**an overview: queer pregnancies on the early modern stage**

This project puts pregnancy and performance in conversation to challenge the strict temporal frameworks and generic knowledge that continues to regulate and police pregnant bodies. The performance of pregnancy on the all-male early modern stage depended on prosthetics and visual illusion, but also on collective truths about pregnancy—a state of being players could only access through language and narratives. I revisit this language, the literary tropes used to conjure pregnancy in the early modern imagination, taking into account Lauren Berlant’s call for a “radical rethinking of the relation of labor and time, of sacrifice, security, and satisfaction,” to ask “whether ‘adding up to something’ is the best metaphor for justifying having labored” (*Cruel Optimism* 5). I posit that when pregnancy is divorced from its promised end—the birth of a healthy child—it is a lived experience that defies rational ways of knowing, straight-time, uniformity, and is, thus, subject to the “crushing heteronormative tide" José Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia*.

Indeed, *many* pregnancies do not end in childbirth and because these “failed” pregnancies produce no material, or legitimate, evidence they are consequently lost. Both pregnancy and performance are ephemeral, fleeting, intangible objects of study in this respect. For this reason, early modern drama is a particularly generative space to explore pregnancy as a queer aesthetic. The accelerated and aborted temporalities of performance resist “unity of time” and other generic conventions; indeed, these plays often hinge on actual or imagined pregnancies. In revisiting canonical plays such as *Tamburlaine 1* and *2*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Titus Andronicus*, my object of study is not any kind of “truth” about the lived experience of pregnancy in these plays, but rather the narratives and fantasies at work—the irrational truths about pregnancy that these performances conjure and critique. Consequently, this project makes use of Muñoz’s “queer optic” to read the multi-faceted narratives and stories available to scholars interested in this period, an optic attuned to “small particular intonations, and other ephemeral traces” in order to attend to queer pregnancies and lives (Muñoz *Cruising*).

**historical overview and literature review: the “medical marketplace” in early modern England**

The opening chapter posits early modern male physicians’ entry into the birthing chamber as a crucial shift in how pregnancy was, and continues to be, known and regulated. Just as the “great-bellied women / That had not half a week to go” gather to watch Anne Boleyn’s coronation in *All is True*, understandings of pregnancy are *still* “woven / So strangley in one piece” (4.1.76-81). This weaving together of pregnant bodies ignores “glances, gestures, encounters, fantasies, and collaborations that have no canon”(Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 285) as well as readings of canonical literature that might break the silence surrounding experiences of pregnancies that do not end in the birth of a healthy child.

Pregnancy is an identifiable state, a certain aesthetic, as the most common early modern descriptors for pregnancy (“great-bellied” and “big-belied”) suggest (Bicks 30). In 16th and 17th century gynecological manuals, however, this one physical sign was deemed an unreliable indicator of pregnancy and, consequently, long lists of sensible evidence were provided for those who wanted to know the *true* conception of women. This desire to *know* pregnancy led to a complex “medical marketplace,” especially in its division of medical authority (Laroche 3). In compiling gynecological manuals, physicians consulted “receipt books” written by midwives that offered guidance on provoking, purging, and obstructing menstruation. Feminist materialist scholars often propose that these recipes offer veiled information about herbal abortifacients, describing the process through euphemisms such as “bringing down the flowers” (McLaren 102, 111).

In medical texts published by male physicians, however, midwives are warned of the serious, moral implications of using herbal menstrual stimulators to end an unwanted pregnancy; for example, Nicholas Culpeper’s promise in one of the best-selling gynecological manuals of the 17th century: “Give not any of these to any that is with child, lest you turn murderers; willful murder seldom goes unpunished in this world, never in that to come” (18). As evidenced in this shrill admonition, the incomplete and anxiety-ridden appropriation of gynecological knowledge in this period certainly informed contemporary dramatic types such as the “herb-women.” In Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, for example, Lysimachus describes the unnamed Bawd who runs a brothel as, “Your herb-woman, she that sets seeds and roots of shame and iniquity” (4.6.85-86). This dramatic “type” also appears in Thomas Middleton’s *A Game of Chess*, Thomas Heywood’s *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon*, and Thomas Dekker’s and John Webster’s *Westward Ho,* and I plan to explore these representations in conversation with contemporary medical texts such as Culpepper’s.

The entry of male physicians into birthing chambers and the appropriation and dissemination of gynecological “knowledge” in this period was also, in part, an attempt to manage the “threats of false attribution of paternity, substitution of children, and infanticide” (Ostovich 105). Of note is the British law passed in 1624 that placed the burden of proof on women when an infant died: “increasingly, collaborative evidence from physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, and male midwives was required when women midwives testified about the viability of a live but premature baby” (Riddle 135). As Mario DiGangi argues in his reading of *Measure for Measure*, “abortion is figuratively linked with costly destruction and with an unnaturally harsh law that measures out untimely death for sexual activity”—this link “indicates what is at stake in a wife’s regulation and responsibility for her ‘ripe time’” (600).

Although laws such as these worked to police and silence “failed” pregnancies, this project resists evidentiary requirements that place the “burden of proof” on scholars interested in queer lives and narratives. In recent scholarship discussing dramatic representations of deviant pregnancies, what can and cannot be said is clearly policed through methodologies that privilege certain kinds of evidence and, thus, certain kinds of readings. William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *Hamlet*, for example, have been posited as plays that allude to rue’s properties as an herbal abortifacient (albeit in short notes). In this case, Ophelia’s evocation of rue[[1]](#footnote-1) might “be better read as a shocking enumeration of well-known abortifacients and emmenagogues” (Newman 227). These readings of *Hamlet* are vehemently contested, however, due to rue’s multifaceted properties as both a herb and literary symbol; for example, Etienne van de Walls argues that, in the early modern period, plant substances were taken primarily to stimulate the natural process of menstruation—“use of abortifacients was a rare deviation from the norm” (184). Robert Painter and Brian Parker respond with similar sentiments, “How far can such a level of reference be pushed?” (43). As a point of entry into the rich scholarly conversation about performance and pregnancy in the period, this section ends with the proposal that, more often than not, the more *viable* reading of a reference such as “rue” is the more *normative* reading—and that these assumptions might offer the pleasant *illusion* of rarity but ultimately work to reproduce privileged ways of reading and writing about early modern drama, methodologies that silence scholars interested in queer lives.

**the figurative language of pregnancy: “bringing down the flowers”**

In this chapter, I explore how the shift in medical authority—the performance of expertise without experience—was facilitated by figurative language and literary tropes. Consequently, poems such as John Donne’s “The Flea” might be read as contributions to the larger cultural conversation about generation and pregnancy, especially since physicians made use of poetry when writing and organizing their texts. Eucharius Rosslin’s *The Rose Garden for Pregnant Women and Midwives,* for example, references the gardens in which midwives grew, nurtured, and gathered herbal remedies in its title. He chooses to frame this medical text, however, with a poem—a ballad entitled “Admonition to Pregnant Women and Midwives.” The poem knits the pregnant female body with the rose garden, ending with the promised “admonition”: “Such roses which your hands do take / Will come in time before God’s face” (36). Rosslin’s attempt at poetry is but one example of how poetic language affects cultural truths and knowledge production.

Thus, this section reads the figurative language of pregnancy in early modern poetics closely—the work of 17th century carpe-diem poets, in particular. Whether physician, playwright, or poet, Gail Kern Paster observes that writing about pregnancy and childbirth “opens up a textual space from which men—and their erotic interest in women’s bodies—cannot be excluded” (188). In the carpe-diem tradition, for example, the “Virgin Rose” is conjured to make sense of the potentially-pregnant female body. The fertility and beauty of both the rose and female body is cast as fleeting, and there is an urgency perpetuated in these poems to “gather” the rose before first decay. The Latin phrase *carpe diem* is usually expressed in English as “seize the day” although its literal translation is “pluck the day” or “pick the day,” casting the potentially-pregnant and pregnant female body as an ephemeral garden (Gray 220). The poetic knitting of the female body to a rose or rose-garden is a “likeness” that is not informed by a sensibility that has experienced pregnancy. These metaphors are notable, however, in depicting pregnancy as a commoditized, treasured state of being yet also suggest that women must be plucked, cultivated, sown, and harvested before time renders them barren and, thus, worthless.

This pervasive conceit begins *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, conjured by Theseus in his attempts to police Hermia’s desire to marry Lysander against her father’s will[[2]](#footnote-2). Although Theseus offers Hermia the option of becoming a nun in lieu of death, should she disobey him, he confidently informs her that “earthlier happy is the rose distill’d / Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn, / Grows, lives, and dies, in single blessedness” (78). The rose “distilled,” here, refers to the process of condensing a rose into drops, most likely for a perfume (“distilled, adj. *OED Online*). This complex imagery mediates the sexually ripe, “plucked” female through the ritual of marriage, but also casts the fantasy of a child regulated and removed from the mother’s body through external processes. In this respect, Theseus’s metaphor privileges the promised end of a healthy child, an end that requires proper extraction by a man.

The “single blessedness” Theseus describes is one without the progeny and futurity attached to a healthy child—but, as *Midsummer* depicts, this singularity can occur for married and unmarried women alike despite Theseus’s “promises” to Hermia. As suggested by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*, the promises attached to pregnancy in these literary tropes continually fail to deliver. To conclude this section, however, I put these poets in conversation with Lady Mary Wroth’s *oeuvre* so that the subsequent chapters might be framed by a female voice, one that speaks from the experience of having two “illegitimate” children. The figurative language Wroth conjures in her poetry and prose responds to, and even admonishes, the aforementioned likenesses perpetuated by her contemporaries.

**stopped pregnant bodies: *Tamburlaine* and *The Duchess of Malfi***

This section examines “big-bellied bodies” on the early modern stage, prosthetic pregnancies invested in an evidentiary aesthetic that simultaneously satisfies and repulses male characters. This chapter begins with Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine 1* and *2* and the representation of Zenocrate, a mother whose body is unmarked by pregnancy, to attend to the fantasy of women who remain entire and Virgin-like, even after often child-bearing, and in whom there is perceived no difference from them that are Virgins” (Paster *The Body Embarrassed* 196). Zenocrate, however, is never depicted in the late stages on pregnancy; alternatively, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* depicts its title character as heavily pregnant, greedy, indulgent, and susceptible to induced labor. The language used to describe the Duchess’s state of being, her body and its responses, offers a vision of pregnancy that resists narratives of straight-time and productivity, but also narratives of failure. The Duchess is a character that generates new conditions of possibility for what it means to *be* pregnant. In joining the existing scholarly conversations on this play, I argue that the Duchess’s accelerated pregnancy and early death work against irrational fantasies and truths attached to pregnancy, depicting the bleak realities of pregnancy in early modern England—“fraught with obstacles and dangers from beginning to end”—but also characterizing pregnancy and motherhood as rich and complex states of being (Pollack 40).

**stretched out, layered presents in *The Winter’s Tale***

In conversation with *The Duchess of Malfi*, I read *The Winter’s Tale* as exploring the queer aesthetic of late pregnancy in an alternatively “stretched-out” present (Berlant *Cruel Optimism*). In *The Winter’s Tale,* representations of pregnancy are charged with dark sexuality, an uncharted temporality between the chaste bodily states of virgin and mother. Hermione’s pregnant body is “spread of late / Into a goodly bulk” (2.1.19-20) yet Leontes eroticizes and consequently pollutes this bodily state when he claims that he perceives the“mingling bloods” of her and Polixenes (1.3.117-9).

In this respect, I am particularly interested in the existing scholarship exploring the possibility of “superfetation” in *The Winter’s Tale*, the belief that a woman could be pregnant with two different men’s children at once. In contemporary gynecological texts, this rare double-pregnancy is said to occur when an already pregnant woman is “animated with an earnest desire of copulation…agitated and overheated more than ordinary” (Mauriceau 50). This fantastical kind of pregnancy perpetuates the illusion that men can know and regulate female desire, yet deconstructs the straight-time through which pregnancy is understood. Moreover, superfetation is a theatrical device with classical roots, demonstrating the theatre’s long history of depicting messy, queer pregnancies.

Janet Adelman reads *The Winter’s Tale* as restoring masculine authority “grounded in a benignly generative maternal presence” (56) and, indeed, Camillo’s observation in *The Winter’s Tale* that he “must believe” the falsities of his King demonstrates how authoritative figures *attempt* to force irrational truths on their subjects. When it comes to pregnancy, however, Leontes regurgitates irrational truths about generation, evident when he snatches Mamillius from his mother snarling, “Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you have too much blood in him” (2.1.57-58). In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate how *The Winter’s Tale* problematizes burgeoning attempts to regulate pregnancy through Leontes and the absurdities, extremities, and irrational truths his character conjures.

**bloody issues and lines in *Titus Andronicus***

The landscapes and bodies of *Titus Andronicus* are in conversation with abortion, miscarriage, and other product-less pregnancies, from Lavinia’s bloody spouts to Tamora’s attempt to murder her miscegenated child. Gail Kern Paster argues that childbirth, in general, is absent from dramatic representation because it is “as un-stageable as the other forms of bodily evacuation it so embarrassingly resembles” (163). This chapter, alternatively, reads the blocked and open passageways in *Titus*—passages that conjure the pregnant female body—in conversation with the “admonitions” and regulatory measures taken to thwart the lateral agency pregnant women had over their bodies and the life of their children. In making Tamora’s child and Lavinia’s bleeding body visible, *Titus* stages queer pregnancies that are as visually evident as a big belly.

Over the course of the play, Tamora and Lavinia are characterized by their progenies, their issues, as all “issues” pass, flow out, and egress from what brings them forth (“issue, n.” *OED Online).* Titus and his family believe that, in Tamora’s “barren detested vale,” “nothing breeds” (2.2.93-6). However, the play pivots on attempts to erase this “nothing”—her and Aaron’s illegitimate, miscegenated child. This contradiction demonstrates the limitations of *knowing* pregnancy as a means to an end, as well as the failure to know and categorize the bodies that are, in fact, issued forth at the end of a pregnancy.

The blood that gushes from Lavinia’s body is also deemed “nothing” by Marcus who likens her now-mutilated body to the play’s earlier, barren, flooded landscapes: “a conduit with three issuing spouts” (2.3.36). Lavinia is no longer a “commodity” as her chastity and beauty are marred, and Marcus continually fails to *fit* her body into cultural fantasies of female productivity. He observes that she cannot speak her sorrows “like an oven stopped,” and then tries to liken her to Philomela, who “in a tedious sampler sewed her mind” (39), only to remember that Lavinia has no hands. In the failure of all of these possibilities to accommodate Lavinia, *Titus* draws attention to the violence “bloudy lines” and repetitive speech-acts have in dictating which bodies are even offered the *possibility* of legitimate (re)production and which are not.

**rich, dangerous voyages in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

This chapter puts *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in conversation with *Titus Andronicus*, arguing that it extends *Titus*’s earlier representations of queer pregnancy. The final moments of the play teemwith threatening progenies. After the newlyweds retire, Oberon blesses the house and promises a fairy will accompany each couple to bed to ensure their future children will be “fortunate” (5.1.370). He lingers on this *issue* of fortune, in particular, promising that “the blots of Nature’s hand / Shall not in their issues stand” (5.1.377-390). The fact that Oberon’s marriage—and his character, in general—is childless and destructive already problematizes this “blessing,” but these penultimate visions of prodigious children certainly resist the joy and delight promised by comedy.

In Titania’s first appearance, she describes the landscape as devastated by her strife with Oberon. She describes “hoary-headed frosts” which fall “in the fresh lap of the crimson rose” (2.2.107-8) and “sweet summer buds” set in mockery (130-31). This “progeny of evils,” Titania argues, “comes / From our debate, from our dissension. We are their parents and original” (2.1.115-17). Oberon responds to this shared vision of responsibility with the direction, “Do amend it, then. It lies in you” (1.1.20). Attending to this language—that of normative and failed pregnancy—reframes otherwise marginal bodies in *Midsummer*. In the second scene, for example, Titania’s fairies identify Puck as the “sprite” who,

…frights the maidens of the villagery,

Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,

And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,

And sometimes make the drink to bear no barm,

Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm? (1.2.35-39)

Of this initial anecdote, Paster and Howard read Puck as “a tiny, mischievous, but essentially harmless and asexual trickster of rural dairymaids” (310). The hard work of these housewives, however, is evidenced by their breathlessness, and Puck’s actions render this hard work, this labor, “bootless.” Puck “frights” the young maidens, stopping up the “quern,” and consequently steals and contaminates their milk—it “bears no barm.” To this day, audiences laugh alongside Puck at these “harmless tricks,” tricks that seem less good-natured when read from the perspective of the nameless housewives, maidens, and widows that haunt the play.

I end with *Midsummer*, however, because itoffers a generative vision of pregnancy—a utopia, almost—amidst the poisonous (literally and figuratively) conditions of the present. Titania’s early account of her friendship with “the Indian votress” is a pregnancy narrative shaped by *conversation* and being-with that does not seek to pulverize or dominate (2.1.127-34). Titania narrates “a voyage rich with merchandise” *as well as* a pregnancy that ends in the death of her beloved friend. She reflects that, “she being mortal, of that boy did die” (135) reminding audiences of the hard, painful work pregnancy requires as well as the very real threat of death that awaits women at the “promised end.” I hope, however, to demonstrate that the greatest tragedy in *Midsummer* is Oberon’s violent regulation and policing of those around him. Through these rich, variant visions of pregnancy, I read *Midsummer* as rejecting the happiness attached to promised ends—the revelation of all devices the rude mechanicals attempt to achieve in their performance. Alternatively, the play privileges a queer optic; it calls us to look to our own eyes and how different ways of seeing might, in turn, inform, transform, and yield rich voyages and progenies.

***The Village Bike*: another early modern legacy**

The stage was, and continues to be, a space that explores queer, deviant narratives of pregnancy; thus, in this final section, I read Penelope Skinner’s *The Village Bike* (2011) as a continuation of this tradition. *The Village Bike* depicts the disgust and neglect women past their prime are met with in contemporary culture, and the desperate lengths to which they must go to preserve the minimal power afforded by youth, beauty, and fertility. Skinner’s protagonist, Becky, is a young female in the early stages of her first pregnancy, struggling to navigate her husband’s waning desire alongside her waxing desire. In her husband’s continued refusal to satisfy her sexual needs, Becky frustration evolves into desperate attempts to regain the power she feels slipping away, a power that lies in the fleeting commodity of a fertile, young body.

By the end of the play, the lateral agency afforded to Becky—infidelity and a desperate attempt to abort the child—fails her. She is unable to navigate a culture—*our* culture—in which female sexuality is commoditized yet demonized, in which women who marry and start a family live with the fear of becoming rusty old bikes that will be traded in for newer models. Women who resist the promise of happiness attached to marriage and pregnancy, alternatively, run the risk of becoming “village” bikes, ridden by many but “kept” by none (living and dying in “single” blessedness). In this cultural critique, *The Village Bike* underscores the irrational reading of *early* modern texts as “of their time” and I conjure it to, in turn, underscore the stakes of this project—that we have never been modern, to use Bruno Latour’s phrase, when it comes to *knowing* and regulating pregnancy, especially in how this knowledge is regulated and disseminated. I hope this project helps illuminate the legacy of early modern gynecological thought and the impact that these performances of pregnancy and how they are *read* continue to have on the lived experience of women.

**responses to questions:**

*What questions/ anxieties do you have about completing research for your dissertation? When it comes to researching your topic, is there something in particular you are wondering about?*

Well, to start—this project is in its nascent stages as I have only just completed coursework. I have been working on it on and off for years through different seminar papers, but I still have much research to do. In its earlier stages, this project relied on an impossible archive—narratives of abortion, miscarriage, fertility control, and the feelings that accompanied these “abnormal” experiences pregnancy. My biggest concern is balancing materialist evidence with theoretical perspective(s). The theoretical attention to time and temporality is a recent development, and I would love any direction on must-read texts and theorists in this area. I am still interested in collecting as many accounts of pregnancy as possible, but I am studying drama, predominantly, as a collection of these untold narratives and histories. Of course, the sheer amount of scholarly work on all of these canonical texts is overwhelming, and I feel I have only just started chipping away at what’s been said about these plays. I suppose, practically, I could use advice on selecting and travelling to in-house archives—what preliminary research I can conduct in this respect.

*Do you have any “dream materials” you are having to find/ any resources that would be of huge value to your project?*

Most gynecological manuals, receipt books, conduct books, and other material documents I have been working with discuss pregnancy in generalized terms or in retrospect. I would love to read letters or journals that offer narratives about this experience in *medias res*, uncolored by the end result. So, I suppose any letters or journals describing pregnancy as experienced in the interim, especially those written by women, would be of huge value. I would also love to find accounts told by, or told about, less privileged populations—midwives, wet-nurses, women of color (outside of travelogues). Of course, letters and journals written by Lady Mary Wroth describing her experiences when pregnant, both before and after having her two “illegitimate” children, would add to the project in generative ways.

*What kinds of research have you already completed on your project, and what resources & databases have you tried?*

I get a lot of my medical texts from *EEBO*, as well as ephemeral literature about monstrous births, female conduct, etc. Most of my secondary sources are found through *WorldCat*, *MLA*, and the *World Shakespeare Bibliography.* I have not had the opportunity to visit archives and have been told there are some relevant letters at the Sidney estate, for example, that very few people have access to.

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1. In one of her final mad-speeches, she says to Polonius, “There’s fennel for you, and columbines; there’s rue for you; and here’s some for me; we may call it herb-grace o’Sundays. O! you wear your rue with a difference” (4.5). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Theseus asserts that Hermia must choose the right lover (Demetrius), celibacy, or suffer death. However, he subsequently aborts the embodied effects threatened in this proclamation, overriding Egeus as natural father. The constructed nature—or devices—of these competing cultural fantasies is at work throughout the play [↑](#footnote-ref-2)