagonist closer to God and, by consequence, demonstrate her superior status to all humans.

There are several examples of this hierarchy being redrawn to demonstrate the Empress-turned-angel's superiority. For example, when she first appears to defend her homeland 'her countrymen perceived at a distance, their hearts began to tremble; [...] like an angel, or some deity and all kneeled down before her, and worshipped her with all submission and reverence'.<sup>108</sup> The choice of words such as 'kneel', 'worship' and 'submission' suggest a hierarchical relationship and the Empress's superiority. Equally, this vocabulary suggests religious worship, but women could not be church leaders in the early modern period. Women could 'not do anything which challenged male authority in the church. They were accepted as exponents of private revelation (prophecy), or of domestic faith and virtue [...]. They might show leadership, but not exercise jurisdiction over anyone.'<sup>109</sup> The suggestion that the Empress is worthy of such reverence further demonstrates her otherworldly power. A few lines later, the Empress is described as 'an angel sent from God to deliver [England] out of the hands of their enemies: neither would she return to the Blazing World, until she had forced all the rest of that world to submit to that same nation.'<sup>110</sup> Again, the word 'submit' demonstrates the Empress's elevated status that her angelic body awards her.

Cavendish explores gendered hierarchy in *The New Blazing World* by moving her main protagonist through several different social positions. At the beginning of the novella, the Empress is a prisoner, stripped of her freedom, kidnapped and held hostage. She is then taken to the North Pole, but all her captors 'freeze to death'.<sup>111</sup> She then marries the Emperor

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<sup>108</sup> Cavendish, *The Description*, 210.

<sup>109</sup> Anne Laurence, "A Priesthood of She-Believers: Women and Congregations in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England," *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990): 345–363, 352.

<sup>110</sup> Cavendish, *The Description*, 211.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

and becomes the Empress before finally being elevated to the status of an angel and ‘uncreated goddess’ who forces the world into an ‘absolute monarchy’.<sup>112</sup> She becomes an angelic being to exact a powerful influence over the other characters from the vantage of her celestial status. Cavendish had previously explored women’s inferiority in *The World's Olio* (1655). She states

In Nature we have as clear an understanding as Men, if we were bred in Schools to mature our Brains, and to manure our Understandings, that we might bring forth the Fruits of Knowledge. But to speak truth, Men have great Reason not to let us in to their Governments, for there is great difference betwixt the Masculine Brain and the Feminine.<sup>113</sup>

In this passage, Cavendish agrees that a separation should be maintained between men and women and specifically justifies men’s refusal to allow women into the political space.

She further addresses this separation in *Sociable Letters*: ‘Women should be Instructed and Taught more Industriously, Carefully, and Prudently, to Temper their Passions, and Govern their Appetites, than Men, because there comes more Dishonour from their unruly Passions and Appetites, than from Mens’.<sup>114</sup> Deborah Boyle comments on this passage, stating that if women’s education were to ‘violate the norms of Nature, Cavendish would oppose it; in her view, education should not seek to turn women into men. What would result from such an education, in Cavendish’s view, would be a sort of hybrid person.’<sup>115</sup>

In *The World's Olio*, Cavendish further comments on the connection between women and angels. She states that Nature has made men ‘like coarse household Bread’ and filled women’s minds with ‘tender Affections, as Love, Piety, Charity, Clemency, Patience, Humility, and the like; which makes them nearest to resemble Angells, which are the

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<sup>112</sup> Cavendish, *The Description*, 215, my emphasis.

<sup>113</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio* (London: A. Maxwell, 1671), page unnumbered – Preface to the reader section.

<sup>114</sup> Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 36.

<sup>115</sup> Boyle, *The Well-Ordered*, 172.

perfectest of all her Works'.<sup>116</sup> She returns to this connection in *The New Blazing World* by transforming the Empress into an angelic being. Although angels are androgynous, the Empress maintains certain feminine traits in her metamorphosed state. She is described in the same sentence as 'an angel', 'a sorceress' and 'a goddess'.<sup>117</sup> This line implies that Cavendish's angel combines femininity with an androgynous body. This angelic corporeality gives the Empress power that her solely feminine body could not access. Earlier in *The New Blazing World*, Cavendish states that 'women and children have no employment in church or state.'<sup>118</sup> Therefore, women in positions of power, such as the Empress, must transform to gain authority. The angelic transformation allows Cavendish to represent a way for women to access both knowledge and political power because of the androgyny associated with angels.

Despite still possessing some femininity, the descriptions of The Empress's body create space between her angelic state and her capacity for reproduction. The choice to have the protagonist of *The New Blazing World* transform into a being who cannot carry a child in her womb is noteworthy. It allows Cavendish the space to move out of the traditional role women held at the time and become politically active. The Empress can engage in the war in her world because she moves from being a woman to an angel, who no longer inhabits the domestic sphere of society or has the physical ability to bear children. Both *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The New Blazing World* use metamorphosis as a literary device to remove the gendered restrictions that confine women. By moving out of a gender-coded body into a fluid corporeality, women display agency in both texts. Metamorphosis offers early modern writers a way of approaching female characters without the labels generally associated with those bodies, whether motherhood, the household, or witchcraft.

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<sup>116</sup> Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, page unnumbered, 'preface to the reader', my emphasis.

<sup>117</sup> Cavendish, *The Description*, 211.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

## 6. Bloody Maternity: The Representation of Menstrual Blood in Early Modern Women's Alchemical Poetry

### 6.1. Introduction

The previous chapters examined the soul-body dynamic in women and specifically their convergence in the womb. This chapter examines the vocabulary that early modern women use to describe menstrual blood and breastmilk in alchemical poetry. The women writers explored in this chapter engage with alchemy to represent the spiritual nature of the female body and its fluids. Blood refers here to ‘the red fluid flowing in the arteries, capillaries, and veins of humans and other vertebrates [...] the blood of an individual, species’.<sup>1</sup> In the early modern period, breastmilk was believed to come from the womb, created from menstrual blood. Jane Sharp explains in *The Midwives Book* that ‘when the time comes for the Child to be born; but after the birth, this blood comes not hither but goes to the Breasts to make Milk’.<sup>2</sup> Alchemy is defined as ‘the branch of study and practical craft in the medieval and early renaissance period concerned with the nature and transformation of physical substances, esp. the transmutation of baser metals into gold’.<sup>3</sup> In alchemy, ‘blood's important role [...] stemmed from its dual function as generative and corrupting, but also how alchemical bloods were used to express the period's uncertainties about sexuality, and female sexuality in particular.’<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I argue that early modern women draw on

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “blood (n.),” December 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4196790062>>

<sup>2</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “alchemy (n. & adj.),” September 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2271366924>>

Roger Bacon in *The Mirrour of Alchimy* (1597) emphasises that ‘there are found many definitions of this Art, [...] *Alchimy* therefore is a science teaching how to make and compound a certaine medicine, which is called *Elixir*, the which when it is cast vpon mettals or imperfect bodies, doth fully perfect them in the verie projection.’ Roger Bacon, *The Mirrour of Alchimy* (London: Thomas Creede, 1597), A3r.

<sup>4</sup> Bonnie Lander Johnson, and Eleanor Decamp, “Introduction,” in *Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700*, eds. Bonnie Lander Johnson and Eleanor Decamp, 1-12 (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 7.

alchemical imagery of the womb's fluids, whether menstrual blood or breastmilk, as symbolic tools to inscribe their bodies in a spiritual context within their poetry.

In the first part of this chapter, I will examine the early modern understanding of blood, and specifically menstrual blood in an alchemical context, before turning to its representation in women's poetry. I will analyse texts of three poets, Elizabeth Jane Weston's *Parthenica* (c.1608),<sup>5</sup> An Collins' *Divine Songs, and Meditations* (1653), and Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* (1679), arguing that these poets use alchemical imagery to reframe their bodily fluids as a source of spiritual transformation. Elizabeth Jane Weston creates a parallel between her blood, the Virgin Mary, and the moon to highlight the nature of women's bodies that experience monthly cycles just as the moon does. An Collins suggests that her body's inability to experience the natural rhythms ultimately brings her closer to God. Finally, Lucy Hutchinson metaphorically suggests that the perception of women can be changed from sin to salvation by using the womb's capacity to convert corrupted menstrual blood into providential breastmilk. I argue that these women writers' alchemical poetry conceptualises the female body, through its metaphorical representation of menstrual blood, not only as a source of corruption and life generation but as capable of corporeal and spiritual transformation.

The overlap between seventeenth-century alchemical women's poetry and the depictions of menstrual blood and breastmilk has received little attention in previous scholarship. There have been several works on menstrual blood and women's bodies, but these works do not

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<sup>5</sup> The exact date of publication of Weston's text is unclear: 'Although the traditional date of *Parthenica* is generally given as ca. 1606, the catalogue of learned women at the end of the volume cites Helena Maria Wackeriana von Wackenfels as having died in Prague. Since her death occurred on 30 May 1607, the book obviously went to press sometime after that date. A copy in the National Library of Prague (Signature II.Ff.12) bearing the bookplate of Prince von Lobkovitz has a contemporary vellum binding with the date 1608 stamped on it; this seems likely to have been the date of its binding and probably of its publication as well.' Donald Cheney, and Brenda M. Hosington, "Introduction," in *Elizabeth Jane Weston: Collected Writings*, eds. Donald Cheney and Brenda M. Hosington, xi-xxxi (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), xxx.

focus on literary representations of alchemical concepts. Medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum has examined the anxieties around ‘blood debates and blood piety’ in fifteenth-century Germany, and Peggy McCracken has explored women’s bleeding in medieval cultures.<sup>6</sup> Patricia Crawford has examined women’s blood in the early modern period but her approach revolves around the body and familial ties to ‘include women and their experiences’ in England.<sup>7</sup> Bynum, McCracken, and Crawford’s approaches do not include analyses of early modern women’s poetry.

Bonnie Lander Johnson and Eleanor Decamp’s edited collection of essays on blood examine literary representations of both male and female blood across a variety of topics, including early modern medical texts on blood circulation, Blood in Dante’s *Inferno*, and blood in Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies.<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Taylor Johnson specifically presents a chapter on blood, milk, and poison in *Romeo and Juliet*, which offers relevant contextual material for this chapter but does not examine early modern women’s poetry.<sup>9</sup> Tara Nummedal has written several works on alchemical blood, but, as a historian, she does not analyse women’s poetry.<sup>10</sup> Works on Elizabeth Jane Weston focus predominately on her position as a neo-Latin English poet living in Prague during Rudolph II’s reign.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Crawford, *Blood, Bodies and Families in Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Lander Johnson, and Johnson and Eleanor Decamp, eds. *Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Bonnie Lander Johnson, "Blood, Milk, Poison: *Romeo and Juliet's* Tragedy of "Green" Desire and Corrupted Blood," in *Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700*, eds. Bonnie Lander Johnson and Eleanor Decamp, 134-148 (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Tara Nummedal, "Corruption, Generation, and the Problem of Menstrua in Early Modern Alchemy," in *Blood Matters: Studies in European Literature and Thought, 1400-1700*, eds. Bonnie Lander and Eleanor Decamp, 111-122 (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Tara Nummedal, "Alchemy and Religion in Christian Europe," *Ambix* 60:4 (2013): 311-322.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Cheney, "Elizabeth Jane Weston (bap. 1581?, d. 1612), Latin poet," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Accessed 8 Apr. 2025. <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/29120>. Susan Bassnett, "Absent Presences: Edward Kelley’s Family in the Writings of John Dee," in *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought*,

spiritual and devotional elements of An Collins' autobiography have been examined in previous scholarship but mostly focus on her physical disability.<sup>12</sup> These works do not propose an alchemical reading of her text. Finally, previous scholarship has addressed the alchemical references in *Order and Disorder*, but these works do not particularly address how breastmilk is portrayed in Hutchinson's writing.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter expands on existing research by drawing on the convergence of medical, theological, and alchemical meanings of these fluids to analyse their symbolic representation in literature. This chapter fills a gap in current scholarly literature, considering the alchemical language that early modern women poets use to discuss the womb, its fluids, and the female body in the process.

## 6.2. Medical, Religious, and Alchemical Blood in Early Modern England

Early modern notions of blood hinged on both its spiritual and medical representations. In the seventeenth century specifically, this fluid was reappraised because of medical advancements. Classical writers' understanding of blood was the foundation for early modern medical writers' description of the substance. Aristotle states that 'blood is common

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ed. Stephen Clucas, 285-294 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 288. Susan Bassnett, "Revising a Biography: A New Interpretation of the Life of Elizabeth Jane Weston (Westonia), Based on Her Autobiographical Poem on the Occasion of the Death of Her Mother," *Cahiers Élisabéthains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies* 37, no. 1 (1990): 1-8. Sonja Fielitz, "Hyphenated Homes: Elizabeth Jane Weston and the Diaspora of Early Modern English Catholics," in *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging*, eds. Florian Kläger and Klaus Stierstorfer, 73-87 (Münster: De Gruyter, 2017), 78-79.

<sup>12</sup> Sidney Gottlieb, "An Collins (fl. 1653), poet," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Accessed 8 Apr. 2025. <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/45500>. Katey Roden, "A Fruitless, Female Body: Disability and Devotion in An Collins's *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1653)," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 131-141. Sarah E. Skwire, "Women, Writers, Sufferers: Anne Conway and An Collins," *Literature and Medicine* 18, no. 1 (Spring, 1999): 1-23.

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Gillespie, *Women Writing the English Republic, 1625-1681* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Alison Bumke, "Distilling Grief: Lucy Hutchinson's Elegies and Alchemy," *The Seventeenth Century*, 38:3, (2023): 385-392.

to sanguineous animals; and so is the part in which it is contained, which is called a vein'.<sup>14</sup> Hippocrates suggested that the body was governed by four essential humours: 'both a woman and a man contain four kinds of moisture in their body [...] which are phlegm, blood, bile and water.'<sup>15</sup>

This humoral understanding of blood endured in the early modern period. Simon Harward comments in *Harward's Phlebotomy* (1601) that 'the best and most familiar iuice in man is bloud' and that blood is not a pure substance but 'is mingled with other humours, to wit, fleame, cholera, melancholy, and the *tenue serum*, which all [...] as they are contained together in the vaynes, are by one word vsually called by the name of *bloud*.'<sup>16</sup> Harward's quotation demonstrates that the definition of blood still depended on a humoral perspective, but blood could be referred to in various ways. It was 'the red fluid in human veins, a humor, a fluid governing crucial Galenic models of bodily change such as plethora and purging, a waste product, a cause of corruption, a source of life, a medical cure, a fluid appearing under the guise of all other bodily fluids'.<sup>17</sup>

Seventeenth-century medical discoveries further impacted the understanding of blood, and 'the early modern period was one of prolonged rivalry between ancient medical theories, based largely on the humoral theory, and new theories including the circulation of blood.'<sup>18</sup> William Harvey's discovery of blood circulation in 1628 developed the early modern understanding of blood from a medical perspective. In *An Anatomical Exercise on the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals* (1628), Harvey explains when the heart

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle's History of Animals: In Ten Books - Book III*, trans. Richard Cresswell, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1902), 50.

<sup>15</sup> Hippocrates, *Hippocrates – Volume X*, trans., ed. Paul Potter (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 101. See also W. C. Aird, "Discovery of the Cardiovascular System: From Galen to William Harvey," *Journal of Thrombosis and Haemostasis* 9 Suppl 1, (2011): 118-129, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Harward, *Harwards Phlebotomy: or, a Treatise of Letting of Bloud* (London: F. Kingston, 1601) A5r, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Lander Johnson, and Decamp, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>18</sup> Cathy McClive, *Menstruation and Procreation in Early Modern France* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 20.

contracts, the arteries dilate, yielding ‘a pulse, [...and] when the right ventricle contracts and propels its charge of blood, the arterial vein [the pulmonary artery] is distended at the same time with the other arteries of the body.’<sup>19</sup> Before Harvey’s discovery, the heart was believed to be the most important organ in the body. Because of its function, ‘the sovereignty of the heart was a medieval commonplace, deriving ultimately from Aristotle’.<sup>20</sup> However, Harvey ‘dethroned the heart through his research and writing.’<sup>21</sup> He believed that blood was more vital because of its role in generating new life. He understood blood’s centrality ‘in every *Foetus*, and *animal conception* whatsoever’.<sup>22</sup> This statement highlights blood’s spiritual importance because conception also implies the moment of ensoulment during gestation.

Harvey notes that it is in blood that ‘the fountain of *motion* and *pulsation* is derived; but also, because the *Animal heat*, or *vital spirit* is first radicated and implanted, and the *soul* takes up her first mansion in it.’<sup>23</sup> For Harvey, ‘blood and spirits and the soul are one thing’.<sup>24</sup> Harvey’s commentary on the soul that resides in blood shows how the ‘medical world was not free from religious and spiritual speculation.’<sup>25</sup> The overlap between blood’s physical and spiritual meanings illustrates how difficult it is to separate one definition from the other when describing the substance in relation to its seventeenth-century perceptions. During this period, blood ‘threatens too much meaning—too many competing allegories in different degrees of revision [...]. The literature of this moment recognizes the semantic shift under

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<sup>19</sup> William Harvey, *An Anatomical Disquisition on the Motion of the Heart & Blood in Animals*, ed. Ernest Rhys, trans. Robert Willis (London: J. M. Dent & Co, 2022), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Hill, "William Harvey and the Idea of Monarchy," *Past & Present* no. 27 (1964): 54-72, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Hill, "William Harvey," 55.

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, *Anatomical Exercitations*, 274.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 277. The verb ‘radicate’ is defined by the *OED* as ‘To cause to take root; to plant or establish firmly (in something).’ Harvey is therefore suggesting that the spirit is first created and fixed in the blood. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “radicate (v.),” September 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2243621687>>

<sup>24</sup> Lander Johnson, and Decamp, “Introduction,” 23.

<sup>25</sup> Francesca Matteoni, "Blood Beliefs in Early Modern Europe" (PhD, University of Hertfordshire, 2009), 108, <https://uhra.herts.ac.uk/handle/2299/4523>.

way.<sup>26</sup> In the seventeenth century, several types of blood are available for interpretation while the word's meaning was equally shifting in both its spiritual and physical understandings.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of blood in the Last Supper and the Eucharist is central to defining this substance's spiritual relevance. Mark 14:24 states: 'And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.'<sup>28</sup> The Old Testament demonstrates how wine is used 'as a symbol of blood (see Gen 49:11; Deut. 32:14; Isa 49:26). Since blood symbolizes life (Lev. 17:11) the pouring out of Jesus's blood metaphorically underlines the expression for his death on the cross'.<sup>29</sup> The connection 'between the Old Testament and the Eucharist was secured by Augustine's conviction that semiotics is the primary tool Christians should employ as they explore the mystery of eucharistic presence.'<sup>30</sup> Augustine comments 'Dear brethren, that which you see on the Lord's table is bread and wine. But when a word is added, that bread and wine become the body and blood of the Word.'<sup>31</sup> Within the history of the church, '[the Eucharist and baptism] have been recognized as central to the church's life and as making the grace of God present in a unique way—they are authoritatively given by Christ himself for the renewal of his people.'<sup>32</sup> The late medieval period 'saw a dramatic insistence on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist in a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Christ was personally and truly present in every Mass'.<sup>33</sup> During the

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<sup>26</sup> Roland Greene, *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 108.

<sup>27</sup> Greene, *Five Words*, 108-109.

<sup>28</sup> Mark 14:24 (KJV).

<sup>29</sup> Isaac Boaheng, "The Theological Significance of the Eucharist: Exegesis of Mark 14:12-26," *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 6, no. 10 (October 2023): 565-577, 573.

<sup>30</sup> David Ney, "Christ is Not the Passover Lamb: Samuel Clarke's Marcionite Memorialism," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 20, no. 2 (2022): 150-163, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: With Seventeen Related Sermons*. Vol. 11., trans. Denis J. Kavanagh (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 321.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Baker Academic, 2017), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Gary Macy, "The Medieval Inheritance," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel, 15-37 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 18.

sacrament, priests were expected to intentionally bring forth ‘the body and blood of Christ. They could not transubstantiate by accident, nor could the word of institution alone accomplish the miracle.’<sup>34</sup>

Thomas Aquinas comments on the symbolic relationship of blood and wine, stating: ‘Also, it is Christ himself: “I am the bread of life” (6:35); “My flesh truly is food and my blood truly is drink” (6:56): and this is so insofar as the flesh of Christ is joined to the Word of God, which is the food by which the angels live.’<sup>35</sup> Aquinas ‘inherited an already constructed metaphysics of the Eucharist’ and ‘[th]e many questions surrounding the existence of the body and the blood of Christ had not been resolved, but at least on this issue, Thomas’s theology represents a summary of the vexed question of how the body and the blood of Christ could be present without being sensed.’<sup>36</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century, the question of whether Christ’s blood was present in the Eucharist was complex, and theologians had to express their theories carefully to avoid accusations of heresy.<sup>37</sup>

During the 1551 Council of Trent, the canons of the *Decree of the Eucharist* asserted the presence of Christ in the bread and wine: ‘immediately after the consecration, the veritable Body of our Lord, and His veritable Blood, together with His soul and divinity, are under the species of bread and wine’.<sup>38</sup> In this decree, the Church articulates its ‘firm belief’ in the presence of Christ’s blood and body during the Eucharist through transubstantiation. This statement was articulated against Martin Luther’s claim that ‘Christ was present in the sacrament of the Eucharist only during the actual liturgical celebration, when it would be

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<sup>34</sup> Macy, "The Medieval Inheritance," 18.

<sup>35</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 6-12*, trans. Fabian Larcher and James A. Weisheipl (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>36</sup> Macy, "The Medieval Inheritance," 27-28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, "General Council of Trent: Thirteenth Session," *The Papal Encyclicals Online*, Last modified January 20, 2025. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/thirteenth-session.htm>.

received in faith by the communicants.’<sup>39</sup> Luther comments on the symbolic value of the Eucharistic bread, which is broken into pieces and is ‘the participation in the body of Christ. [...] Wherein does the participation in the body of Christ consist? It cannot be anything else than that as each takes a part of the broken bread he takes therewith the body of Christ’.<sup>40</sup> During the sixteenth century, one of the central debates surrounding the Eucharist focused on ‘the present location of Christ’s body. Was it, as the medieval Church had taught, there, really, corporeally in real blood and flesh, in the sacrament of communion? Was it, as Luther taught, “next to” the elements, the bread and wine, in the sacrament?’<sup>41</sup> These debates surrounding the Eucharist demonstrate that blood held spiritual significance within the history of Christian liturgy, which is relevant to this chapter since alchemical texts of the period draw on Christian concepts.

The importance of blood in Christian practices overlapped with alchemy since ‘alchemy developed alongside Christianity in the Western world.’<sup>42</sup> The connection between alchemy and Christianity appeared in Europe as early as the twelfth century when both alchemical and theological texts began circulating.<sup>43</sup> Stephen Linden has noted that Christian authors were interested in the ‘correspondence that existed [...] between chemical processes and interactions occurring within their alembics and spiritual transformations taking place within their own hearts and souls.’<sup>44</sup> Christian imagery first appeared in an alchemical text called *Das Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (The Book of the Holy Trinity), written by

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<sup>39</sup> Uwe Michael Lang, *The Roman Mass: From Early Christian Origins to Tridentine Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 357.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments, 1525," in *Luther's Works - Volume 40*, eds. Helmut T. Lehmann and Conrad Bergendoff, trans. Conrad Bergendoff, 73-224 (Philadelphia, P.A.: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 178.

<sup>41</sup> Lee Palmer Wandel, "Introduction," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel, 1-12 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> Roberta Albrecht, *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne* (Selinsgrove, P.A.: Susquehanna University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>43</sup> Nummedal, "Alchemy," 311.

<sup>44</sup> Stanton J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 22.

Franciscan monks in the 1370s.<sup>45</sup> The imagery of this text included ‘the Virgin Mary, as well as of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, St. Francis, Adam and Eve and, not least, the Anti-Christ.’<sup>46</sup> This text and its imagery influenced *The Rosarium Philosophorum cum figuris* (1550), which in turn influenced subsequent alchemical texts in the early modern period.<sup>47</sup> Protestant alchemists such as Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Jacob Boehme (1575- 1624) ‘drew not only on the traditional dogmas of Christianity, whether Lutheran or Catholic, but also on the Western esoteric tradition, thereby engaging with late Hellenistic Hermeticism, astrology, kabbalism and alchemy.’<sup>48</sup>

In *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Frances Yates further emphasises the connections between Christianity and alchemy, along with their effects on political tensions of the seventeenth century. In this work, she examines the impact of two alchemical manifestos from 1614, called the ‘Rosicrucian Manifestos’.<sup>49</sup> According to Yates, these texts and their ‘occult philosophy [...] were attached to a political alliance uniting Protestant England with the Palatinate’ and working specifically ‘to undermine Catholic states from within.’<sup>50</sup> Yates’s work was subsequently criticised by scholars who believed she ‘seriously exaggerates the political aspect of the Rosicrucian “movement”’. What we know about the origins of Rosicrucianism makes it difficult to associate, as Yates did, the Rosicrucian movement with Calvinism.’<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Urszula Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin Mary in the Religious and Political Context of the Renaissance* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1972) 41.

<sup>50</sup> Wm Bradford Smith, "Resisting the Rosicrucian's," *Church History and Religious Culture* 94, no. 4 (2014): 413-443, 414. The word ‘Palatine’ here references Frederick V of the Palatinate who married princess Elizabeth, the daughter of James VI and I. Together, they reigned in Heidelberg from 1614-1619 and Frederick ‘had emerged as the politico-religious leader destined to solve the problems of the age.’ See Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Bradford Smith, "Resisting," 415.

Despite this criticism of Yates' work, alchemical texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did draw on Christian imagery and Catholic doctrine. The blood in these texts demonstrates how '[t]he analogy between Christ and the philosophers' stone extended to Christ's blood and the fecund, redemptive powers it was commonly understood to bear.'<sup>52</sup> The use of Christian imagery in alchemical texts is important to this chapter because it suggests that the representation of blood in alchemical poetry also carries Christian connotations. Early modern poets such as John Donne and John Milton drew on this alchemical imagery to discuss religious matters specifically to 'restore faith, enrich descriptions of nature and love, and, at times, denote change, transformation duality, and also to define the universe.'<sup>53</sup> In 'Holy Sonnet IV (O my black soul)' (1633), Donne references Christ's blood in the context of spiritual transformation

O, make thyself with holy mourning black,  
 And red with blushing as thou art with sin;  
 Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might,  
 That being red, it dyes souls to white (lines 11-14).<sup>54</sup>

For Donne, the alchemical process is mapped onto the 'Christian symbol of the path that a soul must travel after death. The stages of this eschatological journey are marked by the changing colour of the soul, which seems to exhibit the chemical behaviour of distilled metal'.<sup>55</sup> The use of Christ's blood to highlight a particular stage of the alchemical process that 'dyes red souls to white' demonstrates the representation of Christian imagery in relation to alchemical blood in cultural contexts.

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<sup>52</sup> Nummedal, "Alchemy," 315.

<sup>53</sup> Parisa Shams, and Alireza Anushiravani, "Mystical Alchemy in the Poetry of Donne and Milton," *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 7, no. 3 (2013): 54–68, 66.

<sup>54</sup> John Donne, "Holy Sonnet IV (O my black soul)," in *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Hugh A. Robbins (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2010), 545, published posthumously.

<sup>55</sup> Ludmila Makuchowska, *Scientific Discourse in John Donne's Eschatological Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 94-95.

This Christian framework is relevant to this chapter because it equally encompasses representations of the female body through the Virgin Mary and Eve. *Das Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* portrays Mary alongside Christ as ‘the alchemical “mercury”’. From this mystical substance the quintessence (fifth essence) was distilled in the production of the Philosopher’s Stone.<sup>56</sup> The use of Mary in an alchemical context, however, does more than represent a specific metal because her body, and specifically her womb, are the seat of important spiritual events through the birth of Christ. Alchemists transposed ‘Catholic Marian doctrine [...] both in the texts and in the visual iconography, so that the alchemical Marian emblems retain at least some of their original sanctity as religious icons despite their relocation to an irregular setting’.<sup>57</sup>

The *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652) demonstrates this representation of the Virgin Mary’s womb: ‘Into his *Virgin-Mother* wombe, Againe he *enter* must; / Soe shall the *King* by his *new-byrth*, / Be *ten times stronger* just.’<sup>58</sup> The ‘King’ entering Mary’s womb here can represent Christ or refer to the transformational process to create the philosopher’s stone. Mary is seen as ‘the alembic for Christ, the agent of human salvation. And because Mary’s body created a body that combined humanity with divinity, she is often denominated as the first alchemist.’<sup>59</sup> Even though early modern alchemists adopted a ‘liberal attitude [...] by the manner in which they appropriated the cult of the Virgin Mary’, their adoption of this imagery is relevant when discussing the womb and menstrual blood in alchemical poetry.<sup>60</sup>

In the next section of this chapter, I will turn to examine women’s bleeding and its representation in alchemical texts. Alchemical menstrual blood, often called ‘menstruum’, drew on medical understandings of the fluid to apply them to alchemical practices. I will

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<sup>56</sup> Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>58</sup> Elias Ashmole, ed., *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London: J. Grismond, 1652), 343.

<sup>59</sup> Gillespie, *Women Writing*, 301.

<sup>60</sup> Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin*, 3.

begin by describing the early modern medical understanding of menstrual blood before turning to its applications in alchemical texts.

### 6.3. Menstrual Blood in Early Modern England

Early modern medical thought suggested that menstrual blood, along with male semen, generated a foetus and nourished it while it grew in the womb. In *Mikrocosmographia*, Helkiah Crooke defines menstrual blood as ‘the excrement of the last Aliment of the fleshy parts which at certaine times and by standing periods is in a moderate quantity purged by the wombe, but originally ordained for the Generation and Nourishment of the New creature.’<sup>61</sup> Menstruation served two main purposes: it either ‘purified the blood of females, or removed from their bodies an excess of blood.’<sup>62</sup> Jane Sharp describes how a foetus is generated thanks to ‘the seed of both sexes, and the mothers blood; the seed of the Male is more active than that of the Female in forming the creature, though both be fruitful, but the female adds blood as well as seed out of which the fleshy parts are made’.<sup>63</sup> Menstruation was thought to eliminate ‘the impure part of the excess blood, [...] and that this purified menstrual blood was a woman’s contribution to the conception.’<sup>64</sup> Sharp also notes how menstrual blood is responsible for ‘feeding of the Infant in the Womb’ demonstrating how menstrual blood could be purified for consumption.<sup>65</sup>

Menstrual blood possessed a dual nature, having the ability to purify and also carried the potential to corrupt. When discussing menstruation in *The Womans Doctor* (1652) Nicolaas Fonteyn notes that ‘provident Nature assigned [women] their monethly Courses,

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<sup>61</sup> Crooke, *Mikrocosmographia*, 260.

<sup>62</sup> Patricia Crawford, "Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past & Present* no. 91 (1981): 47-73, 50.

<sup>63</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> Read, *Menstruation*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 83.

that by the benefit of those evacuations, the feculent and corrupt blood might be purified'.<sup>66</sup> Jane Sharp also described how menstrual blood could corrupt maids who have yet to experience their periods and are at risk of greensickness: 'Nature sending the menstrual blood from the Liver to the veins about the womb, but those veins and vessels being very narrow, and not yet open, if the blood be stopt, in that it cannot break forth, it will corrupt.'<sup>67</sup> This belief of impure blood carried over into cultural representations of the fluid, which became 'associated with prostitution, poison, corruption, and sexual depravity, menstrual blood is more than just a bodily fluid in the early modern period, it is the symbol for anything immoral or defiled.'<sup>68</sup> The belief that menstrual blood had 'the potential to both create and destroy – perished well into the early modern period in lay and learned medicine alike.'<sup>69</sup>

This ambivalence towards menstrual blood was caused by its medical understanding and theological representations. Leviticus 20:18 reads: 'And if a man lie with her, and *the flowers* of her separation touch him, he shall be unclean seven days, and all the whole bed whereon he lieth, shall be unclean.'<sup>70</sup> Men could not lay with menstruating women because it was 'unclean', which implies an association between menstruation and shame. Male bleeding 'is a public experience, connected to heroism, to lineage in familiar relationships and to sacrificial practises, [but] female bleeding is a private matter'.<sup>71</sup> Biblical images

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<sup>66</sup> Nicolaas Fonteyn, *The Womans Doctour*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 256.

<sup>68</sup> Lesel Dawson, *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 199-200.

<sup>69</sup> Lander Johnson, "Blood, Milk, Poison," 112.

<sup>70</sup> Leviticus, 15:24 (GNV). See also Leviticus, 20:18: 'the man also that lieth with a woman having her disease, and uncovereth her shame, *and* openeth her fountain, and she open the fountain of her blood, they shall be even both cut off from among their people'. 'Flowers' was a term often used in the seventeenth-century to refer to menstruation. For example, Jane Sharp uses it when stating that 'false conceptions, [...] when they happen the Flowers stop presently and never come down, whereas they do sometimes the first two months in true conceptions'. Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Matteoni, "Blood Beliefs," 13. For more see McCracken, *The Curse of Eve*.

associated with female bleeding are characterised in different terms than that of the salvation associated with Christ's Blood.

The Bible represents menstruation as unclean, notably in Isaiah 30:22, which represents menstrual cloths as defiling: 'Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold: thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth; thou shalt say unto it, Get thee hence.'<sup>72</sup> In the early modern period, references to menstrual bleeding were used because of its associations to uncleanliness. For example, Ben Jonson refers to menstruation in his play *The Alchemist* (1610) when Tribulation states 'Against the menstruous cloth, and ragg of *Rome*. / We must await his calling, and the coming / Of the good spirit.' (III.I. 33-35)<sup>73</sup> Editorial notes clarify that this 'ragg of Rome' refers to 'the red surplice worn by Roman bishops' but is also 'identified with rags stained with menstrual blood'.<sup>74</sup> Despite these negative representations of female bleeding and their connection to theological texts, Mary was exempt from these associations. Her 'eternally intact body demonstrates [...] she was not tainted by original sin and the curse of Eve, and this definition of Mary's purity seemed to suggest, at least for some theologians that she could not have menstruated.'<sup>75</sup> The purity of Mary's immaculate body, along with the conceptions of menstrual blood as both a purging and corrupting agent, carried over into its alchemical representations.

The importance of menstrual blood in alchemy is derived from the metaphorical significance of the womb in alchemical processes, which originated in ancient practices. The female alchemist Cleopatra (3<sup>rd</sup>C AD) defines alchemy using an analogy of the female body.<sup>76</sup> She notes that 'plants, elements, and stones' are transformed through the alchemical

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<sup>72</sup> Isaiah 30:22 (KJV).

<sup>73</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

<sup>74</sup> Jonson, *The Alchemist*, see notes to III.I. 33.

<sup>75</sup> McCracken, *The Curse of Eve*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Women both represented alchemical processes at various stages but were also historically known to practise alchemy themselves. For example, 'Mary Prophetess and Zosimo's Theosebia, [along with]

process thanks to fire: '[f]or they are nourished in the fire and the embryo grows little by little nourished in its mother's womb, and when the appointed month approaches is not restrained from issuing forth. Such is the procedure of this worthy art.'<sup>77</sup> These lines illustrate how the feminine body is metaphorically utilised in alchemical language to describe chemical processes. In *The New Light of Alchymy* (1604) Michael Sendivogius notes that it is by divine ordination 'that a man is able, through the wise, and skilfull Art of Alchymie, to make that which is barren, fruitfull, and that which is crude, to ripen, and all things to grow, and to be increased. For the Scripture saith, that God subjected all creatures to man'.<sup>78</sup> Sendivogius equally connects alchemy to the female body by representing it as an alembic: 'all Metalls may returne into living ☿ [Mercury] againe, and become ☿, and by Fire bee regenerated, and purified, if for the space of forty weeks, they bee kept in a continuall heat, as an infant is in his Mothers wombe.'<sup>79</sup>

The physical form of the womb, which resembled an alembic, granted women metaphorical access to the alchemical sphere. The womb as alembic is a receptacle 'in which raw materials were baked together to create new life [...and] penetrated by the athanor, a long phallic tube which fanned the alembic's flames and infused it with fluids in order to galvanize the prime material or "egg" that incubated within.'<sup>80</sup> This imagery demonstrates that the use of the female body and analogies pertaining to procreation were not simply used in alchemical illustrations but encompassed the practical aspects of alchemy as well.

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Cleopatra [occupy] a high place in alchemical lore as one of very few ancient female adepts who possessed the secret of the philosopher's stone.' This Cleopatra, who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD, is not the same as Cleopatra VII, Queen of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt from 51 to 30 BC. See Anonymous "Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers," in *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*, ed. Stanton J. Linden, 44-45 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>77</sup> Anonymous, "Dialogue of Cleopatra," 45. The editor further comments on this page: 'Cleopatra's statement is a very early instance of use of the analogy between the birth of a child and preparation of the philosopher's stone.'

<sup>78</sup> Michał Sędziwój, *A New Light of Alchymie: Taken Out of the Fountaine of Nature, and Manuall Experience. To which is Added a Treatise of Sulphur* (London: Richard Cotes, 1650), 15.

<sup>79</sup> Sędziwój, *A New Light*, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Gillespie, *Women Writing*, 300.

Menstrual blood appeared in alchemical texts as a transformational fluid. It could refer to the *prima materia* or to a ‘feminized alchemical substances [...] characterized in negative terms’ that represented ‘a poisonous dark substance’.<sup>81</sup> There was a conflation of terms surrounding menstrual blood in alchemical texts because the term ‘menstrue’ was used by alchemists to refer to ‘a solvent, esp. one for dissolving metal in the attempt to convert base metals into gold.’<sup>82</sup> However, this term is derived from the word ‘menstruum’, which refers to ‘the menstrual discharge; the menses.’<sup>83</sup> Thomas Norton highlights the connection between the solvent alchemists used and menstrual blood

How the semynale sede masculine  
 Hath wrought & wonn the victorie  
 Vpon the menstruallis worthily;  
 And wel convertide them to his kynde,  
 As bi experience ye shalle fynde  
 Passinge the substance of Embrion;  
 For then complete is made oure stone (lines 2670-2675).<sup>84</sup>

This language demonstrates the gendered symbolism associated with the alchemical process where the ‘seed Masculine’ must win ‘the Victory / Upon the menstrualls’ to create the embryonic philosopher’s stone. The male component is victorious over the female component. Yet, by using this terminology, Norton demonstrates that women and their capacity to generate menstrual blood are part of the alchemical discussion. In the next section

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 19. Prima materia refers to the material used to create the philosopher’s stone which is ‘not so much a stone as a reddish powder, which has an almost miraculous effect on the transformation taking place in the alchemist’s crucible. The alchemist’s goal was thus the production of this powder, not the gold-making itself, and in order to produce it he or she had to begin with the correct basic material, called the prima materia, whose identity was one of alchemy’s best-kept secrets.’ See P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *The Chemical Choir: A History of Alchemy* (London: Continuum, 2012), X-XI.

<sup>82</sup> The *OED* defines ‘menstrue’ as ‘menstrual discharge’ and a sub-entry entitled ‘Alchemy’ states ‘see menstruum’. The quoted definition comes from the definition for the word ‘menstruum’ under 2a. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “menstrue (n. & adj.),” March 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6749458867>> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “menstruum (n.),” September 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6505260753>>

<sup>83</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “menstruum (n.),” September 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6505260753>>

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy* (Cambridge: Proquest LLC, 1992).

of this chapter, I will examine how women poets applied this alchemical language to their poetry.

#### **6.4. Early Modern Women's Alchemical Representations of their Bodies in Poetry**

I will begin this section by examining Elizabeth Jane Weston's poetry before turning to An Collins's poetry. Both women demonstrate an awareness of alchemical practices and encode the female body with alchemical analogies. Weston highlights the female association to alchemical processes through the conflation of the moon with menstrual blood. The analysis of Collins's poetry demonstrates the cyclical nature of menstruation and how this can be mapped onto alchemical processes to highlight women's pursuit of success in spiritual transformation.

Recent scholarship on Elizabeth Jane Weston has suggested her connection to alchemical circles through her stepfather, Edward Kelley.<sup>85</sup> Kelley worked as an alchemist and medium alongside John Dee, later joining the court of Rudolph II in Prague.<sup>86</sup> It was only on Kelley's death, which left the family destitute, that Weston turned to compose poetry in Latin to support her family and garnered 'enthusiastic responses of chivalric empathy from a wide range of European humanists.'<sup>87</sup> One supporter, George Martinus von Baldhoven, collected and edited her poems and letters in two publications, *Poëmata* (1602)

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<sup>85</sup> Donald Cheney has stated that Weston 'was the second of two children of John Weston (identified only as "Clark" in the record of his burial on 6 May 1582) and Jane Cooper (bap. 1563). Her mother subsequently married Edward Kelley, associate of Doctor John Dee, and accompanied him in 1583 to Poland and eventually to Prague, where Kelley was appointed alchemist to the emperor, Rudolph II. Elizabeth and her brother John Francis (1580–1600) apparently remained behind with their grandmothers before joining their mother and new stepfather in Prague a few years later.' Cheney, "Weston," 1.

<sup>86</sup> Louise Schleiner, "Sir Edward Kelley (1555–1597/8), alchemist," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Accessed 8 Apr. 2025. <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/15289>.

<sup>87</sup> Cheney, "Weston," 1.

and *Parthenica or Maidenly Writings* (1607).<sup>88</sup> These texts are unique because ‘there is no other substantial body of extant Neo-Latin poetry penned by a woman; [...]. Weston, however, [...] did manage to circulate her manuscripts creating a place for herself in the international network of male Neo-Latin poets and scholars.’<sup>89</sup> These poems also indicate Weston’s proximity to alchemical knowledge and imply her involvement in alchemical practices herself through her stepfather.

In her poetry, Weston avoids referencing Kelley by name, most likely to avoid any associations with the controversies associated with him.<sup>90</sup> However, the relation is clarified in Weston’s epitaphs for her mother, who died in 1606.<sup>91</sup> The first epitaph [2] begins: ‘I, Jane, lie here, who was wife to the philosopher Kelley’, which clearly refers to the alchemist (line 1). The second epitaph [3] further notes ‘Laid beneath this stone is Jane, a matron of virile spirit / who was formerly the bride in marriage to Kelley’ and a few lines later states ‘She was fortunate in these gifts, but most fortunate of all / in her lovely offspring, Elizabeth Weston’ (lines 1-2, 11-12). Kelley provided Weston and her brother with an education, which ‘reveals a high degree of commitment and expense on the part of Edward Kelley. Westonia’s learning was deemed unusual in such a young woman, as witnessed by many contemporaries’.<sup>92</sup> Weston suggests Kelley taught her alchemy in one of her poems by

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<sup>88</sup> These writings, composed in Latin, were edited and translated into English in 2000 by Donald Cheney and Brenda Hosington for a modern audience. All translations used in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Cheney and Hosington’s edition. See Elizabeth Jane Weston, *Elizabeth Jane Weston: Collected Writings*, eds. Donald Cheney and Brenda M. Hosington (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

<sup>89</sup> Cheney and Hosington, “Introduction,” xxv.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xix. Jennifer M. Rampling further comments on the controversies surrounding Kelley: ‘In April 1591, Edward Kelley, one of Europe’s most famous living alchemists, was arrested in Bohemia. [...] With his arrest, Kelley apparently lost all that he had gained—not just his lands and his position at Rudolf’s court, but his credibility in England as well. Questions over his alchemical prowess prompted his flight from Prague in an attempt to gain sanctuary with Rožmberk. Overtaken en route, he was incarcerated at the emperor’s pleasure in the fortress of Křivoklát, or Pürglitz. His arrest caused a sensation’. Jennifer M. Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300-1700* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 252-253.

<sup>91</sup> Cheney and Hosington, “Introduction,” xi-xix.

<sup>92</sup> Bassnett, “Absent Presences,” 288.

calling him ‘my beloved father *and teacher*’ (line 16).<sup>93</sup> Addressing Kelley as her ‘teacher’ implies he taught her alchemy because another man was employed to teach her Latin, John Hammond.<sup>94</sup> It is therefore possible to assume that Weston, the stepdaughter of ‘a world famous necromancer would have had a unique form of education and training in her early years’, had some knowledge of the art.<sup>95</sup>

Weston’s awareness of alchemy is also suggested by the alchemist Oswald Croll’s request for a poem from Weston for his alchemical treatise, *Basilica Chymica* (1609).<sup>96</sup> In his letter to her, Croll states ‘the most noble Maiden what recently I asked orally, and now more confidently by letter, that in imitation of those excellent men Melissus and Nicholas Maius she may gracefully take the trouble at her leisure to write a few distichs in honour of my Chemical Basilica’.<sup>97</sup> His wish for her involvement in the preface to an alchemical work suggests she had knowledge of alchemy. Weston offers a rare opportunity for the study of alchemical poetry by a woman writer. Her education, connection to Kelley, and ability to circulate her writings in Rudolph II’s court, which was known to favour the pursuit of alchemy, all demonstrate the likelihood of Weston’s knowledge of this subject. Her awareness of an art that represented the female body symbolically would also colour Weston’s poetry.

The use of alchemical symbolism of femininity appears in several poems by Weston, notably through the juxtaposition of the sun and moon. In ‘Shared benevolence’ [II.20] (c.1608) Weston states

Just as the moon illuminates the earth with light she takes  
from the nobler part of her brother,

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<sup>93</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>94</sup> Poem entitled: ‘To the noble and learned gentleman, Master John Hammond, her respected friend and onetime most diligent teacher, with thanks.’ Weston, *Elizabeth Jane Weston*, 313, [I.34]. See also Cheney and Hosington “Introduction,” xiii.

<sup>95</sup> Bassnett, “Revising,” 6.

<sup>96</sup> Cheney, “Weston,” 2.

<sup>97</sup> Weston, *Elizabeth Jane Weston*, 167, [II.106].

so you should share with your comrades whatever gifts  
will come to you from above (lines 1-4).

The moon is personified as feminine because of the pronoun ‘she’ and is set against the sun, which she calls the moon’s ‘brother’. In *The Compound of Alchemy* (1591), Ripley uses the images of the sun and moon to describe how the philosopher’s stone is created through the alchemical process: ‘It is a soule, a substance bright. / Of Sunne and Moone a subtile influence, / Whereby the earth receiue the resplendence.’ (lines unnumbered)<sup>98</sup> Ripley uses a

language that is similar to Weston’s, where the earth receives ‘resplendence’ thanks to the influence of the sun and moon. The association of sun/moon to male/female can also be seen in Emblem XXX of Michael Maier’s *Atalanta Fugiens*. The illustration shows a man



and woman standing together, but their heads are replaced with the sun and moon, respectively. A chicken and rooster also stand at their feet.<sup>99</sup> The accompanying motto reads: ‘The sun needs the moon, like the cock needs the hen.’<sup>100</sup> Maier’s text demonstrates the analogy between a woman’s body and the moon, just as the man’s is associated with the sun.

<sup>98</sup> George Ripley, *George Ripley's Compound of Alchymy (1591)*, ed. Stanton J. Linden (Farnham: Ashgate, 2017), 24, published posthumously.

<sup>99</sup> Image taken from: Jong, *Michael Maier's*, 217.

<sup>100</sup> Jong, *Michael Maier's*, 217.

Alchemists chose these representations of the luminaries because they offer a way to express ‘the generative potential of their art as a series of binaries (King/queen, sulfur/mercury, hot/cold, dry/wet, semen/menstrual blood, form/matter, etc.) that, when combined would produce something new, just as a mother and father produced a child.’<sup>101</sup> The representation of the sun/moon occurs in alchemical texts as one illustrative marker to oppose one gender to another. In George Chapman’s poem *Hymnus in Cynthiam* (1594), this opposition is further highlighted when referring to the moon as a representation of Elizabeth I. The moon, personified as Cynthia, is described: ‘Great Cynthia, rise out of thy Latmian palace, / VVash thy bright bodie, in th’Atlanticke streames, / Put on those robes that are most rich in beames’ (lines 10-12).<sup>102</sup> According to Frances Yates, ‘Chapman assimilates his imagery to the Elizabeth cult’ and ‘[a]ll are enjoined to worship this Moon, in her moral aspect as an example of Chastity, in her political aspect as set against the Sun which now represents the European political and religious powers antagonistic to Elizabeth-Cynthia’.<sup>103</sup>

This sun/moon representation also implies the Christ/Mary dichotomy where the sun represents Christ and the moon, Mary. John Donne connects the sun to Christ in his poem ‘Resurrection (Imperfect)’ (1633) stating

Sleep, sleep, old Sun, thou canst not have repassed  
As yet the wound thou took'st on Friday last.  
Sleep then, and rest; the world may bear thy stay:  
A better Sun rose before thee today (lines 1-4).<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Nummedal, “Corruption,” 114.

<sup>102</sup> George Chapman, “*Hymnus in Cynthiam*” in *Skia Nyktos. = The Shaddovv of Night Containing Two Poeticall Hymnes, Devised by G.C. Gent* (London: Richard Field, 1594).

<sup>103</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1979), 141-142.

<sup>104</sup> John Donne, “Resurrection (Imperfect),” in *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Hugh A. Robbins (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2010), 517, published posthumously.

As the poem's title suggests, these lines imply a connection between the Sun and Christ, who is meant to rise again through resurrection. Donne offers several sun-related metaphors which are 'rich in alchemical and theological connotations. For example, the phrase "a better sun rose" provides a link between the Sun's potency as an agent of the natural *sublimatio* and the regenerative power of Christ's resurrection'.<sup>105</sup>

Mary's connection to the moon stems from a conflation between the iconography associated with her and with the woman from Revelation 12, which reads: 'And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars'.<sup>106</sup> Even though this woman is not Mary, alchemists appropriated 'two specific types of Marian imagery [...] that of the Apocalyptic Woman as described in the Book of Revelation 12 and that of the Immaculate Conception, a type derived from the apocalyptic Mary.'<sup>107</sup> Therefore, the moon is a known alchemical symbol associated with women and, more specifically, with Marian iconography. Weston's poem suggests it is 'the moon [which] illuminates the earth with the light she takes / from the nobler part of her brother' (lines 1-2). Weston does not use the word 'sun' in this poem. This avoidance suggests the focus is on the feminine, which takes something from its masculine counterpart, emphasising the importance of the feminine in the process.

The relationship between the feminine and the moon is further seen in Weston's poem 'To the Same.' [I.38] addressed to her publisher, George Martinus von Baldhoven. This poem illustrates Weston's use of her grief to obtain financial support from benefactors after the death of her stepfather. It was 'the pathos of Weston's position—as an orphaned 'Virgo Angla' with widowed mother and sickly brother away at university—awakened enthusiastic responses of chivalric empathy from a wide range of European Humanists.'<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Makuchowska, *Scientific Discourse*, 88.

<sup>106</sup> Revelation 12 (KJV).

<sup>107</sup> Szulakowska, *The Alchemical Virgin*, 3. See also Revelation 12 (KJV).

<sup>108</sup> Cheney, "Weston," 1.

Weston requests that her publisher ‘accept, friend my Decembers, - ah, the sad fates / which have stolen happier days from me.’ (lines 3-4) With these lines, Weston asks her publisher to accept her poems that describe her difficult circumstances. She further notes that she ‘can only, as usual, weep and lament! / Nor can I that! for do unspeakable wounds overwhelm / my womanly sorrow, ever sharpened by new wounds?’ (lines 6-8) Here, she connects her laments and wounds to her ‘womanly sorrow’, suggesting that her womanhood has, in some way, caused her distress.

The very next line further clarifies this gendered anguish, but before turning to its analysis, an explanation on translations of Weston’s poetry is necessary. All translations of Weston’s work until this point have been taken from Donald Cheney and Brenda M. Hosington’s *Collected Writings*. However, because the focus of this chapter is on alchemical language, it must now deviate from Cheney and Hosington’s work. Weston’s original Latin text reads: ‘O utinam *solis* spirarem adfixa querellis: / Nee querulae impeteres, Livide, vocis opus! / Ast utinam nobis, satiande cruore puellae,’ which Cheney and Hosington have elegantly translated as ‘Oh, would that I might live, attached to my laments alone / you, Envy, would not attack the work of my querulous voice! / But if you must be satiated with a maiden's blood’ (lines 9-11).<sup>109</sup> However, the importance of the word ‘solis’ in an alchemical context must be addressed here. It has, therefore, been retranslated as ‘Oh that I could breathe in the sun, attached to my laments. / Nor should you attack, Envy, the work of the voice! / May we be satisfied with a maiden's blood’ (lines 9-11).<sup>110</sup> These lines imply an alchemical transformation where the poet hopes to ‘breathe in’ masculine attributes, represented by the sun, in order to address her laments.

In the introduction to Weston’s *Collected Writings*, Cheney and Hosington explain that ‘Weston casts herself and her mother as the victims of envy and complains of the

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<sup>109</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>110</sup> My translation.

unfairness of their situation because they are innocent of wrongdoing.’<sup>111</sup> Weston blames ‘envy’ ‘for ruining Kelley [and...] blames the fates that have robbed her of happiness and stability’.<sup>112</sup> In the poem examined here, Weston blames the ‘sad fates’ for causing her ‘womanly sorrow’, and it is only by ‘breath[ing] in the sun’ that she can dispel her ‘wounds’. However, she does not seem able to ‘breathe in the sun’ since she states in the following line: ‘May we be satisfied with a maiden’s blood’. Weston is referring here to her inability to provide for herself and her widowed mother like a man might but instead must find a way to meet her financial needs as a woman. This sentiment is also expressed in a poem addressed and entitled ‘To the illustrious lord Johann Barvitijs, Advocate and Counsellor to his Sacred Imperial Majesty, and private secretary, her revered master and patron.’ [I.9] In this poem, Weston requests that Barvitijs becomes her patron to support ‘an impoverished daughter (alas!) of an impoverished mother frequents your door’, demonstrating her need to support herself financially through her poetry, despite her gender (line 2).<sup>113</sup>

In ‘To the Same.’ [I.38], Weston chooses to represent her femininity through her blood, rather than simply state she is a woman. She juxtaposes her ‘maiden’s blood’ to the ‘sun’ instead of using the classical alchemical opposition of sun/moon, which she does employ in ‘Shared benevolence’ [II.20]. In *The Compound of Alchemy*, Ripley notes that ‘Sol converted into darknes, and Luna into blood.’ (line unnumbered)<sup>114</sup> However, Ripley does not specify if the blood is menstrual blood or not. In Weston’s poem, she does not use the word ‘menstrual’ but ‘maiden’ (in Latin: ‘cruore puellae’). This swap indicates that there is little differentiation between the types of blood in women, whether menstrual or not, but that the blood that is the counterpart of the sun is specifically feminine.

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<sup>111</sup> Cheney, and Hosington, "Introduction," xxii.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>113</sup> Cheney and Hosington’s translation.

<sup>114</sup> Ripley, *George Ripley's Compound*, 97.

The choice to associate blood with the word ‘maiden’ instead of ‘woman’ or ‘wife’ to refer to herself is also relevant here. Weston used this term repeatedly and not just in this single poem. She was ‘widely celebrated throughout the Neo-Latin republic of letters as *Virgo Angla*, “the English Maiden”’.<sup>115</sup> Weston suggests a connection to the Virgin Mary by referring to herself as a ‘maiden’. She is also aware of Marian iconography and its portrayal in alchemy because of her Catholicism. Weston was known ‘as a Catholic exile in Prague at the Court of Rudolf II, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor’.<sup>116</sup> This choice to associate blood with a ‘maiden’ implies Mary and moves Weston away from the shameful unclean association of women’s blood that appears in the Bible towards virginal purity. This association allows her to represent her blood in a more positive light while also emphasising the femininity of the blood.

Weston’s decision to associate women’s blood with the moon gives the moon’s characteristics to women. This connection between women’s blood and the moon existed in medical texts as well. In *The General Practise of Physicke* (1568), the physician Christof Wirsung comments on the influence of the moon on women’s menstrual cycles, stating

[T]hey [menstruation] euery moneth or thirty dayes returne and come againe; or for that they according to the course of the Moone, that is, because they appeare the first quarter of the Moone in young girles, the second quarter in them that be somewhat bigger, the third quarter in the middle sort, the last quarter in aged women.<sup>117</sup>

This passage demonstrates the belief that the moon directly influences menstrual cycles according to early modern medicine. The moon was also used in the early modern period to help measure time. Robert Pont explains in *A Newe Treatise of The Right Reckoning of years* (1599) that ‘The *Moone* also by her shorte motion, to measure and distinguish the

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<sup>115</sup> Cheney and Hosington, "Introduction," xi.

<sup>116</sup> Fielitz, "Hyphenated Homes," 78-79.

<sup>117</sup> Christof Wirsung, *The General Practise of Physicke: conteyning all inward and outward parts of the body* (London: Richard Field, 1605), 476.

Monethes of the years'.<sup>118</sup> These texts demonstrate an association between temporality, the cyclical movement of the moon, and women's cyclical pattern of menstruation. Weston's choice to use the word 'maiden's blood' instead of 'moon' suggests she is highlighting the temporality inherent in women's bodies, which occurs because they are subjected to monthly bleeding.

The connection between blood and natural rhythms can also be seen in An Collins' poem 'Another Song: The Winter of my infancy being over-past' (hereafter 'Another Song'), which is part of a larger collected work entitled *Divine Songs, and Meditations*. Little is known about the poet An Collins beyond *Divine Songs, and Meditations*, which is her 'single published volume of poetry [and] encompasses all that is known about her life'.<sup>119</sup> In this collection, Collins refers to her issues with her health and bodily limitations, connecting them to her spiritual devotion. Collins describes the difficulties she faced in her childhood in her poem 'The Discourse': 'And part of freshest yeares as hath been sayd / Partaking then of nothing cheerfully / Being through frailty apt to be affraid' (lines 86-88).<sup>120</sup> This frailty seems to continue into adulthood. She notes 'Even in my Cradle did my Crosses breed, / And so grew up with me, unto this day' (lines 57-58). Collins then highlights that through 'saving Graces, and Gods holy word' she is able to 'establish inward peace, / How-ever out-ward crosses doe increase.' (Lines 146-147) These references to her disability are the main focus of recent scholarship on her writing.<sup>121</sup> Collins is identified

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Pont, *A newe treatise of the right reckoning of years*, (Edinburgh: Robert Walde-Graue, 1599), 44.

<sup>119</sup> Sara Read, "'Thy Righteousness is But a Menstrual Clout': Sanitary Practices and Prejudice in Early Modern England," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3 (2008): 1-25, 18.

<sup>120</sup> An Collins, "The Discourse", in *Divine Songs and Meditations* (Cambridge: Proquest LLC, 1992).

<sup>121</sup> More on her disability can be found in: Gottlieb, "Collins." Johnathan H. Pope, "An Collins and the Seventeenth-Century Mortalism Controversy," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2016), 131-148. Read, "'Thy Righteousness.'" Read, *Menstruation*. Roden, "A Fruitless," 131-141. Skwire, "Women,"

with ‘three separate, but overlapping communities [...]: she is a woman, a godly woman, and most significantly, a disabled, godly woman.’<sup>122</sup>

Regarding ‘Another Song’ her difficulties with menstruation are implied in her verses through the portrayal of ‘unproductive gardens and bloomless spring times’.<sup>123</sup> Collins connects her infertility to her spiritual state, noting how she ‘content[s] [her]self with this / Sweet Meditation and Contemplacion / of Heavenly blis.’ (lines 53-55)<sup>124</sup> Because of the pressure on women to reproduce and because of ‘the Christian tradition of interpreting physically different bodies as supernatural signs of God’s social, political, or religious judgment, it is not surprising that Collins would interpret infertility as indicative of her spiritual state.’<sup>125</sup> Because Collins connects her spiritual state to her menstruation or lack thereof, the vocabulary used in her verses is similar to the previously mentioned Christianised alchemical language that equally discusses spiritual transformation and menstrual blood alongside bodily metaphors. Therefore, I will examine the overlap between the representation of menstrual blood and its alchemical imagery in the writings of ‘a godly disabled woman’ to determine how this language has been appropriated by an author who, unlike Weston, is not part of any known alchemical sphere.

In ‘Another Song’ Collins makes several veiled references to her difficulties with menstruation. She begins by stating that ‘the Winter of my infancy being over-past / The supposed, suddenly the Spring would hast’ (lines 1-3). Because there are no records of Collins’ life, it is impossible to know if she lived long enough to reach menopause. However, because her poem begins with Winter, it implies that her struggles with her cycle began early in life. The botanical metaphors continue throughout the poem, notably with

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<sup>122</sup> Roden, "A Fruitless," 131.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>124</sup> An Collins, “Another Song: The Winter of my Infancy Being Over-past”, in *Divine Songs and Meditations* (Cambridge: Proquest LLC, 1992).

<sup>125</sup> Roden, "A Fruitless," 132.

the lines ‘*Ver* brings her mate the flowery Queen, / The Groves shee dresses, her Art expresses / On every Green’ (lines 8-10). Later in the poem, she states ‘But in my Spring it was not so, but contrary / For no delightfull flowers grew to please the eye.’ (Lines 11-12) These lines suggest that after her infancy, Collins expects ‘Spring’ to bring fertility through menstruation, but instead, the ‘contrary’ occurs, and no ‘flowers’ grow. These lines depict spring ‘as a bastion of female fecundity with Spring personified as female and also mated to yet another female figure whose “Art” is so prolific that it radically transforms the surrounding landscape from barren to blossoming.’<sup>126</sup> A few lines later, she explains that her spring was unproductive: ‘Aprill was exceeding dry’ and ‘doth betoken / much scarcity’, indicating that her menstrual cycle has not occurred (lines 16, 19-20). These botanical and calendric metaphors demonstrate Collins’s connection to the natural world and how she manipulates this language to illustrate her struggles with menstruation.

These references, however, also connect Collins’s poem to an alchemical vocabulary. Sara Read states that ‘most unusually, Collins links her infancy to winter [...] Poignantly, the poem suggests that Collins’s metaphorical winter did not end in menarche’.<sup>127</sup> However, beginning the poem with winter is not unusual in an alchemical context. Starting with winter alludes to the initial alchemical step, called *nigredo*.<sup>128</sup> In *Medulla Alchimiae* (1476) Ripley maps the four main alchemical transformations onto the seasons

[B]etween the said sign of blackness and perfect whiteness, which will follow the said blackness, there will appear a green Color, and as many variable Colors afterwards as the mind of Man is able to conceive. When the present White Color shall begin to appear like the eyes of fishes, then may you know that Summer is near at hand, after which Autumn or harvest will happily follow with ripe fruit,

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<sup>126</sup> Roden, “A Fruitless,” 138.

<sup>127</sup> Read, *Menstruation*, 15.

<sup>128</sup> Katharine Gillespie comments: ‘While alchemists practiced different variations, a common version of the *opus alchymicum* consisted of four steps. The first step was *Nigredo* or “the earthly encounter.”’ Gillespie, *Women Writing*, 289. See also Jennifer M. Rampling, “Citration and Its Discontents: Yellow as a Sign of Alchemical Change,” *Ambix* 71:1 (2024): 73-97, 83.

which in the long looked for Redness: This is after the Pale, Ashy,  
and Citrine Color.<sup>129</sup>

These lines suggest that the white colour of *albedo* is associated with summer and the red of *rubedo* to autumn, leaving *nigredo* (blackness) to winter, and *Citrinitas* (yellow) to spring. This is further indicated in Ripley's Wheel, which is presented in his *Compound of Alchymy*.<sup>130</sup> In this diagram, he 'takes "hyems" (winter) to signify a process of putrefaction', which is associated with *nigredo*.<sup>131</sup> Collins begins in winter, 'The Winter of my infancy being over-past' and hints at the alchemical experiments by using the verb 'distill': 'the drops *distill*, between the gleams delights abound' (lines 1, 7).<sup>132</sup> This winter occurs before a failed spring: 'no hopefull bud, nor fruitfull bough' appeared and 'My Aprill was exceeding dry, therefore unkind' (lines 13, 16). Dryness is meant to occur in the alchemical process of the stage of *citrinatas* when the distilled liquid of the *prima materia* is meant to evaporate before 'crystals of pale yellow vitriol [start] to form'.<sup>133</sup> However, Collins seems to suggest that her transformation failed because her spring was 'exceeding dry' and 'it doth betoken / Much scarcity.' (Lines 16, 19-29)<sup>134</sup> A few lines later, she highlights this further, noting 'But evill mocions, currupt seeds, fall here also / whence springs prophanesse as do weeds where flowers grow' (lines 36-37). Later in the poem, she comments that 'My little Hopes of worldly Gain I fret not at, / As yet I do this Hope retain; though Spring be lat / Perhaps my Sommer-age may be' (lines 46-48). These lines demonstrate that spring has not occurred as it should, allowing flowers to grow, but weeds

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<sup>129</sup> George Ripley, "Medulla Alchymiae (The Marrow of Alchemy)," *The Alchemy Web Site*. Last modified July 1, 2024, xi-xii, [https://www.alchemywebsite.com/ripley\\_medulla.html](https://www.alchemywebsite.com/ripley_medulla.html).

<sup>130</sup> Ripley, *George Ripley's Compound*, 97.

<sup>131</sup> Jennifer M. Rampling, "Depicting the Medieval Alchemical Cosmos: George Ripley's "Wheel" of Inferior Astronomy," *Early Science and Medicine* 18, no. 1/2 (2013): 45-86, 66. For the connection between *nigredo* and blackness: 'black (associated with putrefaction)'. See Rampling, "Citrination," 76.

<sup>132</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>133</sup> Rampling, "Citrination," 87.

<sup>134</sup> My emphasis.

appeared instead. Yet, Collins still hopes for summer. This hope demonstrates a disconnection from the normal synchronised pattern of seasons.

In the early modern period, there was a ‘multiplicity of methods of measuring time’, and there were differences ‘between lunar and solar months and lunisolar calendars’.<sup>135</sup> Although E.P. Thompson famously suggested that time began to be regulated as a cause of industrialisation, recent scholarship has countered this statement by suggesting that ‘church clocks were not universal in early modern England and were less common in rural than in urban parishes. But they were widespread’.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, the popularity of almanacs in the seventeenth century suggests an understanding of chronological time during the period.<sup>137</sup> For women whose bodies were regulated by monthly bleeding, cyclical time was internalised in their bodies. This type of time is like ‘agricultural and seasonal shifts and [...] did not always correspond well to the new early modern discipline of masculine, mechanical, linear time emphasised in urban centres’.<sup>138</sup> In ‘Another Song,’ Collins is doing more than modestly referring to her difficult cycle through veiled references; she is displaying an awareness of the alchemical process since her poem follows an unsynchronised pattern of seasons.

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<sup>135</sup> McClive, *Menstruation*, 106.

<sup>136</sup> Mark Hailwood, "Time and Work in Rural England, 1500–1700," *Past & Present* 248, no. 1 (2020): 98.

<sup>137</sup> Catherine Evans has commented that ‘Robert Woodruff has tracked the growing popularity of these chronologies, finding that by 1640 twice as many almanacs included them as in 1600.’ See Catherine Evans, "The Temporality of the Early Modern English Almanac," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2023): 87-121, 688.

<sup>138</sup> McClive, *Menstruation*, 106-107.

The representation of cyclical time and its relation to women's bodily rhythms also appears in alchemical texts. An illumination from the MS Ferguson 6, which is part of an alchemical miscellany from 1579 kept at the University of Glasgow, demonstrates this understanding of cyclical time. This manuscript is a collection of several anonymous texts and 'contains not only excerpts from almost every major alchemical text known to be extant in print and manuscript at the time, but also copies of, and changes to, illustrations from those



editions.'<sup>139</sup> The illumination in question depicts a woman sitting and bleeding, surrounded by the twelve zodiac signs. This image demonstrates the cyclical nature of female bodies and its association to time through the representation of each zodiacal month.<sup>140</sup> Yet, Collins cannot define herself within this pattern of cyclicity because her menstruation does not occur.

Collins uses alchemical symbolism throughout her poems to highlight her points about spiritual devotion. Collins's approach echoes what Mike Zuber calls 'spiritual alchemy', which he defines as 'the practical pursuit of inward but real bodily transmutation. This transmutation amounted to the reversal of the Fall and its consequences; furthermore, it prepared the faithful for the resurrection of the dead at the Last Judgement.'<sup>141</sup> Zuber clarifies

<sup>139</sup> Alexandra Marraccini, "Fleshly Wisdoms: Image Practices, Bodies, and the Transmission of Knowledge in a Sixteenth-Century Alchemical Miscellany," *Word & Image* (London, 1985) 33, no. 4 (2017): 339-361, 339.

<sup>140</sup> The image is taken from Anonymous, *Nota Hieroglyphica* (University of Glasgow: GB 247 MS Ferguson 6, c.1600).

<sup>141</sup> Mike A. Zuber, *Spiritual Alchemy: From Jacob Boehme to Mary Anne Atwood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) 9.

that ‘devotional acts or mystical paths are explicitly described in terms of manual operations, alchemical techniques, or stages of the great work.’<sup>142</sup> Collins similarly uses alchemical descriptions not only in ‘Another Song’ but also in other poems such as in ‘The fifth Meditation’. Collins begins this poem by stating that

Such is the force of each created thing,  
That it no solid happinesse can bring,  
Which to out minds may give contentments sound  
For like as Noahs Dove no succour found,  
Till shee return'd to him that sent her out (lines 1-5)<sup>143</sup>

Collins suggests that happiness can only be attained when ‘Noah’s Dove’ returns to its master. In alchemy, doves symbolise the white stage of *albedo*, but in a Christian context, they refer to the Holy Spirit.<sup>144</sup> In Lyndy Abraham’s *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, *albedo* ‘is symbolized by all things pure, white or silver, some of which are: [Luna (the white queen), the moon]’ as well as ‘[Diana, the virgin, dove]’.<sup>145</sup> Abraham also clarifies that the moon, named ‘luna’, symbolises ‘the attainment of the perfect white stage, the ‘albedo, where the matter of the Stone reaches absolute purity.’<sup>146</sup> The alchemical associations of the word ‘dove’ suggest that Collins is connecting women’s happiness to spiritual contemplation.

She uses alchemical terms again a few lines later

Because they know the choisest *quintessence*  
Of earthly pleasures greatest confluence,  
Cannot procure that sweet blissefull peace  
Which from Gods Favour ever takes increase (lines 85-88)<sup>147</sup>

Quintessence is a term that refers to the philosopher’s stone, which is also called the fifth element and is implied in the title of this poem. The fifth element is ‘known as the

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<sup>142</sup> Zuber, *Spiritual*, 10-11.

<sup>143</sup> An Collins, “The fifth Meditation,” in *Divine Songs and Meditations* (Cambridge: Proquest LLC, 1992).

<sup>144</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58. See GNV, Luke 3:21-22: ‘Jesus was baptized and did pray, that the heaven was opened: / And the holy Ghost came down in a bodily shape like a dove’.

<sup>145</sup> Abraham, *A Dictionary*, 5.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.

<sup>147</sup> My emphasis.

quintessence and [azoth,] the product of reconciling the four warring, quarrelling elements into one harmonious and perfect unity, the very essence of the body of the metal or Stone'.<sup>148</sup> For Collins, the philosopher's stone or the fifth element, is useless without peace received from God. This poem demonstrates an awareness of alchemical terminology that Collins manipulates to emphasise her spiritual message of inward reflection and transmutation.

Similarly, in 'Another Song', Collins uses alchemical terminology to describe her hopes for spiritual betterment. At the end of the poem, she states 'Perhaps my Sommer-age may be, / Not prejudiciall, but beneficiall / [illeg.] for me.' (Lines 48-50) If Collins's goal had been to create the philosopher's stone, the last season should be autumn, associated with *rubedo* and the stone itself. Instead, Collins chooses summer, suggesting her desire to reorder the seasons and allow her body to experience its natural cycles. Her inability to experience these cycles implies that she perceives time differently than women who do menstruate. Returning to the definition of alchemy, P.G. Maxwell-Stuart notes that alchemy attempts to make 'an elixir that will cure intractable illnesses and prolong active life even to the point where an individual can become immortal. To this should be added its role as a catalyst to induce or aid spiritual transformation'.<sup>149</sup> Collins is not able to 'cure intractable illnesses', meaning she is not able to heal her disability or experience menstruation. However, she states that her mind is 'enclosed fast' from 'storm and blast' (lines 26-27). These lines suggest she can undergo an inward 'spiritual transformation'.<sup>150</sup> This inner change allows her to 'produce a fruit most rare', indicating that her alchemical experiment has still been successful in some way.

Collins suggests that women who experience menstruation perceive the passing of time differently than she does. Collins ends the poem, stating

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<sup>148</sup> Abraham, *A Dictionary*, 75.

<sup>149</sup> Maxwell-Stuart, *The Chemical Choir*, x.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

And still content my self with this  
 Sweet Meditacion and Contemplacion  
 Of heavenly blis,  
 VVhich for the Saints reserved is who persevere  
 In Piety and Holynesse, and godly Feare,  
 The pleasures of which blis divine  
 Neither Logician nor Rhetorician  
 Can well define (lines 53-60).

Here, Collins chooses to focus on ‘heavenly blis’ rather than her bodily difficulties. Her construction of time is closer to the eternal that exists in the heavenly afterlife, which ‘neither Logician nor Rhetorician / Can well define.’ The ‘fruit’ in her mind is her ability to perceive time in a manner that brings her closer to the divine.

Collins's decision to emphasise the mind in an alchemical poem is reminiscent of another poem that discusses women's minds, Donne's ‘Love's Alchemy’ (c.1590). It is difficult to say if Collins was aware of Donne with any certainty because she is an unknown figure beyond her publication of *Divine Songs, and Meditations*. However, since this chapter has read her writing through an alchemical lens, it is worth comparing these two different approaches to a woman's mind in this context. Donne states ‘Hope not for mind in women; at their best / Sweetness and wit, they're but mummy, possessed.’ (Lines 23-24)<sup>151</sup> This poem presents women as mere bodies devoid of intellect. The statement to ‘hope not for mind’ in women equally suggests that women do not have an intellectual soul but rather are only animated with sensitive and vegetative faculties. They are mummies or ‘[p]reserved dead bodies, perhaps animated by "Sweetnesse and wit," women lack the "mindes" that might make them immortal.’<sup>152</sup> Collins, however, suggests an alternative where her disabled

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<sup>151</sup> John Donne, “Love's Alchemy,” in *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Hugh A. Robbins (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2010), 222.

<sup>152</sup> Rebecca Ann Bach, “(Re)Placing John Donne in the History of Sexuality,” *ELH* 72, no. 1 (2005): 259-289.

body, which cannot menstruate, allows her mind a unique spiritual perspective that brings her closer to God and eternity.

Just like the philosopher's stone sits outside of time through its ability to offer immortality, Collins sits outside of time through her womb's lack of menstruation. Similarly, Lucy Hutchinson uses the womb's alchemical imagery in *Order and Disorder* to examine its transformative abilities, turning menstrual blood into breastmilk as an analogy for salvation in a Christian context.

## 6.5. Early Modern Breastmilk – Introduction

This chapter has demonstrated how women poets have used the associations of alchemical imagery and menstrual blood to highlight the cyclical nature of their bodies. However, the womb was also responsible for the production of another fluid: breastmilk. Early modern physicians suggested that once a child was born, menstrual blood moved from the womb to a mother's breasts to feed her newborn, having transformed into milk. Helkiah Crooke notes that menstrual 'blood floweth of it owne accord to the Pappes, according to his accustomed motion, [...] so that after the birth it is therefore led vnto the breastes, because it was accustomed to bee his course that way all the while the Infant did moue in the mothers wombe.'<sup>153</sup>

In alchemy, breastmilk represents a pure (or virginal) substance that has not been mixed with another. In *A Treatise of Mercury and the Philsophers Stone* (1680), Ripley comments that the 'first Matter' is 'the Seed of Metal because of it all Metals are generated' and is also known as 'Virgins Milk'.<sup>154</sup> Ripley further notes that 'when [this substance] is

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<sup>153</sup> Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 194. Sharp, *The Midwives Book*, 76.

<sup>154</sup> George Ripley, "Ripley's Treatise of mercury and the Philosopher's Stone," *The Alchemy Web Site*. Last modified July 1, 2024, <https://www.alchemywebsite.com/ripmerc.html>

joined with a Male and Female, and married with them, then it is no longer a Virgin, because it adhereth to them, [...] But as long as it remains a Virgin, it is called Virgins Milk, the Blessed Water'.<sup>155</sup> In an alchemical context, breastmilk is known as 'a white alchemical substance that is mixed with the red blood of Christ. [...] We] find a depiction of Mary feeding her child as an allegory of the connection between the philosopher's stone and white tincture.'<sup>156</sup>

Because Christian and Marian iconography were both used symbolically in alchemical texts, as I have previously highlighted, the representation of breastmilk in Hutchinson's text equally implies an association to alchemical principles. I argue that Hutchinson uses alchemical vocabulary to emphasise the connection between breastmilk and Mary, demonstrating that the womb is a space of spiritual transformation from sin into salvation, represented by the change of blood to breastmilk. I will begin this section with a brief explanation of the early modern medical and theological understandings of breastmilk before turning to analyse Hutchinson's text.

### **6.5.1. Early Modern Breastmilk: Medical and Theological Precepts**

Breastmilk was connected to the womb because it was created from menstrual blood. This relationship meant the milk was at risk of corruption because of its maternal origins. Indeed, 'Flowing from mother to child, breastmilk integrates the child's sucking mouth into the tidal and alarming flows and ebbs of the maternal body. The vulnerable newborn is fed with a

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<sup>155</sup> Ripley, "Ripley's Treatise," <https://www.alchemywebsite.com/ripmerc.html>

<sup>156</sup> Pavel Štěpánek, "Tasting the milk of celestial knowledge. Note about the rhetoric of the portrayal of the sacred in Alonso Cano's painting *The Lactation of St. Bernard* (1653–1657) from the National Gallery in Prague," in *The Figurativeness of the Language of Mystical Experience. Particularities and Interpretations*, eds. Antonio Barnés Vázquez and Magda Kučerková, 220-240 (Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2021) 224.

substance whose provenance must be doubtful: the poison bag of the female body.’<sup>157</sup> In *A godlie forme of householde* (1621), Robert Cleaver and John Dod comment on the risks of a nurse breastfeeding a child stating ‘Now if the nurse be of an euill complexion, as she is affected in her body, or in her mind, or hath some hidden disease, the child sucking of her breast must needs take part with her.’<sup>158</sup> It is specifically the nurse here who risks transmitting evil to the child.

Early modern puritan writers such as William Perkins, Henry Smith, or William Gouge believed that breastmilk was God-given and they ‘condemnd wet-nursing as “unnatural”’.<sup>159</sup> Perkins states in *Christian Oeconomie* (1609), ‘God hath giuen milke to women that beare children, & hath so appointed, that no meat is more naturall to the child, then the mothers milke.’<sup>160</sup> These Puritan writers ‘set the stage for maternal breastfeeding to be considered not only a physical and social duty but also a divine duty that was necessary for a productive spiritual livelihood between both mother and child.’<sup>161</sup> Breastmilk served a practical function of feeding the newborn infant but also transmitted beliefs about motherly fluids outside the body, both positive and negative.

The process of blood transforming into breastmilk could purify it of its corrupting agents. Diane Purkiss comments on this purification, stating the ‘breast was a redeemed part of the open, dirty body of the childbearing woman, a part where her polluted blood was purified by the fires of maternal love so that it could become an expression of that love.’<sup>162</sup> Perkins’ comment associates the natural practice of breastfeeding with God’s involvement in the act through Providence, which was common in the texts of Puritan clergymen during

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<sup>157</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 131.

<sup>158</sup> Robert Cleaver, and John Dod, *A godlie forme of householde gouernment for the ordering of priuate families* (London: R. Field for Thomas Man, 1621), 237.

<sup>159</sup> Cantos, “Maternal breastfeeding,” 65-66.

<sup>160</sup> William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie*, 135.

<sup>161</sup> Cantos, “Maternal Breastfeeding,” 66.

<sup>162</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 131.

the early modern period.<sup>163</sup> The *OED* defines Providence as ‘The foreknowing and protective care of God (or nature, etc.); divine direction, control, or guidance.’<sup>164</sup> In the early modern period, ‘Providence was understood as God’s knowledge of and involvement in both ordinary and extraordinary events. [...and] to not breastfeed was to deny providence.’<sup>165</sup> Breastmilk, therefore, carried connotations of spiritual transformation since early modern theologians encouraged women to breastfeed their own children despite this milk originating from menstrual blood in the mother’s womb.

### 6.5.2. Breastmilk in Lucy Hutchinson’s *Order and Disorder*

In *Order and Disorder*, breastmilk is mentioned briefly in Canto Five. Hutchinson states ‘What broken rest afflicts the careful nurse, / Extending to the breasts the mother’s curse, / Which ceases not when there her milk she dries’ (V.157-159). In these lines, Hutchinson implies that having children does not absolve a mother of sin.<sup>166</sup> Hutchinson also uses breastfeeding imagery in her translation of *De Rerum Natura*: ‘As new deliverd woemens breasts, being filld / With sweete milke, food for their young infants yeild’ (V.852-854). However, the original text of *De Rerum Natura* does not reference breastfeeding: ‘semina qua possint membris manare remissis; / feminaque ut maribus coniungi possit, habere / mutua qui mutant inter se gaudia uterque.’ (their frames, and issue from their slackened limbs; / and that woman may be joined with man, they must / needs each have means whereby they can interchange mutual joys.)’ (V.852-854)<sup>167</sup> Hutchinson’s translation

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<sup>163</sup> Cantos highlights this point, noting ‘Texts which consider the relationship between providence and breastfeeding were typically written by Puritan clergymen including Henry Smith, William Gouge, Robert Pricke, and William Perkins among others.’ Cantos, “Maternal Breastfeeding,” 65.

<sup>164</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “providence (n.),” September 2024, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4224794687>>

<sup>165</sup> Cantos, “Maternal Breastfeeding,” 65.

<sup>166</sup> Madeline Lesser, “Unbinding the Maternal Body in Lucy Hutchinson’s *Order and Disorder*,” *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 50, no. 2 (2020): 377-402, 385-386.

<sup>167</sup> Titus Carus Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura: Prolegomena, Text and Critical Apparatus Translation*, ed. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

purposefully redirects the narrative towards women and their ability to breastfeed. The choice to highlight breastfeeding despite the fact it isn't in the original text suggests Hutchinson is centralising the transformational power associated with the womb that can create breastmilk from menstrual blood.

In *Order and Disorder*, the lines on breastmilk occur shortly after Eve experiences painful childbirth. Hutchinson details the centrality of the womb through this process

The next command is, mothers should maintain  
 Posterity, not frighted with the pain,  
 Which, though it make us mourn under the sense  
 Of the first mother's disobedience,  
 Yet hath a promise that thereby she shall  
 Recover all the hurt of her first fall  
 When, in mysterious manner, from her womb  
 Her father, brother, husband, son shall come (V.221-229).

These lines demonstrate Eve's centrality in the act of creation because it is through her womb that 'her father, brother, husband, son shall come'. In Canto One, Hutchinson first uses the word 'womb' to illustrate God's creation in Genesis, stating 'By the successive reign of heat and cold / Thus leading back all ages to the womb / Of vast Eternity from whence they come,' (I.162-164). These lines illustrate God's creative source with feminine attributes since it relates back to the female womb. Hutchinson is using her retelling of 'Genesis to make a counter-claim about origins by articulating the role of mothers in this narrative'.<sup>168</sup> Hutchinson then moves the focus of the womb from its connection to God's creation in Genesis in the earlier cantos to recentre it through Eve as the matriarch of mankind in this canto.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Shannon Miller, "Maternity, Marriage, and Contract: Lucy Hutchinson's Response to Patriarchal Theory in *Order and Disorder*," in *Ashgate Critical Essays on Women Writers in England, 1550-1700 Volume 5: Anne Clifford and Lucy Hutchinson*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki, 107-135 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 122.

<sup>169</sup> Lesser, "Unbinding," 378.

In Canto Three, Hutchinson marks Eve's creation when God 'Then from his opened side took without pain / A clothèd rib, and closed the flesh again, / And of the bone did a fair virgin frame' (III.396-398). By moving the focus in Canto Five away from God's act of creation towards Eve, Hutchinson is demonstrating Eve's centrality in the act of creation. Through Eve, the womb 'is placed into action, [...and] becomes linked to generational identity and authority.'<sup>170</sup> Eve can compensate for her sin by bearing male children. Hutchinson mourns

Of the first mother's disobedience,  
 Yet hath a promise that thereby she shall  
 Recover all the hurt of her first fall  
 When, in mysterious manner, from her womb  
 Her father, brother, husband, son shall come (V.224-228).

Hutchinson offers Eve a way to redeem 'all the hurt' caused by the fall by bearing male children. She achieves this goal thanks to her womb and childbirth. This process naturally implies the creation of breastmilk. This fluid becomes the visible marker of this recovery through childbearing, but it is also a product of Eve's body created through her blood.

Hutchinson connects breastmilk to Eve, but this fluid is often associated with Mary in a Christian context. Perkins states: 'And our Saviour Christ was also nursed by Marie his mother', highlighting the spiritual importance of breastfeeding, despite this milk originating from menstrual blood.<sup>171</sup> It is Eve who bears male children in Canto Five, but the narrative of bearing male children to compensate for Eve's sin is a 'narrative [that] closely resembles the biblical version of events, in which Mary's birthing of Christ typologically redeems woman's sinfulness.'<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Shannon Miller, *Engendering the Fall: John Milton and Seventeenth-Century Women Writers* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 123.

<sup>171</sup> Perkins is here referring to Luk. 11. 27: 'As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.' Perkins, *Christian*, 135. Cantos, "Maternal," 68.

<sup>172</sup> Lesser, "Unbinding," 379.

This conflation Eve/Mary also appears in alchemical texts. In *A Lexicon of Alchemy* (1612), Martin Ruland notes that alchemists have given many names to the prima materia.<sup>173</sup> Ruland then divides the names for this substance into subsections, one of which is entitled ‘Bride, Spouse, Mother, Eve’, which he clarifies as referring to ‘from her royal children are born to the King.’<sup>174</sup> In another subsection for the prima materia entitled ‘Pure and Uncontaminated Virgin’, Ruland comments ‘She is a most extraordinary mother, who slays her husband and offspring, and revivifies them by means of her *breasts*.’<sup>175</sup> Ruland highlights the overlapping of female archetypes through the representation of the Virgin as both a mother and a woman who sins by ‘slay[ing] her husband and offspring’. Yet, it is ‘by means of her breasts’ that she is able to redeem herself, suggesting that breastmilk carries redemption.

Breastmilk, which for a Puritan writer such as Hutchinson would naturally carry connotations of Providence, is set against Eve and her sin. Hutchinson ‘demonstrates a familiarity with the poetic language of alchemy and a broader engagement with an early modern tradition of Christianised alchemy that analogised chemical process to spiritual transformation.’<sup>176</sup> This understanding implies Hutchinson also knows the alchemical conflation of Eve/Mary when referring to the prima materia. Eve becomes ‘the alembic for the alembic, she is celebrated right from the start in Hutchinson’s account of Genesis for the fact that she makes possible the very principle of perfection by introducing error.’<sup>177</sup> If Eve is the error and Mary the perfection, their conflation in alchemical terms suggests the ability of the womb to create not only death and life but transformation as well. Because Hutchinson redefines Eve’s role as creator of all men and ‘the alembic for the alembic’ she

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<sup>173</sup> Martin Ruland, *A Lexicon of Alchemy Or Alchemical Dictionary – Frankfurt 1612*, trans. Arthur E. Waite (London: John M. Watkins, 1893), 204.

<sup>174</sup> Ruland, *A Lexicon*, 205.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>176</sup> K.F. Allan, “Alchemical Poetics in Seventeenth-Century Women’s Writing,” (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2023), 2.

<sup>177</sup> Gillespie, *Women Writing*, 307-308.

is equally suggesting an alternative understanding of the womb, where menstrual blood becomes providential breastmilk and Eve's womb becomes the first site of redemption for her own sin. The womb is the source of creation, not only from which a child is born into the world, but it is also the space where Eve and Mary become one, represented through the ability of their wombs to transform a corrupted fluid into a fluid of salvation.

This chapter has examined early modern women poets' use of alchemical vocabulary in their texts to demonstrate the spiritual capabilities of women's bodies. Weston, Collins, and Hutchinson all manipulate these esoteric principles to highlight their beliefs about the capacity of menstrual blood and breastmilk to facilitate spiritual transformation. Weston shows the value in women's blood by opposing it to its alchemical counterpart, the sun. Collins suggests that her mind is capable of better spiritual understanding and development because of her body's failings and lack of menstruation. Hutchinson uses alchemical conflations of Eve/Mary to show the importance of breastmilk as a redemptive power. All three poets demonstrate an awareness of alchemical representations of women's bodies and use this knowledge to present the transformational power their bodies hold, which occurs as a result of their female anatomy through the womb.

## Conclusion

In chapter one, I discussed the womb's liminal status afforded by its ability to create life and death through birth, miscarriages, and stillbirths. As Phyllis Mack has stated, women are 'portrayed as liminal creatures inhabiting a no-man's-land of natural and spiritual forces'.<sup>1</sup> This liminality was understood in the early modern period as a duality inherent in women's beings. This representation stems from the medical and theological assessment of the womb's potential for corruption and purgation, sin and salvation, life and death. *The Malleus Maleficarum* commented on this potential, stating, 'women can conceive perfectly and give life to the extent that in the suitable part of the woman's womb the demons can apply a human seed to the proportionate matter that already exists there.'<sup>2</sup> Early modern texts acknowledge this organ's centrality in women's spiritual capacity, and how women can create both good and evil because of their anatomy.

The male-authored literary texts explored in this thesis predominately demonstrate the fears of evil associated with women's bodies: The Duchess of Malfi turns to witchcraft because of her children's murder. Several characters in texts explored in this thesis develop spiritual illnesses: Ferdinand is diagnosed with lycanthropia, William Tyndale develops leprosy, Hermione, and Lady Macbeth suffer from disturbed sleep in Shakespeare's texts. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, women are portrayed as powerful and capable of transforming themselves and others into animals. However, they also embody the fear and anxiety of early modern culture associated with witches through their display of power.

The female-authored texts presented in this thesis equally explore the duality inherent in women's bodies. Notably, in chapter three, I detail this point by assessing radical women's ability to move between both divine and demonic possession, but the womb is more complex

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women*, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Kramer, *The Hammer*, Mackay, 132.

than an organ capable of creating a dichotomy between two poles. These prophets along with other women authors explored here also present the womb as a nexus of spiritual power. Mary Carey is connected to her child even early in her pregnancy because she knows it has a soul. Hester Pulter's pregnant body allows her to experience her cosmic understanding of the afterlife. Mary Sidney Herbert and Rachel Speght both demonstrate that unconscious sleep states allow a deeper connection between mother and child or God. Margaret Cavendish uses the association between the female body and its malleability to suggest her protagonist's transformation into an angel. Finally, the women writers explored in chapter six show that the fluids created in the womb are not simply representations of sin *or* salvation, but more subtly, they demonstrate the transformative power that the womb holds where sin can *become* salvation.

As I stated in chapter three, Augustine commented on the equality of souls in men and women, stating, 'since [scripture] does not say that the soul of the woman was made from the soul of the man, it is reasonable to assume [...], that the woman received her soul in the same way [as man does].'<sup>3</sup> Despite this equality, women were more likely to experience changes in sex or metamorphosis, possession, disturbed sleep, and, of course, pregnancy. The soul-body dynamic is at the core of all these events. By exploring these tensions in texts by both men and women, I have demonstrated the nuance that appears in portrayals of the womb. This organ was not simply creating a duality between good and evil, but it also held spiritual power that impacted the representation of women in early modern literature.

Previous scholarship has focused on women's spiritual or corporeal natures, examining medical, theological, philosophical, historical, or literary sources, respectively. Yet, a comparative approach has not been used to analyse these texts. I have attempted to

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<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, *St. Augustine*, 97.

bridge this gap by addressing the intersection of these studies and by incorporating women's texts into the discussion. I have not, however, exhausted the sources of female-authored texts on these topics. Notably, I did not use Anne Conway, Aphra Behn, Ann Bradstreet, or several other early modern women writers in my analyses.

I focused on texts that accurately illustrated the tension between the soul and body, but this approach is not exhaustive. Instead, I sought to highlight this dynamic through texts that best illustrated the medical and theological concerns of the period pertaining to women's experiences, whether from male- or female-authored perspectives. I also focused exclusively on Christian English texts, and this study could be developed by examining other religions and nationalities. Equally, I did not compare women's to men's soul-body dynamics despite the need for this research. I avoided a comparative approach because women's soul-body relationship has hardly been addressed in previous scholarship. Before contrasting it to men's experience, I felt it was important to define this dynamic independently.

The relationship between women, motherhood, bodies, and spirituality has received little attention, which is true before, during, and after the seventeenth century. I have highlighted the complexities of this dynamic in my thesis, but I have not had the scope to address it completely. There is space for more research in this area in both the seventeenth century and in the present. The enduring debates about women's autonomy over their own souls and bodies demonstrate that this need remains pressing.

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