

**2018 SAA Seminar: Reproductive Knowledge in Early Modern England 1**  
**Leader: Sara D. Luttfiring, Penn State Behrend**

**Mary Floyd-Wilson, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

**What “Thy womb let loose”:  
*Richard III* and the Generation of Sin**

Through an examination of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, this paper will consider early modern perceptions of the devil’s generative power. While demonologists typically maintained that the devil, as a spirit, could not produce offspring with a human (unless the devil had acquired the seed elsewhere), early modern Protestants maintained that reprobates function as sons of the devil. Cain, and his descendants, many argued, proceeded from the devil, with some theologians asserting that Cain was “the first seed of the serpent.” But the devil was understood to be bound by nature: he cannot create something out of nothing, or make anything out of anything else, or produce “perfect living beings without seed.” He can, however, delude, corrupt, poison, infect, and deform—influences that carry physical and spiritual power. As an expert in nature, Satan could hasten corruption, a process that spawned imperfect and monstrous creatures such as toads and worms. *Richard III*, I will argue, raises questions about whether Richard’s origins are devilish: he is “rudely stamp’d” in the womb; bearing the mark of Cain; and “sealed in thy nativity . . . [as] the son of hell.” The repeated identification of Richard with a poisonous toad suggests a devilish influence shaped his generation. Indeed, the imagery of Richard’s birth, together with his preternatural capacity to seduce, suggests that his demonic nature is a congenital effect of spiritual and physical corruption. Like the devil, Richard breeds kin not by natural reproduction but by spiritual temptation. And like the toads born of putrefaction, Richard spawns sins in those inclined to receive his poison. This essay is part of a larger project that establishes the significant and felt presence of the Protestant devil in early modern English culture (beyond fantastic possession stories). Disputing a tradition of criticism that treats Richard’s evil merely as the manifestation of his type (as an exaggerated “villain” or as the descendant of an allegorical “vice”), I argue that Richard would have been recognized as Satan’s human vassal, feared for his capacity to tempt and poison with the Prince of darkness’s contagious and destructive powers.

**Jennifer Hardy, King’s College London**

**Promising Boys Hereafter:  
Time, Temporality and Hidden Conception in *Henry VIII***

Drawing upon Jonathan Gil Harris’s notions of polychronicity and multitemporality, this paper considers the implications of Elizabeth I’s temporally obscured conception in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*, as well as the trans-temporal, reproductive connections between Elizabeth and James I that were engineered after her reign. By approaching reproduction from a temporal perspective, my analysis suggests that pregnancy should be considered as both temporally linear and temporally pleated – a condition that draws together layers of human time by interconnecting generations from the past and future. While contemporary medical texts suggested that real-life, fruitful pregnancies could not be ill-conceived or mis-timed, in contemporary drama they often

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were, with conceptions taking place off-stage or in an imagined past or future. Using work by Christine Varnado and Barbara Hodgdon, I consider conception as a structuring absence, resulting from “invisible sex”, and argue that by thinking about conception in a temporal way we can reconstitute meaning from its absence onstage. Elizabeth’s conception is narratively and temporally removed within *Henry VIII*, but its absence allows for a temporally cyclical connection between Elizabeth and James in the play’s final act, as news of Elizabeth’s birth subtly signifies the imagined future conception of James as her successor. By exploiting the temporally and reproductively indistinct metaphor of Elizabeth as the ‘maiden phoenix’, *Henry VIII* fashions James as the physically reincarnated and temporally continuous figure of Elizabeth herself. Consequently, my approach highlights the importance of considering the timing of reproduction, by revealing both the chronological potential and the inherently polychronic and multitemporal nature of pregnancy.

**Lynn Maxwell, Spelman College**

**(In)Fertile Patterns:**

**Margaret Cavendish, Reproduction, Natural Philosophy and Writing**

My looks at Margaret Cavendish’s engagement with questions of reproduction in her works of natural philosophy and consider the extent to which her own experiences with infertility may have impacted her natural philosophy. In 1649, Théodore de Mayerne advised William Cavendish that it might not be a good idea for Margaret to have children, given her melancholy state. He wrote, “Touching Conception, I know not, if in the state she’s in, you ought earnestly to desire it, It is hard to get Children of Good Corage, when one is Melancholy” and warns that children themselves “bring a great deal of Payne with them, And after that very often one Losses them, as I have try’d to my great greefe and am sory to have had them.” This letter reveals both a desire, at least on Williams part to conceive children, and suggests that they were actively struggling to do so. Underlying Mayerne’s advice, beyond the pain of a man who has suffered the loss of children, seems to be a humoral understanding of the body and one that holds in particular that a potential mother’s physiological state has an impact on her child, and make it “hard to get Children of Good Corage.” Together with Cavendish’s own accounts of her life, and that of her husband, Mayerne’s letter helps paint a portrait of how the couple’s fertility or lack thereof mattered. I read these accounts in relation to Cavendish’s philosophical writings in which she claims her philosophical works as children, develops a vitalist and animist philosophy of nature which posits that thoughts and ideas are material, and explores the difference between mental and biological conception. Ultimately I suggest that Cavendish not only substitutes her books for children, but sees such creations as being of a more refined and thus superior nature.

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**Cecilia Morales, University of Michigan**

**Re-Producing Whiteness in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus***

In this paper, I show how Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* stages the multiple, competing reproductive knowledges of its three represented groups: Romans, Goths, and Moors. Focusing on how various characters articulate and perform their respective reproductive knowledges, I show how the play echoes a logic of racialization found in early modern travel literature that associates racial and cultural others with what can be seen as a perversion of the reproductive norms of early English medical tracts. Within certain travel texts, reproductive knowledge became a means by which early moderns negotiated and understood racial and cultural differences. A similar pattern emerges in Shakespeare's *Titus*, in which reproductive knowledges construct, undermine, and put pressure on racial boundaries. Ultimately, my reading of reproductive knowledges illuminates the ways in which early modern England's reproductive knowledge became implicated in developing ideologies of whiteness, even when the contours of racial thinking remained obscured behind discourses of scientific objectivity or empiricism.

While scholars continue to focus primarily on Aaron when thinking about race in *Titus*, I argue that it is *Tamora* who becomes the most urgent source of anxiety in the play – in part because of her uncomfortable similarity (both cultural and phenotypical) to the Romans. At first, the play portrays the similarities between Roman and Gothic reproductive knowledge. Tamora's body is deemed capable of reproducing Saturninus's white heirs. Later, when Tamora codes Lavinia's rape as an act of mothering, she claims Roman/Gothic reproductive knowledge in a way that was meant to provoke disgust in her early modern audience. Tamora's consumption of her children completes the process of her racialization. Unknowingly, she reverses the process of childbirth, rendering her otherness as complete while the threat of this otherness is contained by the stripping of her reproductive knowledge.

**N. Amos Rothschild, Saint Thomas Aquinas College**

**“Hoist with his own petard”:**

**Gender and the Unstable Brain-Womb of the Early Modern Engineer**

In her brilliant (and brilliantly titled) essay “A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in the Female Body,” Katharine Eisaman Maus parses male poets' appropriation of female generative capacity. “The female body provides a risky but compelling model for the structure of male poetic subjectivity in the English Renaissance,” Maus explains, noting that poets habitually trope the womb to figure “an interior space in which the creative imagination works” (268, 275). My essay will suggest that Maus's insights might be extended and complicated. The trope Maus describes factors not only in the period's discourses of poetic creation, but in its representations of *poiēsis* in all its forms, *technē* in all of its manifestations. Correspondingly, the essential figure to which the trope attaches is not the poet, but the engineer—a creator of material devices and texts, a concocter of plots, and much more.

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This multi-valent figure can reveal much about early modern preoccupations with inwardness and gender. Etymologically, the word “engine” derives from the Latin *gignere*, “to beget; to give birth to, to bring forth.” Moreover, the classical learning that Renaissance humanists worked so hard to recover linked the engineer’s cunning with *mêtis*, an ancient Greek concept that constructs the space of intellectual contrivance as a simultaneously fecund and threatening internal femininity: a brain-womb. As such, early modern authors often present engineers as the bearers of a precariously constructed gender identity. Texts as diverse as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, and Herbert’s *The Temple* suggest that if the engineer is able to master the convolutions of his whirling mind, the externalized, material engine might indeed show forth his manifest manliness. However, they also point to the dangerous possibility that (like the petard of Hamlet’s unfortunate engineer) an engine might recoil upon maker, thus unmanning its progenitor by symbolically collapsing back into the brain-womb that brought it forth. It is this powerful image of the recoiling engine and its attendant gendered implications that form the focus of my essay.

**Liz Steinway, Ohio State University**

**Narrating Bodily Status:  
Infanticide and the Dramatization of Reproductive Knowledge**

This paper examines the tension between the verbal construction of pregnancy and its physical assessment within a legal context by analyzing representations of women accused of infanticide who use knowledge about the reproductive female body to assert their innocence. Although the crimes of infanticidal women were often the subject of sensational stories in broadsides, pamphlets, and ballads, such figures did not often make it into the period’s drama. Instead of depicting true crime reenactments of infanticide, early modern drama included fictionalized mothers who kill their children beyond infancy and into adulthood. By eschewing portrayals of neonaticide and the trials associated with it, the drama highlights a dependency upon female characters’ verbal narratives of the reproductive body that reinforces the instability of the epistemology of pregnancy.

I argue that the flexibility of this epistemology allows women, whether female characters in drama or historical women on trial, to distance themselves from the crime of infanticide by reconstructing narratives of both pregnancy and childbirth. Looking to mothers such as Videna in *The Tragedie of Gorboduc* (Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, 1562) and Brunhalt in *Thierry and Theodoret* (Beaumont, Fletcher, and Massinger, 1621), I explore what it means for women to deny responsibility for the murder of their children by rhetorically severing the biological ties between mother and child, thus disrupting conventional portrayals of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. These characters go to great discursive lengths to describe why the children in question are not their own, echoing women’s testimonies in infanticide trials in which narrative reconstructions of pregnancy and reproduction are used to explain any aspect of what seems like pregnancy or childbirth as something else. These parallel rhetorical strategies

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speaking to the difficulties in assessing the reproductive body and emphasize the significance of controlling narratives about that body.

**Lauren Weindling, Auburn University**

**Bed Tricks and Bloodlines, or All's Well that Ends with a Baby**

The trope of the bed trick, in one light, fundamentally questions the importance of a body's specificity, demonstrating that bodies and persons can be easily substituted for one another in the dark. But ironically, the divinely-sanctioned bed trick tradition gives moral weight to bodies and the blood that they carry. The worth of this child, one of a *specific bloodline* which is destined for greatness in a sacred genealogy (e.g. Tamar and Judah of *Genesis* 38), permits the otherwise morally questionable means of its conception. Shakespeare's *All's Well* stages the divinely-sanctioned bed trick (by way of Boccaccio) to trouble the cultural assumption beneath it — that blood determines worth — since it fails to operate as the characters believe and as God supposedly designed. Helena appeals to this bed trick in the hopes of forcing a romantic connection between herself and Bertram. For Helena in conceiving Bertram's child seems to desire not the child for its own sake, but rather the byproduct of this conception, namely the *commixtio sanguis* or mixing blood in marriage's consummation. According to the assumptions of the period, this blood mixing would make her more *like* him, thus worthy of his love, as well as determining an erotic connection. Shakespeare's *All's Well* invites us to see, however, that because Helena appeals to an ultimately hollow system, her attempt to force a connection between her lowly self and the ennobled Bertram founders. And yet as the Countess and King discover, it proves extremely difficult to think outside of this system, even as they recognize that the assumption of blood's worth fails to accommodate the incorporation of persons who are otherwise worthy of alliance and love.

**Amanda Zoch, Indiana University**

**Performing Pregnancy in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair***

The pregnant body was widely understood as a site of contested knowledge in early modern England, and drama offers opportunities to observe characters negotiating this cultural and biological problem through visual interpretations, haptic interactions, pregnancy tests, and obfuscating performances. While many plays ultimately insist on exposing the "truth" of the belly—in the revelation of the Duchess's pregnancy in *The Duchess of Malfi*, for example, or the unveiling of Luce's fake pregnancy in Thomas May's *The Heir*—a few notable exceptions highlight the performative ambiguity of characters' pregnancies, leaving the audience without a definitive interpretation of the female character's reproductive status. Building on the generative discussions of Helena's unverified pregnancy at the end of Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, this paper considers Win's pregnancy in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* to further understand the dramatic effects of embracing, rather than resisting, the ambiguity of pregnancy. Win's pregnancy has long been a site of controversy, with some scholars,

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such as Gail Kern Paster, certain in the veracity of her claim to pregnancy and others, including Lori Schroeder Haslem, confident that the pregnancy is a ruse. Rather than choose a particular side in this debate, in this paper, I will argue that Win's uncertain performance of pregnancy's culinary longings parallels the indeterminate nature of pregnancy and reveals the power of performance to manipulate and undermine the social expectations of pregnant bodies.