"Grievous Gripes of Perilous Pains"[1]: The Curse of Eve and the Rhetoric of Childbirth in Reformation England

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One day in seventeenth century Warwickshire, Rev. John Ward wrote of a parishioner who was enduring labor, "being in travail and sorely afflicted with pain," so much so that her family could not calm her. In attendance at the delivery was Lady Puckering, who reminded the laboring woman, "that this misery was brought upon her sex by her grandmother Eve, by eating an apple" "Was it?" replied the woman, "I wish the apple had chocked her." To which Lady Puckering, "was constrained to turn herself about, and go out of the room and laugh."[2]

Introduction

In 1977, when Joan Kelly published her groundbreaking essay, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?", she found herself pioneering a new avenue of historical study. Alongside the influence of second-wave feminism in the mid 1900s, by adding women to college classrooms and to the field of higher education in the humanities, many began to ask, "how would history look if it had been written by women?" How would history change when it was no longer recorded through the accomplishments and set

[1]Thomas Bentley, *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie Conteining Sundrie Forms of Christian Praiers and Meditations, to Bee Vsed Onlie of and for all Sorts and Degrees of Women, in their Seuerall Ages and Callings … A Treatise Verie Needful for this Time, and Profitable to the Church: Now Newlie Compiled to the Glorie of God, & Comfort of Al Godlie Women, by the Said T.B. Gentleman (*London: H. Denham, 1582), 121.
[2] Charles Severn, ed., *Diary of the Rev, John Ward…1648 to 1679* (1839), 102, quoted in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20-21.

backs of men but instead the accomplishments and set backs of women? Kelly, a Renaissance historian herself, concluded that the avenues through which the success of progressive movements have been documented - war, wealth, government, science, etc. - relied completely on areas in which women were all but excluded. “As soon as we take emancipation of women as our vantage point,” Kelly wrote in her essay “Women in the Renaissance and Renaissance Historiography”, “we discover that events which change the course of history for men, liberating them from natural, social, or ideological restraints upon their powers, may have quite a different, even opposite effect upon women.”[3]

Excluding the experiences of women from historical study not only reinforces a patriarchal remembrance of events but also leads to a one-sided interpretation of how society came to be. What Kelly ended up doing was changing how historians were expected to look at social history. “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” outlined a set of interrogatory perspectives which offered a new mode of inquiry that would better account for historical women’s experiences:

> ‘(1) the regulation of female sexuality as compared to male sexuality; (2) women’s economic and political roles and the education needed for work, property and power; (3) the cultural role of women in shaping the outlook of society; and (4) the prevailing ideology about women.’[4]

Kelly’s impact found reinforcement from women’s studies scholars like Gerda Lerner, whose 1993 study, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness,* worked to expose the struggles women have overcome to share in the field of historical thought. For Lerner, the mid-nineteenth-century focus on uncovering the history of women was, “irreversible… the assumption that a half of humankind can adequately represent the whole – has been exposed and explained, it can no more be undone than was the insight that the earth is round, not flat.”[5]

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[3] Blanche W. Cook, Clare Coss, Alice K. Harris, Rosalind P. Petchesky, and Amy Swerdlow, introduction to *Women, History & Theory; The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), xix.
[4] Cook, Cross, Harris, et al., *The Essays of Joan Kelly,* xix.
[5] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 273.

With these research perspectives in mind, my attention turns towards the study of women in the Reformation, which, while a fairly new field of study, has made quite an impact on the traditional acceptance of the Protestant Reformation as a solely positive, progressive movement, referring to such scholarship by Kirsi Stjerna and Lyndal Roper. Stjerna's 2009 work, *Women and the Reformation*, is a telling engagement with the lives of different fifteenth and sixteenth century women that emphasizes the ambiguity of the effects the Reformation had on them. With the backing of a vast multitude of female stories behind her research, Stjerna, a Lutheran theologian, concludes, "that at the very 'crux' of Reformation theology and its implementation was a particular view of gender relations," thus, "to view the Reformation's legacy as largely beneficial for women," Stjerna concludes with the words of fellow historian Roper, would be "a profound misreading of the Reformation itself."[6] What then, exactly, was the Reformation saying about women?

Protestant Teachings on the Telos of Women

When Martin Luther called the Catholic church into question over the problem of indulgences and, ultimately, over what he felt was an unbiblical hierarchy between laypeople, priests and God, he succeeded in setting up a new societal order both within the church and within the home. For Luther, and his priesthood of all believers, churchgoers had direct access to God, erasing the need for a Pope and Catholic saints. But, along with this new religious society, despite the freedom of thought, was the entrapment of women within the home. In 1522, only five years after he had posted his *95 Theses*, Luther's letter, *The Estate of Marriage,* stated quite clearly his belief on the purpose of women; that being motherhood:

> 'And even if they bear themselves weary, or ultimately bear themselves out that does not hurt. Let them bear themselves out. This is the purpose for which they exist. It is better to have a brief life with good health than a long life in ill health.'[7]

[6] Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 215.
[7] Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage,* trans. Walter I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 38-46.

The mention of 'ill health' referenced the state of women who chose not to have children as the natural healthy state for women was pregnancy. Ultimately, as argued in *Death and the Early Modern Englishwoman,* "a woman was sanctified if she died in labor not because she had shown great fortitude, but because she had given her life for the most important function of her existence."[8] Childbearing became the Reformation's telos for the female sex, shaping the social, political, economic, and religious attitudes and roles defined for Protestant women.

In Lutheran theology, procreation was, "more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance *[werk]* which is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore."[9] Luther was so convicted by the duty to have children, he preached that, "priests, monks, and nuns are duty-bound to forsake their vows whenever they find that God's ordinance to produce seed and multiply is powerful and strong within them."[10] Thus, the Reformation not only established a very singular view of the purpose of women but also led to the dissolution of nunneries and avenues of female expression outside the home. No woman could be seen wasting her fertility by reading books and writing. Many women who had found a home and purpose in a convent were soon forced to marry and begin their 'true' calling.

John Calvin, even more influential in England than his German counterpart, unabashedly preached the smaller value and natural submission of women. In his commentary on Genesis 2:18, Calvin conceded that women, like men, were made in the image of God, "though to a lesser degree."[11] While God had created both beings, God naturally preferred the male, making him the head of the household. As to the wellspring of original sin, woman fell to a greater blame; as Calvin wrote:

> 'Woman is more guilty than the man, because she was seduced by Satan, and so diverted her husband from obedience to God that she was an instrument of death leading all to perdition. It is necessary that woman recognize this, and that she learn to what she is subjected; and not only

[8] Lucinda M. Becker, *Death and the Early Modern Englishwoman* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 109.
[9] Luther, *The Estate of Marriage,* 38-46.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Joannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 23:27-28, quoted in Mary Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy in Calvin's Theology," *Signs* 11, no. 4 (1986): 727.

> against her husband. This is reason enough why today she is placed below and that she bears within her ignominy and shame.'[12]

Calvin's interpretation further concluded that before sin woman had submitted to man without complaint, but her act of independence and defiance not only led to the curse of depravity but humankind's earthly separation from God. If the Protestant woman wanted to take this message to heart, she should willingly accept complacency in her lower, female status as dutiful wife and mother. Perhaps summarized best by Stjerna in her *Women and the Reformation*:

> 'It is ironic, that it should be the evangelical theology that was ignited by a visionary proclamation of the liberation of consciousness from the oppression of religious (and secular) tyranny, and that had its premise in a most emancipatory view of the gospel, that reinforced women's theologically argued subjugation and domestication via motherhood.'[13]

In the eyes of Calvin and of the early modern Reformed, to be a good female Protestant was to be a mother, and any attempt to choose differently was to subvert the most basic expectations of gender.

The Changing Rhetoric of Childbirth

With *inter alia* Kelly in mind, and, aspiring to responsibly review the discrepancy between reality and recorded history with the certainty that much of the 'progressiveness' of the Reformation has been recorded through male institutions, perhaps it is time to change the parallax of study and instead focus on the uniquely female tradition of childbirth. Unlike church, government, or industry, childbirth and the practices surrounding it were notably secretive and belonged to a practice where women held the reigns. Out from under the company of men, women found a sisterhood of encouragement and unity among the laboring rituals of their sisters, daughters, cousins, and friends. How then, if following the methodology of Kelly, would the study of the Reformation's relationship with the rhetoric of childbirth look from an emancipated woman's point of view? As leaders of the Reformation clearly established that a

[12] Joannis, quoted in Potter, "Gender Equality and Gender Hierarchy," 728.
[13] Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation,* 215.

woman's value was tied to her obedience, the way Protestant figures redefined this female-run, often empowering, event unveils the true nature of the failure of the Reformation as a truly progressive movement for women.

The first step the Reformation took against childbirth was to put an end to Catholic influence and 'superstition'. Anti-Catholic purification of the church resulted in the loss, or alteration, of female imagery within the faith. Before the Reformation women looked to and took consolations from the Virgin Mary and the female saints. According to Professor Bruce Gordon, "to imagine late medieval Christianity is to enter a world bewildering in diversity of belief and practice, complex in theology, and populated by angels, demons, and heretics…"[14] Recuperating from the Great Schism of 1378, the Catholic religious era before the Reformation found itself held together by widespread mysticism and superstition. Strict order within the medieval Church waned as women were allowed more freedom in exploring their beliefs. It was here where, "the powerful bond between women and Christ in medieval culture… personified in the love of the Virgin Mary…"[15] The Cult of the Virgin Mary, reminiscent in the dazzling Marian imagery of fourteenth and fifteenth century Books of Hours, not only led women to convent life, but offered a sort of female divine to which women could turn. Pre-Reformation conviction believed that Mary acted as a mother to all of those who believed in Jesus' resurrection, interceding on their behalf, titling her the "Queen of Heaven."[16] With that, Catholicism remained the favored religious tradition of the West until the end of the fifteenth century at the dawn of religious revolution.

Historian Peter Marshall's work on the Reformation found the movement to be just as political as it was predictable. Marshall's view of women and Protestantism agreed with that of we contemporary feminists, who, "suspected the Reformation of being bad news for women, reinforcing patriarchal authority in the home, and closing off the career path represented by convents."[17] Catholic influence stood in direct threat to the subdued, submissive housewife. To the prominent reformers of the fifteenth century

[14] Bruce Gordon, "Late Medieval Christianity," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation,* ed. Peter Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.
[15] Ibid., 31.
[16] Ibid., 4.
[17] Peter Marshall, *The Reformation: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

and into the early modern period, Mary was not only an example of higher virtue and saintly fortitude but her placement as the mother of salvation and Queen of Heaven linked a woman's pregnancy journey to a position of spiritual authority. Mary's divine position not only glorified what her faith allowed her to do but also glorified her for something that women had a unique connection.

Reacting against what Luther, Calvin *et.al.* believed to be unqualified admiration of the Virgin, Mary was quickly stripped of her divine status and domesticated to the household, joining the other female victims of the heavy, reformative hand. Taking liberties with his own 'sola scriptura' position, Luther wrote of Mary:

> 'She seeks not any glory but goes about her meals and her usual household duties, milking the cows, cooking the meals, washing the pots and kettles, sweeping the rooms, and performing the world of a maid servant or housemother in lowly and despised tasks.'[18]

It is perhaps not too far of a jump to link a growing anxiety that pregnant women would find too much inspiration from the godlike elevation of Mary to Luther's take on the housebroken divine. Women were thus left without a female example of celestial influence and instead reminded of the virtue of the humble mother who lived in obedience to their household order and duties without complaint or rebellion.

Christopher Hooke, a late sixteenth-century Protestant preacher, bypassed serious discussion of Mary completely, and instead chose to focus on the biblical example of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. "[F]or whereas *Elizabeth* was barren and long without childe, whereby she was a reproach among women," Hooke emphasized, "the Lord for a reward maketh her fruitfull, and the mother, not of a meane babe, but of such one as greater before him of a woman was never borne."[19] In reference to Elizabeth as a 'reproach among women' echoed Hooke's own disapproval of women without children, to which he purposely chose a story from the Bible which emphasized patient

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[18] J. Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia, 1958-67), 55 vols, 21: 329, quoted in Bridget Heal, "Images of the Virgin Mary and Marian devotion in Protestant Nuremberg," in *Religion and superstition in Reformation Europe,* ed. Helen Parish and William G. Naphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 34.

[19] Christopher Hooke, *The Child-Birth Or Womans Lecture. that is: A Lecture Vpon Chap. 1. Ver. 57, 58. of the Holie Gospell According to Luke very Necessarie to Bee Read and Knowne of all Young Married and Teeming Women, and Not Vnprofitable for Men of all Sortes. by. Chr. H* (London: Raphe Iackson, at the signe of the Swanne, 1590), 3v.

motherhood. With her Protestant fall from glory, "Mary was stripped of her maternal authority [and] denounced of her divine power that had determined her appeal in the Pre-Reformation Church."[20] Celebrations and iconography surrounding Mary were reinterpreted to fit, "a new, specifically Lutheran vision of the Virgin."[21]

One of the Reformation exercises in filling the empty seat of female alignment was the encouragement of laboring women to look away from Mary and to look instead to the example of Christ's patient endurance of suffering. For example, the early German reformer and theologian Thomas Müntzer told women in labor to:

> 'remember the bitter suffering and death of Jesus Christ, how his enemies the Jews and heathens dealt with him so miserably, hideously and wretchedly… how he was so completely patient in the midst of such difficult and cruel torment.'[22]

While alignment with and recognition of Christ's suffering is not inherently a bad thing, a few points of interest matter in this shift. The example of Mary is a solely female concern, where the re-emphasis on Christ takes away from the female space. To ignore the fact that Mary gave birth, herself, and instead point to an unrelated point of suffering under Christ, was a deliberate erasure of the female experience and instead an opportunity to point women back in the direction of men. Imagery of Mary connotated new life and encouraged laboring mothers of the near arrival of their child, whereas imagery of Christ connotated death and punishment for sins. While women were still encouraged to look to a divine figure, Christ was not divine in a uniquely female sense, but instead a figure everyone could turn to during any number of sufferings. The Reformation told women that they were not exceptional in their struggle and should not expect superior treatment or to hold themselves in higher regard.

Although the removal of saints from spiritual life took away both male and female imagery, women were quickly running out of spiritual figures that represented themselves and their struggles. A notable removal for pregnant women was that of St.

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[20] Bridget Heal, "Images of the Virgin Mary and Marian devotion in Protestant Nuremberg," in *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe,* ed. Helen Parish and William G. Naphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 26.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Kathleen M. Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180.

Margaret of Antioch, the patron saint of childbirth. To this day, St. Margaret's aid in childbirth is so significant that she is recognized by the Catholic Church as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. A late medieval example of the saint's adherents is the mid-fifteenth-century landowner Margaret Paston, who penned a letter during one of her multiple pregnancies to her husband, John Paston, about her anxieties around childbirth, asking him to wear a ring she had sent to him with the image of St. Margaret, as a remembrance of her and of her condition.[23] But with the shifting devotional practices of the sixteenth century, Protestant women were no longer encouraged to find comfort in St. Margaret's aid.

Not much is known about the practices and atmosphere of the birth chamber. As most literature from this time period was recorded by male priests or physicians, who, notably, were not allowed in the birth chamber, a shroud of secrecy often covered how effective Reformation ideology was in changing the language of laboring mothers. But what can be known for certain were the measures the Reformation took in its attempts to change this language. While most female imagery was making its way out of religious discussion, one female who embodied the messages church fathers were trying to impose on women was Eve. If women were to think of anything during their labor, it was to remember the curse of labor pains and Eve's disobedience to God's place for women in the Garden of Eden.

Few religious writers imposed this ideology as heavily as Thomas Bentley, in his three-volume series, *The Monument of Matrones,* printed in 1582 by Queen Elizabeth's printer Christopher Barker. This work was a compilation of sundry writings, prayers, and biographies, written for Tudor women. Of the three volumes, each was comprised of seven sections called 'lamps'. In lamp five, Bentley outlined prayers for women to recite during childbirth, including prayers for midwives, husbands, and other chamber women. The main interest of *The Monument* was its strictly Protestant overtone, in its efforts to reaffirm both religious and societal order these various prayers act in ways to remind women why labor proceeds in the way it does, how they should feel and think about this situation, and how they should understand the limits to their provisions during labor. The

[23] Norman Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century,* 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971-6), 125.

likely readers of *The Monument* would have been women of upper rankings who were more likely to die in childbirth due to their increased number of pregnancies compared to working class women. This likely due to their use of wet nurses, leading to higher fertility rates after birth.

Symbolically, "the division of *The Monument* into seven lamps signifies the desirability for women to emulate the Wise Virgins and seek first the word of God… then the words of contemporary 'Wise Virgins'… and then the model of Queen Elizabeth, the reigning Virgin Queen."[24] Referencing back to Kelly's criterium over the regulation of female sexuality compared to men and prevailing female ideology, paradoxically, even during motherhood women were stripped of the evidence of their sexuality. While husbands were never asked to model themselves after 'wise virgins', in the days of *The Monument* English women were expected to remain within the submissive, chaste state the official church had demanded of them while, almost counterintuitively, having as many children as possible.

The Monument viewed labor as God's righteous punishment for female sin. Bentley included over forty prayers and exaltations specifically for the time before, during, and after the birth. Despite the variety of situations certain prayers were ostensibly applicable to - such as "In long and sore labour call earnstlie vpon God, and saie to your comfort…," or, "A generall forme of praire for all women with child, and in child-bed" - almost all of the prayers in some way brought up the sin of 'grandmother' or 'mother' Eve as the cause for their discomfort. For instance, "Another praier for a woman with child," Eve's part in pregnancy is not forgotten:

> 'This increase was easie, but mother Eve hath made it hard, by passing the bounds of thy will, to all hir posteritie; so that the woman conceiveth and bringeth forth in great paine, and painefull trauell; the fruit of hir womb.'[25]

[24] Colin B. Atkinson and Jo B. Atkinson, introductory note to *Monument of Matrones, 3 (Lamps 5-7)* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), xii.
[25] Thomas Bentley, ed., *Monument of Matrones, 3 (Lamps 5-7)* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 127.

With no mention of Mary or St. Margaret, figures who had previously uplifted the pregnancy journey and labor, women's new alignment with Eve emphasized the Protestant themes of personal, spiritual responsibility and deserved punishment. Consequently, women were told, due to the folly of their gender, that labor pains were necessary and justified.

Of over forty prayers within *The Monument,* none of them ask for God to lessen or take away the agony of labor, as to do so would be thwarting God's righteous punishment. Instead, like that in "Another praier of a woman with child before her labour," women were encouraged to humbly ask for perseverance and strength:

> 'Yea, O mercifull father, this paine, is not a sufficient punishment for the grievous transgressions, where with wee and our fore-fathers have transgressed thy most holie will…Wherefore, as I acknowledge, O merciful father this trauell in child-birth, which now approcheth, to be a just reward of my manifold sins… I am not worthie to present this my suite to thy heauenlie majestie; of myself, a most wretched and sinfull woman…'[26]

These prayers do little to emulate a warm atmosphere of women encouraging and uplifting each other, perhaps revealing a darker, anxiety accompanying the problem of unsupervised women and the unknown rituals of the birth chamber.

For women unable to obtain a copy of *The Monument,* indoctrination of their inherited sin found them in other ways. John Donne deployed Eve as a reminder to keep a repentant spirit and remain thankful for a safe return to church after delivery:

> 'The *Curse*, that lyes upon *women*, for the transgression of the first woman, which is painfull, and dangerous *Child-birth*; and given her also, a sense of the last glorious resurrection, in having rais'd her from that Bed of weaknesse, to the ability of coming into his prescence, here in his house.'[27]

[26] Ibid., 100-101.
[27] Jeffery Johnson, "Recovering the Curse of Eve in John Donne's Churching Sermons," *Renaissance and Reformation* Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999): 66.

Despite Donne's general fame, and the fact that Eve's curse was a popular topic from many English pulpits, it is hard to measure how effective such sermons were, and whether women really viewed themselves as atoning for Eve's sin, or whether husbands really felt their wives deserved that. In 1662, Samuel Pepys wrote a diary entry recounting that he, "heard a good sermon of Mr. Woodcock's at our church. Only, in his later prayer for a woman in childbed, he prayed that God would deliver her from the hereditary curse of childbearing, which seemed a pretty strange expression."[28] And admittedly, it may be that the Reformation's attempt to redefine womanhood, at times, existed more in theory than in practice. As David Cressy has noted, many early moderns "declined to worry about original sin and more prepared to treat childbirth in sexual terms than in spiritual terms."[29]

Male Anxiety over Childbirth Rituals

Mary Fissell's 2004 essay, "The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation," argued that, "the reform of women's reproductive bodies was a crucial part of the cultural change that made England a Protestant nation."[30] The Reformation reached beyond its religious limitations to an ultimately controlling, political field. Kelly warned of a history where men often found social liberation in the social entrapment of women, as the success of the Reformation depended on the cooperation of submissive wives and mothers.[31] Lucinda Becker's study on Early Modern death found that, "the birthing bed… was spiritually managed, whether from afar or more closely, by male advisors, whose intervention tended to detract from the possibility of female empowerment through the act of giving birth."[32]

The sermons of Hooke ring true to this sentiment. In 1590, Hooke's sermon commonly referred to as *The Child-Birth* or *Womans Lecture,* which was expansively

[28] R.C. Latham and W. Matthews, eds., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys,* 9 vols. (Berkley and Los Angeles, 1970-6), iii. 91, quoted in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20-21.
[29] David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.
[30] Mary E. Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation," *Representations,* Vol. 87, No. 1 (Summer 2004), 43.
[31] Cook, Cross, Harris, et al., *The Essays of Joan Kelly*, xix.
[32] Becker, *Death and the Early Modern Englishwoman,* 109.

addressed to "all young married and teeming women,"[33] argued for the passivity of women's bodies during conception and labor. Placing strong emphasis on the work of God in childbearing, Hooke's beliefs mirrored many prior medieval conceptions of pregnancy where a woman's womb acted as a house for a fetus, but the house never participated in the growing and development of that baby within. Written under the patronage of Gentlewoman, Mistress Elizabeth Sauel after the birth of her two sons, Hooke preached:

> 'And this that it is so, is a most necessarie doctrine in these daies to be taught in respect of two sortes of people; the one who thinketh children to be a charge: and therefore, if they might haue their choise, had rather to bee without them than haue them… The other sort, for whom the knowledge of this doctrine is necessarie, are the who taking delight, and that great as great may bee in their children, they yet sound not to the deapth of this blessing from the Lord, but doo take it to be a naturall and ordinarie worke of nature.'[34]

Along with retelling women what they should desire in life, Hooke's attempt was to change the way women viewed the talents of their body. Though the use of the female anatomy was enough to keep women pregnant and within the home, that same anatomy was not enough to render her pride over the capabilities of her body. That glory did not belong to women.

Despite their exclusion from the birth chamber, Protestant churchmen often pushed their distaste for many female pregnancy rituals, which they deemed superstitious or power-inducing. Before the eighteenth century - when childbirth was overtaken by medicine, male midwives, and professional doctors - pregnancy, labor, and the start of motherhood were female-centered spaces with their own menus of ritual. Centuries of passed down ceremonies and events surrounded an expectant mother, often dispersed through local midwives who were considered the gatekeepers of this tightknit community. Quickening, lying in, childbed gossips, churching and thanksgiving all had their places and purposes. Quickening led to an indication that a

[33] Hooke, *The Child-Birth Or Womans Lecture,* 2r.
[34] Ibid., 7r-7v.

woman was expecting after feeling the first movements of a baby in her womb. When women found themselves close to delivery, they began preparation of the birth room, new sheets were sent out for and birthing trinkets collected. For instance, royal records documented that Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, personally selected which tapestries would be hung in her daughter-in-law's birth chamber.

Upon the start of labor pains, the birth room was carefully situated to feel like a giant womb itself, dark and warm, with the windows drawn and a fire always burning. In the weeks leading to delivery women often visited their local monastery to rent charms believed to ease the labor process, such as wax amulets of *agnus dei* (the Lamb of God). Women would wrap girdles from parish statues of the Virgin around their abdomen and tie *aetites* or "eaglestones" [geodes] to their thigh that magnetically eased a child out of the womb; if such were removed too late after delivery, it was believed that there was increased risk of the descension of the entire womb. Catholic Queen Anne of Austria, after twenty-two years of barrenness with French king Louis XIII, began to keep a girdle of the Virgin with her and soon found herself pregnant, giving birth to Louis XIV in 1638.[35]

With the influx of anti-Catholic and anti-superstitious Reformative ideology, women and midwives were condemned for the use of these comforts. In the reforms of Henry VIII, bishops addressed these "so called superstitious practices around childbirth" by destroying many of the relics loaned out to expecting women during the dissolution of the monasteries and convents."[36] Despite never experiencing the near-death fear and pain of labor themselves, early Protestant men were fairly confident they had the answer to how women should properly comfort themselves. Luther advised in his letter, *The Estate of Marriage*:

> 'This is also how to comfort and encourage a woman in the pangs of childbirth, not by repeating St Margaret legends and other silly old wives' tales but by speaking thus, 'Dear Grete, remember that you are a woman, and that this work of God in you is pleasing to him. Trust joyfully in his will, and let him have his way with you. Work with all your might to bring forth

[35] Lerner, *The Creation of the Feminist Consciousness,* 126.
[36] Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction," 56.

> the child. Should it mean your death, then depart happily, for you will die in a noble deed and in subservience to God.''[37]

The early-sixteenth-century reformer Nicholas Shaxton, Bishop of Salisbury, input his own advice, warning midwives that:

> 'to beware that they cause not the woman, being in travail, to make any foolish vow to go in pilgrimage to this image or that image after her deliverance, but only to call on God for her help. Nor to use any girdles, purses, measures of our Lady, or such other superstitious things to be occupied about the woman while she laboureth, to make her believe to have better speed by it.'[38]

The 'progressive' movement of the English church from Catholic ideals to Protestant ideals often took place, as seen with the erasure of the divine Mary and female saints, with the blatant disregard or misunderstandings of female needs and sacred consolations.

"Women of the straw", or women who had just given birth, often followed the advice of the midwife Jane Sharp and would remain 'lying in' a quiet, dark room for a few days after birth, limiting distractions to their senses.[39] The practice of lying in followed the "gendered humor system" and, "anticipated twenty days of cleansing after the birth of a male child, considered to be hot and dry, and twenty-five days after the birth of a female, whose humors were cool and moist."[40] Other mothers, who had joined during the labor, participated in childbed gossips, where women would gather in the room of the likely bored, recovering mother to share local gossip. Cressy, in his work on Tudor birth practices, argues that gossips encouraged an atmosphere of female bonding out from under male supervision, which was often construed as potential for social disorder.[41] For a time, the roles of the household reversed, as husbands took up the household duties wives were unable to fulfill shortly before labor and during the

[37] Luther, *The Estate of Marriage,* 11.
[38] *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation,* ed. Walter Frere with William Kennedy, 3 vols. (London, 1910), 2:58, quoted in Mary E. Fissell, "The Politics of Reproduction in the English Reformation," *Representations,* Vol. 87, No. 1 (Summer 2004): 57.
[39] Cressy, *Birth,* 82.
[40] Ibid., 84.
[41] Ibid.

month following. Banned form their own bedrooms and omitted from the stories of the birth and childbed gossips, some husbands' minds could have only run wild with suspicion: the villages of Chester, Leicester, and Westmorland passed regulations in the late 1500s limiting both the number of women allowed to attend gossips and the money exhausted at their expense.[42]

In addition to legal regulation of private female sentiments, religious regulations of private female sentiments added to the atmosphere of unquestioned wifely obedience. There was a commonly-held belief that pregnant women's thoughts and fantasies could lead to deformities in children. "Just as Eve had disrupted and corrupted the perfect order of nature by coveting a forbidden fruit and fantasizing about equality with God," Kathleen Crowther argued, "so mothers could disrupt the patriarchal order through the power of their imaginations, fantasies, and desires."[43] Preachers swayed women to regulate their thoughts with threats of divine punishment. In his Protestant parish, Hooke tied judgment and miscarriage to police women's potential desires of insubordination and disorder:

> 'For this (besides that it is a great griefe, to the mother, to haue her womb be her childes Graue, and withall bringeth her to exteame davnger of her own life, if not to death it selfe) is a curse which the Lord threatneth to punish them with who doe rebelliously transgresse against him.'[44]

Thus, the Reformation strove to tell women what they should want in life, how wives should act within marriage, who they could pray to, the state of their body as passive shells in God's work of pregnancy, and now, the demand to regulate their feelings. Questioning this system was not only doubting God's design for women but putting one's body and baby at risk of condemnation.

Roughly one month after a woman's delivery, if she had in fact survived the day and proceeding weeks of labor, a new mother took part in the ceremonies of churching and thanksgiving. A good number of women never expected to make it to their churching and thanksgiving ceremonies, many "purchased funeral shrouds upon

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[42] Ibid., 84-85.
[43] Crowther, *Adam and Eve,* 177.
[44] Hooke, *The Child-Birth Or Womans Lecture,* 4r.

becoming pregnant, composed fervent prayers during pregnancy, or confided their fears to those diarists who then recorded them."[45] Though fewer women died in childbirth than was often thought, the practice around preparations for death upon pregnancy were no less widespread. Churching and thanksgiving gave women the opportunity to return to the social and religious life of their churches and thank God for a successful delivery. More is known of the rituals surrounding these two events as they were the only labor traditions that directly involved men, and as men were largely recording the happenings of church and society, they naturally grew quite opinionated on the subject.

Churching rituals concluded a new mother's journey from conception to healthy deliverance. When a woman's month of rest was at an end, the ceremony occurred at her first return to church. Normally veiled in white, a woman would bring an offering to her local priest, then, following the Book of Common Prayer, he would cleanse her from her "green" post-birth state, thank God for keeping death away, and reintroduce the mother to her church life and household duties. Following the ceremony, families convened for a final celebration and thanksgiving feast, drinking the health of a woman and baby who survived a process laden with fear and uncertainty.

In 1601, two years before the close of Elizabeth I's reign, a Puritan piece, *Certaine questions by way of conference betwixt a chauncelor and a kinswoman of his concerning the churching of women,* included a godly critique, in the genre of the fictional dialogue, of the "Jewish and Popish purifying" of women after birth, closely tied with the Levitical laws of the Old Testament.[46] Twenty-nine years earlier, in 1572's fiery, *An Admonition to Parliament,* it was debated that the, "Churching of women after childbirthe, smelleth of Jewishe purification: theyr other rytes and customes in their lying in, & coming to church, is foolishe and superstitious, as it is used." [47] The *Certaine questions* followed the same reasoning, using the voice of a godly woman who refused to be churched as the intellect against a poorly argued chauncelor. Retorting the chancellor's demands, the woman replied, "May we not heerein say of you & your

[45] Becker, *Death and the Early Modern Englishwoman,* 35.
[46] *Certaine Questions by Way of Conference Betwixt a Chauncelor and a Kinswoman of His Concerning the Churching of Women* (Middelburg: R. Schilders, 1601), 7.
[47] W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Origin of the Puritan Revolt* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954), 28-29, quoted in Jeffery Johnson, "Recovering the Curse of Eve in John Donne's Churching Sermons," *Renaissance and Reformation* Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999): 62.

fellows, that yee are the most perilous instruments, and dangerous impostors that euer Sathan raysed up for the advancement and restoring againe of Poperie."[48] This author's anger, like that of *An Admonition to Parliament,* was most likely in response to Edward VI's alteration of the language in the official prayer book. In an attempt to appease angry reformers, "the order of the purifications of women," in 1549, had been changed, to "the thanksgiving of women after child-birth, commonly called the churching of women," in 1552."[49] The alteration of 'purification' to the softer terminology of 'churching' was an endeavor to remove language that was not overtly Protestant from the Church. Regardless, many of the "precise" reformed continued to accuse the church of hiding behind false doctrine; as *Certaine questions* delivered its punch, "it is not from Thanksgiving to God (as you would have it) that she refrayneth of Conscience, but onely from Jewish or Popish Purifying shadowed and varnished over with the colour or shewe of Thanksgiving."[50]

While the initial steps towards redefining the churching ceremony looked to be a good step for women, some scholars have argued that church purification was an example of the, "patriarchal or misogynist instrument for the subjugation of women," and others have taken the approach of referring to churching as a form of "sexual politics", where women in the church, evidently shown to have enjoyed the ceremony, were on top, flipping the emphasis away from patriarchal power."[51] Realistically, most women and their husbands didn't view themselves or their wives as unclean, but instead enjoyed the ceremony as a sort of coming out and reintroduction into their social life.[52]

The fact that reformers saw the language shift around churching and thanksgiving as a weak change pointed to a larger issue as it wasn't just a problem of language, but the reality of the personal events in shedding spiritual focus on women. The most radical of reformers sought not only to rid the churching ceremony of its popish ways, but to discount the ceremony entirely. Again, exceeding the reasonable changes expected with religious reform by impacting and eradicating the few luxuries

[48] *Certaine Questions,* 11.
[49] David Cressy, "Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England," *Past and Present* 141 (November 1993): 118.
[50] Ibid., 18.
[51] Ibid., 110-111.
[52] Ibid.

women had. If women were to remember that their bodies were only passive conduits to God's glory, then churching and thanksgiving ceremonies completely unraveled that logic by placing spiritual focus and cultural significance on the new mother. Reformed backlash had just as much to do with popish phraseology as it did female empowerment and succeeded by putting an end to the practice in 1645 with the passing of the *Directory of Public Worship.*

Midwives

It is hard to discuss the childbirth in Reformation England without talking about midwives. Midwives had set the rules and organized the institution of childbirth hundreds of years before Reformers set out to change their practices and to recruit them to the Protestant cause. Highlighted by Nicholas Culpeper's *A Directory for Midwives,* "Hippocrates was never better skil'd in the Rules of Physick than a Midwife ought to be."[53] Midwives were expected to be women of reputable social standing who could freely transverse the lines between rich and poor, upper class and lower class. Trained under the wings of veteran midwives, novice midwives learned through hands-on practice and a long-held tradition of oral instruction. Yet with the exception of Jane Sharp's midwifery text, *The Midwives Book* (1671), most literature circulating early modern Europe on the subject of pregnancy and childbirth, such as Thomas Raynalde's *The Birth of Mankynde* (1545), and Jacob Rueff's *The Expert Midwife* (English translation, 1637), were written by men and they were consumed mostly by medical professionals and laymen.

As men couldn't command the birth room themselves, midwives were sent as their proxies to propound the Protestant message, with the mission of keeping an eye open for outdated practices. Midwives were registered with a bishop and often feverishly trained in various new advancements of the English church. Considering that midwives were to be qualified to give emergency baptisms, there could be no risk that they would perform or recite any Catholic rituals. And due to their ability to influence

[53] Nicholas Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives, Or, A Guide for Women in their Conception, Bearing, and Suckling their Children the First Part Contains ... to Cure all Diseases in Women, Read the Second Part of this Book / by Nicholas Culpepper* (London: George Sawbridge, 1675), 3v.

women in unsupervised spaces, many midwives found themselves accused of witchcraft the moment they were thought to promote popery or superstition. According to Becker:

> 'local elderly women, commonly associated with childbirth… were often accused of sorcery in the superstitious help they supposedly offered. Traditional remedies, the invoking of superstition through words and symbolic actions and the lack of any great medical knowledge all combined to portray a picture of irrational, superstitious femininity at work.'[54]

The ascendency of English Protestantism, through its implantation and treatment of women, exposed a worrying, overall distrust of women; by the end of the eighteenth century, in alignment with the waning of the Reformation and the boom of the scientific revolution, women were all but missing from the practice of medicine.

Pregnancy and Science

A final area the 'progressiveness' of the English Reformation masked as ignorance was the manifested disregard of scientific advancements in gynecological and women's health. Fearing the promotion of atheism and the belief that the reformed Church and science could not co-exist, many Protestant preachers distanced themselves from positive medical discoveries that broke tradition with the widely-held negative, medieval beliefs surrounding issues of menstruation and the 'faulty' female anatomy. While preachers continued to speak of Eve's curse and insubordination-induced miscarriages, one can only hope that women may have been able to secure secular manuscripts on childbirth.

In 1656, Nicholas Culpeper printed his midwife manual, *A directory for Midwives, or a guide for women in their conception, bearing, and suckling their children.* "I conceived a few thoughts, and I hope to bring them to perfect birth," Culpeper began with a pun vis the language of labor, "And that this may be done Methodically (for things look best when they are in Order, because God is the God of Order)."[55] Although

[54] Becker, *Death and the Early Modern Englishwoman,* 38.
[55] Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives,* 2v.

borrowing the Protestant ideal of order and God's grand plan over that order, Culpeper distinguishes himself from the English Church's program in a few interesting respects. Firstly, Culpeper gave detailed descriptions of the female reproductive organs, including diagrams of babies in utero and a revolutionary take with a positive explanation of the mysterious menstrual cycle. Also, differing from Hooke's portrayal of miscarriages as a curse from God due to a mother's rebellious thoughts, Culpeper reported that while a mother's mood could affect a baby, miscarriages were not harsh punishments from God.

Further, Culpeper was an adamant proponent of 'superstitious' labor relics, such as eagle stones that, "when held to the Privities, instantly draws away both child and after-burden."[56] But the most striking difference came forth through an interrogatory, "Why women bring forth in pain?" Here, to Culpeper the sin of Eve and righteous suffering played no role:

> 'I told you before (or I am deceived if I did not) That the sense of feeling was not distributed to the Whol Body by the Nerves straight that it must [be] dilated at the time of her delivery; The dilating there of stretcheth the Nerves, thense comes the pain.'[57]

In this case, the scientific reasonings behind contractions and labor pains was revolutionary: Culpeper boldly told women that labor pain was a normal and natural process, omitting all negative spiritual association. While it is likely that women had a physical answer as to why childbirth caused discomfort, and possibly priests as well, those reasonings were not the messages women were told by Protestant orthodoxy to think of during their time of travail. The standard line was that women were not to embrace the natural process, but that their agony, if anything, was unnatural and that this painful punishment was a divine reminder of a fallen faithful. A rejection of science by the English Church meant a rejection of positive information on women, who otherwise could have come to a better understanding of their own bodies and their own reproductive gifts.

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[56] Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives,* 130.
[57] Ibid., 140.

Catholic Women

While focus here has been placed on English Protestant women, it is notable to mention the wider flocking of Christian women to the Catholic faith even after the failure of the Catholic counter-reform of the sixteenth century. Catholic women still enjoyed the option of convent life and adoration of the Virgin Mary and female saints. In Antwerp in 1601, the intelligencer and Catholic propagandist Richard Verstegan printed a work that encouraged women to remember the holy figures lost to the Reformation. Verstegan's chapter entitled, "The Trivmphe of the Feminyne Saintes," responded to the Protestant reprehension of Marian devotion and adoration:

'And let performance of her woorthy praise,
Of her praise-yeilding race remaine the signe,
That so the blame that for it others raise,
Become the marck of their dissenting lyne.
And let contempt of her with such abyde,
As pay in hel the tribute of their pryde.'[58]

And thereby, Verstegan condemned Protestant ideology by praising women just for being women, and linked Marian devotion with a stronger indicator of positive female perceptions. Writers such as Kenelm Digby promised women in 1638 that Protestantism had gotten Catholicism wrong and guaranteed them "noe false doctrine."[59] But by the time the Catholic church really knew what was going on, the flocks of desperate women were not enough; even with positive female imagery conveyed from e.g., Richard Verstegan, Catholicism lost its influence England and never fully regained the status it had before the Reformation.

Conclusion

I should like to conclude this essay by proceeding from a maxim by Joan Kelly, "Women's history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and restore our history to

[58] Richard, Verstegan. *Odes in Imitation of the Seauen Penitential Psalmes, Vvith Sundry Other Poemes and Ditties Tending to Deuotion and Pietie* (Antwerp: A. Conincx, 1601), 56.
[59] Sir Kenelm Digby, *A Conference with a Lady about Choice of Religion* (Paris: Widow of J. Blagaert, 1638), 50-51.

women."[60] The goal of this study was not to discredit the English Reformation and any greater goods accomplished thereby, but to recognize that the full story of early English Protestantism is often left untold. To define the Reformation – whether of the English sort or otherwise - as a solely progressive movement would mean one would have to believe that the female experience didn't exist the way it did. According to Kelly's feminist impetus to study the lives of women by frame-working men's regulation of female sexual, economic, political, cultural, educational, and ideological power, the Reformation was not a positive step forward for women.[61]The rule of female sexuality compared to men found root in attitudes towards the expected virginal state of women even after childbirth with no reciprocation expected from men. Women's economic and political roles and the education needed for work, property, and power was stripped with the dissolution of convents and the restriction of women to the home under submissive wifehood and motherhood.

The cultural role of women in shaping the outlook of society, namely the female empowerment found in Mary and female saints, childbed gossips and churching, was actively attacked, limited, and regulated by church reformers. And the prevailing ideology about women was the curse of their grandmother Eve, the atonement for her sin, and the literal interpretation of the female anatomy, that entrapped all women - except perhaps the Queen herself - into the same singular, lifelong purpose. Through the redefinition of the telos of women, the changing rhetoric of childbirth from one of female liberation to female suspicion, and the eventual hijacking of gynecological medicine from female midwives to male practitioners, the Reformation, as historians of women find with most traditionally accepted progressive movements, prevailed only by propelling one sex to the detriment of the other through the means of sermons, prayer books, laws, and medical practices. These "grievous gripes of perilous pains"[62] experienced during childbirth would reverberate through the following centuries of women painfully existing under the weight of misogyny. Consequently, what is left is to

[60] Joan Kelly, "The Social Relation of the Sexes; Methodological Implications of Women's History," in Blanche W. Cook, Clare Coss, Alice K. Harris, Rosalind P. Petchesky, and Amy Swerdlow, introduction to *Women, History & Theory; The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.
[61] Cook, Cross, Harris, et al., *The Essays of Joan Kelly*, xix.
[62] Bentley, *The Fift Lampe,* 121.

continue the work, to tell new stories by striving to uncover new chapters from the past, and study with concerted effort to distinguish the nuances between, "history and his-story."[63]

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[63] Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation,* 6.

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