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Pregnant possibilities in medieval and early modern literature

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Abstract
This chapter focuses on the phenomenon of ‘maybe maternal’ literary figures in medieval and early modern texts. Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Webster all write women characters whose maternal status they never totally resolve. Taken together, these authors and their female characters illustrate the extent to which potential pregnancy amplifies the inscrutability of women's bodies and highlights the thwarted efforts of other characters, readers, and audiences to interpret them. By introducing the possibility of these women's pregnancies but leaving their maternal status unverified, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Webster confront the intersections of epistemology and embodiment associated with pregnancy and motherhood. Thus they play seriously with the question of how interpretable the female body is as a potentially meaningful, or morally pregnant, text.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer; William Shakespeare; John Webster; pregnancy in literature; motherhood in literature; ‘pleading the belly’

Premodern pregnancy was inherently precarious and uncertain. Even whether a woman was pregnant was, to some degree, unknowable. A pregnancy’s terminus was its surest verification, yet health risks and diagnostic uncertainties inherent in premodern medicine meant that any pregnancy’s outcome was always at issue. At the same time, the patriarchal logic of early English society necessitated some degree of certainty about pregnancy, or at least performances of such certainty. This experience of time, in which a pregnancy could not really be confirmed until it ended, and its outcome in turn provided the only certain evidence of the pregnancy’s realness, is infused with epistemological uncertainty and temporal complexity. At the

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crux of the interpretive challenges posed by pregnancy was the maternal subject, who was at once in a position of explanatory authority, privy to the embodied experience of pregnancy, and objectified by that state, rendered as a text that others could decipher. While literary scholarship has tended to focus on unequivocally pregnant characters and definitively maternal bodies, this chapter explores some of the possibly maternal literary characters that appear in premodern texts by Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400), William Shakespeare (1564–1616), and John Webster (c. 1580–c. 1626–34). In these works we find women whose ambiguous maternal statuses present interpretive dilemmas for narrators and characters within texts and for their readers and audiences. These potentially pregnant characters embody epistemological uncertainties animated by female agency and the temporality of pregnancy. Across genre and time period, English writers ask how interpretable the female body is as a potentially meaningful, or morally pregnant, text.

Even unequivocally maternal figures in early English texts resonate with the complexity of their eras’ attitudes toward pregnancy. In medieval literature, mystery and uncertainty often surround pregnant women: for instance, in Play 13 of the York Corpus Christi Plays (‘Joseph’s Troubles about Mary’), the Virgin Mary’s unambiguous but paradoxical pregnancy provokes her husband’s comical misogynist doubts. In Arthurian legends, at the moment of his marvelous conception, Arthur’s mother, Igraine, does not know who is impregnating her. Some hagiographical works feature abortion miracles in which, through saintly intervention, fetuses disappear. Meanwhile, Shakespeare and Webster’s prominently pregnant characters, Hermione, from The Winter’s Tale and the titular Duchess of Malfi, face intense scrutiny about their maternal status and the paternity of their children. In the premodern world, as now, a range of reasonably reliable physical signs could help a woman determine pregnancy: the absence of menses, the quickening—or time when the mother-to-be feels movement—and a swelling abdomen. Given that the average early modern Englishwoman was pregnant eight to ten times, the symptoms would have been familiar.¹ Medieval gynecological and obstetrical manuals advised readers about how to interpret signs of pregnancy, and texts like the twelfth-century Trotula include sections on how to interpret symptoms related to the fetus’s sex.² Later manuals implied that identifying and assessing the progress of pregnancy became an increasingly scrutinized process. Indeed, early modern medical texts (usually authored by men) tended to emphasize the potential for misinterpretation and the lack of certainty

¹ Moncrief, ‘Show me a child’, p. 30.
² See in particular Green, Trotula, pp. 102–3
in diagnosing a pregnancy, suggesting that each reported or observed sign could potentially stem from something else. In *Child-Birth, or the Happy Deliverie of Women*, printed in English in 1612, French royal physician Jacques (James) Guillemeau advises doctors to be ‘very circumspect’ in determining pregnancy, warning that there is ‘nothing more ridiculous, then to assure a women that she is with childe’ only to find out she is swollen with wind or water.³ He exhaustively notes the symptoms of pregnancy, but cautions that ‘these signs are not so certaine’.⁴

The outcomes of pregnancy were uncertain in other ways as well; while it offered future hope through the promise of children, the survival of the mother and child could never be presumed in the event of labor and delivery. In this epistemological framework, pregnancy could only be understood as a subjective, physical, and temporal state in terms of its conventional telos, but that end—parturition and survival of mother and child—was seen as neither stably intelligible nor wholly predictable. Possible pregnancy does not simply intensify the instabilities present in every medieval and early modern pregnancy, it makes them impossible to ignore. Premodern pregnancy was, to use a phrase Kathryn Moncrief deploys in reference to early modern England, ‘both obvious and obfuscating’, legible as a visible phenomenon but resistant to stable signification or wholly predictable outcomes.⁵ When pregnancies are potential but unconfirmed in medieval and early modern literature, the obfuscation is what becomes most obvious. By overtly leaving characters, readers, and audiences thwarted by unanswerable questions, the literary deployment of such hypothetical mothers forces us to recognize the impulses to interpret the characters’ bodies and to reimagine past and future in the reflexive temporality of possible pregnancy. If a pregnancy’s existence is permanently in flux, without the stabilizing interpretive force of an outcome to fix its temporal position, many versions of events and their implications are always simultaneously available. The writers of such potential mothers offer these possibilities not only to readers and audiences but also to female characters who exert agency on the strength of their ambiguously productive bodies.

Bringing together works from different genres written centuries apart reveals a persistent strain of interpretive questions posed by and through the potentially maternal figure. Both in spite of and through their physical opacity and the indeterminacy of their narrative arcs, the characters we

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.
⁵ Moncrief, ‘Show me a child’, p. 30.
explore in this chapter evoke temporal, subjective, and moral ambiguity. In *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, May's fake or real pregnancy moves the plot and raises questions about how to interpret her character. Chaucer's Criseyde might be a mother; would her having children make her actions more understandable? The peaceful resolution of *All's Well that Ends Well* is contingent on Helen's pregnancy announcement, but the deception that underlies it calls those ends into question. 'Pleading the belly', the common law process in England that allowed a woman to request reprieve of her death sentence if she could demonstrate pregnancy, emerges as a useful concept for the characters and texts in question. For instance, when Joan La Pucelle claims pregnancy in *Henry VI, Part 1*, she evokes the protected status of maternal body, but is viewed at once as a lying witch, promiscuous opportunist, and terrified victim. Cariola's similar plea in *The Duchess of Malfi* highlights the tenuous authority of the maternal subject amidst the hypocrisy of her society. Even beyond instances that adhere to the legal definition of pleading the belly, women in the texts explored in this chapter look for ways to leverage the authority of their somatic experiences to tell a compelling story about their bodies. Pleading the belly, then, becomes suggestive of a broader network of ways in which women work to author their futures.

These instances illustrate the ways potential pregnancy shapes interpretation, amplifying the inscrutability of women's bodies and positioning possibly pregnant women as at once authorial agents and inscribed objects in relation to other characters, readers, and audiences. Medieval interpretative practices called on readers to navigate the relationship between the surfaces of texts and their meanings; accordingly, characters who appear not as mothers but as potential mothers-to-be manifest interpretive challenges that resonate in Chaucer's time and beyond. In raising the possibility of pregnancy but refusing to verify it within their texts, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Webster force us to confront the intersections of epistemology and embodiment associated with maternity. These writers bring the myriad of future possible outcomes into the literary present of ongoing potential pregnancies. These unfulfilled outcomes simultaneously enable author, character, and audience to revise the past, conjure the future, and conceptualize a dynamic present.

**Maybe mothers: Chaucer's maternal and literary ambiguity**

Twice in his poetry, Geoffrey Chaucer invites readers to speculate about his female characters' maternal statuses. Is Criseyde a mother? Is May really pregnant? And what does it matter? In *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1380) and
‘The Merchant’s Tale’ (c. 1390s), the possibility of motherhood or pregnancy might make a difference in the reader’s understanding of the woman’s moral character and the story’s meaning. Chaucer uses these moments of maternal possibility to explore how fictional surfaces might relate to the kernels of truth they contain. His speculative treatment of Criseyde’s and May’s potential fruits proves surprisingly fruitful, resonating with medieval theories of interpretation in which the reader emerges as bearing responsibility for producing textual meaning.

In an early description of Criseyde, Chaucer’s narrator claims that, ‘wheither that she children hadde or noon,/ I rede it naught, therefore I late it goon’ (Troilus I.132–33). To the alert reader, that claim appears disingenuous on two levels. First, the narrator doesn’t seem to be telling the truth about what exactly he has read and translated. In Chaucer’s main source of the Troilus, Giovanni Boccaccio’s Il Filostrato (1330), the narrator states explicitly that Criseyde ‘had never been able to have any children, [and] did not need to care for any son or daughter’ (I.15). Likewise, Chaucer’s other known sources make clear Criseyde has no children; Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie (c. 1160) calls her a virgin. Second, the narrator’s claim he will ‘late […] goon’ the question of whether Criseyde is a mother is inherently false because he has now planted the idea’s seed in our imaginations. The reader who wants to understand the story might find the question recurring, as evidently it has recurred for the translator. After all, the Troilus tells the tragic story of Criseyde’s betrayal of Troilus and his death in the wake of that betrayal, but even though his story essentially condemns Criseyde, Chaucer’s narrator does not want to speak badly of her (V.1775). Although she ‘was untrewre’, he refuses to discuss her ‘gilt’ and sends the reader to ‘other bokes’ if we want to see her condemned (V.1774–76).

Depending on how far we let ourselves explore it, the question of her maternal status might be critical ‘to [our] interpretation of Criseyde’s character and actions’ and feelings. If Criseyde has children, she has more to protect, more to bargain with, and more to lose. Whether she has children and whether they are with her could make Criseyde’s choice to stay with the Greeks instead of returning to a doomed city more or less understandable, depending. Jane Cowgill observes that, ‘the pointed absence from the text of [Criseyde’s] either existent or non-existent children creates a blank, unresolved space’. More to the point, the children are existent

6 All references are to Benson, ed., Riverside Chaucer.
7 Chaucer et al., Troilus and Criseyde.
and non-existent, that Chaucer sets up a thought experiment not unlike Schrödinger’s, in which the children are simultaneously present and not present, depending on whether we read with them in mind. We can heed the narrator’s advice to let go of the idea of Criseyde’s possible children, but when instead we let it inform our interpretation, it has the potential to influence our understanding and judgment of Criseyde and her story in any number of ways. Simply realizing how much power the possibility has over us might cause us to become more aware of how much power we have as readers to make meaning. The Troilus’s narrator prays in his concluding stanzas that wherever and whenever it is received, his poem will be understood (1798), yet he has also foregrounded the productive problems inherent in interpreting texts.

Throughout his writings, Chaucer shows an interest in the relationship between the surface of a text and the meaning it produces and carries, and in how readers and texts create meaning together. In his retraction to The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer includes the Troilus with those ‘translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees’ (X.1085) for which he asks forgiveness. There, he also offers a way for the Troilus and his other problematic works to maintain their moral usefulness in spite of their seemingly immoral fictions. He reminds us of the Pauline notion that ‘Al that is written is written for oure doctrine’ (1083): the right-minded Christian reader can find or create the proper meaning in any text. And at the end of ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’, Chaucer also translates Paul’s sentiment; there, he includes the familiar medieval image of the fruit and husk to represent the relationship between story and meaning. The Nun’s Priest asks the reader to ‘Taketh the fruyt [the meaning of his story], and lat the chaf [the fictive surface] be stille’ (VII.3443). This admonition seems at first to emphasize the reader’s role as a finder of textual meaning, but medieval allegoresis generally ‘thematizes interpretation, not simply as vertical archaeology (e.g., digging out kernels from their shells), but as a productive act that locates itself in the temporal circumstances of both writing and reading’. 9 Readers must after all decide which surface elements to take as ‘fruit’ and which to let go, and as we have already seen in the Troilus, Chaucer sometimes complicates that process in ways that make us more aware of our responsibility and power as meaning-makers.

In ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, Chaucer lays the comparison between pregnant bodies and morally pregnant texts even barer. The Merchant tells the fabliau-like story of a foolish old man (January) and the young wife (May) who

deceives him with another man. At the tale’s climax, the blind January escorts May to their enclosed garden, where her lover, Damien, awaits. To accomplish her deception May invokes a pregnancy that may or may not be true:

Allas, my syde! [...]  
I moste han of the peres that I see,  
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me  
To eten of the smale peres grene [...]  
I telle you wel, a womman in my plit  
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit  
That she may dyen [...]  

(IV.2331–36)

Her fruit craving provides evidence that she is bearing fruit of her own, and January helps her into the tree, where she and Damien have sex in front of the blind husband (2352). Meanwhile, Pluto and Proserpina (the classical gods of the underworld, here the king and queen of ‘Fayerye’ [2227]) wander by, see the deception play out, and get into a marital dispute of their own. Feeling sorry for January, Pluto restores his vision, but then Proserpina makes it possible for May to give ‘suffisant answere’ (2266) to January so that he believes her outrageous story (that she was struggling with a man in a tree because doing so is a cure she learned for blindness) over the evidence of his own eyes. The Tale’s last image, of January’s stroking May’s ‘ful softe [...] on hire wombe’, brings back to mind his initial enthusiastic late-life revelation that ‘a wyf [is] the fruyt of [her husband’s] tresor’ (1270) and underscores the morally troubling use to which May has put her real or invented pregnancy.

At the same time, May, not her narrator, is the one introducing the possible pregnancy, and in doing so she creates a new possible future for herself in which she can fulfill her appetites. The reader learns of May’s ‘plit’ at the same moment as January, and it had seemed unlikely before this moment in the Tale that the senile sexual incompetent could have impregnated May, yet we know she has not yet consummated the affair with Damian. ‘Is January then more virile than we had imagined? Or is this unheralded yet remarkably convenient pregnancy just another of May’s quick lies?’ 10 Samantha Katz Seal offers an ingenious alternative that emphasizes May’s agency as a conceiver of children and stories, asserting that according to

medieval theories of conception, the woman as well as the man must emit her seed during sex for pregnancy to occur. Because meeting with Damian has already awakened May’s sexual imagination and appetite, Seal argues, she might have had the mental sexual experience necessary while in bed with January to emit her seed and conceive a child, even without physical pleasure. As Seal puts it, ‘In this scenario, even though May’s body is like “wax” in the physical and sexual sense as she receives January’s seed, her imagination remains as imprinted and inaccessible as if she were indeed copulating with Damian, the object of her thoughts.’ Additionally, Chaucer has also awakened the reader’s imagination with May’s possible pregnancy. As in the Troilus, speculating about the truth of May’s story leads the reader to understand and assess her character in different ways.

Thus ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, like the Troilus, uses a moment of maternal ambiguity to redirect our attention to our own potentials and limitations as textual interpreters. Chaucer plays productively with the ideas of fiction and truth, of fruit and chaff, and of maternal and textual indeterminacy. While Criseyde’s narrator’s moment of wondering aloud stimulates readers’ interpretive imaginations, May ‘pleads her belly’, in a sense, to control her future. In that way, she anticipates moves later literary women will make with pregnancy claims. Ultimately, through his maybe maternal characters, Chaucer shows us how narratively and interpretively productive uncertainty can be.

Possible pregnancy and maternal agency in All’s Well that Ends Well

The interpretive relationship between text and recipient signaled in Chaucer’s ambiguous descriptions of maternity and pregnancy can also be seen as animating the end of All’s Well that Ends Well, Shakespeare’s 1604 ‘problem comedy’. Written more than 200 years later than Chaucer’s works and intended for the stage rather than the page, All’s Well raises related interpretive questions around the possibility of pregnancy and its ramifications for understanding the story as a whole. At the play’s conclusion, its protagonist, Helen, reappears from feigned death, in possession of her estranged husband Bertram’s ring and apparently pregnant with his child. Shakespeare, in drawing attention to the spectacle of the pregnant body in ways his source text does not, underscores the contingency of its presumed meaning in ways that resonate in terms of the medieval interpretive practice with which Chaucer’s texts engage, and like those texts, plays

Ibid., p. 303.
on the inscrutability of medieval and early modern pregnancy. The role of pregnancy in *All's Well* furthermore raises questions about maternal agency and authority, rendered all the more powerful by the play’s refusal to stage the ‘ends’ of the pregnancy with which it concludes.

The plot for *All’s Well* originally derives the story of Giletta of Narbonne, included in the Third Day of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, completed around 1352. Giletta, who will become Helen in Shakespeare’s rendering, cures the king of a fistula and is rewarded with marriage to the man of her choosing, Beltramo (Bertram in the play), Count of Roussillon, who disdains the match. He vows not to accept/consummate the marriage until his wife has obtained his ring and given birth to his child. Displaying a level of agency and ingenuity unique among Boccaccio’s female characters, Giletta engineers her husband’s acceptance by fulfilling the terms of his riddle.¹² William Painter offered an English translation of the story in novel 38 of *The Palace of Pleasure* (1575), and this likely served as Shakespeare’s most immediate source. At the end of the tale, Giletta gives birth to twins: in Painter’s words, ‘two sons which were very like unto their father’.¹³ By giving birth to not one but two healthy babies who are both male and resemble their father, Giletta has pulled off a kind of reproductive hat trick, providing an heir and a spare whose family resemblance guarantees their paternity. As Painter describes it, the count ‘knew [...] the children also, they were so like him’.¹⁴ Giletta’s maternal success and Beltramo’s self-evident paternity are depicted with an excess that both highlights the fairy-tale quality of the story and belies the instability and uncertainty that characterized real pregnancy in the period (and beyond). Painter’s translation hints at the precarity of Giletta’s position, somewhat sardonically noting how she ‘caused [the children] carefully to be nursed and brought up’ and describing her weeping and falling prostrate at Beltramo’s feet to beg for his acceptance.¹⁵ Giletta’s success in securing her place as Beltramo’s rightful wife is dependent on his recognition both of her and their children. Her proof that she has satisfied his conditions is external to herself, and thus, Boccaccio (and by extension Painter) are offering a fantasy of scrutable reproductive ends that necessarily elides the inscrutability of pregnancy itself.

Shakespeare, in adapting his source text, concludes his play with an announcement of pregnancy rather than the presentation of healthy young

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¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
heirs. In doing so, he directs our attention to the liminality and contingency of pregnancy while emphasizing the interpretive authority of Helen, the presumptive mother-to-be. The language of pregnancy and procreation abounds in *All’s Well*. In its first line, for instance, Bertram’s mother, the Countess, laments the necessity of ‘delivering’ her son from her in his leaving (1.1.1), and later, the King attempts to reconcile a reluctant Bertram to his sudden marriage, a ‘new-born brief’, with the assurance that his new bride’s attributes ‘breed honour’ (2.3.175, 2.3.129). Most importantly, procreation anchors the riddle with which Bertram rejects Helen, swearing to avoid his new wife and the marriage bed until she can achieve what seems impossible:

> When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband; but in such a ‘then’ I write a ‘never’.

(3.2.55–58)

At the end of the play, of course, Helen seems to have satisfied these conditions thanks to a successful bed trick—a conventional plot device whereby one party in a sex act has been secretly replaced by a substitute. When she appears onstage with the ring and a pregnancy announcement, the reactions of characters onstage, the expectations of genre, and conventional interpretations of the play alike suggest that she has successfully secured her position as wife by fulfilling his stipulations.

Even so, the play’s conclusion provokes controversy, not least because the abrupt changes of fortune and heart on which it relies are difficult to reconcile with the plot’s seeming insistence on the tidiness of a riddle solved. A less commonly referenced complicating factor in the play’s conclusion is that Helen has not actually fulfilled the precise terms of Bertram’s demand; instead of ‘show[ing him] a child’, she offers instead the ‘proof’ of her pregnancy. Her interpretative authority is rooted in somatic evidence, signaled in the riddle with which Diana, Helen’s co-conspirator in the bed trick played on Bertram, announces Helen’s reappearance at the play’s end: ‘one that’s dead is quick. And now behold the meaning’ (5.3.303–4). Ironically juxtaposing Helen’s supposed death with a declaration

16 Citations from Shakespeare, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, ed. Snyder.

17 Kathryn Schwarz probes the conventional ‘problem play’ designation, arguing that it belies the constancy and chastity that characterizes Helen’s actions; she suggests that it is the fact of Helen’s powerful will itself that makes the play a ‘problem’ for audiences. Schwarz, ‘My intents are fix’d’. 
of new life, Diana references the quickening, the stage of pregnancy at which ‘the first perceptible movements of the fetus during pregnancy’ can be felt by the mother, often presumed to be around the fourth month of pregnancy, but in practice dated anywhere from around the 13th to 25th week.18 While midwifery texts from the early modern period tend to call the possibly pregnant woman’s phenomenological experiences into question, suggesting that birth was the only foolproof means of retroactively guaranteeing pregnancy, the quickening was nonetheless viewed as a significant turning point in pregnancy, verifying the existence of new life.19 As Laura Gowing has identified, the quickening was taken as the best means of forecasting parturition, and it was dependent on the woman’s sensations: ‘internal feeling was the best measure of pregnancy’.20 Helen herself, not just her womb, is ‘quick’ in Diana’s telling; she constructs herself as a legible signifier of future life.

At the end of All’s Well, Helen simultaneously presents her pregnancy as an object of interpretation and lays claim to the performative agency to script its meaning. She revisits the riddle Bertram had initially put to her, but in doing so, she revises his text in significant ways. While he had demanded to be shown his child, Helen offers instead his letter itself, and though she is brandishing the original, she paraphrases its contents: ‘this it says/ “When from my finger you can get this ring/ And are by me with child, etc.” This is done’ (311–13). She has indeed succeeding in getting the ring that symbolizes the consummation of their marriage, but in Helen’s iteration of Bertram’s riddle, pregnancy has replaced the living child demanded both by Bertram and by Shakespeare’s source text. Helen elides this difference with the performative claim ‘this is done’, which underscores her own agential capacity while situating the key events in past tense—as fait accompli—rather than as ongoing process, as pregnancy might be understood to be. Though Helen insists on a present relationship instantiated by the pregnancy and ring she bears—full marriage to Bertram—the sense of completion suggested in her phrasing is belied by the way in which her pregnancy extends beyond the boundaries of the play itself. The act of conception may indeed be ‘done’, and by gesturing back to it, Helen insists on the facts of the bed trick as she has presented them, but pregnancy itself is a state of flux—it bears a proleptic relationship to maternity, but it is not wholly synonymous with it.

18 ‘quickening, n. 1’. OED Online, December 2016, Oxford University Press.
19 See Moncrief, ‘Show me a child’, pp. 31–33.
20 Gowing, Common Bodies, p. 122.
While Shakespeare depicts Helen's motherhood as a hypothetical—rather than, as in Painter, the defining feature of Giletta's successful ending—he adds a new unequivocally maternal figure to the plot, Bertram's mother, the Countess of Roussillon. Helen and the Countess are juxtaposed throughout the play as both women contrive to match Helen to Bertram. Janet Adelman counts the Countess among the 'suffocating mothers' in her book by that title, associated with oppressive female agency. Adelman suggests that in announcing her pregnancy, Helen 'becomes the epitome of the maternal power than binds the child'; paradoxically, by becoming a father, Bertram makes Helen a binding mother who can replicate his own. This conflation of Helen and the Countess offers a lens through which we can read Helen as, in a sense, always already a mother (or a future mother) in the play. The Countess's powerful sense of maternal agency is symbolized early in the play when she repeatedly expresses a motherly relationship to Helen as a means of teasing out the younger woman's attraction to Bertram. She insists, 'I say I am your mother,/ And put you in the catalogue of those/ That were enwombèd mine' (1.3.131–33). The Countess here lays claim to an imaginative discursive authority around what constitutes the maternal bond, with the potential to revise the history of her womb to encompass the relationships that she builds. When Helen balks at the specter of incest suggested were she to share a mother with her beloved, the Countess raises the possibility that she might instead be mother-in-law, a suggestion that shifts the conversation away from the genealogical past to the dynastic future, shaping a bond between the two women that animates Helen's quest. Helen, in asserting her procreative will over Bertram in order to rewrite their relationship, is mirroring her mother-in-law in leveraging the discourse of pregnancy.

Maternal agency is, then, a powerful force in the play, which makes Shakespeare's revision of his source text, and the interpretive instability that characterizes the end of the play, all the more striking. Shakespeare exchanges the overdetermined reproductive futurity signaled by Giletta's twin paternal doppelgangers for the spectacle of Helen's purportedly pregnant body. The text leaves the nature of this spectacle uncertain; while Diana's reference to the quickening places Helen at least partway through the pregnancy, the scene includes none of the evocative, weighty language that characterizes full-term characters like Juliet in Measure for Measure and Hermione in The Winter's Tale. Critics have tended to assume that Helen's pregnancy would need to be visible to audiences for dramatic effect and biological veracity, but as Caroline Bicks points out, this need not be the

21 Adelman, Suffocating Mothers, p. 83.
case. When Diana impels the audience to ‘behold the meaning’, she frames Helen as a self-evidently intelligible signifier, but given the way in which the state of pregnancy was, to return to Moncrief’s terms, simultaneously ‘obvious and obfuscating’, the specific meaning of the spectacle of the maternal body is far from clear. Moncrief argues that in light of its fraught interplay of visibility and indeterminacy, Helen’s ‘performance of pregnancy’ calls the stability of the play’s ending into question, suggesting that her successes in winning Bertram ‘may not be as certain as they first appear’. Helen claims that through the ring and her pregnancy, Bertram has been ‘doubly won’, a phrasing that can’t help but hearken back to Giletta’s twins. The comparison underscores the extent to which Helen, in contrast to her literary ancestress, relies on her own interpretive claims, and eventually, her rhetorical performance of pregnancy, to secure her fate.

Helen’s state at the end of the play can be read in terms of the ‘blank, unresolved space’ that Cowgill reads in Chaucer, raising questions about agency and interpretive authority that suffuse the work. Indeed, indeterminacy may be the point, underscoring as it does the contingency spelled out in the play’s title. While ink is often spilled on the concluding adverb, assessing whether the play could be said to end ‘well’ or not, by concluding with pregnancy, the play also calls into question its own ‘end’. While Helen's pregnancy seems to point to a future beyond the end of the scene, the play itself gestures toward recursivity rather than forward progress, as the King promises Diana her pick of noble husbands, just as he did with Helen. Past and future are bound up in the liminal temporal space of pregnancy; simultaneously heavy with meaning and inscrutable, Helen's pregnancy reflects the complexity of maternal agency and its contingent dynamics of time and interpretation as they emerge in All’s Well that Ends Well.

The quick and the dead: pleading the belly in Shakespeare and Webster

When Diana declares, ‘So there’s my riddle: one that’s dead is quick’ (5.1.303), she paves the way for Helen’s seeming rebirth and alludes to her possible pregnancy. Yet this ‘riddle’ also gestures usefully toward other characters

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22 Bicks, ‘Planned Parenthood’, pp. 299–303. For a recent example, take the 2011 Globe Theatre production, available on DVD, in which Helen (Ellie Piercy) does not appear visibly pregnant in the play’s last scene. Shakespeare, All’s Well that Ends Well, dir. Dove.

23 Moncrief, ‘Show me a child’, p. 34.
with possible pregnancies in early modern drama. Joan la Pucelle, Shakespeare’s fictionalized Joan of Arc in *Henry VI, Part 1* (1592), and Cariola, in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613–14), are killed even though they might be pregnant. Both quick and dead, these seemingly disparate figures all, in a sense, plead their bellies. While this tactic, in which a condemned woman could claim pregnancy to forestall a death sentence, technically offered only a temporary reprieve to condemned women, in sixteenth and early seventeenth century England it could often enable women to avoid execution entirely. Reprieves for possible pregnancy could later turn into commuted sentences or pardons. Of these characters, Joan comes closest to facing judicial execution, but her condemnation comes from her English enemies rather than a court of law. Cariola also claims pregnancy, in her case to obtain clemency from murderers. Even Helen can be seen as successfully pleading her belly, using her pregnancy announcement as leverage to revivify herself and reconstitute her marriage. Whereas Helen’s claim to pregnancy is taken seriously by characters in the play and audiences of it, the possible pregnancies claimed by Joan and Cariola are suffused with doubt, raising questions of when and how maternal authority can be imagined to work in framing narratives of pregnancy. All three characters, however, retell their pasts and imagine new futures in the midst of the strange, nonlinear time of possible pregnancy. As part of the fictional worlds of period theater, potential pregnancy enables a proliferation of narratives and interpretations by making obvious irresolvable uncertainties about past, present, and future. By opening the question of whether or not a character is pregnant and refusing to resolve it, these plays raise speculation about past events and gesture toward diverse hypothetical outcomes. When Joan and Cariola plead their bellies they reveal the productive uncertainty of potential pregnancy and test its limits.

A potential pregnancy is not an unreasonable representation of parent and child relationships and inheritance in *Henry VI, Part 1*. Although Joan is the play’s only potential mother, there are many parent–child pairs. Prominent among them is the ineffectual Henry VI, who cannot live up to the memory of his father, Henry V, and his past triumphs in the war against France. However, resembling one’s father is no guarantee of victory. The elder Talbot is England’s remaining great warrior, a parallel to Joan in the ongoing Hundred Years War. His son is just as brave and as unwilling to retreat as he is, even in the face of certain death. The Talbots die together, both unwilling to flee when massively outnumbered, thus ending their

24 Levin contextualizes Joan’s plea: ‘Murder not then the fruit within my womb’, pp. 81–84.
family line. When Joan is captured by the English, after a last ditch attempt at using witchcraft to turn around her fortunes in battle, she encounters and renounces her father and announces her supposed pregnancy. These linked declarations throw into relief the failures of inheritance throughout the play to ensure social stability and to transfer authority. Joan’s temporal creations, the new pasts and futures born of her possible pregnancy, undercut the fiction of stable family lines sustaining social order.

During Act 5, scene 6, as the English lords, York and Warwick, lead Joan toward her death, she first stresses an illustrious parentage and then claims pregnancy as she searches for a persuasive narrative to save her life. Her desperation and the hostile skepticism of lords suggest that Joan is blatantly lying. Yet regardless of the validity of her claims, the immediate proximity of Joan’s rejection of her father, the Shepherd, and her claim of pregnancy indicates that possible pregnancy reflects the failures of inheritance to insure family legacies and cultural stability. Establishing their relationship, the Shepherd asserts: ‘She was the first fruit of my bach’lorship’ (5.6.13) and when Joan declares her condition she echoes his wording, ‘I am with child, ye bloody homicides./ Murder not then the fruit within my womb’ (62–63). This further underlines the connection between Joan’s retelling of her childhood and her articulation of a future child. The Shepherd first declares that her situation ‘kills thy father’s heart outright’ (2), and asserts ‘I’ll die with thee’ (6). Before she even speaks, Joan violates the expectation that parents should live on through their children. She may kill her father in a variety of ways: emotionally, through inadvertently encouraged suicide, and through challenging her paternity to the Shepherd’s face. Although Joan’s supposed patricide is more direct, it is suggestive of Helen’s assertion that she has forgotten her father: ‘I think not on my father,/ […] What was he like?’ (1.1.81, 83). While Helen uses her inheritance, her father’s special receipt for curing the King’s fistula, to create a new future for herself, Joan tries to recast her past and future and is roundly denounced by the men around her. When Joan rejects the Shepherd, he, in return, reimagines the past by positing childhood deaths by poisoned breast milk or attacking wolves before consigning Joan to the flames. If she offers him no legacy, she might as well never have been born. These dire imaginings don’t bode well for Joan’s potential offspring. Her temporal creations are at odds with those of the men around her from the outset.

Like other possibly pregnant characters, Joan’s pregnancy announcement also highlights character and audience efforts to interpret women’s illegible
bodies. Joan's retellings of past and future may not stall the stories others tell about her, but their thwarted interpretations further underscore the failure of patriarchal descent to insure social order. York and Warwick assert the dauphin's paternity and condemn the possible infant because of it, encouraging Joan to identify other fathers and then reproving her for naming first Alençon, then René of Naples. Their narrative suggestions and rejections encourage interpretation of Joan's performance of pregnancy and raise questions about her sexuality. As with Helen, possible pregnancy makes overt the impossibility of ever resolving such questions. Bicks notes: 'Naming multiple fathers, Joan becomes the “Strumpet” that Helena suggests she might be when she bargains with the King.'26 Warwick and York's negative reactions to both Joan’s cutting rejection of the Shepherd and her claims about her child's paternity highlight the weight they confer on patrilineal inheritance. But even as they use lineal descent to taunt Joan and expose her desperation, they reveal brokenness in their own values. All of the potential fathers paradoxically condemn a possible child that the English lords simultaneously assume cannot exist. They actually collaborate with Joan to revise and erase paternity, undercutting its presumed solidity. Even as York and Warwick seem certain of their interpretation of Joan—barren wanton who is not carrying on her father's line and therefore is incapable of reproducing—they leave all options open except survival: 'And yet forsooth she is a virgin pure!/ Strumpet, thy words condemn thy brat and thee./ Use no entreaty, for it is in vain' (5.6.83–85). For all his sarcasm and skepticism, York allows that there could be a ‘brat’. Joan may be anyone from a virgin who lied in desperation to a pregnant witch. The very obscurity of her possible pregnancy makes apparent the inadequacy of lineal inheritance, the play's primary mechanism of transmitting authority. Helen stage-manages her pregnancy announcement, enabling her to exert control over others' reactions and harness a credibility that Joan, an enemy captive, cannot hope to match. Pleading her belly does not save Joan, but even in death she is quick with possibilities, which live on as simultaneous might-have-beens that can never be resolved.

This is a liminal, temporally pliable space that Joan shares with Cariola, the loyal lady in waiting and confidant to Webster's titular character in The Duchess of Malfi. When considered in connection with all of the attention paid to the Duchess's maternal body, by characters within the play and scholars,27 Cariola's last-second pregnancy announcement builds on

26 Bicks, 'Planned Parenthood', p. 327, n. 63, references All's Well 2.2.172. 
27 See for example Luckyj, Winter Snake; Ray, 'So troubled with the mother'.
and intensifies our awareness of the obfuscating nature of pregnancy and highlights attempts to interpret indecipherable female bodies. Procreation is a central concern in Webster’s play, as characters spend much time trying to confirm maternity and determine rightful inheritance. At the start of the play the Duchess is a widow, and she seemingly has no children until the three that result from her secret marriage to Antonio, her steward. However, midway through the play her brother, Ferdinand commands: ‘Write to the Duke of Malfi, my young nephew/ She had by her first husband’ (3.3.67–68).28 While the historical Duchess did have a son during her first marriage, Webster never resolves this apparent discrepancy. Years after she seemingly becomes a mother in the play, Ferdinand’s lines instigate retrospective uncertainty about her maternal status at its outset. Reminiscent of Chaucer’s willful obscuring of Criseyde’s maternal status, this shadow of a possible pregnancy creates an alternate temporality, inviting audiences to rewrite the past and future in light of a heretofore unknown eldest son. Even before the introduction of this son, the Duchess’s indeterminate maternity is a prominent feature of her remarriage. Bosola, serving as a spy for her two brothers, spends a lot of time and energy in Act 2 trying to confirm her supposed first pregnancy. Like the author of an early modern midwifery manual, he is unable to verify it through her appearance or observation of symptoms, suggestive though they are. Antonio provides definitive evidence by dropping the baby’s nativity, or horoscope, in Bosola’s presence. Pregnancy remains illegible, and only the birth of the child retrospectively confirms its existence.

When Cariola, like the Duchess, faces death on Ferdinand’s command and at Bosola’s hands in Act 4, scene 2, she pleads her belly, and this possible pregnancy aligns with and highlights the uncertainty about procreation that fills the play. Rather than accept death as inevitable, like the Duchess, Cariola uses possible pregnancy to articulate past and future narratives that she hopes will save her. Although they fail, potential maternity continues to shadow the play to its end. As with Joan, Cariola’s revisions proliferate. She asserts by turns that she is engaged, has information about treason, has not been to confession in two years, and is pregnant. This excess of options makes all her pleas seem implausible, and yet also makes her pregnancy announcement more credible; Cariola’s claim of being ‘contracted to a young gentleman’ (4.2.239–40) and avoidance of confession might align with a pregnancy. Secret relationships are demonstrably conceivable in The Duchess of Malfi.

28 Webster, Duchess of Malfi.
Duchess of Malfi, given the Duchess and Antonio’s clandestine marriage. As with Joan’s profusion of fathers, for her prospective child and herself, and the impossible possible chronologies of May’s conception in ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, Webster creates a paradoxical array of pasts and futures even as Cariola faces her end.

Cariola’s pregnancy claim also aligns with and follows from the Duchess’s final, fruitless instructions on caring for her youngest children. Up to this point the Duchess seems to believe, due to Bosola’s deception, that her two youngest children are already dead, when in fact they die around the same time as Cariola. Despite this, the Duchess famously gives Cariola final instructions on caring for the children: ‘I pray thee, look thou giv’st my little boy/ Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl/ Say her prayers ere she sleep’ (4.2.196–98). The uncertainty about what the Duchess knows or believes about her own maternal status is reflected in Cariola’s claims. Both women might be mothers and, given the final responsibility the Duchess places on Cariola, her sudden maternal claims invoke ties to those doomed children and to the son, or sons, that live on. The surviving characters declare the Duchess and Antonio’s surviving son the heir, and he faces an unstable inheritance and a possible brother with only the memory of his mother to back him.

Although very different from Helen’s cleverly staged return, Cariola’s frantic final lines underline that for all these characters possible pregnancy is life and death. When she declares: ‘I am quick with child!’ (4.2.245), Bosola replies, ‘Why then/ Your credit’s saved’ (245–46). Webster uses the same terms that Shakespeare employs in Diana’s riddle and in an injunction to Helen on familial duty: ‘You must hold the credit of your father’ (1.1.79–80). This is a coincidence, but an illustrative one. Bosola’s quip callously asserts that killing Cariola saves her reputation because if she is, to use a pointed term, expecting, no one will ever know because this possible pregnancy will never come to fruition. ‘Credit’ is, in a sense, the social burden she dies to preserve, a condition that recalls the ‘credit’ obligations born by Helen as her father’s heir. While Helen uses her pregnancy to sustain a lot of ‘credit’, to tentatively recreate relationships and reputations in a very unstable world, Cariola’s claims generally aren’t given any. As with Warwick and York’s treatment of Joan, Bosola’s snark allows for a potential child even as it encourages audiences to presume desperate, false pleading. Even as Bosola

29 Marcus proposes another possibility: ‘Cariola’s seemingly irrational plea may be based on the hope that, if they believe she has a man available to avenge her, the executioners will be less likely to take her life’. Webster, Duchess of Malfi, p. 287, n. 4.2.239–40.
assassinates Cariola, the possible versions of past and present that she creates proliferate and haunt the play. Helen and Joan share this reproductive limbo, as do Criseyde and May. All these permutations remain as irresolvable as the possible pregnancies of the characters. Pleading the belly enables female characters’ efforts to rewrite their lifetimes, but also invites the prescriptive interpretations of others. Through these figures, these texts probe the limits of temporal productivity and interpretive authority embodied in possible pregnancy.

Conclusion

The texts explored in this chapter invoke the possibility of pregnancy in service of a range of possible ends, for instance: to save marriages, facilitate adultery, mitigate sins, to inspire mercy, or to call morality into question. The possibly maternal characters we have examined all present interpretive dilemmas that themselves produce multiple, if competing, meanings. While May may not plead her belly in the same way Joan and Cariola, or even Helen, do, she too leverages the possibilities of pregnancy to assert control over her destiny. Helen’s revision of Bertram’s conditions for their married life is not so dissimilar from the reinterpretations Chaucer invites readers to consider when he speculates about Criseyde’s maternity and plays with his own sources. Attending specifically to possible pregnancies in early English literary works, not only to verifiable ones, makes pregnancy’s obfuscation obvious, revealing the tendency of writers to highlight interpretive and epistemological uncertainty about female characters’ bodies, pasts, and futures, through irreconcilable, simultaneous possible options. The temporal, generic, and thematic distinctions among these texts reflect the scope of the potential lenses through which possible pregnancy might productively be viewed, and it is because of, rather than in spite of, the range in the texts we’ve explored that we see these instances of raised but unresolved maternity as constituting a generative body for analysis.

The questions of gendered authority and conditions of possibility associated with potential pregnancy are thrown into sharper relief by considering the practice of pleading the belly in relation to another early modern legal tradition that might be considered a rough analog—the recourse literate men (but not women) enjoyed to benefit of clergy. If a male first offender could demonstrate literacy, he could swap knowledge for survival. Women lacked this option, but were able instead to leverage the possibilities of pregnancy to shape their narratives. After a woman pled pregnancy in an
effort to defer her fate, a board of matrons presumed to have the knowledge and experience of childbirth necessary to render judgment would examine her; their determination of pregnancy or possible pregnancy could result in temporary—and sometimes permanent—reprieve.\textsuperscript{30} A legal fiction animated by gendered, embodied, maternal knowledge and authority, this process evoked by Joan and Cariola depends on the uncertain temporality and moral implications associated with premodern pregnancy.

The female authority invoked in pleading the belly was, however, still mediated by male legal authority. It is a literary/historical fact that the female characters we have explored are likewise mediated figures, conjured by male authors and narrators, and, in the case of the dramas, originally embodied on stage by male actors. Even as these texts reflect the possibilities for embodied interpretive authority associated with maternal femininity, they also can’t help but reflect a broader cultural anxiety about the nature of that power and an interest in its limitations. In an era in which pregnancy was increasingly viewed as a medical concern under the purview of male authority, as Guillemeau’s pamphlet helps illustrate, potential pregnancy and its concomitant association with women’s experiential knowledge was a subject ripe for scrutiny, just as it subjected (and continues to subject) bodies to scrutiny. Putting literary works portraying possible pregnancy into dialogue with medical literature, women’s history, the history of law, and other disciplinary approaches and methods could shed light on the ways in which premodern women could, and did, leverage narratives around their bodies in attempts to author their fates. Possible but unprovable pregnancy disrupts the passage of time, assumptions of inheritance, and the supposedly inevitable advance from one phase of life to the next. Reproductive time, which can be viewed as at once cyclical and teleological, is paused in these depictions of potential maternity-in-progress. The irresolvable nature of the possibilities, probabilities, and uncertainties associated with pregnancies that are claimed but do not progress within the bounds of a text illuminates the ambiguities that adhere to social narratives of pregnancy and maternity in the medieval and early modern periods.\textsuperscript{31}

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\textsuperscript{30} Levin, ‘Murder not then the fruit within my womb’, pp. 81–83.
\textsuperscript{31} Thanks to the participants in the workshop ‘Maybe Baby, or Pregnant Possibilities in Medieval and Early Modern Literature’, 18 June 2015 at the 25th anniversary Attending to Early Modern Women Conference for stimulating conversation that led to this essay.
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