

Capturing the Wandering Womb

Childbirth in Medieval Art

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Introduction

Though birth is a rite of passage common to every living being, little of its ritual history has been preserved. In the Middle Ages, the event of childbirth was a process witnessed and experienced almost exclusively by women, as the birthing chamber was the only secular space from which men were systematically absent. Giving birth, therefore, was the essential difference between men and women not only in the biological realm, but also in the cultural realm.

The birthing ritual was also a practice rife with tensions from conflicting powers. Regarding childbirth and female sexuality in general, women received varying messages from the Church, medical practitioners, lawmakers, and fellow women. These incompatible voices led to an increasing marginalization of women within the context of the physical ritual and created an ambiguous societal attitude toward birth itself. Images of childbirth convey how men and women dealt with conflict. For instance, doctrine taught that women ought to be fruitful, yet it also stated that pain from childbirth was God's original punishment to women for failing to ignore temptation. Additionally, women received pressure both to reproduce abundantly and to remain chaste. Both the tensions around childbirth and the related marginalization of women are evident in images of secular and religious births, medieval medical writings, and biblical texts.

Medical and Social Context of Childbirth

Because of high rates of infant mortality, closeness to children was generally discouraged in the Middle Ages, and the act of childbirth held

less of an emotional importance and more of a political one.¹ Healthy babies—especially males—bore significance as heirs who ensured the continuation of a patriarchal lineage. Medieval medical descriptions of the act of childbirth reflected unease about the perpetuation of this patriarchy; part of this anxiety stemmed from men's dependency on women for the line's survival.

It is difficult, however, to determine the truth about the physical process of medieval childbirth because the texts that describe it were primarily written by men who were systematically absent from the birthing chamber. Even the authorship of those texts that have been traditionally accepted as written by women, such as the influential book on women's health, the *Trotula*, has now been called into question. Texts and images describing childbirth relied mostly on female eyewitness accounts related to male writers and artists, as well as ideas passed down from antiquity.

The majority of medieval gynecological beliefs stemmed from the theories of three authors: Hippocrates, Galen, and Soranus. Though mostly outdated by the Middle Ages, certain theories presented by Aristotle also greatly influenced medieval attitudes towards the female body, which was thought of as a vessel that carried the male's seed.

Hippocrates's theory on the wandering womb had a great impact on feelings about the female body and sexuality. Hippocrates, as well as generations of medical thinkers after him, viewed the womb as an independent creature. Because female bodies were thought to crave warmth and moisture, frequent sexual activity was needed to stabilize the uterus. It was thought that unnatural behavior, such as celibacy or an excess of "male activities," would drive the uterus to distraction and cause it to wander freely throughout the body. There were various consequences to these travels depending on how far the uterus wandered and where it chose to attach itself, but when the roving organ ultimately came to rest next to the brain, it caused hysteria.

By the Middle Ages, the majority of Hippocrates's theories on women's bodies had become obsolete, but the idea of the wandering womb remained influential. Galen, the writer who dominated medieval and renaissance medical thought (as well as other prominent theorists writing after Hippocrates and prior to the Middle Ages) rejected the idea, but the notion resurfaced with the writings of medieval medical writers including the supposedly female Dame Trotula. These writers, following in the footsteps of Hippocrates, claimed that the womb would only remain

settled through frequent sexual activity, and, because birth control methods were less reliable, frequent reproduction.

This selective reinterpretation of the antique gynecological theories not only indicated a distrust of female control over sexuality, but it also identified motherhood as a socially mandated way for women to maintain their health.² Though all women were subject to marginalization because of the assumed weakness of their sex, those who were unmarried and who strayed from the feminine norm were considered more susceptible to illness, both mental and physical. Therefore, the dominant medical theories of the time made procreation a matter of central importance to women and their overall health.³

Jennifer Wynne Helwarth describes the medieval ritual of childbirth as having three phases: separation, transition, and reincorporation.⁴ A woman in labor was first sequestered in an all-female space, then she was allowed significant recovery time, and later she was reintegrated into mainstream society. Birth was not yet included in the category of hard medicine; rather, it was considered a part of everyday life, and it therefore remained entirely within the realm of the female experience. The birth itself took place in what one writer called an “*emphatically closed female space*”⁵ known as the lying-in chamber. A pregnant woman tended to make arrangements well in advance regarding who would attend her birth. Typically, those present in a birthing chamber included a midwife and five or six other women, usually family or friends, but never men. A woman who was invited to a birth was called a “*gossip*,” a word originally meaning “*godparent*.”⁶ Increasing anxiety about the existence of such an exclusively female space resulted in a growing negative connotation of the word, which eventually linked “*gossip*” with unbridled speech among women.⁷

The lying-in chamber provided women with a completely enclosed space cut off from the commotion of the rest of the world. When the expectant mother began her labor, all entrances to the room were shut and all windows were sealed to block out light; the environment of the chamber was reminiscent of the womb. After the birth, the new mother remained in her sealed chamber for up to a month (her lying-in period was known as “*her month*”). During this time, she would visit only with her female companions and the midwife.

The midwife occupied a unique place in medieval society. Unlike physicians, whose knowledge was passed on through institutions, mid-

wives learned their craft from their mothers. The knowledge remained within the female province from generation to generation. Also, a midwife's workload could reach up to 300 births per year, and she was therefore among the most active of community members.⁸ Moreover, these women were provided with several powers denied to all other members of society. In addition to their exclusive permission to touch the woman's genitals during the birth and to swaddle the baby for warmth after the birth, the midwife was also designated as the sole lay person who could baptize a baby. Because of the dangerous nature of the birthing process in the Middle Ages, the acknowledged possibility of death permeated the birthing chamber as much as the anticipation of new life. Women were even instructed to confess their sins before going into labor. In case of an emergency, midwives were required by canon law to be instructed in the process of infant baptism, thus ensuring the infant a proper burial and a place in heaven. Midwives, therefore, occupied a nebulous, but important space within medieval society.

Medieval Images of Childbirth

Although images of childbirth in the Middle Ages are rare, the few that exist provide much insight into the ritual itself. These images of births fall into several categories. Some extant manuscripts of the medical writings mentioned above are filled with illustrations that served as visual aids for medical practitioners and wealthy families concerned with their health. As dissections and autopsies became more frequent as ways of understanding the human body, illustrations of the internal organs (and, later, surgical procedures) began to circulate. In addition to medical texts, many of the available secular images come from illustrated chronicles of great historical figures. For example, we have a large body of illustrations of caesarean sections because, according to legend, Julius Caesar was delivered through this procedure. Many of the later historical narratives that describe the life of Caesar include lavish illustrations of his birth. Because these images began to appear at around the same time as the publication of the first written medical account of the procedure in 1305, it is generally assumed that the pictures provide an accurate view of the birthing chambers, the participants in the procedure, the medical tools, and to a certain extent, the procedure itself.⁹ Images of secular births also appear on ritual objects used during the births. The most common type

of birth illustrations in the Middle Ages are those depicting the births of biblical figures such as Jacob and Esau or Cain and Abel, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary, and, most commonly, Jesus Christ.

The majority of images of secular births survive in the form of wooden childbirth trays called *desco da parto*, which were used to bring refreshments into the birthing chamber during the new mother's period of confinement following the birth. Though made primarily by men, these trays were one of the few secular forms of art made specifically for women. The trays, often lavishly painted, first appeared circa 1370 and remained popular until the late 16th century, predominantly in Italy. According to inventories of personal belongings, nearly one half of all families owned at least one *desco da parto* during the late 14th and early 15th centuries.¹⁰ These inventories also reveal the esteem in which the trays were held; if they were kept in storage, they usually lay wrapped in fine fabrics or specially made bags.¹¹ Usually, however, these trays hung on bedroom walls both before and after births, which is evidenced by the ornate painting on one side and less elaborate imagery on the other, as well as the hanging devices (nails, hooks, etc.) which remain on several of the trays.

The iconographic themes displayed on the elaborate fronts of the trays, which hung facing the room, mostly fall into four categories: mythological and classical narratives, contemporary literary themes, religious stories, and scenes depicting a new mother's confinement. The backs of the trays also tended to be decorated with four distinct themes: naked male children, heraldry, game boards, and allegorical figures. This limited scope of iconography implies that the illustration was not purely ornamental.¹² Each theme evoked certain meanings within the context of the ritual of childbirth. Specific mythological characters may have invoked legends associated with fertility and reproduction. Literary schema such as the 'garden of love' brought to mind visions of courtly ideals and harmony. Biblical figures may have been presented as examples of familial role models or representations of parental expectations.¹³

According to Gail McMurray Gibson, surviving medical texts inform us that, "...from Norway to Italy, childbirth practices and especially the presiding over those customs by midwives and female attendants were remarkably consistent from the early Middle Ages until those practices gradually began to be replaced by the science of male-dominated obstetrics in the 17th century or later—or even much later."¹⁴ Therefore, confinement scenes, which were immensely popular as *desco da parto* decoration,

are worth a close examination for their detailed illustration of the ordinary birth ritual.

A mid-15th century Florentine tray held at Ca'd'Oro in Venice (figure 1) portrays a cut-away room in which a birth has just occurred. The new mother, resting on a luxurious and imposing bed, is surrounded by eight women, most likely her midwife and her "gossips." The mother is obviously wealthy, as evidenced by the lavish brocade garments worn by her attendants. There is an element of calmness that permeates the image. The face of each woman is serene, and the mother's posture is relaxed. An attendant and the mother share a soothing look as they clasp hands in a congratulatory and relieved fashion. Mother and child sit in parallel upright and sprightly positions. There is no sign of exhaustion or pain. Considering the risks involved in childbirth, it is significant that there are no signs here of suffering or danger. Images like this one may have been used to reassure expectant mothers who would have been the recipients of childbirth trays as gifts. Because they hung on bedroom walls, it is possible that these images served the meditative purpose of preparing the women for the birthing ritual that lay ahead.

The scene is set in a cross-sectioned room situated in a dramatic landscape that appears on the left and right edges of the tray. Despite the vast outer setting, the overall image has an intimate, almost claustrophobic, feel to it. The room is closed off from the landscape, with the exception of a small window and a doorway blocked by two attendants. The ceilings are low, barely high enough to accommodate the tallest of the scene's characters. The large bed fills the entire room, leaving little space for the mother's gossips and no room for additional furniture. The presence of red curtains on either side of the bed further emphasizes the tightly enclosed feeling of the scene. This compact space is womb-like, perhaps with the undersized illuminated window serving as a representation of the birth canal. It is possible that the enclosed space was intended to comfort pregnant women in the same way that immediate swaddling comforted a newborn. Both the depiction of the chamber and the ritual simulate the initial comforting space of the womb. The compact zone, cut off from the outside world, also emphasizes the complete separation that the woman experienced in her postpartum month. This separation is further defined by the room's complete severance from the rest of the house. The scene is not contextualized. The room is isolated from all other signs of domesticity; it is situated in the domestic landscape, but strangely di-

vorced from that landscape simultaneously. Considering the emphasis on childbirth as a conduit for the continuation of patriarchal lineage, the scene's complete isolation from the rest of the household is startling.

Another wooden childbirth tray, dated 25 April 1428 (figure 2), provides an even clearer representation of the spatial significance of the birthing chamber. The painted image on the tray again shows a cut-away room with a confinement scene. Again, the room is closely cropped to barely enclose the bed, the mother, and her attendants. Here, the female attendants make a full circle around the new mother, which is completed by the figure of a woman situated above the room gazing out the window towards a small crowd of male visitors who wait outside the chamber. The gender separation is obvious here: the men wait, small and passive, bearing gifts. They are physically cut off from the main space and sequestered into the claustrophobic lower left-hand corner. It is interesting to note the disparity in the representations of the landscape within this image. Sprouting from the male section of the image are bountiful flowers, signs of fertility and virility. Above the feminine space is a rocky and inhospitable coastline topped by a daunting sea on which sails an ominous black boat. In all likelihood the artist was a male, and it is conceivable that male anxieties over the birthing ritual and the exclusively female space are manifested in this uninviting landscape.

This second image also serves as a strong example of the potential reassurance that these tray paintings may have offered to an expectant mother. There is absolutely no sign of the pain and exhaustion that must have occurred immediately prior to this moment, and the interior of this space is filled with calming reference points. At the center of the bottom section of the tray, a woman in cascading garments plays the harp while gazing at the newborn child, who rests in the gently caressing grasp of another woman. This attendant looks up towards the bed and tilts her head back, allowing the infant to support its head on her chin. The mother's vibrant red cloak and sheets, which add an air of festivity to the scene, draw the eye towards the center of the composition and highlight the role of the mother. Though the child plays an important part in the scene, as evidenced by the relatively colorful and luxurious fabric in which he is swaddled, it is apparent that the real focal point of this image is the mother. She is situated in the center of a complete circle of female attendants, several of whom kneel before her, thereby creating an atmosphere of worship around her. She is depicted as a near Marian figure.

With very few exceptions, nearly all of the 17 additional pairs of eyes in the composition point towards her. This collective worshipping gaze emphasizes the sacred nature of the birth ritual, and taken in conjunction with the relegation of the men to the exterior of the scene, provides a potential for a sense of female holiness. The reverse side of this tray portrays a large figure of a naked male child. He kneels on a tree stump surrounded by a lush forest, and he holds a pinwheel and a riding toy. Gazing out at the viewer, the child urinates in a stream of gold and silver. The inscription running around the edge of the wooden tray invokes wishes for a safe delivery of a healthy child.¹⁵ Considered together, the images on the front and back of this tray likely provide comfort for an anxious expecting mother.

If confinement scenes painted on wooden childbirth trays were in fact intended to reassure a pregnant woman, it is difficult to imagine the response that an image of a caesarean birth would have elicited. As opposed to the confinement scenes painted on childbirth trays, which were hung in domestic spaces while not in use and meant to be viewed by women, caesarean images were produced primarily for historical and medical texts, so it is not likely that the average woman would view them frequently.

Caesarean sections were rare in the Middle Ages; they were attempted only as a last resort in case of a complication that imperiled the mother's life. Like traditional confinement scenes, pictures of caesareans provide insight into the layout of the birthing chamber. The majority of these images create an all female space, like that depicted in a miniature from *Les Faits des Romans* (figure 3), where the midwife has taken control of the situation and is shown in the process of removing the child from an incision in the mother's abdomen. The procedure is always portrayed as a success, though a successful caesarean birth meant a healthy outcome for the child, but not necessarily for the mother. The midwives in these images are always depicted as competent, and the procedure, surgical instruments, and division of labor tended to be illustrated accurately.¹⁶ It was not until the late fifteenth century that this procedure became associated with hard medicine rather than ritual birth, and this association led to the appearance of male obstetricians and the total exclusion of female midwives and attendants from the operating room.¹⁷

It is possible that caesarean births evoked images of Saint Margaret or that images of Saint Margaret called to mind caesarean births. Saint

Margaret of Antioch, who became the patron saint of childbirth after she emerged unharmed from the belly of Satan in the disguise of a dragon, was called upon during labor to ensure the safe delivery of the child and the preservation of the mother's health. However, the image of Saint Margaret may not have been an entirely reassuring one. Madeline Caviness claims that the image of this triumphant female saint presents a negative view of women's bodies when associated with childbirth: "Margaret then assumes the role of the infant escaping from the threatening birth canal, identified in medieval biological discourse as polluted and even as 'a hell-mouth that is cursed with an all consuming thirst.'"¹⁸ Images of Saint Margaret and images of caesarean sections may have evoked similar reactions. The presence of the dragon in the legend of Saint Margaret, a monstrous beast made even more monstrous in this case by its satanic origins, evokes violent images, made sexual when one considers the medieval view that the dragon-viper gave birth by splitting open. Both Saint Margaret's emergence from the dragon, therefore, and the birth of a child through caesarean section, display the violent and deadly consequences of sexual activity. Because her image emphasizes the violence inherent in birth, the role of St. Margaret as protector of a woman in labor weakens and she too bears the unease surrounding the female ritual.

The Virgin Mary was seen as another ideal intercessor for the medieval woman in labor. However, Mary also made for a conflicted role model for a medieval mother. On one hand, her experience with childbirth brought her closer to the average woman; in Nativity scenes, objects of every day medieval life were often scattered around the image to humanize the birth. Mary was often depicted sitting on or near the ground, implying her identification with earthly beings. These scenes do not show a regal vision of Mary. Instead she is typically rendered in humble reverence to her child, while sometimes exhausted from the birthing process. She is always more human than celestial. However, medieval theologians were quick to emphasize the fact that Mary conceived without pleasure and bore her son without pain, thus differentiating her entirely from the typical woman. Mary was held up as a paragon of motherly love, but was made inaccessible to all mothers.

The relationship between the Virgin Mary and childbirth extends to other types of images. Caviness presents a new reading of the series of Virgin and Child images known as the Throne of Wisdom, which creates the possibility of a conduit through which pregnant women could con-

nect with Mary. Traditionally, these images, which tend to take the form of freestanding sculptures, have been interpreted with an eye towards the concept of majesty. The Virgin Mary takes on the role not only of the mother supporting her son on her lap, but also the seat of divine wisdom incarnate. She therefore allows the divinity and humanity of Christ to shine through equally. Despite the Virgin's physically larger presence in these scenes, Christ is the focus; Mary serves as the throne for her child.¹⁹ Caviness posits that the Virgin and Child's pose can be read as a vision of a successful childbirth. She claims that these images call attention to

the tensions between what [the Virgin Mary] is allowed to be in medieval theology and the slippages that accrue in the visual form; the symmetry of her tall upper body and her widely placed knees may make her a throne (or a quality of mind—wisdom) personified, but they also dehumanize her motherhood. Only a woman's reading that was innocent of theology might have seen evidence of a serene birthing in her seated posture, open legs, and healthy child because medieval women gave birth on a stool, where they were aided by gravity (and by midwives).²⁰

Caviness provides the example of the Visitation and Nativity tympanum on the virgin portal of the west façade of the Chartres Cathedral. Here, the central image depicts a grand and isolated Throne of Wisdom scene. Below the figures are a Visitation and a Nativity scene. The bottom two scenes imply a general emphasis on the theme of birth in the tympanum. The Visitation scene portrays the pregnant Mary, while the Nativity includes a postpartum Mary who rests and receives visitors. Considering this inclusion of the before and after birth scenes, it is reasonable to conclude that the third section of the image would capture the process of the birth itself.

An examination of medical illustrations of the birthing process provides further evidence for this connection. A miniature from a 13th century edition of Pseudo-Apeleius' *Herbarium* (Vienna, NB, MS 93, folio 102; figure 4) shows a woman in labor surrounded by four women, probably three "gossips" and a midwife. The birth takes place in a nondescript location, rather than a specific domestic space like the confinement scenes, but is still emphatically closed by the restricting architectural details. The woman sits on a birthing stool²¹ while the midwife holds a coriander seed near the mother's vagina in an attempt to hasten the birth.²² The rest

of the women encircle the mother, with their arms coming together in a tangled knot, which works to emphasize the notion of childbirth as a collective female ritual. The lines in the women's clothing and the animated position of their hands, suggest vibrancy in the image and imbue the scene with a sense of forthcoming life. The mother's skirt is hoisted up around her knees and her feet are bare, pushing the limits of medieval conceptions of modesty. As in the confinement scenes painted on childbirth trays, the composition here, which places the mother in the middle of the frame surrounded on all sides by attendants, imbues the scene with a worshipful quality. Here, the mother sits on a birthing stool positioned atop a platform as if she were placed upon an altar. The laboring woman holds the exact same pose as the Virgin Mary in the Chartres tympanum. Assuming that this image is an accurate illustration of the normal secular birthing process, it is logical to associate the Throne of Wisdom images with an act of successful and serene childbirth, which would provide the scene with a humanizing element that is lacking in the traditional identification of Mary as a Throne for Divine Wisdom. Most Throne of Wisdom scenes, however, were freestanding sculptures made for monastic settings, complicating the association with childbirth, yet potentially sanctifying the act of childbirth at the same time.

The other type of image linking Mary with the ritual of childbirth is the Nativity scene that illustrates the Holy Family immediately after the birth of Christ. The late medieval Nativity scene, which created the iconographic scheme that has remained popular even today, was shaped by the mystic visions of Saint Birgitta of Sweden, who recounted the scene in her *Revelations*. She described a pregnant maiden arriving at "a stall" with an ox and an ass. The man who accompanied her readied the space by lighting a candle. Birgitta continues:

And when she was all prepared, she kneeled down with great reverence and prayed, and set her back against the manger, and turned her face to the east and held up her hands and her eyes up to Heaven, and she was raised in contemplation with so great a sweetness that it is hard to write about it. And then I saw in her womb something stir; and suddenly she bore her Son. And then came so great a light and brightness that it passed the brightness of the sun, and the light of the candle that Joseph had set on the wall could not be seen. And it was so sudden, that birth of the child, that I might not perceive the passing forth of the child. Nevertheless I saw that blissful

child lying naked on the earth, and he has the fairest skin that I ever saw, without any spot. Also I saw the afterbirth, that is, the surrounding that the child was in, lying all white. Then I heard the angels sing wondrously sweetly and pleasingly.²³

The space in which these Nativity images are set is significant. The typical medieval woman's birthing chamber was defined by its enclosure and exclusivity. Windows and doorways were sealed to block light from entering. This space essentially served as a re-creation of the womb. In the Nativity scenes, Mary gives birth in a semi-open space, usually a ruined barn with open sides and a damaged roof. The walls of the structure are rarely complete and the whole scene is situated in a very visible landscape. In addition to the light streaming through the roof, the child himself usually emanated light. Following Saint Birgitta's description, the light often became the focus of the scene. This focus is exemplified in the Nativity scene from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves, created c. 1440 (Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.945), where the pyramidal composition draws the eye directly up towards a bright sun and the angels who rejoice in its light. The child is the direct recipient of this glowing warmth (figure 6). In the corresponding scene in the Limbourg Brothers' *Belles Heures*, made for the Duke de Berry, a light shines directly from a star above the manger, through a hole in the roof, and onto the child (figure 7).

Considered in conjunction with this luminous and open space, the characters present at the birth of Christ are also noteworthy. Joseph, the surrogate father of the child, is portrayed sitting close to the mother and child, and he looks baffled by the event that has just unfolded. In addition, Christ is attended by several shepherds, an ox, an ass, and often a wise man or three. Birth, then, becomes first, a public experience; the act's sexual nature is denied, and the act is therefore separated from its origins in Eve. When it becomes a public experience, childbirth is removed from the zone that had once only been accessible to females. It therefore transforms into a masculine experience. The ritual has been deemed holy by its removal from the enclosed female space. Fortunately, the presence of the ox and the ass imply that the child was revered by all living beings. Though the artist works to separate the mother from her all-female space, the image does not become entirely masculine through the separation.

Mary's separation from the previously female space of childbirth relates to the popular medical texts that provide men with agency in childbirth. In both, Mary is depicted as a passive mother. She does not labor

or push during the birth of her son. According to Saint Birgitta's story and the accepted imagery, Christ appears suddenly next to her. The need for a ritual, especially an exclusively female one, is eradicated. Caviness points out that Mary's passivity is further emphasized in her death. Just as she is deprived of normal acts of sexual reproduction, she is also relieved of a real death. The Virgin is consistently portrayed as being assumed into heaven through the agency of angels, as contrasted to Christ's active Ascension.²⁴

Childbirth in Text

This ambiguity—the tension between birth as a holy and feminine necessity versus a punishment—that surrounds childbirth has its roots in biblical text. The first section of the Book of Genesis is charged with incredible sexual energy. The text is loaded with fertile imagery and abuzz with excitement over freshly shaped life and things to come. The creation story ends with the mention of childbirth: Eve, after her expulsion from the Garden of Eden with her partner Adam, is punished through the promise of pain and labor during childbirth. This punishment is passed down to all mothers. Childbirth, in the biblical sense, is closely associated with punishment. The ambiguous attitude towards birth in the Bible is demonstrated through God's command to his creations to "be fruitful and multiply." This command takes the agency of creation away from humanity and places it with a divine power. However, the admonition is followed by a promise, taking several forms:

"I will make your descendents as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendents also can be counted" (Genesis 13:16); "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them, so shall your descendents be" (Genesis 15:5); "I will multiply your descendents as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Genesis 22:17).

In her study of the origin of human suffering, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that through this promise "the multiplication of humanity comes to be understood as a re-enactment of the original creation, for the power 'to make' bodily tissue at the original appearance of Adam and Eve is also the power to alter, magnify, multiply the amount of that

bodily tissue.”²⁵ Again, a divine being takes the agency of reproduction out of the hands of mankind. This thread continues with the repeated referral to the opening and closing of wombs throughout the Bible. Several biblical stories feature barren women who have given up hope of having children, but who later find their wombs suddenly opened by the hand of God after prayer. This theme doubly removes any reproductive agency from women. These women are positioned between the absolute categories of barren and pregnant. Any sense of self-alterability is denied.²⁶ This lack of agency is apparent even in the prayer that is meant to catalyze the womb's opening. It is typically not uttered by women, but by their husbands. In this case, man appropriates whatever power is not entirely handed over to God, and the result is projected onto the female body.

Childbirth as a Liminal Experience

Through the visual and textual depictions of childbirth available at the time, childbirth became a liminal experience for medieval women. First of all, women were faced with conflicting pressures regarding their sexuality. The medieval church prized chastity as a great virtue. Many theologians wrote that a woman reached her most virtuous state when she disregarded her feminine nature and became more like a man. However, the emphasis placed on chastity conflicted with the widely held belief that a woman was most healthy when she engaged in frequent sexual activity. Ultimately, these contradicting demands led to the marginalization of female sexuality and the female ability to reproduce, thereby creating anxiety around the ultimate distinction between man and woman: the possibility of carrying a child.

The birthing ritual itself was one defined by its dualities. In a successful birth, the end result was joyful, especially if the child was a male. However, because of high infant mortality rates and the risk posed to the mother, the birthing room always carried connotations of death. The midwife's power to baptize an infant indicated a clear acknowledgement of the possibility of losing that child. This fear led mothers to closely identify with the Virgin Mary. As Christa Grössinger writes, “The Virgin's motherhood was at its most human at the Nativity, when, from the very time of his birth, she had premonitions of Christ's death.”²⁷ In Nativity scenes, Christ's swaddling cloths can be interpreted as premonitions of his shroud, and the juxtaposition of these images acknowledge

that Christ was born to die. Biblical texts waffled back and forth between designating childbirth as a uniquely female experience, and indicating it as another ritual that asserts the omnipresent power of a divine force. Further, the biblical designation of the ritual of childbirth as the result of punishment gave a bitter tinge to the fulfillment of God's command to be fruitful and multiply.

Comparing images of the nativity to images of secular births emphasizes conflicting tensions surrounding childbirth. While the real medieval woman's lying-in chamber was emphatically dark and closed and exclusively female, the Virgin gave birth in an open space, surrounded by family, strangers, and animals. Her company was primarily male and both the space and her child emanated light. Perhaps it is helpful to look back at the notion of God opening and closing the wombs of early biblical characters through the prayers of men, and to see the Nativity scene as the depiction of the ultimate act opening of the womb. The womb is now open. The conflicting pressures from religious, medical, and social powers led to an eventual denial of an exclusively female grasp on the childbirth ritual.

Endnotes

¹ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 13-14.

² Laurinda S. Dixon, "The Curse of Chastity: The Marginalization of Women in Medieval Art and Medicine, in Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler, *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), 72.

³ For further information on the medical beliefs behind medieval childbirth, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler, eds., *Matrons and marginal women in medieval society* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 1995); Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Loren MacKinney, *Medical Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965)

⁴ Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

⁵ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29.1 (Winter, 1999).

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, 1989.

⁷ Hellwarth, 7.

⁸ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1999, 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ Gibson, 10.

¹⁵ Musacchio, 1.

¹⁶ Blumenfield-Kosinski, 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁸ Quoted in Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 111-112.

¹⁹ Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 49-50.

²⁰ Caviness, 8.

²¹ The birthing stool can be seen even more clearly in a woodcut from Jacob Rueff's *Ein schön lustig Trostbüchle*, 1554 (figure 5). Although this image was created after the Middle Ages, medieval medical writings identified the use of this type of birthing stool.

²² Loren MacKinney, *Medical Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 94.

²³ *Saint Bride and Her Book: Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations*, trans. Julia Bolton Holloway (Newburyport, MA: Focus Texts, 1992), 130.

²⁴ Caviness, p. 7.

²⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 192.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁷ Christa Grössinger, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

New Traditionalists

Baudrillard, Devo, and the Postmodern De-evolution of the Simulation

James Weissinger '06

The point is not to resist by clinging to older visions and values—a mistake made alike by the survivalist Right and the communitarian Left. Let us rather push further and further, into ever-new landscapes of simulation and delusion.

-Steven Sharviro, *Doom Patrols*¹

Devo asks the questions that help point us all in the right direction/ to go forward/ move ahead/ and give the past the slip/ It's time to seek out new traditions/ We know where the old ones took us/ and now we are all here together/ So let's go/ take in the full measure of Devo's new traditionalist spirit.

-Devo, "Nu-Tra Speaks (New Traditionalist Man)"²

The above passages from Steven Shaviro's book *Doom Patrols* and the Devo song/manifesto "Nu-Tra Speaks" both advocate a contradiction emblemized by the phrase "New Traditionalists": rather than cling to past social norms and ways of living, humanity should "move ahead" while recognizing that we never truly can do so, for we are perpetually caught in a cycle of aesthetic repetition that yields the same retro result—just more traditions. The only possible "new," then, is our novel acceptance of that inevitability: conscious parody becomes the only option available to the individual who seeks—while at the same time understanding the impossibility of—individuality. Achieving this paradoxical equilibrium between future and past, original and copy, ridicule and praise, Devo disdains the status quo while immersing itself in it; the band's pretense of rebellion recalls arch post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard's description of the postmodern implosion—the co-opting of counterculture by the reigning cultural norm, the revolutionary collapse of revolution itself. Thus, the band's initially resistant rhetoric and bizarre aesthetic eventually progress