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“Oh Lord, Save Us from Such Monsters:” Maternal Impression and Monstrous Births in the Eighteenth-Century Netherlands

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*“Oh Lord, Save Us from Such Monsters:” Maternal Impression and Monstrous Births in the
Eighteenth-Century Netherlands*

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Abstract

This historical survey focuses on the memoirs of Catharina Schrader, a Frisian midwife in the eighteenth century, as a lens into beliefs about maternal impression and monstrous births during the early modern period. The then popular theory of maternal impression, where pregnant women could impact their gestating fetus's appearance or characteristics through their behavior, thoughts, and feelings, was used to explain many instances of monstrous births. Monstrosity, now understood as congenital defects or disabilities, was seen as a result and marker of pregnant women's moral failings. Using examples of monstrous births from Schrader's memoirs, I analyze the threat of maternal impression causing monstrosity as a form of control over women's sexuality, behavior, and desires, focusing on themes of God, sex, motherhood, and paternity. I also link the ideas about maternal impression and monstrous births from Schrader's world in the eighteenth century Netherlands to modern conceptions of pregnancy and childbirth, exposing the similarities and differences between these ideologies of reproduction.

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“Oh Lord, Save Us From Such Monsters:” Maternal Impression and Monstrous Births in the Eighteenth-Century Netherlands

Conceptions about pregnancy and childbirth are built within a constellation of social factors that encompass belief systems about reproduction, paternity, heredity, pathology, and creation. Although pregnancy and childbirth are sometimes seen as a “natural” and therefore unchanging phenomena, understanding pregnancy and childbirth as social constructions requires a nuanced and complex knowledge of the cultural, historical, and geographical conditions that surround these experiences. Theories of maternal impression in the eighteenth-century Netherlands give insight into the ideas surrounding pregnancy and childbirth during the early modern period. Maternal impression, the belief that a mother could impact her fetus’s characteristics or appearance while *in utero*, reciprocally informed and was informed by belief systems about reproduction, women’s bodies and behavior, God, paternity, and monstrosity that can be seen across early modern Europe. Eighteenth-century Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader’s memoirs highlight the confluence of medical and folk knowledge surrounding maternal impression and the concrete ways that maternal impression was used to explain monstrous births during this period. Although now dismissed as a medical impossibility, maternal impression nonetheless had material consequences for the women who were deemed responsible for the “monstrous” state of their fetuses. Similarly, we can see how modern conceptions of pregnancy have extreme power over the daily lives of pregnant women. Maternal impression lends a window into the complicated and changing ideas about pregnancy, childbirth, and monstrosity during the eighteenth century. In studying maternal impression, we can see that the mythology of pregnancy has shifted as cultural, medical, and scientific conceptions have.

From “monstrous births” to congenital defects and fetal alcohol syndrome, knowledge about normal and abnormal pregnancies have transitioned from supernatural to scientific causes. However, a woman’s perceived responsibility to maintain control over her own potentially defective womb has remained constant. Continuing fights for control over women’s bodies and pregnancies demonstrate the high stakes that accompany the realm of reproduction.

Methodology

Often the study of science is deemed to be objective in a way that other disciplines are not. However, it is important to note that the production and dissemination of science are carried out by actors with their own agendas. Science and medicine are not “natural,” inherent, or ideologically pure. Rather, the truth of such knowledge is historically, geographically, and socially contingent. Further, as philosopher Michel Foucault outlines, knowledge and power are mutually constitutive.¹ The knowledge produced through the act of “doing” science or medicine is reliant upon the authoritative and legitimizing power of that individual or institution. Performing such knowledge correctly is necessary for the recreation of authority and power.

Furthermore, as scientific and medical knowledge are imbricated in a network of truth and power, such as the study of history and the creation of a historical archive. What is deemed as both the “official” and “unofficial” history is a discursive product created through the iteration and reiteration of historical and archival texts.² As gender and disability studies scholar Margrit Shildrick describes, “the status of an historical account is never straightforward...what is at stake

¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

² Margrit Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” *Rethinking History* 4, no. 3 (2000): 245.

for a postconventional approach is not, of course, a matter of truth or falsehood, but rather a production of meaning through a process of reiteration that both reinforces the supposed ‘veracity’ of the event, whilst simultaneously destabilizing it.”³ Like scientific “fact,” historical narrative is shaped through a struggle to define current and past reality, often in the pursuit or preservation of power.

Additionally, the text from which I will be working, “*Mother and Child Were Saved:*” *The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader* has been translated from Schrader’s original mix of Frisian, Dutch, and German into English by scholar Hilary Marland 1987. As Marland’s annotations explain, there were often changes made between Schrader’s memoirs and her original administrative notebooks, from which she adapted her memoirs. Schrader’s revisions, sometimes made decades after the births initially occurred, as well as Marland’s translations, produced the document from which I will be working. As a result, my interpretations rest on the work of Schrader and Marland, who are both fallible in their recollection of “reality.” However, their choices in the creation of this text are deliberate and informative to the construction of the historical record that is this book. The document itself serves as an important part of the narrative as much as the actual subject matter. Nonetheless, Schrader’s memoirs as I have accessed them, have been mutated across time and language.

Language

As perceptions of pregnancy have changed, so has the vocabulary used to describe the experiences surrounding it. In the interest of maintaining the historic specificity of female

³ Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 246.

reproductive bodies to the acts of childbearing and childrearing, I will be using “pregnant woman” and at times, “mother.” Although not all pregnant people will become mothers due to many factors, I choose this term in order to align with the primary source literature, largely Catharina Schrader’s memoirs, which refers to the women giving birth as such. Additionally, the words used to describe the unborn are contingent upon social, cultural, and scientific understandings of conception, pregnancy, and the origins of “life.” I will employ “fetus,” which is used medically to denote the gestation period of eight weeks through birth, to speak about this period. I will often also mirror the Schrader’s use of “child” in describing an infant or newborn.

Similarly, the terms used to describe abnormal pregnancies and births have changed considerably since the time of Schrader’s memoirs as both medical knowledge and cultural conceptions have transformed drastically. What are now understood to be congenital defects and disabilities were then deemed monstrous. However, monstrosity is not simply a question of anatomy.⁴ Rather, monstrosity calls into question ideological beliefs about normality and abnormality, which are defined through the naming and recognition of one another.⁵ Even during the early modern period, “monster” was not a static entity or definition. Schrader’s insights into what she deems monstrous are as instructive as the descriptions of the children themselves. Thus, the focus on monstrosity is important for demonstrating the conceptions of abnormal births during this time. I will reflect Schrader’s use of “monster” to maintain its historic precedence and to highlight the ideological stakes attached to such a designation.

⁴ Maria Teresa Monti, “Epigenesis of the Monstrous Form and Preformistic ‘Genetics’ (Lémery-Winslow-Haller),” *Early Science and Medicine* 5, no. 1 (2000): 21.

⁵ Anita Guerrini, “The Creativity of God and the Order of Nature: Anatomizing Monsters in the Early Eighteenth Century,” in *Monsters and Philosophy*, ed. by Charles Wolfe (London: KCL Press, 2005), 158.

The memoirs of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader

Catharina Geertruida Schrader was born in northwest Germany in 1656. While living in Friesland, Schrader was left a widow with six children at age thirty-eight and she turned to midwifery to support her family. As the wife of a surgeon, Schrader had assisted her husband through difficult and complicated deliveries before his death and she was sought out by already established midwives and doctors in the area, even at the beginning her practice.⁶ A devout Calvinist Christian, Schrader believed God had called her to be a midwife. In the introduction to her memoirs, she writes, “it pleased God to choose me for this important work: by force almost through good doctors and the townspeople because I was at first struggling against this, because it was such a weighty affair. Also I thought that it was for me and my friends below my dignity; but finally I had myself won over. This was also The Lord’s wish.”⁷

Throughout her over fifty-year career, Schrader kept notebooks detailing each delivery, including information about the father’s occupation, any complications with the birth, and how much she was paid for her services. At the beginning of her work, Schrader attended an average of 120 births each year.⁸ The number of births she attended decreased as she grew older and she focused largely on more difficult cases that required her wealth of expertise and experience. By the time she attended her last delivery at age eighty-eight in 1745, Schrader had delivered almost 4,000 infants, including sixty-four sets of twins and three sets of triplets, the majority of which

⁶ Jane Beal, “Catharina Schrader: A Midwife of 18th-Century Friesland,” *Midwifery Today* 110 (2014) <https://midwiferytoday.com/mt-articles/catharina-schrader/>.

⁷ Catharina Schrader, “The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader,” in “*Mother and Child Were Saved: The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*,” translated and annotated by Hilary Marland (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 49.

⁸ Beal, “Catharina Schrader: A Midwife of 18th-Century Friesland.”

were recorded in her notebooks.⁹ At age ninety, Catharina Schrader died in Dokkum, Friesland on October 30, 1746.¹⁰

During her long career, Schrader accumulated nine notebooks spanning from January 1693 to February 1745 as a method of financial and medical administration for the thousands of births she attended. Almost every entry contained information about the husband's name and occupation, date and location of the birth, date of parents' marriage, date of the child's baptism if applicable, and the fee charged for her services.¹¹ These records give evidence about the diversity of Schrader's clientele. Schrader attended the deliveries of the wives of laborers, tradesmen, and nobility, charging on a sliding scale based on each family's wealth. Schrader sometimes received large payments ranging from twenty to fifty guilders but a much more common fee was around three guilders. The long list of debts included in her notebooks demonstrates that Schrader did not turn away women who were unable to pay for her services.

When Schrader was reaching the end of her career at age eighty-five, she compiled 122 cases from her notebooks into a collection that would become her memoirs. The memoirs were entitled *Memoryboeck van de Vrouwen* (Memoirs of the Women) and were dedicated to the women whom she had delivered.¹² The memoirs contain mostly the difficult, complicated, and

⁹ Beal, "Catharina Schrader: A Midwife of 18th-Century Friesland."

¹⁰ M.J. van Lieburg, "Catharina Schrader (1656-1746) and Her Notebook," in "*Mother and Child Were Saved: The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*," translated and annotated by Hilary Marland (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 7.

¹¹ Although Schrader often included the name of the woman she had delivered in her notes on more complicated cases, it was still the father's name that was important for her records. The mother and child, as the property of the husband, were assigned to him for payment and potential debts. However, Schrader's records show that the grandparents of the child, often the parents of the mother, also paid her fees on behalf of the family; van Lieburg, "Catharina Schrader (1656-1746) and Her Notebook," 8.

¹² Hilary Marland, "An Introduction to the Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader," in "*Mother and Child Were Saved: The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*," translated and annotated by Hilary Marland (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 46.

abnormal examples from throughout the course of her practice, including sets of twins and triplets, cases of maternal and infant mortality, and those born with congenital defects. Both the notebooks and memoirs were written in Schrader's unique combination of Dutch, German, and Frisian, embellished with individualistic idioms, and mostly lacked punctuation and regular grammar conventions.¹³ As Schrader re-visited her notebooks in 1740 to write her memoirs, details from certain deliveries were sometimes changed or exaggerated. Schrader may have embellished some of the sense of drama in her memoirs, as she hoped that her accomplishments would live on for future generations. However, while Schrader praises God for His providence through her own work, it is also clear that she took great pride in her own skills and their impact on the women whom she served. In the introduction to her memoirs, she writes,

Thereupon in my eighty-forth [*sic*] year of old age in my empty hours I sat and thought over what miracles The Lord had performed through my hands to unfortunate, distressed women in childbirth. So I decided to take up the pen in order to refresh once more my memory, to glorify and make great God Almighty for his great miracles bestowed to me. Not me, but You oh Lord be the honour, the glory till eternity. And also in order to alert my descendants so that they can become educated. And I have pulled together the rare occurrences from my notes.¹⁴

Schrader saw her position as a midwife as God's calling and this is reflected in her attitude toward her work. Schrader serves not only as a physical guardian to guide her patients through childbirth, but she also reveals her desire to act as a moral gatekeeper for the experience of pregnancy. In her notebooks, "Schrader noted down with some precision when a child had been born less than nine months after the marriage. Some children are described as 'bastards,'

¹³ Marland, "An Introduction to the Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader," in *"Mother and Child Were Saved:" The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 46.

¹⁴ Schrader, "The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader," in *"Mother and Child Were Saved:" The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 49.

some mothers as ‘whores.’”¹⁵ Schrader’s work as a midwife was inextricable from her own identity as a Calvinist and the larger social and religious climate of Friesland during the early modern period. Both the spiritual and supernatural are deeply entwined in Schrader’s work and her life. At the beginning of each year, Schrader crafted a new prayer for the coming months. In 1727, her prayer reads, “On Lord, it is again that I was sent for this purpose by way of Your Godly providence to help my fellow men...After all You Lord have decided everything about man, what shall befall him: for better or worse. My eyes are then on You, Oh Lord.”¹⁶ On display is Schrader’s Calvinist belief that God has predestined all of life. Resultantly, Schrader accepts her duty to serve as a midwife and to “help [her] fellow men” but she also sees much of life as out of her own control, that God has already determined the outcomes, including in Schrader’s efforts to deliver women through childbirth.

Maternal Impression

Although the belief in maternal impression in some iterations spans back to ancient cultures, it reached a peak in European popular culture and medical literature alike during the early modern period of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.¹⁷ The theory of maternal imagination, which was supported by medical professionals and laypeople alike, is a product of converging beliefs about pregnancy, reproduction, and largely, monstrosity.¹⁸ Arguments for maternal impression or imagination took several forms but most commonly that a pregnant

¹⁵ van Lieburg, “Catharina Schrader (1656-1746) and Her Notebook,” in “*Mother and Child Were Saved: The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 15.

¹⁶ van Lieburg, “Catharina Schrader (1656-1746) and Her Notebook,” 16.

¹⁷ Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 243.

¹⁸ Shildrick, 256.

woman seeing or imagining violent or traumatic scenes, engaging in improper behavior, or feeling strong emotions could have an impact on her gestating fetus.¹⁹ Well-known examples included pregnant women experiencing strong cravings for strawberries and giving birth to infants with red birthmarks or delivering children without certain body parts after seeing a person with similarly missing limbs on the street.²⁰ Ideas about the actual transmission of images or emotions from the mother to the fetus ranged over time and discipline. However, some prevailing theories were that impressions were communicated through the linkage of the uterus and the placenta or through the sharing of blood between the mother and fetus.²¹

While they are sometimes used synonymously, maternal impression and maternal imagination relate to separate but related phenomena. Maternal impression refers to the impact on the fetus made through the mother's reception of a visual image, such as a traumatic event, but also looking at a painting, sculpture or specific person, especially at the time of conception.²² Maternal imagination encompasses mental fantasies about a person or situation that the mother may or may not have actually seen, either during conception or throughout her pregnancy.²³

Understandings of maternal impression rely on other prevailing theories about the creation of children (and potentially, monsters) during this period. The popular belief about reproduction, especially touted by medical professionals, was preformation. Preformation is the idea that the child was already created by God in its small and perfect form in the body of one

¹⁹ Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 199), 17.

²⁰ Herman W. Roodenburg, "The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland," *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 4 (Summer 1998): 701.

²¹ Ian Stevenson, "A New Look at Maternal Impressions: An Analysis of 50 Published Cases and Reports of Two Recent Examples," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 6, no. 4 (1992): 354.

²² Wendy Doniger and Gregory Spinner, "Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting," *Daedalus* 127, no. 1 (1998): 98.

²³ Doniger and Spinner, "Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting," 98.

parent, even before the moment of conception.²⁴ One theory of reproduction deemed that the child, including its features and heredity, was housed in the male sperm until it was deposited into the womb where it would gestate.²⁵ Thus, the mother was simply a vessel for the fetus and did not contribute any material that would define heredity, relation, or lineage.²⁶ As such, the mother comes to house embryo but it belongs to the father in terms of physical matter.

The science and medicine both produced and practiced during this time were implicated by the pursuit of power, including negotiations between physicians, families, communities, pregnant women themselves, and by extension, God and His chaotic universe. The world of early modern Europe and the Netherlands was a “climate of constant fear” produced by the vast unknowability and irrationality of people’s daily lives.²⁷ The supernatural and the spiritual were often used to understand the everyday phenomena that seemed to have no other explanation, including natural disasters, changes in the economy, death, disease, and injury. Beliefs such as maternal impression were a way to maintain control and find solace in the face of powerlessness. In the case of maternal impression, this control came to rest in the bodies of women.

During this period, there was no definitive way to prove paternity, aside from keeping one’s wife in complete seclusion from other men, but, as children were considered the property of their father or other male kin, lineage had far-reaching consequences over inheritance, family structure, and similar methods for transferring wealth and power. In her memoirs, Schrader writes about “family strife and anxieties concerning the loss of inheritance following the birth of

²⁴ Julia Epstein, “The Pregnant Imagination, Fetal Rights, and Women’s Bodies: A Historical Inquiry,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 7, no. 1 (1995): 153.

²⁵ Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 251.

²⁶ Shildrick, 256.

²⁷ Roodenburg, “The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland,” 702.

child.”²⁸ As these examples demonstrate, an event as important as reproduction being relegated to the unreliable vessel of the female body was difficult for husbands, fathers, and doctors alike to reckon with.²⁹ Fears of maternal impression reflected a world order in which God, and then men, were placed at the top. Women’s ability to defy that world order by potentially corrupting God’s perfect creatures and their husband’s sons was an anxiety-producing prospect.³⁰ Control over the pregnant female body was important to the maintenance of existing power, with birthing capable children and especially male heirs as a paramount duty. For pregnant women themselves, reassurances about the healthiest pregnancy possible were useful at a time when the chances of dying in childbirth were between six and seven percent over a woman’s lifetime.³¹ As pregnancy was an inherently frightening and potentially pathological event, guarding against the perils of maternal impression became a way through which doctors, husbands, midwives, and women themselves could exercise control during unpredictable course of pregnancy.³²

Analysis

Although stories and theories about maternal impression took many different forms, monstrosity was an intrinsic component to both medical and folk knowledge on the subject during the early modern period. In previous centuries, monstrous births were popularly believed

²⁸ In case three of her memoirs, Schrader writes that the pregnant woman’s “dead husband’s brothers had taken everything away from her and had said that she would not give birth; therefore the life of this child was of great consequence” but following the birth of a daughter, “the woman got all her belongings back;” van Lieburg, “Catharina Schrader (1656-1746) and Her Notebook,” in *“Mother and Child Were Saved:” The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 13.

²⁹ Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 248.

³⁰ Shildrick, 253.

³¹ Sharon Howard, “Imagining the Pain and Peril of Seventeenth-century Childbirth: Travail and Deliverance in the Making of an Early Modern World,” *Social History of Medicine* 16, no. 3 (2003): 370.

³² Roodenburg, “The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland,” 702.

to be portents from God, symbols of coming danger such as natural disasters, wars, and death.³³ Although these ideas had dwindled by the end of the seventeenth century in much of Europe, monsters still remained a corruption of the perfect creation of God under the preformationist view. If God produced children as they were to be born, then monstrous births introduced a rift into the understanding of the natural world order. Through maternal impression monstrosity was an affront to both nature and God, pinned on women's minds and bodies as the sources of such evil. However, the relation between monstrosity and maternal impression was often stretched, revealing the different ways monstrosity was understood during the early modern period. Case 2771 in Schrader's memoirs challenges the connections of maternal impression:

1733 on 10 November with Maryken, wife of the servant to the orphanage. A son. But had a face like an ape. At the back of the neck an opening as big as a hand. Its genitals were also not as they should be. She [the mother] had seen apes dancing. It did not live long. Oh Lord, save us from such monsters.³⁴

Monstrosity took several forms during the early modern period, as two different instances are revealed in this case from Schrader's memoirs. In this example, the ape-like face of the child is the only tie to the perceived source of the monstrosity. This monstrosity is clear, that human parents have created a child that resembles an ape. The inhumanity and perhaps the grotesque quality of a monkey-faced infant label Maryken's son a freak of nature, and thus, a monster. However, the other sources of monstrosity, the opening of the neck and the abnormal genitals are noted as irregular but remain unexplained through this instance of maternal impression.

³³ Katharine Park and Lorraine J. Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present* 92 (1981): 23.

³⁴ Schrader, "The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader," in "Mother and Child Were Saved:" *The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 75.

Nonetheless, this occurrence of monstrosity beyond the child's ape-like face demonstrates other defining factors of monstrosity: inability to survive, inability to be productive, and inability to procreate. The most human duties were to live, work, and continue one's line. Thus, the incapacity to do so was in and of itself, a type of monstrosity. Beyond just unnatural or abnormal appearance, monstrous births were labeled such when the child was believed to be unable to perform the expected duties of humanity. Monstrosity is a common theme through maternal impression narratives. As science is often constructed in the desire to make the unknowable known, many medical theories rest on existing knowledge, which, during the eighteenth century Netherlands, was founded heavily on notions of the supernatural and divine. In the twenty-first century, science and religion are often seen as antithetical to each other. However, in the early modern era, they were intricately intertwined. Monstrosity was negotiated alongside understandings of God, producing multiple and sometimes differing theories about His involvement in the production of monsters. While such suppositions were not always clearly delineated, women's culpability for monstrosity remained a unifying thread.

Schrader's memoirs provide a convergence of medical and folk knowledge surrounding control over female bodies and their dangerously impressionable minds. Case 1672 in Schrader's memoirs gives an example of maternal impression based on a pig slaughter as an explanation for an infant born with internal organs outside of his body:

1710 on 5 February with Jan Gorrtzacke's daughter, Hinke, whose husband, Wattse was a corn merchant, who was visiting her mother. And delivered her quickly of a son. Lived but half an hour. But, The Lord works mysteriously, I [was] terrified. Found that between the stomach and the belly [there] was an opening as big as a gold guilder, all round it grew a horny border. Out of this hung the intestines with the bowels. Had grown outside the body. One saw there the heart, liver, lungs clear and sharp, without decay. One could touch wholly

under the breast. It was worthy to be seen by an artist but she did not want it to be shown. I inquired [of] the woman if she had also had a fright or mishap. She declared that she was unaware of anything, but the [when] it had been the killing time they had slaughtered a pig. They had hung it on the meat hook, and the butcher had cut out the intestines and the bowels.³⁵

This explanation by Schrader reveals several elements about the presumed process of maternal impression during this time. Schrader writes, “The Lord works mysteriously, I [was] terrified.” As a devout Calvinist, Schrader, like many of her peers, must reckon with the introduction of a monstrous child into her understanding of an otherwise almighty and perfect God. Monstrous births “literally violate bodily boundaries, a rupture of the natural order that...becomes a symbol for both social discord and disrupted notions of selfhood and identity.”³⁶ Maternal impression provided a way to reconcile this image of God and creation with the monstrous births that Schrader attended throughout the course of her career, in effect, placing “God at a distance from deviancy.”³⁷ Maternal impression allowed for instances of monstrosity in the existing world order, without challenging pre-established ideas of preformation.³⁸

In taking the creation of the monstrous away from God, however, the responsibility then fell on pregnant women as the cause. Schrader’s question of the woman, Hinke, whether “she had also had a fright or mishap,” demonstrates the desire to understand mothers and maternal impression as the creators of monstrosity. Although Hinke, in this case, denies such an event, the slaughter of the pig becomes the accepted explanation nonetheless. The links between the

³⁵ Schrader, “The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader,” in “*Mother and Child Were Saved: The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*,” 63.

³⁶ Ross Hagen, “A warning to England: Monstrous births, teratology and feminine power in Elizabethan broadside ballads,” *Horror Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 28.

³⁷ Monti, “Epigenesis of the Monstrous Form and Preformistic ‘Genetics’ (Lémery-Winslow-Haller),” 7.

³⁸ Guerrini, “The Creativity of God and the Order of Nature: Anatomizing Monsters in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 157.

supposed “fright or mishap” and the monstrous presentation of the infant were often tenuous, but the willingness to still believe such incidents as examples of maternal impression highlights the necessity of maternal impression to the existing worldview of Schrader and others. The preformationist view of the child’s small and flawless state in the womb required an answer to the question of monstrosity. Without maternal impression as an explanation for monstrous births, knowledge about pregnancy, reproduction, and creation would disrupt other firmly-held notions about the world. Within God’s perfect production of nature, it was women’s minds and bodies that “could still be said to defy the laws of nature and be associated with error and disorder.”³⁹

In addition to this fraught example of maternal impression, Schrader’s comment that the child “was worthy to be seen by an artist” but the mother “did not want it to be shown” deserves further exploration. It was fairly common practice during this time in the Netherlands that infants deemed “monstrous” were shown to artists, physicians, or anatomists, often being studied and potentially dissected.⁴⁰ Although it is impossible to know for sure the mother’s motivations in not showing her child to an artist or anatomist, one possible reason may be the shame brought on by a monstrous birth. As women were deemed responsible for monstrous births, such cases could be seen as a failure to properly perform the duties of womanhood and motherhood. Alternatively, this woman may have wanted to protect her infant from the spectacle surrounding monstrosity that existed during this time. Those deemed monstrous, either living or dead, were used for purposes of research, but also as sources of entertainment and sometimes as symbols of the

³⁹ Monti, “Epigenesis of the Monstrous Form and Preformistic ‘Genetics’ (Lémery-Winslow-Haller),” 8.

⁴⁰ Roodenburg, “The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland,” 706.

consequences of maternal impression, again reinforcing the mother's shame over her corruption of God's perfect specimen.

Further, this example from Schrader's memoirs draws specific parallels between the killing of the pig enacted by the butcher and the mother's womb as a place of potential destruction.⁴¹ During a period in which women had little authority over their own lives, their ability to manipulate their reproductive process and products made them not only powerful but dangerous. Women's capacity to undermine God's will through maternal impression was inherently chaotic.⁴² The child's birth also becomes a moment of death, as he "lived but half an hour." Under the doctrine of preformation and the theory of maternal impression, the child is only corrupted within the womb of the mother, making her body the site of violence.⁴³ Scholar Lee Y. Olsen describes this phenomenon as the "monstrous mother," wherein women are monsters in and of themselves through their ability to produce that which is monstrous. As monstrous mothers, the power and peril of women's reproduction is that "they do not simply *destroy*, but rather destructively *create* by producing deformity."⁴⁴ According to Olsen, the monstrous mother is informed by the maternal imagination as "supernaturally powerful, feminine in the worst early modern sense of the word, whorish, lascivious, anti-maternal, maternal, masochistic, and voracious."⁴⁵ The monstrosity of the monstrous mother is not only in her ability

⁴¹ Shildrick, "Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions," 254.

⁴² Shildrick, 253.

⁴³ Epstein, "The Pregnant Imagination, Fetal Rights, and Women's Bodies: A Historical Inquiry," 156.

⁴⁴ Lee Y Olsen, "Imagination and Deformation: Monstrous Maternal Perversions of Natural Reproduction in Early Modern England" (doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, 2011), 16.

⁴⁵ Olsen, "Imagination and Deformation: Monstrous Maternal Perversions of Natural Reproduction in Early Modern England," 15.

to create monsters but in her display of all that is considered evil in womanhood and the transference of such transgressions onto the fetal form.

As the figure of the “monstrous mother” shows, the womb was thought to be a potentially, and perhaps inherently, dangerous place for the fetus. Because of this designation, control over women’s bodies was especially important. Falling prey to the effects of maternal imagination or maternal impression was seen as a part of women’s nature, as the weaker, more impressionable sex. Thus, steps were taken to safeguard women against instances of maternal impression or imagination. Policing of pregnant women’s behavior, thoughts, and feelings took several shapes. In some areas, there were restrictions to keep people with physical deformities off of the streets so pregnant women would not see them.⁴⁶ Pregnancy manuals during the time, including those that Schrader would have read, such as Hendrik van Deventer’s *New Improvements in the Art of Midwifery* (“Manuale Operatien zijnde een Nieuw Light voor Vroed-meesters en Vroed-vrouwen,” 1701) and Jacobus Ruffen’s *The book of the midwife* (“Boeck van de vroet-wijfs,” 1591) cautioned women against seeing or thinking about violent images.⁴⁷ Other folk methods were used to communicate such messages not only to pregnant women themselves but to the larger community that helped restrict pregnant women’s behavior through a type of community policing. The broadside ballads that were distributed during the early modern period would sometimes describe local monstrous births, often detailing the circumstances of the birth, including the mother’s sins, as evidence for the deformities.⁴⁸ Early

⁴⁶ Roodenburg, “The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland,” 711.

⁴⁷ Van Lieburg, “Catharina Schrader (1656-1746) and Her Notebook,” in “*Mother and Child Were Saved: The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*,” 18.

⁴⁸ Hagen, “A warning to England: Monstrous births, teratology and feminine power in Elizabethan broadside ballads,” 3.

modern wonder books also provided depictions of monstrous births to laypeople, which served to “simultaneously demonstrate the need to control monstrous mothers and testify to their overwhelming power.”⁴⁹

Maternal impression was built on pre-existing ideas about the natural weakness, impressionability, and lasciviousness of the female body.⁵⁰ It was a popular belief that the body was a malleable vehicle in which to house the soul.⁵¹ As the weaker and more foolish sex, women were especially vulnerable to outside influences. Additionally, the fragile state of pregnant women and their physical connection to their gestating fetus made the fetus a natural receptor for the impressions of their mother. Fear of women’s deviant sexuality ran through much of the knowledge surrounding maternal impression. As a type of warning to other pregnant women and the community at large, the monstrous child was used to represent the pitfalls of monstrous living, especially women’s natural susceptibility for sin.⁵² Monstrous births came to be seen especially as retribution for engaging in the “pleasures of the flesh.” Having sex during menstruation, committing “unnatural” sex acts, engaging in adultery or pre-marital sex, and even enjoying sex were deemed to be potential causes of monstrous births.⁵³ As a result, monstrous births came to be seen as the symbol writ large of the mother’s hidden and unspeakable desires and passions.⁵⁴ Case 2075 recounted in Schrader’s memoir demonstrates the believed consequences of a woman’s imagination.

⁴⁹ Olsen, “Imagination and Deformation: Monstrous Maternal Perversions of Natural Reproduction in Early Modern England,” 19.

⁵⁰ Shildrick, “Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions,” 248.

⁵¹ Roodenburg, “The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland,” 711.

⁵² Hagen, “A warning to England: Monstrous births, teratology and feminine power in Elizabethan broadside ballads,” 22.

⁵³ Roodenburg, “The Maternal Imagination. The Fears of Pregnant Women in Seventeenth-Century Holland,” 707.

⁵⁴ Marie-Hélène Huet, “Living Images: Monstrosity and Representation,” *Representations*, no. 4 (1983): 73.

1723 on 21 May was fetched to Lisbit, the wife of Eelke Henderickx, who was a currier. The woman had a fairly easy labour, but, oh horror, the child had a fantastic growth on his head. And full curls all grown like meat. I asked her if she had ever mused about such things. She said, that she didn't know, but that she had always had a liking for children with curls like this on their forehead beneath a hat. If she had [a] child, she would want that. But the child only lived an hour luckily for her. How careful the pregnant woman must be to conduct herself well in all she says and thinks.⁵⁵

This example of maternal imagination differs from many others which often center on thoughts that are violent, lustful, or otherwise negative. Nonetheless, the child born with “full curls all grown like meat” is a demonstration of the perils of vanity. Although Lisbit’s thoughts may not have been monstrous in nature, she still produced a type of monster through her improper behavior. The mother’s confession to fantasies about a child with curly hair becomes an admission of guilt. Vanity, as a particularly feminine sin, is a temptation that Lisbit should have resisted during the period of pregnancy, if not for reasons of her own piety, then as a vessel to her fetus. Ironically, it is women’s femininity that makes them imperfect hosts to God’s creations and their husband’s sons. Schrader’s admonishment about “how careful the pregnant woman must be to conduct herself well in all she says and thinks” show the impossibility that maternal impression and imagination presented for pregnant women during this time. Despite real or performed efforts to act as the perfect host to their fetus, mothers were almost always held culpable. The especially impressionable state of pregnancy in combination with the feminine proclivity for sin made the womb a natural site of corruption. Still, however inevitable punishment in the form of monstrosity seemed, it was nonetheless the pregnant woman’s moral

⁵⁵ Schrader, “The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader,” in *“Mother and Child Were Saved:” The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 67.

and maternal responsibility to guard against such evil. The existence of non-monstrous births gave evidence to other women's successful pregnancies, while also reifying the unnaturalness and abnormality of monstrous births.

If vanity was the sin, then monstrosity and the child's subsequent death was the punishment of the mother for her inability to conform to the expected demands of pregnancy. When Schrader comments that the "child only lived an hour luckily for her," it is hard to discern for certain if her assertion that the child's death should come as a relief to the mother could stem from the fear of monstrosity, the perceived burden of abnormality, or the child as a symbol of the mother's guilt.⁵⁶ As children and other family members were considered most valuable in their ability to work, a child born with a severe deformity would create a burden unto a family, like that of a currier, which may already be struggling to feed all its members.⁵⁷ Additionally, according to the wisdom of the day, the child was not really considered a person until a viable birth. As it were, Schrader may have considered the loss of this child as one of a monster, rather than that of a person, and thus, finds his passing as a blessing.⁵⁸ On the contrary, Schrader may also have been demonstrating her belief in a theory about monstrous births during this time: that their early death was a matter of divine intervention.⁵⁹ Although women were the creators of such monsters, God showed His providence through the inability of the monstrous child to survive very long. God making the child unable to cope with the inhospitable world of the eighteenth century was seen as a blessing to the child and its family. Additionally, Schrader may

⁵⁶ Epstein, "The Pregnant Imagination, Fetal Rights, and Women's Bodies: A Historical Inquiry," 150.

⁵⁷ A currier was responsible for the process of tanning and finishing leather that would be used for items such as saddles or footwear.

⁵⁸ Epstein, "The Pregnant Imagination, Fetal Rights, and Women's Bodies: A Historical Inquiry," 15.

⁵⁹ Monti, "Epigenesis of the Monstrous Form and Preformistic 'Genetics' (Lémery-Winslow-Haller)," 9.

have considered it a relief for the mother that she would not have to raise the child that bore the mark of her failure and guilt. The child's quick death ensures that the mother's sin of vanity would not be made public beyond the news of her monstrous birth. However, it is hard to know how the mother herself had felt at the loss of her child, whether she had seen her son as a monster and whether she felt "lucky" at his death.

Reflecting the fears of the evil of femininity combined with the uniquely female powers of reproduction, maternal impression was also seen as a potential device of deceit.⁶⁰ While many instances of maternal impression are presented as unexpected accidents, other beliefs also circulated about women's ability to produce children who did not look like their true fathers. For example, a woman's child would look like her husband, although the child might truly be her lover's, allowing infidelity to remain undetected.⁶¹ The fear of the monstrous was also a fear of adultery, in which no woman was above suspicion.⁶² In addition to the fears of adultery, all types of deviant sexuality were assumed to have the potential to produce monstrosity, as the moral code blended with accepted scientific and medical knowledge during this time. As maternal impression could be a safeguard under which to conduct an affair, it could also mark a child with the reflection of his mother's deviance, including conception and birth outside of wedlock. In case 1609, Schrader recounts the perils of pre-marital sex:

1709 fetched on 9 June to a dishonoured sweetheart called Brörrke, who was the daughter of the porter of The Three Pipes, Frerick. Delivered it with the feet. Very heavy. The water was already gone days before. It was very misformed in [its] hands and feet with short arms, first fat, then very thin. The feet also the same. Two fingers. A strange creature. It died in three weeks. The

⁶⁰ Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 199), 3.

⁶¹ Doniger and Spinner, "Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting," 117.

⁶² Shildrick, "Maternal Imagination: Reconceiving First Impressions," 250.

Lord punished her because she had sworn to herself that she should not get with child, that she knew better. It [the child] was from a doctor where she lived.⁶³

Although Schrader is not explicit in her description, it is evident that the “dishonoured sweetheart” has conceived her child out of wedlock. For Brörrke, her punishment by way of a monstrous child is twofold, for the sins of both lust and pride. The birth of a child out of wedlock was an affront to both God and the sanctity of marriage, as both sex and reproduction were expected to occur only within the marital bed. However, Schrader scolds Brörrke not only for this sin of fornication but also for her hubris in believing that she “should not get with child.” While this pride is already egregious, Schrader seems to find Brörrke’s insistence that she “knew better” than God especially offensive. As several of Schrader’s cases have shown, pregnancy was the site where women’s high susceptibility for “sins of the flesh” came to be known and recognized. Beyond just ideas of monstrosity reflecting a mother’s inner desire, pregnancy’s inherent link to sex has incriminated women for time immemorial, but especially in highly religious or morally stringent communities. In a manner both biblical and biological, women are forced to bear the evidence of sex where men do not. And although women are seen as prone to sin through the weakness of their constitutions, they are also held as the moral gatekeepers to sex, making men exempt from responsibility for their own rampant libidinal urges. Brörrke’s crime then is not only that she had sex, but she made that act known. Further, her desire to hide her engagement in sex was an affront to God’s omnipotence and power. Monstrosity is the price she must pay for the double jeopardy of lust and pride.

⁶³ According to Marland’s annotation of this case, Schrader’s notebook denotes that this child was a boy, although she does not specify in her memoirs; Schrader, “The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader,” in *“Mother and Child Were Saved:” The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 62.

While evidence of women's transgressions could physically manifest in the form of pregnancy, it seemed that men's punishment in the realm of reproduction was the inability to truly know paternity. Anxieties over maternal impression and the subsequent efforts to control women's behavior and environment reflect men's desire to control the uncontrollable. As monstrous births threatened current understandings about God's role in formation, conceptions of paternity were also challenged under the theory of maternal impression. During this period, one theory was that all of the child's hereditary material was understood to belong to the father, while the mother served only as a vessel for gestating the fetus, rather than also contributing of herself. As such, resemblance was an important factor for establishing paternity.⁶⁴ Although it was impossible to prove true fatherhood, matching physical features or characteristics were understood to be a good measure of paternity.⁶⁵ When a child resembled her mother, maternal impression was sometimes used as an explanation. Both medical and folk knowledge touted that women's vanity and time spent looking in the mirror could imprint their own image onto their fetuses.⁶⁶ Although knowledge about the passage of genetic material between parent and child was a distant future discovery, resemblance played an important material and ideological role in parentage, including the negotiation of maternal impression and monstrosity. Further, non-resemblance was mysterious, frightening, and powerful, wherein culpability mostly came to rest on the shoulders of the mother. Case 1533 in Schrader's memoirs presents a case in which the child does not resemble his father:

⁶⁴ Doniger and Spinner, "Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting," 116.

⁶⁵ Doniger and Spinner, 117.

⁶⁶ Epstein, "The Pregnant Imagination, Fetal Rights, and Women's Bodies: A Historical Inquiry," 153.

1708 on 15 November fetched to Ostrum to Tetzke, wife of Chlas Eles, labourer. Found that the child came with its back before the birth canal. Was impossible to turn it, unless I put her bending forward with the head down. With great difficulty got the feet, brought them to the birth canal, put her again in her proper position. Got it with very great labour and difficulty, but then the birth canal closed around its head, which was malformed, And I had terrible work with it. But when it was born it was a big creature and dead. It was a pig's head, no nose, no bones behind. Very miserable, the hand three fingers with one nail. The feet monstrous, to [the] great horror of us all. Oh Lord, save us from such cases. The people accused the women of having worked so much around a young pig or farrow when she was pregnant, that the creature must [have] always been with her, sitting with her at the table or on her lap. People may certainly take warning from this case, and not have such foolish ways.⁶⁷

In this case, monstrosity works on two levels. The first type of monstrosity is that which is unable to sustain itself. Schrader's description of the child's lack of bones and nose, and his abnormally shaped hands and feet display the child's inability to survive at birth. However, this type of monstrosity is not the major point of interest for either Schrader or the people to whom she talked about the birth. Rather, the monstrosity expressed through the "pig's head" is the more important factor and the one that reflects the instance of maternal impression. Aristotle's definition of monstrosity is "that which does not resemble its parents," which, given the conceptions of heredity, can be understood as that which does not resemble its father.⁶⁸ Without resemblance to mark the child to his father, there is no way to prove the child is his at all.⁶⁹ Rather, the child becomes a product of his mother's womb and through the process of maternal impression, the pig that he resembles. If the child is a physical manifestation of his mother's desires then the child with the pig's head is a sign of the mother's symbolic infidelity. Through

⁶⁷ Schrader, "The Memoirs of Vrouw Schrader," in *"Mother and Child Were Saved:" The memoirs (1693-1740) of the Frisian midwife Catharina Schrader*, 61.

⁶⁸ Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

⁶⁹ Doniger and Spinner, "Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting," 99.

her care for the young pig, in which the pig would sit “with her at the table or on her lap,” the father’s position as the begetter of the child is usurped. The birth of a non-resembling infant, such as the one Schrader describes, served as a “public reminder that, short of relying on visible resemblance, paternity could never be proven.”⁷⁰ Through maternal impression, women are portrayed as “bodysnatchers,” with the ability to replace a true (paternally sound) child with a monster.⁷¹ Women’s ability to deny the father’s contribution to the child, either unknowingly or purposefully, is a motivating factor for limiting the effects of maternal impression.

Additionally, as Schrader’s example demonstrates, pregnancy was a community event. Women’s behavior during pregnancy was monitored not only by husbands and doctors but by their neighbors as well. Schrader’s conversation with the people of the village about the mother’s behavior that might lead to monstrosity reveals that both pregnancy and childbirth were community concerns. Teztke’s association with the young pig during the supposedly fragile period of pregnancy had perhaps been a concern even before the moment of birth. Schrader’s wording of “accused” demonstrates the belief that the mother had been willful in her behavior that led to the monstrosity of the child. Schrader’s interviewees found Teztke guilty of the crime of creating a monster. The monster produced through her proximity to the pig was an affront to the father, the community, God, and Schrader herself. As Schrader writes, the child’s feet produced “great horror” and she asks that the Lord “save us from such cases.” The monstrosity then was not simply retribution on the mother for her inability to conduct herself properly through pregnancy, it was also a punishment upon those who had to bear witness to the

⁷⁰ Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, 34.

⁷¹ Doniger and Spinner, “Misconceptions: Female Imaginations and Male Fantasies in Parental Imprinting,” 117.

monstrosity. Monstrosity was the fear of an entire community but singular women were held as the culprits.

Pregnancy in the Twenty-First Century

Although ideas about womanhood have changed drastically since the eighteenth century, pregnancy is one realm in which the similarities across time are thrown into sharp relief. Drawing out the complexities of maternal imagination and monstrous births in the early modern era highlights the belief systems surrounding issues of reproduction. Maternal impression was one answer to the question of monstrous births that threatened to upend existing notions about God, womanhood, and pregnancy. However, many questions remain to this day about the ethics of reproduction, including, to what extent does a mother *owe* her child a perfectly hospitable womb?⁷² To what extent should she be punished for not providing it? What control should people have over their own reproductive products? As in the eighteenth century, the answers provided to such questions are often deemed as scientific or medical truths. Yet, such ideas about reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth are constructed within belief systems that include moral and material stakes.

Just as in the eighteenth century, the current view of embryos and fetuses is not only a medical story but also a social and cultural one, still deeply imbued with religious and moral ideals. The attribution of fetal individuality and personhood is a symptom of what *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos* author Lynn M. Morgan calls the “embryological worldview,” which recognizes the embryo or fetus as an individual separate from the pregnant

⁷² Epstein, “The Pregnant Imagination, Fetal Rights, and Women’s Bodies: A Historical Inquiry,” 159.

woman who is carrying it.⁷³ Only under the embryological worldview, which has emerged as an ideology over the past century, has the fetus as both a symbol and a biological event come to represent the beginnings of individual life.⁷⁴ Individual life is accompanied by the understanding of a fetus as an independent agent. Within the embryological worldview, the fetus is given subjectivity outside of its relationship to its mother, although she sustains it. Pregnancy, as it is now recognized and experienced, is a product of the medical and cultural shifts of the past century. German medical historian and gender studies scholar Barbara Duden asserts that even the corporeal experience of pregnancy and how women *feel* it within their bodies is historically specific.⁷⁵ Privileging medical authority erases the epistemological value of women's lived knowledge. The felt experience of quickening (when the fetus is first felt moving within the womb) is replaced with the seen experience of ultrasound technology in establishing the presence of a fetus.⁷⁶ Duden describes that within the current view of pregnancy, "the public image of the fetus shapes the emotional and bodily perception of the pregnant women" in a manner not possible in the eighteenth century.⁷⁷ As the fetus is posited as an independent subject, the mother's role becomes one of a host. However, women's wombs do not simply house fetuses. Instead, the fetus is a literal part of its mother's body, definitionally dependent on her for the majority of the gestational period.

Within the twenty-first century, it is difficult to denaturalize ideas about pregnancy that seem to be inevitable parts of the human origin story. In the age of the two-week pregnancy test,

⁷³ Lynn M. Morgan, *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 11.

⁷⁴ Morgan, 4.

⁷⁵ Duden, *Disembodying Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 51.

⁷⁶ Duden, 80.

⁷⁷ Duden, 52.

fetal subjectivity is established in a manner that would be unthinkable to the inhabitants of the early modern world. Further, lowered rates of miscarriages and infant mortality, as well as technology such as ultrasounds give parents a heightened stake in the fate of their fetuses at an unprecedented stage in gestation. While pregnancy loss, potential monstrosity or abnormality, and infant and maternal mortality were often understood as an intrinsic part of the frightening and unpredictable pregnancy and childbirth process in the eighteenth-century Netherlands, these components are now subsumed in the highly medicalized reality of modern reproduction.

However, the fact remains that pregnancy loss, disability, injury, and mortality are still prevalent in twenty-first century pregnancies and births. Meanwhile, the community support, as well as community control, of the early modern era have been replaced by outside legal and political mechanisms for deciding the fate of pregnant women and their fetuses. As women's bodies and their reproductive products continue to be the subject of public opinion and jurisdiction, the stories of individual women and families who have faced the myriad of complications that accompany pregnancy are silenced.

In both the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, the ideological and temporal ramifications for the blame and responsibility of birth outcomes are high. These social, political, and legal consequences are often levied against individual pregnant women and at times, their families. However, birth outcomes do not belong solely to the realm of personal responsibility. Instead, experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are built within a web of systems, where so-called birth successes are influenced by markers of race, class, and geography. Lack of access to healthcare, food, water, or shelter, bias against black women and other women of color, fat women, poor women, immigrant women and queer people in the medical establishment, and

unequal quality of medical institutions in impoverished or rural areas are some of the many reasons that certain women may experience more difficult pregnancies. However, such large structural inequalities which create potentially harmful environments for both the pregnant woman and her fetus are largely ignored. Health initiatives focus specifically on the embryo rather than broader health environment of its mother, family, and community. For rhetorical and political purposes, the womb is still sometimes painted as the most dangerous place for a fetus, especially by anti-abortion forces. Additionally, anxieties over fetal alcohol syndrome and maternal drug use construct the womb as a potential site of corruption, legislating pregnant women's behavior on behalf of their fetus.

As a consequence of the embryological worldview, embryos are afforded personhood that makes them eligible for legal and medical rights that in fact may not even be given to the women who are carrying them. Further, although fetuses are granted such rights, the responsibility for their welfare largely falls solely on the women gestating them. Women unable to care for their fetuses to the standard dictated by the embryological worldview are punished through political, social, and criminal mechanisms. A woman is kept in servitude of her fetus for the length of gestation, while continued medical monitoring alienates her from her own body and a more personal relationship to the pregnancy.⁷⁸ Outside mechanisms abound to control the pregnant woman's body and fetus while also assigning her sole responsibility for the fetus's welfare, and thus, sole responsibility for associated problems. The shame and stigma of abnormal births remain, often leveraged almost entirely against singular women. What was once seen as women's moral and religious duty to create a healthy womb for their fetuses, is now legislated

⁷⁸ Duden, *Disembodying Women*, 4.

and policed, often on the grounds of the power and truth of medical authority. Across time and space, women are forced to carry the burden of abnormal births, marking them with the failure to properly perform womanhood, pregnancy, and motherhood.

Conclusion

Catharina Schrader's memoirs make up a unique document. It provides a lens into the realm where medical knowledge met folk beliefs about pregnancy during the early modern era in the Netherlands. Schrader demonstrates that overarching theories about the origins of life and its reproduction were not housed simply in institutions of science and medicine, rather, they were inscribed on the physical bodies of pregnant women. Converging beliefs about God, preformation, women's moral impressionability, monstrosity and bodily difference, and paternity came to rest in the fight over control of women's wombs. Fear and desire of women's reproductive capabilities dictated and were dictated by the medical knowledge about maternal impression and monstrous births.

While her fifty-year career is only a small window into the historical arc of pregnancy and childbirth, Schrader's memoirs provide insight about the quotidian material consequences Dutch women faced as a result of monstrous births. Schrader provides a stopping point in a winding and nonlinear continuum of reproductive control, forcing her readers to reflect on modern pregnancy practices. It is difficult to emphasize the importance that reproduction holds in the story of human history. If what is past is prologue, historical negotiations over women's bodily autonomy such as those elaborated by Schrader remain salient and relevant sites of inquiry for modern scholars. Although the actors, theories, and methods have changed, the essential struggle over women's reproductive capabilities has not. The unpredictability of

pregnancy, even in a highly medicalized world, remains a source of anxiety. Even more so, the perceived unpredictability of women in determining the fate of their own reproductive products, which are increasingly categorized as public purview, is seen as downright dangerous. In the eighteenth century and twenty-first century alike, the stakes of reproduction are incredibly high. Medical, scientific, legal, political, social, and cultural agendas are all embroiled in the fight for reproductive control. Because, whether the institutions and individuals implicated in this struggle acknowledge it or not, the ability to create the next generation is the ability to define a future reality.

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